

THE CLASH

PUNK MEETS ISLAM IN A LOCAL BAND THAT SHREDS STEREOTYPES

By Omar Sacirbey
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NEW YORK Basim Usmani and Shahjehan Khan had already decided they weren't going to play a song whose title includes the name of a 13th-century Muslim poet and a slur for homosexual. If taken out of context, they worried, the song might be misconstrued as a bad joke and the musicians as a pair of gay-bashing Pakistani-American Muslims.

In fact, the song is a farcical jab at Siraj Wahhaj, a tough-talking Brooklyn imam who is admired for his fiery sermons and anticrime programs but who in 1992 allegedly said he would burn down a proposed gay-friendly mosque in Toronto. The song is well known to young Muslims who read webzines such as MuslimWakeUp .com, where it was briefly available as an MP3, and get the references to Wahhaj and Rumi, the Sufi poet. But although the song's point has been made to Muslims, the mostly white audience at a Brooklyn bar called Galapagos last month probably wouldn't have gotten it.

"What are we proving by playing it to a bunch of just punk-rock kids who've got no idea?" said Usmani, 22, who lives in Lexington.

So singer/bassist Usmani, guitarist Khan, and their drummer Adam Brierley kept Rumi under wraps. Instead, kids in mohawks and goth gear danced to "Sharia Law in the USA" and "Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay."

Meet the Kominas, a musical threesome from the Boston area ready to take on conservative clergy and Homeland Security.

Their music has attracted fans of all stripes but speaks to young South Asian Muslims who identify with both their faith and American culture, and yet feel welcomed by neither. They're fed up with racist classmates, judgmental relatives, suspicious neighbors, and the extremists Islamic and Islamophobic who have made it a burden to be Muslim in the United States. But thanks to online communities and sites like MySpace, where they post songs and have attracted a substantial following, they now have a pulpit, too.

The band's next shows are Saturday at the Chandni Raat Night of the Moon Festival at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell and May 7 at Club Hell in Providence.

The Kominas, whose name means "bastards" in Punjabi, say they hate labels but offer "Bollywood Muslim punk" to describe their sound, a blend of punk, metal, and Bhangra folk music. The lyrics, written mainly by Usmani, are clever, sometimes risqué commentaries on racial profiling, foreign policy, and religion.

The Kominas are among the first American Muslim musicians to emerge from a nascent punk culture its adherents call Taqwacore, the name taken from a novel by a white convert to Islam named Michael Muhammad Knight. If it develops and channel MTV Desi has already done a spot on the Kominas the band will likely be remembered as Taqwacore's pioneers.

The Taqwacores

Knight was 15, listening to Public Enemy and reading "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," when he converted. As a teenager, he was rapt with faith and went to Pakistan to study Islam, and even considered joining Pakistani mujahideen bound for Chechnya before a teacher counseled him against it.

But this almost-John Walker Lindh also saw corruption, poverty, and racism in Pakistan and returned home to upstate New York dogged by doubts about his faith. After bouncing in and out of college, Knight, now 28, began writing "The Taqwacores," a novel about a group of Muslim punk rockers who smoked dope, read scripture, slam-danced, prayed, had sex, and embodied the tolerance and compassion that Islam encouraged but that, in Knight's view, were being neglected in favor of rules and rigidity.

He made copies and drove to Chicago, where the Islamic Society of North America, arguably the country's biggest Muslim organization, was hosting close to 40,000 people at its 2003 annual convention. There, he peddled the novel from his backpack to young Muslims who looked like they might relate.

"The Taqwacores" was ultimately picked up for distribution by Alternative Tentacles, the publisher and music label owned by former Dead Kennedys vocalist Jello Biafra. By early last year it had developed a small following of young South Asians, or Desis, and Muslims, including Usmani and Khan.

Around the same time, Usmani was beginning to hear from disgruntled Desi peers who responded to his online ruminations about music, identity, and community pressures.

"I was browsing and came across your journal," begins one entry. "Relief only just begins to emphatically stress what I felt realising your [sic] pakistani and have a mohawk too."

"My sister and I are intending on starting a Paki-Ska band," goes another. "I've already penned down a metal version to 'Tujhe Dekha To Ye Jaana Sanam' with an insane solo. . . Come visit, dear. Have some daal, smoke a bowl or two, and we can jam."

Other entries came from a Pakistani metalhead told by white peers to "act his culture," a headscarf-wearing punk, a gay Palestinian, and an Israeli who said that even though she's not a Desi, she could relate.

And of course, the band members had issues of their own.

"I grew up anti-Desi I didn't want anything to do with Pakistan," said Khan, who grew up and still lives in Boxborough. "I think I felt guilty for being different, and it just didn't make sense: Why are my parents so weird? Why is my culture so weird? I hope I don't smell like curry when I leave the house."

Before long, Usmani concluded there was an appetite for punk made for Desis. "There hasn't been an avenue for kids in America from our background to express ourselves, until we started this band. If there were already musicians that were doing this, we wouldn't have had to form this band we'd just be going to their concerts."

Odd men out

When they were high school freshmen, Usmani and Khan became friends skipping religion classes at their Wayland mosque. Last year, they found themselves bonding again, this time over "The Taqwacores." Usmani, a senior at UMass-Lowell, and Khan, who works for a film production company, became fast friends with Knight, now one of the most controversial writers in the Muslim blogosphere, who occasionally documented their high jinks on MuslimWakeUp.com, to the chagrin of their parents. They wrote the "Rumi" song that spring, and the Kominas, with "The Taqwacores" as their manifesto, were born. (The band doesn't have a regular drummer, using a rotating cast instead.)

Amin Salahuddin, one of a handful of Muslims who saw the Kominas' Brooklyn show, believes the band will resonate with young Muslims like himself.

"The lyrics about living in a post-9/11 situation as a young Desi or South Asian kid growing up in America relates to me," said Salahuddin, 22, of Teaneck, N.J. "It's pretty easy to get into it. Those kinds of cynical lyrics, those catchy tunes, using punk rock as a delivery, that's what gets me."

Consider "Sharia Law in the USA," which Usmani said he wrote after listening to Public Enemy's "Fear of a Black Planet." Appropriating a term that makes many Americans uneasy, "Sharia Law" explores fears that American Muslims experience and the perils they face under the Patriot Act.

"Rabyah" is a scathing critique of the international reaction to last October's devastating earthquake in Kashmir, which Usmani wrote after spending a month there with his mother, an oncologist at Massachusetts General Hospital who was volunteering. Other songs make references to Bollywood movies and romances with Farsi-speaking girls in hijabs "covered in patches." The "Rumi" song, on the other hand, has earned them admiration in some Muslim quarters, and scorn in others, for criticizing homophobia.

"I would stand with people like the Kominas because I believe they're fighting injustice," said Hodaya Ziad, 28, who is pursuing a PhD in Islamic studies at Yale and edits Chowrangi, a magazine for "progressive" Pakistani-Americans. "They're in a society which in many ways is anti-Muslim, and then on the other hand they're odd man out among the Muslims as well."

It's too early to tell whether the Kominas, who recently completed a five-song EP, and bands on their heels will really put together a scene that lasts. Punk has emerged in some Muslim countries and has also become popular with Muslim immigrants in the United Kingdom and a few other Western countries, although it is far less than developed than rock and hip-hop.

"The fact that they're the first guys to do this, they're going to create a lot of curiosity," said Iram Soomro, a 24-year-old Pakistani American from New York who saw the show. "Desis will look into it just because its something different."

And if Desis don't dig them, there are at least a few white kids who do. "I think music in general can use this kind of kick in the [pants]," said Zac Amico, who was at the Brooklyn show. "There are so many bands that are going up there, and when they're done, nobody's any different. And when you see the Kominas . . . you think."

Driving back to Boston the night after the Galapagos show, Usmani and Khan listened to a track of "Rumi" three times over. The hypnotic beat, cutting lyrics they liked it. "We should play this," Usmani mused.

Who knows, maybe they will.