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[Home](#) [Arts](#) [Arts](#) [Straight Outta Quran - Islam and hip-hop](#)

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Straight Outta Quran -
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Straight Outta Quran - Islam and hip-hop



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By **Lisa Reinisch**

When Timbaland played a DJ set on the beach of Abu Dhabi recently, the crowd was not what you'd expect at a hip-hop show: families including toddlers, schoolchildren, teenagers and grannies, many in traditional Muslim dress, turned up for the free gig.

On the surface the scene might have looked like a joyful demonstration of globalised pop culture. But on some level, it was a reminder of the trenches separating the various communities in the audience. Knowingly or not, Emiratis along with expats from all over the world had come together to listen to music about drugs, pimps and booty calls.

Tension was evident in the faces of parents and security guards on the sidelines, and Timbaland's numerous, cringe-inducing references to his love for the Middle East ("I love Abu Dhabi so much; my personal trainer is from Kuwait!"). If representative of anything, the scene showed that performing US rap in a strictly Muslim Arab country is no smooth ride – and asks for a lot more finesse.

After all, the jury is out on whether music as a whole – let alone hip-hop – is taboo for Muslims. The question at the heart of the issue is, can you be a good Muslim *and* be into hip-hop? Most artists and fans will answer with a resounding yes and cite positive content and cultural awareness as the key.

"I don't see my religion as a problem towards my music and I don't see my music as a problem towards my religion ... as long as music doesn't affect me negatively," says Narcycyst, an Iraqi-Canadian artist, who has just released his new album *Phatwah*. "I think your education and your family are more key to your actions than what music you listen to."

"The Quran does not say it's blasphemous. Music is a topic that is debated between Muslims, half are split and say if music has a positive feel topic-wise and also motivates positively then it's fine," says UAE-based duo Desert Heat, who have also just brought out their new album, *When the Desert Speaks*.

But there is no denying that prejudice and ignorance among authorities and audiences can be a problem. Desert Heat's first album was banned in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait "for the simple fact that two Arabs are making hip-hop, while Snoop Dogg's album is easily available. Maybe it's just a misunderstanding." Otherwise, the most common hassle for Arab hip-hop artists seems to be US immigration – a situation that is tackled in Narcycyst's biting funny *Phatwah* video.

But on the whole, these artists have experienced little interference with their work. Since only a tiny minority of very conservative Muslims subscribe to strict interpretations of the Quran that forbid music, those who take offence are few and far between.

Nevertheless, those radical few get a hell of a lot of attention. It's a 'juicy' debate the media love to latch onto – which is partly the reason you are reading this article right now, of course. To the aggravation of many Muslim hip-hop fans, the mass media have a habit of painting the sensationalist picture of a clash of civilisations – East against West.

"Mainstream media tries very hard to exploit this idea ... This is simply an opportunistic approach to dealing with this situation. Controversy sells," says Mustafa Davis, director of *Deen Tight*, a new documentary about Muslim hip-hop artists. Having grown up with hip-hop culture in the US, Davis converted to Islam in 1996. He gave up music for some years before allowing himself to listen to "positive" music again.

For Davis, the notion that Western modernity is incompatible with Islam is not to be taken seriously. "My Western side can attack the Islam in me, and my Islam can attack my Western being. Put that way it's comical ... just as funny as the rhetoric that Islam is against the West and vice versa. We live in a global village now."

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Deen Tight features Muslim artists such as Tyson Amir Mustafa, Mutah Beale (formerly Napoleon of Tupac Shakur's Outlawz), DJ Belike Muhammad and HBO Def Poet Amir Sulaiman. Their attitudes range from using hip-hop to proselytise (DJ Belike Muhammad) to the complete abandonment of music as an act of obedience to God (Mutah Beale). The many ways in which they approach faith and art is telling of how complex an issue this is. Watching the film, it is clear that it is also a deeply emotional one.

In a Muslim context, hip-hop has the potential to bring into play weighty issues such as religious interpretation, international relations, history, identity and multiculturalism. Islam is not 'just' a religion and hip-hop is not 'just' music – to many, both are ways of life. Consequently, most Muslim hip-hop artists have to negotiate multiple cultural identities.

"Hip-hop in the Middle East, we're still trying to find that voice," says Narcycyst. "There is a full spectrum of different kinds of artists. Some of the best hip-hop I've heard comes out of camps in Lebanon and Palestine. And then I've seen people on the extreme other side, who are rich and make hip-hop music."

In trying to bring together cultural identities, Muslim hip-hop artists have a fine balance to strike. They run the risk of either resorting to too much dirt, thereby going against Islamic principles, or overdoing their devotion and losing credibility. Both would lead to predictable music and compromised ethics. Muslim or not, only unusually gifted artists manage to produce quality hip-hop that excludes sex, drugs, decadence and crime – The Roots, K-Os and K'naan, for example. It's simply a whole lot harder to carve out your own niche than to mimic stuff that already has mass-appeal. Thankfully, it seems, plenty of artists are more than up for the challenge.

This is the first of two articles on Islam and hip-hop. Part two will be published on Monday 7th December

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