# Armenian-Americans of Hollywood Discuss Genocide & The War at Artsakh

Miguel Costa · CULTURE · April 24, 2021

April 24th marks Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day– It has been 106 years since the attempted ethnic cleansing of over 1.5 million Armenians took place in Europe and Western Asia. For many Armenian-Americans, April 24th has become the symbol of everlasting resiliency and a fight for global recognition of the monstrosities that occurred in 1915. In the decades that followed, accounts of the Armenian Genocide would be retold by Armenian-American film producers like Eric Esrailian (*The Promise*) and rappers like R-Mean ("Cries of War"). Productions like these have contributed to how the Armenian Genocide was introduced to the mainstream media in the United States.

But what no one could have ever anticipated, was the day that Armenian-Americans would have to re-live the horror stories of their ancestors. That's exactly what happened in September 2020 when full-scale war broke out near the border between Armenia & Azerbaijan. As a result, 2020 became a moment when the Armenian-Americans in Hollywood used their platforms to amplify the voices of their community. Over the course of six weeks that followed, the Armenian casualties of war reached the thousands at the behest of the Azeri military. For the people of Armenia and Artsakh, the staggering death toll sent them on an emotional recourse back to April 24th, 1915.

People all over the world were focused on the global pandemic, a presidential election in the US, and the Black Lives Matter protests that were all going on simultaneously. The mainstream media seemed to put the second coming of the Armenian Genocide on the back burner. Although the silence outside of the Armenian-American community was deafening and disheartening at times, it did not deter their adaptable spirit. Slowly but surely, hashtags like #artsahkstrong and #standwitharmenia started to pop up all over social media—oftentimes accompanied by encouraging messages from Armenian-American celebrities like Angela Sarafyan, R-Mean, Kim Kardashian West, Cher, Hrush Achemyan, and so many others. While celebrity supporters from outside of the Armenian-American community like Cardi B, Ty Dolla $ign, Big Sean, and The Game began to follow suit and show their solidarity on social media.

The more Armenian-American celebrities spoke out about the second coming of genocide, the more it began to shed light on past Armenian-American films and songs that retold the story of the original genocide of 1915. Films like *The Promise* (starring Christian Bale, Oscar Isaac, and Angela Sarafyan) gave historical context to the new battle Armenians were facing.

Simultaneously, retrospective songs like "Open Wounds" by R-Mean became even more meaningful to a community that is permeated with patrons who are often seen wearing black tee shirts with classic lyrics from the hip-hop track printed on them. "Open Wounds clothing started as merch for my song, for which we launched a music video in April 2013. In the video, I was wearing that shirt which basically quotes my last line of the song: '*Our wounds are still open*,'" said R-Mean. "I felt like it summed up how we feel as a people in one sentence. People saw the shirt in the video, and it quickly became a demanded item. It became extremely popular and an amazing way to educate and raise awareness about our cause in a new cool and hip way."

Recording artists like R-Mean and Karra Mane provided a soundtrack to their community's demand for the U.S. government's acknowledgment of the Genocide. While activism from celebrities like Hrush Achemyan and Eric Esrailian eventually helped bring the voice of their community to local news cycles, their collaborative efforts with organizations like the Armenia Fund gave visibility to the Armenian youth.

The Nagorno-Karabakh war ended in a ceasefire in December 2020, but in the words of the Los Angeles-born rapper R-Mean, "our wounds are still open." There is still a lot more work that needs to be done for their community to heal. So, this year, on April 24th, when "Artsakh Avenue" in Glendale is filled with colorful demonstrations in honor of Remembrance Day, it will certainly mean a lot more to the new generation of Armenian-Americans and non-Armenian Angelenos who support the cause. Now, there is a new generation of Armenian-Americans with a story to tell us. The only question is: Will people listen this time?

In honor of Remembrance Day, we spoke to Angela Sarafyan, R-Mean, Eric Esrailian, Hrush Achemyan, and Karra Mane about their Armenian heritage, entertainment, activism, and the role that they would like people outside of their community to play in the future.

## From Armenia in 1915 to the big screen in Hollywood

***Angela, you're a descendant of people who survived the Armenian Genocide back in 1915. Can you tell us about how you have been affected by the events that your ancestors were subjected to?***

**Angela Sarafyan:** Ever since I was a little girl, I heard stories about my ancestors and how they fled Armenia & the towns and villages that is Turkey today. It separated my family to Syria, Lebanon, France, America, and a very small few to the Armenia we know it to be today. I had an interesting interaction when I was in Paris. I serendipitously met this lovely woman in a bookstore, who was a psychoanalyst. We began this beautiful conversation about the human mind. Because the pathologies with which we live tend to come from our subconscious mind, and our genetic make-up plays a role in it. She said that when one experiences that level of trauma, it changes us on a genetic level. Their offspring, their children, and their children's children will be born with that mutated gene. That changed gene. And they will continue to carry and live with that pain until the wrongdoing and the wrongdoer have acknowledged their action. Only then will they be given peace, grow, then let go, and then evolve. But until then, nothing will change. The fight will continue.

***You starred in Eric Esrailian's The Promise alongside Christian Bale & Oscar Isaac, which was the most expensive Hollywood production ever to be made about the Armenian Genocide. When filming in 2015, did you ever think it was possible that history could repeat itself and a full-scale war in your homeland could happen again, nearly five years later?***

**Angela Sarafyan:** I was afraid it could… and it did. I have been disillusioned by what I have seen since the attacks began, the war in Artsakh back in September (2020), and how alone Armenians really are in the world.

***The budget for The Promise was donated by a legendary Armenian-American investor named Kirk Kerkorian. Although he was the president of MGM Studios for several years, he could not garner enough support for a feature film about the Armenian Genocide during his tenure. So he decided to fund the project independently. Unfortunately, he passed away in 2015, a few years before the film premiered. What did he mean to you while he was alive? And how involved was he in the making of this production?***

**Eric Esrailian:** He was and still is an absolute hero to me. In fact, he has received that designation as a hero of the Armenian nation. Not only was he one of the most successful businessmen of the 20th century, but he was an incomparably generous philanthropist and humanitarian. Most importantly for me, he was a dear mentor and friend. I feel like he is with me every day. The entire vision and architecture for the film was his. He had a very specific goal in mind: to tell the story as a visual museum– regardless of the lack of marketplace or potential commercial interest– and he ultimately wanted us to secure Armenian Genocide recognition using the film as a tool. He wanted the best actors working to be in the lead roles, he wanted a love story to be a key part of the film, and he wanted us to make a film that could be shown in schools so that it could be accessible to as many people as possible. During his lifetime, he had seen all of the attempts at denial by the Turkish government and others to cover up the genocidal legacy of the Ottoman Empire, and he knew what it would take to have a long-term impact.

## Fall 2020: History repeats itself in Armenia

***In theory, films like The Promise should have prepared the mainstream media for a more informed response to the second coming of the Armenian Genocide during the Fall of 2020. With that being said, do you think that the Hollywood stars who knew about the crisis spoke up enough about the war in Nagorno-Karabakh during 2020?***

**Angela Sarafyan:** I think the way Azerbaijan hired bots and spent millions and millions on PR firms to create propaganda made it very difficult for celebrities not to get bullied. Both personally and their businesses. Michael B. Jordan, Sean Penn, and a small few were brave enough to speak, and I am grateful to them. I thank you!!

There were two wars– One on the frontlines and the other on social media. Azerbaijan soldiers would get paid $100 to cut off the heads of Armenians and would try to directly call the family members, of those whose heads they would dismember to show them what they were about to do– Live! That level of hate is the baseness and disgust I feel about humanity at its worst. That is just one of all the horrendous events that have taken place. Chemical warfare, torture, lies– The list goes on.

***R-Mean, you're the most popular Armenian-American rappers in the world right now and one of the best emcees in the rap game, period. Being from Los Angeles, you've become well acquainted with rappers from different ethnic backgrounds. When all of the fighting was going on in Artsakh last year, what was it like to see other LA-based rappers like The Game and B-Real speak out in support of the Armenian community?***

**R-Mean:** Because of the unrecognized nature of our history, it always feels good when people of other backgrounds speak up and give recognition to the injustices that have happened and are still happening to our people. Being in the rap game specifically, it was always my intention to use my platform and relationships to raise awareness. Having these

guys step up and speak on the conflict was very rewarding and important. They have large followings and strong voices– people listen when they speak. Educating as many people as possible will be our first step towards change.

***Hrush, you've worked with some of the biggest names in Hollywood. Do you believe that your Hollywood counterparts did enough to support Armenia and Artsakh last year?***

**Hrush:** I definitely think they didn't, but how could I expect them to have the proper information? I think the media is at fault for a lot of it. They just don't care… It's a very uncomfortable topic to talk about, and many people just don't want to see it. People want to turn a blind eye, so I can't blame anyone for not posting about it or not talking about it if they don't have the proper tools.

***LA is home to one of the largest Armenian communities in the world. With LA specifically being such a melting pot of cultures, why do you think so many people had no idea what was going on in Artsakh?***

**Hrush:** People don't care unless it hits them across the face… I think more people would have been aware if COVID-19 wasn't going on. I truly believe it would've been more at the forefront, but there were so many other important things going on that it got overlooked. But that's why I continue posting about it. I'm still keeping it relevant– every single day, I get more and more messages from new people saying: "Oh my god, how did I not know about this?"

***Eric, do you believe that the city did enough to support Armenians during the war with all that you have done for Los Angeles?***

**Eric Esrailian:** It will honestly never be enough given the trauma that generations of Armenians have experienced, the decades of denial, and the international apathy we witnessed in the midst of the pandemic and other crises. Because of oil money from Azerbaijan and the geopolitical influence of Turkey, given its geography and military leverage over the United States and other countries, Armenians were attacked with impunity despite the infamous human rights records of these governments. Nevertheless, I am proud to be an Angeleno because the leadership of the city, county, and state of California– including prestigious universities, scholars, and other influential voices– spoke clearly and decisively on the matter. I personally witnessed and participated in massive rallies in the community, and the city leadership embraced this effort.

## The war in Nagorno-Karabakh reaches a boiling point as more lives are lost

***Karra Mane, we'd love to hear your opinion on this matter. As an Armenian-American and a native of Los Angeles, what was it like living through the six-week crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh during the Fall? This war must have felt strikingly similar to what your ancestors experienced in 1915.***

**Karra Mane:** I actually happened to be in Armenia right before it all started on September 27th. Sadly, my father passed away that month, so we all flew to the motherland to say our last goodbyes. Our plane was scheduled to take off at 3 am on Sept 27th, and Azerbaijan started its unprovoked attacks at 7 am. Had I known it was going to happen, I'd have canceled my ticket and stayed to help since then I wanted to go back so many times, but my family convinced me to put my emotions aside and be rational because I can help better by working and sending funds to Armenia so they could buy what they needed there by donating to the Armenia Fund and other charities such as 100 LIVES (Humanitarian Foundation).

I often think that had I been born at the wrong time, like 1915 in Kars (a region associated with historic Armenia), I couldn't have escaped the same excruciating destiny just like my great grandfather. Have you seen photos from that time? Google it. Those young girls from the pictures of the Armenian Genocide look just like me, they're also young Armenian girls full of hopes and aspirations, but they didn't get a chance to make their dreams come true. Instead, they got raped, tortured, and killed by Turks at the beginning of the 20th century. For what? For being a "wrong nationality." The thought of it gives me chills and makes me deeply sad each time. *Architects of Denial*, produced by Dean Cain and Montel Williams, is a good film. They had a phrase that is so true: "Genocide denied is Genocide continued." The documentary's release was in 2017, and look what happened just three years later: Azerbaijan and Turkey attacked Armenian lands. Again. Killed thousands. Again. And there was not much help from the world. Again. It was silent, just like in 1915 when Turks committed an enormous crime against humanity– a Genocide, and it's still hasn't been recognized by many.

***R-Mean, you also worked with the Armenian Fund during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. Would you mind telling us what your experience was like collaborating with them back in October?***

**R-Mean:** My experience was great. They put that telethon together last minute with the help of some of our business partners, and it was definitely a success. It was great to see how the entire community came together for one cause. It was great to see everybody step up and do their part. I believe the Armenia Fund has done great things and did its best, even though they could have used some better PR to gain people's long-term trust. I hope they and any other organizations are open to having new young professionals come and restructure some things, but overall, I'm proud of what was accomplished.

***Hrush, your appearance on the live telethon was so touching that protestors began to chant your name during a peaceful demonstration in front of the CBS building. Can you tell us a little bit about the events leading up to that protest? How did you ended up getting involved?***

**Hrush:** They were basically asking CBS to withdraw a statement that they made that was false, and one of the CBS workers verbally attacked the peaceful protesters, and they caught it on camera… It was actually young kids, to be honest. That's why it enraged so many people. I was watching it online. Originally, I didn't know what (the protest) was for, but one of my friends was there, and he FaceTimed me and said, "They're chanting your name, and they're chanting your cousin's name. You should come." And I was like, "Okay, I'm down, I'm coming."

When I got there, the emotional energy of patriotism just made it feel like home. I've never felt that much passion… So much passion for the country and so much passion for people they don't even know about are going through it. They were crying for them. I took a personal loss from the war, and these were people that didn't have any personal losses and didn't have family that live in Armenia. But they were just as passionate about it as I was. That's very admirable, and that's where I'd like to see all diaspora Armenians. They joined together, and they peacefully got CBS to hear them out. It was not some big organization; it was just a bunch of kids.

***The fact that you were able to galvanize a group of people without being physically present says a lot about who you are and what you mean to the Armenian-American community. Do you know the reason why the kids were chanting your name during the protest of CBS?***

**Hrush:** I've always been a very outspoken person… I've always marched to the beat of my own drum, and I think over time, people have grown to respect that. I spoke about my cousin's murder at the frontlines and I spoke out in a very emotional way– while hosting a live telethon for the *Armenia Fund*. I think that's why they were chanting my name. I've never cried on stage, but I broke down during that telethon.

## The Armenian-Americans of Hollywood look to build a brighter future

***Angela, if you could executive produce a film or series about the modern-day experience of Armenians in America, how would you go about telling the story of your people?***

**Angela Sarafyan:** There is something very special in the works I am producing and writing with my brother, Karbis Sarafyan. This is incredibly special and intimate and unlike anything you've read nor seen. We will start pitching fairly soon and fingers crossed, with the right creatives involved, I hope the world will see it soon. It's a story that needs to be told. I make stories. I became an actor because I love telling stories, and I love being immersed in them. Acting is a living art. The roles I play change me. They give me everything as I hope to give all of me to them in return. For the first time, I am learning that I must produce the stories I want to tell. So here we go!

***Eric, how would you begin to tell a story about the horrific events that just occurred in 2020?***

**Eric Esrailian:** I wish we did not have to keep telling these stories, but we do. Collecting this evidence and presenting it in both a journalistic/documentary and narrative format is necessary to help educate the world. Social impact filmmaking cannot only enlighten and educate people, but it can contribute to changing laws and passing resolutions as we have seen with the Armenian Genocide. Hopefully, it can contribute to making the world a better place. We need to keep getting our stories out there. I will continue to do what I can.

***What would you like to see from the next generation of Armenian-American celebrities?***

**Karra Mane:** I'd say Armenian-American public figures did a pretty good job, but I'd like to see more celebrities of non-Armenian descent stand up for what's right and demand the recognition of the genocide and condemnation Turkish-Azeri coalition for all their crimes against Armenians and humanity. And I'd like to see people have the consistency and

courage to stick to it. For example, it was very disappointing to see Sir Elton John post about what was going in Artsakh and then delete it because of all the pressure he got from the Azeri bots in the comments. I have enormous respect for his talent and legacy. But why bow down to the aggressor? I'd like to see more financial help to the motherland; with a tiny GDP, Armenia can't be equipped adequately. The enormous courage of our people alone can't be enough to fight modern military weapons.

## The Soundtrack of Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day.

***R-Mean, when it comes to honoring your ancestors during Armenian History Month, you've released some pretty memorable songs. "Open Wounds" is a classic, and your new song "Cries of War" is another heartfelt banger. But because 2020 was so polarizing for your community, can you tell us about the track you released last year? What inspired the making of "We Are Still Here" featuring Sebu Simonian?***

**R-Mean:** It was the start of the pandemic, so the protests and commemorations we usually have had all been canceled, and I felt the urge to do something… Anything. I told my in-house producer, Pyro, to do something with duduk, and he sent me that beat. I wrote my lyrics with the approach of "we survived" instead of "we were victims." I felt like it was time to look at our history in a more positive and inspiring way. I wanted to do something to empower the diaspora and just all of us around the world. I recorded my verses, and then I texted Sebu. We've known each other for a long time but never worked together. I felt like this song might be "the one." That day, he recorded that chorus and sent it back, and I was mind blown by how incredible it was. Right there, we decided to quickly do a video for it and release it on the 24th. It all came together in only a few days, and I feel it was one of those magical records that will live on forever.

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