

## Finding a Voice: Young Muslims, Music and Religious Change in Britain

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On a warm Sunday afternoon, in early September 2011, large crowds are strolling around the grounds of a 19<sup>th</sup> century non-conformist higher education college in Manchester. As the autumnal sunshine and leafy gardens are enjoyed by all, to the rear of the college, in an old peaked chapel that juts from the back of the bricked building, a man, dressed in a dark, buttoned-up suit and tie, moves across a small stage with microphone in hand. Smiling broadly as he scatters flowers to a swaying crowd, the man sings into the microphone. Supported by pre-recorded backing harmonies and percussion emitted from a temporary sound system, he gently unfolds lyrics praising Allah and the beauty of creation, attempting to evoke notions of love and compassion. This is the 2011 Eid Festival, at the British Muslim Heritage Centre, and the performer, Khaleel Muhammad, has travelled from London to perform a selection of English-language nasheeds (religious songs) for those at the celebration. He is just one of several celebrity performers that are here to contribute to the nasheed concert, while outside Muslim families enjoy the food stalls, the activity tents and the small funfair.

In many respects, this celebration and similar events across the country are part of an emergent Islamic entertainment culture – a culture that incorporates music as a central, distinctive but rather ambiguous practice. The event was typical of its kind: organised by a Muslim civil society and staffed by young Muslim volunteers in jeans and t-shirts, it aimed to combine a religious celebration with the gaiety of a wholesome and popularised entertainment culture. The nasheed concert itself was hosted by a British-Algerian R&B musician, Rahim, and involved performances by Khaleel Muhammad and three other well-known, English-language British nasheed artists. These celebrated musicians are all entertainers, public figures and religious mediators in their own right. They are a familiar presence in the British Muslim media market and across the Islamic events circuit. Often eschewing live instrumentation of any kind, these musicians restrict themselves to vocal renditions, sometimes with synthesised percussion, but otherwise drawing much of their influence from the pop music sounds of contemporary Britain. It is an emergent Muslim musical culture – little more than a decade or so old – that attempts to fuse religious observance and spiritual expression with global pop sounds and the faint traces of an Islamic musical/poetic tradition.

Amir Awan, for instance, is a smartly-dressed mathematics graduate, of Pakistani ethnicity, who works in the City of London for a major bank. In his spare time he writes, records and performs his own nasheeds, guided by his knowledge of *tajwid* (principles of Quranic recitation), and accompanied by a sound that is consciously inspired by Michael Jackson. Elsewhere in London, Poetic Pilgrimage, an

assertive female hip hop duo from Bristol, with Jamaican roots, can be found blasting out lyrics on spirituality, global politics and the rights of women. Meanwhile, Usman Rehman, a young British Pakistani from Bradford, plies his trade across the north of England. As well as reinterpreting popularised qawwali songs (Sufi religious songs), he writes his own English-language nasheeds, with vocal sounds that are reminiscent of both Western pop music and classical South Asian performance. In Birmingham, the folk-rock group Silk Road combine a number of musical styles – from Irish folk music, to funk, blues and Indian classical music – producing elaborate instrumental music that is overlaid with earnest lyrics inspired by the Qur’an, *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) and poetry of Rumi.

In the following chapter I highlight some of the key issues surrounding this cultural phenomenon and more broadly outline the contours of this musical scene. In fitting with the overarching theme of this edited collection, I pay particular attention to the dimensions of youth, discussing the socio-cultural and ethical-religious motivations that are inextricably woven into the sonic and semantic fabric of Muslim music.

I begin the chapter by considering some of the issues that surround the study of young Muslims in Britain, including a brief argument to locate Muslim musicians within this thematic context. This is followed by a history of selected Muslim musicians in Britain – a series of cultural narratives, no doubt incomplete, that crisscross the social soundscapes of 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Using this historical context as a point of reference, I argue that contemporary Muslim musicians represent a new and distinctive wave of cultural producers. They are an emergent generation, deeply thoughtful and religious, as well as rooted in the intricacies and dynamics of Britain’s contemporary social and cultural landscape. In the final section of the chapter I will flesh out this argument by describing in detail the different styles of music that characterise Muslim music in Britain – nasheeds, syncretic styles, and Muslim hip hop – by providing short vignettes of musicians for illustrative purposes.

### **Young Muslims in Britain**

While the dynamics of age are relatively complex within this cultural scene – with ‘older’ musicians also producing challenging and innovative forms of music – there is undoubtedly a significant generational imprint. Popular Muslim musicians are relatively young themselves, or at the very least particularly influential through their direct engagement with young Muslims. It is telling that the most popular ‘day job’ for Muslim musicians is youth work, followed closely by teaching. To study Muslim musicians, then, is to consider individuals at the centre of a social, cultural and religious milieu that is characterised by *religious and generational change*. Music is one way – much like comedy and film –

through which young Muslims are handling a number of the pressing social and political concerns that are relevant to this emergent generation.

It might be argued, then, that this music partially reflects the broader concerns of young Muslims in Britain – and it should be noted that approximately 50% of Muslims in Britain are under the age of twenty five (Gilliat-Ray, 2010) Many of these young Muslims are now ‘coming of age’ and their influence on Islam in Britain should be considered a crucial factor of study within the field. Indeed, the rise of interest in young Muslims is partly evident through the increasingly plurality of monograph-length publications and edited collections devoted to the subject (Lewis, 2007; Herrera & Bayat (eds.), 2010; Kabir, 2010; Ahmad & Seddon (eds.), 2012) – including from the perspective of youth work practitioners (Belton & Hamid (eds.), 2011). There is furthermore a more insidious angle when the unfortunate policy focus on ‘extremism’ and violent terrorism amongst young Muslims is considered (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010).

Philip Lewis manages to aptly capture some of the dynamics at play amongst young Muslims:

Policy-makers worry about the existence of ‘parallel worlds’, especially in northern cities. Whatever the precise nature, extent, reasons for and significance of such social, cultural and spatial separation, it is clear that young Muslims within those spaces consider themselves British and share many aspects of popular youth culture with their non-Muslim peers. Their problem is with the many traditionally-minded parents who seek, usually unsuccessfully, to limit their access to it. (Lewis, 2007: 149)

In this short passage, Lewis manages to highlight the notion of separation – of the religious and social distinctiveness that is potentially decisive for young Muslims – but also the irresistible pull of a shared national and popular culture. Adding to this, I would also point toward the resurgence of religiosity amongst young Muslims (Hamid, 2011) and the powerful impact of a politically-aware young Muslim elite (Edmunds, 2010). These issues are undoubtedly at work amongst Muslim musicians, including within their immediate and overlapping peer groups. To place this argument within the proper context, I turn in the following section to a more sweeping historical overview of Muslim musical practice in Britain.

### **A History of Muslim Musicians in Britain**

It is perhaps rather misleading to refer to a singular or even coherently conceived history of Muslim musicians in the UK. There are perhaps instead multiple musical histories that – while sonically and socially divergent – are only connectable through the tenuous threads of religious and national identity. The experiences and life-worlds of Muslim seafarers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, cannot really be connected in any direct and meaningful sense to the countercultural awakening of the 60s and 70s. Yet while these histories might seem distinct and at times unconnected, they do nonetheless mark the stages and interludes within a complex and interwoven past – a

fragmented history that can be lived and understood backwards. It is therefore helpful to understand the place of Muslim musicians and Islam within any given historical context. As I shall argue throughout, the role and character of music for Muslims in Britain is ultimately shaped by the social and cultural forces at work during any given historical period. Understanding this enables one to better comprehend the particularities of Muslim musicians and Muslim music in contemporary Britain.

While Muslim communities within Britain predate the period of mass migration following the Second World War, such communities were relatively small and transitory, consisting primarily of seafarers who were concerned with securing employment in a hostile environment (Ansari, 2004). I have struggled to find any compelling evidence that these communities practised music, except perhaps (if it is defined as ‘music’) Sufi religious chanting, known as the *dhikr* (Lawless, 1995). It is nonetheless likely that these seafarers brought with them a range of musical styles and practices – from countries such as Yemen and Somalia – although the legacy of this cultural transposition appears to be indistinct, unresearched and perhaps lost within the vagaries of a forgotten yesterday.

In contrast, post-Second World War migration saw the well-documented establishment of large Muslim communities that were predominantly from the Indian subcontinent. The transportation of diverse cultural backgrounds brought, in some cases, ‘traditional’ musical forms to urban Britain – though it should be noted that music did not always play a prominent role in the cultural practice of migrant groups (as with the Mirpuris). Forms of music included, in particular, Qawwali, a type of Sufi religious music unique to South Asia (Baily, 1990); *na’at*, a form of poetic rendition praising the Prophet Muhammad; and Bhangra, a non-religious music originating from the Punjab region (Banerji & Baumann, 1990). A range of smaller musical traditions and communities were also brought over during this period of migration, including, for example, an estimated 5,000-6000 strong Khalifa community from Gujarat (Bailey, 2006). Regardless of the specific tradition and communal context under consideration, these musical forms remained enclosed within socially excluded migrant communities and contributed to a sense of cultural solidarity (Baily & Collyer, 2006). During this genitive phase, music can be understood as a trope for these communities: spatially located in Britain, yet culturally and emotionally rooted in an ethnic past.

During the latter period of this migratory phase and subsequent consolidation – in the 1960s and 1970s – an alternative and entirely disconnected movement was taking place amongst a group of folk-rock musicians in the UK. Inspired by the spiritual yearning of a 1960s counterculture, various musicians were exploring their interest in different types of religion other than Christianity. This was sparked by an opening of ideas and possibilities, as well as disdain for the stifling conformity and barrenness of a rapidly developing consumer culture. The physical movement of people and ideas became an essential catalyst for these changes – parts of South Asia and North Africa literally and

metaphorically became a ‘spiritual home’ for this restless generation. While some musicians chose a path that drew them toward Buddhism or other esoteric forms of South Asian religion, a small but prominent group of musicians found their own distinctive path through the teachings of Islam. Most notable amongst these were the two musical superstars, Richard Thompson and Cat Stevens: Thompson began practising Sufism with his wife, Linda Thompson, in 1974, while Cat Stevens formally converted in 1977, adopting the name Yusuf Islam in 1978. Other musician converts from this particular time and place included Ian Whiteman and Danny Thompson (a founding member of the band Pentangle).

The influence that these musicians have had on Muslims in Britain is varied, and, with the exception of Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam, relatively insignificant for any social or cultural bearing on our understanding of Islam in the UK. Richard Thompson, for example, produced a trio of spiritually-rich albums, laden with symbolism (see Figure 1), before continuing a musical career that largely omitted any direct reference to Islam. That being said, for several years Thompson was a part of the Muslim revert community in Norwich – a community that has grown to become a vibrant exemplar for Muslim converts in Britain (including several prominent Muslim hip hop musicians in London)<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, Cat Stevens became Yusuf Islam and abandoned music entirely for a time, before gradually moving back into the spotlight with reinterpretations of nasheeds and – after picking up his guitar once more – newly-written ‘Islamic pop songs’. Yusuf Islam has subsequently become a symbolic figure of inspiration for Muslim musicians in the UK.



**Figure 1:** *Pour Down Like Silver*, by Richard and Linda Thompson (1975). The ‘orientalised’ Sufi-inspired photograph of Richard Thompson is quite striking.

Running partly in parallel to this countercultural spiritual movement, during the late 1970s and 1980s, South Asian Muslim musicians slowly began to develop out of their own cultural isolation. They essentially emerged alongside – despite being *concealed by* – a politics of resistance. A common experience of discrimination by all non-white migrant communities led to a politics of anti-racism that asserted ethnic minority rights under the umbrella term ‘black’ (Kalra *et al*, 1996). ‘Asian’ identity featured at best as the neglected penumbra; ‘Muslim’ identity was simply concealed. Thus, the white

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.muslimsofnorwich.org.uk/>

Left, motivated by anti-racism, celebrated the emergence of *'black music'*, unaware of the blanketing silence that this imposed upon many within that generalization. It was during this period that certain forms of 'traditional' South Asian and Arab music were held up by anti-racism campaigners as the exotic markers of multiethnic Britain. Such musicians could be seen performing alongside a range of exoticised others during the marches and parades that took place in large urban centres. While highly visible in a politically symbolic sense, the authentic identities of these musicians – religious or otherwise – were largely ignored.

During this time, beyond the public eye, Muslim musicians were keeping alive a grassroots tradition of Arabic nasheeds and Urdu/Punjabi na'ats – songs that would predominantly be performed at a mosque, in the home, or at religious/community celebrations. This grassroots, paraliturgical musical tradition was extremely important during this period. It kept alive a connection between Islam and music, but it also furthermore inspired a new generation of Muslim musicians – musicians who grew-up during the 80s/90s, before 'coming of age' and beginning to exert varying degrees of cultural influence on Muslims in Britain.

It is only in more recent times that Muslim musicians have emerged into the public sphere as *Muslims*. During the 1990s, motivated in part by the Rushdie affair, a small number of second-generation Muslim musicians began to experience relative success with alternative styles of music – the most notable example being Aki Nawaz's band Fun-Da-Mental. Combining a mixture of musical styles – including heavy-rock, rap and Qawwali – Fun-Da-Mental were a multi-ethnic group with controversial lyrics and an aggressive image rooted in notions of social justice (Hutnyk, 2000). While Fun-Da-Mental were to some extent self-consciously 'Islamic' (Swedenburg, 2001) – producing songs peppered with lines from the Qur'an – they were unable to escape, in either academic discourse or common parlance, being subsumed under the newly recognised category of 'Asian music' – a genre that was largely dominated by hybrid styles of Bhangra music. Continuing within a tradition of political resistance, Fun-Da-Mental were perhaps less concerned with expressing their Islamic identity than they were with belonging to a broad anti-imperialist movement, within which 'Islamic' motifs often slotted quite comfortably – such as Malcolm X or the Palestinian struggle. It is also worth considering that – despite intense academic interest – there is little evidence that Fun-Da-Mental had a widespread or lasting impact on the mainstream Muslim majority Britain. I would instead argue that Fun-Da-Mental found a niche that straddled an alternative mainstream music culture, on the one hand, and a particular generation of liberal Muslim professionals, on the other.

It was toward the end of the 1990s that two styles of music would emerge to have a significant and continuing influence on mainstream Muslim musical cultures in Britain. The first was the contemporary nasheed style. Drawing from both the poetic Arabic nasheed and South Asian na'at

traditions, this style of music attempted to express Islamic themes through English, as well as through the inclusion of popular musical styles that would be more familiar to a younger, British-born generation of Muslims. Early examples of nasheed performers in this style include the groups, Shaam (from 1997) and Aashiq Al Rasul (from 1998). It was a musical style that drew inspiration from the notion of an Islamic art tradition – ranging from architecture, through to calligraphy and poetry – with a corresponding desire to transpose and develop this heritage within the British context. The primary drivers of this movement were (and still are) young South Asian Muslims and, to a lesser extent, the children of Muslim exiles, migrants and refugees from the Middle East.

The second style of music that became significant for some young Muslims, also toward the end of the 1990s, was hip hop. This expressive poetic-musical style, with its emphasis on the idioms of urbanity and of speaking truth to power, was in many respects an ideal vehicle of self-expression for a generation of socially-excluded and economically disadvantaged young Muslims. This was coupled to the undeniable reality that saw hip hop gradually become a global sound for young people in a range of diverse and contemporary societies. It is a familiar form of music that has become embedded within mainstream popular culture. Yet beyond the obvious reasons for the success of hip hop amongst some Muslims, there were also additional reasons why hip hop specifically became the music of choice for a certain sub-section of young Muslims in Britain.

From the beginning of the 1990s there was a growing interest in Islam amongst the African-Caribbean communities of Britain. The impact of Spike Lee's biographical film on Malcolm X is often highlighted as a moment when a new generation of Black Britons began to connect Afrocentric ideologies to Islamic belief and Muslim identity. Through the 1990s, then, a gradual process of conversion began to bring young black people to Islam, including young men in prison who were looking for structure and meaning within their lives (Reddie, 2009). When it is considered that hip hop originated in an urban African-American culture and has always had a special place amongst the transatlantic Black diaspora (Rose, 1994), it was perhaps inevitable that these individuals would bring an interest in hip hop with them when they converted to Islam. The connection between hip hop and Islam was anyway already well established in America, with numerous hip hop artists publicly and musically expressing their Muslim faith. It was toward the end of the 1990s that British Muslims began to experiment with hip hop as a means of expression. Early pioneers of this musical form in Britain included Mecca2Medina and the Planets. These two groups were the forerunners for an explosion of interest in Muslim hip hop that was to take place from the beginning of the new millennium.

## Contemporary Muslim Music: An Emerging Generation

The importance of this historical context lies not just in revealing the progression and development of various musical styles, but also in indicating how music is often fundamentally linked to a situated reality and notions of societal belonging. Early British Muslim musicians remained practitioners of 'traditional' musical styles (such as Qawwali) because they, along with their fellow migrants, were rejected by the host society. These communities felt 'out of place', separated from their *true culture*, with which they would (one day) be reunited (Anwar, 1979). Similarly, a second generation of British Muslim musicians were born from the anti-racist struggles of the 1980s. These musicians, along with the migrant communities that they sought to represent, felt a sense of ethnic entitlement that, in the main, often transcended their religious identity. However essentialized that movement may have been (Sharma et al, 1996), there was still a sense in which British Muslim musicians felt part of a wider process, whereby a lingering imperialist system was challenged – not just within Britain, but globally.

The number of British Muslim musicians releasing recorded material and becoming visible in the Muslim public sphere has increased significantly over the last decade or so. Even a cursory glance at many of the musicians currently making an impact on the British Muslim music scene will support his claim. Sami Yusuf, Amir Awan, Mohammed Yahya, Blakstone, Poetic Pilgrimage – none have released albums before 2000. In fact, even during the 1990s it was not really possible to talk about a popularised 'Muslim music scene' in Britain. While it is of course not entirely satisfactory to draw a neat dividing line down between these musicians and those from an earlier era, I would nonetheless suggest that these individuals represent a 'new wave' of Muslim music in Britain. These particular forms of music and artistic expression are arguably rooted in the pressing social, political and cultural concerns that have shaped and continue to influence the lives of young Muslims in Britain. While such issues are of course relevant for *all* Muslims in the UK, they specifically represent a set of crucial 'environmental' factors underpinning the social realities of this assertive generation – a generation that cannot remember the early struggles of their migrant forebears or a time predating the contemporary socio-political context of Muslims in Britain. There are two key issues underpinning and influencing this generationally marked cultural movement.

First, a general and increasingly heightened Muslim subjectivity has visibly marked the production of British Muslim music over the last decade or more. Many of the musicians that have been active in Britain over the last few years 'came of age' throughout the 1990s, a time during which British Muslims were still dealing with the controversy surrounding the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War. It was a period during which British Muslims were increasingly encountering prejudice; a time when discourses relating to identity, integration and national belonging were beginning to heat up. These social trends only intensified following the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., as a series of escalating events placed Muslim



communities all over the world under public scrutiny. I contend, then, that just as groups like Fun-Da-Mental arose from the anti-racist/anti-imperialist struggles of the 1980s, so too have a new generation of British Muslim musicians emerged – this time linked to the specific difficulties that Muslim communities have recently encountered in the UK.

A second reason why contemporary Muslim music is distinct from an earlier era relates to the linked notions of Muslim consumer markets and public spheres. It appears that there has been the gradual development of a distinct and coherent British Muslim public: that is, there has been an acknowledgement that British Muslims have a unique set of social and cultural requirements that cannot otherwise be satisfied in the ‘public square’. This has manifested itself in the form of a growing consumer market concerned with Muslim events, services, goods and cultural products. But it has also involved the formation of a distinctly Muslim public sphere in Britain – a public space that is centred on Muslim media resources (Ahmed, 2005) – through which discourses and cultural narratives specific to Muslims in Britain are deployed. Contemporary Muslim musicians are distinct from an earlier generation, then, in the sense that they operate within and partly shape this consumer market and public sphere – they have become *celebrity figures* for a particular British Muslim subculture. Unlike earlier manifestations of Muslim music in Britain, contemporary Muslim musicians are contributing toward a wider and coherent culture of ‘British Muslimness’. That is, they are using innovative forms of cultural expression to consolidate notions of Muslim identity, as well as helping shape the Muslim communities, institutions and public discourses that frequently characterise the experiences of Muslims in contemporary Britain.

### **British Muslim Musical Soundscapes**

In the final section of this chapter I will outline the musical realities that constitute the ‘Muslim music scene’ in Britain. It will be clear by the end of this section that a number of different styles and musical genres characterise Muslim music in Britain; these are: contemporary nasheeds, syncretic styles, and Muslim hip hop. While these musical styles often appeal to different subcultural and/or mainstream audiences, they are nonetheless brought together – as Muslim music – within the context of the British Muslim public sphere. To take one example, Muslim hip hop musicians might perform at a mainstream hip hop festival, but they are also invited to perform at Islamic events alongside nasheed artists and other Muslim musicians – this switch in context effectively transforms them from ‘hip hop musicians’ to ‘Muslim musicians’. These intersecting spheres of musical influence are therefore both complex and difficult to map, but they are at the very least indicative of the unsettled and dynamic cultural landscape that young Muslims in Britain are increasingly required to traverse.

### ***Contemporary Nasheeds***

In mosques and homes up and down the UK, religious celebrations and community events are punctuated by the rising sound of voice in song. In Urdu, Punjabi, Arabic, Farsi or English, with carefully controlled cadences, stark intonation and simple melody – though nonetheless thrumming with emotion – this is the sound of the ‘traditional’ nasheed (or na’at). Na’at is often used as a shorthand reference to a South Asian Muslim poetic tradition – that is, melodic narration in Urdu or Punjabi, unaccompanied by any instrument. Nasheed is broader in remit but is usually understood to apply to an Arab vocal tradition, with simple songs – potentially accompanied by light percussion – that can stretch back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. In the UK these two different styles of music/poetry are often understood interchangeably, with the general designation of ‘nasheed’ being the most appropriate catch-all term.

While somewhat prone to disagreement or confusion over terminology, style and scope, the defining feature of this genre is a clear focus on lyrics praising Allah or the Prophet Muhammad, an emphasis on vocality, and, if not the complete rejection of instrumentation (either as *haram* or simply unnecessary), then at least a restriction to the use of membranophones (such as a simple hand drum). Praise is given to those with ‘a good, clean voice’, while overwhelming significance is attached to ‘the message’ contained within the lyrics – it is important to understand that which is being sung.

There is a vibrant amateur tradition of nasheed within Britain. Different mosque communities often contain a group of men that will perform nasheeds for the benefit of their fellow worshipers – much as a neighbouring church may well host an amateur choir and an organ player or two. Women will also perform, but usually within the privacy of a home gathering for other women and children, and also usually to commemorate a significant or personal event (such as the birth of a child), or during times of celebration (such as *Mawlid* or Eid). In the British South Asian context, this amateur tradition draws from a rich history of Urdu and Punjabi na’ats, as well as maintaining contemporary transnational links with, in particular, Pakistan. This includes sponsoring na’at performers to visit from abroad, and drawing from a shared song repertoire. The amateur tradition furthermore emphasises a pure, unadulterated style, and the use of any instruments is usually prohibited. The genre also tends to sit quite comfortably alongside the art of Qur’anic cantillation; the two are often performed together at an event and to the unfamiliar ear they can sound somewhat alike in meter and intonation.

It is from within this amateur tradition that I would suggest the roots of a growing professional British nasheed genre have emerged. In the public sphere, all of the artists are male and the scene is overwhelmingly constituted by those from a South Asian ethnic heritage. These artists, while often drawing from a tradition of Arabic and South Asian nasheeds, tend to differ from the amateur style. They are experimenting with the genre – pulling away from passive repetition or mimesis of traditional

material – in an attempt to make it ‘more relevant’ for a young, British Muslim audience. This includes the imaginative use of vocality – including vocal percussion and *a cappella* – as well as original English language nasheeds written by the artists themselves. The lyrics nonetheless tend to remain consistent with a focus on praising Allah and the Prophet Muhammad.

Compared to the grassroots nasheed tradition, this emerging contemporary nasheed style places more emphasis on the use of percussion instrumentation. A variety of instruments, such as the djembe, tabla and dombek, are regularly used to ‘get a different sound’. The careful use of percussion highlights one of the many appealing features of this form of music – that is, the avoidance of proscribed instruments. It is this combination of religious permissibility and overt Islamic lyricism that inclines many British Muslims toward the genre. While not necessarily performed or listened to in a religious context, I would describe this music as paraliturgical in the sense that it is a form of worship and connects to an orthodox religious sound that stretches from nasheed, through to Quranic recitation (*qira’ah*) and the call to prayer (*adhan*).

#### *Aashiq al-Rasul*

Based in Birmingham, the prolific Aashiq al-Rasul perhaps typify the contemporary nasheed style. They incorporate extensive percussion and are influenced by Arab and South Asian-style drumming. With two percussionists – utilising a variety of membranophones, from an electric drum kit to the dombek and tabla – their lyrics are often backed by music that incorporates interlocking or polymetric percussion instrumentation, handclapping, and humming. Their songs also include various recorded samples, from religious oratory through to natural sounds (such as the wind). In terms of musical influences, one of the group’s founders, Amran, has highlighted his understanding of South Asian *ragas*, while another founder member, Osman, talks about influences stemming from rock, jazz and funk.

There are eight members of the group (though some are part-time or ad hoc members): all are men, in their thirties and forties. The group have been performing for over ten years now and, remarkably, have released eight albums, with an additional four compilations of one kind or another. Their success extends far beyond the UK, with international events a regular



feature – from South East Asia and North America, through to Europe and the Middle East. The

**Figure 2:** Aashiq Al-Rasul

group operate out of a converted building that doubles up as a small community centre and Sufi *tariqa* run by Amran. Indeed, the group's Sufi influences are notably visible, particularly through their keen utilisation of percussion and the lyrical nature of their songs, many of which place emphasis on praising the Prophet Muhammad and Allah.

#### *Amir Awan*

A London-based artist, Amir Awan is twenty nine years of age, with a degree in Mathematics from University College London and a career in investment banking. In his free time he performs as a nasheed artist and has released one album to date. From an early age Amir Awan studied the art of Quranic recitation, at Safar Academy, and would recite the Qur'an at various events across the UK. He has had additional vocal training at the Institute of Contemporary Music and Performance. Amir Awan's music does not use live instrumentation, but instead incorporates synthesised sounds and electronic/recorded percussion. A richness is given to the sound through careful studio production, with backing harmonies, drones, and looped beats. While certainly located in the contemporary British nasheed tradition, Amir Awan draws from R&B and other pop sounds, citing Michael Jackson as one of the most significant influences on his music. Yet his music remains simple and sparse, providing a platform for prominent English-language lyrics that cover a number of themes, from women and the *hijab* in Western society, to the praise of Allah, to remembrance of historic events (such as the battle between early Muslims and Meccans before Mount Uhud).

#### ***Syncretic Styles***

The second genre of Muslim music in the UK is arguably more complex and less easily categorised. While nasheeds are usually typified by a stripped-down musical style and/or a restriction to percussion instrumentation, it is increasingly possible to find syncretic styles of music that – like nasheeds – similarly take overtly Islamic themes as their subject. Indeed, such music might actually find itself being located within the auspices of the British nasheed industry, despite an often radically different sound. These syncretic styles of music perhaps resemble something like 'Islamic pop' and they can incorporate a range of musical influences, from classical guitar playing and folk-rock, to Sufi-style drumming, Qawwali, rap, R&B and the utilisation of Arab modal systems. The use of instrumentation can furthermore range from the imaginative use of multiple percussion instruments, to the acoustic guitar, and even a full-blown orchestra.

While the mish-mash of musical influences and traditions makes it difficult to clearly conceptualise this genre of syncretic music, a connecting thread seems to be the desire to produce Islamically-

themed music that is relevant for a predominantly youthful, English-speaking audience, as well as moving beyond the typical confines of the nasheed tradition. The subject matter of such music also tends to vary to a much greater extent. While a focus on Allah and the Prophet Muhammad still remains common, artists also promote political, ethical and lifestyle arguments that, while rooted in a particular Islamic worldview, nonetheless advance ideas that have appeal beyond a specifically Muslim audience. Musicians who practice these styles of music are therefore far more likely to argue that their music is capable of reaching out to non-Muslims and the musical mainstream.

### *Sami Yusuf*

Sami Yusuf is an ethnic Azeri, born in Tehran, but raised in London by parents who encouraged musical practice from a very young age. He was trained by a succession of teachers and musicians in both the classical traditions of Europe and the Middle East. His first album was ultimately a product of this training. *Al-Mu`allim*, released in 2003, combines a variety of membranophones and related percussive styles<sup>2</sup>, with Western melodies and lyrics that are largely either in Arabic or English. Yusuf's second album, *My Ummah*, utilises a range of instruments in an attempt to combine musical traditions<sup>3</sup> – it has a resulting sound that is highly polished and often described as 'Islamic pop'. His third album, *Wherever You Are*, continues this movement toward a global pop-sound, with greater reliance on the piano and an acoustic guitar. Having sold millions of albums worldwide, Sami Yusuf is usually recognised as the most successful Muslim musician on the global stage (with the possible exception of Yusuf Islam).

Sami Yusuf is distinguished by his gradual move away from nasheed-influenced musical styles, to a type of spiritually-inclined pop music that he himself has termed 'Spiritique'. Accordingly, not only has his sound become a little more generic and less rooted in a distinctive Middle Eastern tradition, but he is beginning to write song lyrics that are influenced less by specific religious content and more by a desire to reach out to a general, spiritually-sensitive listener (both Muslim and non-Muslim). Both sonically and semantically, it would be reasonable to state that Sami Yusuf is attempting to break into the global mainstream.



**Figure 3:** Sami Yusuf

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<sup>2</sup> These included daff, tombak, marimba, tabla and a variety of African and Arab drums.

<sup>3</sup> These included piano, violin, flute, drums, oud, santour, tar, and tombak.

### *Pearls of Islam*

Pearls of Islam is a London-based duo consisting of two sisters, both in their early-twenties and from an African-Caribbean background. The children of converts to Islam, Rabiah and Sakinah produce gentle, poetic music that incorporates a range of musical styles, including influences of nasheed, folk, soul and rap. Utilising instruments that include the guitar and a selection of membranophones – such as the djembe and doumbek – they cite extensive influences that range from the Malian heavy-blues group, Tinariwen, through to the roots-rock of the American musician, Ben Harper. Through their lyrics they attempt to translate their Islamic beliefs into a universal language of spirituality and morality, with the aim of achieving a wider resonance beyond the boundaries of the traditional Muslim collectivity. Their music correspondingly tends to focus on personal and spiritual journeying – a delicate and at times beautiful evocation of faith, belief and optimism in modern Britain.

### **Muslim Hip Hop**

The third and final musical genre that has emerged in Britain is so-called 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' hip hop. The relationship between Muslims and hip hop in America has received long-standing attention – in part because Islam was embedded within mainstream American hip hop from its inception. Yet Muslim hip hop is a comparatively recent phenomenon in the UK, with an increasing number of acts having emerged over the last decade. While the idea of a 'global hip hop *umma*' has been repeatedly highlighted by some (Aidi, 2004; Alim, 2005; Ackfeldt, 2012) it is important to remember that this scene is bounded as much by national and local context as it is shaped by the multiple arcs of transnational creativity and social interaction.

In relation to musical style, Muslim hip hop undoubtedly places extreme emphasis on the function of language, cadence and rhyme, positioning itself as the innovative vanguard of an ancient tradition in Islamic poetry. In terms of lyrical content, it tends to be less devotional in the abstract, with a greater focus on individual lifestyle and moral practice. Furthermore, there tends to be an overriding concern with contemporary social and political issues, ranging from the status and role of Muslim women, to popularised political campaigns, such as Palestine. So although Muslim hip hop largely tends to articulate itself in terms of an ethical earnestness, it nonetheless ranges from the satirical and the playful through to the challenging and the controversial.

### *Poetic Pilgrimage*

Poetic Pilgrimage is an assertive hip hop and spoken word duo, based in London. The group consists of two female converts in their early-thirties, Sukina and Muneera, who are both from Bristol and are the children of Jamaican parents. Citing influences that include West African music, soul, jazz and

reggae, Poetic Pilgrimage are particularly inspired by the socially-conscious hip hop movement of the 1990s – an American cultural and music tradition that includes hip hop musicians such as Mos Def, Common and Nas.

In ideological terms, Poetic Pilgrimage consciously attempt to pull together notions of afrocentrism, Britishness and their Islamic faith – ideas that are necessarily filtered through an uncompromising feminist politics. With searing lyrics that tackle issues such as misogyny, global politics, faith and spirituality, Poetic Pilgrimage have made a deep and controversial impact on the Muslim music scene. Resisted by some as too outspoken and incendiary – not to mention the complicating religious issues surrounding female performance – they are nonetheless embraced by others as emblematic of a young and self-confident generation of Muslim women in Britain.



**Figure 4:** Poetic Pilgrimage

### *Quest Rah*

A young and articulate Londoner, Quest Rah writes, produces and raps over his own thoughtful and technically-proficient hip hop. With dense electronic beats and a range of intimately blended samples, Quest Rah produces a sound that consciously reaches back to some of the legendary hip hop figures, including Gang Starr<sup>4</sup>, who pioneered the ‘East Coast’ sound in New York. Despite this familiar and much admired influence, Quest Rah attempts to develop his own unique sound by reaching toward the musical soundscapes of his father’s country, Egypt. Quest Rah accordingly works a range of classical Arab and other ‘world music’ samples into his traditional sound, leading many to describe his music as ‘East Coast meets Middle East’<sup>5</sup>.

Perhaps because Quest Rah actively began practising his Islamic faith only a week before the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., as well as recording music shortly after the invasion of Iraq, he acknowledges himself that his early music took on a hard, outspoken edge. Yet his powerful criticism of American hegemony and George W. Bush merely reflected and channelled the undoubted anger that swirled around during that era. Since that particularly acute moment in our shared social and political past,

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<sup>4</sup> Gang Starr was an influential hip hop duo that heavily influenced the development of a unique ‘East Coast’ hip hop sound rooted in the evolving urban culture of New York. East Coast hip hop placed particular emphasis on multi-syllabic rhymes, intricate lyrics and heavy electronic beats. It is distinguished from the gangster-influenced, musically sparse West Coast hip hop sound.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.rapreviews.com/archive/2008\\_11\\_ancienttapesv1.html](http://www.rapreviews.com/archive/2008_11_ancienttapesv1.html) [accessed 03.11.12]

Quest Rah now produces music that deals with issues ranging from spirituality and self-knowledge through to the problem of violence among young men and the problems of urban 'street life'. By weaving religious, historical and mythological themes into his lyrics, Quest Rah provides a unique and refreshing look at a range of contemporary issues.

### **Conclusion**

The long-term relationship in Britain between Muslim musicians and a wider Muslim youth culture is unclear. Are we witnessing a religious and cultural 'flash in the pan' or a more sustained upheaval of attitudes, experiences and expectations? While the answer to this question cannot be resolved without more sustained observation and research – that is, the ongoing trends are currently unverifiable – it does seem clear that Muslim musicians are at the forefront of cultural change amongst some young Muslims in Britain. These musicians frequently incorporate a range of salient themes into their music – from late-modern notions of spirituality and religious practice, through to political activism, national/transnational identities and gender issues. They also consciously draw on divergent strands of cultural practice in a confident attempt to fuse together multiple styles of music. While the full implications of these dynamics might not be entirely clear, the confluence of these factors does at the very least highlight an important research agenda. That is, there is an ongoing need to more seriously consider the intersecting nature of cultural practice with social and religious change amongst young Muslims in contemporary Britain.

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