Sounds Islamic?

Muslim Music in Britain

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PhD Religious and Theological Studies
Cardiff University
2013

For Rowan

*'May your heart always be joyful
and may your song always be sung'*
Bob Dylan – 'Forever Young'

And to Lisa

*For sharing this journey,
along with so many others*

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Lastly, my most profound thanks must go to those individuals who have been willing and eager to participate in the research. None of it would have been possible without the people who have taken the time to share their lives, their music and their laughter – above all, I hope that this work will live up to the expectations and trust that these individuals have placed in it.

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A note on translation
A number of non-English terms have been used in this document. For the sake of simplification I have avoided the use of formal transliteration, using instead only the standard Latin alphabet. These words have largely been italicised to signify their non-English origin. Exceptions include words that are so common now in English as to be an effective part of the English language (e.g., Allah, Eid, hajj etc).

adhan	the call to prayer
Allah	God
barakah	blessing
biradari	South Asian kinship network
daf	a handheld frame drum
da'wah	religious invitation
Eid	religious festival
fatwa	legal opinion (pl. *fatawa*)
Hadith	sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pl. *alhadith*)
Hadra	a Sufi devotional practice, often involving prayer, recitation and *zikr*
hajj	pilgrimage to Makkah
haram	forbidden
halal	permissible
imam	Muslim religious leader
jubba	a South Asian ankle-length robe
kafir	non-Muslim (pl. *kuffur*)
mahram	unmarriageable kin
maqam	Middle Eastern modes of music
Mawlid	The birthday celebration for the Prophet Muhammad
murid	Sufi disciple (pl. *muridun*)
nasheed	a religious song
na'at	a religious poem/song from South Asia
qawwali	a Sufi religious song
qira'ah	correct recitation of the Qur'an
sama	listening
Sheikh	spiritual teacher
tajwid	techniques and principles for correct recitation of the Qur'an
tariqah	Sufi order
'ulama	religious scholars
umma	global Muslim community
zakat	proscribed charity, one of the five pillars of Islam
zikr/dhikr	remembrance of God

Abstract

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Young Muslims in Britain are increasingly required to navigate an unsettled social, religious and cultural landscape. These complex dynamics encompass a range of factors: from sectarianism and the global marketplace of Islamic knowledge, through to the influence of diverse ethnic communities, the ubiquity of popular culture, and late-modern discourses relating to spirituality and religion. Religious practice, identity formation and social/cultural relationships are therefore a continual process of (re)negotiation, with young Muslims often adopting highly reflexive and pragmatic approaches to this uncertainty. Emerging from this turbulent context is a vibrant Muslim music culture.

This thesis provides an ethnographic account of this music culture – through engagement with both musicians and fans – whilst furthermore analysing the deeper significance of Muslim cultural production in contemporary Britain. The observations and arguments throughout are based on extensive fieldwork that took place over a period of approximately two years. A number of methodological strategies were employed: these included interviewing, participant observation and various online research methodologies (including an online survey).

While the ethnographic account provided in this thesis is an original and timely contribution to the study of Muslims in Britain, there are broader theoretical implications to emerge. In particular, the original concepts of 'Islamic Music' and 'Islamically-conscious music' are developed to better understand how Muslim musicians varyingly emphasise both their individual subjectivity and a more collectivist sense of religious belonging. By examining the development of a distinct British Muslim public sphere, it will therefore be claimed that Muslim musicians are using cultural production as a vehicle to simultaneously contest, negotiate and develop ideas of Muslim practice and collectivity in contemporary Britain.

1. Muslim Music in Britain: An Introduction

On a warm Sunday afternoon, in early September 2011, large crowds are strolling around the grounds of a 19th 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. 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. The term might be somewhat problematic, resisted and contested – and such tensions will be explored – but as a conceptual shorthand I intend to refer to this musical culture throughout as 'British Muslim music'.

British Muslim music contains a variety of musical styles, including nasheed and hip hop – the two most practiced forms of Muslim music – but also a gradual and tentative interest in alternative styles of popular music. The scene is furthermore populated by a range of unique and interesting individuals, each with their own particular background, interests and distinctive approach as a musician. Muslim music partially encapsulates the organic complexity of Islam in Britain: unsettled, diverse, and at times counterintuitive.

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 as a musician 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.

These musicians – and those like them – will be the focus of attention throughout this thesis. My aim is straightforward: to examine broader issues of contemporary relevance through the prism of an emergent Muslim music culture. In doing so, I will document and analyse an important cultural phenomenon – that is, Muslim musicians in contemporary Britain – while furthermore making more extensive claims regarding issues such as

religious authority, spirituality, Islamic consumerism, ethnicity, class, and globalisation. I will therefore reference pre-existing streams of literature, but also develop new and neglected research avenues relating to the study of Muslims in Britain. While I accordingly cover a wide range of issues, the overarching theoretical discourse that will bind my ideas together is a consideration of British Muslims and modernity. Central to this agenda is my argument that notions of Islamically-grounded plurality are woven together with complex inflections of community and individuality in an increasingly confident and multidimensional British Muslim public sphere.

Contested Cultural Spaces: The Outline of a Research Agenda

As most scholars of contemporary religion will testify, one never need look particularly hard when searching for real-world examples to characterise and support the arguments at hand. As I sit writing this introduction, it is impossible to avoid considering the events that rage across television screens and internet news feeds – convulsions at once so distant and removed, yet simultaneously unfolding with the startling compression of place and the alacrity of a hurried, pin-wheeling and interconnected world. I refer to the furore surrounding a low-budget film, *The Innocence of Muslims*. In September 2012, this avowedly anti-Islamic film – conceived and produced in California by an Egyptian Coptic Christian – sparked demonstrations and violent protests across parts of the Muslim world. Available only through the internet – and residing at the extreme fringes of mainstream culture – this film nonetheless managed to ignite passions and draw responses from a variety of world leaders. The American president, Barack Obama, for instance, described the film as 'disgusting' but simultaneously found it necessary to defend the values of free speech.

This was a familiar and rather telling incident for a number of reasons. It vividly demonstrates the rapid and extreme fecundity of global discourses within localised contexts. This might seem a rather superficial claim, but it is nonetheless worth considering the extent to which symbolic and globalised meta-events are capable of triggering a plurality of reactions in different local/national contexts. Second, it highlights the ease with which small and ideological groups are able to dramatically shape political and media discourse. Provoked by this film and encouraged by a small clique of religious

leaders, relatively tiny groups of Muslims took to the streets to demonstrate against the film – in most countries these crowds amounted to only a few hundred people. Indeed, contrary to the 'violent mobs' depicted across television screens, magazine covers and the internet, Muslims everywhere overwhelming stayed at home. Yet it is the final feature of this incident that is so emblematic of the concerns that will underpin my arguments throughout this thesis. Once again, that supposedly generic group – *Muslims* – are portrayed as hyper-sensitive, dismissive of free speech, and largely uncomprehending of enlightenment values.

I raise this incident, not as a means to plug into well-worn academic debates about media representations of Muslims (for example, see Poole, 2002; Meer, 2006; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), but to highlight the *values of association* that undeniably percolate within mainstream debates regarding Islam in the West. In some respects these concerns have not shifted since the watershed events surrounding the Rushdie affair (Modood, 1990). Muslims in Britain – then and now – are often denied the space to make challenging political and social critiques, founded on the values of a democratic society, whilst simultaneously being pilloried as antithetical to the conventions of civility and rational engagement.

The presumptive thread that characterises my arguments throughout this thesis, then, is a modest attempt to develop a critical avenue that runs contrary to these flawed associations. Through my examination of British Muslim music, it is possible to demonstrate that a diverse group of Muslim musicians are using culture as a means to project complex, hybrid and negotiated ideas – relating to religion, politics, and cultural practice – into shared public spaces.

This was a research agenda that gently developed over the course of the fieldwork. In the first instance, I had indeed elected to research British Muslim musicians because it seemed apparent that there was a positive story to tell. But the specifics of this narrative remained hazy and ultimately shifted over time – like all good ethnographic voyages, the wind and the currents carried me in a direction that I could not quite have foreseen. Having said this, the empirical scope of the research remained relatively constant: to explore and analyse the experiences of Muslim musicians in the UK. Before considering this empirical grounding in greater detail, it is necessary first to more fully elaborate the

research agenda and the broad theoretical thrust that characterises my research findings throughout – that is, to summarise the sociological, philosophical and (dare I say it) moral significance of my work.

My research agenda is partly rooted in two relatively recent publications that have drawn attention to new and exciting realms of academic possibility. In the first of these publications, *Muslim Spaces of Hope*, the geographer Richard Phillips discusses the central thrust of his edited collection and the justification for choosing the title of the book:

> [This collection] argues that there are grounds for hope in many areas of everyday life, and challenges assumptions and assertions that have been made about Muslims in the West. Segregation is set against integration, fear and hate against what cultural critic Paul Gilroy has termed convivial culture… Assumptions that Muslims are non-liberal and anti-modern are challenged with evidence about their negotiations of liberalism and modernity. (Phillips, 2009: 1)

In this collection, then, these authors attempt to pry open a new discursive space for the exploration of unique and positive forms of Muslim engagement with civil society in Britain – ranging from Muslim scout groups, to anti-war movements and local finance initiatives. These arguments and empirical studies are deployed to counter the egregious myths that have arisen around Islam and Muslims in the West, but also better to reflect the actual experiences of Muslims in the UK. It is within this theoretical context that I will attempt to locate my study of British Muslim musicians and their significant influence on shared Muslim public spaces. While this musical and cultural milieu is not without failings and challenges of its own, there is indeed a grounded, factual story of hope to be told.

A second publication that partly frames my research agenda, *The New Spirituality*, by Gordon Lynch, claims that a new generation of progressive religious thinkers, activists and organisations are emerging in the West. Characterised largely by left-wing actors across different faith groups, Lynch terms this religious trend 'progressive religion':

> Progressive religion, in its widest sense then, is constituted by individuals, groups and networks who tend to be either liberal or radical in theological terms or green and left-of-centre in political terms. Often religious progressives are both. Progressive religion typically defines itself over and against forms of religion that are both theologically and politically

conservative, and it is a shared sense of opposition to such religious conservatism that can generate a sense of mutual identity amongst progressives across different religious traditions. (Lynch, 2007: 20)

Moving beyond this initial descriptor, Lynch continues to outline a new religious ideology that has emerged through this progressive milieu – a blend of traditional religion and new age spirituality (so-called 'progressive spirituality'). While I will not take this bold theoretical plunge with Lynch – in the sense of outlining a radical new form of theological and religious belief – I am prepared cautiously to ground the experiences of Muslim musicians in his more modest notion of progressive religion.

There is certainly nothing new with the claim that Muslims in Britain are often motivated by broad, left-wing ideologies – often rooted in vague anti-imperialist agendas, across both national and transnational contexts (Yaqoob, 2003; Birt, 2005; Gillan & Pickerill, 2008; Phillips & Iqbal, 2009). Yet these studies largely confine themselves to an examination of the organised mobilisation that structures belief and ideology – a function that gives it political form. I would also note that religious and political beliefs are extremely complex: reducing them to left/right or liberal/conservative dichotomies often results in a failure to capture the subtle blending that regularly occurs in practice. As a matter of course, Muslims frequently combine socially conservative beliefs with radical left-wing political agendas. Muslim musicians similarly integrate ideas and practices that would often be counterintuitively held apart – thus, ideas of propriety, modesty, familial hierarchy and related lifestyle practices are seen to sit comfortably alongside a plural socio-political outlook and a biting critique of established power structures.

The agenda of this thesis, then, is more fully to reflect this complexity and to understand how these seeming tensions are made manifest via cultural production in the public sphere. In this respect, Muslim music is perhaps an ideal area within which to examine these themes, because it necessarily incorporates the overlapping movements of praxis and belief. Not only this: in thematic terms it additionally resides at the dynamic point of contact between religion, politics and culture. Muslim musicians literally give voice and meaning to their beliefs and practices. So while I would point out that Muslim musicians within this thesis are certainly not representative of *all* Muslims in Britain, a

consideration of their world views and experiences nonetheless reveals an interesting strain of political, social and religious activity. That is, it has been possible to identify attempts by musicians – through music and other forms of related cultural production – to negotiate and synthesise their simultaneous place within both a living religious collectivity and a fragmented global society where traditional barriers are increasingly being broken down. Underpinning this, then, is a fascinating interplay between ideas of community and individuality.

The concepts of community and individuality are sometimes placed in opposition to one another – the former can be commonly perceived as the bearer of tradition, while the latter is seen as irreverent and unpredictable. For example, in *The Spiritual Revolution*, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) make a fundamental distinction between 'congregational religion' and the 'holistic milieu' – an analysis that places communal religious tradition in opposition to the shifting tides of the so-called 'subjective turn'. Echoing this in pejorative terms, the accusation that Muslims in Britain are 'anti-modern' ultimately often relies on the notion that Muslims cleave toward conservative religious and ethnic communities, rather than seeking to engage with the supposedly tolerant jumble of Western individualism (Phillips, 2009).

In contrast to this flawed and simplistic view, I have examined the experiences of Muslim musicians in Britain as a means to highlight the vivid and completely inseparable interplay that exists between notions of community – whether national, religious, ethnic, local, or cultural – and late-modern practices of individualism. I therefore argue that Muslim musicians – rather than conforming to predetermined communal norms – often indeed have deeply personal and reflexive relationships with multiple and overlapping communities. Such processes are not a rejection of community – they are rather instead a natural movement of rebalancing, contestation and organic change. These complex dynamics are explored in a number of ways throughout this thesis: from the critical engagement by musicians with scholastic networks and communities of knowledge (see Chapter 4), through to the shifting orientation of subjectivities across different layers of perceived Muslim communality (see Chapter 9). Yet the binding feature that marks these complexities out as so fascinating is the attempt by Muslim musicians to hold these tendencies together in the creative tension of a shared public space.

While I more fully make the case for the concept later (see Chapter 7), throughout the thesis I reference the idea of a British Muslim public sphere. Constituted largely by Muslim media resources in the British context – from print media and television, through to film, music, Muslim celebrity figures and various cultural events – the British Muslim public sphere is a realm of activity where many of the debates covered in this thesis are beginning to be played out. This is manifested in practical terms through the attempt by musicians to develop and sustain specifically Muslim institutions, discourses and cultural resources, whilst simultaneously also promoting a heterogeneity drawn from subjective experience and individual background. Muslim musicians therefore occupy something of a liminal space. They are important players in the formation and development of a British Muslim public sphere, but they also simultaneously draw from and orientate themselves toward diverse cultural contexts. This includes musicians who are able to effortlessly switch between various musical sub-cultures, ethnic traditions, and mainstream British cultural contexts.

While this cultural and social diversity has a clear impact on the evolving nature of the British Muslim public sphere, it is also necessary to recognise that shared British Muslim spaces are to some extent promoted in counterpoint to other realms of cultural and social activity. Indeed, Muslim musicians often critique elements of mainstream British society, on the one hand, and disaporic cultural traditions, on the other. So the permissive and excessive practices of popular culture are often shunned, but so are the apparently restricted and iterative traditions of – to take one example – a South Asian Muslim heritage in Britain. Yet this is not a straightforward analysis whereby Muslim musicians choose a negotiated position between two cultural extremes. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, Muslim music is developed in part as a critical alternative to these realms of cultural activity, but it nonetheless significantly draws from multiple arenas and shifts between diverse cultural contexts. Muslim musicians therefore play an important and occasionally challenging role in the British Muslim public sphere: they are dynamic cultural producers and public figures, continually pushing up against competing sites of power and influence. As I make clear throughout the thesis, then, Muslim musicians are frequently engaged in a process of contestation and negotiation.

This is not to claim that Muslim musicians are consistent in their motives or their approach to the British Muslim public sphere. As I argue later, Muslim music is fascinatingly multi-dimensional in purpose and orientation (not to mention marketability). Thus, while some musicians use music to strengthen the bonds of a shared religious tradition and community consciousness, others instead place greater emphasis on self-expression and individuality. While I therefore make an analytic decision to distinguish between these particular musicians – with reference to the concepts of 'Islamic music' and 'Islamically-conscious music' (see Chapter 6) – this is not intended to undermine other fundamental commonalities that run across this music scene. Indeed, while many of these musicians are stylistically and lyrically diverse, they nonetheless share a consistent outlook that promotes plurality and correspondingly critiques the homogenising tendencies that can exist in the British Muslim public sphere. Such differences are therefore often a matter of emphasis: it is important to recognise that all of the musicians discussed in this thesis make some attempt to explore their individuality through a continually contested framework of Muslim (and non-Muslim) communality.

It is the exploration of such themes that have ultimately emerged to characterise the research agenda running across this thesis. My analysis regularly shifts between an examination of the Muslim music scene as a singular and coherent cultural whole, through to the subtleties and paradoxical differences that ensure Muslim music is in many respects kaleidoscopic in nature. Indeed, Muslim music and the emergent British Muslim public sphere are emblematic of the somewhat ambiguous positioning of Muslims in Britain. There is not just a sense that Muslims can draw from multiple sources and traditions, but that they are also often able to engage in a variety of inflected cultural and social conversations. It is indeed perhaps the liminal space that Muslim musicians have come to occupy in modern Britain that so effectively enables them to bring together the different threads of community and individuality.

Muslims and Musical Practice in Britain

As I have already made clear, the focus of this thesis will be on Muslim musicians in Britain. To narrow this even further I have confined my interest to a particular group of Muslim musicians in the UK – that is, English-language musicians operating in a

developing Muslim public sphere and Islamised entertainment culture. In this section, I will more fully elaborate on the scope of the research field. This will include a history of Muslim musicians in Britain, followed by an argument concerning the distinct theoretical relevance of *contemporary* Muslim musicians. The section will then conclude with a careful elaboration of the terminology that will be used throughout – including the notion of 'Muslim music' – and a brief mention of the extremely limited literature that has previously considered Muslim musicians 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 20th century, for instance, can not 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 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 challenging and at times hostile environment (Ansari, 2004). We therefore have no compelling evidence that these communities practiced music in any form, except perhaps (if we define it as 'music') Sufi religious chanting, known as the *zikr* (remembrance of God) (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 and unresearched.

Post-Second World War migration saw the establishment of large Muslim communities that were predominantly from the Indian subcontinent. These religious communities brought with them various forms of sound art rooted in Islamic practice, including Quranic cantillation and the *adhan* (call to prayer). But the transportation of diverse cultural backgrounds also brought '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 (Bailey, 1990); na'at, a form of poetic rendition that praises 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 5,000-6,000 strong Khalifa community from Gujarat (Bailey, 2006). Regardless of the specific tradition and context, these musical forms remained largely 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.

Meanwhile, during the latter period of this migration 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 also 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 (see Figure 1.1)[1] and Cat Stevens: Thompson began practicing 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).
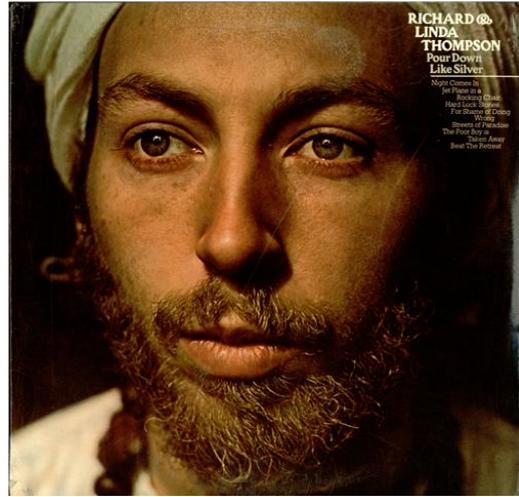
Figure 1.1: Richard & Linda Thompson, *Pour Down Like Silver* (1975)
(Source: Island Records)

The influence that these musicians have had on Muslims in Britain is varied. Richard Thompson, for example, produced a trio of spiritually-rich albums, laden with symbolism, 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 convert/revert[2] community in Norwich – a community that has grown to become a vibrant exemplar for Muslim converts in Britain (including several hip hop musicians in London)[3]. 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, finally – 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[4].

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

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[1] The 'orientalised' Sufi-inspired photograph of Richard Thompson is quite striking.
[2] 'Revert' is a term preferred by some Muslim converts. It implies that everyone is a Muslim at birth and that conversion is therefore a matter of returning to Islam rather than converting to it. The terms are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.
[3] http://www.muslimsofnorwich.org.uk/
[4] Because of Yusuf Islam's unique and varied past, I will refrain from considering him in any great depth during my analysis. Despite his undoubted influence, Yusuf Islam is nonetheless something of a semi-detached enigma and should theorised as distinct from the music scene considered in this thesis.

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 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. Consequently, 'unknown' South Asian and Arab musicians could be seen performing alongside a range of exoticised 'others' during the marches and parades that took place in large urban centres (Kalra *et al*, 1996). 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 largely be performed at a mosque, in the home, or at religious celebrations. This grassroots, paraliturgical musical tradition was extremely important during the 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 and have now become culturally influential in contemporary 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 straddling an alternative mainstream music culture, on the one hand, and liberal Muslim professionals, on the other.

It was toward the end of the 1990s that two styles of music emerged to have a significant and lasting impact 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 generally attempted to express Islamic themes through English, as well as – to a greater or lesser extent – through the incorporation of popular music sounds that would be more familiar to young, British-born 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 found inspiration from the notion of an Islamic art tradition – ranging from architecture 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, 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 is coupled with an undeniable reality that has seen 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 and generalised reasons for the success of hip hop amongst some young Muslims in contemporary Britain, there was also an additional and connected reason why hip hop specifically became the music of choice for a certain sub-section of the British Muslim youth.

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 Islam. 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 in 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 should also be considered that Islam and hip hop culture both place particular emphasis on the centrality of an orally transmitted text. It was, then, 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 Musicians: 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). 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. A glance at many of the musicians currently making an impact on the British Muslim music scene will attest to this. 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 not really practical to draw a neat dividing line between these musicians and those from an earlier era, I would indeed suggest that they nonetheless represent a 'new wave' of Muslim musicians. There are two primary reasons for this.

First, I would suggest that 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' during 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 has a new generation of British Muslim musicians emerged – this time linked to the specific difficulties that Muslim communities have recently encountered in the UK.

The second reason why contemporary Muslim music is distinct from an earlier era relates to the linked notions of Muslim consumer markets and public spheres. As I argue, 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. 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 – 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 feed into and partly shape this consumer market and public sphere – they have become celebrity figures within a British Muslim subculture. I am claiming that – in contrast to earlier manifestations of Muslim music – contemporary Muslim musicians are contributing toward a definable *culture* of British Muslimness.

There has recently been a tentative and growing academic interest in the social and cultural significance of contemporary Muslim music in Britain, though, unfortunately, such interest has largely been confined to short and poorly-researched articles or book chapters. Miah and Kalra (2008) made the most serious effort to research popular Muslim music in the contemporary British context. In their article they provide a short ethnography of a musical production at a predominantly Muslim school in Oldham. The musical (a reinterpretation of the classic *Aisha*) incorporated songs by popular (non-British) Muslim musicians, including Outlandish (Denmark), Native Deen (U.S.) and Dawud Wharnsby (Canada). Miah and Kalra use this ethnography as a platform to sketch the significance of popular Muslim music in the British/Western context. They ultimately conclude that such music is ideally placed as an outlet for cultural, social and religious resistance by young Muslims. They furthermore suggest that it provides a space for the fusion of religious practice and popular culture. Unfortunately, the article fails directly to consider British Muslim musicians themselves – focusing primarily as it does on American musicians – and it additionally only provides a superficial (if interesting) theoretical outline of the issues.

Elena Midolo – an Italian researcher – has written a short article (2010) and a related conference paper on 'Islamic conscious rap' in the UK. She has also written an entire book on this topic (2009). Midolo is interested in the interplay between local practice and Muslim supranational identities. Specifically, she argues that hip hop is an ideal cultural vehicle for the articulation of imagined communities, including the Islamic notion of the *umma* (global Muslim community). It is through hip hop and related flows of popular culture that, according to Midolo, young Muslims challenge and subvert the pathologization of minorities.

Mandaville (2010) continues this argument in an extremely short online publication. Specifically referencing the social realities of young South Asian Muslims in disadvantaged urban environments, Mandaville refers to 'new arenas of Muslim politics' – with the specific claim that Muslim hip hop represents such an arena. Other short publications include a two-page article for Al-Ahram, by Michael Mumisa (2006), a cursory mention in Richard Reddie's book *Black Muslims in Britain* (2009), and an even briefer mention in Kabir's book *Young British Muslims* (2012).

Judging from this brief overview, it is clear that there is a shortage of sustained empirical research in this area. While the publications that I have detailed above do in actual fact foreshadow some of my later arguments, this thesis represents the first in-depth attempt to research contemporary Muslim musicians in Britain. Nonetheless, my arguments here do not exist in anything like an academic vacuum. As I make clear in the next section, there is a vast expanse of literature that I intend to draw upon throughout the remainder of this thesis.

Traditions and Trajectories: An Examination of the Academic Literature

In this section I examine the academic debates that provide the intellectual framework for my claims throughout this thesis. I argue that the recent history of British Muslims can be charted alongside the academic literature haphazardly trailing this field of study. I therefore outline the general trend of academic literature and the historical/social developments that underpin it. My objective is partly to demonstrate that researching Muslim musicians in Britain is both timely and original, but also to locate my research in a particular academic tradition. I therefore think that it is helpful to examine the contribution that my research findings will make to the study of Muslims in Britain. Yet the section will also pivot somewhat and examine the place of this research within the broad framework of ethnomusicology literature. Rather than examining my direct contribution to ethnomusiciology literature itself, I instead utilise this literature as a means to analyse the themes that connect the study of music to Muslims in Britain.

Muslims in Britain: Academic and Historical Realities

To what extent does the historical context and a corresponding tradition of academic literature underpin the saliency of this research? I argue that the current framework through which Muslims in Britain are understood – the conceptual and societal arrangement that makes sense of British Muslim realities in both academic and non-academic discourse – was to a large extent sparked by the Rushdie affair in the late-1980s and early-1990s. In many respects this epochal incident marked the moment when Muslims in Britain began to conceive of themselves as *British Muslims* – religious and national identity became the distinctive loadstones for a whole range of issues that impacted on the lives of Muslims in the UK. It was therefore an incredible moment of paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1996). In academic discourse Muslims began to take centre-stage as a socio-religious group at the very heart of social upheaval and negotiation in Britain (Jones, 1990; Modood, 1990; Parekh, 1990; Piscatori; 1990). More importantly, Muslims themselves began to acknowledge their own collective interests on a national scale, moving beyond the local campaigns that had previously characterised Muslim social engagement (Lewis, 1994). Indeed, from the late-1980s there has been a continuous movement to build British Muslim institutions, networks, narratives and alternative subcultures – as I shall argue shortly, 'Muslim music' is an integral part of this socio-cultural trend.

Over the subsequent decade, in Britain, Europe and other Muslim-minority contexts, there was a continual process of Muslim organisation, consolidation and negotiation – along with the inevitable charting of this development through sociological literature. My claim here is that this research considered a number of central issues – and that these issues are essential thematic forerunners to this thesis. Such research included the mapping of sectarian and religious diversity amongst Muslims in Britain, along with the nature of religious authority among these diverse traditions and reform movements (e.g., Barton, 1986; Lewis, 1994; Geaves, 1996; 2000; Sikand, 1998). This connected directly with the literature that considered the ways through which Muslims were increasingly negotiating a place for religious observance and practice in Britain (Gardner, 1998; Joly, 1995; McLoughlin, 1998). There was also an important stream of literature that specifically focussed on gender and the experiences of Muslim women within this

context (e.g., Knott & Khokher, 1993; Haw, 1996; Burlet, 1998; Dwyer, 1999; 2000; Macey, 1999; Mohammad, 1999).

Meanwhile, a broad and highly-theoretical tranche of publications plugged into debates taking place amongst cultural theorists, applying these discussions on ethnicity, identity, nationalism and diaspora to Muslims in Britain and Europe (e.g., Anthias, 1998; Ellis & Khan, 1998; Höfert & Salvatore, 2000; Khan, 2000; Werbner, 2000). Furthermore, another connected prong of research began to consider the means through which Muslims were carving out Islamised spaces in Britain and Europe – spaces that were varyingly physical, social and symbolic (e.g., Eade, 1996; Werbner, 1996; Soysal, 1997).

I have outlined these pioneering publications in order to identify the major academic themes that were clearly evident in Britain during this period – themes that have laid down the tracks for subsequent research agendas. These themes might be summarised, then, as sectarian diversity, religious authority, gender, diaspora/ethnicity, nationalism, and Islamisation. Yet while the academic debates of the time were important, running in parallel to this trend of academic framing was a simultaneous process of British Muslim institution building, social dialogue and community coherence.

The Muslim Council of Britain, for example, was established in 1997 to represent the interests of British Muslims in the political sphere (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). English-language media institutions – aimed at a specific British Muslim readership – were established, including the *Muslim News* in 1989 and *Q-News* in 1992 (Ahmed, 2005). A plurality of small but significant grassroots organisations were also beginning to make a contribution to British civil society from an Islamic perspective – these ranged from the intellectualised City Circle[5], to the women and community-oriented An-Nisa Society[6], to an engagement with young people through Muslim scout groups (Mills, 2009) and the Muslim Youth Parliament[7]. There was also a growing assertiveness by Muslims, with recognition, for example, of the unique forms of discrimination that were levelled against Muslims in Britain (Runnymede Trust, 1997) – an awareness that ultimately led to the formation of the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism (FAIR), in 2001[8].

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[5] http://www.thecitycircle.com/
[6] http://www.an-nisa.org/mainpage.asp?id=17
[7] http://www.muslimparliament.org.uk/history.htm
[8] http://www.fairuk.org/intro.htm

I suggest that while academics were beginning to sketch out the rough contours of this research field, Muslims were emerging from the initial roots that had been laid down during the early years of migration to become a self-consciously distinctive section of British society. In a sense – just as the academic field concerned with this area was really beginning to take shape – so too was it continually becoming ever more complex, as well as imbued with a richness and depth. It was during this period that the first English-language Muslim musicians really began to make an impact upon the wider Muslim demographic in Britain. In one sense, the historical overview I have provided here is a useful context in order to understand the emergence of Muslim musicians in Britain. Yet it also outlines an academic tradition that was beginning to take shape and widen in scope – an academic tradition that furthermore underpins the theoretical composition of this thesis.

From the beginning of the new millennium this academic tradition began to significantly widen. This was partly as a result of the growth in specialist areas of research – itself a reflection of the increasing interest that was being shown toward Muslims in a minority context – but also as a result of significant political events, including the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks. A number of sub-fields began to emerge, ultimately themselves becoming independent areas of scholastic activity – these have included Islamic Finance and Terrorism Studies. Of more interest here, however, is the development and coherence of specific research streams within this tradition. I do not think that it is necessary to consider all of the varied research themes and agendas that now characterise the study of Muslims in Britain. I do however think it helpful to outline some of the key areas that connect to the aims of this thesis and contribute toward many of the arguments that I will make throughout.

The three primary academic streams that I will now outline are fundamentally interlinked, if not entirely inseparable. They furthermore represent the areas of literature that I will most significantly draw from – not to mention where I hope to make a unique contribution. These areas are: young Muslims in Britain; globalisation, transnationalism and diaspora; Muslim public spheres.

(1) Young Muslims in Britain

Muslims in Britain are on the whole an extremely *young* socio-religious group. Indeed, it has been pointed out that approximately 50% of all British Muslims are under the age of twenty-five (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). With the huge implications that this entails for religious practice, social dynamics and cultural change, the increasing importance of 'Muslim Youth Studies' should be entirely clear. 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. The general 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 we consider the unfortunate policy focus on 'extremism' and violent terrorism amongst young Muslims (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2010).

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

> 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 also point toward the resurgence of religiosity amongst young Muslims (Hamid, 2011) and the powerful impact of a young, politically-aware Muslim elite (Edmunds, 2010).

The research that I outline here connects to these concerns in a number of ways. Muslim musicians are generally considered either young themselves, or at the very least particular influential through their direct and influential engagement with other 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 directly consider

individuals at the centre of a social, cultural and religious milieu – one that is bordered by age and characterised by change. Music can perhaps be understood as one of the ways through which young Muslims are handling the concerns that have been identified in the literature – concerns that potentially range from social dissonance and political assertiveness, through to increasing religiosity, transnational connectivity, and the role of popular culture. While this thesis is not exclusively concerned with the experiences and changing attitudes of young Muslims, it would be fair to say that this is nonetheless a presumptive thread that runs throughout.

(2) Globalisation, Transnationalism and Diaspora

The connected processes of globalisation, transnationalism and diaspora do not really need an introduction – they have already been prominently developed as central 'textbook' themes for any consideration of religion in the late-modern era (Beckford, 2003; Davie, 2007; McLoughlin, 2010). Such processes are furthermore an undoubted feature of any research that wishes to concern itself with Muslims in a minority context. As Cooke and Lawrence have argued, these processes ultimately revolve around Muslim networks in an increasingly interconnected and spatially detached era. Islam cannot be understood without recourse to the crisscrossing and heterogeneous lines of social, cultural, economic and religious activity:

> Precisely because Islam is not homogeneous, it is only though the prism of Muslim networks – whether they be academic or aesthetic, historical or commercial – that one can gain a perspective on how diverse groups of Muslims contest and rearticulate what it means to be Muslim. (Cooke & Lawrence, 2005: 2)

Befitting this fundamental recognition, researchers of contemporary Islam have frequently turned their attention to the movement of people and ideas across and beyond national contexts. While this literature is itself quite extensive, there are three primary streams of literature that have relevance for my arguments within this thesis.

There has been a longstanding interest in exploring the dynamics of diaspora amongst Muslims in Britain – or, conversely, exploring the dimensions of religion amongst diasporic communities. This has usually manifested itself through a focus on Pakistani and Bangladeshi diasporic communities in Britain (e.g., Alexander, 2000; Anwar, 1979;

Eade, 2006; Goodman, 2006), often with a focus on heritage, ongoing cultural connections, and contestation in a new social context (e.g., Mukadam & Mawani, 2009; Shaw, 2000; Werbner, 2004). A smaller selection of literature has also considered alternative ethnic diasporic communities amongst Muslims in Britain, including Arabs (Nagel, 2009) and those from an African or Caribbean heritage (Reddie, 2009).

A second tranche of literature specifically examines Islamic transnational connections. This literature ranges from an in-depth analysis of transnational religious movements (e.g., Ali, 2003; Ernst, 2005; Spellman, 2005; Wiktorowicz, 2005), through to a more holistic examination of the global dynamics of Islam (Roy, 2004; Mandaville, 2009). It also includes a concern with religious authority in the global arena (Robinson, 2009; Turner, 2007; Volpi & Turner, 2007) and the movement of people and ideas along commercial and online Muslim networks (e.g., Bunt, 2003; McLoughlin, 2009).

These first two streams of literature are familiar and well-trodden areas of study. I nonetheless hope to make a contribution to these debates, largely through my relatively original examination of transnational and diasporic musical connections and influences amongst Muslims in Britain. However, it is a third strand of literature that connects to the most original feature of my arguments throughout – that is, a concern with the concept of the *umma*. There have been a number of attempts to theorise the significance of this concept for Muslims in Britain, Europe and across the rest of the world (Bowen, 2004; Grillo, 2004; Mandaville, 2009; Roy, 2004; Schmidt, 2005). I will explore these arguments in-depth toward the end of the thesis. Yet this concept will be highlighted throughout as one that is significant for many Muslim musicians.

(3) Muslim Public Spheres

The final area that will be of most significance throughout this thesis will be the notion of Muslim public spheres. Deriving its theoretical impetus from seminal publications by Anderson (2006 [1983]) and Appadurai (1996), it is possible to identify a selection of literature that considers the connection of mediated public spaces to specific Muslim demographics. In Britain this area has tentatively been touched upon through an examination of emerging Muslim media resources. While there has been a great deal of attention paid to Muslim representations within mainstream print and broadcast media

(e.g., Ahmad, 2006; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Harb & Bessaiso, 2006; Meer, 2006; Poole, 2002), there is an apparent lack of literature concerning the ways through which Muslims are creating alternative media spaces. In one of the few articles to have been written on this area, Ahmed summarised the potential role of these media resources for Muslims in Britain:

> The numerous forms of community media, both new and old, are not only enabling Muslims to explore new ways of expressing their convictions on Islam and what it means to be Muslim, but creating news hybrid cultures that merge together aspects of South Asian culture, Islam and British cultural norms. (Ahmed, 2005: 124)

Ahmed is referring to Muslim print media, but her claims are nonetheless applicable to the new forms of broadcast and electronic media that are beginning to take prominence – including, for example, local radio as a means to provide an alternative cultural and religious space (DeHannas, 2010).

The internet is especially relevant as a form of mediated public space. Over the last decade and more, there has been a particular interest in exploring the democratising role of the internet for Muslims in Britain and elsewhere (e.g., Akou, 2010; Kort, 2005; Poole, 2002; Wheeler, 2002; Varisco, 2010). The internet is therefore often conceived as a potentially destabilising form of media, undermining traditional sites of authority and knowledge transmission (Anderson, 2003). Yet there is a possible counterargument, which suggests that the internet is also capable of broadening and solidifying longstanding modes of power and pedagogy.

While media resources are important as a means to shape and control public spheres, there should nonetheless be a recognition that other forms of cultural practice and production play a central role. On the one hand, there has been a great deal of attention paid to the symbolic visibility of Islam in the public eye, including a number of academic publications on the veil (e.g., Dwyer, 1999; Meer, 2010; Werbner, 2007) and mosque building (Naylor & Ryan, 2002; Gale, 2004; McLoughlin, 2005). However, the task now is increasingly to consider the vibrancy of Muslim cultural contributions and contestations in the public sphere (van Nieuwkerk, 2008). Accordingly, there has been increasing academic concern with the ways in which Muslim identity and Islamic beliefs are manifested, through, for example, Islamic fashions (Lewis, 2007; Tarlo, 2010) and

consumer products (Echchaibi, 2012; Yaqin, 2007). Music itself has also been considered in this context – as both a cultural artefact and a dynamic vehicle for social change – although the tendency until now has been to concentrate on the role of music in Muslim majority national contexts (LeVine, 2008a; Otterbeck, 2008; Rasmussen, 2010; Weintraub, 2008). My arguments throughout this thesis will therefore variously connect to these debates, uniquely developing an extended argument concerning the nature of a dominant Muslim public sphere in Britain, as well as outlining the forces that underpin it and the role of music within this mediated and discursive space.

Ethnomusicology and the Study of Muslims in Britain

To date there has been no attempt to connect the academic tradition of ethnomusicology to the study of Islam in contemporary Britain. This absence is particularly stark – not to mention puzzling – amongst those authors who have written about Muslim musicians in Britain (e.g., Midolo, 2010). This is an unfortunate omission, partly because ethnomusicology is often concerned with themes that have direct relevance for the study of Muslims in Britain. I have chosen to briefly concentrate on two such areas. The first concerns the study of Islam and music; the second is a consideration of issues around community and identity politics in music. Running across these two themes, however, will be an overarching concern with the processes and movements that mark out modernity – including globalisation, popular culture and technology.

When considering Islam and music there are two streams of literature that have direct relevance for the study of British Muslim musicians. The first is a consideration of the religious debates concerning the place of music within Muslim societies and Islamic practice. There are various publications that grapple with these concerns, though most of them ultimately pivot toward the discourses of scriptural exegesis and public morality, that are produced by Muslim *'ulama* (religious scholars) as a means to assess the religious permissibility of music (e.g., al-Faruqi, 1985, 1986; Nelson, 1985; Otterbeck, 2008; Rasmussen, 2010; Shiloah, 1995, 1997). These religious debates might be a familiar and perhaps even clichéd pillar of the literature concerning Muslims and music, yet they are nonetheless important and cannot be ignored. This is especially true when it

is considered that debates regarding the permissibility of music are very much alive for Muslims in Britain.

While a focus on these religious debates might be a familiar staple of this literature, there is a growing interest in exploring the intersecting nature of popular music and Islam in the context of modernity. With reference to the religious, social and cultural soundscapes of Egypt and the Muslim world, Hirschkind remarked that:

> Modernity itself encompasses 'plural ways of being in the world', forms of reason, memory, and experience grounded in histories other than those authorized by dominant secular rationalities. Modernity is not a functionally integrated totality governed by a singular overarching logic but rather a constellation of practices and technologies contingently connected within discontinuous formations of power. (Hirschkind, 2006: 21)

Hirschkind's point is well made and it provides a certain incentive to research Muslim musical practices in radically different contexts. Music often rests at the crux of restless social forces. Examining specific instances of musical practice or culture can therefore potentially produce unique insights into the dynamics of modernity and associated social pluralities in the Muslim world.

A relatively recent surge of literature is beginning to reflect this potential. Khabeer, for example, has discussed how hip hop is being used as a symbolic marker and mechanism for American Muslim identity (Khabeer, 2007). Meanwhile, Alim and Aidi have both argued that hip hop provides a shared language and form of cultural practice for young Muslims across the globe – a so-called 'hip hop *umma*' (Aidi, 2004; Alim, 2005). In all three instances there is a fruitful exploration of how music intersects with popular culture, religiosity and transnationalism. LeVine inverts these themes with something of a difference in emphasis, looking at the ways through which heavy metal is used in the Middle East and North Africa as a form of political activism – a form of music that is simultaneously deployed against Western imperialism, authoritarian governments, and local Islamist groups (LeVine, 2008a; 2008b). Hecker explores similar themes in his study of heavy metal in Turkey, though with an emphasis on the unique debates between secularism and the public role of religion in Turkey (Hecker, 2012).

Elsewhere, Murthy almost entirely detaches his study of Muslim punks from place and locality, examining the power of alternative musical subcultures in the online medium

and their ability to shape and reconnect ethnic diasporas (Murthy, 2010). In contrast, locality and place are often central themes for the study of Muslims and music. This is especially true for those researchers who look at the formation of identity through 'glocalised' musical cultures (Robertson, 1992) – that is, through the localised reinterpretation of global sounds. Specific instances of this practice include, for example, acapella *nasyids* (alternative spelling of nasheed) in Indonesia (Rasmussen, 2010) and the localised rap scene in Tunisia (Shannahan & Hussain, 2010).

My decision to research Muslim musicians in the UK – where similar themes and issues are immediately apparent – is something of a continuation of this research agenda. It concerns the examination of Muslims and modernity through the lens of music and popular culture. Yet these themes, while understood through the academic tradition of ethnomusicology and cultural studies, are nonetheless indistinct from identical (or at least comparable) themes in the sociological study of contemporary religion and Muslims in Britain. There is therefore the potential of utilising a common conceptual language in order to make a contribution from a unique and relevant research perspective.

Another connected area of interest in ethnomusicology is the study of identity politics and community consciousness through music. Music is capable of shaping social and ethical norms, of evoking collective memories, of defining and re-defining historical ruptures, and of giving voice to political discontent. The relevance of this for broader debates concerning Muslims in Britain should be immediately apparent.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is organised into four principle sections (totalling eight chapters – that is, two chapters for each section), with an additional concluding chapter to draw together and summarise my arguments. The content of each chapter has been specifically chosen to examine a particular facet or set of issues relating to the Muslim music in Britain. By structuring the thesis in this way, I hope simultaneously to cover a large expanse of both theoretical and empirical ground.

The first section is entitled 'Mapping the Scene'. The section begins with Chapter 2, where I fully outline the methodological dimensions of my fieldwork and linked analysis. While I cover various 'housekeeping' and methodological specifics – including fieldwork

processes, interviewing, sampling and coding – I also integrate a number of initial ethnographic reflections into this chapter. This is followed by Chapter 3, where I examine in some depth the empirical scope of the research. This detailed and colourful chapter will look at 'the Muslim music scene' as a whole – including musicians, music style, the Muslim fanbase and events circuit. The aim of this chapter will be to provide an important social and cultural backdrop for the subsequent analysis of later chapters.

The second section is 'Religion, Knowledge and Spirituality'. Drawing more directly from academic debates in religious studies and the sociology of religion, in this section I analyse the specific dimensions of religious belief and practice in the Muslim music scene. Chapter 4 begins this analysis with an examination of British Muslim attitudes toward the religious proscription of music. By outlining wider Islamic discourses relating to the issue of music – followed by the manifestation of these debates in the British context and the related dynamics of religious authority – I develop these arguments to claim that Muslim musicians are educated, assertive and capable of critically engaging with the global 'marketplace' of Islamic knowledge. In Chapter 5 – moving away from a specific consideration of these pedagogical processes – I analyse forms of collective and individual religious belonging. By focussing on sectarian affiliation, I outline the influence of Sufism on Muslim musicians, while additionally examining the anti-sectarian, universalising tendencies that characterise religious belief and belonging for many of these individuals. I buttress these claims in the second part of the chapter with arguments relating to the expression of Islamic subjectivities through the language and experiences of late-modern spirituality. These arguments suggest that Muslim musicians are sympathetic to the pluralising notion of individual belief and experience.

The third section is called 'Muslim Markets and Media'. In these chapters I examine the dynamics of Muslim cultural production and consumption, with an emphasis on the interrelated nature of an emerging Muslim economy and a media-driven public sphere in Britain. Chapter 6 analyses the idea of 'Muslim music' as a distinct musical genre. I make an important distinction in this chapter between 'Islamic music' and 'Islamically-conscious music'. I also explore the notion of an emerging alternative Muslim lifestyle – along with the connection that this has to music and cultural consumption – and I furthermore examine the business networks and consumer market underpinning the

production of Muslim music. In Chapter 7, my concerns shift to the theorisation of a British Muslim public sphere. Characterised by increasingly dominant Muslim media resources – including the Islam Channel and *emel* magazine – I claim in this chapter that musicians often struggle for access to and representation within this public sphere. Accordingly, I continue to examine the opportunities provided by the anarchic possibilities of the internet and the specific challenges faced by female musicians when engaging with the public sphere.

The fourth section is entitled 'Identity, Community and Belonging'. My concern in this final section will be with the ways through which music defines and redefines ideas of identity and grouphood. Chapter 8 begins this argument by examining the intersecting dimensions of class and ethnicity. Drawing from the theories of Bourdieu (1993) and Bhabha (1994), I argue that Muslim music is at the heart of a struggle to define notions of 'Muslimness' – that is, Muslim identity and pre-discursive behaviour. I therefore examine the interweaving relationship between various Muslim ethnic identifications and the underpinning assumptions of class, with a series of examples to demonstrate how these dynamics are at work within the Muslim music scene. In Chapter 9, I turn to a consideration of Muslim collectivity, with a particular emphasis on the concept of the *umma* (global Muslim community). After fully interrogating the meaning of this concept, I argue that it can be found working in Muslim cultural production across different levels of Muslim collectivity – including local, national, regional and transnational sites of belonging. As I claim in this chapter, the *umma* is used by musicians to promote a range of practical and ideological agendas.

Section One

Mapping the Scene

2. Researching Muslim Musicians in Britain: Methodological Reflections

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Introduction

Once I had completed the fieldwork, the research methodology included interviews with _twenty two_ different British Muslim musicians, an online survey completed by _eighty four_ Muslim music fans, and sustained participant observation at various events and performances across the country. While this of course neatly summarises the final set of research methods, it does not it any sense encapsulate the methodological process that I lived through over a fifteen month period.

I have found that one of the remarkable and retrospectively pleasing features of the research has been the organic, changing nature of the fieldwork over time. Practical difficulties – essentially a research field unwilling to cooperate – ultimately forced me to make significant changes to the research methodology. A sharp reminder, if I ever needed one, that the field researcher is often more the footsore wayfarer than omniscient scientist. In acknowledging this fundamental constraint I attempted to learn from the actual process of an evolving methodology. In short, it is helpful continually to consider why I keep 'bumping up' against the hard reality of the research field and then to reflect this back into my analysis – either as useful data or as a methodological critique. As Spradley (1980) has argued, this tends to happen fairly innately throughout the research cycle anyway – the researcher is continually forced to channel the data back into the research plan, rethinking and reorienting the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research. So while the research process will almost certainly be different in form than that originally planned, it is largely a matter of incorporating an explicit acknowledgement of this into the retrospective body of text.

In this chapter I offer an examination of the research methodology in some depth. Rather than discuss a static methodology, I hope rather to chart the research process and the uneven accretion of coherency – essentially, to analyse the methodological journey that I was embarked on for fifteen months, and not simply the eventual destination. There

are several reasons for this approach. First, it more accurately reflects the research process itself, and offers – through greater transparency – an insight into the decisions that I took along the way. Second, the analysis and presentation of data begins through a reflection on the effectiveness of the methodological strategies employed, particularly when I ask why certain difficulties might have arisen (Gilliat-Ray, 2005). Third, the methodology does not need to be artificially separated from the research data – there was no clear distinction in the research field itself, so why create one now? This section is therefore also the beginning of the analysis – I hope that it will be richer and more interesting as a result.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to remark that I submitted my research proposals – including various criteria around sampling and confidentiality – to the ethics committee at Cardiff University's School of Music. A research information sheet was given to each interviewee, along with two copies of a confidentiality form (myself and the interviewee retained one completed copy each). Templates of these documents are included in Appendix One. The research was approved by the ethics committee before any fieldwork began: it was therefore in full compliance with university regulations.

Preliminary Research Methodology

When first considering how best to research the notion of a British Muslim musical aesthetic, it became immediately apparent that the very idea of 'music' was problematic. In some Islamic traditions there is the division of vocal and instrumental arrangements according to permissibility: the Arabic term *'handasah al sawt'* (the art of sound) is sometimes used to refer to acceptable forms of music and sound art (Maurer, 1998[9]), while *'musiqa'* (music) is reserved for those forms of music/sound art that are perceived to be impermissible according to Islam (al Faruqi & al Faruqi, 1986). There are also other forms of non-instrumental sound art that certainly would not be classed as music but nonetheless have a profound impact on the Muslim aural experience – I am of course referring largely to *qira'ah* (Quranic recitation) and the *adhan* (call to prayer). Recognising these complexities, I took the decision early on to broaden the research

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[9] https://ccrma.stanford.edu/~blackrse/islam.html [accessed 25.03.11]

enquiry to cover 'Muslim sound' and therefore to avoid the problem of deciding what or what not to exclude from the outset.

My initial decision on the conceptual thrust of the research led to an interest in the connected idea of 'Muslim soundscapes'. The concept of a soundscape is broad and largely deployed as reference to a sonic environment (Schafer, 1993). This can mean a natural acoustic backdrop – such as the sounds of animals or of the weather – but it can also mean the environmental sounds created by humans – ranging from music and conversation, to everyday noise, such as the sound of traffic or the clatter emanating from a busy restaurant kitchen. In an effort to examine the notion of a 'Muslim sound' it therefore made excellent sense to consider the soundscapes that might constitute the audial experience of Muslims in Britain – this might potentially include, for example, musical, environmental, religious and verbal soundscapes. It is fascinating to ask how these soundscapes might be formative in the production and reception of 'Muslim sound'.

From early on in the research – with soundscapes becoming an increasingly important concept – it seemed that there was clear theoretical justification for working in a localised environment. Rather than approaching the *producers* of 'Muslim sounds' from the outset (such as musicians, Quranic reciters etc), a deliberate decision was made to explore Muslim soundscapes from the ground up. This would involve a rigorous and intimate examination of soundscapes that, if not confined to a manageable locale, might otherwise be difficult to research.

One element of this – influenced by the work done on religion and space (Knott, 2005a; 2005b; 2009) – was the exploration of the unique sonic environments that British Muslims might experience – both in a secular and a religious context. In the same way that we can theorize the impact of space on social and religious experience, it should be possible to do something similar with sound in relation to British Muslim experience. In practical terms this involved an attempt to map the sonic environment of certain clearly defined localities. Several areas of Leeds (areas distinguished by large Muslim populations and other related features, such as mosques, Islamic bookshops etc) were chosen for this purpose. I will discuss this approach in more depth shortly.

As well as beginning to develop a methodology based around sound and locale – a type of 'sonic geography' (Waterman, 2002) – I also developed a methodology that

incorporated more traditional forms of ethnography, particularly based around participant observation (Spradley, 1979). This largely meant developing personal relationships in the attempt to more directly involve myself with Muslim communities across different parts of Leeds.

As part of the ethnography, then, I placed particular emphasis on so-called 'sound communities' – that is, communities that have cohered in some way around a concept or practice relating to sound. Examples of this might include, for example, a network of musical practitioners, a group of Quranic reciters, the audience of a local radio station, a regular *zikr* gathering, attendees at a local concert etc. Through traditional forms of ethnography – participant observation and interviewing – I was hopeful that I could begin to understand the sonic experiences of Muslims in Leeds. As well as uncovering a broader picture relating to the audial everyday, there was also a desire on my part for the fieldwork then to lead toward the direct involvement of the practitioners of sound art. The idea was that researching *consumers* of sound art – their tastes and preferences – would gradually lead to a more refined understanding of the *producers* of sound art. It would then be theoretically interesting to incorporate the producers of sound art into the second phase of the research.

I have discussed here the methodology that initially guided my research: an examination from the ground up of soundscapes and sound communities. As I will make clear in the following section, various problems arose early on that necessitated a switch in emphasis and methodology. Field research will always be guided somewhat by practical exigencies, yet the difficulties that are encountered can be extremely revealing if analysed correctly.

Fieldwork Difficulties

I began the fieldwork with an effort to map public soundscapes in two well-defined areas of Leeds. In practice this meant spending a large amount of time walking around the streets, entering public places (such as shops, cafes etc), and making careful notes about everything that I could *hear*. Most sounds in public places are seemingly innocuous and there is a danger that fieldwork conducted in this way might produce quite superficial data. Examples of sounds that are of potential interest include, for example, the music

played by a passing car, the languages spoken by customers at a café, the sounds emanating from an open house window or the radio station being broadcast at a local shop. So while I was able to make detailed notes based on careful observations over several days, it soon became apparent that this methodology could only take me so far.

The problem that arose was the seeming *lack* of sounds associated in some way with the local Muslim community or Islam. I found that the notion of an Islamic soundscape – at least a *public* Islamic soundscape – could really only be applied in quite a limited fashion. There were clear and often notable exceptions. Islamic bookshops, for instance, might on occasion play nasheeds or na'ats as background music – though these shops are tucked away and have little public presence. Another obvious (and very public) example is the broadcasting of the *adhan*, with the various mosques in Leeds having different arrangements to broadcast at select times during the day. The *adhan* is clearly a controversial and much discussed issue, but it also represents one of the few public manifestations of Islam in the everyday British soundscape.

This might not seem surprising: in Britain, other than the occasional notable example (church bells, etc), religion is not something we usually expect to *hear* in public spaces. This is certainly not the situation in many other parts of the world, with accounts being given of the distinctively public place that Islam can have in a local soundscape, ranging from Indonesia (Rasmussen, 2010) to Egypt (Hirshkind, 2009). In clear contrast to my experience of soundscapes in Leeds, Anne Rasmussen offers an evocative description of her time in Indonesia, and the tangible presence of the recited Qur'an in the very atmosphere of daily Indonesian life:

> On any day I might hear qur'anic recitation played on cassettes in a shop or stall, broadcast on the car radio, emanating from the neighbour's house where a women's afternoon study group practices, coming from a class of schoolchildren down the street, or broadcast live from the five or so mosques that were within range of our house. (Rasmussen, 2010: 39)

Islam is clearly not present in the sonic environment of Leeds with anything like the same richness or tangibility. Nonetheless, I argue that the absence of a significant public Islamic soundscape is in itself data. By way of contrast to the seeming insignificance of sound, there has been a notable degree of interest in the increasingly *visible* nature of Islam and Muslims in Britain, ranging from clothing and veiling (Meer et al, 2010; Tarlo;

2010) through to the architectural and institutional significance of mosques (Gale, 2008) and faith schools (Meer, 2007). While an obvious focus for public, political and academic attention, these highly visible markers of Islam perhaps conceal more than they actually reveal. Just as behind the stone or brick façade of a mosque there is the textured hum of social, religious and cultural activity, so too beneath the visibly Muslim parts of Britain we can perhaps find a deeper and more fruitful landscape (or soundscape) to explore. Islamic soundscapes might not be immediately public, but this just perhaps indicates that they can instead be found within private or non-physical spaces.

Considering these difficulties, then, the second component of the research methodology – attempting to conduct ethnography among local Muslim sound communities – seemed at the time to be the most feasible route into private Islamic soundscapes and Muslim audial experiences. If sound could not be researched within the public realm, it perhaps seemed necessary to encourage research participants to open up and share their hidden sonic environment. Unfortunately, I also found that this strategy became beset with difficulties.

From early on in the research I had pursued traditional ethnographic practices in two specific areas of Leeds. This included an attempt to build trusting relationships with several Muslim gatekeepers – key individuals that had been introduced to me through pre-existing contacts. It also involved an attempt to develop new relationships and to involve myself in appropriate activities and events whenever possible. While these are routine, text-book methodological strategies (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), they nonetheless failed to gain the traction that I had hoped for. I therefore needed to ask what went wrong and why. One well chosen example of this failure provides a good illustration of the more general difficulties that were encountered during this initial phase of fieldwork.

Through a trusted personal contact I was introduced to a potential gatekeeper called Mahmood. In his late forties, and a member of the committee at his local Leeds mosque, Mahmood was more than happy to show me around and introduce me to the many people he knew. With his personal guarantee, we were both hopeful that I would very quickly meet people who were interested in the research and who would be willing to participate in one way or another. Accompanying Mahmood to the local mosque on several

occasions, I received a friendly and courteous welcome from those that I spoke with. Accompanied by smiles and polite questions, various people praised my motives for conducting the research, telling me how important it was for somebody to be doing it. It was often suggested that I should speak with this or that well informed person, and other potential lines of inquiry were raised as a possibility for the fieldwork. This was good, solid ethnography and it appeared to be progressing perfectly. It soon became apparent, however, that this early optimism was unfounded.

Despite a seemingly genuine desire to participate or help the research in some way, the contacts that I was beginning to develop ultimately led no further. After having had a good informal conversation with a participant, for example, my request to interview them in more depth was always politely refused: 'I don't really know enough about this, you'd be better interviewing someone else' or 'I'd like to but I'm just too busy at the moment'. Similarly, promises of help with other lines of inquiry never materialised. For instance, I was occasionally told that I would be kept informed about interesting events and other relevant announcements. When I did not hear anything after a while, a telephone call or email resulted in nothing more than the promise to let me know when something came up. Introductions to other research participants also never developed very far. I was often told that it would be hard to persuade people to take part in an interview. Or when a promise was given to contact an individual of interest on my behalf, the answer always came back as a negative. The feeling ultimately grew that I was encountering a form of polite, passive resistance. Nobody wanted to say no – but neither did they want to let me into their lives.

An event that occurred several months later perhaps offers an interesting insight into this reaction. After this line of fieldwork had long been abandoned, it came to my attention that feelers had been put out in the Leeds-Bradford area to try and establish my credentials. Basically, someone had been 'checking up' on me – asking around to try and ascertain whether or not I could be trusted. While my status as a university researcher could easily be determined, there was still always going to be a question about my 'research politics' – *who* was I really and *how* was I going to write about Muslim communities in Leeds?

Whether or not this 'background check' was directly responsible for my difficulty in gaining trust in this particular instance, it is nonetheless indicative of the general wariness that Muslim communities clearly feel toward 'outside' intrusions. There are perhaps two primary reasons for this. First, 'research fatigue' is certainly becoming an issue, especially in over-researched areas such as Bradford. During the course of my fieldwork it was common to encounter individuals who had been directly involved with research before – on one occasion I was told by a participant that he had already assisted *three* or *four* researchers in the past! Additionally, the agenda of previous research can also be an issue. Transient researchers – those lacking a long-term relationship with the researched community – can often cast a shadow over the intent of every researcher. Frustratingly, it sometimes seemed that the context set by previous research and various policy agendas created a prism through which my (completely original) research was viewed. Research participants often assumed that I would be interested in the politically-charged issues of the day – an assumption that typically shaped the nature and content of our conversations.

Second, there should not be an underestimation of the political and social context of Islamophobia (Allen, 2010), violent extremism (Kundnani, 2009), and official policy responses to these difficult issues. Concerns such as these have placed Muslim communities under enormous pressure. One man explained to me that Muslims in south Leeds felt under siege following revelations about the connection between the 7/7 bombers and the city – at one time journalists were simply going door to door, he explained. As Bolognani points out, research participants are inevitably going to feel somewhat jaded, even toward supposedly altruistic research:

> Communities affected by widespread tension based on rumours of imminent attacks by the far Right, and likely threat of racist and religious harassment, might see little positive return from such investigations. As one interviewee puts it: 'journalists and researchers come down, take you out for lunch, write their piece and you will not even get to read it'. (Bolognani, 2007: 280)

These experiences highlight the difficulties in conducting research with British Muslims in the contemporary context of institutional scrutiny and inter-community mistrust. Given the shoddy behaviour of some researchers and journalists, this wariness is perfectly understandable and it highlights the difficult but important task that academic researchers have in building long-term relationships with the social groups that they hope

to collaborate with. Nonetheless, while a long-term ethnographic project of this nature would have ultimately been successful, given the time constraints of the research, the risk was simply too high to gamble on an 'all or nothing' research strategy that required greater access in this specific setting – access that was simply not forthcoming at that time. After approximately three months of pursuing this research methodology, then, I took the decision radically to revise both the fieldwork strategy and the emphasis of the research itself.

Re-evaluating the Methodology

During the initial months of the fieldwork I made the attempt to study local soundscapes and sound communities. While it had always been clear that there was a vibrant 'Muslim music scene' within the wider British Muslim public sphere – seemingly sustained through the internet and specific forms of Muslim media – my initial aim had been to research this scene through the consumers of sound themselves – through the fans who actually listen to these artists. Given the difficulties that I clearly encountered with this approach, it consequently seemed possible, if not entirely desirable, to invert the methodology and directly to approach the artists themselves. This was more feasible on a practical level because the musicians in question were usually open to becoming involved in the research – partly because they have an interest in promoting their music, but also because they are often media-savvy and more comfortable with the idea of an interview. The new strategy raised issues over sampling (which musicians to include and why), and it also largely discarded the more general consideration of 'Muslim sound' or 'Islamic soundscapes'. But the core objective of researching Muslim music would still be at the heart of this new methodology.

The methodology that I began to develop was centred on the idea of 'well known' or 'popular' British Muslim musicians. This included an examination of the professional and artistic communities that these musicians might be a part of, the experiences they have of being Muslim music practitioners in the UK, and their engagement with an 'Islamic cultural economy' (Bourdieu, 1993). Interestingly, while the original research methodology focused on the idea of locality, this new methodology oriented itself toward large, geographically dispersed social groups – sound or musical communities that exist

in a more abstract, diffuse or even imagined form (Anderson, 2006 [1983]). Fundamentally, these musicians operate within a realm of cultural production, sustained through various forms of Muslim media, and largely stretching beyond the confines of a particular locale. Recognition of this was reflected in the formation of the methodology.

The fieldwork ultimately included three primary strands of methodology: (i) semi-structured interviews with a range of musicians (ii) ethnography at events and performances (iii) and internet research (including an internet survey and other forms of online research methodologies). The fieldwork was variously documented through recorded and transcribed interviews, fieldnotes and a field diary.

These particular methods enabled a focused examination of Muslim musicians, the environments they operate within (from various media discourses through to events and performance venues), and the fans that constitute both online and offline sound communities. The fieldwork process initially operated by identifying specific musicians to examine and interview. Through these sampling decisions I was then able to attend the events that these musicians performed at, as well as making an attempt to reach out to their fan base. As the fieldwork progressed even further, *in situ* sampling decisions were taken (i.e., additional musicians were identified or prioritised). This meant that the research remained open and reflective to the vagaries of the fieldwork, with new lines of inquiry and consequent sampling implications raised throughout. So, before discussing specific areas of the methodology in more detail, I think it will be helpful to consider the sampling framework that guided the fieldwork throughout.

Sampling

The original methodology had planned to work from the ground up, exploring musical tastes among Muslim communities in Leeds, and through this process eventually to reach relevant British Muslim musicians. The new methodology effectively inverted this process, using a direct examination of Muslim musicians to guide the research to Muslim music fans. It is therefore sufficiently rigorous only if it is explicitly acknowledged that the research is now focusing on specific Muslim sub-cultures (i.e., Muslim musicians and their fan groups). The research cannot make significant claims about a wider British Muslim demographic. It can however say something about the individuals that either

practice or take an overly keen interest in a Muslim musical aesthetic. Having acknowledged this, it is still vital to describe exactly why these particular musicians were included in the sample.

An initial sample of musicians was developed through a phase of preliminary research. While this involved a limited amount of participant observation in Leeds – speaking to people about these musicians, asking who was popular, examining the music sold in Islamic bookshops etc – it primarily consisted of a focus on media and internet sources. The simple question was asked: who has developed a significant public profile? With fundamental parameters established – a clear focus on British Muslim, English-language musicians – I proceeded to examine sources that ranged from Islamic magazines and newspapers (e.g., *emel* and Platform), to a variety of websites (e.g., muslimhiphop.com and meemmusic.com), to television (e.g., the Islam Channel and the Ummah Channel), through to an examination of the major Islamic cultural/charity events that take place during the year (e.g., Global Peace and Unity). By immersing myself in this saturated media environment, it was possible to begin identifying musicians and then contacting them directly.

Through this process I began meeting and interviewing a range of musicians, attending events throughout the UK, and beginning to research the interaction of music fans online. However, as the research progressed it was possible for the sampling to become more strategic. This was based on my recognition that categories, taxonomies and structures were beginning to emerge. Consequently, *in situ* sampling decisions were able to be taken based on theoretical relevance, with constant awareness that data is most valuably analysed via effective comparison. This method has been alternately known as 'strategic sampling' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983), 'theoretical sampling' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or 'purposeful sampling' (Patton, 1990). It is a principle that is based on the argument that sensitive, relevant categories are often hidden until the ethnography is underway (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), and that such categories are of necessity 'member-identified' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 50). Consequently, toward the end of the fieldwork I attempted to ensure that certain musicians were included in the research because – from a sampling point of view – they were theoretically distinct in some way:

perhaps they were musically unique, or they were representative of a particular religious, ethnic, class or cultural background.

While sampling decisions and recruitment took place, to a large extent, through the natural evolution of the ethnography, snowball sampling[10] also played a role when deciding who to involve in the research. While snowball sampling is of course primarily used for its practical benefit (it facilitates recruitment), it is also arguably a form of data itself. By carefully recording the nature of the relationships within a snowball sample, it is perhaps possible to reveal interesting data based on the organic emergence of these relationships (Noy, 2008). This manifested itself in my research very directly because it became theoretically important to identify the connections between different musicians. I actually began to ask musicians about *who else* I should be including in the research – they understandably pointed me toward the musicians that they respected or had personal and professional relationships with. This was invaluable data when attempting to map the existence of Muslim musical communities in Britain, particularly when understanding the sub-cultural and/or local connections that underpin specific Muslim musical communities (e.g., Muslim hip hop musicians in London).

The research ultimately identified *twenty four* different 'acts' (i.e., solo artists and groups) that fit the theoretical criteria of the research (see p.2-3). Six of these groups have three or more members; another five are two-person acts; and thirteen are solo artists. In total, this amounts to *forty four* individual musicians.

Interviewing

Of the forty four individual musicians that I identified through the sampling process, *twenty two* responded to my request for an interview. The interviews were sometimes conducted as a group or – as was more often the case – they involved just one musician. I was keen from the outset to integrate the more formal interviews with less intense interaction between myself and the musicians – I wanted to 'hang out' with the musicians whenever possible. This certainly occurred on several occasions. For example, I was to visit the home of several musicians and spend time with them at a performance.

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[10] Snowball sampling refers to the process of recruiting new interview/research participants through personal recommendations of current participants. This method of sampling is particularly useful as a means to access 'hidden' social groups (Morgan, 2008)

Unfortunately, these opportunities were more limited than I might otherwise have wanted. This was partly due to the professional experience of these musicians and their exceptionally busy schedules. They were already familiar with the notion of doing an interview over coffee or lunch, and they furthermore had little time to allow me into their busy lives on a more sustained basis. Despite these restrictions, I managed to conduct a number of extremely rich interviews that were supplemented – to a greater or lesser extent – through informal conversations and other forms of participant observation.

The interviews were all arranged either through a phone conversation, email or the social networking website, Facebook. All of the musicians interviewed are professional, publicly facing individuals and were easily contactable. Unfortunately, not all of the musicians responded to my repeated attempts at contact (and there also appeared to be no discernible pattern connecting those musicians who refused). I was therefore only able to interview twenty two musicians, not all of the forty four that had been identified in the sampling process. As I have already alluded to, the interviews themselves took place in a number of places. Geographically speaking, I conducted the interviews in Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, Nottingham, Cardiff and London. These interviews were variously conducted in restaurants, cafes, on university premises (once) and at the home of several musicians. Before each interview I explained the purpose of the research, issued the interviewee with a research flyer and information sheet, and asked them to complete an authorisation form (see Appendix One).

Once the interview had been fully transcribed, I sent the complete transcript to the interviewee for comment, although no points of correction or clarification arose at that stage. Minor changes were suggested during the final stage of the research when I sent interviewees the specific lines of text from the interview that I hoped to use – these changes were not significant. In terms of anonymity, the overwhelming majority of interviewees have not been issued with a pseudonym in this thesis. This decision was taken by mutual consent and – because these musicians are public figures – it provides an important dimension of context to my arguments. However, several musicians have been kept anonymous. This was either their stated preference; because they had discussed something particularly sensitive; or because they lacked a relevant public profile. When interviewees with a pseudonym are first introduced I make this very clear.

During the interviewing process itself, I utilised an integrated combination of narrative, non-directive and semi-structured approaches. A narrative interview involves attempting to encourage lengthy monologues from an interviewee without intervention by the interviewer. The objective is to overcome the stilted and artificial question/answer approach that can often predominate in a traditional interview. As Jefferson and Holloway have argued, traditional interview questions can have an abstract quality and encourage interviewees to respond with 'comfortable, well-rehearsed generalizations' (Jefferson and Holloway, 1997: 60). In contrast, a narrative is linked more directly to a participant's actual experience – they must use their own memories, ideas and emotions carefully to construct a lengthy and largely original response to a narrative question. A richer and more authentic account is ultimately the aim of this approach (Flick, 1998). To give an example of a narrative question that I routinely used, I found it effective to ask musicians to tell me 'the story' of how they became a musician. This frequently encouraged lengthy narratives that spanned much of their childhood and their adult life, revealing enormous amounts of detail on a wide range of topics.

I did find that a narrative approach could usually take me only so far and/or it was not entirely appropriate for a group interview. Furthermore, narrative responses often raised interesting areas that I wished to probe in more depth. At some stage in almost all of the interviews I switched to a more standard semi-structured approach, with traditional open-ended questions on a variety of topics. At this point I attempted to guide the interview towards becoming more of a 'friendly conversation' (Spradley, 1978: 58). I would interject more frequently, make clear my interest in their answer, and routinely ask spontaneous follow-up questions on the spot. Furthermore, I tended to craft completely original, or at least relatively specific, questions for each individual interview. Such questions would be based on criteria that included the musical material produced by the musician, a cautious assessment of their public profile, and the developing *in situ* dynamic of the interview encounter. Every interview therefore had a completely natural flow to how it progressed – I followed the interviewees toward the topics that they found most relevant for themselves and organically shaped my questions accordingly.

Online Research Methodologies

As I shall make clear later, the internet is an absolutely critical medium for Muslim musicians as a means to distribute their music, interact with fans, and forge an independent, self-mediated public image. It was only natural, then, that online research methodologies become an important supplement to the more traditional ethnographic techniques that I utilised. For the purposes of my arguments here, I define an 'online research methodology' as any data collection approach that is conducted entirely through the internet. I unfortunately lack the space to consider these methodologies in-depth, though there is a relative expanse of literature relating to online research methodologies (e.g., Helland, 2000; Kozinets, 2010; Kruger, 2005; Lange, 2007; Papacharissi, 2009; Røislien, 2011) and their applicability to researching Muslims (e.g., Bunt, 2000; 2003; Kort, 2005; Mihelj, Sabina, Liesbet van Zoonen and Farida Vis, 2012; Siapera, 2006; Wheeler, 2002). I will therefore restrict my discussion here to a consideration of the vital role that Facebook played throughout the course of the research.

It became apparent at an early stage in the research that the social networking website, Facebook, was an important medium for almost every musician that I had identified through the sampling process. These musicians use their own individual Facebook page to build an online network of fans, providing them with a framework for regular interaction. This enabled two important modes of online research.

First, as I have already mentioned, musicians publicly interact with their fans through the various communication functions on Facebook. These same musicians furthermore post a variety of content onto their Facebook page – ranging from poetry and song lyrics, through to music videos, photographs and personal reflections of one kind or another. I was therefore able to analyse this publicly available data, paying particular attention to the social, political and religious discourses deployed through both written and multimedia material. Taken in isolation, such data might be rather skewed and simply reflective of the public agendas that these musicians are pursuing – but this data is nonetheless an important supplement to other forms of ethnography.

The second mode of research specifically enabled by Facebook was the distribution of an online survey. Muslim musicians have gradually acquired a relatively significant fan following through Facebook – often around 5,000 fans or more in most cases. After

filtering these fans by geography (i.e., to exclude non-British fans), I was able to construct a contact database and then distribute an online survey to a random selection of these fans (see Appendix Two for the complete survey). Due to various technical limitations the process was time consuming, but I was able to distribute the survey to approximately 1,500 fans. This sample was spread across a range of musicians, allowing for a targeted survey response and corresponding analysis (i.e., I was aware of the musical preferences of each respondent). Eighty four individuals completed the survey in total, giving a response rate of 5.6%. The response rate was lower than I had hoped for, though it should be remembered that I was seeking supplemental data rather than statistical validity. Any observations from the survey are therefore cautioned by more extensive qualitative fieldwork. It should also be noted that response rates do tend to be low when surveys are conducted through electronic means (Sue and Ritter, 2007).

There are clear methodological flaws with this online surveying methodology – that is, it is contingent on a sample with internet access and the sampling method itself is solely rooted in self-selection. Nonetheless, I argue that it is rigorous enough to provide useful data. As Sue and Ritter have argued:

> Online surveys are an effective mode of survey administration when dealing with closed populations, when probability sampling is not essential, and when the target respondents have access to the necessary computer technology. (Sue and Ritter, 2007: 149)

When it is considered that the Muslim music scene is engaged with by fans overwhelmingly through the internet – a situation that will become entirely clear in later chapters – then it is not wholly inappropriate to conduct data collection through the internet. That being said, these methodological reservations should be noted and considered throughout the thesis.

A final point of interest concerning online research through social media relates to visibility as a researcher. In contrast to traditional forms of online research – in internet chat rooms for example – social media websites encourage members to provide rich and varied information about themselves, from biographical content to photographs. This raises an issue of self-presentation. While it is certainly possible to create a specific profile for the purpose of conducting research – and this might be desirable under certain circumstances – it is also likely that a researcher will use a pre-existing account that

incorporates a range of work, family, friendship and other social contacts. By conducting research through the medium of social networking media, the researcher is potentially opening up their personal life to intense scrutiny in an unprecedented way. This raises key points around reflexivity and positionality within the field. These issues are common to all field researchers, but they are perhaps particularly acute when conducting research through the potentially unvarnished medium of social media websites. In both online and offline contexts, then, it was necessary to give considerable thought to my own place as an individual and as a researcher.

Reflexivity and Fieldwork

The notion of reflexivity is particularly influential across anthropology and other related areas of social sciences: as a concept it recognises that the physical and social impact of the researcher in the field must be accounted for. The researcher is therefore not a neutral device for data collection, but rather a social individual with distinct prejudices, preconceptions and forms of positionality. Consequently, when conducting research it is inevitable that the researcher will both alter the field *and* be altered by it. As Lee has argued, it is necessary to 'replace an earlier conception of the researcher as 'detached' from the setting with one in which the researcher affects the setting as much as the setting affects the researcher' (Lee, 1993: 122). While this recognition ultimately rejects the notion of an 'authoritative' and 'dispassionate' ethnography – for we cannot ever be *above* the field itself – it does nonetheless allow for research that makes visible the place of the researcher within the field. There are two parts to this: (i) to understand the positioning of the researcher during the research and (ii) to integrate this dynamic directly into the written work.

As a white, non-Muslim researcher from a privileged background and prestigious academic setting, my place in the research field was never going to be straightforward. I have already discussed some of the difficulties that arose when I attempted to gain access to various research settings in Leeds. During this early phase of research, I was inevitably associated – whether negatively or positively – with wider debates and institutional agendas relating to community cohesion, multiculturalism and extremism. This placed limits on my access to a sceptical community and furthermore helped shape any

interactions that I was able to pursue. This was in many respects a classic example of unequal power relations and it made fieldwork rather difficult – though not impossible – to conduct within this particular context.

My decision to shift the focus of the research away from a grassroots music culture in Leeds, to a popular national/transnational music culture, dramatically changed the dynamic of my positionality within the research field. The overwhelming majority of the musicians that I eventually engaged with during the fieldwork can be described – much like myself – as young, liberal, assertive and educated. Furthermore, as popular musicians, they often have their own political, cultural, religious and professional agendas, as well as a significant amount of experience in an interview setting. The power dynamics of the fieldwork therefore levelled out to a much greater extent. I believe there were two important outcomes that resulted from this.

First, there was often a personal chemistry between myself and the musicians that I spent time with. We often spoke the same language – both metaphorically and literally – and we were able to reference similar cultural experiences (such as an overlapping taste in music). This resulted in a certain ease of conversation, not to mention laughter, which served to facilitate a much more open and engaging fieldwork process. While I have attempted to retain as much critical perspective as is possible during fieldwork, it should be noted that as a researcher I might be more accurately described as a 'critical friend'.

Second, I made my views and sympathies clear to the musicians when I conducted the fieldwork and interviews. As I argued in the first chapter (see p.4-6), my intention from the outset was always to conduct research on Muslim music because it appeared to be a positive and dynamic cultural practice – it challenged the myths and distortions of widespread public discourse on Muslims in Britain. While I was prepared for my preconceptions and preliminary research agenda to be proved wrong, I nonetheless situated myself as moving in parallel with these Muslim musicians: we share and were able to discuss related ideas and motivations. The vaguely political edge to the research therefore drew something from feminist debates relating to relationships and emancipatory fieldwork. As Thapar-Björkert and Henry have argued, 'feminist scholars have proposed reflexive, emancipatory, collaborative and participatory methodologies' (2004: 363). This methodological viewpoint manifested itself in the fieldwork through

my attempt to emphasise a sense of collaboration and solidarity – I made a subtle appeal for the musicians to work with me in revealing and ultimately disseminating their ideas and experiences.

This approach is not as evident within the final written account as I would perhaps have liked. This is largely because the research data encouraged me to produce a thesis with a thematic rather than an ethnographic structure. Ethnographic accounts and interview extracts are therefore pulled together as supporting planks of evidence, rather than forming a coherent and detailed narrative in the mould of Geertz's 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). Nonetheless, I believe that it is fair to say that I have attempted to be as open and reflective of my own sympathies, prejudices and positionality as is possible within the presentation of the fieldwork data.

Coding and Analysis

While I have continually attempted to understand my own role and place within any analysis of fieldwork data, my overarching approach to analysis was undertaken through the use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This well known methodology advocates the use of finely-coded empirical data as a mechanism inductively to generate abstract theorisation. In essence, rather than imposing a conceptual or explanatory framework on the data before analysis (as one might when testing a hypothesis), the data should instead be allowed to 'speak for itself'. By coding the data in extreme detail – and crucially avoiding a reductive coding frame through which data is lost (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) – it is possible to enable a more *open* analysis through which hidden categories, relationships and (ultimately) abstract theories begin to emerge. Using this methodology, the fieldwork data was coded through use of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

With a detailed coding frame in place, I deployed an influential analytic technique termed the 'constant comparative method'. Essentially, data must be taken and compared against other data, in order to generate categories and their constituent properties; it is often through this process of comparison that such properties and categories become visible. For example, in their study of 'awareness of dying', Glaser and Strauss compared American cancer wards with the Japanese equivalent, which made apparent a wide range

of similarities and differences that would otherwise have remained concealed. Such comparison is essential for a revealing analysis:

> Comparing as many differences and similarities in data as possible… tends to force the analyst to generate categories, their properties and their interrelations as he tries to understand his data… (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 55)

The idea is that an analyst is forced beyond the level of observational data towards forming a hypothesis, *necessarily* constructed from an interrelated set of categories. The analyst must attempt to generate these categories, based on underlying properties and relations, if a cogent hypothesis is to be constructed and the observations explained.

This method was applied throughout the analysis on many different levels of coded data. For example, it was especially revealing to compare the data derived from Muslim converts against the data from those who would describe themselves as Muslim from birth. Yet within these categories, on a more detailed level, it was interesting to compare discussions of open spirituality against the practice of specific religious orthodoxies. My point here is to suggest that this constant comparative method must happen at all levels of the analysis in order for rigorous and revealing theories to develop. As new categories begin to emerge and relationships between data become increasingly evident, new possibilities for comparative analysis continually arise. It is an evolving process that requires an effective system to ensure a consistent and methodical approach.

As has already been mentioned, the computer program NVivo was used in order to effectively pursue the analytic methodology outlined above. NVivo has been designed specifically to help organise and analyse qualitative data. As Pat Bazeley explains (Bazeley, 2007: 2-3), NVivo has five primary functions:

(i)   It allows the researcher better to manage and organise raw research data.

(ii)   It assists in the recording and organisation of conceptual ideas and theories.

(iii)   It acts as a database, allowing one to query and cross-reference data.

(iv)   It enables graphic modelling of data, from charts to matrices.

(v)   It provides reports on request, allowing the researcher to better summarise and overview their data and analysis.

While these functions were all useful to some extent, NVivo proved especially effective as a means to code in extreme detail and then thoroughly cross-reference data.

NVivo organises codes into parent nodes (large conceptual groupings) and child nodes (more specific codes that are organised within a parent node). For example, 'Gender' is a parent node that contains child nodes including, for example, 'Masculinity', 'Patriarchy', and 'Modesty'. Using the coding function in NVivo, I was able to code *twenty two* parent nodes and a remarkable *four hundred and thirty two* child nodes. There is a danger that an excessive number of nodes can encumber the analysis – the researcher can essentially become confused and lost within the data. However, there are several reasons why this was not the case in this instance. First, approximately half the nodes were references to specific places or people (e.g., musicians, religious scholars, media figures etc). While these nodes still need to be organised and understood correctly, they do not present the same conceptual challenge that might be found with more abstract nodes. Second, there are many nodes that ultimately proved to have little analytic value. For example, there was one reference to South American identity throughout the entirety of the data. This created a new but essentially redundant node that did little to help or hinder the analysis.

NVivo not only enabled the creation of a detailed coding frame, but it subsequently allowed the data to be manageably organised for analysis. Significant codes shone through by their repeated reference, and this was especially interesting when a code might otherwise have been missed. For example, 'Love' was a sporadic but surprisingly common concept that might otherwise have gone unnoticed without a detailed coding frame. The analytic functions of NVivo similarly facilitated a more effective comparison of nodes, largely through cross-referencing queries and visual data modelling. Indeed, nodal relationships were far more easily highlighted through use of these functions.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the research methodology was a gradually evolving process. It required regular calibration, continual sensitivity towards personal relationships and a significant shift of the research focus during the early stages of fieldwork. Central to my research methodology is a recognition that data collection, analysis and writing cannot ultimately be separated from one another. Spradley's notion

of the 'research cycle' provided a helpful model through which each of these 'phases' of research were continually fed back into one another (Spradley, 1980).

Despite recognising that the research process ultimately proceeds in such a way, I have constructed the remainder of this thesis thematically rather than through the development of an ethnographic narrative. I made this decision for two primary reasons. First, the fieldwork itself was rather stretched and piecemeal – regularly moving as it did across different contexts and modes of data collection – with the result that sustained ethnographic writing would sometimes have been difficult to produce in any meaningful or engaging way. Second, the fieldwork revealed a range of distinct and occasionally original theoretical ideas (at least within the context of studying Muslims in Britain) that required serious and focussed consideration. These concepts – including spirituality, class, the public sphere, religious authority and the *umma* – could only properly be examined by pulling together multivalent data from multiple contexts. The thesis therefore lacks something of an ethnographic flow, but instead attempts to rigorously use various forms of data to address linked theoretical arguments.

3. The British Muslim Soundscape

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Introduction

In this chapter I more fully outline and characterise the empirical scope of the research. This includes a general sociological profile of musicians and Muslim music fans, but also a description and partial analysis of musical style and performance culture. As the chapter progresses it will become increasingly clear that I am concerned with overlapping British Muslim public spheres and interwoven socio-cultural networks. I claim that British Muslim musicians are not simply free-floating creative spirits, awash in a wider music industry: they often collaborate, form friendships and inspire one another, reach out to overlapping audiences, perform at the same events, and project themselves into shared or interpenetrating media environments. It therefore makes sense to cautiously think of a _British Muslim music scene_, though this must of course be advanced with a degree of caution. Just as these artists cannot simply be bracketed by the dual identity 'Muslim' and 'musician', neither can there be an assumed expectation of fidelity toward the cultural and social boundaries that are erected around them.

The chapter can be broken down into four sections. In the first section I profile musicians according to sociological criteria. In section two I examine musical style and provide accompanying vignettes of selected musicians. In the third section I profile Muslim music fans. In the final section, I look at the range of different events involving Muslim musicians across the UK.

Profiling British Muslim Musicians

Musicians – or 'artists' as some voice-only performers prefer to be known – are the central focus of this study. In this section I therefore attempt to breakdown a chosen sample of these musicians into sociological criteria. At this stage I am less concerned with individual musicians themselves, finding it instead more relevant to develop the broader sociological picture relating to ethnicity, gender, age and religious background.

As with all musicians, Muslim musicians fall into different professional categories. Many are amateur performers, confined to devotional singing at home or at their local mosque; others strive to build a professional, full-time career through and around their talent; most fall somewhere in between. My concern here is with those musicians that have sought some element of wider public recognition beyond their locality, whether through performance, publicity or recording. Amateur musicians have been encountered and do receive some mention in subsequent chapters. However, I am attempting here to survey the professional and semi-professional field – i.e., those that significantly engage with Muslim public spheres in Britain.

Having surveyed the British Muslim musical soundscape – through recommendations, artistic networks, various forms of media, and the internet – I was able to identify *twenty four* different 'acts' (i.e., solo artists and groups) that fit three essential criteria: Muslim, British and professional/semi-professional. Six of these groups have three or more members; another five are two-person acts; and thirteen are solo artists. In total, this amounts to *forty four* individual musicians. No doubt there will be musicians that I overlooked, so this cannot be considered a comprehensive list. It does however provide a representative sample of musicians operating within overlapping and media-driven British Muslim public spheres.

In terms of ethnicity, this sample of musicians paints a fascinating picture of diversity, with a mixture of largely South Asian and Black performers, as well as a number of artists from various European and Middle Eastern ethnic backgrounds. This is the situation with regard to inter-group ethnicity – internally the groups are usually (though not always) ethnically homogenous. The ethnicity of musicians can be broken down as follows:

Ethnicity	*Total musicians*	*% of Total*	*UK Muslim Population %**
South Asian	17	38.6	67.8
Black	11	25	6.9
White Other	10	22.7	7.5
White British	6	13.6	4.1

Table 3.1: Muslim musicians by ethnicity   * (*Source:* Peach, 2006)

While there is some difficulty in accurately assessing the national picture of religion by ethnicity – with broad categories arguably concealing rather complex ethnic backgrounds – the rather simplistic comparison in the table above immediately reveals interesting possibilities around the issue of ethnicity. First and foremost, the disproportionate number of artists from a Black and White Other background stands out. A corollary to this remark is the correspondingly low number of musicians from a South Asian background. Is this explainable by the relatively small number of artists in the sample? Or are there perhaps other social and cultural factors at work? These important questions are central to this study.

Looking at gender, it is clear that this scene is overwhelmingly male. Only four musicians from a total sample of forty four are female. This distinct gender imbalance obviously requires explanation and analysis. Interestingly, all four of the female artists are British-born, with Jamaican roots, and are either converts themselves or the children of converts to Islam. The fieldwork indicated that there is a form of cultural and religious censure at work, with women expected, in many contexts, to perform only for children and other women. This can result in female artists being shut out of particular spaces and public discourses.

In conversation with a highly-trained (though non-professional) female nasheed artist and her male cousin, he offered a short laugh, saying, "She's brilliant but you'll never be able to hear her. She's only allowed to sing in front of women and the children". While many seem comfortable with this restriction – with female musicians often stressing that such modesty is a part of their faith – it is acknowledged by others that this makes it difficult for female artists to build a career when there are significant restrictions on access to performance spaces. For example, Global Peace and Unity, an event held every year and attracting as many as fifty thousand people, does not allow female musicians to perform. Living Islam, meanwhile, has held a 'ladies only' concert where women are able to perform for other women. The music scene is therefore very much riven by the relationship between gender and performance.

Another category of interest is age. While the exact age of many musicians is not always determinable, it is clear that, overwhelmingly, most are in their late-teens, twenties or early thirties. There are several exceptions to this trend, where acts have been

established for some time now – so called 'pioneers', including Mecca2Medina, Yusuf Islam, The Planets and Aashiq Al-Rasul. While this arguably reflects the national profile of Muslim communities – with around fifty percent of Muslims under the age of twenty five (Gilliat-Ray, 2010) – it is potentially more interesting than that: most of these artists began their musical careers post-9/11, within the context of overwhelming discourses concerning the 'war on terror', Islamophobia and 'Britishness'. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that such themes emerge prominently within the lyrics of these musicians.

One final category is the religious background of professional Muslim musicians in the UK. This complicated and deeply personal information can usually only be gleaned through informal conversation or a more extensive interview, and it is always difficult to make firm or sweeping claims. Nonetheless, I would argue that two interesting trends have emerged during the course of the research. First, either through an interview conducted by myself or through various media announcements by the musicians themselves, it is clear that *at least* fifteen of these artists – so around 34% – are either converts to Islam or the children of converts. This is quite a startling picture when it is considered that the number of converts to Islam in the UK, as of 2001, is estimated to be somewhere between 90,000 and 100,000 (Brice, 2010), or 3.3-3.7% of the total Muslim population[11].

A second trend relating to religious background is the tendency of musicians to identify in some way with Sufism – this can range from expressed sympathies through to outright membership of a Sufi *tariqah*. At least seventeen musicians from this sample can firmly be identified as falling into this category. Without actually interviewing all of these musicians, or locating this information in some other way, it is difficult to put an upper limit on this number. Nonetheless, I would theorise that it is almost inevitably larger than the seventeen that I have been able to firmly identify.

Listening to British Muslim Musicians

Musical genre is of course extremely important in any effort to make sense of this diverse group of musicians. Whether it is as central to the concerns of the musicians themselves

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[11] According to the 2011 census, the total UK Muslim population is 2.7 million (Office for National Statistics: http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_290510.pdf [accessed 12.11.12).

remains to be seen – many of the professional Muslim musicians in the UK are at times artistically ambiguous, drawing from multiple musical styles and traditions. While therefore somewhat unsatisfactory, it is nonetheless necessary to organise these artists through musical and performative style. For a start, self-definition certainly occurs, with different artists often perceiving themselves to belong to a particular musical fraternity. Also, from a practical point of view, I am primarily interested in the sociological and cultural relevance of these musicians – this requires some effort to identify broader trends. I have tentatively attempted to carve-up my sample of musicians into three genres. After a summarised description of each genre, I will provide short vignettes of specific musicians for illustrative purposes.

The Nasheed Genre

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 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 poetic tradition[12] – 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.

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[12] Na'at actually refers to melodic poems specifically about the Prophet Muhammad. It would normally be distinguished from sub-divisions of song and poetry that take other subjects as their object of concern.

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 in Britain 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 Eid or *Mawlid* (the birthday celebration of the Prophet Muhammad).

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 emphasises a pure, unadulterated style, and the use of any instruments is usually prohibited. I also found that the genre sits 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. Of the twenty four different acts that I identified earlier, *five* can perhaps be described as performing largely in this style – three groups and two solo artists. All of the artists are male and the scene is overwhelmingly South Asian in ethnicity. These artists – while often drawing from a tradition of Arabic and South Asian nasheeds – differ from the amateur style that I have just outlined in the sense that they are experimenting with the genre – pulling away from passive repetition or mimesis of traditional material – and are attempting to make it more relevant for a 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 remain consistent with a focus on praising Allah and the Prophet Muhammad.

Compared to the grassroots nasheed tradition, this emerging contemporary nasheed style also tends to place more emphasis on percussion instrumentation. A variety of instruments – including most commonly a goblet drum (such as a djembe or doumbek)

and a tabla (see Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2) – 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 instrumentation. 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 tentatively describe this music as paraliturgical. It certainly appears to be contiguous with an orthodox religious sound that stretches from nasheed, through to Quranic recitation (*qira'ah*) and the call to prayer (*adhan*).

Figure 3.1: Lenke wood
djembe from Mali
(Source: Wikipedia)

Figure 3.2: Professional tabla
from Pakrashi
(Source: Wikipedia)

Aashiq al-Rasul

Based in Birmingham, the prolific Aashiq al-Rasul[13] perhaps typify the contemporary nasheed style. They incorporate extensive percussion and are somewhat influenced by Arab and South Asian-style drumming. With two percussionists – utilising a variety of membranophones, from an electric drum kit to the doumbek 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

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[13] Translation: Lovers of the Prophet.

musical influences, one of the group's founders, Amran, has acknowledged an understanding of South Asian *ragas*[14], while another founder member, Usman, 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. 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 group operate out of a

Figure 3.3: Aashiq al-Rasul
(Source: Aashiq Al Rasul)

converted building that doubles up as a small community centre and Sufi *tariqah* (Sufi order) 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:

We turn to You day and night
Seeking ways from wrong to right
We turn to You in pray and bow
Not knowing all the deeds we do
We turn to Your endless favours
Increasing in their flavours
We turn to You in sheer delight
For truth never strong to fight
We turn to Your kindness
Your mercy and Your mildness
We seek Your generosity
Forget and enter vanity
We turn to You in fullness
In sorrow and in harshness...

'Allah the Almighty' – Aashiq al-Rasul (2007)

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[14] Deriving from the Sanskrit word for 'colour' or 'hue', a *raga* is a melodic mode used in Indian classical music.

'Allah the Almighty' is representative of the paraliturgical music that Aashiq al-Rasul produce. The lyrics focus on praising the supreme qualities of Allah, as well as emphasising a *collective* relationship to the divine and the support that can be derived through this connection. This song should absolutely be considered an exemplar of the English-language contemporary nasheed style.

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 a London-based Muslim weekend college (Safar Academy[15]) – reciting the Qur'an at various events across the UK. He has had additional vocal training at a private music education institution in London (the Institute of Contemporary Music and Performance[16]).

Amir Awan's music does not utilise instruments, 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

Figure 3.4: Amir Awan
(Source: Amir Awan)

located in the contemporary British nasheed tradition, Amir Awan draws from contemporary 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):

At the Mount of Uhud, where the great Prophet stood,

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[15] http://www.safaracademy.org/ [accessed 28.09.2012]
[16] http://www.icmp.co.uk/ [accessed 21.11.2012]

Leading his army for the greater good.
The fifty archers were given orders,
Protect us from cavalry with your arrows.
They were told to stay, not walk away,
Hold your positions, you've got a key part to play,
But they did not obey, they just walked away,
These heedless few lost us victory that day…

'Battle of Uhud' – Amir Awan (2009)

'Battle of Uhud' is another excellent example of a contemporary nasheed. With an evocation of a shared Muslim history it serves to educate the listener, but also to raise the notion of an overarching moral framework ('the greater good') and a corresponding requirement for individuals to adhere to their collective and religious duty. It is a fascinating song that channels contemporary themes of suffering, collectivity and sacrifice through the prism of historicity.

Syncretic Styles

The second genre of Muslim music in the UK is 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 religious/spiritual themes as their subject. Such music might therefore 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 incorporate a range of musical influences, from classical guitar playing and folk-rock, to Sufi-style drumming, qawwali, rap, contemporary R&B and the utilisation of Arab modal systems. Furthermore, the use of instruments can range from the imaginative use of multiple percussion instruments, to the acoustic guitar, and even a full-blown orchestra.

   The mish-mash of musical influences and traditions makes it difficult to clearly conceptualise this genre of syncretic music. A connecting thread does however seem to be the desire to produce Islamically-themed, English-langauge music that is relevant for an English-speaking audience – but also to move beyond the stylistic and semantic confines of the typical nasheed. The subject matter of such music therefore varies to a greater extent. While a focus on Allah and the Prophet Muhammad still remain 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 more likely than not to argue that their music is capable of reaching out to non-Muslims in the broader cultural public sphere.

Sami Yusuf

Sami Yusuf is emblematic of this musical genre. An ethnic Azeri, Yusuf was 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[17], 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[18] – it has a resulting sound that is highly polished and often described as 'Islamic pop'. His third album, *Wherever You Are*, continues this movement

Figure 3.5: Sami Yusuf
(Source: ETM International)

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'. 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

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[17] These included daff, tombak, marimba, tabla and a variety of African and Arab drums.
[18] These included piano, violin, flute, drums, oud, santour, tar, and tombak.

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):

I know that I'm not alone
What I've seen, has been seen before
But it hurts just like a thorn
A pain I've never felt before
My heart says: "Just speak the truth"
But my mind says: "Don't be a fool"
Need to get something off my mind
Don't let this silence be misunderstood
I don't know where my heart will take me
But I know your light will protect me
From this fragile world
I don't know where I'm destined to be
Rich or poor, famous, loved or lonely
But I know, without your light I'll never cope
In this fragile world...

'Fragile' – Sami Yusuf (2010)

There are strong religious and spiritual overtones in 'Fragile' – referencing, as it does, perennial tropes that relate to the metaphysical nature of humanities existence – but it also notably avoids overtly Islamic themes. Considering that 'Fragile' is backed by the familiar and dulcet sound of global pop music, the object and intention of Yusuf's music is clear: both sonically and semantically, it would be fair to state that Sami Yusuf is attempting to break into the global mainstream.

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 a traditional Muslim collectivity:

Remembrance of God is my friend;
Reason is the root of my faith;
Love is my foundation;
Enthusiasm is my horse;
Knowledge of God is my capital;
Firmness is my treasure;
Sorrow is my companion;
Science is my weapon;
Patience is my mantle;
Contentment is my reward;
Poverty is my pride;
Devotion is my art;
Conviction is my power;
Truth is my redeemer;
Obedience is my sufficiency;
Struggle is my manner
and my pleasure is in my prayer.

Figure 3.6: Pearls of Islam
(Source: Pearls of Islam)

'Love is my Foundation' – Pearls of Islam (2012)

'Love is my Foundation' exemplifies the syncretic/poetic style through the careful use of powerful metaphors that are based on personal values and experience. As with the more recent music by Sami Yusuf, there is a deliberate attempt to avoid specific Islamic references – they instead pitch their music toward the more general listener. It is therefore no coincidence that Pearls of Islam cite Ben Harper as one influence among many. Indeed, Pearls of Islam are certainly reminiscent of the emotive roots-rock produced by Harper, a two-time Grammy award winning musician who incorporates strong but often undefined religious themes into his own music.

Silk Road

Based in Birmingham, Silk Road is a four-man group that – as they describe it – create 'Sufi inspired acoustic folk-rock'. The group is itself ethnically diverse, with members that are varyingly of South Asian, Egyptian, Afghani and Anglo-Irish descent. Performing with two acoustic guitars, an electric bass guitar and a tabla, Silk Road produce music that comfortably draws from a popular tradition of folk-rock music. They cite the award-winning British folk-rock group, Mumford & Sons, as most comparable in terms of their style – and it is perhaps no coincidence that Mumford & Sons regularly draw on religious themes in their own music.

While firmly rooted in a popular folk-rock tradition, Silk Road nonetheless draw from an eclectic range of influences, including funk, Irish folk, West African and classical Indian music. Musically proficient and professional, the band are able to discuss in technical detail the direct integration of these influences into their music. Lyrically the band attempts to avoid direct references to Islam, instead preferring to more subtly integrate a selection of religious themes into their music.

Figure 3.7: Silk Road performing live.
(Source: Silk Road

While these lyrics might specifically draw from the Qur'an, *Hadith* and the poetry of Rumi, they nonetheless transpose these themes into a language that has broader and trans-religious appeal. They want nothing less than to reach out to a mainstream, spiritually-inclined audience:

Ask my heart
Is my Lord near
It replied no doubt,
It's Him that's always here
Ask my heart
Why I can't see through
It said His light is shining
In every bit of you
I said that's a strange thing for me
Hidden lights that my eyes just can't see
It said illusion,
That's what we call the cover
Look past into your self
And you will discover
Look past into your soul, you will see your Lord
In every atom, that you have ever explored
For there is nothing, that you've ever seen or done, but
It was always destined, by the One

'Ask my Heart' – Silk Road (2011)

Inspired by the poetry of Rumi, 'Ask my Heart' rises and falls with the passionate lyrics and instrumental guitar music that provide it with a familiar pop-rock sound. It is no wonder that Silk Road have marketed 'Ask my Heart' as their first single. In a fascinating point of overlap with the musical influences that guide Pearls of Islam, the lead singer of Silk Road, Faraz, told me that he conceives of their music 'sitting on the ipod of a twenty-something, maybe somewhere between Ben Harper and Pink Floyd' (Faraz, 34, October 2011, Birmingham). It is this powerful ambition that continually drives Silk Road toward the musical mainstream.

Muslim Hip Hop

The third and final Muslim musical genre 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 (Rose, 1994). Yet Muslim hip hop is a comparatively recent phenomenon in the UK, with an increasing number of acts having emerged over the last decade. This genre of music places extreme emphasis on the poetic function of language, positioning itself as the innovative vanguard of an ancient tradition in Islamic poetry. In terms of lyrical content, Muslim hip hop 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. While Muslim hip hop therefore 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. It also has a specific and overlapping relationship with the underground hip hop scene in the UK and, to a lesser extent, Europe and the U.S.

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 late-twenties, 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 (Sobral, 2012). 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:

Figure 3.8: Poetic Pilgrimage
Source: Poetic Pilgrimage

She's become a slave to the ways of destruction
What when, no one else can, when no one else has got a plan,
Hands on heart I bear witness
God can, construct just as easily as the passing tides, that I'm prepared to ride
It's as if God gave me rhyme in order to save my life
So me, now I spit to higher heights, with the light of that of a million suns
Knapsack on back, prayer mat is packed, I trek this track with the birds and bees as my
Backing track, I, trek this track singing sweet redemption songs for all those women
All those women who bore children and their partners?
Their partners just upped and left them
All those lost in wars and found an early grave, are a sight for your sake
Sister soldiers and those soldiers sex slaves, your pain is not in vain
For me, I chant down Babylon in your name and for the sake of all the nameless
And these words that I speak, these words that I speak, are not for fortune nor fame
Cause my heart is in too much pain for this,
Bringing my realities and my memories to the surface time
Battling with the emotions of being worthless time…
…Lady of life, daughter of light, descendent of a beautiful African-born…
She shines like the stars in grey or dark skies
Reading Qur'anic script that is mesmerised by the beauty of life
Even in the midst of strife, I said this rhyme came to save my life
I said this line came to save my life

'A Star Woman is Born' – Poetic Pilgrimage (2010)

Pulling together a range of themes – including patriarchy, the empowerment of women, spiritual journeying and Afrocentrism – 'A Star Women is Born' is representative of the music and spoken-word poetry produced by Poetic Pilgrimage. Resisted by some as too

outspoken and incendiary – not to mention the 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.

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[19], 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'[20].

Figure 3.9: Quest Rah
Source: Quest Rah

Perhaps because Quest Rah actively began practicing 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, Quest Rah now produces music that deals with issues ranging from spirituality and self-knowledge

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[19] 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.
[20] http://www.rapreviews.com/archive/2008_11_ancienttapesv1.html [accessed 03.11.12]

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:

I step out from the darkness, I'm light for my targets
Inscribed on your arches, you'll find me at the markets
Read me on your carpets, make you sharp like some carvings
You gotta keep on asking rich or you starvin
Hear before you born, I'm with you when you die
You got an inner storm, I'm with you when you cry
Ancients wrapped in turbans, to modern day suburban
I'm the discussion in the circles of the learned men
I come in peace, but they take me to war
But I say war, if they kick down ya door
I am the first step, wisdom is the next
Some get vexed when they see me on the set
I was owned by many thru war and thru calm
I was thrown in the river by Hulagu Khan
I was burned in the library of Alexandria
I was shot in the autobahn when they gunned down that leader
I am the writing in the Torah, the writing in the Bible
I am the beauty of the holy Qur'an recital
Guidance is vital to unlock my title
From Aristotle, I'm local to hopefuls
I am Ibn Taymiyyah
I am Ibn Arabi
I am the middle way like Al-Ghazali
'5th Element' – Quest Rah (2011)

In this thoughtful track, Quest Rah draws inspiration from a series of scholastic and religious sources – both Muslim and non-Muslim – to produce a critique of the shallow, unreflective nature of the modern world. Integrating concepts of spiritual knowledge with a firm handle on the contemporary struggles that mark the corporeal world, '5th Element' is representative of Quest Rah's complex and engaging work.

Profiling British Muslim Music Fans

While musicians are obviously a central and highly visible part of the Muslim music scene in Britain, it is important not to overlook the fact that fans constitute the broader social foundation of this scene. It is these individuals that ultimately sustain any sub-cultural group. This section therefore details the results of the survey – a survey that I

distributed to approximately 1,500 self-identified music fans[21]. I will also provide a number of additional reflections – based on ethnographic fieldwork – that will provide a degree of balance against the unavoidably narrow parameters of the survey. Through this additional analysis I acknowledge that Muslim musical culture has many layers and that some degree of caution must be exercised when utilising the results of a survey that has specifically targeted 'hardcore' music fans – especially when that survey has been distributed through the internet. Indeed, there are many Muslim musical and cultural activities that take place in spaces beyond this self-selecting group of music fans.

Despite this caveat, I believe the survey has enabled a fruitful glimpse into a Muslim musical sub-culture, and when placed within the proper context it undeniably provides useful data. The following section will therefore be similar – though not identically structured – to the last section, in which I profiled Muslim musicians. Accordingly, I will analyse ethnicity, gender, age, occupation and religious background. As with my earlier profile of Muslim musicians, the aim here is to provide the rough sociological contours of this group, not to unpick the deeper subjectivities that will be the object of my analysis in later sections.

Ethnicity is a tricky concept to analyse under any circumstances and it can be particularly difficult through the limited scope of a survey. Indeed, ethnic identification can be extremely complex – an individuals perception of their ethnicity might not easily slot into the standard typology. Nonetheless, the survey has provided a useful outline of the ethnic makeup of Muslim music fans:

Fans by Ethnicity	Total responses	% of Total
White	7	8.3
Asian	67	79.8
Black/African/Caribbean	4	4.8
Other Ethnic Group	6	7.1

Table 3.2: Muslim music fans by ethnicity (see survey in Appendix Two)

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[21] The methodological rigour of the survey is discussed in the previous chapter. The results of the full survey can be found in Appendix 2.

In stark comparison to the quite remarkable ethnic diversity of the musicians profiled in the previous section, the respondents to this survey appear to be far more in line with the national Muslim norm. For example, 72.61% of the respondents in this survey identified themselves as coming from a South Asian ethnic background (i.e., Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian) – this compares with 67.8% for the entire Muslim population (Peach, 2006). Of those that provided details for the 'Other Ethnic Group' category, two stated they were Arab, one Middle Eastern, two mixed race, and one person – intriguingly – marked down 'none'. The possibilities for the difference between the ethnic character of musicians and their fans will be discussed in later chapters – it suffices to raise the issue at this stage.

The picture of gender was again consistent with national norms. These norms indicate that while there is a slight imbalance of men over women (a 52/48 ratio), due essentially to migrant patterns, the gender balance of younger Muslims is largely more proportionate (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 121). With this survey there was an exact 50/50 ratio, with forty two respondents identifying themselves as female and forty two respondents identifying themselves as male. In contrast, when profiling musicians I found that gender imbalance was hugely apparent – only four musicians (from a total sample of forty four) were women. I will explore these gender issues later in this thesis (see Chapter 7, p.183). However, it is worth suggesting at this point that the difference can potentially be explained by the religious and cultural views held by many Muslims on female performance and modesty. In essence, women are able and willing to enjoy music in private, or as passive listeners in a public space, but they are either excluded from or choose not to engage with the public sphere as producers of music and performance culture.

When examining age I found that Muslim music fans are largely comparable to the musicians themselves and to the Muslim population as a whole – it is a young sample, with the overwhelming majority of respondents aged younger than thirty, the large majority of whom are in their twenties. This reinforces potential claims regarding the idea of an emerging Muslim youth culture – of which music forms an integral part (Herrera & Bayat (eds), 2010). Additional cultural practices associated with a Muslim youth culture might range from film to fashion. For instance, ethnographic work as part of this research

project has suggested that particular streams of Muslim youth culture are identifiable with distinctive 'Islamic fashion scapes' (Tarlo, 2010). The clothing of so-called 'Kool Islam' (Miah & Kalra, 2008) – which includes hooded tops emblazoned with slogans such as '1Ummah' and 'Don't panic, just a Muslim' – can frequently be found for sale, on both websites and stalls, sitting right alongside music CDs. Given the seemingly youthful nature of this musical sub-culture, it is unsurprising if at times it is possible to find an 'Islamised' music culture/industry pitched toward the young.

Employment Status	Total responses	% of Total
Employed	34	40.5
Self-employed	9	10.7
Unemployed	9	10.7
Full time student	30	35.7
Other	2	2.4

Table 3.3: Muslim music fans by employment status (see survey in Appendix Two)

The occupational status of those who responded to the survey is especially interesting. Some of the results are partially explainable when the age of respondents is considered: as might be expected with a youthful sample, a greater number of respondents are in full time education than the national average. Beyond this straightforward observation, there are interesting remarks to be made when this data is considered in a little more detail.

First, the number of those who are unemployed is lower than might otherwise be expected. It has been estimated previously that young Muslims are more likely to be unemployed, with unemployment standing at 18% among those younger than twenty four (Gilliat-Ray, 2010:125). It can reasonably be assumed that this figure will have been substantially higher in the period during which this survey was distributed (i.e., 2011-12): national unemployment rose significantly during this period and it has been calculated that between November 2011 and January 2012, youth unemployment as a whole stood at 22.5%[22]. It can also be argued that Muslim youth unemployment would be even higher – young South Asian Muslims are more likely to have been born into challenging economic

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[22] http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn05871 [accessed 07.09.12]

and educational circumstances. However, when the results of this survey are used to calculate unemployment among those younger than thirty, the figure comes to 15.5%. In short, I am claiming that young Muslim music fans are more likely to be in work or education than other young Muslims.

A second point of interest is the educational background of those who responded to the survey. Considering the age of respondents, it is perhaps not surprising that 35.7% of respondents are in full time education. However, the majority of those in full time education are in their twenties and are therefore almost certainly pursuing some form of higher education. Connected to this conclusion is further evidence based around the nature of different types of employment. While most respondents failed to provide specific details regarding their current employment, those that did overwhelmingly listed professional occupations of one kind or another – including several teachers, a college lecturer, a film producer and a health psychologist.

It seems clear to me from this data that the respondents are generally well educated, largely pursuing professional careers, and are less likely to be unemployed. I would caution these results by remarking that it is such people who are more likely to respond to an academic survey request. Nonetheless, ethnographic work that I have conducted partially substantiates the claim that an emerging Muslim middle-class is predominantly – though certainly far from exclusively – involved in Muslim cultural production and development of British Muslim public spheres.

Making Space for Performance

Performance is of the utmost importance to many artists. Indeed, the *raison d'être* for some is the ability to perform and share their music with as many people as possible. However, the context for performance organisation is not uncomplicated. While smaller performances are occasionally organised by the musicians themselves, larger events are usually almost certainly managed by other organisations – potentially organisations with a different agenda to the musicians themselves. This can introduce problematic issues based on access and control. Who runs these events? Who do they invite to perform? I will advance these arguments more concretely in a later chapter. Here I instead focus on a

broad outline of the different events that take place across Britain, attempting to evoke the general performance context for Muslim musicians.

A striking commonality that seems to run through the experiences of many musicians is the precarious position of their performance schedule. A small number of highly successful musicians (e.g., Yusuf Islam and Sami Yusuf) are clearly in high demand and have the resources to more fully control where they perform. Most musicians rely on being hired directly to perform at a particular event and therefore often lack the independence to sufficiently control their own performance schedule. Regular performance events often include weddings (and occasionally other private functions), Islamic conferences, music festivals, and multicultural arts events (such as those run by a local council). Often these events will involve a small fee plus expenses – sometimes only expenses can be offered. Musicians have different views on whether or not they will perform 'for free', and this will often depend on the context of the event. Some larger groups have been known to perform with fewer members because the fee for performance does not cover the cost of the whole group.

For most musicians there appears to be little evidence to support the idea of a large and consistent fan base – at least in terms of filling performance halls on a regular basis. This often appears to make it difficult for musicians to run events where they are the sole attraction for the audience. Paradoxically, musicians are still often the headline attraction at many events – it just seems that such events must also offer additional (and superficially more legitimate) reasons for attending, such as charity fundraising, a range of informative speakers, or family-fun activities. I will examine the possible reasons for this in a later chapter (see Chapter 6), but it is potentially explainable by the caution with which some Muslims might approach 'entertainment' – that is, entertainment for entertainment's sake can be seen as a distraction from more serious issues. Several musicians have also directly raised the issue of performance culture within the South Asian context, suggesting that passively listening to a performance for its own inherent value is something more traditionally associated with 'Western culture'. According to these arguments, religion and politics are elevated within music to a position above entertainment and art. The validity of this claim will be an important theme in later chapters.

There have been attempts by musicians to independently create their own performance spaces. In particular, a number of Muslim hip hop artists have attempted at various stages to run their own events (both as a one-off and on a regular basis). Examples of this include the Rebel Muzik night, running in Ladbroke Grove, London, on the first Thursday of every month during 2009 (see Figure 3.10). While not exclusively inviting Muslim hip hop acts to perform, the event was organised by Muslim musicians, and the focus was certainly on a 'conscious message'. Islamic pamphlets and other related information were often made available for the audience to take home.

Similarly, many of these same musicians were involved with the 'I am Malcolm X' tour that took place during 2009 (see Figure 3.11). This tour was jointly organised by
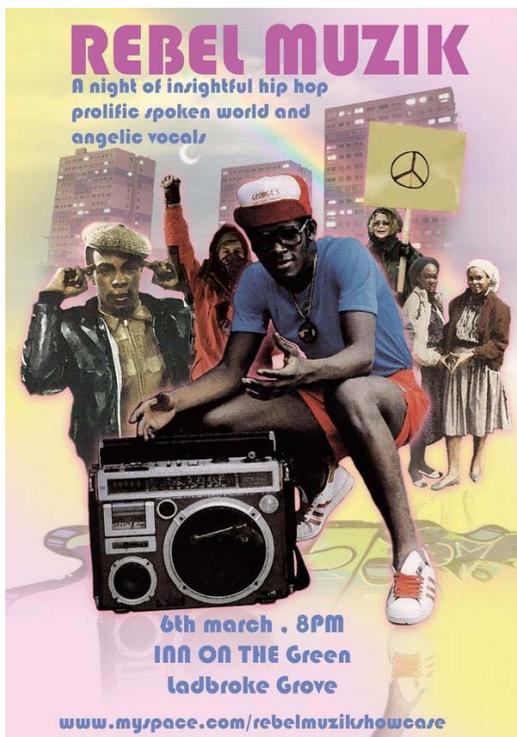
Figure 3.10: Poster for 'Rebel Muzik' hip hop event, 2009.
(Source: Rebel Muzik)
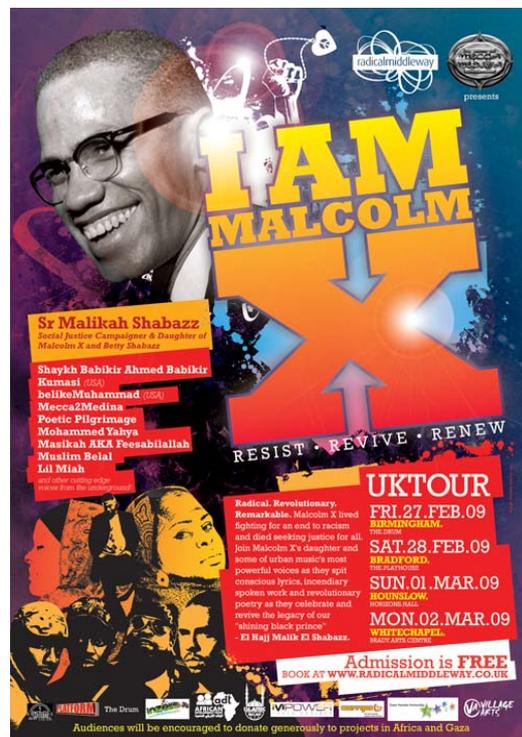
Figure 3.11: Poster for the 'I am Malcolm X' tour, 2009.
(Source: Radical Middle Way)

Radical Middle Way (RMW) and Crescent Moon Media (CMM). Launched in 2005, RMW is a 'revolutionary grassroots initiative aimed at articulating a relevant mainstream understanding of Islam that is dynamic, proactive and relevant to young British

Muslims'[23]. As is clear from this brief mission statement, RMW is focused on helping provide young Muslims with a sense of strong identity and encouraging their political and ethical engagement with British society. CMM is the record label founded by the hip hop group Mecca2Medina. In partnership, these two organisations enabled the 'I am Malcolm X' tour, which involved four performances, across four days, in Bradford, Birmingham and London. Performing were a variety of British and American hip hop musicians, spoken word artists and poets. The artists were joined on this tour by Shaykh Babikir Ahmed Babikir, a Sudanese Shaykh in the Sammaniyya Tariqah, and Malcolm X's daughter, Malikah Shabazz.

While artists from particular musical genres have attempted to create their own spaces for performance, I did also find events being organised by different religious networks. This is especially the case with different Sufi traditions in Britain – tours showcasing a variety of Sufi musicians are not uncommon in the UK. Sometimes these are based along ethnic lines. For example, Sayarts, a Birmingham-based organisation, specifically sponsors Sufi musicians from Pakistan to perform in the UK. Occasionally it is possible to find tours or performances that are more focused on a British or culturally diverse scene. This was the case with the 'Green Path to Eternity' tour, which was organised by the Rabbani Project, an off-shoot from the Naqshbandi Centre for Spirituality and Cultural Advancement (CSCA) based in London. The 'Green Path to Eternity' tour involved three evening performances, at Oxford University, SOAS, and a church in Nottingham. There were a variety of visiting international acts – including several North African instrumentalists – along with a selection of British performers, such as Pearls of Islam, Rakin Niass and Poetic Pilgrimage. The tour was partly conceived as a means to promote a double album produced by the Rabbani Project, called *Eternity*, with twenty six tracks by a number of different musicians – mostly international musicians, but the album did include several British acts.

The events outlined so far tend to be smaller, attracting niche audiences that are often young and/or from a Sufi religious tradition. They also tend to have a particular outlook – often focusing on issues of political and social justice, or spiritual and humanitarian love – while placing less restraint on those who perform (so women and instruments are

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[23] www.radicalmiddleway.org [accessed 13.04.12]

usually not excluded from the performance space). They also seem to cater for a more educated audience, which partly explains why the 'Green Path to Eternity' tour held two events at university venues. In contrast, larger events do take place across the UK. These events often attract audiences from a wider Muslim demographic and receive greater coverage across Muslim media outlets.

Figure 3.12: Poster for the 'Green Path to Eternity' tour, 2012.
(Source: The Rabbani Project)

Figure 3.13: Poster for 'Ladies of Light' event, 2012.
(Source: The Rabbani Project)

The most well attended of these events is Global Peace and Unity (GPU). Held in London, at the ExCel Exhibition Centre, and described as the 'largest Muslim, interfaith and multicultural event of its kind in Europe', an estimated 55,000 people attended during 2006[24]. Four events were held annually between 2005-8, with another GPU event held in 2010. In 2010 the event was held over two full days. The event was organised by the Islam Channel, and they essentially had full control over who was invited and how the programme was managed. This was not without controversy – as I shall demonstrate in a later chapter (see Chapter 7, p.172-176).

Half of the exhibition space at GPU contained food tables, a small funpark, and stalls run by various organisations, charities, and businesses (from clothing and halal pick 'n

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[24] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Peace_and_Unity [accessed 10.12.11]

mix through to hajj travel companies). A series of talks were offered in the main hall throughout the day – largely by prominent politicians (Muslim and non-Muslim), media figures, religious scholars and public intellectuals. The evening focused on entertainment, which largely consisted of 'nasheeds' – a term used broadly to capture a range of Muslim singers. There were only a small number of British performers, and evening highlights often included popular Islamic nasheed/pop acts from abroad, such as Zain Bhika (South Africa), The Sound of Reason (Canada) and Outlandish (Denmark). There were no female performers and no instruments were allowed (although synthesised or recorded instrumental sounds were used by some artists). Most of those attending GPU were either groups of young people – teenagers and those in their twenties – or families with small children. It was clear that the musical performances were the clear attraction: the talks during the day were sparsely attended, while the evening entertainment was packed to the rafters.

In some ways the event arguably captured the mainstream and politically 'acceptable' face of British Islam – the vast range of speakers included Sarah Joseph (Editor of Emel Magazine), Farooq Murad (Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain), Tariq Ramadan (the well-known and outspoken Muslim intellectual), and Sadiq Khan (the Labour MP for Tooting). Nonetheless, the event was certainly not without controversy. The Conservative Peer, Baroness Warsi, was reportedly ordered by Prime Minister David Cameron not to attend the event because of links that several speakers allegedly had to 'extremists' – a view partially reinforced by a Quilliam Foundation report, in 2010, claiming that the Islam Channel promoted 'extremists' through its regular broadcasting content[25]. This echoes criticisms from other Muslims – including Muslim musicians – who believe that the Islam Channel is culpable of a specific and biased agenda.

Interestingly, a striking juxtaposition to this particular political furore could be found outside the GPU exhibition centre, where a small band of male protesters from Al-Muhajiroun were demonstrating peacefully against the GPU event. During a brief interview (conducted by myself) one of the protesters explained why they were demonstrating:

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[25] http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/press-releases/ofcom-rules-against-islam-channel-following-quilliam-report/ [accessed 21.04.12].

…we just want to make the Muslims understand… you can have conferences but it has to be Islamic in the first place. It has to meet certain criteria. You can't allow free mixing in a conference. Second, you can't allow *kuffur*, [hesitates] disbelief ideas, propagated at a so-called Islamic conference. Like here, they will be promoting interfaith, like here they'll be promoting democracy, secular beliefs [inaudible] all these sort of ideas, you can't promote them, you're not allowed. And second, there will be singing and dancing, you know, singing with all these nasheeds and music and all that [inaudible] it's not Islamic at all. (Unnamed protester, London, 23rd October 2010)

GPU has therefore been criticised, both for being too 'extreme' and too 'moderate'. British Muslim musicians also attacked GPU for not doing enough to promote UK-based artists during the event – there was apparently too much emphasis placed on international artists (especially South Asian musicians). Some of these criticisms are perhaps the inevitable result of an event that supposedly brings together the entire 'Muslim community'. At the very least, it highlights the difficult performance context that musicians face when attempting to become involved in a large event that has competing pressures and multiple agendas.

Another high profile event that musicians are keen to perform at is the four-day Living Islam event, which has been held several times before (2003, 2005, 2008 and 2011) in the Lincolnshire countryside. Living Islam is organised by The Islamic Society of Britain (ISB) and promoted by various media partners, including Emel Magazine and the Islam Channel. As with GPU and other similar events, Living Islam is conceived around the notion of family fun and educational or religious enlightenment – although the evening sessions specifically focus on musical performance and other forms of entertainment. International performers tend to dominate the performance schedule, with acts like Zain Bhika (South Africa) and Sound of Reason (Canada) once again the popular headline acts of 2011. Living Islam allows the use of instruments, and the British group Silk Road gave a well-received instrumental performance with guitars, percussion and an electric keyboard. There were no female performers at Living Islam in 2011, though previous Living Islam events have been known to permit female musicians to perform at 'ladies only' performances.

Eid in the Square is the third big performance event of the British Muslim calendar. Held in Trafalgar Square, the event is organised by the Greater London Authority (GLA) in collaboration with the Eid in London Committee (ELC). The ELC is an appointed

group of organisations that advise the GLA on issues relating to the sponsorship and running of Eid in the Square. In 2011 the ELC was comprised of organisations including Islamic Circle & Regents Park Mosque, UK Muslim Scouts and North African Arts. There was some criticism at the time from Muslims who felt these organisations were not truly representative of Muslims in Britain. There was also outrage in some quarters when Zee TV (an Indian, Hindi-language television channel) was given the main sponsorship slot in place of the Islam Channel (which had previously sponsored the event). Eid in the Square has a variety of stalls and exhibitions, promoting various aspects of Islam, but the main focus is once again on entertainment and musical performance. Eid in the Square is significant in some respects because it has given a prominent platform for musicians who might not perform at other big headline Muslim events in the UK. This includes female musicians, several of whom have performed at Eid in the Square, including Poetic Pilgrimage and Pearls of Islam.
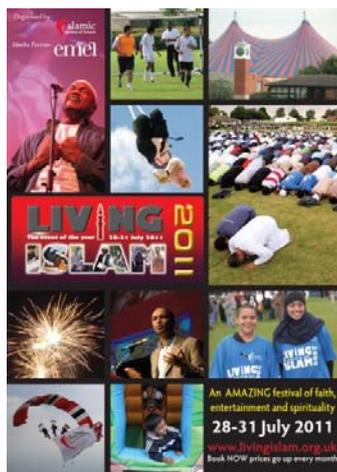
Figure 3.14: Poster for the Living Islam festival, Lincolnshire, 2011.
(Source: Living Islam)
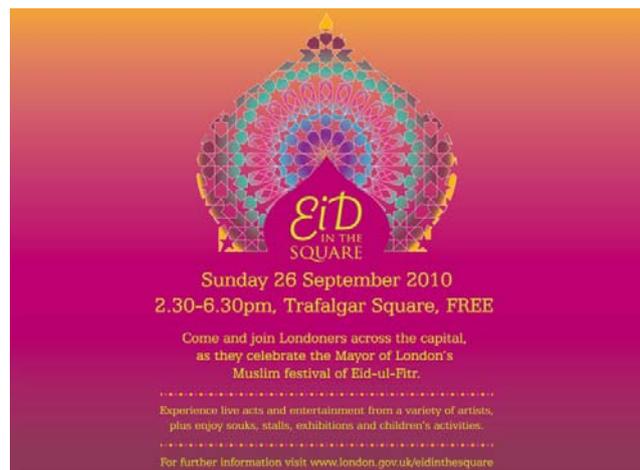
Figure 3.15: Poster for Eid in the Square, London, 2010.
(Source: Eid in the Square)

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the Muslim music scene in Britain. While the requirements of space and clarity make it difficult to adequately describe this scene in any great detail, I have nonetheless developed the broad empirical parameters required to make sense of later arguments. While this chapter has been largely descriptive in content, it has nonetheless been possible to make a series of connected observations that go some

way to supporting my claim regarding a distinct 'Muslim music scene' in Britain. In particular, it is relevant to note that while Muslim musicians and their fans are ethnically, culturally and musically diverse, they also appear to share certain commonalities based on education and religious outlook – in short, they often tend to be well-educated Sufis. It is also worth acknowledging the varying degrees of interaction between individual musicians and the overlapping social/cultural spheres that they inhabit.

Accordingly, I would argue that these musicians share a number of commonalities – both ideological and practical – that strongly support my decision to bring them together into one overarching group. It goes without saying that there is a complex and textured diversity of opinion amongst these musicians – just as they are also often participants in various disconnected sub-cultural groupings. Yet, despite these caveats, there is a clear sense that these musicians reside within the same experiential ambit. This makes some degree of sociological generalisation an appropriate mode of analysis for later arguments.

Section Two

Religion, Knowledge, and Spirituality

4. Religious Pedagogies: British Muslims, Islam and Music

Introduction

It became clear from the outset that British Muslims often have a complex and at times counterintuitive attitude towards music. The spectrum of opinion ranges from outright rejection of music in all of its forms, through to the complete acceptance of music as an everyday and enjoyable component of wider British culture. Yet it is more usual to find nuanced interpretations between these outer parameters: opinions that are often based on motivations ranging from iterative religious pedagogies through to contextualised reflections on British society and the place of music and Muslims within it. For some the idea of 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' music is simply anathema – either because music is frowned upon or perhaps because music is perceived to be an acceptable but undeniably secular practice. Others believe that Islam should enthuse music like all other aspects of human experience. Yet attempting to outline these rough contours only serves to conceal the shades of opinion that lie within. And while cultural or sectarian influences both offer important guidelines for unpicking this complexity, individual autonomy and reflective subjectivities perhaps play a more important role.

In this chapter I examine the religious themes that shape the experiences, discourses and epistemic grounding of Muslim musicians in Britain. I will begin by providing a brief and general overview of the wider debates within Islam concerning music. In section two I draw directly from fieldwork data to consider how these debates are manifested amongst Muslim communities in contemporary Britain. This is followed by the final section where I examine the relationship that some Muslim musicians have with traditional sites of religious authority in Islam.

While I therefore explore the specific religious debates regarding music and instrumentation – including the role of Muslim *'ulama* – I also look at broader influences of religious thought. I will suggest throughout that many Muslim musicians generally exhibit strong tendencies of autonomy. This includes a critical and reciprocal engagement

with traditional sites of religious authority, as well as an emphasis on religious subjectivity and personal pedagogy. While confident in their own beliefs and practices, Muslim musicians are often keen to engage beyond their own normativised experiences and circles of knowledge, with an emphasis on values that are based on plurality and empathy.

Islam and Music: A Contested Tradition

Debates concerning Islam and the permissibility of music have on the whole been adequately covered by a range of scholars (for example: al-Faruqi, 1985, 1986; Nelson, 1985; Rasmussen, 2010; Shiloah, 1995, 1997; Otterbeck, 2008). I will only attempt here very briefly to summarise this wider discourse, and merely as an introduction to original material concerning Muslim views on music in the British context. While the broader topic of Islam and music may indeed be well covered in certain respects, it is worth considering that the discourses of 'high Islam' – religious, scholastic and political spheres of power and authority – are influential but that they perhaps also overshadow practice and interpretation 'on the ground' – a claim that almost certainly has distinct resonance when Muslim minority communities in Europe and elsewhere are considered.

The arguments against music stretch back at least as far as Ibn al-Dunya (823-894), the author of the first major critique of music and the progenitor for a subsequent historical discourse on this thorny issue (Shiloah, 1997). Ibn al-Dunya's treatise is based on 68 *alhadith* and very interestingly places morality and decency at the heart of this ongoing debate:

> Almost all his references to musical instruments, music, and music making are interwoven with statements concerning other forbidden pleasures and misbehaviour that are incompatible with the performance of religious duties, or moral conduct, and that will bring perdition to their perpetrators. The last 30 *hadīths* do not touch upon music but are entirely devoted to the interdiction of divination, games and gambling (backgammon and chess), as well as male and female sodomy. (Shiloah, 1997: 146)

The notion that music is inseparably linked with prohibited acts and sensuality has therefore long been at the heart of such critiques. While Wahhabi and Salafi arguments have been advanced in some conservative quarters – claiming that the early Muslim community did not engage with music except in a fairly limited sense – arguments

against music have tended to focus on the association of music with activities that are deemed incompatible with correct Islamic practice (see Baig, 2008).

The central thrust of this discourse continues in much the same way today. It is apparent that attempts to proscribe music in Muslim majority countries often occur on a platform of public morality. As Otterbeck (2008) has observed, contemporary religious conservatives largely oppose music because it is perceived to be a distraction from religious practice – competing with Allah for the soul of an individual – and as an inevitable inciter of sinful living. According to Otterbeck, moderates are generally more circumspect and tend to assess music on a case by case basis:

> If it has slanderous or crude language or if it is sexually exciting (through rhythms or through dance) it is generally haram. Further, if the listening is done to excess it is haram as Islam is against taking things to extremes. But there is a personal dimension to it; if you are not aroused by the songs and you keep your spirituality then there is no problem. (Otterbeck, 2008: 220).

While Otterbeck is referring specifically to scholars based in Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, such concerns act as essential parameters for current debates in Britain and elsewhere. As I shall make clear, even the most ardent defenders of music feel obliged to conduct something of an apologia, claiming that music is not inherently bound together with incompatible Islamic practices and justifying it on the grounds of religious or moral utility.

Parallel to these orthodox religious debates are of course alternative teachings and practices relating to Sufi mysticism. Sufism has long emphasised the important role that sound and music can play in encouraging spirituality and closeness to God – particularly when deployed through specific practices such as *zikr* and *hadra*. Different sounds have therefore been classified by Sufi scholars and placed into a spiritual hierarchy, such as by al-Maqdisi (13th Century), who wrote about forbidden, permitted, estimable and laudable sounds (Shiloah, 1997). Indeed, when referring to the act of *sama* (listening), the early Sufi mystic al-Makki wrote:

> The [singing] voice is an instrument said to carry and communicate meaningful ideas; when the listener perceives the meaning of the message without being distracted by the melody, his *samā* is lawful; otherwise, and when the content expresses physical love, simple desire and simple futilities, the *samā* is pure diversion and must be banished. (al-Makki, *Food of Hearts*, quoted in Shiloah, 1997: 149)

While Sufism has often been portrayed as inherently sympathetic toward music and the role that it can play for spiritual development, it is apparent that traditional Sufi teachings nonetheless emphasise correct sound and musical practice. This echoes concerns amongst Islamic religious debates outside of Sufi practice, providing a common theme that can be found running throughout contemporary debates in Britain. While I have found that Muslim musicians in Britain generally tend to fall under the aegis of Sufism – whether consciously or through an inherited Barelvi tradition (Lewis, 1994) – a central concern with the religious merit of music remains constant (and certainly consistent with deep historical currents of Islamic scholasticism).

In addition to a concern with the semantic content or sonic nature of music, debates and traditions within Islam have furthermore concerned themselves with the permissibility of different styles of music. At root this has most commonly come down to a concern with the permissibility of specific musical instruments. The range of opinions on this matter are too complicated to consider here, though Shiloah does neatly summarise the form that this contested debate takes:

> In the interminable debate about the *Samā'*, legalists, theologians, spiritual leaders, custodians of morality in the cities, the *literati* and Sufi leaders all participated. The debate elicited views that varied from complete negation to full admittance of all musical forms and means, even dance. Between these two extremes we can find all possible nuances – some, for instance, tolerate a rudimentary form of cantillation and functional song, but ban all instruments; others permit cantillation and add the frame-drum but without discs, of course forbidding all other instruments and all forms of dance, and so on. (Shiloah, 1995: 31)

Music and instrumentation are therefore clearly at the heart of complex and diverse traditions within Islam. While these wider debates are of some interest here, of greater relevance for the argument that I pursue in the following section is the form of their manifestation amongst Muslims in contemporary Britain.

British Muslims and the Religious Permissibility of Music

At performances across the UK I have found that it is rare to find Muslim musicians on stage with musical instruments – at most there will often only be a percussionist or two. Musicians usually therefore perform a voice-only set – perhaps with a recorded backing

track – relying on the power of their own voice, backing harmonies, and perhaps light percussion instrumentation. It is possible to find the occasional exception – such as Silk Road, known for performing long, instrumental guitar pieces – but the absence of significant live instrumentation is rather striking. Recorded backing tracks might incorporate a range of instrumental sounds, but live instrumental performance is rare in the popular context. This is partly due to the forms of music that are commonly practiced within the Muslim performance context – neither hip hop nor nasheed place emphasis on live instrumental performance. In contrast, the utilisation of microphones and other forms of electronic amplification and/or sound support appear to be common. The decision whether or not to use these technologies appears to be largely based on musical style, context and the nature/size of an audience. I found no evidence of a religious or cultural proscription concerning the electronic mediation of voice.

It is clear, then, that bound together with the dynamics of performance and music are complicated views relating to the very permissibility of music and instrumentation in Islam. One Muslim musician, Faraz, from Silk Road (see p.66-67) – a guitarist and passionate advocate of instrumental music – commented on the wider Muslim community and his perception of a generally inconsistent approach:

> …the vast majority of Muslims listen to music and they actually don't have any problem with it. They'll listen to music on the radio and they'll listen to music in a Bollywood film, but suddenly sitting in front of a band that's playing meaningful music live, it suddenly becomes haram. Its cognitive dissonance gone crazy (Faraz, 34, October 2011, Birmingham)

Faraz is suggesting that views on music – in particular regarding the use of instrumentation – are not always consistent or rigorously observed. Indeed, there may well often be a divergence between public behaviour (e.g., live performance) and private practice (e.g., film, television and radio consumption).

During the fieldwork a prominent Muslim musician told me that Muslims in Britain are divided into two camps: those influenced by Sufi teachings, who accept all styles of music and instrumentation, and those influenced by Salafism, who completely reject music. While I believe that this picture is overly simplistic, there is nonetheless a kernel of truth in the suggestion that British Muslims are somewhat riven down the middle over the permissibility and role of music. Research participants consistently made an

approximate generalisation to suggest that around fifty percent of Muslims in the UK either reject or remain deeply uncomfortable with music. While this generalisation cannot be independently verified, it does seem accurately to reflect observations that I made throughout the course of the research. Yet this generalisation is hugely reductive – opinions on music can certainly not be divided into a 'for or against' typology – and there is instead a more complicated middle ground of mainstream opinion.

Select the following statement as appropriate:	Total responses	% of total
I listen to any type or genre of music, regardless of lyrical content. I choose to listen to music that I like the sound of.	16	29.8
I will listen to any type of music, as long as it does not have negative lyrics (such as swearing or the promotion of violence)	18	22.2
I believe that I should only listen to music that has an Islamic message	22	27.2
I believe that music is either forbidden or strongly discouraged by Islam. I only listen to singing, not music.	15	18.5
I neither listen to singing nor music.	1	1.2
Other	9	11.1

Table 4.1: Muslim music fans on music consumption (see survey in Appendix Two).

Select the following statement as appropriate:	Total responses	% of total
I believe that Islam permits the use of all musical instruments	14	16.9
I believe that Islam only permits the use of percussion instruments.	30	36.1
I believe that Islam forbids the use of all musical instruments	14	16.9
I don't know what musical instruments are permitted in Islam.	9	10.8
Other	16	19.3

Table 4.2: Muslim music fans on instrumentation in Islam (see survey in Appendix Two).

The survey that I conducted as part of this research asked respondents directly about this very issue (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2). It is worth noting again that I used the survey to target groups with a specific interest in music and/or non-instrumental nasheeds – so it is reasonable to expect a corresponding bias towards music (though possibly against instrumentation) – but the results nonetheless say something about those who specifically

listen to 'Muslim music'. When respondents were asked about the type of music that they listen to and their stance on instrumentation, it became apparent that there is a great swathe of opinion amongst this sample. On either end of the spectrum there does appear to be two groups, roughly comparable in size (both between 17-20%), that either completely accept music or entirely reject it. As one might expect, these respondents tend to be associated with artists and musicians that reflect their own particular preference (e.g., those who reject instrumentation are fans of voice-only nasheed artists). Between these two poles there lies a sizeable majority who express a more conditional opinion on music and instrumentation. This group (approximately 49% of the total sample) tends to believe that only percussion instruments are permissible, including often just the *daf* (frame drum) and that lyrical content must either be compatible or even directly linked with an Islamic worldview.

While these results are not derived from a direct sample of a wider Muslim demographic, it is nevertheless realistic to suggest that they are indeed reflective of broader British Muslim opinion. This is backed up by ethnographic work suggesting that Muslims often listen to music – whether by Muslim or non-Muslim musicians – but only when set against certain conditional criteria (e.g., lyrical content, instruments used etc). While the survey manages to establish a set of sweeping contours, it does raise many additional questions. For example: what constitutes an 'Islamic message'? How do Muslims define 'percussion instrumentation'? What about synthesised sounds and the electronic replication of instrumentation? Individuals often arrive at different conclusions to these and similar questions, making broader generalisations a little problematic. I therefore suggest throughout this chapter that Muslims in Britain adopt conditional and often highly reflexive attitudes toward music. This was indeed borne out through the interviews that I conducted with musicians themselves, and also through ethnography at various events across the UK.

I immediately found that one particular area of contestation is the very notion of combining music and Islam in *any* form. It is suggested by some that music is permissible, but that it should be confined to a secular realm and fundamentally divorced from Muslim practice. According to such a view, one might listen to music on the radio whilst driving a car, or when watching television, but religious practice should be

separate, primary and inviolable. The notion of using music to express Islamic thought or Muslim experience is considered unwise and potentially dangerous. Usman, the drummer for the popular nasheed group, Aashiq al-Rasul (see p.60-61), explained to me that this tended to be the overwhelming opinion amongst his parents' generation during the 1970s and 1980s:

> …Some people believe that you can't mix music and Islam together, that it's not allowed, and I was one of those people, who didn't believe. I was led to believe this way in terms of my upbringing… there weren't the avenues, the creative avenues… (Usman, 33, October 2010, Birmingham)

The experiences that Usman had during his formative teenage years – listening to rock and funk for pleasure, but believing that Islam should be a distinct and rigidly 'traditional' practice – highlight a view that perhaps used to be held in common by many British Muslims. The popularity of so-called 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' music in Britain is a more recent phenomenon, dating back little further than the late-nineties, with the emergence of nasheed artists and Muslim rappers during that period.

It is a distinct mark of change in the UK that many Muslims now consider music to be an acceptable mode of religious expression, and particularly appropriate as a means to reach out to a younger and potentially disaffected generation. According to those holding this opinion, there is nothing inherently wrong with music, as such, and it should be judged solely on its religious merit. This is further complicated by varying degrees of understanding in relation to the very definition of 'music': it is not uncommon for nasheed 'artists' to interpret nasheeds as a form of religious poetry, rather than 'prohibited' or 'undesirable' music. That being said – whether or not they incorporate it into their own work – the overwhelming majority of nasheed artists appear to be relatively relaxed about music.

These are partly generational issues – with younger, British-born Muslims more likely to acknowledge the accessible and religiously emotive character of music – but there has undoubtedly been something of a shift in overall, cross-generational opinion over the last two decades. In short, older Muslims are increasingly being persuaded that music can and should play a role in their religious and cultural lives. Amran – a founding member and

lead singer for Aashiq al-Rasul – recounted to me a recent story about being approached by a member of the audience at a concert:

> …The man from the audience, an elderly gentleman, a scholar and a leader amongst our local Muslim community, said, "I've never been to a concert in my life"… and he'd never listened to Islamic music either, because he thought it was wrong… He said, "this is the first time ever I've heard you guys perform or heard any Islamic music", and continued "I closed my eyes and listened, and I thought, is this haram or halal? Is this taking me towards God or is this taking me away from God?" And he said, I have to share this with you, "that it brought me closer to God, so I smiled, opened my eyes, and enjoyed the evening"… (Amran, 34, October 2010 Birmingham)

The religious utility of music is therefore often held as an overriding concern, although this notion is frequently extended to encompass the role that music can play for broader social and political concerns. According to such a view, unalloyed entertainment can be a seductive distraction from correct religious observance or moral behaviour. Music therefore becomes a vehicle for a higher purpose – although I did find that definitions over what exactly constitutes such a purpose are often contested.

While the combination of 'music' and Islam might be considered acceptable in the abstract, then, there are nonetheless variations of opinion over the appropriateness or even permissibility of different forms of music. At the heart of this disagreement is an ongoing and fractious debate concerning the permissibility of musical instruments. This debate is furthermore complicated by pragmatic or seemingly contradictory choices concerning the praxis of instrumental music. As far as I can tell, there appears to be a majority of Muslims in Britain who believe that only membranophones are permissible within Islam. Many Muslims are either clearly opposed to instrumental music or at the very least uncertain enough to adopt a type of Pascalian wager – that is, avoiding music 'just in case'. This claim is backed by the results of the survey in which 49.1% of respondents stated that they believe only percussion instruments are permissible (see Table 4.2).

In some respects, Muslims in Britain have arrived at this view because of the fierce debates relating to music and instrumentation within wider Islamic discourse. It is quite common for an individual to assess different religious and scholastic voices, on opposing sides of the debate, and then to adopt a compromised position somewhere between the

two extremes. Percussion instrumentation and vocal performance are considered by many to be a cautious but appropriate 'middle ground' of mainstream Islamic teaching. This stance is further complicated when it is considered that some individuals will additionally distinguish between secular and Islamic music, arguing that Islamic music alone should be restricted to percussion instrumentation. 15% of those in the survey who agreed with the proposition that Islam only permits the use of percussion instrumentation proceeded then to name their favourite musicians, including, for example, Beyoncé, Coldplay, Lady Gaga, Eminem, Adele, Michael Jackson and Bob Marley – an eclectic range of artists that have all incorporated multiple types of instrumentation into their music.

Those who believe that Islam only permits the use of percussion instruments furthermore often suggest that voice-only performance is the preferred alternative to even the simplest of membranophones. This is partly due to religious concerns with the status of instruments, as discussed above, but also in recognition of the fact that there are Muslims in Britain who reject all forms of instrumentation – Muslims who would be excluded from a performance event if instruments of any kind are used. The preference for voice-only performance can indeed be borne from a desire for inclusivity. The power of this view is evidenced in part through a surge of interest in performance poetry amongst young Muslims, with suggestions that many are turning to this expressive art form as an alternative to instrumental music. Ayman – a London-born rapper with Sudanese roots and over a decade's experience as a founding member of the hip hop group The Planets – explained this changing attitude to me as we sat chatting in a busy restaurant (partially drowned out by a large and boisterous party of portly, moustachioed Greek men sat at an adjacent table):

> I mean, what you have now, you have a lot of young Muslims, like early teenagers, who have started writing poetry, for example. Never, like in the nineties, you never came across Muslims writing poetry, but now you can go to an event, some event full of teenagers, it's no club, everyone's just sitting quietly and well behaved, this is like on a Friday or Saturday night for example… it's really, really interesting that Muslims want to be entertained but they want to express themselves as well. (Ayman, 33, October 2011, London)

I was already familiar with the phenomenon that Ayman was attempting to highlight. Yet the definition of such poetry is often stretched so that it more accurately refers to melodic

rap and spoken word performance. This is a consequence of the desire that many young Muslims have creatively to express themselves, though within the boundaries provided through shared – or at least communally negotiated – ideas of correct Islamic practice.

The notion of exploring and developing creative avenues – though without overstepping the mark and transgressing beyond Islamic strictures – is increasingly important for the practice of music by Muslims in Britain. Along with different modes of voice only sound art – such as poetry, rap and spoken word – there has been a desire in some quarters, with artists such as Aashiq al-Rasul and Amir Awan, to remain within a perceived Muslim consensus, exploring just how musically expressive they are able to be by restricting their music to the human voice and membranophones. Amir Awan (see p.62-63) – who cites Michael Jackson as a major influence – explained exactly how he walks this line:

> So I try to keep to the middle ground of things and use vocals and percussion only, that's drum kits of different kinds, Arab drums, Asian drums, oriental drums. A lot of it, the music that you'd have, like the piano, or your guitar, or your woodwind, is done by myself. Or people who are with me will provide harmonies in the background. So its quite interesting, if someone listens to it they wouldn't be able to tell the difference, but it's a much fresher and more true sound than the actual instruments… there are a few people who come up to me and say, oh you've used those instruments there and I'm like, no I haven't [laughs]. (Amir Awan, 29, May 2011, London)

The aim is to ensure that there are no limits to creative and artistic output, whilst nonetheless remaining true to ideas of correct Islamic practice. Such music often involves multiple membranophones, different styles of percussion, as well as the imaginative use of synthesised sounds and sound amplification/recording equipment to make the most of the human voice and other permitted sounds.

The overall picture amongst Muslim musicians regarding the use of instrumentation remains mixed. Of the forty four individual musicians that I identified for this research, twelve perform with nothing but their own voice, eight will use live percussion instrumentation, seventeen will use a recorded backing track but no live instrumentation, and seven will play a range of instruments during a live performance. As I have discussed, the reasons that musicians provide for their decisions regarding instrumentation can be based on stylistic, religious and pragmatic grounds. Musicians

furthermore remain flexible and are often willing to alter their usual performance repertoire in order to better reflect the vagaries of the audience.

Running through these different views on music tends to be an overwhelming desire by individuals to cleave toward a perceived place of compromise. This can involve distinguishing between 'secular' and 'Islamic' music (in order to keep the sacred pure from inappropriate musical practice, despite recognition that we nonetheless live in a culture-soaked society); or, as has been discussed, pursuing creative outlets that restrict instrumentation to a greater or lesser extent. I would argue that the nature of this perceived 'middle ground' and the motivations for allowing it to shape musical practice can take two forms.

First, there is often a desire for inclusivity and unity. It is recognised by many people – including musicians – that to hold an event involving instrumental music is to necessitate the exclusion of a large number of Muslims on specific religious grounds. If the purpose of music is to transmit a message or to celebrate a shared faith, then it is often more effective to forgo instrumentation in order to reach a greater number of people. Musicians are therefore regularly asked to perform without instruments, even if such music is a normal part of their repertoire. Several musicians, including those involved in the hip hop scene, explained to me (often with self-deprecating, ironic humour) that they prepare voice-only material for the growing number of Islamic events that request for instrumentation to be left out of the performance.

I also found that this extends beyond live performance into the process of recording and producing music. Several artists have produced specific albums using percussion instrumentation only, or in some cases no instrumentation at all. Sami Yusuf, for example, has produced two versions of his best selling album, *My Ummah*: a 'Music Version' and a 'Percussion Version'. Amran, the lead member from Aashiq al-Rasul, explained his motivation for producing an album without instrumentation:

> We respect everybody and their views and opinions, we have to understand that we all, even within our own band, have our own views on certain things… we are reactive to that in the sense that the band has created an album which is all a cappella, there is no music whatsoever, it's totally voice. This is to cater for those people that may be in a dilemma about listening to devotional sounds accompanied with music. We try to support as many

> communities and beliefs as we possibly can but still stay strong to what we
> believe in. (Amran, 34, January 2011, Birmingham)

Whilst there are no doubt pragmatic reasons for this flexible approach – especially when the benefit of providing an additional market for the sale of such music is considered – these attempts at conciliation recognise the internal religious diversity of Muslims in Britain. More importantly, there is an *acceptance* of this diversity, rather than a challenge or dismissal. In this sense, such compromise represents an attempt to create a common cultural space: sectarian and diverse, but unified around a shared religion and vision of belonging to a wider Muslim community.

Beyond this flexible approach to music production, there is a second and extremely widespread way through which Muslims seek a 'middle ground' on this fractious issue. That is, with a complex yet divided range of scholarship to draw upon, many Muslims – including some Muslim musicians – choose to adopt a position somewhere within the perceived centre of this debate. Unwilling decisively to adhere to one polar position or another, individuals choose to compromise on a religious and practical level. As I argued earlier, this might involve a simple restriction to the use of membranophones, or perhaps through making a distinction between 'secular' and 'Islamic' music. Yet central to this approach is a desire to avoid an outlier position – instead to cautiously negotiate a rational position somewhere in-between.

Religious Authority and Muslim Musicians

In some respects the contentious issues surrounding music and instrumentation rest at the very crux of wider changes within the milieu of Islamic religious authority – or so I argue. As Robinson (2009) has claimed, the traditional authority of the Muslim '*ulama* has long been on the decline – largely since the imposition of European colonialism, but more recently through new media and the supposed democratisation of knowledge (Anderson, 2003). According to such a view, lay interpretations of Islamic thought have become hugely influential and 'the Muslim world has returned to the interpretive anarchy which marked it's early years' (Robinson, 2009: 353). With the weight of cultural pressure on Muslims in a minority context – through global flows of popular entertainment and rooted national culture – and parallel attempts amongst some Muslim

cultural and religious spheres at resisting or redefining Western impositions (Nieuwkerk, 2008) – I think it is unsurprising that music should become a site of dynamic interpretive interplay.

While Muslims in Britain tend to steer toward a middle ground of compromise and pragmatism, there is nonetheless a vibrant process of religious interpretation at work, along with an interesting pattern of engagement with traditional and hegemonic Muslim *'ulama*. In some respects Muslim musicians in Britain are at the very heart of this process. First, individual musicians tend to be well educated and self-confident, with a real desire to engage in critical and reflective religious practice. Second, these musicians furthermore operate in cultural and religious spheres of knowledge – often mediated through new forms of technology and concordant social relationships – both as producers and recipients of information and ideology. This matches with Turner's observation that there has been a corrosion of those 'traditional forms of authority' that are 'linear, hierarchical, imitative and repetitive' (Turner, 2007: 118). Yet I would caution against the belief that religious authority has disintegrated into the 'interpretive anarchy' suggested by Robinson (2009), arguing rather that the nature of authority and the pedagogical processes involved in the transmission of religious knowledge are in a state of flux.

Before I examine the changing nature of religious authority for Muslims in Britain – including for many Muslim musicians – it is certainly worth reflecting on the fact that these changes are far from being a normative British Muslim experience. Religious leadership amongst Muslim communities in Britain has historically tended to be dominated by a succession of local imams imported from South Asia. With limited English language skills, and uncomprehending of the social context faced, in particular, by young British Muslims, these imams are often criticised for failing to offer the kind of religious leadership required by Muslim communities in Britain (Birt, 2005). This is overwhelmingly still the case, with only 8.1% of British imams actually having been born in the UK (Geaves, 2008). Indeed, a report by The Muslim Council of Britain highlighted the challenge that imams face in addressing the many pastoral needs of their communities (Rahman et al, 2006). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising if foreign-born, 'imported' imams attempt to sustain more traditional relationships of iterative religious authority –

reinforcing hierarchies of pedagogy based on ethnic solidarity – with clear implications for opinions on music and Islam.

Broadly speaking, the thriving amateur and semi-professional na'at scene in Britain tends to identify with a Pakistani diaspora – a connection that remains partially rooted in a cultural homeland. This carries with it assumptions of language (primarily Urdu), gender segregation, familial structure and, importantly, the underlying purpose of na'at performance – a purpose that extends beyond na'at as 'just' a form of paraliturgical worship (which of course it is). In a sense, na'at becomes a means through which communal belonging, based on ethnic solidarity and diasporic culture, can be upheld. Na'at reciters within this context therefore tend to identify more strongly with religious leadership as traditionally conceived within the local South Asian Muslim community – religious authority for the individual and for the community become tightly bound together. During informal conversation, na'at performers in places like Leeds and Bradford would often refer to 'our scholars' – referencing local muftis or imams in the area – and show a greater sense of connection to the religious teaching provided by these religious leaders. Ameena [not her real name] – a second generation Pakistani na'at poet from Bradford – explained that her book of Urdu na'at poetry was vetted by two respected scholars from Bradford and Birmingham:

> Once my book was published, I gave my book draft to two scholars and they both said it's just fine, there's nothing wrong in it, nothing wrong in it. So you can just publish it…. They actually look at the language and the words we use, how we use words for, like, the Prophet. I think the best scholars, they check not only the wording but the balance as well. The poetry balance. They can check that as well. (Ameena, 52, September 2011, Bradford)

With statements like this throughout our interview, Ameena revealed that local scholars have an important and assumed role of authority over na'at composition – it would be unthinkable to publish anything without the direct application of scholastic expertise. The implications of this for music making extend to additionally shape the rules guiding performance. This includes, for example, religious proscriptions against women performing before a mixed audience, and the use of instrumentation by both men and women. Na'at poets and reciters might well disagree on the guidance and rulings issued by these religious leaders – Ameena herself expressed disapproval with scholastic rulings

regarding her performance in public – but Ameena and others nonetheless acknowledge the final ruling of an expert religious elite.

In contrast, when popular styles of nasheed, hip hop and syncretic music within British Muslim public spheres are considered – and the musicians at the heart of these musical genres – I think there is a sense in which religious authority has become less of an *assumed* relationship. Indeed, critical and autonomous subjectivities are instead applied to religious pedagogy. I am certainly not suggesting that musicians fail to show deference to religious authority – those who dedicate their time to religious learning are of course highly regarded – but that these musicians are far more likely to seek out knowledge and religious scholarship on their own terms. Such attitudes are part of a general movement in Britain (particularly amongst younger and more educated Muslims) towards a globalised consumer model of religious authority. Rather than static or inherited modes of religious learning, many British Muslims appraise a range of scholars and authority figures – listening, assessing, comparing – and then apply their own moral framework and critical faculties to these diverse forms of knowledge.

This argument differs somewhat to Anderson's claim regarding Islam's 'new interpreters' (Anderson, 2003: 47). Anderson suggested that lay interpretations of Islam are emerging through the internet as a challenge to the traditional authority of the *'ulama*. This is certainly true – and I would argue that numerous Muslim musicians can be slotted into Anderson's category of 'new interpreters'. Nonetheless, as Larsson (2011) has highlighted, Muslim *'ulama* play an increasingly important role on the internet and through other forms of global knowledge exchange (including print media and lecture tours). With a plurality of scholastic voices in this dynamic global environment, musicians and other Muslim individuals are able to be especially discerning in their engagement with the sources of knowledge that they find most credible and relevant. This has attracted Muslims in Britain toward English-speaking Islamic scholars from across Europe and North America – scholars perceived to be of particular relevance for Muslims living within these societies. Evidence for a real eagerness to adopt this approach is apparent in the huge supply of online lectures, audio tapes, books, pamphlets, and the vibrant Islamic lecture and event circuit in the UK. Musicians furthermore use their position as public figures to stimulate debate and share scholastic material; so it is routine

for musicians to post quotes, recommend Islamic scholars and share online lectures through the internet (in particular through social networking media).

I found it quite striking that Muslim musicians in Britain are often immersed within this pedagogical environment – not least because they are routinely asked to perform at Islamic conference events, alongside Muslim *'ulama*, or indeed actually work with some of these scholars to organise events across London and the UK. Particularly influential Muslim scholars include Sheikh Abdul Hakim Quick, Sheikh Babikir Ahmed[26], Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Professor Tariq Ramadan, Sheikh Michael Mumisa and Sheikh Abdul Hakim Murad. These figures of religious authority are all marked by their desire to promote a vision of Islam that sits comfortably alongside life in the cosmopolitan regions of Western Europe and North America. They dismiss claims that Islam forbids music or instrumentation, arguing that music is an appropriate and particularly powerful way to reach people. Indeed, the guidance offered by these religious figures has been important for providing many Muslim musicians with the confidence and drive to utilise their talent to promote Islam. It is the charisma, inclusivity and context-sensitive approach of these particular scholars that resonates with young British Muslims – a leadership approach that is replicated by many Muslim musicians themselves.

The respect given to these figures, and the security drawn from their support, is extremely important for some musicians, especially considering the extreme hostility that can be generated by Muslims who consider music utterly and irredeemably haram. Sukina from Poetic Pilgrimage (see p.68-70) took the time to travel from London and visit me in Cardiff. She discussed her experiences as a Muslim convert/revert and female performer, as well as the compounded difficulties that are raised through the issues of gender and music. Despite receiving regular and hurtful comments or criticism, she suggested that the support provided by Muslim scholars was extremely comforting, and a source of confidence:

> …as women it's just important to keep on and to just be strong in that. When we came into Islam and when we performed, you know, our first three performances were with scholars and people who are learned in Islam, who are respected. So we always came in with blessings of what we were doing. If they're giving us their blessing then for me that's a sign that it's okay. (Sukina, 28, February 2011, Cardiff)

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[26] Sheikh Babikir Ahmed is also sometimes known as Sheikh Ahmed Abubakr.

Indeed, beyond suggesting that music and art are *merely* permissible, many of these scholars take an active interest in promoting music as a natural and expressive way for engagement with Islam. Sheikh Babikir Ahmed is well known for having originally advised Rakin Niass – at the time a new convert to Islam and former member of the hip hop group Cash Crew – to form the Muslim hip hop group Mecca2Medina and use music to spread the message of Islam. As well as running an educational organisation, Sheikh Babikir Ahmed continues to play an important role for Muslims and hip hop in London, helping to provide ongoing religious justification for the connection between Islam and hip hop – as the rapper Ayman testifies:

> I was at a talk recently where something he said, this was a talk on, actually it was a study of a famous poem, called the Qasida al-Burda, it's probably the most famous Islamic poem, written by Imam Busiri, from Egypt. And during this talk he spoke about how the poem is centred around the love of our Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him. Sheikh Abubakr said something quite interesting, he said, look, there's no one, ok this is just to paraphrase, he said, if you love the Prophet you'll write a poem about him, you'll definitely write a poem about him, okay, this is really the only way to express how you feel, so poetry being a language and an art form itself, hip hop, rap, is really just an extension of it. (Ayman, 33, October 2011, London)

By defending the status of music through such an argument, there is the linkage of music (particularly lyricism) to an authentic and authorised history of Muslim practice – hip hop becomes the innovative vanguard of an ancient tradition in Islamic poetry.

While it is clear that religious scholars are a critical touchstone for religious knowledge amongst Muslim musicians in Britain, there is nonetheless an underlying process of critical and independent learning, along with a willingness by musicians to act as influential lay interpreters in a public environment. As educated and devout Muslims, there is a clear desire voraciously to consume books and pamphlets, to watch or listen to lectures online, and to engage in debates and other forms of religious-knowledge exchange – such behaviour is quite simply a natural extension of faith for Muslim musicians. Many of their ideas are no doubt informed by the sources of religious authority that underpin much of the educational material made available through particular modes of dissemination (such as bookshops, internet websites, Islamic educational networks etc). Yet there is additionally a parallel practice of individual

intellectual reasoning, a form of engagement that is often applied to the root sources of Islamic knowledge (including the Qur'an and *alhadith*) or utilised to critique alternative and mediated religious opinions.

One central religious issue often subjected to this kind of independent reasoning is indeed the practice of music – perhaps an inevitable consequence of the ongoing and unresolved debate regarding the permissibility of music. Surrounded by a clamour of competing and contradictory religious voices, musicians understandably feel justified in turning to primary Islamic sources, or in criticising opinions they hold to be irrational and inconsistent. This reflects a similar situation amongst Muslims in Britain – particularly those with greater educational attainment – who similarly take a view on music that is independently reached, contextually and pragmatically, without direct or unmitigated reference to a particular source of mediated religious authority. Rabiah is a young female musician of Caribbean heritage, from the group Pearls of Islam (see p.65-66), who sings soft, spiritual songs over gentle acoustic guitar music or light hand percussion. As I sat with both members of Pearls of Islam – Rabiah and Sakinah – in Russell Square (laughing at the furtive antics of local squirrels while sipping hot chocolate), she explained exactly how she and Sakinah dealt with the controversy of music at the beginning of their artistic careers:

> …people were heading in our direction saying, you know, music is haram. And so it made us, it brought us to question it ourselves, you know, when people are coming up to us and saying you're wrong, you're wrong, we had to do our own research and understand our religion, understand where we are as Muslims, to be able to come back to them and say, well actually… I understand what I'm doing, and I'm happy with what I'm doing, I don't have to justify myself to you... as long as we are doing this for the love of Allah, I only need to justify myself to Him, and Him alone (Rabiah, 23, November 2011, London)

The conclusion of such reasoning might be to accept all styles of music, as Rabiah does, or (as many do) to highlight a preference for avoiding certain types – or indeed *all* types – of instrumental music. Crucially, I argue that this independent process does not jettison the influence of Islamic scholarship – indeed, I have already shown that traditional religious leadership is important for musicians – but that it additionally suggests such leadership is a *necessary* though *insufficient* condition for the development of individual

religious knowledge. Islamic scholarship is required by musicians to deepen their understanding of Islam, but such teachings are filtered through their own critical faculties and fashioned into a personally coherent vision of Islamic practice.

Chatting over lunch with Yahya [not his real name] – a photographer with an extensive background working in both the mainstream and Muslim music industries – in an Egyptian café tucked away near Regents Park Mosque, he explained to me how he formed his own views on music:

> …the people who say it's completely forbidden, they use what for me is quite an obscure interpretation of the Maryam Qur'an, that mentions idle talk, it condemns idle talk, and then they interpret music within the boundaries of idle talk, although this seems to be obscure for me personally… the way I look at it, is if you want to look at the *Hadith*, there were *Hadith's* concerning poets and poetry that condemns poets and the poetry, and there are *Hadith's* looking at poets and poetry, praising poets and poetry. And the difference seems to be the content of it, so I look at it in the same terms with music, and also with visual arts, so it depends entirely on the content, and that's my only way of viewing it. (Yahya, 63, London)

While no doubt influenced by the views and teachings of religious scholars – and Yahya did indeed allude to connections with religious leaders such as Sheikh Abdul Hakim Murad – he nonetheless applies his own analogical reasoning to the contentious issue of music, opening the doors of *ijtihad* onto a topic rife with sectarian struggle, and equating music with poetry. He continued in our conversation furthermore to critique the contradictory view of scholars who opposed music, highlighting the somewhat convoluted practice that can result. Describing his time at an international arts competition in Abu Dhabi, Yahya recounted watching the Canadian Muslim group Sound of Reason perform:

> …I had seen the Sound of Reason on television before, where they were singing and playing guitars, and when they were performing in Abu Dhabi they sang without guitars but with recorded guitar accompaniments. And I asked about this and I was told, well it's halal because they're not playing guitars. But you had the sound of guitars! So this for me is a ridiculous contradiction, because they had to play their guitars to have the sound, to have the backing track. (Yahya, 63, London)

Yahya continued directly to accuse the scholars authorising this particular form of musical practice in Abu Dhabi of inconsistency and faulty reasoning. His views are interesting in themselves, but they additionally highlight the confidence with which

musicians, as lay interpreters, are able to criticise religious leadership on an informed and rational basis.

The role that musicians can play as religious leaders in their own right is indeed significant and this theme was repeatedly raised by Muslim musicians themselves. In the same way that English-speaking scholars based in Europe and North America have greater relevance for many Muslims in Britain, so too are musicians better placed to communicate with young British Muslims – a generation that is perhaps otherwise disconnected from traditional forms of religious leadership. Rakin Niass – an influential rapper and founding member of the influential hip hop group Mecca2Medina – explained to me the importance of musicians as religious role models:

> I think parents who have young children, they're the ones that realise that, oh my god, these guys are a good influence on my kids because they love Islam and they're thinking about Islam, and my kids, I want my kids to grow up Muslim, and they're speaking a language that my kids understand so they grab on to that, you know. Sometimes artists have more influence over their kids than the local imam, sometimes the local imam might not even speak it in their language, or won't have an idea about their experiences in school and what they go through, you know. (Rakin, 41, July 2011, London)

Rakin's criticism of local imams reaches down to the root cause of the popularity and accessibility of musicians for many Muslims in Britain. A 'local imam' – perhaps foreign-born and 'imported' from abroad – will often be unable to relate to the experiences of a younger generation and the challenges they might face in contemporary Britain. Nor are they able necessarily to speak English with any real proficiency, making communication not just a metaphorical but indeed a linguistic problem. The ability of musicians to strike a deep emotive chord among young Muslims is often acknowledged by Islamic scholars themselves, as Mohammed Yahya, another successful London-based rapper, explained:

> …you ask a Muslim teenager to attend a lecture by a scholar from Saudi Arabia and unfortunately they often won't because it can be difficult to relate to their reality, however if you ask them to recite the verse from their favourite rap album or the latest track and they'll do that straight away. You know, so many times I've performed at an event and a speaker has spoken for half an hour, and then I'll come and perform a few songs and the speaker afterwards will say, you know what, what I done in the half hour, you've done it in a song. The message is the same, you know, and you've done it in a way that they, the youth, can digest and relate to it. I don't take any credit as I

know it's ultimately from God, not from me, but I'm very familiar with the impact words can have on the youth. (Mohammed, 29, February 2011, London)

Muslim musicians – supported by their own interest and relative confidence in religious learning – are able to act as role models and sites of Islamic pedagogy, because they literally and metaphorically, linguistically and culturally, *speak the same language*. This takes place through music itself – through lyricism and spiritually evocative imagery – but also through media contact, including interviews, and unmediated internet communication with their fans. This includes extended debates on social networking media, such as Facebook, on a range of religious issues, including, for example, the permissibility of music in Islam. They are able to popularise and rephrase the teachings of an elite, and at times culturally dissonant, Muslim *'ulama*; to repackage and (just as importantly) reinterpret teachings that they have internalised themselves, through extended engagement with traditional sources of Muslim leadership and Islamic scholasticism.

This claim is important because – as I argue in the next chapter – Muslim musicians are often motivated by a desire to universalise specific Islamic subjectivities and spiritualities. They are in a unique position to 'reach out' to those from different sectarian traditions and to non-Muslims. While many of these musicians therefore demonstrate strong tendencies of critical autonomy, it is nonetheless of some significance that they are actively engaged with traditional sources of religious authority. It suggests an evolution in religious practice and learning, rather than a direct break with traditional hierarchies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I make two central points. First, it does appear to me that British Muslims – when taken as a whole – have started gradually to move away from more liberal attitudes toward music. This claim is ultimately impossible to verify without much more extensive research, but the data that I have collected does suggest a generally more cautious and contingent approach to music. While such views are often complex, they do tend to revolve around an increasing concern with the religious permissibility of instrumentation. Potential catalysts for this shift in opinion might be religious revivalism

amongst the young, the influence of more conservative strands of religious thought, and even perhaps the increasing availability of an Islamic alternative to mainstream instrumental music.

My second point acknowledges that musicians themselves have on the whole formed fairly stable opinions on the status of music and instruments – they are after all practicing musicians and have made a public decision about whether or not to include instrumentation in their repertoire. It has therefore been more relevant to consider exactly how musicians have arrived at their views on music and other issues of religious concern. Here I argue that complex lines of religious authority are drawn in and refracted out through the prism of these creative, independent and religiously observant individuals. My analysis has largely focused on personal and intellectual relationships of learning and expression. I have therefore connected musicians directly to Muslim *'ulama*, with the latter being conceived both as an abstract group and as individual scholars with direct associations of influence. From this analysis, then, I have been able to claim that Muslim musicians are particularly engaged with a tradition of English-language, Islamic scholasticism in the West. The ultimate trajectory of these religious debates are not clear, but it does seem apparent that the controversy over music is unlikely to subside anytime soon.

5. Sectarianism and Spirituality: In Search of Religious Universalisms

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Introduction

In this chapter I pivot somewhat from a consideration of religious modes of knowledge and pedagogy, instead turning to more expansive and collective forms of religious belief. While clearly inseparable from issues of religious authority, in the first part of this chapter I explore the perceived division between Salafism and Sufism, analysing the relevance of this sectarian split for Muslim music in Britain. I claim that one of the implications of sectarianism is a desire by Muslim musicians and others to overcome such divisions – to stress commonalities based on a shared Muslim identity and to articulate ideas of religious collectivity. This is a form of intra-group pluralism, with Muslim diversity often being comfortably contained within the aegis of an overarching and shared faith.

Continuing with this sentiment, I examine the concept of spirituality for the Muslim musicians that I engaged with during the course of the fieldwork. While I have attempted to acknowledge the influence of Sufi spirituality, I have nonetheless found that these musicians frequently deploy late-modern discourses of spirituality and personal belief. This is of course not to deny the transcendental truth of Islam for these individuals, but such discourses are perhaps striking in their ability to reach out to 'spiritually sensitive' non-Muslims. Indeed, it is actually through the development of these themes in their music that many musicians hope to find wider, mainstream appeal.

Healing the Rift: Muslim Sectarianism in Britain

Sectarian affiliation for British Muslims is hazy at best and there is often a lack of self-awareness regarding the currents of religious thought that struggle for influence in the UK. While individuals, groups or mosques may sometimes have a clear sense of where they belong in the theological spectrum of Islamic practice – whether Barelvi, Salafi, Wahhabi, Deobandi, Sufi, or some other school of thought – British Muslims more often

have an unreflected notion of sectarian attachment – if indeed they have any attachment at all (with many actually rejecting sectarianism as divisive and therefore undesirable). As Gilliat-Ray has argued:

> …not all British Muslims actively identify with a particular school of thought, and the question of which organizations or individuals should 'represent' them in the public sphere can seem very remote from daily lived experience. Their own 'self-representation' and personal development within family life, within educational and employment settings, or within local religious institutions is, for many, a much more immediately pressing consideration. Just how this is playing out in the rapidly moving context of early twenty-first-century Britain is not always easy to establish. (Gilliat-Ray, 2010: 111)

While specific sectarian attachment might not always be relevant for Muslims in the UK, I argue that the fascinating (if uncertain) dynamics of sectarian jostling are indeed 'playing out' for Muslims within the context of music and cultural production in Britain.

While I have found that some interpretation or sense of attachment to Sufism is largely the predominant strain of thought for Muslim musicians – and those with a particularly keen interest in music – there are nonetheless other, potentially competing factors on the rise. Literalist interpretations of Islam are perceived to be increasingly influential in some quarters, with the corresponding castigation of music as impermissible. Yet these stirrings also include a real desire amongst many to move beyond sectarianism in order to promote a vision of universal Islam based on collective religious unity, however that might be defined.

As one might expect, the Islamic tradition overwhelmingly pursued by the vast majority of Muslim musicians in Britain appears to be Sufism. Broadly speaking, the traces of extremely diverse Sufi thought and practice are not always easily identified in the UK. Geaves provides a fourfold typology of Sufism in Britain, suggesting that there are varying degrees of association with Sufism in the UK – including direct identification with Sufism, but also more subtle and even unconscious tracks of Sufi thought (Geaves, 2000). Of the twenty two musicians interviewed during the fieldwork, *nineteen* self-identified as having some kind of Sufi leaning, ranging from outright membership of a *tariqah*, to a more subtle expression of sympathy for Sufi practice and a concomitant worldview. Of the musicians not interviewed as part of this research, I was able to

establish that many are nonetheless publicly associated with Sufi scholars, which supports my fairly unremarkable finding that Muslim musicians are more likely than not to be influenced by the Sufi tradition.

Do you consider yourself a member or follower of a Sufi tariqa (tariqah/tariqat)?	Total responses	% of Total
Yes	13	31.7
No	27	65.9
Other	1	2.4

Table 5.1: Muslim music fans on membership of a *tariqah* (see survey in Appendix Two)

When did you last perform or take part in the zikr/dhikr (including by yourself)?	Total responses	% of Total
Today	7	17.1
This week	10	24.4
Last week	4	9.8
This month	3	7.3
More than one month ago	10	24.4
Never	6	14.6
Other	1	2.4

Table 5.2: Muslim music fans on *zikr* performance (see survey in Appendix Two)

Yet I also discovered that adherence to Sufism – or variations of Sufi practice (e.g., Barelvi practice) – furthermore extend into the fanbase of Muslim musicians. When asked in the survey, 41 respondents answered questions relating to Sufi practice. Of these respondents, 13 stated that they were actual 'members' or 'followers' of a Sufi *tariqah* (see Table 5.1) – such clear affiliation to a *tariqah* is quite striking and certainly not reflective of general Muslim practice in Britain. Furthermore, 24 respondents had performed *zikr* within the last month, with only 6 respondents never having performed *zikr* (see Table 5.2). There is therefore a strong argument to suggest that a clear majority of respondents are influenced by – or somewhat sympathetic towards – Sufism, with a smaller but still significant number engaged in clear and self-conscious Sufi practice through a *tariqah*. While Sufi religious thought is clearly evident within the cultural output and religious practice of many Muslim musicians – and I will discuss this in more detail shortly – I additionally identified several Sufi organisational networks that are centrally placed within this social and cultural milieu.

One such network is the Tijaniyyah order, a Sufi *tariqah*, with particular influence in West Africa and increasingly followed by Muslims in Britain of an African or Caribbean ethnic heritage. Whilst certainly not confined to those with a self-conscious black identity, members of this Sufi *tariqah* nonetheless appear to be motivated somewhat by Afrocentric tendencies – membership entails something of a political as well as a spiritual outlook. The Tijaniyyah tradition has developed a presence in Britain, partly strengthened by the existence of a Tijaniyyah holy place in London. An important and influential leader of the Tijaniyyah order, Ibrāhīm Niass (b.1900), died at St Thomas' Hospital, London, in 1975. It was been claimed by one London-based Muslim musician (with a certain degree of local pride) that members of the Tijaniyyah order have been known to pray in this sacred space.

The Tijaniyyah path has become central for the religious practice of many black Muslim hip hop musicians in the UK and across the globe. Several of the musicians that were interviewed for this research had officially joined the order, and other well-known musicians associated to the order include Rakin Niass (from Mecca2Medina), Mohammed Yahya, and Poetic Pilgrimage. These musicians are in regular and direct contact with the religious leaders of the Tijaniyyah order, based in Senegal, and are actively contributing to a Tijaniyyah network in London. Regular *zikr* circles, meditation sessions, and other forms of spiritual practice take place on a weekly basis at homes and private spaces across the city.

Another prominent Sufi tradition that I identified as crucial for the promotion of music in Britain is the Naqshbandi Haqqani order. One of the many orders rooted in the Sufi Naqshbandi tradition, the Haqqani order is extremely well represented across, in particular, North America and Europe, with a highly visible internet presence that facilitates the recruitment of Sufi *mureed* (followers). The order has an important institutional presence in London, especially since the opening of the Centre for Spirituality and Cultural Advancement (CSCA)[27] in February 2010. With strong links to many young Muslim social networks in and around the School of Oriental and African Studies, CSCA is an important driver of artistic and spiritual activity amongst Muslims in

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[27] http://spiritandculture.org.uk/ [accessed 08.09.12]

London. A clear manifestation of this activity is the Rabbani Project[28]. Launched in 2012 by CSCA, the Rabbani Project aims specifically to support Sufi artistic networks by running events where poetry, music and other spiritual-cultural activities can take place. The Rabbani Project helped release a double-album, entitled, *Eternity: Music for the Soul*, featuring a range of Sufi musicians from across the world, including, amongst others, the British musicians Rakin Niass, Pearls of Islam and JKAS. There are a whole range of Muslim musicians that have some kind of connection to the Naqshbandi Haqqani tradition. Five of the musicians that I interviewed during this research specifically mentioned their direct affiliation (as a *murid*) to the order, whilst several others have looser cultural, religious and social ties.

I argue that one of the primary implications of these organised Sufi networks is the extent to which they pull musicians together and generate a critical mass of dynamic cultural interaction. Muslim musicians have regular contact with one another through these networks – they collaborate and find a sense of belonging through membership. Importantly, these networks are not exclusionary and boundaries between different Sufi orders can be porous; it is perhaps more accurate to describe a Sufi-influenced artistic/musical movement, centred in London, but reaching out across the UK and indeed the wider world. When it is considered that many of these musicians are influential in Muslim public spheres beyond their prominence as actual musicians, then the ability to spread a message influenced by Sufi thought should not be underestimated – and this includes an emphasis on not just the religious permissibility of music, but indeed its centrality as an inherent aspect of human spiritual experience.

It did become apparent that there is a tendency for some of these musicians to place this Sufi-influenced cultural movement into opposition with a nebulous tradition of Salafism. While I would suggest that a manicheistic paradigm of 'Sufism versus Salafism' should certainly be resisted, there is nonetheless a sense in which the bearers of these two hazy traditions can struggle against one another in the attempt to influence the religious development of Muslims in Britain. Salafism is generally understood to be a broad swathe of Islamic thought, largely defined by a common desire for a return to religious fundamentals. As such, there is no central authority to the Salafi social

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[28] http://therabbaniproject.co.uk/ [accessed 07.09.12]

movement and it should instead be perceived as a heterogeneous tradition, with authority largely diffused into the teacher-student relationship (Wiktorowicz, 2005). Hamid details the pull of Salafist thought on British Muslims since the 1990s:

> Muslims tired of what they saw as 'cultural Islam' found in the Salafi perspective an approach to religious commitment which seemed to be intellectually rigorous, evidence-based, and stripped of the perceived corruptions of the folkloric religion of the Barelwis, or the "wishy-washy" alternatives offered by rival Islamic tendencies such as Young Muslims UK or Hizb ut-Tahrir… Joining the Salafi dawah meant acquiring membership into a multi-ethnic, supranational identity which offered a revival of "pure" Islamic practices that were seen as lacking in other Islamic trends. (Hamid, 2008: 10)

The attraction for many, then, is the abandonment of the 'cultural fluff' that has adhered to Islamic practice over the centuries, including musical practice – it is as much a rejection of one form of Islam as it is the development or reinterpretation of another. Salafi thought furthermore promotes a strict and often literalist interpretation of the *Hadith* – Salafis often refer to themselves as *ahl al-hadith* (the people of the *Hadith*) – and this includes a ruling that music is deemed impermissible.

For Muslim musicians the label 'Salafi' can become something of a catch-all for those Muslims with a more 'conservative' or literalist leaning – whether or not the term 'Salafi' is entirely appropriate or accurate. Nonetheless, as musical practitioners – with extensive experience performing at Islamic events across Britain – I do believe that it is reasonable to assume Muslim musicians have a particular insight into changing mores vis-à-vis music. It was pointed out to me by several musicians that there is a growing trend for Islamic events with voice-only performance – and, fairly or not, they attributed this directly to the influence of Salafi thought:

> …I think behind [the growth of voice-only performance] is actually a Saudi-influenced, Wahhabi, Salafi influence, who want to spread a message that music is bad, but then the way they kind of do it now is by having more events with no music. It's always been there anyway, but I think, you know, at the moment they do more and more events. They've always been there but I think they were much more quieter, but now they're kind of getting hands-on. (Rakin, 36, July 2011, London)

Rakin is raising an issue that was acknowledged by several Muslim musicians. After a surge of interest in the middle of the last decade – in particular marked by the rise of

Sami Yusuf – there has perhaps been the beginning of a push back against the idea of Muslim music. Gradually the notion seems to have taken root for some that to be a sufficiently observant Muslim one must limit or even entirely reject music. This particularly seemed to be the case with some Muslims in their twenties who – after being voracious consumers of popular and Islamic music during their teenage years – have 'reengaged' with Islam and now consider themselves correctly to follow Islamic practice.

Such experiences were articulated most vividly by Mohammed, a Pakistani man in his late twenties, as we sat talking before the start of a nasheed concert in Nottingham. Dressed in a traditional white *jubba*, Mohammed described how he used to listen extensively to the band Oasis and other forms of popular music at university. He proceeded to explain that, as he began to take Islam more seriously, he grew disenchanted with popular music and the role it plays in supporting American capitalism and imperialism. Producing an iPhone[29] from within the folds of his *jubba*, he showed me a music video by the global superstar Beyoncé. This particular version of the video had a superimposed script explaining how the imagery within the video can be connected to the Illuminati[30] and an anti-religious/anti-Muslim worldview. According to Mohammed, popular music should be avoided because of the connection it has to a corrupt global socio-political order – Muslim music is by extension the only acceptable form of musical practice.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the increasing ubiquity of voice-only performance signals something of a shift away from instrumental music by Muslim musicians – it is the attempt to offer an alternative and religiously permissible style of music and cultural production. While I do think that an extensive or verifiable claim regarding the influence of Salafi thought in Britain is beyond the scope of this research, it is clear that Muslim musicians in the UK will often explain this shift in opinion by referring to the impact of a Saudi-backed Salafi movement. Indeed, one does not need to look too far on the internet to see that much of the online material regarding the impermissibility of music is inspired by religious scholars from Saudi Arabia. One

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[29] An iPhone is a mobile telephone produced by Apple. With advanced computing capability and connectivity, it has become an emblematic product of the digital age.

[30] The Illuminati is the name given to a supposedly secret sect intending on ushering in a New World Order based around an authoritarian global government.

excellent example is the English-language Facebook group 'Music is Haram'[31]. With almost two thousand followers – a majority of whom appear to be UK-based – this group provides religious advice and *fatawa* on music, largely drawing its information from the rulings of senior religious clerics in Saudi Arabia, such as Abdullah Ibn Jibreen (d.2009) and Muhammad ibn al Uthaymeen (d.2001) – both are considered highly influential scholars of Salafist thought.

While it is perhaps unlikely that wider Salafist teachings are impacting in any meaningful or identifiable sense – as Hamid points out, only 'a handful of mosques openly identify themselves as Salafi' (Hamid, 2008: 10) – it does appear possible that there is a gradual erosion of previous support amongst some young Muslims for instrumental music as an acceptable form of cultural practice. This may be a consequence of a more assertive Salafi presence in the field of cultural production. As I mentioned earlier, with a seeming choice between the polar extremes of Sufism and Salafism, on this issue, an increasing number of Muslims now choose to navigate a middle path involving either a restriction to percussion instrumentation and/or a more cautious combination of Islam and music.

In some respects this links directly with a far more significant trend amongst Muslims in Britain and indeed across the globe – that is, a movement to promote Muslim unity beyond sectarian discord. This broader attempt at Muslim unity cuts across a number of perceived divisions – including nationalism, ethnicity and politics (Roy, 2004; Schmidt, 2005; Mandaville, 2009) – but it is a specific opposition to religious and sectarian fracturing that is largely relevant for my arguments here.

Adherence to Muslim religious unity most commonly articulates itself as a rejection of sectarian labelling. Interestingly, this stance does not preclude an awareness of substantive theological differences. Indeed, it more often involves the argument that sectarian group identity is itself the problem. Thus, it is possible to be influenced by particular Islamic scholars – and to hold specific views on a number of divisive religious issues – but nonetheless to respect those with different opinions and to suggest that the core beliefs of Islam bind all Muslims together. The popular and influential British Muslim musician Sami Yusuf made clear his rejection of sectarian labelling – but

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[31] https://www.facebook.com/music.is.haraam [accessed 02.03.12]

crucially not theological difference – during an interview with the Arab-language news website aljazeeratalk.net, in 2008:

> Regarding me being a Sufi, or a "Munshid"[32], or any of these things, I believe in unity, I don't like to go into groups divisions. But generally speaking my affiliation to Islam is clear. For those who know me and know the scholars that I follow and respect, for them, it is clear what kind of understanding I have. (Sami Yusuf, interview with aljazeeratalk.net[33], 2008).

Sami Yusuf is simply one prominent example of a British Muslim musician with a demonstrable wariness of adopting a defined sectarian label. This channels a broader feeling amongst many young Muslims who are tired of sectarian squabbling, which they argue has diverted attention away from the challenges faced by Muslims in the contemporary global context. A striking image (see Figure 4.2 overleaf) that is in ubiquitous circulation amongst global Muslim online networks vividly highlights where these perceived divisions are seen to fall – namely Sufi/Salafi and Sunni/Shia – and there is an attempt to reaffirm the primacy of a singular 'Muslim' religious identity.

There is a tension in the notion that religious diversity and religious coherence can be held together. Muslim religious identity is perceived to be both singularly powerful, yet broad enough to encompass a number of perspectives. It is an attempt to promote tolerance and diversity by appealing to universality. I found that this view appears consistently to underpin the religious outlook of the overwhelming majority of Muslim musicians in the UK – including those who would also describe themselves as members of a Sufi *tariqah*. It is furthermore reflected in much of the discourse and rhetoric emerging within the global online networks of Muslim music fans, which tend to be predominantly

Figure 4.2: A popular image from Facebook critiquing sectarianism
(Source: Facebook)

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[32] Munshid: alternative spelling of murid (Sufi disciple).
[33] http://www.ammartalk.com/?p=293 [accessed 06.01.11]

constituted by younger Muslims in Britain, Europe and North America, but also across parts of North Africa and the Middle East. Much of this language involves reference to shared religious history and affiliation with Muslim holy places, as well regular deployment of the term '*umma*'. Within the discourses of this cultural and religious milieu, there is a continual evocation of the concepts, traditions, symbols and images that bind Muslims together across sectarian differences.

This view was encapsulated perfectly by the rapper Ayman during an interview when he passionately launched into a critique of sectarian division, offering me instead an alternative vision of Islamic – and indeed non-Islamic – universality:

> …Muslims themselves, they may just go to one particular scholar, okay, and get their teachings from that, but not realising that Islam itself has such a wide range of beliefs, and rulings, and judgments, and law, and practices. It's so huge, that anyone who's within these bounds is classed as a Muslim, so as long as you're doing your five basic, your five basic pillars, and even if you're not doing your five basic pillars, then there's room for everyone, okay… So regardless of whether you're Sufi, or a Salafi, or Shia, or Sunni, you know, whatever you might want to call yourself, this thing can encompass everyone. And even if you're a non-Muslim, you can still be inspired by the teachings of Islam, because it deals with justice and truth and honesty, treating people fairly, looking after the environment, giving charity. Everyone can really, as we say, everyone can really sit in the garden and enjoy the truth, you know. (Ayman, 33, October 2011, London)

Ayman is raising the possibility of a celebration of Islamic belief that rises above sectarian division and even beyond the traditional boundaries of religion itself. It is the suggestion – one that was certainly raised by a whole range of Muslim musicians – that the central values of Islam have universal applicability and appeal.

This message can be found reverberating throughout the music of many of these musicians. Through both sound and language there is a compelling tendency by Muslim musicians to reference a shared semiotic system based on universal Islamic tendencies. This can include the continual deployment of Arabic – the language of the Qur'an and the signifying sound of Islam for many – the evocation of social and moral concepts, ranging from family through to charity, and more abstract notions, including love, submission and blessedness. There is furthermore an understandable focus on the relationship of Muslims (both as individuals and as a group) to Allah and the Prophet Muhammad.

Taken together this represents an attempt to deploy a shared conceptual lexicon – both verbally and sonically visceral – in the attempt to draw Muslims together beyond perceived differences. Clearly, the use of music to do this is highly controversial and indeed utterly inappropriate for some. Yet, interestingly, some musicians have made it clear that they are willing to perform without music in order to reach audiences that would otherwise be reluctant to view their performance. The rapper, Rakin, explained how he is willing to respect the views of different audiences – which can differ to his own engagement with Sufi practice – and alter his performance accordingly:

> …because it's Islam, we'd do like a bespoke performance to fit in with whatever they'd like, so if they're kind of like Salafi-inclined, Wahhabi, Saudi, kind of, inclined, hardliners who don't really like music, in that case we could perform acapella then. And if it was another place they might say, oh we just want drums, in that case we'd perform with drums. In other places they'd say, yeah you can perform with full music. So, I guess, you know, we'd fit into whatever they want. (Rakin, 41, July 2011, London)

Such flexibility, it seems, is not unusual for Muslim musicians in Britain. Indeed, a clear majority of musicians have limited their performance – often quite radically – in order to reach new Muslim audiences that might otherwise be hostile to their performance.

Spirituality and the 'Subjective Turn'

If religious unity and a form of religious universalism are one side of the coin for Muslim musicians, vis-à-vis music and Islam, the other is a developed sense of spirituality and inner-experiential religion. Spirituality is a complex term: it is most often taken by sociologists of religion to highlight the movement away from organised religion to more personalised beliefs relating to non-physical and transcendental experience (Flanagan and Jupp, 2010). While arguably therefore an oppositional concept in relation to ideas of religious community – and by extension Islam as a codified religious tradition – I argue that postmodern notions of spirituality are not so starkly distinct from Islamic beliefs when set within the context of contemporary Britain. While spirituality is already an important, longstanding concept for Sufism – and this influence should not be ignored – it does seem evident to me that Muslim musicians in the UK additionally frame their religious subjectivity through forms of language and conceptualisation that move in tandem with contemporary notions of inner-life spirituality.

I will offer three prongs of evidence to support this claim. First, Muslim musicians reproduce a linguistic and conceptual discourse of postmodern spirituality. This discourse, emphasising inner-being and subjective experience, is often interchangeable with the metaphoric language of contemporary spirituality. Second, there are a smaller number of Muslim musicians who consciously attempt to evoke universal (or at least trans-religious) themes and concepts within their music. Third, an astonishing number of Muslim musicians have converted to Islam, generally after experiencing other religions or modes of spiritual practice. While they may finally have settled on their own interpretation of a satisfactory metaphysical truth, based on an Islamic theistic worldview, they nonetheless bring with them strong ideas relating to the notion of a spiritual journey and an inner-yearning for 'something more' beyond the stale rigidity of wider materialistic society. I suggest that this connects to their identity as artists/musicians, with the creative process itself undoubtedly sympathetic to expressions of inner-life being and spiritual change. However, before considering these arguments further, I think it is necessary to examine the concept of spirituality and to consider exactly where it fits into ideas of postmodernity or late-modern society.

Embedded within the context of the 'secularisation' debate (see Davie et al, 2003) – and in an attempt to explain the decline in congregational forms of religion – Heelas and Woodhead (2005) provided a seminal study of the so-called 'spiritual revolution'. In their compelling, though at times problematic account (see Voas and Bruce, 2010), Heelas and Woodhead make a distinction between the 'congregational domain' and the 'holistic milieu' within western societies. It is worth quoting them at some length fully to outline their analysis and its underlying justification:

> The [former] emphasizes life-as and the normativization of subjectivities, the other subjective-life and the sacralization of unique subjectivities. In the former, self-understanding, change, the true life, is sought by heeding and conforming to a source of significance which ultimately transcends the life of this world; in the latter, self-understanding, change, the true life, is sought by seeking out, experiencing and expressing a source of significance which lies within the process of life itself. (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 31)

According to Heelas and Woodhead, this dichotomy rests on broader cultural and social changes relating to subjectivity, which they term the 'subjectivization thesis':

> In a nutshell, the subjectivization thesis states that 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture' favours and reinforces those (subjective-life) forms of spirituality which resource unique subjectivities and treat them as a primary source of significance, and undermines those (life-as) forms of religion which do not. In other words, the thesis explains the varied fortunes of different forms of religion and spirituality today by reference to a single process – the widespread cultural shift in emphasis from the value ascribed to life-as to the value ascribed to subjective-life. (Ibid: 78)

The arguments that I develop here appropriate only one strand of Heelas and Woodhead's thesis. Crucially, I will make no attempt to support or utilise the rather sharp distinction between congregational religion and holistic spirituality – whether or not this dichotomy is sustainable will remain unexamined. Nonetheless, I develop an argument to suggest that followers of so-called congregational religion – or in this case, Muslim musicians – are bound together with the 'massive subjective turn of modern culture' and that this injects distinct elements of autonomy and inner-experientiality into their religious practice. By making this argument, I in no way wish to dismiss the importance of higher, external authority for these individuals – as has been demonstrated, original textual sources remain central, as does an engagement with secondary sites of scholarship. Yet it does appear to me that the language and personalised approach of 'postmodern' spirituality can be – and has been – consistently integrated into the conceptualisation of religious practices that are largely centred on traditional theistic codification. A more helpful and perhaps 'softer' definition of spirituality is therefore perhaps helpful in understanding this process and seeming antinomy:

> The (re)discovery of spirituality re-presents the individual's effort to make conscious his or her 'inner life', that is, his or her personality and moral ideas. Contemporary spirituality therefore expresses several features of postmodern conditions, especially the possibility offered to the individual to shape his or her view of the world. It also makes possible for someone to join a spiritual or religious group that is rooted in a culture different to one's own. (Varga, 2007: 145)

This view of spirituality perhaps recognises that 'postmodern conditions' run across religion and non-defined holistic practices. There is a language and conceptual currency that is interchangeable in the spiritual and religious discourses of the West, relating to inner-being and the transcendent. The task here, then, is to assess the ways in which

Muslim musicians are inherently bound up within the discourse of contemporary spirituality.

The most striking and immediate way in which contemporary notions of spirituality are visible in the worldview of Muslim musicians is through the language that they use to frame religious experience. 'Spirituality' is a word that frequently arose in the discourse deployed by Muslim musicians. It has been used specifically and consistently to reference internal and highly subjective 'happenings' of religious experience, as opposed to structured engagement with external religious practice or teaching. Less direct language included frequent evocation of emotion (including 'love' and 'passion'), reference to inner change and development (including notions of 'questing' and 'journeying'), and allusions to inner being (including 'heart' and 'soul'). While many of these concepts have roots in the mystical tradition of Sufism – with its emphasis on practice that includes meditation and an ecstatic experience of the divine – these musicians, who have largely been born and brought up in the UK, have tended to frame this conceptualisation in language that is interchangeable with the popularised discourse of spirituality. It seemed to me that these concepts were deployed with inherent semantics of religion and were not meant to reference a spirituality existing beyond the scope of an all encompassing Islam. But the language was clearly constructed through the application of universal tropes of subjectivity that translate, or perhaps make contiguous, Muslim religious experience with the postmodern discourse of western spirituality.

This conceptual framing furthermore extends into the very act of music making itself. When attempting to describe for me the act of performing – whether playing an instrument or singing – musicians frequently, and without prompting, directly raised the 'spiritual' nature of their performance. Usman, the drummer for Aashiq al-Rasul, situated his performance within the context of Islam but stressed the deeply subjective, physically and emotionally visceral, performative act:

> The way I strike a skin, obviously not being able to verbalise it or put it into words, but that whole action and the reason for that action, do you know what I mean? What I'm trying to say? So when I'm playing a bit of hand percussion, it's almost like where I'm coming from and how I'm trying to project myself, and what I feel, which is Islam, predominantly just pushing it, a spiritual force if you want to put it that way… it's what's coming from there [gestures to heart]. (Usman, 33, October 2010, Birmingham)

Musicians furthermore discussed the connection that an intensely spiritual performance could create between themselves – as singular spiritual beings – and members of an audience. The bass player, Ash, from the folk-rock band Silk Road (see p.66-67), tried to verbalise the spirituality that he often feels crackling through their performance:

> …when we perform and when we become absorbed in what we're playing, then the room becomes absorbed, and that's when, that's when they share with us that upliftment. And it's not an upliftment in the sense of happy-go-lucky, giddy, it's deeper than that, it's more mahogany than ash, do you know what I mean? (Ash, 27, October 2011, Birmingham)

One of Ash's fellow band members, Atallah, tried to expand on this theme:

> People have come up to us after that gig and they had been affected spiritually… we were playing sometimes and I would feel, you know, very spiritually active, I would feel my heart had been affected, and so that's a good sign of connecting. (Atallah, 53, October 2011, Birmingham)

While I do not believe there is any doubt that these feelings of spirituality are rooted in their Islamic faith, there nonetheless appeared to be the identification of a spiritual 'connection' between these artists and members of their audience – an audience that may or may not be Muslim. Indeed, during our interviews and conversations, these musicians often discussed these emotions through the language of universal spirituality, eschewing direct reference to Islam itself in order to emphasise the power of a potentially non-specific and shared spirituality.

It seems apparent to me, then, that a central and underlying aspect of this expressive spirituality is *universality*. While not all Muslim musicians directly engage with a perceived universalism – and some musicians very much consider themselves artistic practitioners of a specifically Islamic tradition – almost all of the musicians interviewed would deploy a discourse of religious and spiritual universality – even if this worldview was not necessarily reflected in their music. This approach is directly and self-consciously built into the music of some of these musicians. Two very different groups – Poetic Pilgrimage and Silk Road – typify this stance in their attempt to produce spiritually accessible music that reaches out beyond the usual boundaries of Islamic communality.

In 2010, Poetic Pilgrimage fascinatingly reworked the song, 'Satta Massagana', by the Jamaican reggae group, the Abyssinians[34]. They have set the core musical sound of the original song into a modified strophic form[35], backed by a steady hip hop pulse, and have directly quoted the lyrics from the original chorus – creating a hip hop homage to the original, called 'Land Far Away'. The chorus line (common to both versions[36]) references a place away from the embodied world – an afterlife perhaps but tantalisingly vague – and refers to 'the book of life' – a scriptural source but possibly a holistic, experiential one. In our interview, Sukina, one half of the duo Poetic Pilgrimage, explained the power that a universal spiritual message can have when transcending specific religious traditions:

> …the concept or what they're singing about, 'land far away', it was just so universal, you know, like, we believe in a land far away, where there's no night, only day. They say, look into the book of life, and that could be a Qur'an, a Bible, a Bhagavad Gita, you know what I mean, it could be a holy scripture. So kind of the fact that it referred to the scripture, to the book of life, that was wicked. It doesn't conflict with our beliefs, because the Qur'an is the book of life too and you'll see that there is a land far away, so it was just perfect and I think we wanted to talk about, about heaven, I suppose, or about a sacred place or a place away from conflict and pain and fear and war. (Sukina, 28, February 2011, Cardiff)

For Poetic Pilgrimage, there is a powerful inclusivity in producing music that is relevant to their own identity as Muslims but nonetheless lyrically framed in language and concepts that speak beyond the typical bounds of Islam. This is not about downplaying Islam, or Muslim experience, but about opening it up and making it accessible to a wider audience.

The band, Silk Road, similarly stressed the centrality of a message that is universally spiritual but simultaneously underpinned by an Islamic worldview. This approach is reflected most powerfully through song semantics. Silk Road explained to me that they derive much of their inspiration directly from sources such as the Qur'an and *Hadith* –

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[34] The Abyssinians are a Jamaican reggae group that formed in 1968. An influential group in the reggae scene, they are known for their promotion of Rastafarianism, and 'Satta Massagana' is occasionally sung as hymn, partly in Amharic, during Rastafarian services.
[35] 'Modified strophic form' refers to a semi-repeating musical structure – in this instance a looped sample.
[36] 'There is a land far, far away, where there's no night, there's only day. Look into the book of life, and you will see that there's a land far, far away.' (The Abysinnians (1976), 'Satta Massagana'/Poetic Pilgrimage (2010), 'Land Far Away').

and from more eclectic sources, such as the Sufi poet Rumi – but then construct a lyrical form that has broader appeal. One of the classical guitarists in the band, Atallah, explained the specific inspiration behind two of their songs:

> …there's one song called Ask My Heart, and it's the translation of a poem by a great Sufi Sheikh about the relationship between his heart and his spirit, in conversation… [and another] called The Stranger, it's actually based on a *Hadith*, [the Prophet Muhammad] said that the person in life is like a traveller who stops under a tree for a while, knowing that he's got to go on… so this song is all about that, and it's about a person travelling in life. So it is enthused with spiritual overtones. (Atallah, 53, October 2011, Birmingham)

Both of these songs have the occasional lyrical reference to Islam, but they largely attempt to deal with religious and spiritual themes that, while rooted in Islamic sources, can be accessed by an audience that might otherwise be disconnected from a religion that they do not consider their own. Both songs consider the relationship of the individual with the transcendental and the divine, conjuring images that include spiritual light and the nature of our temporary journey through the physical world. Expanding on this, Ash, the bass player for the group, explained to me their motivation for a 'spiritually open' approach:

> Something I think I can say on behalf of all of us is that it's more important for us to, while all the spirituality is certainly the core of our expression, through this medium, um, at the same time a lot of it's quite subtle and like, you know, like Atallah was explaining to you that's how the *Hadith* was translated and expressed through this song, because we don't really want to alienate the majority of audiences, we really want to do something for someone that hasn't got the linkages to the spirituality of Islam, can still take something good from it, and still relate to it on a personal level. (Ash, 27, October 2011, Birmingham)

This approach, therefore, appears both to be natural and conscious, with the spirituality of the group 'oozing out' – as the lead singer, Faraz, described it – whilst they additionally craft lyrics in a form that speaks to an audience across and beyond any specific religion.

Beyond a self-conscious attempt to advance shared notions of religion and spirituality through their music, I suggest that there is an additional and extremely important reason why this approach perhaps comes naturally to some Muslim musicians, and indeed their audience. Namely, a disproportionate number of Muslim musicians are converts to Islam and they correspondingly bring with them a unique set of experiences that influence their

particular worldview. The number of Muslim converts in Britain cannot be accurately confirmed, but as I argued earlier (see p.57), converts potentially represent 3.3-3.7% of the total Muslim population in Britain. In a previous chapter I also claimed that of the forty four Muslim musicians producing music in the public sphere, at least fifteen are converts (approximately 34%). So, in proportional terms, Muslim musicians are approximately ten times more likely to be converts than Muslims in the wider British demographic.

While I do think that this trend carries with it several important possibilities, one primary implication seems to be a heightened sensitivity that these particular musicians display toward trans-religious concepts and notions of universal spirituality. The language of postmodern spirituality (i.e., the conceptual and verbal emphasis on transcendental subjectivity) certainly emerges more frequently among converts than it does amongst musicians who were Muslim at birth. While this use of language is inherently interesting (in the sense that it refers to a particular socio-cultural set of experiences), underpinning it is a conceptual assumption that references the idea of spiritual and religious change – something bound together with the 'spiritual journey' that converts undertook during their conversion to Islam (not to mention before and after). In his study of Muslim converts in Colorado, Bowen (2009) suggests that change and movement are important underlying factors facilitating the conversion process. I argue that the idea of change is similarly intertwined with the subjective experiences of Muslim convert musicians. Indeed, these musicians frequently raised ideas relating to spiritual questing and journeying.

When attempting to explain to me how Islam now permeates his music, the hip hop artist, Mohammed Yahya, suggested that while his lyrics are not overtly 'Islamic', his worldview as a Muslim naturally and subtly emerges throughout the artistic process. Mohammed recounted his spiritual journey from Pentecostal Christianity through to Rastafarianism, Paganism and finally to Islam. The current 'truth' of Islam was placed by Mohammed into a broader narrative of spiritual and epistemic change that clearly spanned a number of religions before reaching its more settled conclusion:

> I guess, I do promote Islam in my music because my music is always a reflection of me, how I am as a person, so I try to, without wanting to, whatever I'm feeling inside, whatever my personal experiences are you'll be

able to hear that through the music. (Mohammed, 29, February 2011, London)

Mohammed – and indeed other musicians that have converted to Islam – often seem to take their identity as a musician and utilise it as a connecting thread between their current selves and their pre-Muslim identity. They stress the integral notion of change to their overarching identity – spiritually, religiously and artistically – and this perhaps encourages them to develop or deploy transferable concepts and language – a semiotic framework that is anchored to a fundamental understanding of themselves as spiritual, subjective beings. As I suggested earlier, they are certainly not trying to suppress or downplay their current Muslim identity and religious subjectivity, but, perhaps more accurately, they do attempt to find a common lexicon that will make sense of their 'spiritual journey'.

For many of these converts, then, music falls easily into place as the most natural way to express a state of spiritual being and the nature of internal change. The entwined identities, of Muslim convert and musician, gently complement one another, making sense of their own spiritual journey and connecting with those beyond a Muslim communality. The white convert Atallah, who's musical style is influenced by classical guitar playing and Irish folk music, fondly looked back at his spiritually-inclined generation, who were 'looking for something more' during the 1970s. He compared that generation of musicians – which included an array of converts to Islam – with today's talented but spiritually deficient musical culture:

> …a lot of music nowadays, it's just about the, sort of, people's anguish. It may not be violent, but it's just about their internal anguish, and they say that the artists are actually painting their prison, and, you know, art isn't actually about describing the prison we're in, whereas spiritual music is actually painting the world outside the prison [laughs]… There are some wonderful musicians now, singers like Bon Iver, like that, who I actually, I find it quite spiritual listening to them. But listening to the words, they are not, they are not singing about a religious experience, it's about songs for the pain, they're going into the depths in their hearts, but they haven't found, they're not connected… (Atallah, 53, October 2011, Birmingham)

For Atallah and many other Muslim musicians – both converts and those who were Muslim at birth – there is a desire to inject a little spirituality back into the cultural mainstream. This necessitates a careful use of language and the framing of experience to

transfer musical expression beyond a normativised notion of Muslim subjectivity to broader commonalities of postmodern spirituality. It is about making music *spiritually accessible*.

Heelas and Woodhead suggested that new forms of spirituality are inevitable, or at least powerfully contingent, consequences of subjectivization. They argue that:

> …'the massive subjective turn of modern culture' favours and reinforces those (subjective-life) forms of spirituality which resource unique subjectivities and treat them as a primary source of significance… (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 78).

Leaving aside the specific practices that Heelas and Woodhead associate with their definition of a 'holistic milieu' (such as yoga and homeopathy), it does seem to me that a clear sense that spirituality – as they conceive it in the most general of terms – can be found at work within the experiences of Muslim musicians in Britain. I argue that evidence for this claim manifests itself in several ways: through the shared language of subjectivity and inner-being; through the conscious conceptualisation of religious and spiritual universality and translatable experientiality; and through the emphasis on internal change and spiritual journeying (most clearly articulated by Muslim converts). While heightened subjectivity, through an emphasis on inner-religious experience, is a notable feature of the discourse deployed by many Muslim musicians (though not all), I nonetheless suggest that this does not entail a dismissal of the centrality of codified religion – also known as the 'congregational domain' according to Heelas and Woodhead. Instead, it perhaps suggests that the two realms of religious and spiritual experience cannot be so sharply divided – that they are indeed often bound together in novel and dynamic modes of spiritual and religious being.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted more broadly to consider issues of religious belonging and belief. As one might have expected, it is entirely clear from my findings that Muslim musicians in Britain are overwhelmingly rooted in a tradition of Sufism (though the nature and scope of this influence does vary from one musician to another). This influence extends to include the impact made by several organised Sufi networks – predominantly active in London – that both support and encourage the expression of

Muslim belief through music. Understanding this sectarian context is crucial, largely because it provides an explanation for the emphasis on spirituality and personal faith that Muslim musicians so clearly adhere to. It also suggests that religious networks and musical/subcultural networks are, in this instance, often fairly closely related.

Musicians also articulated a linked concern relating to the influence of more literalist/conservative trends of religious thought. While often unspecified, these concerns refer to the supposed tightening of attitudes that are being directed toward music and instrumentation – a trend that musicians lay firmly at the door of a loosely-defined and rather nebulous Salafi/Wahhabi movement. Yet despite the clear connection that Muslim musicians predominantly have with Sufism – and the ambivalence they show toward more conservative tendencies – they nonetheless appear to remain consistently open to alternative forms of Islamic belief and practice. I have suggested that this is a form of intra-Muslim pluralism. It tends to revolve around notions of Muslim religious unity: a form of universalism that tolerates and even encourages religious difference amongst Muslims, whilst arguing that certain fundamental beliefs and values bind Muslims together as one faith group.

Continuing with this theme, I have also suggested that running parallel to this sectarian context is another form of universalism and/or trans-religious thought – that is, the deployment of late-modern/postmodern discourses of spirituality. Central to such discourses are notions of inner-subjective being, spiritual universality and personal change. Several musicians have argued that such themes have resulted in their music having a more extensive and universal appeal.

These arguments are particularly important when set within the overarching context of the thesis. In both instances – when considering sectarianism and spirituality – it is apparent that Muslim musicians ground notions of plurality and universalism in the specifics of their own personal faith and belief. Indeed, I argue that these specific areas are particularly illustrative of just how the pluralising conventions of modernity can be distinctively grounded in the tenets of Islam.

Section Three

Muslim Markets and Media

6. The Muslim Music Market: Culture and Consumerism

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Introduction

Perhaps the most conceptually difficult question raised by this thesis concerns the nature of 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' music: does such a thing exist in Britain? In several respects, I suggest that the answer to this question has subtle implications for British Muslim cultural, social, and economic development. Different sounds, styles and contents do produce unique musical genres – and these can be rooted in a range of specific social contexts, ranging from the local and communal, through to the national and transnational. Furthermore, the idea of religious genres of music within popular culture is not unknown – consider 'contemporary Christian music' in America (Howard & Streck, 2004). Yet Muslim music in Britain spans different styles, contents, and pre-existing genres, making singular conceptions of Muslim music rather problematic.

I would suggest that the act of defining something as 'Muslim' can be unnecessary and even dangerous, implying as it does categorisation based on ideological rather than cultural grounds. For example, Sami Yusuf and the rapper Mohammed Yahya have little in common, despite being grouped together under the rubric of 'Muslim music'. They are both British Muslim musicians, but their backgrounds, musical styles and lyrical contents are largely dissimilar. To group them together as 'Muslim' potentially involves not just the imposition of a particular set of commonalities based on religion, but also a possible artificial division between Muslim and non-Muslim musicians – musicians who otherwise might have significant forms of social, political and cultural overlap.

Despite this cautionary note, the idea of 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' music can have both practical and theoretical purchase. I therefore raise in this chapter the question of whether or not there are specific qualities marking music out as 'Islamic' or 'Muslim'. In the first section of the chapter I consider the conceptual, social and semantic dynamics that potentially define Muslim music as a distinct genre of music. I make a distinction between two forms of Muslim music: 'Islamic music' and 'Islamically-conscious music'.

In the second section I proceed to examine the development of an alternative Islamic lifestyle culture – an economic and consumer culture that is underpinned by religious and ethical motivations. I claim that music is an integral part of this lifestyle culture and that Muslim musicians are active agents in attempting to promote it within wider Muslim social contexts. In the final section I consider the economic and business model that surrounds Muslim music. I specifically look at the Islamic production and recording companies that have been created to support Muslim musicians, as well as considering patterns of consumption amongst Muslim music fans. I conclude that Muslim musicians face grave financial challenges and that the prospects of a self-sustaining Muslim music scene are uncertain.

Muslim Music: Defining a Genre

British Muslim musicians are in disagreement over whether or not there is a particular genre of music that might be labelled 'Muslim' or 'Islamic'. Even those who reject the term – refusing to be pigeonholed – recognise that it has some practical and conceptual purchase. In using the terms 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' music (and they tend to be deployed synonymously) there tends to be a recognition of three necessary, but perhaps insufficient, features of such music: (i) music made by Muslim musicians (ii) music containing self-conscious Islamic or Muslim subjectivities, and (iii) music that has a singular, or at least significant, orientation toward a Muslim audience and consumer market. While this categorisation is a useful guide, it does conceal additional complexities – Yusuf Islam, for example, produces music that can be both inside and outside of this category. I therefore outline a two-fold typology that roughly divides Muslim musicians into one of two cultural streams: 'Islamic music' and 'Islamically-conscious music'.

I claim that Islamic music is created by musicians who are more exclusively targeting communal and religious spheres of activity. These musicians produce paraliturgical music that strengthens Muslim identity and focuses on local and communal belonging. As I shall demonstrate, such music plugs directly into discrete Muslim cultural and religious networks, becoming an important cultural product in emergent Muslim markets and public spheres in the UK. The second stream of music – Islamically-conscious music

– incorporates a range of musicians that are more circumspect in their engagement with Muslim networks. It seems to me that while such music might directly reference Islam – and it is certainly inspired by a Muslim worldview – it nonetheless attempts to deploy more universal concepts in an effort to reach a wider audience. I claim that such music maintains a strong association with Muslim cultural and economic contexts, but that it cannot be solely defined by these connections – other subcultural networks are often just as important.

The first stream of Muslim music, Islamic music, is overtly immersed within Islamic discourse (as one might expect) and usually attempts to reinforce the moral coherence of a distinct Muslim community. It is partly defined by sounds and lyrical content that reference the traditions, beliefs and religious figures distinguishing Islam as a unique religion. Yet it also includes music that deals with broader concepts of Islamic morality and spirituality – ranging from deep and abiding respect for one's mother, through to boundless gratitude for the beauty of creation. Crucially, in all instances there tends to be a clear rootedness in specific Islamic practices or beliefs. I suggest that such music can therefore tentatively be conceived as a form of paraliturgical practice. Indeed, it is perceived to exist within a spectrum of Islamic sound that is arguably reminiscent of al-Faruqi and al-Faruqi's typology of *handasah al sawt* (al-Faruqi and al Faruqi, 1986). According to this analysis, there is a hierarchy of performative sound directly shaped by a vocal tradition rooted in Quranic cantillation. This tradition holds Quranic cantillation as the exemplar sound, followed in order by: religious chants/poetry (zikr, na'at etc), vocal/instrumental improvisations, songs with serious themes, and, finally, entertainment music (al-Faruqi and al Faruqi, 1986: 457-459). I believe that Islamic music perhaps falls into the second category of this typology – religious chants/poetry – and it is telling that musicians often discuss such music by utilising the concept of 'remembrance' – as with *zikr*, chanting and poetry, Islamic music is a form of religious practice, celebration and reaffirmation.

In popularised British Muslim public spheres Islamic music usually manifests itself in the form of contemporary nasheeds. Yet it is important to remember that Islamic music is not confined to any one particular style – it is the words and intent that determine whether

music might or might not be considered Islamic. As Amran, from Aashiq al-Rasul explained, Islamic music covers multiple genres:

> Who can say it is to do with a particular genre, or that a certain genre only constitutes Islamic music? You can't say that, because you have today Islamic music composed and performed in many genres or styles like Country and Western, Hip Hop, Rap, R&B. You have got all sorts of flavours, and you find Islamic music at all kinds of places and times. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

Referencing an American Muslim 'country and western' musician from rural Oklahoma – Kareem Salama – Amran is suggesting that it is the intention of the musician that marks music out as Islamic, not the actual style or genre of music itself. Indeed, according to Amran and many other musicians, of central importance is the intention to remember God and the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the desire to celebrate Islam and express a Muslim worldview:

> Intention is central in a Muslim's life, in whatever we do, if your intention is sincere, your prayer is accepted. If your intention isn't true, even your good action is void… [So] if I were to give a definition of Islamic music, it would be focussing on the words and meanings of the lyrics… Vocally, there are certain words which you could say, are through and through Islamic. They remind or educate the listener about God or Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, back to Mecca. When you hear these words or phrases they resonate with particular experiences. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

Amran is suggesting that Islamic music allows the listener directly to connect with Islam through the very act of listening. He highlights the notion of intention, echoing a theme that is continually raised by musicians and followers of this particular genre. Musicians and nasheed artists are seen as mediators of faith, transmitting religious experience and spiritual emotion through their performance and music. This solemn role requires a pureness of intent as well as a pureness of form. It emphasises communal gathering and the sharing of religious experience through the mediated form of music.

An examination of the music produced within this genre clearly demonstrates that four central themes repeatedly emerge to almost the exclusion of anything else:

- Praise to Allah and/or the Prophet Muhammad.

- Celebration of Muslim practice – most commonly Ramadan, Eid, the act of marriage and other practices relating to fasting, charity, prayer and pilgrimage.
- Reaffirmation of Islamic values – often relating to modesty, gender roles and respect for one's parents.
- Reference to Muslim history – whether specific historical events or highly respected individuals.

The predominant purpose of Islamic music, then, is to strengthen the bonds of communal solidarity and identity through shared beliefs, practices, values and history. In Britain such music is overwhelmingly produced in the modern nasheed style. Furthermore, a range of songs are consciously produced for a variety of performance contexts – several musicians, for example, have remarked that it is useful to have a 'wedding nasheed' in order to get booked regularly for marriage events.

While the celebratory and communal role of Islamic music is perhaps most significant, it is also perceived to act as a form of religious pedagogy. Through Islamic music – in whatever form or style – Muslims are able to learn about their religion in an accessible and even entertaining way. It is suggested that this particularly applies to younger, British-born Muslims, who occasionally struggle to grasp traditional forms of learning practiced by Muslim *'ulama*. Samira [not her real name], an amateur nasheed artist and active organiser of both local and national performance events, suggests that Islamic music is absolutely key for young Muslims to not only learn about their faith but also to make sense of practicing Islam in the British context:

> The other advantage is the youth don't know much about Islam themselves, really. We get that a lot of people who say, I'm born a Muslim but I don't know much about Islam, so by coming to these events I get to know what Islam is and it's good, it's positive. Everyone who organises these events, they've giving out positive messages anyway, even things like the riots, or the terrorist attacks, it helps from that sense as well, because we can get to that bit of the community and organise community events. It's not only about Ramadan, it's not only about Eid, it's not only about the birthday of the Prophet, it's about current affairs, living in England as a Muslim, the community, being involved in society, you know, what Islam's about and what we should do as a good person in general. It's the right opportunity to talk about this sort of stuff and spread positive messages. (Samira, 33, December 2011, Bradford)

Samira is broadening the definition of Islamic music somewhat and suggesting that it might also encompass attempts to express and understand the idea of being Muslim in the British context. Rather than just articulating generic Islamic values, I am arguing that this music can also contextualise these values and explore individual or communal life-worlds. This view is shared by many practitioners of Islamic music, all of whom are seemingly happy to accept this broader definition. Yet here the nub of the argument is reached – for at what stage does Islamic music broaden its substantive content and simply become 'music'?

In order to resolve this conceptual dilemma, I that argue that it is possible to identify music that is permeated with an Islamic ethos but that should not be categorised as 'Islamic music'. For analytic purposes, I refer to this as Islamically-conscious music, although the purpose of this argument is largely to dismiss categorisation based solely around religion. Islamically-conscious music is marked by a desire to universalise the values and beliefs of Islam – to take an Islamic/Muslim worldview and express it in language that will resonate with both Muslims and non-Muslims. Such music will therefore often focus on social and political issues that are especially pertinent for Muslims – though not always – as well as spirituality and religion in a broader and less specifically 'Islamic' sense. The musicians that produce this music are furthermore often connected to Muslim cultural networks, but also to other subcultures and genre-specific contexts – this is particularly true of Muslim hip hop musicians who have specifically discussed their sense of belonging to an 'underground UK hip hop scene'. In a sense, these musicians – including Poetic Pilgrimage, Mohammed Yahya, The Planets and Quest Rah – are often able to lay claim to both the cultural and religious capital associated with the field of Muslim cultural production (Bourdieu, 1984), whilst simultaneously drawing on subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996) in the overlapping, though predominantly different, cultural contexts of the UK, European and American hip hop scenes.

While hip hop is the musical style that might more commonly be described as Islamically-conscious music, there are other notable instances of stylistic variation, such as the folk-rock of Silk Road, Yusuf Islam's recent venture back into pop music, and Sami Yusuf's attempt to create his own genre of music – so-called 'Spiritique'. As Yusuf

has explained, it draws from Muslim musical traditions and expresses Islamic spirituality, but essentially tones down the specific and exclusionary references to Islam itself (references that are characteristic of nasheeds and Yusuf's own early music):

> It incorporates and utilises Middle Eastern and Western harmonics, underpinned by spirituality. It's all-encompassing, all-inclusive… It will utilise music as a facilitator for spiritual appreciation, regardless of race and religion. (Sami Yusuf, quoted in Tusing, 2010)

Yusuf is reacting to the traditional characterisation of his music as 'Arab' or 'Islamic'. He has accordingly altered his lyrical content, shying away from overt Islamic discourse, as well as moving toward an exploration of universal themes around human rights, the nature of worldly existence, and individual spiritual experience. These musicians will also often engage with political issues, particularly relating to geopolitics and a broadly anti-imperialist agenda. Such themes are typical of music that would be included in this genre, right across the gamut of musical styles from hip hop through to pop music.

Despite variant musical styles, all of these musicians are largely comparable in their attempt to produce music that is inclusive beyond the traditional borders of religious belonging. They furthermore tend to reject any form of labelling that would place them squarely and exclusively into an Islamic or Muslim genre, as the hip hop musician Ayman explained:

> We're just making music and we happen to be Muslim as well, we don't put ourselves in that bracket where we're Islamic rappers or Muslim artists and rappers. Others may want to do otherwise, but we've never approached it that way, we've never really approached it that way. So, if I'm speaking to, you know, if there's an interview with a Muslim radio station or Muslim magazine and they mention it, then I'll talk about it, you know, but we don't use it as a selling point. It's just, these are our beliefs, it influences what we do but we don't tend, we try not to focus on it, even though if you want to hear our stuff, you will get the impression that we are Muslim, you'd realize that we are Muslim but… we don't go out of our way to promote it (Ayman, 33, October 2011, London)

While Ayman joins numerous other musicians in rejecting a religiously defined label, he nonetheless stresses that his Islamic worldview naturally and visibly emerges through his music. This echoes comments made by other musicians who maintain a similarly cautious approach toward wearing their Muslim identity on their 'musical sleeve'. This

includes the guitarist and folk rock musician, Faraz, from Silk Road, who argues that his sense of being is central to his music:

> Islam just enthuses the way that we are and we live. We don't need to spell it out all the time, because it just oozes out in how you do stuff and how you see things... (Faraz, 34, October 2011, Birmingham)

Faraz and Ayman – whilst practicing music in very different ways – are both adamant that their Muslim background provides a rich array of personal and ethical experiences that they are able to draw upon for their music. They believe they have something significant to say and they want as many people as possible to listen.

I believe that this stress on individuality and a unique Muslim perspective is advanced further by facets of intra-Muslim difference. Individual musicians argue that they organically bring their own unique backgrounds, identities and ideas to bear on their music. In doing so it is hoped that they can make sense of their own particular place in the world and simultaneously provide a cultural outlet for other people with common experiences. Individual musicians have commented on a number of personal attributes – ranging from race and ethnicity through to gender and class – that they believe have value and should be asserted in the public sphere. The hip hop musician, Muneera, from Poetic Pilgrimage, argues that this is especially true for Muslim women, who are often excluded or misrepresented in the public sphere:

> It's essential for the voice of women to exist, you know, and we may not always reflect Islamic themes, but us being Muslim, it is a Muslim perspective, we're talking about love. When I'm talking about what I'm looking for in a husband, we're still reflecting that from a Muslim perspective, you know. (Muneera, 29, February 2011, Cardiff)

Islamically-conscious music, then, is not overtly marked by Islamic concepts or by issues typically framed as 'Muslim'. Such music might instead cover a range of themes. Yet all of these musicians would argue that Islam is the central filter through which all their experiences and ideas are channelled – it both defines and guides them as creative and artistic individuals.

At root, the defining concepts that mark Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music out as different from one another are *community* and *individuality*. Islamic music is inseparably linked to a specific religious tradition – it attempts to reinforce Muslim

practice, values and belonging through direct engagement with central Islamic discourses. In contrast, Islamically-conscious music is about self-expression and individuality – it places an emphasis on reaching out to touch 'the other', rather than laying down the tracks of community. Both streams of music are relevant and valuable, demonstrating the ways through which music can serve different needs. Yet this musical bifurcation furthermore points toward the complex attitude that Muslims in Britain have adopted towards wider society. There is a simultaneous and not necessarily paradoxical desire to reinforce Muslim communal identity, but also to bring Islamic beliefs to play within wider social and cultural conversations.

While I believe this discussion is interesting on a conceptual level, there are indeed material consequences resulting from the choices that musicians make with regard to the content and orientation of their music. In short, musicians must be somewhat canny when attempting to assess where their music will find an audience and a viable market. The label that they attach to their music – and the public image that they gradually build – can determine exactly who will be willing to listen to (and buy) their music. The hip hop musician Quest Rah (see p.70-71) – a young and articulate Londoner, with filial roots in Egypt – has taken advantage of the security of a Muslim fanbase but also more recently tried to build a reputation within the wider hip hop scene in London:

> It's about what experiences you're coming from and what inspires you. If people want to label it, then that's up to them. There was more of a "Muslim hip hop" scene at the time than there is now, so we were more comfortable with the label. But for the last couple of years, and how I feel now, it's more of a universal thing, I've always had a more balanced and universal approach to music. And I feel there's enough common principles within Islam that won't isolate people too. (Quest Rah, 25, October 2011, London)

Quest Rah originally made a name for himself as a semi-professional musician by performing specifically at Muslim events, billing himself as a Muslim rapper in a Muslim hip hop scene. There were opportunities provided to him here that might not have been available if he had not been a Muslim musician. Nonetheless, his desire now is to reach out to a wider audience – an act that provides both challenges and possibilities, as well as a necessary consideration of exactly who will be sympathetic toward his particular approach.

Consumer Culture and Music

While the style, content and categorisation of Muslim music are important on a conceptual level, there are also more tangible concerns relating to the nature of a Muslim music market. In this section, I examine whether or not a distinct Muslim music market exists. For while Muslim music is in some respects a distinct cultural product, it nonetheless has a strong association with other spheres of Muslim consumer culture – particularly Islamised forms of branding and consumption that are often known as the 'halal market'.

The 'global halal market' has been valued at US$150 billion (Fischer, 2008) and plays an increasingly important role in providing 'Islamic' products and services for Muslim consumers around the world (Echchaibi, 2012). Music is undoubtedly central to this developing consumer culture – yet what makes it 'Islamic'? What makes *any* type of consumer or cultural product 'Islamic'? Certain styles of fashion might be considered 'Islamic' – with style and religious observance integrated through specific sartorial arrangements (Tarlo, 2010) – as might hajj travel packages (McLoughlin, 2009), Muslim smart-phone apps (Bunt, 2010), or the 'Islamic Barbie' (Yaqin, 2007). But then there are consumer products and forms of culture that have few, if any, implications for Islamic practice. Mecca Cola is often represented as an anti-imperialist Muslim consumer product, subverting the traditional dominance of that ubiquitous American brand, Coca Cola (Knudsen *et al*, 2008). Does Mecca Cola therefore possess any unique qualities that mark it out as 'Islamic' – or does it become Islamic because it targets a specifically Muslim consumer market through clever branding? In the hard-edged world of global marketing, the answer might simply be that the identity of a cultural product is reflected back by the very market that breathes life into it.

Of central importance to the argument advanced here, then, is the suggestion that Muslim music is an integral part of a wider Muslim consumer market in Britain, Europe and the wider Muslim world. Growing beyond the simple provision of halal food, Islamic religious artefacts and other functional services, this consumer market is also increasingly about lifestyle and the reworking of mainstream Western products and practices. Thus, the Muslim consumer market becomes as much an original consumer *culture* as it is a mechanism for the provision of religious products. Little research has yet been done to

examine this Islamic consumer culture – it is largely new and emergent in any case – but it is worth quoting at length an insightful summary by Echchaibi:

> The stunning growth of the global halal industry… has been accelerated by a wave of religious fervour among a social class of young, educated, and affluent Muslims who, according to the organizers of the World Halal Forum, wish to embrace an 'Islamic contemporary and global lifestyle'. It is still unclear what this Islamic lifestyle is, but a new market of consumer products, advertising, and commercial media programming is increasingly labeled "Islamic" and slowly contributes to the rise of an alternative culture industry. Like all forms of consumption, such an elaborate Islamic consumer culture has deep implications for identity construction and constitutes a prime stage for the production and reproduction of what it means to be a modern Muslim in the twenty-first century. (Echchaibi, 2012: 31-32)

As Echchaibi points out, the rise of an Islamic consumer culture is driven by affluence and shaped by class. When identity is constructed through material culture, I believe it is those with access to the means of production and consumption that are ultimately in a position significantly to shape its development. So while an Islamic consumer culture might be increasingly important for young Muslims in Britain and elsewhere, the social and economic framework that enables its development must also be acknowledged. Yet of foremost interest to my arguments here is the nature of Muslim consumer culture and the connection it has to music.

I am arguing that there are two forms of Muslim consumption in Britain – the practical and the symbolic. The former has already been outlined to some extent: practical consumption relates to specific services and products that are required by Muslims for religious observance. This includes, for instance, halal food, prayer mats, beads and books, but also financial services, Muslim marriage websites, non-alcohol-based perfume and hajj travel packages. Such consumption is essentially about religious practice in some form – from direct religious activity and worship through to the necessary observance of religious strictures. These services and products are largely distributed through Muslim business networks that have gradually developed in order to meet the specific religious needs of Muslims. Such networks include Islamic bookshops, health stores, supermarkets, butchers and clothes shops, but also a growing online presence where all-purpose purveyors of Islamic products can be found, such as the aptly named

www.islamicproducts.co.uk. These distributors essentially offer something specific that cannot be purchased outside of discrete Muslim business networks.

Islamic music, then, can realistically be theorised as a form of *practical* consumption. As I argued earlier, Islamic music is aimed specifically at Muslims, as a religious group, and it should be considered a form of paraliturgical worship. This is reflected in the distribution of such music. Islamic music is regularly sold through business networks that, in contrast, entirely reject Islamically-conscious music. This is partly due to the tendency for Islamic music to restrict the use of instrumentation – a controversial issue in the Muslim mainstream – but it also represents the fact that Islamic music sits comfortably alongside recordings of Quranic cantillation and audio lectures. Islamic music essentially serves a similar purpose for many: to facilitate and enhance Muslim religious practice. Walking into most Islamic bookshops around Britain, for example, one might find a selection of nasheeds and other forms of Islamic music arrayed between recordings of Quranic cantillation and books on Muslim lifestyle and Islamic philosophy.

Access to these networks of distribution can be essential for musicians to reach an audience that might otherwise be unreachable. The nasheed artist, Amran, remarked that producing an album without any instrumentation at all – just the human voice – immediately opened up a whole distribution network that was originally closed to his group, Aashiq al-Rasul:

> There are many Muslim shops or outlets that would not stock our songs, particularly those with musical accompaniment. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

This particular mode of distribution – through specific sellers of general 'Islamic' products and services – serves to reinforce the status and specificity of Islamic music as a form of practical Muslim consumption. These business/religious networks exercise great power in determining to stock and therefore distribute only select and 'appropriate' products – everything else is subtly castigated outside of the Muslim mainstream and correct Islamic practice.

Symbolic consumption differs to practical consumption in the sense that symbolic products and services do not provide a specific religious function, but they are nonetheless still branded as 'Muslim' or 'Islamic'. I am claiming that symbolic

consumption is about lifestyle and identity – not necessarily about functionality. A prime example of this might be 'Eid party plates' (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Eid party plates
(Source: Muslimstickers.com)

There is no practical reason – based on culture or religion – why ordinary plates cannot be used for Eid celebrations. The use of such plates instead signifies a declaration of Muslim identity and belonging through material and consumer culture. This is an interesting but rather banal example, but symbolic consumption is capable of additionally incorporating the socially-charged subversion of mainstream branding and consumer culture. This is often done to critique the failings of wider society, but also as a means to inject Islamic ethics and ideologies into alternative cultural forms. Thus, 'Islamic Barbie' (Yaqin, 2007) becomes the symbolic subversion of popularised sexuality, while Mecca Cola (Knudsen *et al*, 2008) becomes the rejection of American hyper-capitalism. Through such products there is the gradual development of an alternative Islamic consumer lifestyle: a movement that advances substantive ethical and religious ideologies through symbolic and material culture. It is a cultural trend that essentially seeks to stand in contrast to the failings of mainstream consumer culture – it is a form of ethical consumer culture.

While Muslim music is never purely symbolic – it always contains substantive arguments and themes – it is nonetheless part of this alternative Islamic consumer lifestyle. Islamically-conscious music, in particular, is a means through which Muslims utilise music to challenge the perceived failings of popular culture. Thus, hip hop becomes the ideal vehicle to critique Western over-consumption, aggressive sexuality, and social malaise. It can do this with particular effect through hip hop, specifically *because* mainstream hip hop so very often represents these specific failings – consider the hip hop stereotypes concerning sex, drugs and violence. As the British-Mozambican rapper, Mohammed Yahya, explained to me – as we sat eating *pastéis de nata* (egg custard tarts) and sipping coffee in a Portuguese cafe along Hounslow high street – hip hop moved from being a vehicle for moral and intellectual debate to becoming a commodity for corporate profit:

> When hip hop started, there wasn't much money involved in it. It was a reflection of the daily experiences of the people that's why they called it the CNN of the ghetto, or the black ghetto… they didn't really have a voice or someone that could speak out for them and represent them. So hip hop became that. But the music industry started changing, more money was pumped into it, and record label requests started growing too. So yeah, it became a business and with every business there are requirements. So unfortunately TV stations like MTV always promote, or give more exposure, to commercial hip hop artists whose labels have large budgets to pay to get on TV and unfortunately whose message is critically watered down. (Mohammed, 29, February 2011, London)

Mohammed and other Muslim hip hop artists believe passionately in their contribution to the 'underground' scene in Britain – that is, a subcultural hip hop network, promoting 'conscious' lyrics and challenging the injustices of the world. This is a return to the perceived authenticity of the original and 'uncorrupted' hip hop culture of the 1980s and 90s, but it is also a symbolic inversion of the contemporary commercialisation of hip hop. Muslim musicians – across a range of styles and genres – are scathing in their condemnation of 'sell-out' musicians at the pinnacle of the mainstream music industry. By practicing music on a foundation of spirituality and ethical integrity, Muslim musicians argue that they can play a part in gradually altering attitudes toward the excessive lifestyles that are so glorified in contemporary culture. Music therefore becomes an integral part of this alternative consumer lifestyle.

I think it would be helpful at this stage to look at two specific examples of Islamic consumer culture. Through these examples I will demonstrate the interesting connection that musicians and music can have to this alternative lifestyle. Food is a prime example. The so-called 'halal market' itself essentially originates from the desire to produce, provide and consume halal food. This has developed, however, from the simple establishment of local halal butchers, to medium-sized companies that distribute branded halal food products across the UK. Ummah Foods, for instance, manufactures a range of gloriously packaged chocolate bars known as 'Ummah Chocolate' (see Figure 6.2) – a food range that is increasingly being stocked by major supermarket chains across the country. While musicians seemingly have no commercial link to these food companies, they nonetheless encourage their fans to lead healthier and halal lifestyles. Branded halal food products can be found stocked and advertised at the events where musicians perform. Furthermore, musicians frequently use the internet and social media to promote nutritional and balanced diets, largely through the advocation, for example, of juicers, home cooking, and particular types of health food. It also involves the inverse critique of 'junk food' and the associated lifestyle that is perceived to accompany it – inner-spiritual wellbeing is often invoked as a reward for a balanced and halal diet.

Figure 6.2: Ummah Chocolate
(Source: Ummah Foods)

Another example of the connection between Islamic consumerism and music is the burgeoning Muslim clothes industry. Islamic fashion in the UK has been well documented by Emma Tarlo (2010), but nothing has been done to analyse the sartorial

arrangements of Muslim musicians in Britain. While I cannot pursue this analysis here in any depth due to space considerations, it should certainly be mentioned that musicians adopt a range of fashions – from the smart suits or casual jeans/t-shirts of contemporary nasheed artists, through to the afro-inspired clothing of some Black female musicians, to the 'street wear' of Muslim hip hop musicians. While it is not uncommon for a male nasheed artist to dress in a *jubba* (South Asian robe) when on stage, modest, contemporary and fashionable clothing is usually an important part of the image that musicians seek to project.

One Muslim musician – Ayman Raze (see Figure 6.3), from the hip hop group The Planets – even designs his own range of clothing under the organisational name of Tawheed Is Unity – an organisation dedicated to Muslim development and expression through the arts.

Figure 6.3: Ayman Raze
(Source: Ayman Raze)

The name 'Tawheed Is Unity' has been derived to evoke the solidarity of Muslims through the belief in one God – although the founder, Ayman, argues that this concept of unity can and should embrace non-Muslims as well. The motivations behind this clothing range are outlined on the Tawheed Is Unity website:

> Tawheed Is Unity began in 2006 as the brain child of Ayman Raze as an alternative clothing line for Muslims living in the West. Being involved with

Hip Hop since the mid 90's, Ayman recognised the fact that young Muslims are steadily developing their own culture distinct from that of their parents and traditions. Being aware of the fact that whether you listen to Hip Hop or not, this is the Hip Hop generation and fashion is a key emphasis of the sub-culture. Ayman set about developing designs that would both represent Islam and the society and culture we are in. (Tawheed is Unity website)[37]

The clothing range consists of a selection of 'sweatshop free' t-shirts emblazoned with particular designs – several of which have the Arabic slogan '*Al Maarifah Quwah*' [trans. 'Knowledge Is Power'] across the front. A recent addition to the clothing range involves an inversion of the famous 'Just Do It' slogan by the American company Nike – a company notorious for its use of cheap factory labour. This t-shirt (see Figure 6.4) displays the words 'Just Dua It', utilising the Islamic concept of supplication as a means to critique a notorious symbol of excessive Western capitalism.

Figure 6.4: A t-shirt design from the Tawheed is Unity clothing range
(Source: Tawheed is Unity)

Musicians, then, are part of a wider cultural movement that is more than just an attempt to provide functional Muslim products, services and cultural forms – it is nothing less than an attempt to create a consumer culture underpinned by deep moral and religious values. The utopian nature of this culture might be questioned – and I think there should certainly be an interrogation of the extent to which Islamic branding might merely be a clever marketing tool – but there certainly seems to be a desire to break with certain late-modern notions of capitalism. Of course, the extent to which any musician can live up to these ideals should be questioned. It is immediately apparent, for instance,

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[37] http://tawheedisunity.com/about/ [accessed 22.08.12]

that traditional forms of capitalism – including ticket sales, promotional strategies and business structures – remain important characteristics of the Muslim music scene.

I will discuss the business model for Muslim music in the next section. However, as further evidence for the extent to which an alternative consumer culture is pursued, it is useful at this stage to highlight the important connection between Islamic charities and Muslim musicians. I argue that this vital link is indicative of the alternative worldview that structures Muslim cultural production and consumption in Britain.

Perhaps because of the Islamic belief relating to *zakat* (charitable giving) – and perhaps because of the ways through which modern charities are structured in the UK – a number of Islamic charities have become significant institutions in Britain. These charities include the likes of Muslim Hands, Ulfa Aid, Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief. While Islamic charities have unfortunately often been perceived through the lens of terrorism and geopolitics (Alterman and von Hippel, 2007), UK-based Islamic charities have been successful, with Islamic Relief moving from its modest Birmingham beginnings, in 1984, to become a large organisation with field offices worldwide and a sharp, policy-savvy agenda. With reference to Islamic Relief, Masood has claimed that '[w]hat we are witnessing is possibly the world's first international NGO with origins in Islam' (Masood, 2005). Crucially, Islamic charities recognise the value of engaging in the type of public relations campaigns that generally characterise sizeable organisations in Britain today – campaigns that involve visual and emotive advertising, branding, and the deployment of cultural tropes and narratives.

Consequently, in order to raise both their profile and vital funding, Islamic charities have become a familiar presence in the British Muslim social and cultural milieu. Most Muslim events in Britain are prominently partnered with one or more Islamic charities – raising money for charitable causes actually often becomes the seeming *raison d'être* for such events. The Global Peace and Unity event at London's Excel Centre is a case in point. In 2010, the arena was packed full of stalls for Islamic charities – signing people up and providing information about their overseas work – while streams of volunteers milled around the centre, collecting donations and entreating people to read glossy leaflets. The entertainment on the main stage during the evening was furthermore punctuated by the lively presenter, who introduced the musicians and performers,

discussed the work of various charities, encouraged people to publicly donate large sums of money, and monitored a running tally of total donations for the evening. It is within this context that popular Muslim musicians most frequently perform, as the British-Palestinian rapper and activist, 'Umar [not his real name], explained to me:

> A lot of people do awareness conferences and everything like that… because I'm singing for [the Palestinian] cause, they'd bring me in as entertainment for the night… humanitarian events, charity events and charity dinners, things like that. ('Umar, 18, November 2011, London)

For 'Umar and every other Muslim musician that I spent time with, it is clear that entertainment and music for the sake of profit is almost entirely dismissed – performance instead becomes a tangible act of social justice and religious/political obligation.

The relationship between charities and musicians, however, goes beyond just the context within which they perform. In 2011, Muneera Williams – one half of Poetic Pilgrimage – founded the Fatima Tubman Foundation (FTF). Critical of the overseas focus characterising much of the work done by Islamic charities, FTF is focussed on helping the homeless in London. In August 2011, FTF worked with the Peace Network and Tawheed Is Unity to initiate a project called 'Feeding Folk'. A whole range of volunteers, including Poetic Pilgrimage and the hip hop musicians Quest Rah and Ayman Raze, took to the streets of London to distribute food and also document via film the problem of homelessness in London. As Muneera explained in the short video that resulted from this project:

> We're living in London, and in 2012 we're gonna have the Olympic Games, and people coming to England for the first time will think, oh wow there's no homeless people here. But there are homeless people here, but they just kind of get washed away, it's like we don't see them, so they don't exist to us. (Muneera Williams, Fatima Tubman Foundation video)[38]

Through this project and the resulting promotional video, these musicians have turned the focus of Muslim voluntarism away from frequent international efforts to aid people in places like Kashmir or Palestine, to the raising of awareness for the plight of homeless Muslims (and non-Muslims) in Britain today.

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[38] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm--He5cHdI&feature=player_embedded [accessed 24.08.11]

This is not an isolated example. A clear majority of musicians are directly involved with voluntary work in some capacity. This includes one musician who works as a senior manager for a major Islamic charity based in the UK. There are also other instances of musicians playing an important role in founding charitable organisations – including one charity based in the north of England, The Reach Out Network, that helps young Muslims leaving prison, and another, the Amirah Foundation, that works with the victims of domestic abuse. Indeed, Muslim cultural production and consumption is not linked to voluntarism and Islamic charities by shear coincidence – the same motivational and religious wellspring appears to guide each of these individuals.

The model for Muslim consumer culture and cultural production in Britain, then, is fundamentally bound together with assumptions of morality and religiosity. Whether through an ethical and largely symbolic consumer culture – or through a radically different model of cultural production – it is possible to acknowledge an alternative Islamic lifestyle that eschews shallow materialism and entertainment without higher purpose. As Echchaibi points out, this cultural movement critically uses the 'toolbox of modernity' to subvert and reconstruct 'a "true" modern identity' (Echchaibi, 2012: 38). In this context, at least, I am claiming that Muslim musicians are part of a movement to transform the hyper-capitalist culture of contemporary Britain into a form of consumerism that is supported by deep ethical foundations.

Production Frameworks and Distribution

Having considered Muslim music as both a distinct genre and a form of alternative consumer culture, I will now turn to the income generating and professional model that underpins Muslim music. This will necessarily involve a further consideration of consumption, though I will attempt to place my arguments within the context of sales and listening habits (i.e., rather than the *culture* of consumerism considered in the previous section). My aim in this section is to provide some context concerning the economies of a Muslim music market. In doing so I hope to shine a light onto the means through which Muslim musicians manage to support themselves financially, but also to begin the work of mapping the Muslim business structures that very clearly support some areas of this cultural scene. The wider economic context of Muslim music was unfortunately only a

small aspect of the fieldwork that I was able to conduct – largely because I had limited access to the Muslim music companies that have recently been founded in Britain. An in-depth examination of this business framework remains a future and extensive task.

Professional and semi-professional Muslim musicians rarely operate outside of some kind of organised business framework. While grassroots musicians might often be able to practice their music in an *ad hoc* fashion, professional and semi-professional musicians tend to be more ambitious in the promotion and distribution of their music. This often involves – to a greater or lesser extent – managers, technical recording sessions, producers and distribution companies. The decision that most Muslim musicians must take at some stage is whether or not to channel their professional career through an emerging Muslim cultural economy, or whether to utilise the independent, genre-specific business networks that are already in place. It appears that most Muslim musicians choose the former option. While mainstream and smaller independent record companies are of course theoretically available as one route for Muslim musicians, they often choose instead to release their music through companies that operate in an Islamically appropriate manner. Either that, or they simply produce and release their music themselves, selling their CDs at events and through the internet. Taking a sample of sixteen different musicians and/or groups, it is possible to examine the production company that they used to record and produce their album (see Table 6.1 overleaf).

Five of the musicians/groups in this sample have not utilised a production company to release their album. They have recorded, produced and partially sold their albums themselves. The other six musicians/groups in this sample have used 'Islamic production companies'. The six companies listed were all established to facilitate the production and distribution of Muslim music. Four of these companies can broadly be described as supporting 'nasheed artists', whilst the other two (Crescent Moon Media and Tawheed is Unity) have been established by musicians specifically to help provide a platform for 'Muslim hip hop' musicians in the UK. These companies all have an Islamic ethos of some kind and they regulate their activities accordingly. This might include a restriction concerning the use of instrumentation or the management of lyrical content. These companies are more often marked by a simple desire to support music that expresses an Islamic worldview. Several of these companies additionally release audio lectures by

Muslim *'ulama* and other figures of religious note – further proof, perhaps, that Muslim music is often perceived as belonging to an arc of religious pedagogy, rather than as a more straightforward form of 'halal entertainment'.

Production Company	Total Musicians/Groups
Awakening Records[39]	4
Meem Music[40]	3
Mountain of Light Productions[41]	1
Safar Media[42]	1
Crescent Moon Media[43]	1
Tawheed is Unity[44]	1
None	5

Table 6.1: Muslim musicians broken down by production company

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[39] http://www.awakening.org/records/ [accessed 21.11.12]. Awakening Records was established in 2000 to cater for an emerging Muslim music market in Britain. Originally based in Swansea, it now has an office in London and has since developed a significant international reach.

[40] http://www.meemmusic.com/ [accessed 21.11.12]. Meem music is a nasheed and spoken word music label founded in 2002. Originally based in London and the Midlands, it now also has offices in the United States and Canada, as well as an extensive international online presence.

[41] http://www.mountainoflight.com/ [accessed 21.11.12]. Mountain of Light Records emerged in the late-nineties following Yusuf Islam building his own studio. It is responsible for releasing music by Yusuf Islam and other artists within his artistic ambit. It also acts as an organisational platform for Yusuf Islam's charitable activities.

[42] http://www.nasheedchannel.com/ [accessed 21.11.12]. Founded in 2005, Safar Media is a London-based recording company that was established to support local nasheed artists. It has since expanded to attract a range of artists. It is notable for only dealing with non-instrumental recordings.

[43] http://www.myspace.com/crescentmoonmusic [accessed 21.11.12]. Crescent Moon Media was established in London in 2008 to support Muslim hip hop musicians. It provided recording expertise, as well as playing an active role in organising live performances across London – this included attempting to the finance visiting hip hop musicians from the United States. Crescent Moon Media struggled to sustain itself and eventually closed down in 2010.

[44] http://tawheedisunity.com/ [accessed 21.11.12]. Tawheed is Unity was formed in 2006 as a Muslim lifestyle brand (see p.147-148). It has largely focussed on clothing and graphic design, but it also provides a brand name for the hip hop recordings of the founder, Ayman Raze.

All of these different Islamic production companies vary in the support that they are able to offer to musicians. Awakening Records is the most significant and successful Islamic production company, both in Britain and across the wider world. Indeed, Awakening Records has taken Muslim music to an entirely new corporate level. Boasting an estimated 500 million customers worldwide, Awakening Records supports some of the most successful (and lucrative) Muslim musicians – including Maher Zain, Hamza Robertson and Mesut Kurtis[45]. Sami Yusuf himself began his career with Awakening Records, releasing his first two albums with the company before an undocumented dispute drove him elsewhere. It is important to note that all of the musicians associated with Awakening Records have extensive international appeal, suggesting that the UK Muslim market alone is not significant enough for musicians to achieve huge levels of success.

In terms of the support provided, Awakening Records engages in active media promotion, the organisation of events worldwide, as well the production of both music recordings and associated videos. The individual level of support provided to the musicians beneath the corporate shield of Awakening is unclear, though it apparently includes regular financial support for selected musicians. There is no doubt that such musicians must have extensive international appeal for such an arrangement to be financially viable. For this reason Awakening Records is entirely focused on the contemporary pop/nasheed style of music that has become so successful in Muslim markets across the globe.

As well as a seeming growth in Muslim production companies, it is also possible to note the tentative emergence of Muslim recording studios. Muslim musicians have in the past simply used any recording studio that can provide the technical support needed. Yet it is increasingly possible to find recording studios that overtly pitch for an 'Islamic market' (see Figure 6.5 overleaf).

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[45] http://www.awakeningworldwide.com/ [accessed 07.03.11]

Figure 6.5: An advertisement for a recording studio in Birmingham
(Source: Audio Dawah)

It is not entirely clear how an Islamic recording studio might offer a different service to a 'non-Islamic recording studio'. Yet the very emergence of these studios does serve to demonstrate two important points. First, there is clearly a growing technical and professional pool of expertise amongst Muslims in Britain, along with the business and financial resources that are required to sustain them on a commercial footing. Second, the demand for these services perhaps does something to indicate the interest in utilising audio recordings as a form of *da'wah* (religious invitation) by Muslims in Britain. I have already referred to an 'arc of religious pedagogy' and in a previous chapter I noted the seeming lack of Islam in the sonic environment of Britain (see Chapter 2, p.36). Yet the interest that some Muslims demonstrate in expressing Islam through sound might potentially result in the audible Islamisation of Britain and the consequent growth of an

Islamic music/audio market. Through its mission statement, the production company Crescent Moon Media vividly illustrates the desire that some Muslims have to use sound as a form of *da'wah*:

> Crescent Moon Music is a company that was set up to show the beautiful side of Islam. All of the artists are talented musicians but are also Muslims. They enjoy talking about the deen and believe that the arts is probably the most powerful way to talk to the youth. The main aim of the company is to bring good music to the listener. The company also wants to give dawah to non-Muslims and to show them that not all Muslims are terrorists.[46]

While it is perhaps unlikely that the cassette culture of Egypt and other Muslim majority countries will be replicated in Britain (Hirschkind, 2006), one might speculate that Muslims in Britain could potentially be at the forefront of English-language recordings relating to Islamic teachings and beliefs – from nasheeds and hip hop through to audio lectures, Islamic adverts and audio books. A cassette culture might indeed be something that has now been consigned to the technological past of Britain, but an emerging English-language Islamic audio culture on the internet is certainly within the bounds of speculation.

Yet it is perhaps because of the internet that Muslim musicians have ultimately encountered a challenging economic context. Indeed, one of the primary concerns raised by Muslim musicians is the difficulty that they have in supporting themselves *as musicians*. The overwhelming majority of musicians find it extremely challenging to make money from their music – internet downloading is often blamed for this difficulty. Exceptions can of course be found, but most musicians have a slightly romanticised view of themselves as 'struggling artists'. Yusuf Islam and Sami Yusuf might have little difficulty in selling their music on a relatively large scale, but Muslim musicians cannot typically rely on generating significant streams of income as a professional musician. It is because of this financial context that almost every Muslim musician in Britain – with the exception of global superstars such as Sami Yusuf and Yusuf Islam – has a 'day job'. This includes musicians who work as teachers, youth and community workers, students, charity fundraisers, bankers and managers. Muslim musicians are essentially a cohort of

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[46] http://www.myspace.com/crescentmoonmusic [accessed 21.11.12]

successful professionals who use the remainder of their time and energy to write, record and perform their music.

In asking why this might be the case it is necessary to consider exactly how Muslims in Britain access such music. The extent to which Muslim music fans are willing to pay for a recording, or for entry to a concert, determines the overall professional character and viability of Muslim music as a self-supporting cultural and economic venture.

The survey that I conducted for this research provides an interesting insight into exactly how British Muslims access Muslim music. As I have already pointed out in previous chapters, it is necessary to account for inbuilt bias within the survey itself. In particular, this includes the distortion that is almost certainly caused by distributing the survey through the internet. Furthermore, it targets individuals who have directly expressed an interest in music – the wider Muslim population may itself express slightly different opinions. However, the concerns generated by this fundamental methodological reservation will be allayed shortly through the consideration of additional data that will support the indicative nature of the survey. Meanwhile, Table 6.2 details the truncated results from question 15. While the complete results from the survey can be found in Appendix Two, there is instead here a narrowed focus on those who have responded positively to the suggestion that they use a particular method to access Muslim music (i.e., I compiled the responses for those who have marked 3, 4 or 5, on a scale of 0-5, when ranking the importance of a particular method of listening).

*Select the following statement as appropriate:**	*Total responses*	*% of Total*
Through the internet	57	80.3
Through another media source (radio, television, etc)	47	65.2
Through recordings bought in a shop	28	41.2
Borrowing or copying recordings from a friend	26	37.1
Live music or singing	38	54.3

Table 6.2: Music consumption by Muslim fans (see survey in Appendix Two).
* These results collate the responses 3, 4 & 5 on the scale 0-5.

The most striking figure relates to the internet: 80.3% of respondents state that the internet is important or very important (i.e., 3-5) as a method of access to music. This figure is in striking contrast to the practice of buying recordings in a shop. Only 41.2% of respondents believe that buying a recording from a shop is important or very important, while 30.9% of respondents have actually marked '0' (see Appendix Two), indicating that they *never* buy recordings from a shop (compared to 9.9% who have marked '0' for the internet). This is comparable with the broader situation facing the UK music industry, where there has been a notorious turn away from music retail outlets to online shopping, illegal downloading and freely distributed music on the internet. As Kusek and Leonhard (2005) presciently argued, music has gone from largely being a purchasable physical product – such as vinyl, tapes and CDs – to cultural information that is accessed through new media technology (often at no cost). In this new and evolving environment, it has been suggested that musicians and the associated music industry must turn away from music sales as traditionally conceived, focusing instead on live performance, merchandise and sponsorship/advertisement (Kusek and Leonhard, 2005).

This claim provides some insight into the nature of the Muslim music market in Britain. Indeed, a question is raised concerning the extent to which Muslim musicians must also pursue this economic model of cultural production. Interestingly, respondents to the survey were generally positive about live performance, with 54.3% marking live performance as important or very important (i.e., a 3, 4 or 5). This can additionally be looked at alongside question 17 in the survey, which asked about attendance at live performance events (see Appendix Two). Responding to this question, 32.5% of respondents stated that they had seen a live performance within the last month. While this tells us nothing about the actual performance that they might have attended – it could have been anything from a nasheed recital in their local mosque to an open-mic hip hop night at a London club – it does suggest that a sizeable number of Muslim music fans are often attending *some kind* of a performance. Finally, Table 6.2 also shows that, for 65.2% of respondents, a media source other than the internet (such as radio or television), is important as a method of listening to music.

In summary, then, I believe the survey suggests that Muslim music fans are primarily listening to music through the internet and other media sources – most likely at little or

no cost. They are far less likely to actually buy music from a shop, but they do attend live performances of music – presumably this includes a willingness (at least occasionally) to pay in order to attend a performance. The survey has specifically targeted music fans and this has almost certainly produced a set of responses that emphasise music as an important cultural resource. It might then be argued that Muslims in Britain – taken as a whole – are actually less inclined to part with money than self-declared music fans: so less willing to buy music or attend costly performances, and therefore more likely to use free media to access music (including the internet and the radio) or simply not bothering to listen to music at all.

The survey is one strand of data that should be viewed with extreme caution. Yet it does support additional ethnographic research that I conducted to reach similar conclusions. In particular, it was clear to me throughout the research that the internet has emerged to become a dominant technological medium for Muslim musicians – with both negative and positive consequences. Indeed, the internet almost certainly undermines the actual sale of music. Amran – a successful and long-standing nasheed performer, with experiences of the music market that reach back into the 1990s – has argued that it is increasingly difficult to sell music because of illegal downloading:

> The ability to download music from sites such as YouTube, file sharing, etc, have not only had a negative impact on Western music sales, it's affected our music as well. We headlined an event at Trafalgar Square, where there were twenty five to thirty thousand people in the audience and everyone is singing our songs. We sang five or six songs and they're familiar with all of them. They must have listened to them from somewhere… but this doesn't reflect in sales, so most probably it's illegal downloading or sharing. This is generic amongst the music industry, it's crippling artists, and so investors in music are looking for alternatives, and different ways to survive. (Amran, 34, October 2010, Birmingham)

Amran is echoing a concern that many Muslim musicians have in relation to selling their music. They recognise that the internet has unavoidably taken CD sales away from them and fundamentally undermined their ability to make a full-time living out of being a musician. Yet musicians also acknowledge that the internet is extremely important as a tool to raise their profile, connect with fans, and sustain the kind of musical and cultural scene that is required to generate an interest in their music. Several musicians have remarked – particularly in relation to hip hop and other niche genres of music – that their

particular 'music scene' *only exists* on the internet. In a sense, then, the internet encourages a powerful amateur cultural movement – taking away the need for intermediary organisations and traditional forms of marketing or distribution – whilst simultaneously placing limits on the commercial viability of music. This is as true for Muslim cultural and economic spheres as it is for a changing mainstream music industry. The implications of the evolving online environment will be considered in the next chapter, though it is clear from this discussion that there are grave pecuniary consequences for musicians: they must continually find more innovative ways to support themselves.

Conclusion

As I have argued, there are two strands of Muslim music in Britain – Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music. Islamic music is rooted in the context of religious practice and community, while Islamically-conscious music attempts to transmit broader ethical and spiritual subjectivities to a more general audience. While the musicians engaged in these subtly different categories of music are therefore often characterised by a difference in approach, I have argued that they are connected through their engagement with a distinct Muslim economic framework in the UK. For some, working beneath the aegis of these spheres of Muslim economic activity is indicative of a desire to remain within the orbit of tightly-conceived Muslim peer groups. For others, the Muslim market – while valued and respected – perhaps more accurately provides a reliable foundation from where they are able to launch their music into wider and more diverse contexts.

Regardless of individual motive and orientation, it is evident that Muslim business networks and consumer markets provide crucial economic resources for Muslim musicians in Britain. From recording and technical support, to marketing and distribution, an increasing number of companies have been specifically created to meet the needs of Muslim musicians and to cater for the growing Muslim music market. Yet the future of this market appears mixed. Despite a niche (and loyal) group of Muslim music consumers in Britain, only those musicians with strong international appeal are able to develop full-time musical careers. This is further compounded through the challenge posed by the internet – the ambivalent nature of the internet erodes the pecuniary value of music, while

simultaneously enabling musicians to reach out to larger and more diverse audiences. As I have argued, this has resulted in Muslim music developing into something that more accurately resembles a powerful amateur movement.

It is perhaps partly because of this amateur tendency that musicians tend to be scathing of traditional forms of consumer culture and capitalism. By eschewing the 'shallow' materialism of wider consumerism, these musicians attempt to promote a consumer and cultural lifestyle that is characterised by a distinct ethical framework. It is an ethical framework that has emerged from their sense of religiosity and spirituality, but one that nonetheless chimes with broader concerns relating to anti-capitalism and social awareness. It is an attempt to challenge the corrosive impact of modernity, but it is also a form of resistance that adopts and transforms the very processes that it seeks to oppose. Musicians clearly utilise familiar modes of capitalism – relating to production and distribution – but nonetheless make an effort to shape these with an ethical framework that emphasises Islamic values over and above a narrow focus on commercial success. It is a fascinating cultural evolution that arguably moves in tandem with other 'progressive' political/cultural movements found in Britain and elsewhere.

7. Muslim Musicians and the Media: Finding a Voice

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Introduction

One of the most interesting issues to emerge throughout the fieldwork was the engagement of Muslim musicians with a discrete Muslim public sphere in Britain. Because I chose to build my thesis around the study of *popular* Muslim musicians, these individuals almost by definition are involved with various media discourses and networks – they are outwardly-facing cultural producers with a very specific stake in the dynamics of the public sphere. The saliency of this issue was always apparent: areas of particular concern include the role that musicians adopt as public interpreters, the access of female performers to the public sphere, the influence of Muslim media institutions, and the increasing dominance of the internet as a mode of social and cultural contact. These particular areas are of undoubted significance for the practice of music by Muslims in Britain.

    In the first section I outline my theoretical justification for referring to a 'Muslim public sphere' in Britain. Invoking both Anderson (2006 [1983]) and Appadurai (1996), I will argue that the Muslim public sphere is unstable and heterogeneous, but that it is increasingly being controlled by dominant Muslim media institutions in Britain (e.g., print media and television). I explore the evidence for this in the second section, examining the relationship that Muslim musicians have to this media-controlled public sphere. I claim that this relationship revolves around access and representation, with musicians often attempting to carve-out alternative public spaces beyond the dominance of mainstream Muslim media networks. In section three I will look specifically at the internet as the primary means through which Muslim musicians attempt to project and represent themselves beyond the restrictions of mainstream Muslim media networks. And finally, in section four, I will consider the specific experiences of female musicians and their varying decisions to challenge, negotiate with, or acquiesce to, religious and cultural proscriptions around performance.

The British Muslim Public Sphere

A widely held theory claims that modernity is fundamentally characterised by new and evolving forms of mass media (for example, see Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 1995). Arguably set in motion with the development of media institutions in the late-fifteenth century, modernity has been marked at every stage by the emergence of new technologies and modes of communication that radically shape the organisation of society and frameworks of knowledge – from the printing press and the novel, through to the internet and the 24-hour news cycle. While there have been various attempts to theorise the implications of our increasingly media-driven social structures and behaviours, a particularly convincing and influential stream of thought has originated with Benedict Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006 [1983]). This celebrated and evolving theory will form a central plank of my arguments within this chapter. I will therefore examine and interrogate it, before then extending and adapting it for application to the analysis of contemporary Muslim public spheres and media resources in the UK.

Anderson was primarily interested in the phenomena of nation states and the feelings of national solidarity and community that they manage to evoke. Anderson sought to answer the question as to why individuals who will never meet in person – and who in any case might be significantly different in numerous social and cultural respects – nonetheless conceive of themselves as belonging to the same national community. Anderson has a detailed answer to this question that encompasses the symbolic, linguistic and conceptual embedding of 'the nation' – from census and map making, to institutional vernacular, through to the entwined ideologies of racism and patriotism. Yet the central argument advanced by Anderson points toward the expansion of shared language and communication through print media capitalism in the sixteenth century. According to this theory, print-capitalism ignored unprofitable oral vernacular languages and sought instead to exploit the potential for a shared national language, inevitably laying the foundations for a distinct national consciousness. This argument brought Anderson directly to his oft-quoted conclusions regarding the nation as an 'imagined community':

> It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion… it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the inequality and exploitation that may

prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (Anderson, 2006 [1983]: 7)

Central to Anderson's theory is the notion of imagination – it is the imagined bonds of solidarity and shared experience that generate a sense of community. So while Anderson is specifically discussing nationalism, the stripped-down causal connection between imagination and the consciousness of an abstract community suggests that this thesis can be expanded beyond its original focus: the nation is just one type of imagined community and print media just another form of communication technology.

Arjun Appadurai develops these themes in an attempt to shed light on the nature of modernity and its connection to globalisation (Appadurai, 1996). He suggests that mass media and migration are crucially linked – there is a global churn of people, images and ideas that drive the imagination and create discrete, if interwoven, media audiences:

> …to put it summarily, electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination. Together, they create specific irregularities because both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation… the work of the imagination, viewed in this context, is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern. (Appadurai, 1996: 4)

Appadurai is moving beyond Anderson's singular focus on nationalism in order to claim that a comparable process of imagination can be found at work within discourses and groups beyond or across national boundaries. According to this argument, global media flows are necessarily entwined with transnational audiences – that which he terms 'diasporic public spheres':

> Diasporic public spheres, diverse among themselves, are the crucibles of a postnational political order. The engines of their discourse are mass media (both interactive and expressive) and the movement of refugees, activists, students, and laborers… The challenge for this emergent order will be whether such heterogeneity is consistent with some minimal conventions of norm and value, which do not require a strict adherence to the liberal social contract of the modern West. (Appadurai, 1996: 22-23)

Appadurai introduces not just a necessary focus on the currents of globalisation and the complexities of postnational public spheres, but furthermore stresses the role of contestation and the possibility of heterogeneity.

Appadurai extends and sharpens Anderson's theory in two primary ways. First, he takes the notion of 'imagination' and develops it within the context of late-modernity, arguing that social imaginations are continually shaped by the dynamics of an increasingly complex and media saturated global milieu. While Appadurai does not specifically dwell on the concept of 'imagined communities', the inference is nonetheless clear – imagined communities will continually bubble up within the hyper-mediated soup of late-modern globalisation. A second and connected point made by Appadurai challenges the slightly static and historical conception of nationalism offered by Anderson. In contrast to this view, Appadurai tantalisingly touches on the complexity of nationalism in the postnational global environment. He regularly deploys concepts such as 'deterritorialization' (Ibid: 49) and 'new ethnicities' (Ibid: 139), whilst identifying phenomena such as 'long-distance nationalism' and 'diasporic public spheres' (Ibid: 22). Appadurai is not attempting to erase nationalism as a relevant and contemporary concept – far from it – but he does demand that nationalism be simultaneously conceived alongside the cross-cutting discourses and movements of migration, global commoditization and mass mediation.

This theoretical framework neatly prepares the ground to argue the case for a 'British Muslim public sphere' – a concept, I think, that finds epistemological root in both Anderson's 'imagined community' and Appadurai's 'diasporic public sphere'.

I am arguing that the British Muslim public sphere is fundamentally *constituted* by Muslim media resources in the British context – ranging from television and print media, through to cultural production (music, film, novels etc), celebrity figures and high-profile public events. This complex and fertile convergence is marked with self-conscious and very real attempts to articulate notions of British Muslimness. Nationalism and religion – Britishness and Muslimness – become the loadstones of collective consciousness – of an imagined community. Yet the British Muslim public sphere is *shaped* by the intersecting flows, discourses and influences of ethnicity, religion, class, nationalism, globalisation and transnationalism – of diaspora. So while it bears the fundamental characteristics of a community conceived through the prism of national and religious collectivity, it nonetheless remains subject to the buffeting winds of globalisation and transnational

exchange. And it is within a distinct, coherent public sphere – constituted by developing forms of Muslim mass media – that these phenomena occur.

Pnina Werbner has tentatively developed the notion of an 'Islamic public sphere', but with something of a difference in emphasis (Werbner, 2004). Discussing British Asian cultural production, Werbner argues that British Pakistanis are often simultaneously engaged with two different diasporic public spheres:

> Whereas the Islamic discourse advocates an exclusive, highly conservative and strictly orthodox perspective, the new wave South Asian artistic products are thus by their very nature hybrid, impure and socially inclusive. Seen from the perspective of British Pakistanis, then, we can say that they actively participate in the creation not of one but of *two* diasporic public spheres – the British Islamic and the British South Asian – even though morally, politically and aesthetically the discourses dominating these arenas appear to be radically opposed. (Werbner, 2004: 898-899)

There are a number of difficulties with the argument advanced by Werbner. First, Islamic discourse in Britain is certainly not as conservative or rigidly defined as Werbner depicts. Indeed, it is extremely diverse and often integrates satirical, counterintuitive and even subversive strands of thought into new modes of cultural production. Second, it is problematic so sharply to distinguish between Islamic and South Asian realms of public and cultural activity. Different public spheres – marked by a variety of social networks and identities – are indeed theoretically cogent. Yet there is inevitably an overlapping and an intermingling that is instead suggestive of heterogeneity – something that furthermore raises the possibility of both conflict and hybridity.

Crucially, then, the British Muslim public sphere is unstable and never fully formed. Dominant discourses, groups and even individuals might exert a decisive influence in shaping exactly how this public arena takes shape. Yet external influences, minority voices and other destabilising factors will continually challenge exactly what it means to be Muslim in this ever-so complex era of globalisation and mass media. *The British Muslim public sphere is therefore a contested and constantly evolving space*. But what exactly is the 'British Muslim public sphere'? And what is the relationship between this realm of activity and Muslim musicians?

I am claiming that the British Muslim public sphere is primarily made up of various types of Muslim mass media, along with the individuals, cultural activities and

organisations that they encompass. Unfortunately, academic discussions of Muslim mass media in the UK are extremely limited and have generally tended to focus on Muslim print media (i.e., the Muslim press). This is largely because Muslim print media was for so long *solely* constitutive of Muslim media in Britain. The Muslim press emerged in the 1980s and 1990s for a number of reasons (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). First, to report and interpret current affairs from a Muslim perspective – a particularly important role following the Rushdie affair and the flawed representation of Muslims in the mainstream press (Poole, 2002). Second, to provide English language news media for an emerging generation of educated and assertive British Muslims that were seeking to have their own interests more effectively represented. At the very centre of this change in social attitudes – turning away from diasporic connections in the search for a British alternative – was the recognition that Muslim religious identity was inseparably interwoven with British national identity. As Ahmed explains, the Muslim news media became an important vehicle to bring these multiple threads of identity out into an articulated public discourse:

> The emergence of distinct Muslim media has provided a focal point through which Muslims, and particularly young Muslims, can find expressions of their concerns and aspirations… The numerous forms of community media, both new and old, are not only enabling Muslims to explore new ways of expressing their convictions on Islam and what it means to be Muslim, but creating news hybrid cultures that merge together aspects of South Asian culture, Islam and British cultural norms. (Ahmed, 2005: 124)

I believe this statement is now as relevant for other forms of Muslim mass media – including television, film, novels and music – as it is for Muslim print media. Yet I would also point out that there are alternative voices and cultural influences at work within this milieu, not just those from a South Asian ethnic heritage.

The English-language Muslim print media in the UK was for many years dominated by a single current affairs newspaper, *The Muslim News*, and a plurality of smaller, niche magazine publications. These included *Q-News* (aimed at younger, professional Muslims) and *The Invitation* (which focused on religious and community issues). *The Muslim News* is still important for many Muslims as a means to keep informed about current affairs – particularly foreign affairs and issues relating to Islamophobia. *The Invitation*, meanwhile, is still publishing and claims to have a readership of 20,000, though many of these will be casual readers who acquire a free copy of the magazine at

an Islamic conference or similar events[47]. *Q-News* produced its final issue in 2006, after having been a leading source of intellectual debate amongst Muslims in Britain since 1992. In many respects it has been replaced by the increasingly influential Muslim lifestyle magazine, *emel*. This magazine apparently has a readership of 100,000 – including an email list of 74,000 – and since its launch in 2003 it has become a familiar presence in the British Muslim media market[48]. As a lifestyle magazine, *emel* plays an important role in promoting music and other forms of cultural production. The success it has achieved can partly be explained through a conscious attempt by the magazine to reach a broad and general British Muslim readership. Through this attempt, I argue it seemingly becomes a dominant media institution, *symbolically* representing Muslims in Britain as a whole – which includes papering over sectarian, ethnic and cultural difference, along with the social and economic inequalities that fracture Muslim solidarity.

While print media is undoubtedly influential for Muslims in Britain, perhaps of greater import is the increasing plurality of Islamic television channels – of which eight are now being broadcast in the UK[49]. The Islam Channel, launched in 2004 and based in London, was the first to be established. While it has broadly attempted to cater for the diverse Muslim mainstream in Britain, its broadcasting output has not been without controversy. In 2010, the Quilliam Foundation accused the Islam Channel of promoting extremism – largely because the Islam Channel permitted a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir to host one of the programmes broadcast by the channel (Nawaz, 2010). In the same year, Ofcom found the channel in breach of broadcasting rules over comments concerning marital rape (Halliday, 2010). Despite these specific instances of controversy, the Islam Channel seemingly attempts to produce content with mainstream appeal. Just like *emel* magazine, I argue it focuses its attention on a *British* Muslim audience – using the English-language, along with references framed by national sentiment and knowledge, to reach an otherwise diverse (and even fractious) Muslim demographic in Britain.

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[47] http://www.invitation-magazine.com/ [accessed 20.11.12]
[48] http://www.emel.com/subscribe/ [accessed 20.11.12]
[49] These are: Islam Channel; Ummah Channel; Takbeer TV; Peace TV; Noor TV; Hidayat TV; Ahlebait TV; and Iqra TV.

Following the success of the Islam Channel, another seven channels were launched in the UK between 2006-10. These new channels all incorporate a mixture of English and Urdu-language content – though with a general weighting towards Urdu – and are undeniably aimed at a South Asian Muslim audience. They are also organised along sectarian lines. For example, two of these channels now cater for a specifically Shia audience (Hidayat TV and Ahlebait TV), Peace TV was founded by a self-declared Salafi (Zakir Naik), while Noor TV, Takbeer TV and the Ummah Channel are all apparently based on Sufi principles. In contrast to the Islam Channel, then, these broadcasters have been established to connect with discrete South Asian Muslim audiences in Britain.

I am claiming that this plurality of Islamic television suggests the continuing religious and cultural contestation of Islam in Britain. Yet it is notable that the broadcaster with the most extensive appeal – the Islam Channel – remains dominant in its attempt to symbolically represent the interests and experiences of Muslims in Britain as a whole.

I believe that print media publications and Islamic television channels represent the very core of the Muslim public sphere in Britain. Yet I would additionally note that the Muslim public sphere is itself more extensive. It includes various examples of Muslim-produced cinema, literature and music, along with various celebrity figures and Muslim cultural events. It also incorporates local forms of media – such as regional radio – though these are often reflective of broader national trends in terms of content and style. Despite these points, I think it is reasonable to suggest that large media organisations reside at the very centre of this cultural milieu. With vast Muslim audiences, they are able to shape perceptions, tastes and attitudes through the editorial choices that are made in representing other forms of Muslim cultural production in the UK. I am claiming, then, that it is through these media institutions and shared cultural experiences that Muslims in Britain, to a greater or lesser extent, internalise the common conceptual and cultural references that evoke notions of community belonging. Furthermore, beyond their powerful role as social, cultural and religious mediators, these media organisations can be found sponsoring and organising events across the country, as well as exerting an influence in areas of policy and intellectual debate.

The Islam Channel and *emel* magazine are arguably the two most significant forms of Muslim mass media in Britain. They reach large and diverse Muslim publics in Britain,

but they also strikingly highlight the ability that these organisations have to launch specific individuals and cultural forms into the public consciousness of Muslims in Britain.

The front cover of *emel* magazine is representative of this very phenomenon. While *emel* will occasionally have an abstract design or landscape photograph on the front cover, the magazine will more often include a lead interview piece with a corresponding front page photograph of a particular individual. Examples of this have ranged from the British Olympian, Mo Farah (see Figure 7.1), to the musician, Sami Yusuf (see Figure 7.2), through to the public intellectual, Tariq Ramadan (see Figure 7.3). Interestingly, these individuals have been selected by *emel* to represent the successes of Muslim society and culture, with a specific focus in most instances on the achievements of Muslims in Britain. I think there is a sense, then, that *emel* has an impact on British Muslim conceptions of success, elitism and its own collective identity, as filtered through these specific individuals. Such individuals become emblematic of British Muslims as an imagined community – iconic individuals that are chosen and represented, in this instance, solely through the editorial choices of one magazine.
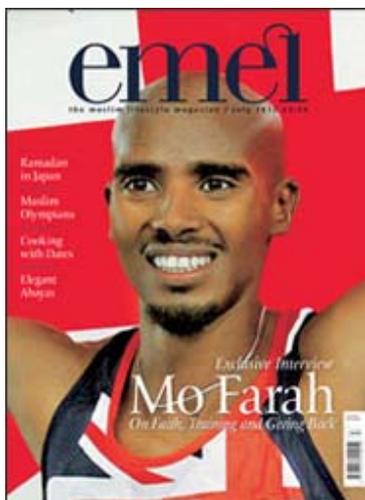
Figure 7.1: Mo Farah on the front of *emel*.
(Source: emel)
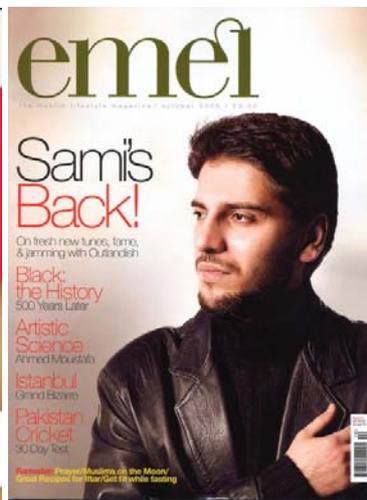
Figure 7.2: Sami Yusuf on the front of *emel*.
(Source: emel)

Figure 7.3: Tariq Ramadan on the front of *emel*.
(Source: emel)

In this section I have defined the Muslim public sphere in Britain as a realm of cultural production encompassed by a small but powerful collection of mass media organisations.

To reach distinct Muslim audiences it is usually necessary for Muslim cultural producers to navigate the public terrain carved out by these mediating institutions. While it is of course inevitable that different media organisations will reflect particular values and worldviews – with corresponding editorial choices concerning content, inclusion and the representation of other cultural producers – a concern arises in this instance when it is considered that Muslim media organisations lack any significant sense of plurality. It is dominated by a small number of broadcasters and publishers that seek to represent the interests of a diverse Muslim demographic. I believe this inevitably leads to the contestation of public space by individuals – including Muslim musicians – who disagree with the homogenising and monopolising tendency of such representation.

Musicians and the Muslim Media

I claim that Muslim musicians themselves have a complicated and at times ambivalent relationship to the British Muslim public sphere. While they are public figures and influential cultural producers in their own right, they are nonetheless often dependent on mediating institutions to distribute their music and represent them in the public arena. The internet has provided a powerful means for musicians to avoid this dependency. Yet to reach sizeable audiences it remains necessary for musicians to utilise the platform provided to them by Muslim media institutions. This includes their representation in the public sphere, through interviews and advertisements, but also more directly through their ability to perform at specific media-organised events. The Islam Channel, it should be remembered, is responsible for the largest and most significant cultural occasion in the British Muslim calendar: Global Peace and Unity (GPU).

Muslim media resources, however, do not exist in isolation. Muslim musicians plug into other cultural discourses and public spheres, ranging from mainstream television channels, magazines and newspapers, to various subcultural media networks (e.g., genre-specific music magazines). In this section, I will therefore consider how Muslim musicians engage with the Muslim media – in particular, I will examine the ways through which musicians are able to project themselves into the consciousness of discrete publics. In doing so I will also discuss the criticisms that musicians direct toward media institutions and the attempts that are being made to carve out alternative public spaces. At

the heart of these debates are issues relating to *access* and *representation*: the possibility of musicians accessing public space, and their subsequent representation within the public arena.

Live performance is absolutely critical for most Muslim musicians in the UK. The market for recorded music has been greatly reduced following the explosion of internet downloading. This has inevitably forced musicians to concentrate on live performance as the most significant way to generate a living. Access to performance space therefore becomes a matter of some concern, with event organisers wielding considerable power in their ability to decide which musicians are invited to perform. I argue that Muslim media organisations play an important role here for two reasons. First, while these institutions are often important sponsors and mediators of Islamic events, they also organise live music and other cultural events directly. Second, through their own media output, they generate normative notions of cultural and religious acceptability with regard to performance practice. The status of instrumentation and female performers is often at the forefront of this concern, though it extends to the promotion of certain musical styles and contents over other alternatives. Muslim media organisations in Britain therefore adopt a pivotal role in respect to the organisation, practice and discourse surrounding live performance.

The Islam Channel is at the forefront of media involvement with Islamic events in the UK. It organises and broadcasts the largest Islamic event in Britain – GPU – as well as being an important sponsor and broadcaster for a range of smaller events. This has resulted in the belief among some musicians that the Islam Channel is the only effective way to reach a more general Muslim demographic – to cross the boundaries of sectarianism, ethnicity and culture that traditionally limit the ability of musicians to reach certain Muslim groups and subcultures.

One amateur musician and event organiser, Samira, explained to me that the Islam Channel wields this influence irresponsibly. Samira organised a string of successful performance events that involved both amateur and professional Muslim musicians. These events were recorded and they included a range of performances in front of a live audience – usually in the nasheed or hip hop style. The performances were seen as an opportunity for 'up and coming' Muslim musicians to break out beyond their own local

context and reach a wider British Muslim audience. An agreement was reached with the Islam Channel, both to advertise and then broadcast the final event. Unfortunately, Samira bitterly claims that the Islam Channel reneged upon this agreement:

> **Samira:** Yeah, the Islam Channel, they were our media partners, um, last time, for this event in London, they advertised it and they charged us eight thousand pounds. We did that and they were supposed to air it as well and unfortunately they didn't show it. So they've actually betrayed us in a way to be honest. They haven't aired it, we've got a contract with them, and you're the first person I'm telling, I'm thinking why should I hold back now to be honest, because I believe they're running a channel in the name of Islam but they haven't even got the basic morals and principles if they can't keep their word. They promised to run the whole event, uh, to record it and they said they were gonna air it but they haven't done that. And now they're wanting more money to show it.

> **Me:** And the recording is not going to be available?

> **Samira:** Yeah, it is gonna be available but on a different channel now… but the thing is, it's going to now appeal to one type of market, where the Islam Channel they have like a bigger market. So it's like a loss for us. We could sue them, to be honest, we could sue them because we've got a contract, everyone's seen the contract, you know what, we could actually sue them but I don't think we want to go down that road.

> **Me:** Why are they refusing to air it?

> **Samira:** Because they want more money now. That's it.
>
> (Samira, 33, December 2012, Bradford)

I believe that Samira makes two important and connected points. First, she recognises that the Islam Channel has a large and diverse Muslim audience – both in Britain and internationally – making it an absolutely critical medium for musicians to successfully engage with 'a Muslim mainstream'. While an agreement was finally reached with a different Islamic television channel, Samira believes that the audience will now be significantly smaller and confined to a largely Urdu-speaking South Asian demographic. Second, Samira criticises the Islam Channel and suggests that there has been a breakdown in the ethical and religious covenant that should supposedly bind the broadcaster. She implied throughout the interview that the Islam Channel has used its monopolistic status to leverage a better deal.

This example highlights the mixed response that Muslim musicians adopt toward the Muslim public sphere in Britain. There is recognition that particular forms of media are extremely effective in reaching out to a large and diverse audience. Yet a parallel concern is frequently raised with regard to the overbearing influence that large media organisations have in controlling and shaping the British Muslim public sphere. The Islam Channel, in this instance, was acting as a corporate gatekeeper for musicians and live music into the public arena.

Through management of GPU, the Islam Channel also has direct involvement in the practical organisation of live performance and the corresponding creation of an embodied public space. GPU is the largest Muslim event in Britain, with an estimated 55,000 people in attendance, most of whom are British Muslims (Safdar, 2006). It is described by its organisers as an event that portrays Muslims in an authentic and positive light, as well as promoting intercommunity dialogue. A range of senior British politicians, public figures and members of different faith groups have spoken at GPU. In a very real sense, then, GPU is taken seriously by the British political class and has become an outward facing space of representation for Muslims in Britain – it is a symbolic space for the reworking of an apparently mainstream British Muslim community. I argue that it is therefore of some significance that the Islam Channel has complete organisational control over GPU.

Muslim musicians generally tend to stress the importance of an invitation to perform at GPU. An invitation represents a stamp of recognition and approval – it places musicians squarely within a perceived Muslim mainstream – but it can also signify a successful struggle against the barriers of cultural and religious conservatism that have been erected by the Islam Channel. The hip hop musician, Quest Rah (see p.70-71), described to me how – at the height of the 'Muslim hip hop scene' in Britain – the Islam Channel felt obliged to include Muslim hip hop artists within the GPU programme:

> **Quest Rah:** Between 2004, until around 2008/2009, there was quite a scene of artists doing hip hop that was identifiable with their faith… I'd say London mainly had most of these artists. There was definitely a scene of people getting shows, and we even managed to break into the Global Peace and Unity event, which is held in the Excel Centre, and is run by the Islam Channel.
>
> **Me:** You broke into it?

Quest Rah: No, we didn't break into it that way [laughter]. We kind of, you know, hip hop had an appearance there, you know what I mean. So, rather than the kind of traditional nasheeds that you've seen before.

(Quest Rah, 25, October 2011, London)

The specific wording used by Quest Rah – claiming that hip hop musicians 'broke into' GPU – indicates quite clearly his belief that a default place does exist at this event for alternative music cultures. This is a running point of contention for many musicians, especially when it is considered that hip hop is perceived by some to be an authentic voice of the Muslim youth in Britain – its exclusion (or not) from the symbolic performance space of GPU is therefore of great significance. It is also telling that he chooses to define hip hop against 'traditional' nasheeds. The Islam Channel is perceived by Quest Rah and many others to be a conservative institution that cleaves toward the safety of tradition and stable identities.

This ongoing debate flared-up following the 2010 GPU event. The spark that ignited this controversy was the decision taken by the Islam Channel to cut the performance time of Muslim Belal – an ex-rapper from Britain, with Jamaican roots, who now performs without instrumentation or backing music, largely in a spoken word style. As one of the few British musical performers at GPU in 2010, this decision was seen as particularly controversial because it supposedly favoured visiting Arab and Asian musicians at the expense of an 'authentic' British Muslim musician. The incident channelled broader concerns regarding the unwillingness of the Islam Channel accurately to capture the diversity of Muslims in Britain, including alternative musical styles and an ethnically diverse, pluralistic British Muslim youth culture.

Following this incident at GPU, in 2010, an extended and occasionally heated debate ensued through the Facebook page of a prominent British Muslim musician. A variety of public figures contributed to this debate – including Muslim Belal himself – and it focussed on the decision by the Islam Channel to cut his allocated performance time. A representative from the Islam Channel also entered the debate to defend the decision that had been taken. This representative argued that it was necessary to prioritise visiting performers because they had travelled to the UK at great expense. Nonetheless, the primary criticisms levelled at the Islam Channel concerned two related issues: (i) an

institutionalised racism at the broadcaster and (ii) a failure to include performers that represent the true interests of Muslims in Britain. The general feeling articulated by most contributors to this debate was that the Islam Channel is dominated by foreign interests (both cultural and economic) and that Britain needs a new, English-language Islamic television channel. Muslim Belal offered a more balanced view of this controversy, though his desire for the Islam Channel to 'respect' *British* performers nonetheless chimed with many of the views expressed during this debate:

> Wow thanks for the support people... on that Saturday when I was told I had been cut I was majorly disappointed especially after all the work I went through to get an album ready for the event and all the people I had waiting for me to come on etc. So the move to Sunday hurt and cost me too but if I have to be honest I don't think it was racism why I was cut or because I was black… I think it was more simply a timing and respect thing. The time was short so the acts who they thought were more respected they had to give priority to...but I have to thank them still for considering me in the first place and putting me on that stage...I just hope I've done enough to show our friends over at Islam Channel that we have talent here that is well respected and should be put on that platform talking to our people in the language which they understand. (Muslim Belal, Facebook, October 2010)

Muslim Belal's reference to 'our people' and a 'language which they understand' is entirely typical of the view that many British Muslim musicians and their fans have adopted toward the Islam Channel and GPU. It is a fundamental belief that the broadcaster simply does not reflect their everyday experiences – GPU therefore becomes a symbolic space where the struggle for representation through music and performance is played out.

The Islam Channel is emblematic of the broader failings that many attribute to the media resources dominating the Muslim public sphere. There is indeed a strong desire for Muslim media and cultural resources that utilise the English language and reflect the inherent concerns of Muslims in Britain. Yet there is an inevitable emergence of conflict when a small collection of media institutions are burdened with the task of satisfactorily representing such a diverse Muslim community. Muslims belong to different sections of society in Britain and they often have competing ideas of what exactly it means to be British and to be Muslim. It would be optimistic to expect any one media institution adequately to encompass this vast range of interests and experiences. There are also

concerns over the practical and economic consequences of this media monopoly. These concerns are particularly evident amongst those musicians that practice alternative musical styles – such as hip hop – but they are also articulated by nasheed artists and others who might find a more natural home with vaguely conservative institutions like the Islam Channel.

In a sense, then, I believe the British Muslim public sphere is simply *too narrow* – it lacks a pluralism that is necessary for the inherent diversity of Muslims in Britain. This perceived failing is not limited to the Islam Channel alone. *Emel* is seen by some as increasingly comparable in terms of the Muslim print media market. The hip hop musician, Rakin – from Mecca2Medina – suggested that *emel* attempts to reflect notions of British Muslimness, but in doing so it fails to capture the experiences of young and socially disadvantaged Muslims. As Rakin explained to me during our interview:

> Emel magazine is not aimed at young people. Its audience is the middleclass Muslim community. (Rakin, 41, July 2011, London)

Rakin and several other musicians claim that *emel* promotes an expensive, middleclass lifestyle that is simply unattainable for many Muslims in the UK. By extension, *emel* arguably fails to find room for the alternative music cultures that can thrive in these excluded sections of Muslim society and culture.

In response to the perceived failings of this narrow Muslim media culture, there have been attempts by Muslim musicians to create new and alternative spaces in the Muslim public sphere. This has happened largely through use of the internet, though in 2006 a Muslim hip hop magazine was briefly launched, entitled *The Platform Magazine* (see Figure 7.4). This magazine was specifically designed to cater for a niche market somewhere in-between mainstream youth/hip hop culture and the wider Muslim public sphere. As well as covering music, the magazine additionally attempted to reflect the everyday experiences of an urban Muslim youth culture, as the founder, Tony Ishola, explained in an interview with Yahya Birt:
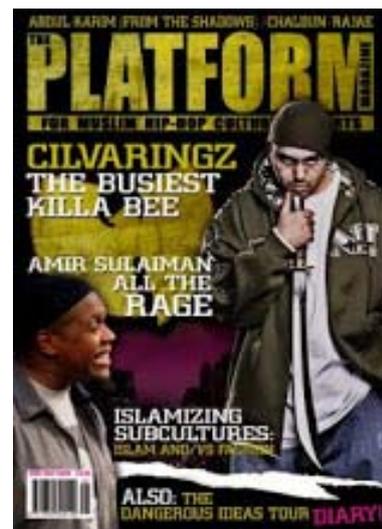
Figure 7.4: The Platform Magazine (Source: The Platform Magazine)

> A lot of these kids have checkered 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.[50]

Unfortunately, *The Platform Magazine* lasted for only a very short time. It was simply unable to develop a commercial strategy that allowed it to sustain itself for very long. Despite this apparent failing, several musicians have argued that a market for comparable media does indeed exist, but that there are financial and organisational obstacles to making it commercially self-sustaining – in short, cultural innovation requires investment upfront and just a little bit of patience.

The Internet

If the Muslim public sphere in Britain is overwhelmingly dominated by a small collection of mainstream Muslim media resources, I argue that it is nonetheless being continually challenged by alternative public discourses that exist solely on the internet. The democratising potential of the internet for Muslims has already been repeatedly highlighted by several other writers (Poole, 2002; Wheeler, 2002; Kort, 2005; Akou, 2010). According to such a view, the proliferation and increasing importance of 'cyber-Islamic environments' (Bunt, 2003) represents the opening-up of an 'extended discursive space,' within which 'new interpreters' are free to debate and explore their religion (Anderson, 2003: 47). Alexis Kort refers to the notion of an 'Islamic reformation' (Kort, 2005), with the suggestion that Muslims are using the internet to challenge conventional sources of Islamic authority and to provide new interpretations of traditional religious sources. While this general trend toward the plurality of religious knowledge is certainly identifiable amongst British Muslim musicians, I also found that they specifically use the internet as a means to engage with issues that have various political, cultural and social dimensions. Yet these alternative discourses are in some respects a by-product for more practical concerns relating to the marketing and distribution of music by musicians. The

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[50] http://www.yahyabirt.com/?p=117 [accessed 08.08.12]

commercial and/or distributive function of the internet is often an overriding benefit for many musicians.

I found that Muslim musicians routinely use the internet as a primary means of promoting and disseminating music – this includes selling their music directly through the internet and also the careful construction of a public image. Most musicians do not have a website of their own but instead make extensive use of social networking websites. The five that are most commonly used – and there are several musicians that use all five – are Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter and ReverbNation. Without going into the specifics of each website, it is possible to outline some of the generalities that make these websites so functionally effective for Muslim musicians. First, they allow regular and unmediated contact between musicians and their fans. Second, several of these websites allow for the distribution of audio and visual media – so they are particularly effective for disseminating music and associated video content. Finally, these websites encourage the development of subcultural networks and – ultimately – the emergence of public discourses that are rooted within the cultural context of each musician.

It is clear, then, that the commercial potential of the internet is of overriding practical significance for most Muslim musicians. From nasheeds through to hip hop, I am claiming that the internet provides a space for musicians to advertise, showcase and sell their music to a sympathetic fanbase. I believe that the vast majority of online activity by Muslim musicians should therefore be classified as declaratory in nature. It includes the announcement of forthcoming performance events and the distribution of new song collections and music videos. The attraction of this arrangement is fairly straightforward: it allows musicians gradually to acquire a following and to then ensure that their fans are kept informed about new developments. The commercial impact of this online activity can take two forms. First, musicians are able to sell their music on the internet through direct mail order. Not all musicians are successful in selling CDs or related products, but it does create a small income for several musicians. Second, musicians are able to not only promote forthcoming events, but also to encourage contact between themselves and potential event organisers. The internet is essentially a facilitative point of contact between musicians and those who would commission them to perform at an event. This is

especially true in terms of the transnational connections that are formed through online activity – several musicians remarked that they are frequently contacted through the internet by event organisers based overseas. Furthermore, in addition to their own independent presence on the internet, musicians usually have some form of representation on commercial and fan websites. This significantly increases their online presence. Muslimhiphop.com (MHH) is one such website (see Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5: A screenshot from Muslimhiphop.com (Source: Muslimhiphop.com)

Founded in Los Angeles, in 2004, by Mike Shapiro – a 23 year-old American who was inspired after witnessing a hip hop performance at a mosque[51] – MHH quickly became an important online hub of activity for Muslim musicians across the world. It primarily acts as an information portal, with details of Muslim musicians who perform in a range of different styles – including hip hop, nasheed, pop, reggae and spoken word. The site largely promotes American and British musicians, though it does include musicians from

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[51] http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/6576281/ns/today-entertainment/t/muslim-rappers-combine-beliefs-hip-hop/#.UFLpeq5dCdA [accessed 08.08.12]

continental Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Viewers are able to listen to sample tracks, read about different artists, and in some instances purchase music directly through the website. It is typical of an online space where cultural innovation and commercial necessity intersect.

As one might expect, then, the internet forges transnational connections and global discourses. Bypassing the monopolistic grip of English-language media institutions in Britain, musicians propel themselves into disembedded online contexts that transcend national boundaries. It is within such contexts that local, transnational and global discourses collide – a fecundity that I claim represents an exemplar of Appadurai's 'diasporic public spheres'. It is through these new and unsettled public spaces that Muslim musicians adopt one of their most significant roles: as social and religious commentators – that is, as the 'new interpreters' conceived of by Anderson (Anderson, 2003: 47).

It is primarily through interactive social networking websites – and in particular Facebook – that musicians utilise the internet to communicate regularly with fans across the world. During my study, I found that musicians tend to use these websites as a form of public diary – posting comments ranging from philosophical, social, cultural and religious reflection through to highlights about events in their daily life – as well as using it to remain in almost constant communication with individuals and groups that they might or might not encounter in an everyday offline context. Consequently, I think it is the disembodied nature of this medium that makes it so fascinating. Musicians are simultaneously caught up within local, national, transnational and global discourses that involve a mixture of actors and audiences across this contextual milieu. Comments are targeted in multiple directions and influences emerge from a range of radically different sources – discourse semantics are therefore necessarily plural and unsettled.

To illustrate these claims I have chosen one example among many. It is an example that draws attention to the political role played by Muslim musicians, along with the cultural and religious assumptions that are often built into their positioning. In March 2012, a controversial politician representing the left-leaning Respect party, George Galloway, was elected to the House of Commons in the Bradford West by-election. The Respect party have become distinctive in British politics for their uncompromising

socialist position, with policies that include a rejection of privatisation, opposition to university tuition fees, and an outspoken criticism of Western involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Respect has consequently drawn significant support from Muslim voters in certain parts of the country. The Bradford West by-election was significant because George Galloway managed to win the seat for Respect despite an historically sizeable Labour Party majority in Bradford West.

On the days running up to the election, a young South Asian nasheed artist in Bradford, Ahmed [not his real name], began using his local and regional prominence as a musician to campaign for George Galloway. Admitting that he had no prior interest in politics, Ahmed began organising and inspiring other young South Asian Muslims to become involved in the campaign. He did this through his online Facebook network, which consisted of several thousand fans and friends across Bradford, the UK and even overseas. Through the internet, then, the dynamics of a local political campaign were witnessed and commented upon by music fans living far beyond this particular geographical context. Yet while the practicalities of this internet campaign were significant, it is the rhetorical means through which he rallied support that is of primary interest to my arguments here.

Ahmed was able to connect to popular geopolitical issues, using emotive language to highlight the plight of Muslims in areas from Palestine and Kashmir, to Iraq and Afghanistan. These issues of global concern were channelled into this specific instance of local politics. The message was clear: if you want to stand up for your Muslim brethren around the globe, then vote for Galloway in Bradford. This support was particularly fascinating when it is considered that Galloway – himself a Scottish, White, non-Muslim – was opposed by a local, South Asian, Muslim candidate for the Labour Party, Imran Hussain. Ahmed and his supporters did not just support Galloway, they levelled a sustained criticism based on religious and cultural values against Hussain. This included comments about Hussain's alleged drinking habits – with 'sightings' of Hussain down at a local Bradford pub – and the perceived involvement of Hussain in a corrupt *biradari* (South Asian kinship network) political system that, according to its critics, was inappropriately brought over from Pakistan during migration to Bradford.

In this local-global online context, then, Ahmed uses the lens of local politics to challenge notions of correct Muslim behaviour and establish norms of political and cultural activity in the British context. I am claiming here that this example is emblematic of the ways through which a diasporic public sphere operates; it involves cross-cutting discourses that use the internet to effortlessly combine and move between the local, national, transnational and global. Indeed, these global flows of culture and social activity are in many ways anarchic and fluid in their operation. As I will argue in the next section, it is ultimately the internet that has provided a significant outlet for female musicians attempting to overcome the traditional gender boundaries of cultural and religious practice.

Muslim Women and the Public Sphere

Throughout this chapter I have so far skirted around a critical issue that cannot be excluded from any discussion on public space via-à-vis Muslims: that is, the specific experiences of women within this mediated and contested arena. This discussion is particularly relevant when it is considered that interpretations of female modesty and correct behaviour are often deployed as barriers to prevent Muslim women from performing or practicing music. Yet for some women this issue is not a clear case of patriarchal discrimination – indeed, individual women have their own views on where the restrictions of gender are inappropriately erected.

The ability of Muslim women to access, shape and authentically represent themselves within the public sphere and civil society has long been a topic of interest. Much of this attention has tended to revolve around the symbolic and embodying status of women as the visible markers of Islam in Britain. As Tarlo has aptly remarked, Muslim women are overwhelmingly represented through 'one single all-consuming image, word and concept – *the veil*' (Tarlo, 2010: 2). The themes of these embodied tropes tend to range from community identity and honour (Mohammad, 1999; Werbner, 2007) – including outright violence and control within gendered spheres of activity (Macey, 1999) – through to markers of national belonging (Meer, Dwyer & Modood, 2010), and conceptions of femininity and self (Dwyer, 1999). The general trend has therefore been to examine the

ways through which women become the passive objects of wider cultural pressure or to consider how social priorities are inscribed upon the female body.

I am not intending to criticise such work – academic studies looking at the disempowerment of Muslim women are extremely relevant. Yet I believe there is the potential for a shift in emphasis to the ways through which women are *successfully* challenging, navigating or subverting their own disempowerment. Several studies have explicitly focussed on this approach. This includes an examination of the ways through which Muslim women are accessing higher education (Ahmad, 2001; Dwyer & Shah, 2009), reformulating gendered assumptions and structures of authority through religious knowledge (Ramji, 2007), and projecting themselves into local Muslim public spheres through community radio (DeHanas, 2010). These studies reflect a trend that is anecdotally observable (particularly within the context of higher education): that is, the increasing confidence and assertiveness of a new generation of educated, dynamic young Muslim women.

It is possible to root the experiences of Muslim women musicians within this general sociological trend. As I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, female musicians are not immune from gender-specific discrimination and exclusion from the public sphere – far from it – but they do deploy assertive and self-confident strategies to navigate through these particular difficulties. These musicians are therefore arguably representative of a generation where gender expectations are beginning to either change or partially disintegrate. Specifically, I suggest that these women are part of a 'new Muslim elite' where avenues of social and political engagement are widening across the traditional boundaries of gender (Edmunds, 2010).

In general terms, the ability of female Muslim musicians to access the mainstream British Muslim public sphere is still extremely limited. At the most basic level, female musicians are simply not invited to perform at the majority of mixed Muslim events in Britain – this includes not only GPU, but also the more liberally-inclined Living Islam festival (where separate 'ladies only' events have been held). Female musicians are furthermore excluded from mainstream Muslim media resources, including both *emel* and the Islam Channel. This is not to suggest that women are entirely excluded from these spaces. Women often have a relatively prominent speaking role at public events and are

furthermore often represented – to a greater or lesser extent – across the gamut of Muslim media (indeed, the editor of *emel* is a woman!). Yet female musicians are often required to adopt a different kind of role and are largely unable to represent themselves *as musicians* in the British Muslim public sphere. Poetic Pilgrimage, for example, were the presenters of a 'lifestyle' programme on the Islam Channel, entitled *City Sisters*, but – despite a public prominence achieved through music – they have never performed music on the Islam Channel. In a sense, then, there are spaces for Muslim women in the public sphere, just not necessarily for female Muslim musicians.

The reasons for this exclusion largely revolve around Muslim interpretations of modesty. A woman's singing voice is perceived to be an intimate reflection of her femininity (Youssefzadeh, 2004) and should therefore be isolated from compromising acts of display. This stems from a strong tradition of Islamic jurisprudence that worries about the connection of music to forbidden pleasures, including women and wine (Shiloah, 1997). South Asian Muslims in Britain (both men and women) largely appear to adhere to this religious ruling, acknowledging that the female voice can indeed encourage inappropriate sexual contact. As one young South Asian man explained to me at a nasheed concert in Nottingham, a woman's voice is part of her beauty and it should not be flaunted before 'non-*mahram*'(unrelated) men. His comments were especially interesting because while the nasheed concert had been prominently organised by women, it only included performances by men.

Yet there are different degrees of understanding and practice in relation to this ruling. Deobandi scholars in Britain, for example, have ruled that men should avoid listening to even the recording of a female singer. In contrast, scholars of the Barelvi Sufi tradition have tended to argue that recordings (including film recordings) of female performance are permissible. Within the religious context of Sufism, then, women will often perform na'ats and nasheeds on the television channel Noor TV, but those same women will not perform before men during a live performance.

While the South Asian majority tend to adhere to this view of female performance, there is more likely to be a dissenting view amongst those from other ethnic groups in Britain. The most prominent female performers in the UK are from backgrounds that include those with a Caribbean, Middle Eastern and North African heritage. Visiting

female performers from these regions have been known to express dismay at the 'backwardness' of Muslims in Britain. Yet while ethnicity appears to play a role here, it is unclear to what extent these views are actually shaped by class. For example, a more liberal view on this issue tends to be expressed by South Asian Muslims in the spheres of professionalism and higher education. Despite the complexity of such views, it is entirely clear that the Muslim majority in Britain maintains some level of reservation with regard to female musical performance. It is because of this dominant paradigm that there are so few Muslim women performers in the public eye.

Female musicians approach this situation in a number of different ways – they employ a variety of strategies but also maintain diverse interpretations and practices of their own. The notion that female musicians *always* reject these restrictions and conventions should be immediately dismissed. I think that a three-fold typology more or less summarises the different approaches that characterise the approach of female Muslim musicians in Britain:

(i) *The radical*. The women who adopt this stance are usually uncompromising in their desire to change the attitudes that shape wider Muslim cultural practice in Britain. This necessarily includes offering competing sources of religious knowledge in the attempt to carve out alternative spaces for female performance and musicality.

(ii) *The pragmatist*. The female musicians within this category are usually mindful of the need to balance competing demands. This entails an attempt to reconcile their own personal views on female performance (which can vary to some degree) with wider influences and demands from other Muslim groups. These musicians recognise that there is a place for female performance, but that it must be carefully negotiated.

(iii) *The conformist*. This approach is pursued by those female musicians who believe that the prevailing attitude to female performance is indeed religiously correct. It also includes those who might personally disagree with some of these religious rulings, but who are nonetheless unwilling to challenge or deviate from the religious scholars that have formulated them.

This typology is a simplified attempt at understanding the different approaches taken by female Muslim musicians. It cannot adequately cover the complexity of these different responses, but it does perhaps provide something of a handle on the issue. I also think it

is worth noting that individuals themselves can alter their approach depending on the context – even the most fervent radical can compromise in order to deal with an issue pragmatically.

The first approach – *the radical* – is characteristic of those Muslim women who wear their feminist principles on their sleeve and actively attempt to challenge prevailing Muslim opinion. The musicians who fall into this category are fairly small in number – in the UK they most prominently include Poetic Pilgrimage and Pearls of Islam. Of utmost importance to many of these musicians is the need to find a public platform for performance and the distribution of their music. Yet a driving motivation for many of these musicians is critically to represent and perform alternative notions of femininity in the public sphere (see Butler, 1990). Finding a route into the public eye is therefore extremely important.

An occasional grassroots or subcultural movement tends to be the most likely outlet for musicians who have yet to develop their own following. An example of this is the 'Sisterhood' project, launched in 2007 by Deeyah, a Norwegian singer and human rights activist of Punjabi/Pashtun heritage[52]. While it is unclear exactly how active the Sisterhood project still is, it does aim to engage Muslim women with contemporary political and social issues through the arts and music. In 2007 the project produced an album that compiled pop songs by Muslim women across Europe and North America – this included young and unknown musicians from the UK[53]. These songs were largely produced in a polished and contemporary pop style, with lyrics from a Muslim perspective dealing with issues ranging from love and belief through to war, racism and politics.

These women are either strident in their attempt to redefine gender roles within Muslim communities, or simply self-confident in their own beliefs and grasp of religious knowledge. In the interviews that I conducted, both Poetic Pilgrimage and Pearls of Islam were particularly keen to stress their acquisition of religious learning and an involvement with critical scholarship. I claim that their views are representative of female musicians

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[52] http://bitchmagazine.org/post/sisterhood-of-muslim-female-mcs-and-singers [accessed 01.05.11]
[53] http://www.reverbnation.com/artist/artist_songs/174033 [accessed 05.09.12]

within this category: self-confident, assertive and willing to interpret Islam through critical engagement with sources of religious knowledge.

Those female musicians who might perhaps fall into the second category – *the pragmatists* – are marked by a desire to more fully balance competing and at times conflicting demands. There is recognition by these musicians that various religious and community requirements regarding modesty must be acknowledged and taken seriously. Yet these musicians also suggest that such pressures must be weighed in balance against the right that female musicians have to express themselves through music and performance, as well as to project their ideas and beliefs into the public sphere. The British Pakistani musician and event organiser, Samira, has been forced to deal with this issue on a regular basis. When organising music events, she has had to consider whether or not to invite women to perform at an event if the audience will contain men. Initially she opened the event to female performers who were no older than fifteen, but she began to reconsider her decision when women from across the country began to contact her:

> But then there were some girls that emailed me and they said we want to enter, and there were some that were sixteen, and even eighteen or nineteen, one that was twenty five, girls basically. And I said, I can't, I can't, because I'm gonna get literally battered by the community and I can't really do that. But I said I can help you in other ways. I can try and help train you up and make a girls group, or invite you to a non-Islamic event. But they were like, no, no, no, we'd rather do it the halal way than the haram way. What they meant by that is they'd rather do an Islamic type of contest rather than going to somewhere like X Factor, so that's what they were trying to say… I discussed it with family and a few friends, and I said look, I'm in a dilemma, if I allow them to sing there might be other girls who look at them and say, okay, you know, they're sending across good messages and we want to do that and stay away from negative kind of music… So I allowed it, in the end I allowed it. (Samira, 33, December 2011, Bradford)

Samira's situation is typical of the desire to reconcile community pressure and religious obligation with 'low-key' feminist principles.

As she mentions, one possible strategy included providing support for female musicians that did not involve performance in front of Muslim men – this included musical training and non-Muslim event contacts. Yet she ultimately decided that this would simply encourage female musicians to transgress beyond the strictures of correct Islamic practice. She therefore decided to allow women to perform at the

mixed events that she had organised – to provide them with adequate public space for performance, but also to keep them within the communal and religious fold. No age limit was placed on female performance and the oldest woman to perform was nineteen.

The reaction from 'the Muslim community' was mixed: many supported this decision and the performances were well attended, but ultimately the only negative criticism levelled against the event focused on the fact that women were allowed to perform in front of men. Because of the visceral reaction from some quarters – generally from a male and vaguely scholastic direction – Samira is considering once again imposing a restriction on the inclusion of female performers.

The final category of female musicians – *the conformists* – are characterised by a general compliance with their perception of the communal and religious norm (i.e., a hegemonic South Asian Muslim interpretation of performance). These musicians therefore have fairly limited access to the public sphere and largely restrict themselves to performing in private spaces for women and children. These musicians will usually perform more traditional nasheeds and na'ats. Through their performance they provide a community and cultural service at significant social and religious events – ranging from *Mawlid*, through to the blessing of a new house or the birth of a child. Contrary to the kind of stereotypes that might be applied to women in this category (e.g., poorly educated, non-English speaking etc), they generally come from a range of different backgrounds. This includes those who are young, British-born and pursuing a professional career in the wider public sphere.

The reasons that some of these female musicians choose to restrict their performance includes their own religious beliefs in modesty and gender segregation. But it can also sometimes involve a simple deference to the wisdom of the religious scholars associated with their own particular community. For example, one female nasheed artist – a British Pakistani, from Leeds, in her forties – described how she has frequently attempted to persuade 'her scholars' to allow women to perform at events. Unsuccessful, she has always abided by their decision: 'They're just very strict', she said with laughter.

Conclusion

Clearly, there are multiple issues around the engagement of Muslim musicians in the public sphere. As I have argued throughout, these issues tend to revolve around the possibilities relating to access and representation. While there are inevitable and frequent conflicts between musicians and those who seek to restrict their access to the public sphere, it is apparent that musicians are entirely comfortable in the media-saturated era of global communication. The thread that connects all of these issues together is the desire by musicians to create new public spaces and new modes of cultural innovation. This is perhaps unsurprising – after all, nobody wants to be censored – but it must be concluded that musicians are overwhelmingly concerned with the control that Muslim media organisations exert over their professional lives. It is partly because of this context that the internet is employed as a means to create and access these alternative public spaces. Indeed, musicians are particularly keen to pluralise the various discourses that underpin the religious and social concerns of Muslims in Britain.

Section Four

Identity, Community and Belonging

8. Ethnicity and Class: Locating 'Muslimness' Through Music

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Introduction

In this chapter I turn to a consideration of class and ethnicity. The purpose of the chapter is to examine how class and ethnicity are often inseparable from broader notions of 'Muslimness' – that is, from Muslim identity and pre-discursive behaviour. I will argue that Muslim cultural spheres – both in Britain and globally – exert a unique influence on exactly how understandings of Muslimness are internalised by groups and individuals. Invoking the theoretical paradigms of both Bourdieu and Bhabha, my aim is to demonstrate that while musical practice and other forms of British Muslim cultural production are structured by the constraints of power and convention, they are also subject to contestation, instability and change. As I therefore argue, 'Muslimness' is in some respects a form of _habitus_ (Bourdieu, 2009) – a prediscursive set of norms shaped predominantly by class and the expectations of power. But it is also a unique cultural _third space_ (Bhabha, 1994) – a point of contact where the intermingling of cultural practice generates new, hybrid and subversive musical forms beneath the rubric of Muslim identity. In both instances, a direct comprehension or utilisation of Muslimness can be found at the heart of cultural practice and the social currents that surge beneath.

   In the first section I outline various theoretical considerations of class and ethnicity. I invoke both Bourdieu and Bhabha as a means to reconcile the enculturing nature of Muslim public spheres with the creative and subversive possibilities pursued by Muslim musicians. I suggest that – while there are dominant discourses framing the social and cultural activities of musicians – individual artists are able to pursue specific strategies that either sustain or oppose these powerful tropes and narratives. In the second section I analyse South Asian Muslim musicians and their engagement with South Asian cultural spheres. I claim that different musicians orient their music in a number of directions, simultaneously to engage with, subtly alter, and challenge South Asian cultural traditions in Britain. The complex relationship between ethnicity and class will be elaborated on

during this section. In section three I focus on the emergence of dominant discourses of Muslimness, building on my claim that these are underpinned by globally-mediated assumptions of class and ethnicity. I use the example of Sami Yusuf – perhaps the most successful British Muslim musician – to show exactly how ideas of Muslimness are bound together with various forms of Muslim cultural production in Britain. In the fourth and final section I examine the experiences of Black Muslim musicians in Britain. I argue that these musicians significantly critique these dominant discourses of class and ethnicity. Through this analysis I show how ideas of ethnicity, nationalism and universalism are combined by musicians to assert the role and relevance of Black Muslims in contemporary Britain.

Bourdieu and Bhabha: Rethinking Class and Ethnicity

In his seminal and highly influential book, *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy evoked Du Bois' notion of 'double consciousness' (Gilroy, 1993). Gilroy reworked the idea of diaspora – historically used to reference Jewish exile from Jerusalem (Helly, 2006) – and suggested instead that it might have meaning as a source of multiple, hybrid identity formation[54]. Gilroy successfully deconstructed one-dimensional forms of cultural nationalism, but only by raising the spectre of further essentialization. Dual ethnic identities might often hit a little closer to the mark, but they still run the risk of applying rigid and proscribed collectivities to the experiences of specific groups or individuals. To guard against this tendency, Caglar suggested that we write against the grain of cultural identities, destabilising ethnic categories, and focusing on heterogeneity:

> By defining our object of study as an 'ethnic' group we are in danger of prioritizing one form of identification over all others. We can avoid this by writing 'against' culture; that is, against the popular tendency to freeze cultural differences between groups of people on ethnic lines, to assume that each culture is internally homogeneous and that multiple loyalties imply potentially conflictual ethnic/national loyalties. (Caglar, 1997: 175-176)

This approach is certainly consistent with recognition that ethnicity is complex and constantly in flux. It also crucially acknowledges that ethnic identifications are often

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[54] 'The Black Atlantic' is a reference to the claim that African American identity is created and sustained through an engagement with both European and African cultural identities.

interwoven with additional factors, ranging from global flows of popular culture, to local and regional identities, not to mention, amongst other things, class and religion.

Despite the seeming appeal of this theoretical stance, when we move into the 'real world' it becomes apparent that, unsurprisingly, individuals do not always conform to this academic ideal. Ethnic identities might indeed be unstable and internally heterogeneous, but they are nonetheless seized, essentialized, altered and deployed, for reasons that largely hinge on strategic or tactical expedience. There might well be understandable attempts at 'strategic essentialism' by ethnic groups themselves (Spivak, 1990), or a more troubling slide into ignorance, naivety or racist stereotyping. Indeed, music itself is often loaded with the burden of identity and cultural authenticity – whether as a means to cohere or preserve national/ethnic identities (O'Connell, 2000), disrupt or subvert supposed cultural authenticities (Langlois, 1996), or create essentialized identities as a means of material resistance (Kaya, 2002). Recognising these difficulties, Martin Stokes suggests the following for the consideration of the relationship between music and ethnicity:

> [We must] turn from questions directed towards defining the essential and 'authentic' traces of identity 'in' music (a question with which much nationalist and essentially racist folklore and ethnography is explicitly concerned) to the questions of how music is used by social actors in specific local situations to erect boundaries, to maintain distinctions between us and them, and how terms such as 'authenticity' are used to justify these boundaries. (Stokes: 6)

Stokes correctly argues that there must be an examination of the ways in which ethnicity is used by specific groups to create or sustain boundaries 'between us and them'. Yet I think it is important to remember that ethnicity is never a pure construct – there are always additional factors at work.

My arguments in this chapter are based on the theoretical assumption that ethnic boundaries are often linked to underlying features of class. The definition of class is disputed and historically unsettled, but I believe it is possible to bring together major strands of thinking into a satisfactory working definition. Throughout this chapter I consider class a manifestation of social status, determined by factors including education, taste and a relationship to both symbolic and material modes of production. This clearly brings together ideas that range across the historical gamut of thought, originating with

Marx and Weber, but it is the arguments of Bourdieu that I will largely expand upon here. I suggest that – at least in terms of British Muslim music and the public sphere – ethnicity is linked to the formation of taste, deportment and other class-based norms. I additionally utilise the notion of 'middleclass values and tastes'. I use this contested and rather uneasy concept to reference the idea of dominant social and cultural class traits that load value onto traditional forms of education, popularised notions of taste and consumption, and particular types of 'worthwhile' social and cultural leisure activity.

Bourdieu's theory of the 'field of cultural production' is particularly helpful in making the theoretical connection of musical practice to the notion of dominant British Muslim public discourses/practices. Bourdieu posits the idea of a cultural field: that is, a realm of cultural production, necessarily structured by a set of internal dispositions, which endow particular cultural practices with elements of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1993). While Bourdieu argues that there is substantial overlap between different fields of activity (such as economics or education), they are nonetheless distinct. Agents working within the cultural field are therefore constrained somewhat in their attempts at cultural production. Not only must they play by the 'rules of the game', in order to accrue capital, but their own practical and artistic inclinations – their habitus – are anyway a partial construct of the cultural field they find themselves working within. The concept of habitus refers to pre-discursive knowledge and behaviour. According to Bourdieu, it can be understood as our internalised and utterly fundamental way of being. It is subtly distinct from identity, which is a self-conscious and expressive sense of self or grouphood. Both concepts – habitus and identity – are arguably subject to the same social pressures imposed by dominant public discourses and modes of cultural production.

Extending this theory and applying it to the arguments within this thesis, I am therefore claiming that British Muslim musicians operate within a specific 'field of cultural production'. Generated and sustained in part through the increasing prevalence of British Muslim media resources – ranging from television and magazines to the internet and the Islamic conferences circuit – I claim that this space of cultural production has become the battleground for fierce debates regarding the nature of an 'imagined' British Muslim community (see Anderson, 2006 [1983]) and authorised notions of 'Muslimness'. I have already examined the cultural, economic and social features of this field in previous

chapters (see Chapters 6 and 7). I extend this argument here to claim that the warp and weft of this public sphere – like all attempts to shape the production of shared meaning and acceptable practice – is the underlying play of power.

As I will repeatedly demonstrate in this chapter, there are cultural and social pressures at work that normativize Muslim experience through the prism of class and ethnicity. If they wish to operate within this cultural milieu, musicians are required to 'play by the rules of the game'. This necessitates that individuals pursue various strategies of legitimation, to both advance claims of cultural, social and religious relevance, whilst reinforcing or potentially subverting hegemonic proscriptions around class and ethnicity.

While it is possible to be sceptical about some of the overly deterministic elements of Bourdieu's thesis – and I would certainly ascribe greater agency to individuals than Bourdieu does – there is nonetheless a case to be made concerning the enculturing nature of a British Muslim public sphere and inherent hierarchies of power. British Muslim musicians often have a sense of the practical possibilities that lie open to them: for instance, the impact and recognition they can achieve, the level of success they can attain, and the extent to which they are able to communicate a particular message or ideology. Navigating the terrain of possibilities requires a specific set of strategies. This can involve passivity or collaboration with the dominant paradigm. Yet, it can also mean working against the grain of authorised practice – pushing against boundaries, challenging assumptions and subverting authority. The significance of this for my argument here is the claim that British Muslim musicians are necessarily caught up in a structured set of power relations, against which they are forced *into some kind of a reaction*, whether this reaction is framed as dissent or tacit compliance. This has enormous implications for individual musicians, often relating to choices regarding performance, the promotion of their music, the use of instruments and from where they draw musical, political and religious inspiration.

Whilst some acknowledgement of the constraints faced by individual musicians is crucial, there is a danger that notions of an overly rigid cultural field can be constructed – that is, an artistic milieu shaped by the dynamics of power and lacking any sort of autonomy from a broad and hegemonic realm of British Muslim activity. By drawing from Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), I believe it is possible to

integrate vital elements of individual and cultural agency into Bourdieu's theoretical paradigm regarding material and symbolic social constraints. More specifically, I am arguing that Muslim identity acts as a cultural *third space* (see Bhabha, 1994) – that is, Muslim identity provides the confidence and cultural platform necessary for musicians more overtly to bring together different musical traditions from a perceived Muslim heritage. In a sense, Islam is seen as a unifying religion that provides authentic access to different ethnic and cultural traditions.

While the theories of Bourdieu and Bhabha are not usually understood as being particularly sympathetic to one another – with Bourdieu's emphasis on a Durkheimian social substrate and Bhabha's post-structuralist attention to the shifting sands of textual meaning – there is no essential reason why the two should not be considered alongside one another. Arguing through the prism of post-colonial theory, Bhabha's important contribution has been to claim that the creation of new cultural meaning – of hybrid cultural forms – takes place at the point of contact between existing cultural identities. He crucially rejects the idea of settled, pristine cultures having ever existed in the first place. Bhabha is not offering hybridity as an original meeting of monolithic cultural forms: he is instead arguing that culture has always been constituted through the continual process of hybridisation, with acts of innovation taking place at the periphery of dominant cultural discourse. Bhabha argues that:

> …it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture... by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (Bhabha, 2010: 56)

The notion of a 'third space' strikes a chord when the themes of identity and belonging are considered – it is cultural hybridity that opens up the radical space required for the construction of new social identities.

Applying this theoretical framework to British Muslim musicians, I am claiming that while 'pure' musical styles are anyway essentially nonexistent, there is a fascinating point of contact between the themes of diaspora, nationalism and Islam. It is a potent combination that encourages innovative forms of musical expression, social discourse and identity (both communal and individual). Indeed, many of the musicians considered

in this research draw from multiple sources and make imaginative attempts at synthesising supposedly competing claims to social and cultural identity. While sometimes portrayed as conflicting – or at least not entirely compatible with one another – in subsequent sections of this chapter I will examine evidence to suggest that British Muslim musicians draw from multiple sources of cultural, social and political identity to produce textured interpretations of community, loyalty and belonging. As I have argued, Muslim identity therefore acts as the *third space* through which these supposedly competing or subversive musical traditions are combined.

While Bourdieu and Bhabha are not usually considered complementary thinkers, I believe that their theories can be viably deployed in parallel for two primary reasons. First, it is clearly possible to recognise that hierarchies of power and enculturation do not necessarily exclude partially autonomous instances of cultural or social change. Within the hegemonic frameworks of authorised and normativised cultural, social and religious practice, it is undoubtedly possible to find a glimmer of the unexpected and the novel. Second, British Muslims are often deeply enmeshed within the intersecting dynamics of social class and religious/ethnic culture. The complex relationships between these traditional sites of social analyses are – for British Muslims – starkly evident in a way that can often be concealed by the divergent traditions of sociology and postcolonial theory. By incorporating thinkers and different philosophical/sociological traditions into the analysis, it is perhaps possible more rigorously to deal with the crisscrossing lines of ethnicity, class and religion.

It should also be remarked that – by stressing cultural innovation, agency and hybridity – it is not necessary to jettison Bourdieu's arguments concerning power, structured constraints and the need for practical strategies. Bhabha's cultural autonomy and Bourdieu's habitus are not the Scylla and Charybdis of sociological theory, requiring us necessarily to chart our course one way or the other. Bhabha even argues that all identities are political identities, necessarily tempered by the searing heat of power relations. In relation to British Muslim musicians, I am proposing that it is possible to recognise the constraints of power and the enculturing nature of a hegemonic public realm, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the spaces through which genuine spontaneity, innovation and cultural agency are able to occur.

South Asian Cultural Diasporas: Resistance and Renewal

In some respects, one of the defining features of Muslim music is the interplay between an emergent British Muslim public sphere and discrete networks of diasporic cultural production. South Asian Muslim musicians are especially susceptible to the gravitational pull of a potentially lucrative South Asian cultural scene – a scene where Urdu and Punjabi language music is particularly well regarded. This is compounded by the sense of exclusion that South Asian musicians might occasionally feel from other musical genres. Ahmed, the son of a professional singer from the Punjab region in Pakistan, was born and raised in Bradford. He has long tried to carve out a place for himself as a practicing musician, but it has not always been easy and he has had to adopt something of a flexible approach:

> I used to be an R&B singer, believe it or not [laughs], I was one of the first South Asian R&B, UK born and based, R&B singers. I think it was later on that I realised, or I felt, that as a South Asian R&B singer I wasn't taken seriously. So I started taking an approach towards the South Asian scene, where I wanted to make a name and still be recognised, and that's exactly what I did. And I did start to get recognised and I did start to get a lot of bookings. (Ahmed, 29, October 2010, Bradford).

Moving away from R&B and other styles of popular music, Ahmed began performing a range of Urdu and Punjabi language na'ats, along with covers of well known South Asian musicians, such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Embracing the trans-Pennine South Asian cultural scene – from Leeds/Bradford, across the Pennine mill towns, to Manchester – Ahmed has been able to build a name for himself amongst the South Asian Muslim communities that are established in these particular areas. With this reputation he is often invited to perform at events, including weddings, religious celebrations and multicultural arts festivals. He has additionally attempted to promote himself through various South Asian Muslim media networks – including, for example, the television channels Noor TV and the Ummah Channel – as well as local radio stations, such as Radio Asian Fever in Leeds (which broadcasts in a mixture of English, Urdu and Punjabi).

While the South Asian cultural scene is important as a foundation for performance and reputation, Ahmed has tentatively attempted to broaden his appeal to a wider British Muslim audience; yet he is proud of his musical heritage and he believes that South Asian music can appeal to those beyond the traditional confines of ethnic culture.

Attempts at realising this include writing his own music, which is often based on South Asian classical styles of music (e.g., utilising various *ragas*), as well as additionally incorporating pop music influences (for example, he cites Michael Jackson). It is also important that such music should predominantly incorporate lyrics in Arabic or English – South Asian languages are seen as exclusionary by many young British Muslims. Crucially, Ahmed argues that this particular approach gives him a unique 'selling point' through which he can broaden his appeal to a wider Muslim (and even non-Muslim audience):

> …alhamdulillah, thankfully, I've got many influences. I've combined it in creating my own influence, my own essence, my own style. So when I do classical, when I do R&B, soul, or something, I'll stick the South Asian classical style with it, you know, and it's something that you will never hear. You won't hear it because no one else does it. (Ahmed, 29, October 2010, Bradford)

Ahmed's Pakistani ethnicity and musical heritage provide both a number of constraints and opportunities. While he believes himself to be excluded from mainstream music, he is able to deploy South Asian cultural capital – in the form of South Asian musical styles and influences – as a means both to access Muslim networks and communities in the north of England, as well as to potentially develop an original and attractive style of 'hybrid' music for a wider British Muslim market. He recognises the constraints that he faces – including a sense of exclusion from the wider music industry – and adopts a strategy to take advantage of the status that his performance can achieve in South Asian cultural networks. Nonetheless, his Muslim identity and sense of belonging to a wider community provide him with the confidence he needs to combine musical styles and reach out to a wider Muslim audience.

While there are many South Asian Muslim musicians who follow a similar path to Ahmed – in the sense that they overtly cleave toward South Asian communities and musical traditions – there are also a number of South Asian Muslim musicians who are more circumspect in their engagement with South Asian cultural spheres. Nazeel Azami is one such musician. Born in 1981, to Bangladeshi parents, Azami was raised in Manchester and London, studying at the University of Manchester before becoming a secondary school teacher in physics. Azami's interest in music stems from a family

environment that encouraged, amongst others things, the recitation of classical Bengali poetry. He released his debut (and currently only) album in 2006, under the Awakening Records label, entitled *Dunya*[55]. While Azami acknowledges the subtle influence of Bengali culture on his music – including one song that directly draws from Bengali poetry – this album is clearly oriented toward a more generic Muslim audience. The lyrics are overwhelmingly in English, with some Arabic (Bengali is only used once). The musical style itself is constituted by simple hand percussion, along with singing and backing vocal harmonies that largely utilise *maqams* (Middle Eastern modes), making this an exemplar of the modern nasheed genre.

Like a growing number of South Asian Muslim musicians, Azami produces music that moves beyond a direct rootedness in South Asian culture. He is attempting to develop a musical style that – while perhaps subtly influenced by a Bengali cultural heritage – is more overtly connected to an Arab poetic/nasheed tradition and the English language. Thus, while Azami will often perform at events dominated by a South Asian Muslim audience, he nonetheless approaches the audience as a 'British Muslim', not as a 'British Bengali'. This obviously involves using English instead of Bengali, Urdu, or Punjabi, but it is also more subtly reflected in his demeanour and body language, his clothing, as well as the cultural references and conceptual frameworks that he deploys during his performance. He leaves the audience in no doubt that he belongs to a British, educated, articulate, English-speaking, middleclass and professional culture. This is not to suggest that Azami attempts in any way to conceal or distort his Bengali background – a culture that would often be associated in the UK with poorly educated migrants and manual labour – merely that it is seemingly secondary to his experiences and orientation, as a British Muslim, fluent in the international argot of global Islam. As with Ahmed, for Azami there are two distinct processes at work. First, there is a desire by Azami to pull together multiple cultural threads – ranging from the Bengali poetic tradition, to English-language lyricism, and Arab-style percussion and modal systems. As a British Muslim, and the child of Bengali migrants, Azami lays claim to these multiple cultural traditions. Yet, he furthermore orients this hybrid style toward a broader British Muslim media

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[55] 'Dunya' is a word that has the same meaning in both Arabic and Bengali. It is a religiously-grounded concept that refers to the physical and temporal world, as opposed to transcendent spiritual existence. The word Dunya literally means 'closer' or 'lower'.

culture. This is an attempt to appeal to a supposedly universal audience, where ethnic culture is contained and interwoven with the common currency – the cultural capital – of an international English/Arabic Muslim cultural discourse.

While Azami subtly alters the notion of South Asian Muslim identity in Britain – shifting it toward supposedly universal notions of British Muslimness – it is indeed possible to find Muslim musicians who can be critical – even scathing – of South Asian cultural 'backwardness'. Interestingly, such criticism is often part of a wider movement amongst young Muslims in Britain, who believe their parents are clinging to a Pakistani or Bangladeshi culture that has little relevance for life in the UK. These critics furthermore often claim that there is a blurring of South Asian culture with Islam – so called 'cultural Islam' – and that Muslims in Britain must actively understand their religion in order to discard any unnecessary cultural baggage. The inability of some South Asian Muslim communities to make this change has been described by Faraz from Silk Road as 'a grotesque failure' that 'nobody will talk about'. Discussing his music and the response that it generates, Faraz explained his willingness to challenge 'flawed' cultural practice amongst some South Asian Muslims:

> [The band will] happily sing love songs. We often joke with our audience, and ask them who's never been in love? As if Muslims can't sing a love song… I hope we open up and blow away a few cultural cobwebs that we really don't need, that have been passed down, particularly from South Asian culture. People aren't happy with them, they don't like them, and so people are left with the illusion of a fabricated choice that they have to either accept the culture in its totality or they have to reject it – love it or leave it. So many reject it and walk away. But those that come back find their own little niche and their own way of being a non tribal Muslim. Of course many don't find their path and a great many people are pushed away because of cultural things which don't necessarily sit in Islam… (Faraz, 34, October 2011, Birmingham)

Faraz raises the issue of love, as one example amongst many, where a conservative South Asian culture has been mistaken for 'correct' Islamic practice. He is effectively arguing that the modern, romanticised notion of 'love' (as conceived in contemporary popular culture) is a natural emotional experience for young Muslims in the British context. It is a challenge to diasporic South Asian culture in the UK – with its emphasis on family duty

and arranged marriage (Bano, 2007; Shaw, 2001) – and established discourses relating to religious practice.

Such criticisms inevitably extend into a consideration of cultural production itself. In relation to music, an argument was advanced by some musicians to claim that diasporic South Asian culture is often uncomfortable with musical performance as practiced in the contemporary European context. Two of Faraz's fellow band members, Ash and Atallah, believe they have not always had a sufficiently enthusiastic response when performing for a predominantly South Asian audience in Britain:

> **Atallah:** We actually found that at lots of events the Asian community, particularly, well, not particularly because we've never played at Arab events, but they don't, they're not used to the idea of sitting down and listening to music, it's usually background music or at weddings. So actually they just tend to…

> **Ash:** …Even if they're from quite a liberal family where they'll put on music and dance, or something like that, to sit and watch a performance is something that [they just don't do].

> (Ash, 27 and Atallah, 53, October 2011, Birmingham)

Ash and Atallah are both critical of South Asian performance culture, believing that in many contexts their music is not listened to in the correct way. They are emphasising the primacy of music as an *art form*, first and foremost, not as the sonic backdrop to a broader social event. Their comments do appear to accurately depict the nature of musical performance across both South Asian and Muslim cultural contexts in Britain. Music often tends to be an 'add on' – one element of a larger event, where community, charitable or religious motivations take overt precedence. Atallah and Ash move on during the interview to suggest that this is not always or necessarily the case. They discuss the positive reception that they have had before from a younger, slightly niche, South Asian Muslim audience. They specifically mention how covers of iconic 'Brit-pop' songs – such as 'Wonderwall' by the British band Oasis – have been greeted with cheering and arm waving by an audience that participates in song during the chorus.

Silk Road are part of a small but potentially growing number of musicians who are not just introducing new styles of music to the South Asian Muslim cultural context, but are additionally challenging longstanding notions of performance culture, and injecting socio-cultural concepts into music-meaning that will be more familiar to those who have

been raised in Britain. They are essentially aligning themselves with the wider music culture in Britain – in terms of both style and performance – both in order for access to alternative audiences (i.e., non-Muslim audiences) and as a means to critique the perceived backwardness of a Muslim cultural sphere that can be marked by the shibboleths of South Asia. When asked directly about their place within a 'Muslim music scene', Atallah responded in cautiously negative terms:

> Yeah, I shiver when I think of trying to fit into the Muslim music scene [laughter]. I don't want to. Nonetheless, I appreciate nasheeds… But I think our music is appreciation of instrumental music and it's only for those people who want to listen to instrumental music. It's essentially a recreational and celebratory thing, it's what many listen to, many of the people who come to our events are quite educated, professional Muslims, who want, you know, to go to something a bit more meaningful, and spiritual, and uplifting. (Atallah, 53, October 2011, Birmingham)

This revealing statement introduces a direct reference to the subtext that has been pushing up from beneath the surface of this discussion – a consideration of class. Occasionally the references to class might be overt, such as a mention of the 'correct way' to appreciate the aesthetics of music and performance – this is certainly reminiscent of Bourdieu's claim about the enculturing nature of class and its inbuilt connection to aesthetic value (Bourdieu, 2009). To claim that music is a 'form of art' suggests the utilisation and deployment of middleclass values around taste. Furthermore, the suggestion that 'educated, professional Muslims' are looking for something 'a bit more meaningful' than that offered by nasheeds is also telling. This statement echoes countless informal discussions with professional and well educated Muslims, who have often denigrated nasheeds as 'babyish' and 'naïve', with lyrics that are more akin to 'nursery rhymes'.

Yet the suggestion that nasheeds are an 'inferior' form of music – suitable only for those lacking refined taste or education – is muddied by findings that run contrary to such an analysis. Most nasheed artists are highly educated, in professional careers, and often have an extensive knowledge of music theory and practice. Even when artists might be described as 'working class' – with a particular accent, deportment, and set of expectations that might stereotypically mark them out as such – their deployment of cultural values or behaviour can be complex and often counterintuitive. Socially approved forms of education and status are not requisites for an appreciation of 'art'. This

unsettled picture extends to the fans of music themselves. The results of the survey targeting nasheed fans indicated that the overwhelming majority of respondents were either in higher education or pursuing professional careers (see Chapter 3, p.74). Even when response bias is factored in, I do believe this does something to disprove the suggestion that education is necessarily a decisive factor in whether or not an individual might appreciate the nasheed genre.

Nonetheless, I am arguing that there are distinct class fractures running through Muslim cultural production in Britain – and these cannot always be isolated from ethnicity. It seems clear that younger and/or more educated Muslims are tending to move away from passive mimesis of ethnic musical styles, largely in an attempt to forge new cultural modes of expression for the British context. This runs counter to traditional cultural practice in South Asian communities in the UK, where older, rooted, South Asian-language social groups – especially those in struggling urban environments – tend to preserve diasporic cultural practice as a connection to the homeland. So while 'pure' forms of diasporic music – nasheeds and na'ats – are increasingly being forgotten or significantly adapted by a new generation of assertive, self-confident Muslims in Britain, I do not think it is possible to simply draw the lines of class down between supposedly competing genres of music.

I am instead theorising that class is at the heart of a struggle to define values and taste within the British Muslim field of cultural production. As new forms of music and cultural expression are increasingly developed within emerging British Muslim public spheres – especially the popularised and globally marketed nasheed genre – the anarchic milieu perhaps begins to settle down beneath the weight of accepted values, behaviour and taste. While these may be less marked by diasporic ethnicity than once they might have been, it is nonetheless possible to find an educated, middleclass elite driving these changes – an elite that is furthermore often bound together with business, media and organisational networks of influence and power. As has been shown in relation to South Asian musicians, these individuals often bring with them a set of values and expectations that are shaping or challenging ethnic/religious identities and modes of being. While the impact of this enculturing process is largely beyond the scope of any one research project, it is possible to begin cautiously mapping instances where class-based cultural

practices are increasingly bound together with notions of religion and ethnicity. In the following section I attempt to develop this argument by examining the influence of Middle Eastern ethnicities and middleclass values on the idea of 'Muslimness'.

Sami Yusuf: The Authorised Image of Muslimness

There is no singular ethnic identity that relates to either the Middle East or North Africa. This region, known as MENA[56], is characterised by multiple ethnic groups, languages and cultural practices. There are strong commonalities across the region – including shared cultural, social, religious, geographical and political factors – but it is also 'riven by contradictions and distinguished by variations within' (Halliday, 2003: 27). I am therefore cautious in referring to those British Muslims with ethnic roots in this region as if they are anything like homogeneous: there are interesting points of overlap for Muslim musicians with roots in this region, but also distinct cultural and social differences. Nonetheless, it perhaps makes some sense to incorporate these ethnic categories into the same discussion and recognise their particular interrelatedness. Furthermore, when it is considered that 22.7% of the musicians sampled for this research are from an ethnic background rooted in the Middle East or North Africa, it should be clear that these musicians have a disproportionate influence on the Muslim music scene in Britain.

Sami Yusuf is perhaps the most interesting musician to fall within this category. Yusuf is an ethnic Azeri, born in Tehran but raised in London by parents who encouraged musical practice from a very young age – this included proficiency in Persian instruments such as the tar and tombak. The former is a type of stringed lute, while the latter is considered the principal membranophone of Iran – both are symbols of Persian musical identity. Yusuf was trained by a succession of teachers and musicians in both the classical traditions of Europe and the Middle East. His three albums combine this range of musical and cultural traditions, with a smooth, pop-like veneer. His most successful album, *My Ummah*, globally exceeded sales of four million – no small feat in the age of internet downloading.

Perhaps because of this success, Sami Yusuf has in some respects begun to personify an authorised image of the respectable, pious, but comfortably modern Muslim. Dressed

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[56] MENA: Middle East and North Africa

in clothing that might often combine jeans with a shirt and jacket, projecting a sense of knowing confidence, nonetheless tempered by a humble spirituality, Yusuf's identity appears to cohere into that of the global Muslim – educated, well travelled, familiar with (yet uncorrupted by) the consumer culture of late-modern globalisation. I am arguing that – however innocently this image might have been developed – it nonetheless slots neatly into global Muslim media and cultural discourses that very subtly promote an Arab-influenced image of 'Muslimness'. While this of course contains distinct class and economic connotations, there are nonetheless tracks of ethnic and cultural bias at work, gently equating Islam with everything 'Middle Eastern'. Through clothing, language, accent, deportment and skin colour, a generic, class-based Middle Eastern culture becomes embedded as a neutral marker of Muslim identity.

This cultural imprint is further reinforced by the landscapes that form the backdrop for the sanitised image of the modern Muslim – from the cityscapes of Jeddah or Cairo, to the crimson sun that sinks behind the rocky pinnacles of the Hijaz mountains – these are just some of the images that permeate the music videos of Sami Yusuf. Interwoven with these images are telling markers that signal a particular set of values. Witness the shots of domestic households, spacious and well furnished, with styles indicative of Arab interior décor. Or consider specific scenes, such as in a city park – all sandstone and delicate palms – with a well-dressed man, designer sunglasses on his forehead, reading a book as the evening light draws in. Or Sami Yusuf and his activities across a range of music videos: from a suited presentation in a business boardroom, to driving a jeep into the desert and using a long-focus lens camera to takes shots of the landscape, to scenes that involve violin playing, wood carving and teaching. The image of Sami Yusuf – a global Muslim icon – is persistently reinforced with assumptions about class and ethnicity that nonetheless masquerade as neutral and universal forms of identity and behaviour.

It would be unfair to accuse Sami Yusuf of being anything less than authentic. His deportment and identity are almost certainly a genuine state of being, not a cynically constructed patina for the age of consumerism. He comes from a solidly middleclass, artistic family with strong roots in the Middle East, where he spends much of his time. Yet while the consequences of this ubiquitous discourse remain largely unclear, it is important to recognise that this cultural bias exists and that it has increasing traction

within British Muslim cultural spheres. Sami Yusuf is not alone. There are comparable figures of success in the UK – such as Maher Zain, the Swedish-Lebanese musician – with similar public images that are reliant on a notion of a supposed de-ethnicisation. Clothed in urbane modernity, conversant in the linguistic shibboleths of religion and global capitalism – Arabic and English – these public figures project a normativised vision of Muslim behaviour and identity that is nonetheless rooted in a culture of Middle Eastern consumerism and middleclass ideology.

Figure 8.1: Maher Zain
(Source: Awakening Records)

Figure 8.2: Sami Yusuf
(Source: ETM International)

Leon Moosavi – drawing directly from Bourdieu – has developed a theory of 'Islamic habitus' that has striking relevance when applied to this context:

> Muslimness can be thought of as a religious-based habitus, an 'Islamic habitus', rather than a class-based habitus as Bourdieu focuses on. It is helpful to think about Muslimness in this way because it reflects the notion that being an authentic Muslim who possesses Muslimness is about more than just performance, but about internalizing a whole range of dispositions which is captured in the term habitus. (Moosavi, 2012: 115)

While I would extend the definition of 'Muslimness' to incorporate identity, as well as pre-discursive modes of being, Moosavi's attempt to develop Bourdieu's theory of habitus is relevant for the argument being pursued here. It recognises that there are different ways of 'being Muslim' – that there are unconscious modes of behaviour shaped by the expectations and cultural/social norms of Muslim collectivities. I am claiming that these dispositions are never solely based on religious values, knowledge and theistic outlook. While an individual's habitus is formed through everyday practice and ingrained

social behaviour, an important aspect of the 'everyday' is, of course, the milieu of popular culture and media consumption. I believe that these spheres of cultural production have implications for both unconscious (habitus) and self-conscious/mediated (identity) modes of being.

While I have not been able to engage with Muslim music consumers in more depth on this particular issue (an agenda for future research perhaps), I have nonetheless been able to begin identifying a range of images and behavioural norms, transmitted through music and related flows of Muslim popular culture. Not all musicians conform to this normativised vision, but it is clear that these tropes of Muslimness are present in the imagery of Sami Yusuf (arguably the most influential and popular British Muslim musician). Without disparaging Sami Yusuf's undoubted musical talent, I believe that one reason for Yusuf's success is the neatness with which he slots into dominant cultural and media discourses of 'Muslimness'. Whether consciously or not, Sami Yusuf plays by 'the rules of the game', readily acquiring specific forms of Muslim cultural capital in Britain and elsewhere. Yet this cultural framework does not remain unchallenged. In the next section I will examine how Muslim musicians are also capable of critiquing ethnic and class-based cultural practices/discourses. I will argue that a significant number of musicians understand quite clearly that cultural production is a struggle to influence the nature of Muslim public spheres in the UK.

Black Muslim Musicians: Redefining Muslimness

There are a number of instances where Muslim musicians attempt to disrupt dominant discourses and modes of cultural production in Britain. One example might be the dubstep musician, Celt Islam – a white convert, who describes himself as an 'English Muslim' and produces 'Sufi inspired Global Grooves' for a wider British 'Bass Nation' musical culture[57]. While musicians such as Celt Islam should not be ignored, I believe that he represents a fairly unique instance of cultural change. In contrast, I will argue that a more acute manifestation of broader social and cultural resistance can be found among Black Muslim musicians in Britain.

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[57] http://celtislam.tumblr.com/ [accessed 05.06.12]

Whilst there is a wealth of research on African-American Muslims in the US (for example, see Marable and Aidi, 2009), little has been done to map the relationship between Islam and African and Caribbean migrant communities in Britain. One notable exception is *Black Muslims in Britain* (Reddie, 2009). While this book is not based on significant empirical fieldwork, it nonetheless provides an insight into how Islam is becoming an important religion for many Black people in the UK. As Reddie points out, 9 per cent of Black Britons are Muslim and 13 per cent of Muslims are Black (Reddie, 2009: 149). Furthermore, there is additional anecdotal evidence to suggest that an increasing number of Black men are converting to Islam. Interestingly, Reddie compares this movement of religious change to Rastafarianism in the 1970s:

> The focus on Rastafari is vital because it was the first counter-cultural religious force to capture the affiliations and imaginations of Black youth in Britain… There are clear resemblances between the subversive approach of the Rasta movement in Britain during its heyday and the current counter-cultural positioning of Islam. (Reddie, 2009: 8)

I believe that there are indeed interesting parallels, with a wave of young Black Muslims bringing new ideas, cultural influences and challenging political attitudes with them when they convert to Islam. While a counter-cultural attitude is certainly oriented toward a criticism of mainstream society – and one of the attractions of Islam for Black converts does appear to be a deep and consistent morality – it is also directed at the perceived failings of Muslim communities, both inside and outside of the UK. I am arguing that Black Muslim musicians are some of the most vocal proponents of these critiques, with arguments that often hinge on their own experiences as Black performers in Muslim cultural spheres dominated by Middle Eastern and South Asian influences.

One of the more dispiriting issues for Black Muslim musicians and their fans is the spectre of inter-Muslim racism. Some Black Muslim musicians have argued that they face discrimination when looking to perform at Islamic events, with priority instead being given to South Asian and Middle Eastern performers. This issue flared up after the Global Peace and Unity Event, in October 2010, with claims that Black Muslim musicians had their allotted performance time cut in favour of Pakistani and Arab musicians visiting from abroad. While some questioned this interpretation – suggesting that the event organisers were pushed for time and felt the need to prioritise visiting

international acts – there was nonetheless an argument put forward by some that the South Asian and Arab event organisers privileged performers from their own ethnic diaspora. This was seen as a reflection of the generally poor state of racial affairs within the wider Muslim *umma*. In an extended internet debate following the Global Peace and Unity event, one individual described the situation in remarkably negative terms:

> [W]e need to be moving away from venues that don't embrace us and create our own venues that do embrace us. I'd rather be an Afro-centric brother who happens to be Muslim and invite my African people to sit at my table than to continue to force my way to a so-called Muslim table that has no seat for me. (Jamal, 32, Facebook, October 2010)

I think it is difficult to assess the extent to which this feeling pervades the spectrum of Black Muslim musicians, and indeed Black Muslims more generally. Clearly, it is a sensitive issue that many are reluctant to overtly discuss. Furthermore, the arguments are often more nuanced than they might seem at first blush, with clear recognition by most that racism obviously cannot be blanket-applied to all South Asian and Arab Muslims. Many stress with pride the extent to which they have strong multi-racial friendships across their young Muslim cohort – criticism is instead reserved for their perception of a racism that is largely attributable to an older generation.

I am claiming that these arguments are part of a more general narrative relating to a cultural hierarchy across the wider British Muslim public sphere. It is an argument that I have already advanced in previous sections of this chapter, but it is important to note that it is also being consciously articulated by musicians at the coal face of British Muslim cultural production. According to the claim made by many of these musicians, Islam across the Muslim world is in many respects practiced and understood through the prism of Arab culture, whilst the South Asian majority in Britain additionally impose aspects of diasporic culture from the sub-continent. Regardless of the extent to which these controversial claims might be accepted, it is possible to outline some of the strategies deployed to deal with this perceived discrimination. These strategies are fundamentally rooted in an attempt to redefine notions of Muslimness in modern Britain – something that often involves a restatement of original Islamic values and beliefs. I have identified three primary strategies: (i) the visible promotion of Black ethnicities as compatible with a Muslim identity (ii) identification with a shared, if multi-faceted British Muslimness

(iii) stressing the inclusiveness of Islam – through the concept of the *umma* – and the consequent openness of Muslimness as a concept. I will discuss each of these strategies in turn.

First, there is a noticeable effort by some Black Muslim musicians to promote their diasporic heritage alongside their new Muslim identity – with the aim of showing that the two are entirely compatible. Musicians often do this by highlighting the rich cultural history of the Caribbean or Africa, and by paying homage to their roots. This can take many forms. Some musicians are noticeably vocal about their background – usually through interviews and the management of their public image – refusing to let their ethnic histories and identities become submerged within what they claim is a cultural interpretation of Islam. Sukina, from Poetic Pilgrimage, explained to me during our interview that this was a frequent concern for many Black converts to Islam:

> …a lot of Black people that do convert to Islam, they feel lost, they are like, who am I, who have I got to be, I don't want to be, like, Asian, I don't want to be Arab, I want to be me. (Sukina, 28, February 2011, Cardiff)

As well as celebrating their African or Caribbean ethnic heritage – refusing to let their ethnicity become a silent mark of their past – there are also clear attempts by several musicians to connect Black history with Islam. This ranges from the veneration of Malcolm X – described to me as an inspiring figure for *all* Black people in Britain – through to the case where Muneera from Poetic Pilgrimage described how she felt a stronger sense of Muslim identity when she found out that many African slaves brought over to the Caribbean were Muslim – this served to create a link between herself and an authentic Islamic past. It is no coincidence that the first major tour by Black Muslim musicians, in 2009, was the 'I am Malcolm X Tour'.

Interestingly, several participants also claimed that the promotion of a strong Black identity serves to mollify disgruntled members of their respective non-Muslim communities. Apparently, there can be a suspicion that Black Muslim converts are really attempting to become 'Arab' or 'Asian'. Several musicians have found that, by visibly refusing to abandon their ethnic and musical past, they are more able to share their new life as a Muslim with both friends and family.

Additional attempts to promote Black identity also include the visible incorporation of musical styles from various African and Caribbean diasporas. This can involve, for instance, the utilisation of African instruments, such as the djembe, as well drawing inspiration from particular musical genres, including West African music or reggae. This even includes sampling directly from such music and I touched upon a prominent example of this earlier in the thesis (see Chapter 5, p.124): the song 'Land Far Away', by Poetic Pilgrimage, is a reworking of 'Satta Massagana' by the Jamaican reggae group, the Abyssinians. Along with the fairly obvious significance of Muslim musicians reworking an iconic reggae song, the video itself was filmed in the Caribbean communities of Shepherds Bush in London. It was in Shepherd's Bush that the original Caribbean migrants to the UK – fresh off the *Empire Windrush* and subsequent ships from around the Commonwealth – made their home in the 1950s. Poetic Pilgrimage specifically consider the song to be not just a homage to their musical past, but also a song of thanks to their parents and grandparents, who struggled so hard to make a life in Britain for their children.

Another important musical connection for Black Muslims musicians – and by far the most important – is that with the 'global hip hop diaspora' (especially the authentic American heart of this popular genre). Several of the musicians that I interviewed stressed that, at its best, hip hop is socially conscious, dealing with important issues relevant beyond urban America. I argue, then, that hip hop becomes the ideal vehicle to express many of the concerns that originate from an ethically acute sense of Muslimness. Female musicians additionally mentioned the neo-soul movement in America, which includes artists such as Lauren Hill, Jill Scott and Erykah Badu. Sukina, from Poetic Pilgrimage, made comparisons between female neo-soul artists from the United States and her identity as a Black Muslim woman in the British context:

> The women of this movement were so dignified and gracious in how they carried themselves as women. They were like, you know, they covered their hair and they dressed very modestly and, they had strong, afrocentric tendencies. (Sukina, 28, February 2011, London)

Sukina – a convert to Islam with Jamaican roots – is looking across the Atlantic and finding inspiration for her own sense of Muslimness. The identities, bearing, clothing and deportment of these (non-Muslim) neo-soul artists have helped Sukina define herself as a

Black Muslim woman in contemporary Britain. While Sukina's own personal experiences are of course interesting, it is her highly-visible role as a musician and public figure that will potentially have a wider impact on notions of Muslimness in the British, European and indeed global Muslim context. While the consequences of this are difficult to measure, I am claiming that these musicians do indeed offer a counter-cultural discourse to that offered in wider British Muslim public spheres; a counter-cultural discourse that, by raising the profile of African and Caribbean ethnicity, alters notions of exactly what it means 'to be Muslim'.

A second strategic disposition adopted by some Black Muslim musicians is an attempt to engage with a conception of *British Muslimness*. I think there are two strands to this discourse. The first involves a struggle for the recognition that Black Muslims have their own specific set of experiences within the multifaceted spectra of British Muslim experience. Black Muslim musicians promote the idea that there are components of Black British Muslim identity and deportment that have equal legitimacy in terms of their contribution to a broader British Muslim communality. Importantly, this incorporates influences from the history of African and Caribbean migrants to the UK; the contemporary experiences of Black people in Britain; and the unique perspective that Black converts, in particular, are often able to offer. According to this claim, Black British Muslims are part of a wider British Muslim community. A sense of national identity and belonging is used as a means to make the case for Black Muslimness within the wider Muslim community: a suggestion that, despite the ethnic differences fracturing Muslim communality in Britain, there are nonetheless connecting threads of shared national and religious belonging. Rabiah from Pearls of Islam argued that it was actually music and performance that instilled her with a much greater sense of confidence in her identity:

> Pearls of Islam brought out confidence in all of us…. I think I understand and I'm happy with who I am: an Afro-Caribbean British Muslim women. When you're put in that position, when you get so many questions and doubts that come up in your own mind, you have to deal with it. (Rabiah, 23, November 2011, London)

Rabiah and other Black Muslim musicians therefore often subtly blend their ethnic identity into a broader tapestry along with other religious and national identities. Taking

this context into account, Black Muslim musicians have been described by some as the authentic voice of a *community within a community* – a voice that sometimes struggles to be heard in the wider British Muslim conversation.

I am also claiming that an additional and related aspect of this strategy is the promotion of shared British Muslim experience. This involves acknowledgement that Muslims in the UK face a set of challenges that can only be overcome through a sense of unity and a vision of the common weal. Black Muslim musicians are therefore seen as legitimated in dealing with issues portrayed as affecting Muslim communities across Britain: from discourses on radicalism and political discrimination, to issues around Islamophobia and inter-faith relations. These arguments are deployed to prioritize British Muslim musicians – crucially including the voice of Black Muslims – over the imposition of transnational musicians who appeal only to a specific diasporic grouping. For instance, I have found that events are often criticized for not including a significant number of English-language musicians – that is, musicians who are able to speak directly to the British experience. Referring to a Global Peace and Unity event from several years prior, and within the context of a debate about discrimination against Black performers, one individual commented:

> I'm a Londoner and didn't see *any* Londoners, or any fellow British person for that matter perform that night apart from Yusuf Islam! Ain't being funny but the majority didn't wanna listen to old school acoustics… its good to see our brothers performing from all over the world in diff lingos, but we wanted to see our English brothers too and be proud of 'em. (Nabil, 21, Facebook, October 2010)

As this comment makes clear, the notion of a shared British Muslim community – a community that one *can* and *should* be 'proud of' – a community further localized into the idea of being both English and from London – emphasises the important role that national belonging can play in asserting specific ethnic entitlements. I believe that Black Muslimness is seen as more relevant for Muslims in the UK because of its rootedness in the specifics of British Muslim experience – unlike performers from South Asia or the Middle East.

The third and final discourse strategically deployed by Black Muslim musicians (and indeed others) is the universality of Islam and the inclusive nature of the Muslim *umma*. I

will explore this concept more fully in a later chapter – so I will only discuss it here in brief – but there are multiple themes that run throughout this concept. First and foremost, the ethnic and racial diversity of Islam is seen as evidence for the universal appeal of the 'true faith' – it is something to be inspired by and it is something that sets an example for the rest of the world. Many Muslim musicians see their multi-ethnic fan-base as living evidence of this claim. They note with extreme pride their ability to reach out to different audiences – ascribing this success to the distinct nature of Muslim diversity. It is through such diversity, many argue, that a more sensitive and responsive understanding of the world can be achieved.

Despite this optimistic outlook, this ideal is also understood by many as a utopian objective that has not yet been fully realized by the Muslim world. Indeed, it is often suggested that the *umma* has a number of very troubling issues relating to racism and cultural tolerance. A vision of the original multi-racial community created by the Prophet Muhammad – including the story of the companion of the Prophet, and former slave, Bilal – is one narrative through which these perceived failings are challenged. Furthermore, sympathetic religious scholars are often referenced in order to provide legitimacy to the claim that the Muslim *umma* must struggle to live up to its own aspirational ideals.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have made visible two competing tendencies. On the one hand, musicians are capable of feeding into normative accounts of Muslim identity and behaviour. This occurs through the attempt that some musicians make to engage with specific musical networks – networks that might be structured by the cultural parameters of a specific diasporic public sphere – as well as through the impact of powerful ethnic and class-based discourses relating to both Muslim identity and pre-discursive behaviour (i.e., Muslimness). I invoked the theories of 'cultural production' and 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1993; 2009) to make sense of the structuring pressures and practical strategies that undoubtedly shape Muslim music in Britain.

Yet I have also argued that musicians resist, disrupt and subvert the influence of these networks and discourses on British Muslim cultural production. This occurs most

significantly through the activities and rhetoric of those musicians from an African or Caribbean ethnic heritage. It is furthermore not uncommon for some of these tendencies to work against one another (e.g., class-based expectations can be prioritised over the 'backwardness' of ethnic culture). Nonetheless, drawing from Bhabha (1994), I have argued that a conception of 'Muslimness' acts as a 'third space'. It provides musicians with the confidence and justification necessary to draw together multiple cultural strands and perceived musical traditions. While often still working within the overarching context of a particular Muslim public sphere in Britain, musicians nonetheless often appear to be extremely well-disposed to plural and hybrid forms of cultural production. Indeed, musicians are generally consistent in their attempt to broaden notions of Muslim collectivity and belonging. They furthermore also often attempt to justify their inclusionary impulses through a return to the 'original' beliefs and practices of Islam, as well as the cultural traditions that have shaped the interlinked 'Muslim experience'. This therefore represents a unique combination of social, religious and cultural realities beneath the perceived aegis of a shared communal faith – yet it furthermore recognises the intersecting and influential pressures of class and ethnic norms.

9. The Politics of Belonging: Nationalism, Transnationalism and the *Umma*

Introduction

In this chapter I will consider issues of belonging and community at various levels of Muslim social activity, ranging from the local and national through to the multiple streams of transnationalism. My primary concern in this chapter will be with notions of group membership – of collectivity. During these discussions I will pay particular attention to the concept of the *umma*. Often conceived as a form of supra-national communal identity and/or discourse, I will suggest throughout this chapter that the *umma* is deployed by musicians with a number of contextual and inflected conceptions of belonging in mind. The *umma* becomes a concept that is used by musicians for a whole number of ideological and practical reasons. Motivations range from a desire to encourage a sense of international responsibility amongst Muslims, through to attempts at refashioning British Muslim identity, invoking notions of a European Islam, and even utilising the concept as a means to universalise or broaden specific local subjectivities. In this chapter, then, through an examination of the lyrics and discourses produced by Muslim musicians, I will attempt to demonstrate that concepts of collectivity are utilised as vehicles for the advancement of varied interests and ideologies.

In the first section I will examine recent theoretical arguments concerning the *umma* and its relevance as a concept for the study of Muslims in the contemporary world. After a consideration of more general debates concerning the *umma*, I will argue that Robertson's seminal theory of glocalization (Roberston, 1992) is particularly helpful in understanding how broader notions of Muslim collectivity – including the *umma* – are understood and enacted at the more local level. In the second section I take this theoretical assumption and explore exactly what this means for Muslim musicians. I will examine the ways through which the *umma* and other notions of Muslim collectivity are applied to a variety of social contexts – including local communities, British nationality and European regionalism. In the final section I will look at specific dynamics of

transnationalism and internationalism. This involves an analysis of how Muslim musicians use the *umma* as a conceptual foundation for political agendas that deal with humanitarian and international issues, challenge corrupt leaders in Muslim-majority countries, and – in a small number of cases – critique the Western secularist and capitalist socio-political model. By the conclusion of this chapter it will be clear that interpretations of group membership are continually deployed by musicians for a variety of reasons that are not necessarily grounded in actual social and communal relationships.

The *Umma*: Theoretical Debates

I am suggesting from the outset that the *umma* is a complex term defying straightforward analysis. While it is often reduced in common parlance to something reminiscent of a world-systems theory – the *global* conceptualisation of *all* Muslims – there has been an attempt by various academics more fully to flesh-out the contemporary significance of this concept. In this section I will outline three of these theories – by Bowen, Mandaville and Grillo – before attempting to connect the *umma* to Robertson's celebrated thesis concerning 'glocalization'. These theories will have clear applicability throughout the remainder of this chapter. They have partially guided my attempts to understand the relevance of the *umma* and other forms of Muslim collectivity for Muslim musicians in Britain.

Bowen (2004b) provides a simple and coherent typology of 'Islamic transnationalism' that incorporates a consideration of the *umma*. He offers three categories: demographic movement (migration), transnational religious institutions (such as Tablighi Jamaat) and 'Islamic knowledge/debate' (a transnational Muslim public space). For Bowen, the multiple levels of Muslim transnationalism are infused with a belief that Islam necessarily transcends political circumscription, that 'this consciousness first and foremost creates an imagination of an Islamic community transcending specific boundaries and borders' (Bowen, 2004b: 882). Bowen does not identify the *umma* as part of a typology of transnationalism; instead, he suggests that it is an *idea* operating within and across specific instances of Muslim transnationalism – though Bowen does place a distinct emphasis on the function that it has within a transnational setting. I will argue that notions of a 'universal Islamic community' are certainly not confined to

transnationalism. Conceptions of the *umma* are often understood within a local and national context, and this should not be overlooked due to a limited (though important and understandable) focus on transnational manifestations.

Mandaville (2009) offers an analysis of transnational Islam that is in many respects similar to Bowen's. A key difference can be found in the addition of a fourth category: the discourse and practice of an *umma*-oriented solidarity. Mandaville seems to suggest that a transnational space – the fertile nexus of technology, global cities and intellectual ferment – exists within which multiple understandings of universal Islam are both raised and in some instances acted upon. Mandaville recognises that there are difficulties with this classification – commenting that conceptions of the *umma* are 'nebulous' at best – though he nonetheless argues that this fourth category is analytically useful and should be conceived of as distinct from a broader transnational Muslim public space. Mandaville suggests that this category represents transnational political and religious mobilisation around the concept of 'universal Islam', as well as the development of an 'Islamic consciousness', in the sense of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006). I would remark that, while it is certainly tempting to conceive of a 'high' category – a self-conscious supranational discursive space – it is difficult to sustain this as a distinct and coherent whole. I have already suggested that conceptions of the *umma* do not necessarily operate on a transnational level, so it is necessary to point out that, at the very least, a discussion of the *umma* should certainly not be confined to the transnational level.

This aside, even when focusing on the transnational, I am sceptical about Mandaville's proposed analytic separation. While it is possible to tentatively point toward a broad discourse concerned with the notion of the *umma*, diverse strands of this discourse are embedded within many different contexts: whether transnational religious movements, from Salafism (Wiktorowicz, 2005) to Sufism (Spellman, 2004; Geaves, 2000); international Islamic jurisprudence (Ali, 2009); regional political organisations (Salih, 2004); and diasporic identity politics (Maghissi, 2006). Despite a seemingly shared 'Islamic acrolect', the ambitions, concerns and strategies of the actors within these contexts are often wildly different. For instance, the *umma* can be conceived, in political terms, as the loadstone for a communal utopia (in the European public sphere for example), or, in spiritual terms, as the model of individual behaviour (through the

conceptualisation of an 'idealised' member of the *umma*). Indeed, by utilising the categories that Bowen (2004b) outlined, it is perhaps more consistent to argue that conceptions of the *umma* are found and enacted across different transnational levels: whether when making sense of migration and diaspora; when organising politically, socially or religiously at a transnational level; or when creating a transnational space for debate and the exchange of knowledge. And such an argument furthermore relies on ignoring the national and local manifestations of the *umma* (a topic that I will discuss shortly).

Carving out a 'high' category – the *logos* of 'Islamic consciousness' – as Mandaville does, runs the risk of reifying a number of context-bound conceptions. I am not suggesting that this discourse does not exist – no matter how diffuse and plural – just that it should not be so casually uprooted from the specific contexts within which it is grounded. While certainly not Mandaville's intention, the danger posed by this categorisation is clearly evident in certain strains of academic literature – such as Saunders (2008), who, in Huntington-like fashion (Huntington, 1996), paints the lurid picture of an 'ummahist' movement of which 'the West' must be wary.

The third and final analysis of Muslim transnationalism (and the *umma*) has been outlined by Grillo (2004). He suggests that there are three ways in which we might conceptualise Islam as a transnational phenomenon: the existence of transnational circuits (he takes the flow of short-term West African migrants to Europe as an example); a bi-national or pluri-national framework (covering a variety of agendas, ties and actions); and, lastly, the *umma* as transethnicisation:

> There are numerous examples of the 'transethnicisation' of Islamic populations in countries such as Britain, and elsewhere. By 'transethnicisation' I mean the emergence of an identification ('British Muslim', 'Musulman francais'), covering all strands of Islam from the point of view of religious doctrine and practice, and national and ethnic origin. (Grillo, 2004: 866)

This is helpful because it outlines transnationalism as *process*, rather than *object*. Instead of conceptualising the *umma* as a coherent, discursive entity, resting at the matrical interstices of a global tectonic, Grillo suggests that it can be understood as a concept bound to the process through which a universal vision of Islam (and therefore Muslim

identity/community) can be asserted beyond the confines of ethnicity. The distinction is subtle and should be clarified. Conceiving of an '*ummatic* discourse' – analytically separable from specific instances of transnationalism – is an unnecessary bringing together of diverse and sometimes-conflicting phenomena. In contrast, by recognising that conceptualisations of 'the *umma*' are employed, either strategically or organically, as constituents in varied processes of 'transethnicisation', Grillo isolates a minimal thread that arguably runs through all conceptions of the *umma*: some comprehension of a universal, idealised Islam and/or Muslim community that is theoretically open to all.

This minimal categorisation is analytically helpful in the sense that it allows the identification of real-world instances of the *umma* and Muslim collectivity, while nonetheless remaining open to the varied and unstable manifestations that it enables. His use of 'British Muslim' and 'Musulman francais' as an example is highly significant, for they are complex, internally-diverse embodiments of negotiated identities, centred around the notion of an idealised Islam or religious community. Such idealising may be bound by national, local or individual contexts, yet from within such specificity springs a broader comprehension of Islam. Ignoring for a moment the contested nature of 'British Muslimness', I would suggest, for example, that a British Muslim conception of the *umma* is synchronised with a comprehension of being 'British Muslim'. It is a *universal* vision rooted in a *local* context – not merely (or even necessarily) in the sense of brandishing a clutch of distinct cultural markers, but through the local development of normative behaviour that has been transposed into a vision of globalised Islam.

While this might seem like a rather straightforward and superficial claim, it is striking – in relation to the *umma* – how the academic gaze has settled on the history and discourse of a transnational Muslim elite (for example: Ali, 2009; Archer, 2009; Bowen, 2004a; 2004b; Mandaville, 2009; Roy, 2006; Saunders, 2008; Sayyid, 2001; Volpi, 2007;). The *umma* becomes another intellectualised creed – challenging the post-Westphalian consensus – competing with pan-Arabism, communism and other secular ideologies – tempered or torn down by the flow of history. While these studies are certainly a valuable contribution, they are narrowly conceived in the sense that they draw largely from the public sphere(s) of Islamic transnationalism. This fails to capture the everyday conceptions of the *umma* that are so vitally important. While the transnational

debates about the 'nature of the *umma*' – among religious scholars, activists, politicians and intellectuals – are significant, so too are the overlooked developments taking place at a national, local and individual level. In reaching down to the very roots of society, it might be asked: what impact does the idea of the Islamic *umma* actually have on the lives and experiences of 'ordinary' Muslims? How is it conceptualised and lived? What rights, responsibilities, ties and bonds of solidarity does it engender? These are hugely important questions that remain largely unanswered.

In many ways, the previous argument chimes with Robertson's seminal and well-known theory of 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1992; 1995). It is therefore worth briefly examining the claims made by Robertson and considering exactly why they are relevant to any discussion regarding the *umma*. In an important essay, Robertson (1995) argued that globalisation has been interpreted as the creeping homogenization of the local by the global, and that there was therefore a tendency to polarize the local *against* the global – the implication being that 'home' is gradually destroyed by the 'forces' of globalisation. As Robertson pointed out, there is a fundamental flaw with such reasoning:

> …it makes no good sense to define the global as if the global excludes the local. In somewhat technical terms, defining the global in such a way suggests that the global lies beyond all localities, as having systemic properties over and beyond the attributes of units within a global system. (Robertson, 1995:34)

In contrast to this view, Robertson suggests that the dialectical interplay between the global and the local must be acknowledged. According to Robertson there should be a particular emphasis on the way through which localities are continually reconstructed in relation to the global. Yet it must also be remembered that the global is continually viewed through the lens of locality. The local remains unique and singular, even while it adapts – in its own idiosyncratic way – to the powerful trends of globalisation.

Robertson's theory of glocalization helps in attempting to fully appreciate the conceptual dynamics of the *umma* and Muslim collectivity. I would suggest that it is a mistake to restrict any conceptualisation of the *umma* to the level of transnationalism. One the one hand, it is it a concept that has specific resonance at a transnational, national *and* local level. Yet it is not even always clear if these geographical and spatial

hierarchies are entirely consistent – the local, national, transnational and global continually blur into one another.

There might indeed be hegemonic and transnational Islamic discourses – global, if you will – that seek to offer or shape a comprehension of the *umma*. Yet there are also a seething multitude of 'local' interpretations and ideas regarding the *umma* and other forms of Muslim collectivity. Less apparent, perhaps, is where the global finishes and the local begins. There is a confusing mix that integrates the *umma* (as a concept of global Islam) with various manifestations of transnationalism, regional, national and local ideas. Bowen (2004a), for example, touches on this dynamic interpenetration with his examination of French Muslims and their ambiguous relationship to both French national culture *and* Muslims outside of France. This uncertain dynamic in France involves a range of actors – both internal and external to France – including international Islamic scholars, French Islamic organisations, Muslim public intellectuals, local religious leaders, and members of the public.

It is perhaps worth stating again that academic scholarship, when theorizing the idea of 'global Islam', has often tended to focus on a transnational Muslim elite – whether in terms of religious authority or political influence. This has often taken place at the expense of other levels of activity, such as the national and the local. It is necessary, then, to restate a research agenda and attempt to understand notions of the *umma* and Muslim collectivity across a range of intersecting levels. The study of Muslim musicians and related spheres of cultural production has proved particularly effective in pursuing this analysis.

Muslim Collectivity: Context and Contestation

I am arguing, then, that the *umma* is a concept that must be understood contextually and through the varying local interpretations that continually shift the boundaries of membership. In fact, I would go somewhat further, suggesting that the *umma* is deployed strategically as a means to control and shape perceptions of – and membership in – a 'real' and clearly-defined Muslim collectivity. While the *umma* might often reference global manifestations of Islam, it is used just as frequently to refer to specific and localised Muslim communities.

It is not apparent how extensively this claim might be sustained beyond the scope of my own fieldwork, but an examination of Muslim musicians and their fans does show that the *umma* is often centrally placed in an effort to redefine Muslim communalities in various local, national and regional contexts. In these instances, the *umma* often becomes interchangeable with reference to a particular Muslim collectivity. Thus, individuals will talk about the 'British *umma*' or the 'local *umma*' or perhaps the 'young *umma*'. Whether or not the word '*umma*' is used, the process itself represents an eagerness to continually redefine and contextualise notions of Muslim belonging. It represents a conceptual framework that is additionally buttressed by the specific networks – local, national and transnational – that emerge through musical and cultural practice. Aidi has already coined the term 'the Hip Hop *Umma*' (Aidi, 2004), but there is a broader point to be made about the Muslim networks and socio-religious groupings that emerge through various streams of cultural practice.

I wish to identify three primary realms of belonging where the *umma* and other concepts or metaphors of Muslim collectivity can be found at work. These are traditional areas of demarcation: (i) the local (ii) the national (iii) and the transnational. My overarching claim is also straightforward: in all of the instances that I have been able to examine, notions of group membership are both shaped by emerging and pre-existing musical networks, as well as being utilised strategically to promote and contest various notions of Muslim identity and ideology. In particular, the *umma* itself often acts as a rhetorical and conceptual device in the formation of collective boundaries and conceptions of belonging.

Local Belonging

Perhaps the most interesting area where musicians and their fans deploy interpretations of the *umma* is on the local level – a seeming inversion of the typically global-view that permeates this concept. This is manifested most commonly in the conceptualisation of a community or group as a small and discretely unique *umma* in itself. After a successful performance at an educational event in London, for example, the hip hop duo Poetic Pilgrimage and others were congratulated on now belonging to the 'Broomfield mini-*umma*'. This is a small instance where notions of Muslim collectivity, musical

performance and ideological approval are combined. Honorary inclusion in this particular Muslim *umma* was seen as a signal of support for the controversial hip hop duo – a loaded form of approval that represents a symbolic stance toward controversial issues running across the Muslim world (such as gender segregation etc). It is through these localised conceptualisations of belonging, then, that there are attempts to deal with broader issues transcending the locality itself.

Harlesden Ummah Community Centre (HUCC) is a striking example of this claim. HUCC was founded in 2006 by Mustapha Badru, a Nigerian migrant and former professional dancer who had travelled to London during the 1980s, before undergoing a religious revival and opening an Islamic clothing company. Harlesden itself is an area of London that is famed for its Caribbean heritage. Once notorious for gun crime and organised gangs, this urban crime culture has gradually been turned around in Harlesden over the last decade or so. Part of the movement to challenge the violence and corrosiveness of this culture has centred around the *da'wah* activities of HUCC – that is, reaching out to the local community with Islamic values and beliefs. These activities included the founding of a nasheed group by Mustapha Badru – Talaalbadru & Friends – as a means to raise money for the new HUCC premises. It also includes the regular organisation of music events as a fundraising tool. Yet of particular interest is the founding of a successful hip hop group at the centre, known as Young Ummah.

Young Ummah (see Figure 9.2 overleaf) is comprised of three young men, in their twenties, two of whom are actually the children of Mustapha Badru. Producing music that deals with a range of issues – including the remembrance of Allah, religious practice, faith and marriage – the group attempt to reach out to young people (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) both in their locality and across the UK. With a self-declared background that is rooted in the 'street culture' of urban Britain, Young Ummah attempt to channel their experiences into a form of contemporary music that consciously connects with a younger generation:

Aged ten, holding knives for the olders,
People on my back, just like my damn shoulders…
Aged fourteen, I was moving like I was eighteen,
Spittin balls and telling you, what the latest thing seem?
I never knew Islam was the straight deen,
I was led astray on the roads, the fake deen,

But now I'm sixteen, it's time to wise up,
I never know, Allah might send the end to say your time's up,
So I stick to my deen and young ummah,
Forbid evil and abide by the sunnah.

Young Ummah – 'Islam's the Only Way' (2008)

Through lyrics such as these and other modes of self-presentation (photography, fashion, interviews etc), I would argue that Young Ummah attempt to carve-out a sense of normalised religious collectivity and belonging that is founded on both locality and cultural specificity. I am claiming that their localised background and experiences – rooted in both the Muslim and 'street culture' communities of Harlesden – are broadened out to encompass young Muslims across the UK. They utilise the particularities and colloquialisms of the local 'Harlesden Ummah' as a vehicle to connect with the diffuse and abstract experiences of a general and emerging Muslim generation – of the 'young *umma*'. In doing so they are specifically deploying the concept of the *umma* as a means to reformulate the experiences of young Muslims in Britain under the rubric of commonality. The *umma* becomes a concept that – through the connections between a Muslim youth community and a common set of experiences – normalises the experiences of young Muslims in Britain.

Figure 9.1: Young Ummah
(Source: Young Ummah)

National Belonging

Despite concern amongst some Muslims over the 'dividing tendencies' of nationalism, there is nonetheless a simultaneous movement to fashion an idealized notion of Muslim identity – an identity that is based on the idea of the British Muslim community. This occasionally involves invoking the idea of a 'British *umma*', but more often entails a simple reference to either 'British Muslims' or the 'Muslim community'. At the heart of such debates is a desire to overcome the ethnic, sectarian and cultural differences that pull apart the 'Muslim community in Britain'. While this process encompasses considerations other than just ethnicity, it is nonetheless theoretically comparable to Grillo's notion of 'transethnicisation' (Grillo, 2004). It is a concept of collectivity that both contains and overcomes traditional dividing lines.

In the case of Muslim musicians, there is an attempt to overcome the 'problems' of diversity by emphasizing the particular strengths that an inherent multiplicity can actually endow on the British Muslim *umma*. Sukina, from Poetic Pilgrimage, epitomized this view in a statement that she issued to her fans:

> We have a culturally rich Ummah in this country and there's nothing wrong with shining all of our lights!!! (Sukina, Poetic Pilgrimage, Facebook, October 2010).

Sukina is articulating a view that most Muslim musicians in Britain hold to a greater or lesser degree. It is the recognition that Muslims in Britain are uniquely diverse; that the drawing together of these cultural differences, beneath the aegis of Islamic belief, is the beginning of a progressive and cosmopolitan model for wider British society. An imagined British Muslim *umma* correspondingly becomes the conceptual loadstone for this optimistic set of values. It is not without significance that Ayman Muhammad – a Muslim rapper from The Planets and the founder of the Islamic clothing company Tawheed Is Unity – used an 8th Century gold coin in his promotional material. This coin (see Figure 9.3 overleaf), attributed to King Offa, is inscribed with Arabic and is generally considered the earliest manifestation of Islam in Britain. It is symbolic of the claim that Muslims make concerning their belonging to both British society and history.

Figure 9.2: King Offa's gold imitation dinar, circa Ad773-96
(Source: British Museum)

Across a range of musical styles, then, British Muslim musicians conceive of their music as a symbolic and cultural exemplar of this possibility. Muslim musicians are proud of their attempt to combine a range of musical styles – including Western and diasporic musical forms – with a set of fundamental Islamic values. Usman, the drummer from Aashiq al-Rasul, was keen to emphasise the sense of responsibility that has adhered to his nasheed group. Through the 'fusion' of belief and culture, Usman argues that music can be used to strengthen a sense of British Muslim communality – a process that additionally forges stronger connections to wider British society:

> I think from where I'm standing, when you hear, for example, the Call to Prayer or a song that fuses… different religious beliefs and cultural setups, as is the case for us being here, British Muslims. I think… there's not enough emphasis. A lot of work needs to be done in terms of building bridges and bringing people together. I've got this thing in me where it's almost like, think local, act local, and I think what our songs do is recognise those kind of efforts in terms of the link between culture, beliefs, different approaches, and I think that's something we try to do with our music. (Usman, 33, October 2010, Birmingham)

Usman is suggesting that Muslim musicians are well-placed in an effort to reconcile supposedly competing cultural and religious traditions. To create a coherent sense of

identity and communal narrative from the huge diversity that clearly runs through the wider British Muslim community.

In acknowledging the possibility of a diverse but overarching and coherent Muslim community in Britain, Muslim musicians are particularly aware of their own status as role models. The rapper, Rakin, from Mecca2Medina, has argued that Muslim musicians are seen as particularly important in reaching out to a younger generation of Muslims – a generation that might be confused about the compatibility of their ethnic heritage, British cultural identity and Islamic beliefs:

> So I think, you know, a lot of Muslims see us as icons, role models, in the Muslim community, especially because of what we talk about, especially because they understand that, you know, there's a need for role models for the young Muslims coming up, there's a need for role models. We've had so many parents thanking us for what we do because their children are influenced by what we're talking about, by our positive message, you know, and it's making them be proud of their religion, be proud of their faith. (Rakin, 41, July 2011, London)

It is with this understanding in mind that Muslim musicians frequently attend schools and community groups across the country, running workshops that deal with issues around identity, integration and faith. Such activities are almost as important as their music for some musicians. It is a direct form of practical engagement that seeks to capitalise on this notion of a progressive British Muslim collective identity.

Transnational Belonging

It is of course possible to identify various transnational Muslim communities that operate both within and across national boundaries. These range from ethnic and diasporic Muslim collectivities, through to political and sectarian organisations. Yet traditional forms of transnational Muslim collectivity are in some instances being replaced by alternative forms of regionalism and supra-nationalism. In relation to Muslim musicians, it is clear that this communal and conceptual shifting is at work within various transnational musical networks. In actual fact, these networks have partly emerged through the specific arenas of transnationality that bind musicians and cultural producers together. While there are perhaps several examples of this transnational phenomenon –

including the transatlantic Muslim connection – I will focus in this section on the phenomenon of a European Muslim sense of collectivity.

It is apparent that Muslim musicians have strong links with Europe – particularly in the north of Europe – and that performances in Scandinavia, France and Germany have now become a regular feature for some musicians. This is combined with regular internet contact between Muslim musicians and their growing European fanbase. British Muslim musicians have accordingly highlighted the important connection that they have with continental Europe, stressing with pride the growing sense of community and cultural exchange that takes place between Muslims in Europe.

While the implications of this remain vague and largely unresearched, I was continually struck by the frequent evocation of Al-Andalus by Muslim musicians. Indeed, the medieval empire of Muslim Spain has become something of a symbolic and metaphorical exemplar for European Muslims. It is perceived by Muslim musicians and others to have been a period of cultural vibrancy and social harmony – there is a particular interest in the inter-faith reputation of Al-Andalus, as well as the cultural and intellectual output from this unique period of history (including philosophy and poetry). It was no coincidence that Faraz – the songwriter, vocalist and guitarist from Silk Road – turned to Al-Andalus in his attempt to explain why he practices music:

> I hope that our music will inspire the next generation to make beautiful songs that lift the heart and soul and quell the popular trend to create noise that only spits and spews. One of the things that, particularly Muslim civilization in Spain did, was to write volumes of work studying music and cadences and harmonies and how they affect the human heart. They built the first mental hospital that used music as its only form of healing, because the power of music has always been known. There's been no denial of the power of music, but it's all about how it is used. (Faraz, 34, October 2011, Birmingham)

Faraz is not alone in his awareness of the legacy that has been bequeathed to Muslims and Europeans by Al-Andalus. The interest that Muslim musicians show in this period of history has extended to lectures and workshops on Al-Andalus, including a spiritual retreat by musicians and others to the region (see Figure 9.4 overleaf). Organised by Sheikh Babikir Ahmed – the influential religious leader who has inspired a generation of British Muslim hip hop artists – the retreat involved a range of activities, including poetry workshops by musicians such a Poetic Pilgrimage and Mohammed Yahya.
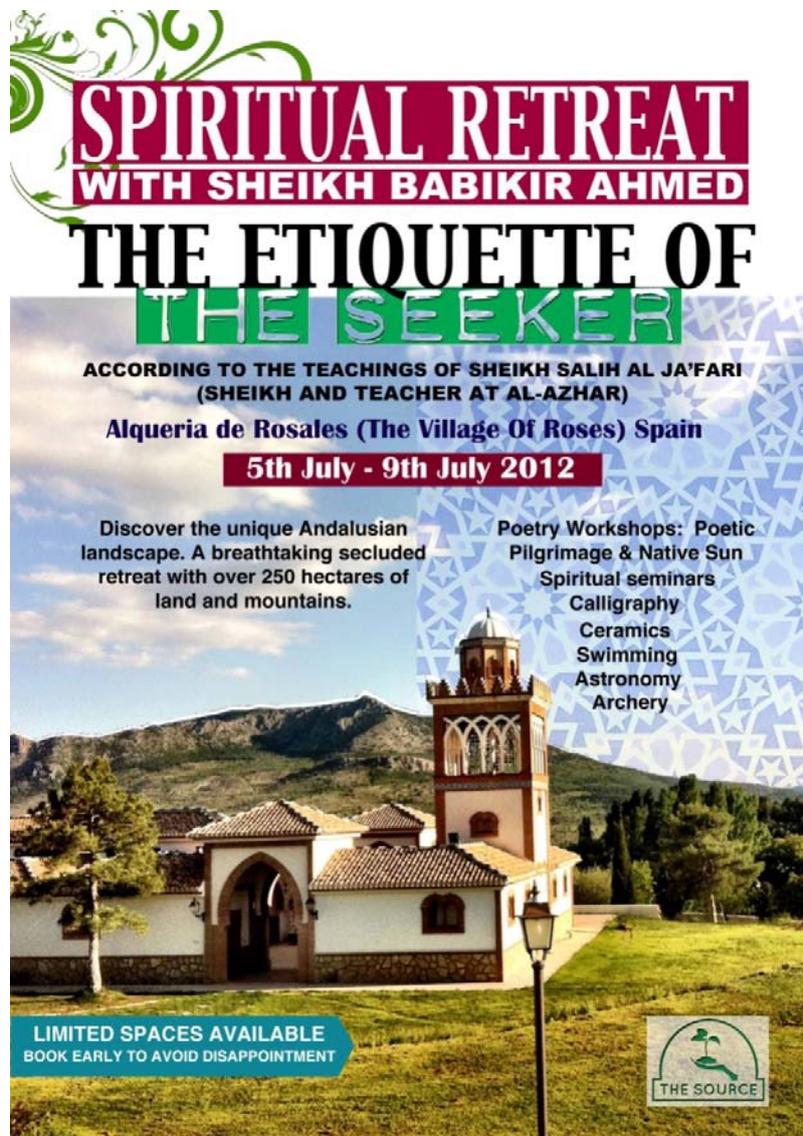
Figure 9.3: Poster for a spiritual retreat in Alqueira de Rosales, July 2012
(Source: The Source)

Muslim musicians of course have strong connections elsewhere – transatlantic, diasporic and Middle Eastern links are absolutely central for most. Yet the emotional and cultural connection to Europe is unique. In practical terms, the proximity of Europe enables the development of performance circuits that are not feasible elsewhere. Yet beyond the material significance of Europe, Muslim musicians appear to maintain a significant cultural and emotional connection with Europe. This supports a similar claim

made by Herding (2011) and other scholars (e.g., Herrera & Bayat [eds.]), who have claimed that young Muslims in Europe are increasingly promoting a form of European Islam through popular culture and alternative forms of media. The long-term implications of this are unclear, but it does seem apparent that musicians are dynamic figures within the evolving creation of a distinct European Muslim community.

The Politics of International Responsibility

While conceptions of the *umma* might often be deployed with a range of local, national and ideological motivations in mind, there is nonetheless an undeniable connection between this concept and a powerful strain of Muslim internationalism. I do not wish to follow Mandaville in attempting to theorise the *umma* as a supranational discursive space, but I do intend to highlight the pervasive and interpenetrating discourse that depicts Muslims as a coherent 'international community'. This discourse particularly emphasises the collective responsibilities and common interests that bind Muslims together across national boundaries. It is relevant to consider this ideological and conceptual movement because Muslim musicians are often intimately involved in attempts to develop and promote variations of this discourse. As I have argued throughout this thesis, these musicians are influential public figures in their own right. Or, to put it more simply: their opinion matters. It is therefore relevant to consider the message that these musicians transmit concerning international politics, foreign policy and global humanitarian issues. The stance that Muslims in Britain take on these issues can have significance for their relationship to wider society and the state, not to mention the transnational connections that are potentially developed through a burgeoning internationalist outlook.

It was clear throughout the fieldwork, then, that the *umma* – or a more general and less defined global Muslim collectivity – was an important lens through which international issues were often understood. At music events across the country I would often find the word and concept in evident circulation, with event organisers and presenters on stage using the term to evoke feelings of collectivity and concern. It was a familiar pattern: efforts to raise money for charity or to provoke interest in a particular international issue would be continually buttressed with reference to 'our *umma*' or the 'one *umma*'. Certain

musicians themselves would also utilise this discourse – whether at events, through informal interaction and online debates, or occasionally through their music itself. In all of these different contexts, this powerful discourse emphasises unique and indelible international connections of solidarity between Muslims.

Such claims are not particularly surprising or original – the saliency of foreign policy and international affairs for British Muslims is well documented (Yaqoob, 2003; Birt, 2005; Gillan & Pickerill, 2008; Phillips & Iqbal, 2009). Yet I do believe that it is relevant to examine the specific ways through which this general discourse is deployed. After all, there is a significant difference between drawing on the *umma* as a rhetorical mechanism to raise funds for charity, on the one hand, and using it to radically reject the conventions of British democratic nationalism on the other. Accordingly, with specific reference to Muslim musicians, there are three strains of thought that relate to the *umma* and international politics. These are: (i) collective responsibility (ii) intra-Muslim critiques (iii) and a rejection of Western democratic nationalism. It is important to note that these issues are addressed directly only by a select number of Muslim musicians. Broadly speaking, musicians that practice Islamic music – such as most nasheed artists – tend to cleave overwhelmingly toward religious and spiritual themes. It is Islamically-conscious music that more often contains hard-edged political lyrics, ranging from the gentle humanitarian approach of Sami Yusuf to the uncompromising radicalism of hip hop musicians.

Collective Responsibility

The notion of collective responsibility is of course a familiar theme for British Muslims. Muslims are perceived to belong to the same international community – the *umma* – and it is upon this notion of solidarity that an Islamic charities industry and numerous political causes have been built. It is therefore no coincidence that musicians frequently plug into the discourses that surround supposedly Muslim-specific humanitarian and political issues. At the heart of such efforts is a desire to educate Muslims about the suffering of their 'brothers and sisters' around the world. As the rapper and convert, Moahmmed Yahya, explained, converting to Islam dramatically increased his awareness

of particular international issues and encouraged him to deal with them directly in his music:

> I think becoming a Muslim has helped broaden my perspective of the world, politics, different cultures and so on. Before I converted to Islam I didn't know what was going on in Palestine. If someone had told me what was going on in Palestine I would have felt for the people in Palestine. If someone told me about anyone that's going through oppression, I would have related to that. But being a Muslim encouraged me to search harder, read more and become more concerned with the state of the whole humanity. (Mohammed, 29, February 2011, London)

As Mohammed and many other musicians made clear to me throughout the course of the fieldwork, raising awareness of certain international issues is a central and occasionally overriding concern. Music itself is furthermore seen as a particularly suitable medium for attempting to reach out to apathetic Muslims in Britain and elsewhere.

This perspective was echoed by a number of musicians, including the young British-Palestinian rapper, 'Umar. Conceiving of himself first and foremost as a political activist, 'Umar reached out for the most familiar cultural medium available – the hip hop of Eminem and other contemporary rappers – in an effort to raise awareness of the Palestinian issue:

> Well, as a Muslim, I see from a Muslim point of view and the Palestinian issue is very important to me… I mean, the Palestinian case is not just related to Palestinians, it's not just related to Muslims, it's related to anyone who has a heart, anyone who says that they're a humanitarian person, because we see the massacres that happen in Palestine, we see everything that happens and, um, we just stop to think that, what am I supposed to be doing? And then I think to myself that doing my music, is actually, doing my music actually plays my part, and I play my part in trying to raise awareness cause I think that's the most important thing. A lot of people are ignorant towards the cause… With my music I try to lead the way… you find that it relates back to a lot of Muslims and how a lot of Muslims feel about their brothers and sisters being occupied, and that's why they see they need to do something about it. ('Umar, 18, November 2011, London)

As with Mohammed, 'Umar attempts to use his music as a medium to educate Muslims about the plight of their 'brothers and sisters' living in less fortunate circumstances. As 'Umar has explained, it is through music that he is 'playing his part' and contributing to a shared struggle. 'Umar and those like him produce music with a distinct political and

humanitarian tone – an edge that is continually sharpened with the metaphors and emotions of Muslim collectivity.

In terms of the transmission of these messages through music and lyricism, it is helpful to consider how the position of the listener is often linguistically framed by the musician. An excellent example of this can be found running throughout Sami Yusuf's successful album, *My Ummah*. In song after song, Yusuf addresses the collective group – that is, *all* Muslims – which includes both himself and the abstracted listener. Utilising this sentiment throughout, Yusuf addresses a number of issues, ranging from the political and humanitarian crisis in Palestine, to the Beslan school massacre in 2004. One song, for example, takes a symbol of Palestinian resistance – hurling stones – and connects it to the ritual of *ramy al-jamarāt* (the stoning of the Devil) during hajj – a practice that is symbolic for the struggle to overcome temptation and, in this case, the specific temptation to ignore the difficulties faced by Palestinian Muslims. The tenor of Yusuf's lyrics throughout the album make it abundantly clear that *we* – the *umma* – including *you* the listener – have a religious and social obligation to care about these issues.

Sami Yusuf furthermore broadens this obligation to encompass humanitarian issues that exist beyond Muslim-majority societies. Practical examples of this include a music video released by Yusuf that was filmed on location in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, with the aim of raising money for the victims of natural disasters. In lyrical terms, Yusuf has even chastised the supposed indifference that Muslims might feel toward humanitarian causes in non-Muslim contexts. In 'Make a Prayer', Sami Yusuf signals the open and universal values of Islam, imploring the *umma* to draw on their religious values and beliefs to support non-Muslims in challenging and even tragic circumstances:

O people
Are we deaf, dumb, and blind?
What is going through our minds?
Don't we care for the rest of mankind?
O people
We claim to love peace and justice
Why do we preach what we don't practice?
Let's help them out of this darkness
Tell me what we're going to do
For our brothers in Ethiopia
For our sisters in Rwanda

Show me what we're going to do
Are we just going to sit there?
Nice and cosy on our armchairs
Will we not even make a prayer?

Sami Yusuf – 'Make a Prayer' (*My Ummah*, 2005)

Intra-Muslim Critiques

While the *umma* is most often invoked as a concept to raise awareness and encourage a sense of collective responsibility, it is also utilised in a small number of instances as a platform to critique the perceived failings of Muslim nation states, political leaders and cultural practices. In these instances, the *umma* becomes a concept that enables Muslim musicians to justify their critique: it is through a sense of global Muslim collectivity that they feel emboldened to challenge those who fail to correctly uphold the ideals of the *umma*. This approach is not extensive – most musicians generally concentrate on less controversial issues – but there are indeed a number of hip hop musicians who are less compromising in their approach.

This attitude is most powerfully advocated in the song 'Silence is Consent' by Poetic Pilgrimage and Mohammed Yahya. These three London-based rappers launch a scathing attack against the dictatorial Arab leaders that – through inaction or direct complicity – permit some of the social and political ills that ravage the region. The image-saturated music video that was produced for this song should be watched in full[58] (Figure 9.5 overleaf). Depicting images of these various leaders – including Muammar Gaddafi and Hosni Mubarak – the video criticises the self-importance of these individuals and their unwillingness to prevent humanitarian and political crimes against Muslims. It is not without irony that this video was released shortly before the Arab Spring in 2011.

Yet the most interesting and emotive section of the song and accompanying video considers the patriarchal culture that permits violence against women. The remarkable lyrics dealing with this issue are worth quoting in full:

If silence is consent, they're sinning,
Making you as guilty as those that are pillaging,
Inflicting torture on those that are being led like lambs to the slaughter,
You debaucher their hopes and realities,

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[58] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1orCqZg4SA [accessed 01.05.12]

Might as well go back to burying females alive,
The truth you can't deny,
The genocide of her soul, and inside she corrodes…
…Keeping it secret, out of public domain,
I'm gonna speak up and speak out, not in my name,
You're washed in filth and your acts are profane,
If I ruled the world, I swear you'd be slain,
For women killed, from Somalia to Bahrain,
In Saudi and Iran, the treatments the same,
This shame you bring upon my *umma*,
I'll defend her honour

Poetic Pilgrimage & Mohammed Yahya – 'Silence is Consent' (2011)

The fascinating decision to genderize the *umma* – transforming the global Muslim community into a female entity – serves as a symbolic reminder of the rights and status of women within Islam – inviolable religious and moral conventions that are breached by those who profess to lead and represent Muslims throughout the Arab world. The possessive pronoun ('my *umma*') furthermore serves to remind the listener that the musicians involved have the right to rise from their own national context and lay-out this challenge – as the rapper, Muneera, makes clear, it is these leaders that are bringing shame upon *her umma*.

Figure 9.4: Poetic Pilgrimage and Mohammed Yahya in 'Silence is Consent'
(Source: (Source: Poetic Pilgrimage and Mohammed Yahya)

Poetic Pilgrimage and Mohammed Yahya are not alone in using their membership of the *umma* as justification to criticise practices and ideologies that they disagree with. The hip hop group, Blakstone, similarly use their music and notions of global Muslim collectivity to criticise leadership in Muslim nation states – though with a difference in emphasis that I will elaborate on shortly. However, this approach does tend to be less overtly practiced by most musicians. Less direct and controversial instances of intra-Muslim critiques might also include, for example, the disappointment that the nasheed group Aashiq al-Rasul expressed over the violent response that some Muslims enacted over the Danish cartoons controversy. Despite their own personal hurt and dismay, Aashiq al-Rasul responded with a performance to highlight the compassion and understanding that Muslims should demonstrate over such issues.

Interestingly, it is easier for musicians who are somewhat outside of the Muslim mainstream to voice these concerns. As Sukina from Poetic Pilgrimage explained, as a female musician she often finds herself shunned by Muslim event organisers and sponsors. While this might place crucial limits on her ability to perform and reach out to particular audiences, it nonetheless provides her with a peculiar form of artistic freedom:

> I think also, another thing for me, which is really important, is the fact that I'm kind of glad that we don't get as much support from the Muslim community. Because I think if we got a load of support from the Muslim community and we were getting paid a thousand pounds a gig to perform, and doing the Muslim circuit all around the Arab world, there's a strong possibility that we might just do what our audience want, you know, what the people paying us want. However, I think when we first started to get rejection and doors were shut in our face, that's when we were like, hold on a second, who are we, what scene did we come from, what are our feelings and how do we make music that speaks to everyone. (Sukina, 28, February 2011, London).

As Sukina explains, the 'Muslim community' – both in the UK and internationally – might overwhelmingly reject her ideas and music, but this enables Sukina and others like her to remain authentic and detached from commercial pressures.

A Rejection of Western Secularism

It is important not to overstate the significance of this trend of thought, but there are nonetheless a small number of musicians who radically reject the economic structures

and democratic conventions of the West. A critique by Muslim musicians of the corrupted capitalism and corroded ethical values that supposedly exist in the Western world is not uncommon – indeed, such an ideology is overwhelmingly shared by most Muslim musicians. Yet rather than wishing to work within the social, economic and political structures that are already in place, some musicians instead argue that the *umma* must forge a unique and coherent Muslim society based on the values of Islam. Potentially straddling the views of an Islamic Caliphate that are held by organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, this strain of thought can be manifested in quite radical and provocative terms. The London-based hip hop group Blakstone are perhaps the only notable example of this tendency in the UK:

And no more talk of war and of bombs to drop,
Under Allah's Shade and Shield and fearing not.
No more bleeding due to scheming dogs on thrones,
Whom plot with foes to spread woes, the stench of rot.
And that's how it's supposed to be.
I look around and all I see today is poverty and misery,
From systems ruling over me with blasphemy.
Their tool, kufur rule, it's a catastrophe…

Blakstone – 'Close 2 Me' (no release date available)

Blakstone arguably represent a strain of Muslim political thought that is critical of the failures perceived to exist in the modern world – from social issues, such as racism and poverty, through to various meta-issues, including the global economic framework and international conflict. Blakstone correspondingly bring forward the notion of an idealised Muslim socio-political order – *a new Muslim umma* – through which these particular failures might be corrected. They are using the concept of Muslim collectivity as a hub around which an alternative – and arguably *superior* – model of Islamic social organisation is advanced over the current Western model of secularism and democratic capitalism.

   Crucially, this is not to suggest that these musicians in any way advocate violence. I would argue that Blakstone have consistently shown a willingness to work through the democratic and civil structures of modern Britain – they specifically use their music to influence people and change minds, not to incite violence. This differs entirely to the much-publicised but entirely anomalous Soul Salah Crew, who stirred tensions in 2004

with their track 'Dirty Kuffar'. This provocative music video seemed designed to deliberately catch the attention of those who are interested in sensationalising 'all things Muslim'. While 'Dirty Kuffar' stands entirely alone with its sympathy toward violent terrorism, it unsurprisingly received a huge wave of media and political attention, with MPs expressing concern over the 'radicalising' impact of the song (Barnett, 2004). With a deep scepticism regarding the impact of Soul Salah Crew on Muslims firmly in mind, I will say nothing more except to provide an excerpt from the lyrics from their incendiary but otherwise unremarkable song:

Peace to Hamas and the Hizbollah
OBL [Osama Bin Laden] pulled me like a shiny star
Like the way we destroyed them two towers ha-ha
The minister Tony Blair, there my dirty Kuffar
The one Mr Bush, there my dirty Kuffar...
Throw them on the fire
Soul Salah Crew – 'Dirty Kuffar' (2004)

Conclusion

It seems clear, then, that Muslim musicians utilise the concept of the *umma* and other notions of Muslim collectivity for a variety of reasons. Yet beneath these different motivations, I would suggest that it is possible to find a shared desire to advance some comprehension of Muslim unity and solidarity. This happens at multiple levels – including the local, national and transnational – but it fundamentally incorporates ideas relating to a common Islamic ethos, as well as a collective history and set of interests. Importantly, these notions of collectivity are often rooted in ideologies of pluralism, with, for example, emphasis frequently being placed on the benefits of intra-Muslim diversity and the importance of interfaith relationships. It is a peculiar dynamic where the specifics of group membership and religious belonging – including, for example, the distinct concept of the *umma* – are expanded to fundamentally integrate universalising tendencies beyond the limiting nature of corporate grouphood.

10. Conclusion: Muslim Musicians and Cultural Change in Britain

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I have consistently argued in this thesis that Muslim music is emblematic of wider struggles to establish discourses, institutions, cultural products and lifestyles that are framed by Muslim worldviews and moral frameworks. It is in one sense the coherence of a British Muslim community consciousness and the intensification of a shared identity – a process that can be exclusionary as well as inclusionary. Yet I have also claimed that embedded within this movement is another powerful – and at times competing – tendency to prioritise pluralism, diversity and hybridity. This conflict produces a delicate balancing act, whereby Muslim spaces – symbolic and physical, social and cultural – are created but then fought over to determine who and what has access. There are two parts to this analysis.

First, musicians are part of a wider movement in Britain to establish and contribute toward nationally-conceived (i.e., British) Muslim sub-cultures, discourses, institutions and social resources. This represents a manifest desire to extend the values and beliefs of Islam beyond religious observance and into other practical aspects of daily life. It also reflects the inevitable consequences of Muslim solidarity, demographic concentration and educational/professional attainment: as Muslim communities in Britain mature and develop, it is only natural that socio-cultural 'superstructures' emerge from the tight economic, religious and social Muslim networks that have for some time characterised many Muslim communities in Britain. Music and other forms of cultural production are integral components of this phase in British Muslim development, connected as they are to business and media networks, a developing Muslim public sphere, and a vibrant Muslim youth culture.

Second, this attempt to develop various Muslim institutions, sub-cultures etc – that is, to develop them in largely religious and national terms – necessarily contains something of an inherent contradiction. British Muslims are in most respects a diverse religious group – ethnically, religiously, socio-economically, culturally – and cannot be easily

represented or organised in singularly-conceived terms. This is especially true for Muslim musicians, who, for various reasons, tend to be unusually diverse, not to mention the bearers of occasionally distinctive 'back stories' (just consider those musicians who have made a journey from Christianity, to Paganism and finally Islam). Such diversity is furthermore muddled by the inseparability of 'Muslim' cultural practice from the interweaving streams and overlapping spheres of British, European and global cultures. Indeed, I believe it self-evident that Muslims are increasingly woven into the rich and complex socio-cultural threads characterising everyday life in Britain.

There are therefore two potentially competing tendencies at work within popular British Muslim musical culture: (i) the attempt to develop specifically British Muslim institutions/cultural resources based on notions of shared community (ii) and the desire to promote a heterogeneity that is drawn from textured and individual experiences. These tendencies are significantly reflected in the distinction that I have drawn between Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music (see Chapter 6, p.132). The former musical style emphasises communal solidarity and tradition, whilst the second places greater value on individuality and personal experience. As I made clear in Chapter 6, although musical genre is something of a factor – with nasheeds tending to fall under the category of Islamic music, while syncretic music and hip hop are more likely to be Islamically-conscious – there is not actually a direct link between genre and the substantive positioning of musicians. Thus, while certain musicians and genres appear to cleave toward one side or another of this typology, both tendencies nonetheless run across this music scene as a whole.

It is for this fundamental reason that it has been appropriate and particularly interesting to consider the interplay between individual Muslim subjectivities, on the one hand, and notions of community and belonging, on the other. By using the typology of Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music as a theoretical frame, I believe it has been possible to more fully understand the nature of these intricacies and – despite an impulse of critical plurality that is shared in common by these musicians – the extent to which an emphasis can be placed in different directions. As I made clear in Chapter 6, this is a vivid demonstration of the fact that British Muslims are quite capable of engaging in seemingly divergent social and cultural conversations.

First and foremost amongst these issues is the very ambivalence of music for Muslims in Britain. As I argued in Chapter 4, music is a controversial subject that divides opinion, with the production of textured interpretations and practices amongst musicians and the wider Muslim demographic. The potent combination of this particular issue with the educated and dynamic nature of those who tend to be involved in this cultural scene, results in a fragmentation of religious knowledge and authority, with greater emphasis on individual learning and autonomy. This runs alongside the more personal and sectarian tendencies that I outlined in Chapter 5, including anti-sectarianism and spiritual experience. Yet such tendencies are nonetheless filtered through paradoxically strong notions of grouphood and collective membership (including Sufism), shared religious discourses and scholastic networks, and some comprehension of fundamental Islamic values. The result in most cases, then, is the articulation of an overarching Islamic faith and Muslim community that is nonetheless tempered by a fundamental social, religious and cultural pluralism.

It would be fair to state that those musicians who more overtly practice forms of Islamic music tend to emphasise the need for religious and social consensus. These musicians are therefore more likely to reach toward 'universal' Islamic beliefs, dialects and practices, often indeed altering their performance repertoire and positionality as a means to cross pedagogical and sectarian boundaries. In contrast, musicians with a more Islamically-conscious orientation are perhaps more open to challenging and critical conflict, placing more emphasis on their role as dynamic and outspoken individuals within both Muslim and non-Muslim contexts. Yet despite such differences, both groups of musicians remain anchored to fundamental ideas concerning the nature of the individual and religious community. Whether through contestation or the search for consensus, there is a common belief that individual subjectivities exist beneath an overarching sense of community and the shared spaces that structure such relationships.

These themes find greater practical purchase when advocated by musicians through the framework of a British Muslim music market and public sphere. So while Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music orientate themselves in subtly different ways, both are supported by a diverse, grassroots business model. This includes a number of small recording and distribution companies, but also an extensive role played by the internet. It

is of particular interest to remark that pecuniary motives are not especially significant. There is therefore a strong argument to conclude that this scene is characterised more by a passionate amateurism than anything else. This results in a higher level of autonomy due to the absence of pressures that might result from a more traditional business model with urgent financial requirements. The effects of this anarchic business model filter through to the engagement of musicians with the Muslim public sphere that I outlined in Chapter 7. Indeed – while there is a clear desire by musicians to operate in a shared Muslim cultural space – one of the most significant arguments to emerge from this research was a criticism by musicians of the increasingly monopolised nature of the Muslim public sphere. It is clear, then, that these economic and media contexts incorporate unifying and diversifying characteristics. There is a desire by Muslim musicians and their peers for shared realms of British Muslim cultural and social activity, yet there is an indivisible urge by these musicians to resist hegemonic and heterogeneous structures of organisation.

These issues can manifest themselves in different ways for musicians varyingly practicing Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music – although in some respects the commonalities are just as striking. So, while Islamic music does tend to sit more comfortably within the accepted religious/cultural framework of the Muslim music market and the British Muslim public sphere, it can nonetheless often find itself in conflict with the organisations and power structures that wield significant influence. Similarly, while Islamically-conscious music increasingly pitches itself toward a more general and non-Muslim audience, it nonetheless largely supports itself through a dedicated Muslim fanbase and grassroots Muslim business structure. It is therefore arguable that – despite differences in approach – Muslim musicians engage with the same core social, cultural and professional spheres of activity. While the nature of such engagement can vary according to musician, it is consistently characterised by a negotiation between the support provided through structures of community and the desire to promote individual subjectivities, interpretations, or agendas.

The implications of this for 'identity politics' are perhaps most significantly articulated in the debates and discourses around ethnicity, class and belonging. As I claimed in Chapter 8, while the Muslim public sphere is partially structured by the constraints of

power and convention – with the particular imposition of ethnic and class norms – genuine possibilities of hybridity and cultural innovation emerge from the complex, criss-crossing lines of Muslim identity formation. Indeed, as a group Muslim musicians bring with them an inherent diversity that paints a rich and varied story of British Muslim identity – a diversity that is capable in many instances of working against these essentializing tendencies. As I demonstrated in Chapter 9, this process of resistance can be found within other more expansive notions of collectivity. More specifically, the *umma* is deployed by a range of musicians to both open-up and universalise notions of Muslim belonging and communality, but also to hold these expansive modes of group membership in careful tension with the cheek-by-jowl diversity that fundamentally characterises the experiences of Muslims in Britain.

There are then multiple themes and issues that mark Muslim music out as being a complex and important stream of cultural practice in the UK. Muslim music – whether Islamic music or Islamically-conscious music – is in many respects a particular socio-cultural interface for the complex movements of diaspora, global culture, religious discourse, nationalism, individualism, and hyper-mediation. This should not be surprising: as a cultural phenomenon, Muslim music merely jostles alongside similar and overlapping tales of late-modernity. Yet it manages to distil this complexity into shared bonds of religious group membership that are nonetheless tempered by a strong sense of individuality in the context of modern Britain. These complexities were perhaps articulated most directly by Faraz from Silk Road:

> Music is important to us as individuals and as a community. The creative arts are part of the human story and when you take them out, there is a gross de-humanising effect on people and their communities. You need only glance at our present state and peruse our histories to see how this has happened. What we have is a socio-dynamic for whom politics and religion is naïve, simplistic and drowned in dogma. When creative arts are nurtured as they once were in Muslim society, more children have the opportunity to grow into adults that understand the complexity, beauty and diversity of the human condition and value and respect our shared experience. That's when the 'other' disappears and becomes 'us'. The music and lyrics that we write are not to please others but to please ourselves that we have added something positive to the shared experience and helped to weave something of our tall tales into our collective stories. (Faraz, 34, October 2011, Birmingham)

Faraz quite clearly brings together the interconnected themes of community and individuality, but with a subtle emphasis on both their distinctiveness and inseparability. It is through music that Faraz believes such tensions can be held together in a vaguely paradoxical harmony – artistic expression allows for the interplay between community and individuality to be uncovered and explored through shared cultural spaces.

While these themes have been central to this thesis – as well as having significance for wider debates – it should be noted in closing that Faraz's undoubted eloquence and self-awareness point toward a new generation of young, assertive and well educated British Muslims. It is a generation that nurtures deep religious roots and notions of collectivity, whilst simultaneously traversing a complex and multi-faceted global landscape. In some respects this generation and their emergent forms of social, religious and cultural practice stand in sharp relief to an earlier generation of British Muslims – a generation who perhaps looked back to a distant homeland. Yet neither does this signify a rejection of an inherited past in search for new horizons. Through the interplay of community and individuality – through the practice of Islamic music and Islamically-conscious music – it is reasonable to identify Muslim music as an attempt by this assertive generation to negotiate and synthesise competing influences in the continually shifting context of modern Britain.

Appendixes
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Appendix One: Authorisation Form and Information for Interviewees

Cardiff University
School of Religious & Theological Studies
And the School of Music

INFORMATION SHEET FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT ON

'Sounds Islamic?: Muslim Music in the UK'

This information sheet invites you to participate in a research study. To help you decide whether or not you wish to take part, you may find it helpful to know what the research aims to achieve and what it will involve. We would be grateful if you would read the information below carefully. Please do not hesitate to ask if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

What is the purpose of the study?

o We are hoping to explore the different roles that 'sound' and 'music' play for British Muslims, and how these auditory influences can shape conceptions of 'community' and 'belonging'. The research is also interested in the different ways that British Muslims conceptualise 'the *umma*'.

o The project aims to answer four questions:
   1) How do British Muslims understand and articulate an idea of 'the *umma*'?
   2) What role does 'sound' play in shaping conceptions of 'community' and 'belonging' among British Muslims?
   3) How do we define and characterise the music produced by British Muslims?
   4) How are British Muslims creating an 'Islamised' British musical culture and/or institution?

What do I have to do?

o   We would like you to take part in an interview. We will talk to you about your views and experiences of community, sound, music and 'the *umma*'. The interview will be audio-taped so that we have a record of what was said.
o   If you are a musician we may ask to record a musical performance for analysis and/or to discuss it with you at a later date.

What will happen to the information about me that you gather?

o   With your permission, the recordings of the audio-taped interview will be written up into what is called a 'transcript'. This will allow us to read what you've said again. The original recording and the transcript will only be available to you, the lead researcher Carl Morris, and his supervisors, Dr Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Dr John O'Connell.
o   When we create the transcript we will change the names of yourself and everyone you mention. Nothing in the written outputs of the project will identify who you are.
o   If you wish, we will give you a copy of the transcript of your interview so that you can be sure that we've written is accurate and that no-one in it can be identified by others.
o   The original recording, transcript, and written notes will be kept in a secure place. The data we gather will be held in password protected files, and kept securely in strict accordance with the Data Protection Act.
o   Musical recordings will similarly be stored in a secure place and will only be used for the purposes of the research.
o   As a participant in the project, you can give as much or as little information as you wish.
o   An analysis of the information we gather for the project will form part of our report at the end of the study, and will be published in academic journals. If you request, we would be pleased to let you know where the results of the research have been published. The project web site will also provide full information about reports.

Do I have to take part?

o   It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you do decide to participate you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You are also free to ask for more information before making a decision.

Who are the researchers and who is funding the project?

o   The research team is based in Cardiff University in the School of Religious & Theological Studies and the School of Music. The lead researcher is a doctoral student, Carl Morris, and the supervisors are Dr Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Dr John O'Connell.

o The project is being undertaken as a PhD project by Carl Morris and is funded through Cardiff University by the Jameel Scholarship Award. Details of the funding can be found at: **http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/relig/research/researchcentres/csi/scholarships/index.html**

Who has reviewed the research?

o The project has been reviewed by the Cardiff School of Music's ethical approval committee.

Contact information

o If you would like more information about the project, please do not hesitate to contact the lead researcher:

    Carl Morris
    Email: MorrisCJ2@cardiff.ac.uk
    Tel: 07944056162
    Address: Cardiff University, Humanities Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff, CF10 3EU

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

Cardiff University
School of Religious & Theological Studies
And the School of Music

CONSENT FORM FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT ON

‘Sounds Islamic?: Muslim Music in the UK’

Name of Researcher:………………………………………

Please initial box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet (version ....)
for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, to ask
questions and have had any questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time,
without giving any reason.

3. I agree to take part in the study.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Name of Person taking consent   Date   Signature

2 copies: 1 for participant and 1 for research file

Appendix Two: Survey results

Question	Total Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses
1. I am over 18 and voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Yes	84	100
No	0	0

Question	Total Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses
2. I understand that any information about me recorded during this survey will be stored in a secure database. The survey is completely anonymous. No data which might identify me will be transferred outside of this survey.	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Yes	84	100
No	0	0

Question	Total Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses
3. I give the researcher (Carl Morris) permission to use the results of my participation in this survey once any identifiable data has been removed.	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Yes	84	100
No	0	0

Question	Total Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses
4. Do you listen to either '"live"' or '"recorded"' performances of Quranic recitation (Qirā'ah)?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Yes	80	95.2
No	2	2.4
Other	2	2.4

Question	Total Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Responses
5. If you listen to performances of Quranic recitation, please indicate how important the following methods of listening to recitation are for you:	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
5.a. Through the Internet		
0	3	3.7
1	7	8.6
2	4	4.9
3	8	9.9

4	17	21
5	12	51.9
5.b. Through another media source (radio, television etc		
0	8	9.8
1	6	7.3
2	9	11
3	18	22
4	19	23.2
5	22	26.8
5.c. Through recordings bought in a shop		
0	11	13.6
1	6	7.4
2	11	13.6
3	20	24.7
4	15	18.5
5	18	22.2
5.d. Borrowing and/or copying recitations from a friend		
0	9	11.4
1	13	16.5
2	17	21.5
3	14	17.7
4	13	16.5
5	13	16.5
5.e. Live recitation		
0	2	2.5
1	3	3.7
2	5	6.2
3	12	14.8
4	12	14.8
5	47	58

6. When did you last listen to a '''recording''' of a Quranic recitation performance?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Today	26	32.1
This week	30	37
Last week	7	8.6
This month	6	7.4

More than one month ago	11	13.6
Never	1	1.2

7. If you listen to '''recorded''' Quranic recitation performances, please indicate how often you listen to it in the following places:	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
7.a. Home		
0	0	0
1	4	4.9
2	7	8.6
3	13	16
4	18	22.2
5	39	48.1
7.b. Car		
0	17	21.2
1	8	10
2	11	13.8
3	15	18.8
4	15	18.8
5	14	17.5
7.c. Public transport		
0	40	51.9
1	8	10.4
2	8	10.4
3	13	16.9
4	3	3.9
5	5	6.5
7.d. At work		
0	46	61.3
1	11	14.7
2	9	12
3	5	6.7
4	2	2.7
5	2	2.7
7.e. Cafe, restaurant etc..		
0	58	75.3
1	11	14.3
2	2	2.6
3	3	3.9
4	1	1.3

5	2	2.6
7.f. Community centre		
0	44	56.4
1	8	10.3
2	9	11.5
3	6	7.7
4	3	3.8
5	8	10.3
7.g. Mosque or a place of worship		
0	14	17.7
1	6	7.6
2	4	5.1
3	7	8.9
4	11	13.9
5	37	46.8

8. When did you last attend a '''live''' Quranic recitation performance?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
This week	24	29.6
Last week	4	4.9
Within the last month	12	14.8
More than one month ago	13	16
More than one year ago	17	21
Never	6	7.4
Other	5	6.2

9. If you attend '''live''' Quranic recitation performances, how often do you attend performances at the following places:	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
9.a. A private residence (e.g. somebody's house)		
0	32	42.7
1	10	13.3
2	10	13.3
3	12	16
4	6	8
5	5	6.7
9.b. A local community venue		

0	31	40.8
1	10	13.2
2	8	10.5
3	11	14.5
4	8	10.5
5	8	10.5
9.c. A mosque or place of worship		
0	4	5.2
1	8	10.4
2	11	14.3
3	10	13
4	7	9.1
5	37	48.1
9.d. A cafe, restaurant etc..		
0	62	83.8
1	8	10.8
2	4	5.4
3	0	0
4	0	0
5	0	0
9.e. A performance hall or arena		
0	36	48.6
1	11	14.9
2	8	10.8
3	14	18.9
4	4	5.4
5	1	1.4

12. Select the following statement as appropriate (please feel free to make additional comments in the text box below):	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
I listen to any type or genre of music, regardless of lyrical content. I choose to listen to music that I like the sound of.	16	29.8
I will listen to any type of music, as long as it doesn't have negative lyrics (such as swearing or the promotion of violence).	18	22.2
I believe that I should only listen to music that has an Islamic message.	22	27.2

I believe that music is either forbidden or strongly discouraged by Islam. I only listen to singing, not music.	15	18.5
I neither listen to singing nor music.	1	1.2
Other	9	11.1

13. Select the following statement as appropriate (please feel free to make additional comments in the text box below):	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
I believe that Islam permits the use of all musical instruments.	14	16.9
I believe that Islam only permits the use of percussion instruments.	30	36.1
I believe that Islam forbids the use of all musical instruments.	14	16.9
I don't know what musical instruments are permitted in Islam.	9	10.8
Other	16	19.3

15. If you listen to music, please indicate how important the following methods of listening are for you:	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
15.a. Through the Internet		
0	7	9.9
1	3	4.2
2	4	5.6
3	6	8.5
4	11	15.5
5	40	56.3
15.b. Through another media source (radio, television etc).		
0	14	19.4
1	4	5.6
2	7	9.7
3	15	20.8
4	18	25
5	14	19.4
15.c. Through recordings bought in a shop		

	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
0	21	30.9
1	9	13.2
2	10	14.7
3	12	17.6
4	8	11.8
5	8	11.8
15.d. Borrowing or copying recordings from a friend.		
0	20	28.6
1	13	18.6
2	11	15.7
3	15	21.4
4	5	7.1
5	6	8.6
15.e. Live music or singing.		
0	22	31.4
1	5	7.1
2	5	7.1
3	15	21.4
4	9	12.9
5	14	20

16. If you listen to '''recorded''' music, please indicate how often you listen to it in the following places:	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
16.a. Home		
0	5	7
1	3	4.2
2	9	12.7
3	8	11.3
4	13	18.3
5	33	46.5
16.b. Car		
0	12	16.7
1	2	2.8
2	6	8.3
3	7	9.7
4	16	22.2
5	29	40.3
16.c. Public transport		

0	24	34.3
1	6	8.6
2	7	10
3	10	14.3
4	5	7.1
5	18	25.7
16.d. At work		
0	32	45.1
1	11	15.5
2	5	7
3	10	14.1
4	8	11.3
5	5	7
16.e. Cafe, restaurant etc..		
0	37	54.4
1	10	14.7
2	8	
3	5	
4	5	
5	3	
16.f. Community centre		
0	36	52.2
1	12	17.4
2	11	15.9
3	4	5.8
4	2	2.9
5	4	5.8
16.g. Mosque or a place of worship		
0	47	69.1
1	6	8.8
2	7	10.3
3	3	4.4
4	3	4.4
5	2	2.9

17. When did you last attend a '''live''' performance of music?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
This week	9	12.2
Last week	6	8.1

Within the last month	9	12.2
More than one month ago	11	14.9
More than one year ago	23	31.1
Never	14	18.9
Other	2	2.7

18. If you attend '''live''' performances of music, how often do you attend performances at the following places (0 = never, 5 = regularly)	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
18.a. A private residence (e.g. somebody's house)		
0	39	58.2
1	6	9
2	7	10.4
3	7	10.4
4	4	6
5	4	6
18.b. A local community venue		
0	25	37.3
1	9	13.4
2	6	9
3	11	16.4
4	7	10.4
5	9	13.4
18.c. A cafe, restaurant etc..		
0	49	74.2
1	7	10.6
2	5	7.6
3	2	3
4	2	3
5	1	1.5
18.d. A music hall or arena		
0	32	47.1
1	8	11.8
2	9	13.2
3	8	11.8
4	4	5.9
5	7	10.3

19. When did you last hear a '''live''' performance of the adhān (this includes a live call from the mosque at prayer time)?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Today	14	33.3
This week	12	28.6
Last week	4	9.5
This Month	3	7.1
More than one month ago	7	16.7
Never	1	2.4
Other	1	2.4

21. Other than when daily prayers are called, when did you last listen to a '''recording''' of the adhān?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Today	20	25
This week	18	22.5
Last week	6	7.5
This Month	7	8.8
More than one month ago	16	20
Never	8	10
Other	5	6.2

22. Please indicate how important the following methods of listening to '''recordings''' of the adhān are for you:	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
22.a. Through the Internet		
0	20	25.3
1	14	17.7
2	5	6.3
3	10	12.7
4	8	10.1
5	22	27.8
22.b. Through another media source (radio, television etc)		
0	19	23.8
1	6	7.5
2	10	12.5
3	8	10

4	10	12.5
5	27	33.8
22.c. Through recordings bought in a shop		
0	36	46.8
1	12	15.6
2	8	10.4
3	12	15.6
4	4	5.2
5	5	6.5
22.d. Borrowing and/or copying recordings from a friend		
0	36	47.4
1	15	19.7
2	5	6.6
3	8	10.5
4	5	6.6
5	7	9.2
22.e. Public broadcast of a recording		
0	23	29.5
1	5	6.4
2	6	7.7
3	5	6.4
4	10	12.8
5	29	37.2

23. Do you use an adhān clock (this includes automated prayer reminders on your mobile phone)?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Yes	16	38.1
No	24	57.1
Other	2	4.8

24. Do you consider yourself a member or follower of a Sufi tariqa (tariqah/tariqat)?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Yes	13	31.7
No	27	65.9
Other	1	2.4

25. When did you last perform or take part in the zikr/dhikr (including by yourself)?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Today	7	17.1
This week	10	24.4
Last week	4	9.8
This Month	3	7.3
More than one month ago	10	24.4
Never	6	14.6
Other	1	2.4

26. When did you last perform or take part in a haḍra gathering?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Today	0	0
This week	4	10
Last week	2	5
This Month	3	7.5
More than one month ago	9	22.5
Never	20	50
Other	2	5

27. When did you last watch an Islamic channel on TV?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Today	22	27.8
This week	19	24.1
Last week	5	6.3
This Month	12	15.2
More than one month ago	17	21.5
Never	1	1.3
Other	3	3.8

29. How often do you watch either of the following on the Islamic channels?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
29.a. Music/singing/nasheeds		
Daily	10	11.9
Weekly	19	22.6

Monthly	11	13.1
Rarely	29	34.5
Never	15	17.9
29.b. Quranic recitation (Qirā'ah)		
Daily	16	19.3
Weekly	21	25.3
Monthly	15	18.1
Rarely	20	24.1
Never	11	13.3

31. What is your gender?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Male	42	50
Female	42	50

32. What is your religious affiliation?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
None	0	0
Christian	0	0
Muslim	83	98.8
Jewish	0	0
Hindu	0	0
Buddhist	0	0
Other	1	1.2

33. What was your religious affiliation at birth?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
None	2	2.4
Christian	5	7.2
Muslim	76	89.2
Jewish	1	1.2
Hindu	0	0
Buddhist	0	0

34. What is your occupation?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
Employed (please state occupation below)	34	40.5
Self-employed (please state occupation below)	9	10.7
Unemployed	9	10.7
Full time student	30	35.7
Other	2	2.4

35. What is your ethnicity?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
White	7	8.3
Asian	67	79.8
Black/African/Caribbean	4	4.8
Other ethnic group	6	7.1
35.a. White (please specify)		
English/Welsh/Scottish	5	71.4
Irish	0	0
Other White background	2	28.6
35.b. Asian (please specify)		
Pakistani	37	57.8
Indian	5	7.8
Bangladeshi	16	25
Chinese	0	0
Other Asian background	0	0
35.c. Black/African/Caribbean (please specify)		
Carribean	0	0
African	2	66.7
Other Black background	1	33.3

36. What is your country of birth?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
UK	63	75.9
Other (please state below)	20	24.1

37. What is your country of residence?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total

		(%)
UK	74	90.2
Other (please state below)	8	9.8

38. If you live in the UK, what is your current area of residence?	Individual Responses	Percentage of Total (%)
North East	1	1.3
North West	3	3.9
Yorkshire and Humberside	6	7.8
Midlands	21	27.3
East of England	3	3.9
South East	5	6.5
London	34	44.2
South West	1	1.3
Wales	0	0
Scotland	3	3.9
N.Ireland	0	0

Appendix Three: NVivo Coding Frame

The following coding frame contains a total of 454 nodes – 22 parent nodes and 432 child nodes. They are arranged in this section according to this structure, with child nodes listed beneath the relevant parent node (highlighted in bold).

Artist Practitioning
- Amateurism
- Artistic Background
- Artistic Exchange
- Criticism
- Instruments
- Pecuniary Gain
- Performance
- Practical Social Engagement
- Practice
- Praise
- Production
- Professionalism
- Promotion
- Reception
- The Market

Artist Song
- Ask My Heart
- Eggs and Butter
- Land Far Away
- Only You
- Silence is Consent
- The Stranger
- Wind in the Reed

Artists
- A Tribe Called Quest
- Abyssinians
- Ali Bhakitari
- Amadou and Mariam
- Amel Larrieux
- Amir Sulamain
- Anas Canon
- Baaba Maal
- Babymuslims
- Ben Harper
- Black Star

- Blind Alphabetz
- Bob Marley
- Bon Iver
- Bonga
- Britney Spears
- Brother Ali & Rhymesayers
- Coldplay
- Common
- Comrade Fatso & Chabvondoka
- Cookie Crew
- Cool & the Gang
- Curtis Mayfield
- Dawn Penn
- Dawud Wharnsby
- De La Soul
- Dead Prez
- Desmon Dekker
- DJ Anas Canon
- Donnie Hatherway
- Erykah Badu
- Grenique
- Guru
- Hasan Salaam
- Incredible String Band
- J Dilla
- James Brown
- Jay Electronica
- Jay Z
- Jermaine Jackson
- Jerry Lee Lewis
- Jill Scott
- Kanye West
- Karl Jenkins
- K-OS
- Last Poets
- Lauryn Hill
- Lines of Faith
- Lizz Fields

- Logic ft. Shadia Mansour
- Lowkey
- Lupe Fiasco
- Marvin Gaye
- MC Lyte
- Mecca2Medina
- Mesut Kurtis
- Michael Jackson
- Mohammed Yahya
- Monie Love
- Mos Def
- Mumford & Sons
- Muslim Belal
- Nas
- Native Deen
- Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan
- Oasis
- Outlandish
- Pearls of Islam
- Pharoh Monche
- Pink Floyd
- Poetic Pilgrimage
- Public Enemy
- Queen Latifah
- Quest Rah
- Rah Digga
- Rakin Niass
- Red Hot Chili Peppers
- Richard Thompson
- Right Hand
- Ronnie Sise
- Sabri Brothers
- Saigon
- Sat-n-Peppa
- Sami Yusuf
- Slumgdog Village
- Sound of Reason
- Sway

Talib Qwali
The Planets
The Roots
The The
Wu Tang Clan
Youssou N'Dour
Yo-Yo
Yusuf Islam
Zain Bhika
Zaki Ibrahim

Emotion
Anger
Desire
Fun
Happiness
Hostility
Hurt
Love
Passion
Pride
Sadness

Gender
Femininity
Hijab
Masculinity
Misogynism
Modesty
Muslim Men
Muslim Women
Patriarchy
Women

Identity
Afghan
African
Afrocentrism
Algerian
Arab
Asian
Bengali
Black
British
Caribbean
Chinese

English
Ethiopian
Fashion
Hausa
Jamaican
Malian
Middleclass
Moroccan
Multiculturalism
Muslim
Muslim Community
Nigerian
Non-Muslims
Older Generation
Pakistani
Palestinian
Pan-Africanism
Saudi
Senegalese
Somali
South American
Turkish
Umma
White
Youth & Young
People

Islamic Discourse
Afterlife
Allah
Blessings
Da'wah
Fatwa
Hadith
Halal
Haram
Islamic Worldview
Muslim Spain
Nation of Islam
Prophet Muhammad
Qur'an
Religious Pedagogy
Salafi
Scriptural Figure
Scriptural Reference
Shia

Sufism
Sunni
The Soul
Time of the Prophet
Universal Islam
Wahabbi

Language
Arabic
English
Patois
Punjabi
Turkish
Urdu

Media & Culture
Art
Comedy
Facebook
Graffiti
Internet
Islamic Television
Magazines-
Newspapers
Mainstream Media
Muslim Film
Muslimhiphop.com
MySpace
Permissibility of
Visual Arts
Photography
Poetry
Popularised
Television
Radio
Spoken Word
Twitter
Video
YouTube

Misc Individuals
Abdul-Rehman
Fatima Mernissi
Hamza Yusuf
Michael Mumisa
Prince Abdi

Rumi
Sheikh Abdul Hakim
Murad
Sheikh Abdul Hakim
Quick
Yvonne Ridley

Music
Acapella
Entertainment
Listening
Lyricism
Mainstream Music
Industry
Maqam
Morality of Content
Music with Meaning
Musical Fusion
Musical Ambitions
Muslim Music
Powerful
Rhythm
Singing
Songs
Sound
Voice

Music Genres
African Music
Asian Music
Blues
Classical
Country Music
Folk
Funk
Gospel
Hip Hop
Indian Classical
Irish Music
Jazz
Middle Eastern
Music
Na'at
Nasheed
Neo Soul
Opera

Pop
Qawwali
Reggae
Rock
Soul Music
Western Music

Muslim Practice
Adhan
Alcohol
Charity
Culture/Islam
Dhikr
Eid
Fasting
Hajj
Islamic Bookshop
Islamic Scholar
Marriage
Mosque
Muslim History
Muslim Reverts
Prayer
Quranic Recitation
Rejection of Music
Role Models
Tariqa
Tijaniyya
Worship

Organisation
Crescent Mood
Media
Green Medina
Project
Love Music, Hate
Racism
Markfield Institute
New Muslim Project
Radical Middle Way
Reflection Network
Remarkable Courage

Personal Life
Education
Family

Friendship
Musical Taste
Personal History
Work

Place
Africa
America
Arab Countries
Austria
Birmingham
Brazil
Brick Lane
Bristol
Britain
Burkina Faso
Canada
Caribbean
Chicago
China
Czech Republic
Damascus
Denmark
Egypt
England
Europe
France
Gambia
Germany
Ghana
Gothenburg
Indiana
Indonesia
Ireland
Ivory Coast
Kurdistan
Latvia
Leeds
Lithuania
London
Los Angeles
Malaysia
Mecca
Morocco
Mozambique
New York

North Africa
Norway
Oslo
Pakistan
Persia
Poland
Portugal
Private Space
Punjab
San Diego
Saudi Arabia
Scotland
Senegal
Shepherds Bush
South Africa
South Asia
Sri Lanka
Suweto
Sweden
Syria
Texas
Ukraine
Zimbabwe

Politics
Al Qaeida
British National
Party
Community Leaders
Danish Cartoon
Controversy
English Defence
League
Extremism
Integration

Malcolm X
Muslim Defence
League
Palestine
Politics-Political
Zionism

Public Event
Eid in the Square
Global Peace and
Unity
Living Islam
WOMAD

Religion
Buddhism
Christianity
Church
God
Hinduism
Hymns
Interfaith
Jesus
Judaism
Rastafarianism
Religious Education
Religious Rivalry
Secularism
Sikhism

Religious Experience
Faith
Religious Emotion
Spirituality

Social Commentary
Alienation
Deprivation
Evironmentalism
Mainstream Society
Migration
Nationalism
Prejudice
Progressive Change
Racism
Social
Consciousness
Stereotypes
Unity

Values
Authenticity
Challenging
Commerce
Creativity
Diversity
Empowerment
Freedom
Freedom of
Expression
Human Weakness
Humility
Justice
Knowledge
Open Minded
Struggle
Truth
Universalism

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Discography

A note on the discography

It has not been possible to include every instance of music that I have encountered over the course of the fieldwork. Over two years and more I have witnessed many different live performances and various tracks available online. I have attempted to include the most significant albums and single song titles in this discography. Furthermore, because much of this music is self-released or released only online, full reference details are not always available and correspondingly cannot be included here.

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Shaam. *Mercy Like the Rain*, (2002) Meem Music.

Silk Road. 'Ask My Heart' (2011)

Soul Salah Crew. 'Dirty Kuffar' (2004).

Various. *Eternity*, The Rabbani Project.

Yusuf Islam. *Footsteps in the Light*, (2006) Mountain of Light Productions Ltd.