

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 14

A Lot of Kids Are Angry

Frustrated with the direction that mainstream Hip Hop was taking, Tony 'Bilal' Ishola decided to set up a magazine that would reflect a new wave of consciousness among Muslim Hip Hop artists after 9/11. He is interviewed here by Yahya Birt. The interview was published on Yahya Birt's website <http://www.yahyabirt.com>

YB: When and how did Islamic influences come into popular music in the West?

TI: It's always been there ever since black people came to the West. They brought their culture and their music. Hip Hop is just poetry spoken over beats really. Rhythm and poetry, that's basically what rap music is.

YB: Do you think there was a Muslim influence there, even if it wasn't seen that way?

TI: Yes, there always has been. And even when Hip Hop music started with people like Afrika Bambaataa in the 1970s, they used samples of Malcolm X. So there's always been some form of influence in Hip Hop.

YB: How about Muslim rappers?

TI: In the 1990s when I began to get conscious of these sorts of things, I noticed Moss Def for example. He's one of the best Muslim rappers that I know. Though he sings about lots of things, he doesn't hide the fact that he's Muslim.

YB: When did a Muslim Hip Hop scene kick off in the UK?

TI: I'm not too aware of when it kicked off in the UK as I spent my teenage years in Nigeria. As for those in the UK who didn't hide their religion in their music I would say that this is something new. It's something that came in the 2000s. It came as a result of other people telling young Muslims what to think about their religion. They felt they had a different opinion to express and they just decided to use their talents to express it. It's not just in Hip Hop, it's in other forms of culture and art, and in business, film and broadcasting too. Muslims are now expressing themselves more, expressing their religion more, using whatever gifts Allah has given them for *da`wah*.

YB: The Muslim Hip Hop scene in the UK seems to be getting bigger.

TI: The internet has helped a lot of Muslim artists from Morocco, from Amsterdam, from America, from the UK, from South Africa, from everywhere. People have set up various websites, and artists have used MySpace to get their music out there. It's out there, but it's not been getting the attention that it deserves, but people who are into this type of Hip Hop know where to find it.

YB: It seems that there are many different messages that Muslim Hip Hop in the UK is sending out, particularly political ones because of the current situation. It's quite a political, socially-conscious form of Hip Hop isn't it?

TI: Yes, yes. I'm all for freedom of speech. It's no hidden fact that a lot of kids in the West are angry, and they have opinions and they want to express them. I don't think these opinions should be suppressed. At one point I think we should all sit down and discuss our differences. That's my opinion. A lot of these kids have chequered pasts — some of them have been to prison, and some of them discovered Islam while in prison. Islam has given them a different perspective on life, and a lot of them are angry about the angle the war on terror is taking, what's going on in Palestine and issues like that. Muslims feel this affects them personally and these kids feel they have something to say. Instead of meeting in secret to discuss these issues, why shouldn't they express themselves openly so long as they are not harming anybody? The Platform Magazine is out to encourage that sort of thing.

YB: What kind of reception has Muslim Hip Hop had from the Muslim community here in the UK?

TI: From the Muslim community in the UK, it's been mostly positive, but you do get a few who come up to you and say that Islam and Hip Hop shouldn't mix. I think fair enough, no problem, fine, if you think that Hip Hop is *haram*, then simply don't listen to it. Spread the da`wah the way you know best and I'll do what I can do.

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