

Music And Islam



*Wind, Strings
and
Fear of A Black Planet*

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Music and Islam: Wind, Strings and Fear of A Black Planet

This Thing About Music

One of the most controversial and argument provoking issues amongst Muslims today is the issue of Music and Islam. Muslims living in historically Non-Muslim societies, such as the United States, Canada and England, are identifying more and more with their unique cultural contexts. These Muslims are engaging with certain aspects of culture that can at times conflict with the understandings of Islam and Culture by other Muslims in the same and certainly outside of the same society. One of these conflicts relates to the very permissibility of music in Islam. In the often emotionally charged atmosphere over the “halal/haram” of music in Islam a clear definition of this word “Music” is rarely articulated. Before we delve into the details of the title of this article let us try to have an understanding if not definition of Music.

*“How to **define music** has long been the subject of debate; philosophers, musicians, and, more recently, various social and natural scientists have argued about what constitutes [music](#)... Music may be defined according to various criteria including organization, pleasantness, intent, social construction, perceptual processes and engagement, universal aspects or family resemblances, and through contrast or negative definition.” (Wikipedia)*

“In Africa there is no term for music in Tiv, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Birom, Hausa, Idoma, Eggon or Jarawa. Many other languages have terms which only partly cover what Europeans mean by the term music” (Wikipedia)

Based on the above a definition it would appear as though that which constitutes music is subjective or ambiguous at best. But what makes a clear definition of music even more elusive is the fact that many languages, as you see above, and cultures don’t even have a word for it including by the way the Arabic language at the time of the Prophet Muhammad! (peace be upon him) . So when we talk about music being halal or haram (permissible or prohibited) what are we referring to as music? Part of this article is dedicated to addressing this.

The study of music including theory and structure has been a kind of science for centuries. Music was used by Muslims and Non-Muslims to aid in understanding other sciences such as Astronomy. However the Arabic word “musiqā”, derived from the Greek *mousike* (i.e. from the muses), came **after** the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Pre-Islamic Arabs were not a scientific people and thus did not have such a word "music" until after Islam. Instead the Arabs like many other people had names for certain **aspects** of cultural expression like poetry (Sh’ayr) or song (ghina). But we are not living in Pre-Islamic

Arabia nor vice-versa. Today whether you hear a “song” or an instrumental you consider it to be this thing called “Music”. If you hear a song like “Man In The Mirror” by Michael Jackson or something lewd from Snoop Dogg you still call both music. Was this the case in 7th Century Arabia?

There is a definition of music known as the Social Construct view. This view states that music is what people call music and it is dependent on time and culture. So what constitutes song and even dance today is not necessarily what would be recognized as such during the time of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him. So when we talk about music being permissible we are not talking about the “music” of Britney Spears, Gangster Rap, or that which accompanies various forms of vice. So what is music? I will not tell you! (smile). God willing you as the reader will answer that question for yourself.

Why Am I Writing This Article?

When I decided to write this article I was motivated to do so not by the legalistic argument over music in Islam but really by the larger issues related to Culture, Identity and Power. I have found that the recent tenor of this discussion has degenerated to the point where it really isn’t so much about halal/haram as it is about culture clashes, Muslim identity, racialism, and communal control. So my purpose is not to contribute to argumentation or debate. I have no interest in a debate over music. My interest lies in the implications of this debate for our lives as Muslims. Music is a major component of the “lived experiences” of people. If we are going to say that “music”, however we define it, is haram then are we comfortable totally negating the lived experiences of everyone in humanity that has ever existed since the time of the Prophet until today? Are we going to metaphorically incinerate every culture’s wind and string instrument for the thousands and thousands of years they have had this type of artistic expression? That would be the **implication** of music being haram and that is a concern that I have. So my goal in writing **Music and Islam: Wind, Strings And Fear of A Black Planet** is simply to try to help heighten understanding and bring people closer to a place of sakeenah (tranquility) within the broad parameters of this beautiful faith. With this as my introduction...Let us begin!

Music Is Halal By Default...You Need Evidence For Its Prohibition

There is a guiding principle amongst the surviving schools of thought that all matters not related to worship (those in the cultural realm for example) are deemed to be permissible or at best *thanni* (conjectural) until **there is compelling evidence to the contrary***. There are very few things outside the realm of *ibadah* that are absolutely definitive. This is well known in *usul* (Juridical methodology). The list of prohibitions in artistic expression is rather short and quite intuitive for Muslims and people of good conscience alike. Some of them are:

- No lewdness
- No vulgarities/obscenities
- Nothing that ignites nationalism or divisiveness

- Context in which artistic expression takes place does not promote behavior considered socially unacceptable in Islam

You can probably ascertain a few others for as I say the above is quite intuitive. In the domain of “non-ibadah” most things are *thanni* hence the wide array of opinions on music and the use of instruments. But if you recall in the opening section of this article we have had some ambiguity as to the socio-cultural definition of this word music. Let’s explore it then from a Quran, Sunnah and Scholarly perspective.

What does The Quran Say Not Say?

There is no verse in the Quran specifically forbidding music. There is no verse that says “Music or the playing/listening to of musical instruments and singing is haram”. By contrast you will find verses on prohibited meat, alcohol and gambling but nothing prohibiting music. The most oft cited verse by those who proclaim music to be haram is in Surah Luqman (31:6):

“And of mankind there are some who buy idle tales without knowledge, to mislead people from the path of Allah, and take it in jest. For such there is a humiliating torment.”

Those that promote the music is haram view say that “idle tales” (*lahw*) means music. We have discussed how the Arabs of the time did not even have a word for “music” but instead referred to forms of what we consider musical expression today so let us look at the occasion of this verse. The Non-Muslim Meccan elite who were antagonistic towards Islam used to try to distract the Muslims away from the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. One of the ways they would do so was to hire “singing girls”. These were usually attractive young women or girls who would sing songs along the paths where Muslims would walk thereby diverting their attention from The Prophet. This verse was revealed in response. But *lahw* does not refer specifically to “music”. If you recall in the introduction to this article the Arabs at the time did not consider “song” and “playing instruments” and “listening to instruments/songs” and “poetry” and “performance” all equivalent. They did not lump all of these artistic expressions together under the term we know as music. The word used in this verse is *lahw* which refers to **any** diverting amusement (even football for you British soccer lovers out there). These idle tales by singing girls was a diverting amusement just like sports and games. In fact the 14th century scholar ibn Taymiyyah held this same view. He was against ALL FORMS OF *LAHW* (AMUSEMENT) including games. But let’s assume that *lahw* does in fact refer to music. What of Surah Jumuah (62:11) where the same word *lahw* appears:

Yet when they see some business/merchandise (*tijara*) or amusement/diversion (*lahw*) they break away to it and leave you standing (referring to the Prophet Muhammad). Say: 'That which Allah has in store is far better than any diversion or merchandise.'

Here we see *lahw* being used again. In the essay A Fatwa On Music, Shaykh Jad Ul-Haq Ali of Al-Azhar University writes:

In this verse God has joined **lahw** (amusements with musical instruments) together with **tijara** (business or trade) using the grammatical particle **wa** (and) which means that the law and ruling that applies to one of them must apply to the other since they are joined together. We know that Muslims unanimously agree that **tijara** (business or trade) is permissible...

Furthermore in the Arabic dictionary Al-Misbah Al-Munir it says that the original meaning of *lahw* is *tarwih* which is amusement and relaxation. Lahw then is really **any** amusement that can pre-occupy one but is NOT EXCLUSIVE to music. Also if you try to use this verse to justify music being haram you would have to then say that engaging in business is haram due to the conjunctive used in the verse. No one says this. Since the Quran does not forbid music most of those who hold music to be haram focus on the Prophetic Sunnah. Let us spend some time there.

The Sunnah and Music

“Allah is beautiful and he loves beauty” -Sahih Muslim

For our purposes we will define The Sunnah by how we come to know what the Sunnah is i.e. ahadith (plural of hadith which refers to reports we have received regarding the sayings, actions and tacit approvals of The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him). Let us begin with support for musical expression.

The Abyssinians in The Mosque

This hadith found in the strongest of all hadith collections (Sahih Bukhari) refers to an instance during one of Islam’s religious celebrations of a group of Men from Abyssinnia who were dancing with spears and playing drums in the mosque. The Prophet’s close companion, and 2nd Caliph, Umar had a desire to stop them but was prevented from doing so by the Prophet. (In fact according to scholar Sheikh Abdallah Adhami the Abyssinians also engaged in this activity on other occasions **including days other than Eid**)

Playing Musical Instruments and Song

In Sahih Bukhari we also have mention of the occasion of The Prophet’s arrival to Medina (Yathrib). The people welcomed him by playing instruments (in all likelihood drums as this was the predominant instrument in their cultural practices), performing a kind of dance (which we will define in a moment) and engaging in song which incidentally the Women of Medina participated in. Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s closest companion and 1st Caliph, wanted to reprimand them for this but the Prophet said “No...Let the Jews see that our religion is relaxed and accommodating.” They continued by singing amongst other things “We are the daughters of Najaar”. [As an aside: The Prophet specifically mentioned “The Jews” because in Medina they were the cultural arbiters of expression].

In terms of dance the Ansar were performing something akin to the Quranic definition of dance known as “haraqa”. *Haraqa* in classical Arabic is “fervor created by movement”. It is the kind of dance you might see at a cultural festival but not at a club or party or on a music video. It is not to be confused

with the modern Arabic definition for dance i.e. “Raks” even when this term occurs in some ahadith it is still not referring to the modern Arabic understanding. In fact what we call “dance” (raks in modern Arabic) today would not be recognized as such in 7th century Arabia.

A Woman’s Vow

Also in Sahih Bukhari we have the story of the woman who pledged to the Prophet that she would “sing” a song of praise if the Messenger of Allah were to be returned safely from a battle. The Messenger did not rebuke her and say “Oh no sister you can’t make a vow like that because as a Woman your voice is your awrah and you are not allowed to sing to Men not even me.” That did not occur. In fact when he did return he encouraged her to fulfill her vow. She sang but how did she do so? She sang of course in a dignified not lewd manner. Let us recall our usuli principles that were mentioned under the heading Music is Halal By Default. In fact in a separate narration of the same story in the Sunan of Abu Dawud we find that not only did this Woman sing (remember 7th century decorum) but that she also included a kind of haraqa in a style similar to those Abyssinians in the mosque. In fact there are some traditional tribes in Morocco that have maintained this dignified centuries old form of coordinated folk movement. Here’s a little nugget: This story is an example of the Prophet’s mercy and magnanimity for in allowing her to fulfill her vow he honored and elevated her. This is because the vow of a Woman in Pre-Islamic Arabia was invalid!

The Girls Who Sang an Ode

We also have the story in Sahih Bukhari of the group of girls that were singing an ode in front of the Prophet . It was only when they started to sing words to the effect “And oh Allah bless our Prophet who knows the future” that he interrupted them by gesturing and saying in the negative “Mah” (or “uh uh” for a modern equivalent). He said words to the effect of “What you were saying before that was fine but don’t say **that** [i.e. knowing of the future].” This demonstrates that “content” is the major determining factor in permissibility.

The Girls Who Sang But Weren’t Singers

We also have a very illuminating story for our discussion related by Aisha in Sahih Bukhari. In this hadith there were two girls that were singing at her home in the presence of the Prophet. Abu Bakr became upset by this and proceeded to attempt to stop them. The Prophet instead said to let them continue. You may think that I am mentioning for the fact that they were singing and the Prophet prevented Abu Bakr from stopping them. Yes we can say how this supports the position of this article but I did not include this hadith for that reason. What is really interesting about this hadith is what Aisha mentions when relating it. She, may Allah be pleased with her, described the girls as girls who sang **BUT WERE NOT SINGERS!** Why did Aisha not simply stop after saying “two girls were singing” and relate the hadith? This is crucial for us to remember because this whole argument of people claiming music to be haram almost always fails to inform us of **history and context**. These girls were not the Britney Spears and Shakira (may they be guided aright) of their time. Aisha makes a point of emphasizing that the girls

were not songstresses. They were not of a people who during that time were known to be Singers with a capital S. During this time and for several centuries after you would have individuals that would sing lewd poetry, often accompanied by musical instruments by the way (we'll get to that). So you would have songstresses involved in this kind of undignified musical expression. But ghina (singing) per se wasn't the issue as the hadith shows. Aisha makes a DISTINCTION between good singing which in this historical context meant individuals who were not "Singers" and bad singing which in this cultural reality was the practice of virtually anyone who was a "Singer". In fact the hadith is more of a proof of usuli principles and frankly that is where this discussion truly resides. Context is King!

Wind, Strings And Understanding The Famous Bukhari Hadith

The most oft quoted hadith from those who claim music, especially the use of wind and string instruments, is prohibited is found in the following hadith in Sahih Bukhari:

"From among my followers there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk, the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful."

English ≠ Arabic

Sahih Bukhari is the most rigorously authenticated hadith collection in Islam. The English translations however are not always accurate or they are not related in a way that can give the reader a full appreciation for what they actually mean to say. To help us with the ORIGINAL ARABIC of this hadith I asked the eminent scholar, linguist and hadith expert Sheikh Abdallah Adhami to provide an explanation of the philological (the study of historical and comparative linguistics) analysis of the implications that are inherent in the hadith. In other words what is in the original Arabic, what is the context of the hadith and what historical realities help us to understand this hadith in modern times. Please note that the Sheikh is not reiterating the renown ibn Hazm critique of the authorities (transmitters) listed. This hadith is definitive yes i.e. Sahih. But the implication of a definitive hadith is not necessarily definitive. You need to understand the classical Arabic. Let us begin.

The Sheikh has explained that the modern Arabic word for playing musical instruments is 'azf. But in pre-Islamic Arabic this word 'azf meant something different. It was a noun that carried several derivable meanings however its core meaning was understood by the Arabs to mean "an unrecognizable sound". Now in the hadith above we find the very same root for 'azf being used however in its plural form *ma'aazif* (the use of musical instruments). *Ma'aazif* usually accompanied lewd poetry of the time. So thus far we have what should be translated as "the playing of unrecognizable sounds [through these instruments that are normally associated with the lewd singing of poetry (i.e. what we may consider a song today)]". We will analogize the unrecognizable part shortly. Stay with me I know it's a lot but not everything is a simple answer.

Where Imam Bukhari Places This Hadith

Herein lies the caveat! What is the chapter heading that Imam Bukhari places this hadith under? Is it under a chapter that says "Music/Singing/Poetry is haram, Instruments are haram, etc...etc..?" No it is

not. The chapter heading in Sahih Bukhari that this hadith falls under is: “Prohibition of Khamr (wine/intoxicants) and Calling The Drink By Another Name”. Thus the more correct understanding of the hadith would be that

you will have people who will call the playing or listening to of these unrecognizable sounds (using instruments normally associated with vice) by another name in order to make it lawful.

So this hadith isn't saying that music or musical instruments are haram BY NATURE...INTRINSICALLY. It is saying that these people will call wine something else, silk clothing something else, fornication something else, “*ma'aazif*” something else in order to legitimize them! This isn't a wholesale rejection of music. Quite the contrary as we have shown that other forms of what we consider musical expression to be today were allowed and at times encouraged by The Prophet himself!

Cultural Context

What is critical in our understanding of this hadith and the general issue of music permissibility is what was going on at the time. Culturally speaking instrument playing was done in conjunction with lewd poetry. It was a cultural norm. Instruments (wind and string in particular) were also mostly present in gatherings that encouraged vice. And if you read the various scholars and Imams that have said musical instruments are haram they almost always position their rulings in this context. So if you were someone who played an instrument as a general rule that would be a red flag in society. Why? Because the only people who did that were people in these types of gatherings. This is why in some classic texts you will find mention of the rejection of court testimony of some musicians. Abu Bakr Bayhaqi as we know compiled a well known and highly regarded hadith collection many scholars quote from. In the 10th volume (Book of Testimony) he talks about music and interestingly this is the ONLY place he mentions music. He highlights how Imam Shafi said poetry is the realm of wisdom and there are people who use poetry along with musical instruments to entertain and bring joy to others. Imam Shafi says that the testimony of **these people** is VALID. There are those people who make a profession out of this however and their testimony is INVALID. It was understood in this cultural context that people who did this were engaging in or facilitating lewd behavior. This is important when accepting or rejecting a person's testimony in court. Interestingly Abu Hanifah also held that engaging in music and lewdness was not a necessary association although the mashur (majority opinion) of the Hanafi madhab does not take their founder's view.

Jurists and An Analogy

All of the Imams that talk about the legality of musical instruments do so from an usuli perspective. You see this with ghinaa (singing). Virtually everyone considers singing to be lawful. But jurists have said that singing can be haram. But when they do they refer to the kind of singing that incites and ignites carnal desire. They do so based on the usuli principles we mentioned earlier. Once again we see content is king! All commentators on this hadith remarkably say very little about the musical instrument portion. In Fath Al-Bari by Ibn Hajar he spends 3-4 pages on this hadith but only 3 lines are focused on the

musical instruments part of the hadith. *Usul* is what we go to to understand music in Islam. This is why I made a point of including the *usuli* principles in this article.

At this point you are hopefully beginning to have an appreciation for the foundational understanding of the view of music being permissible. And when we say music is permissible are we talking about **anything** we call music? Are we talking about **any** setting? Are we talking about **any** type of content? Are we understanding what musical/artistic expression meant in 7th Century Arabia? Are we applying 21st century Western understanding to 1400 years ago and vice-versa? Hopefully we can now accept that at the very least there is a legitimate difference of opinion (if you still adhere to another view) and that our energy is better spent on the issues of FAR GREATER import that I will address later in this article. But let's move on to the final legalistic discussion and bring in some history and scholarship.

Some Historical Nuggets

"The origin of the words lute, rebec, guitar and naker are from the Arabic Al-Oud, Rabab, qitara and naqqara is an established fact. That we owe three of these instruments themselves to the Arabs we know for certainty [dispute over guitar coming directly from Arabs]."

—**Historical Facts For The Arabian Musical Influence** by Henry George Farmer**.

Interestingly Muslims had a tremendous impact on music and musical instruments historically.

Al Andalus

Most of the Iberian Peninsula saw its greatest development under Islamic rule and this extended into Art and Culture. Al-Hakam II, Sultan in Al-Andalus, improved upon a kind of saxophone. Al Salahi (13th century scholar) says that the Christians borrowed this instrument from the Arabs (i.e. Muslims). Ibn Khaldun also describes this. We also know that Al-Andalus was at the center of musical instrument production in the world and the Abbasid Caliphate even had a court musician. You will not find an analogy of anything else that is supposedly "haram" being publicly state sanctioned, developed and promoted globally. Muslims never contributed much to the development of gambling, alcohol, pork production, houses of "ill repute" etc even if a limited number of private citizens engaged in these things. But they did so with music. This would be the only exception if music were indeed haram. Let us move on to scholarship.

Scholarship

You will often hear people say things like "All scholars condemn music" or the "vast majority of scholars" say music is haram. Others will say "only modern scholars" allow for musical instruments. Here is a list, with special thanks to Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, of just some of the classic scholars that have written on the permissibility of music to varying degrees:

- Imam Dhahabi
- Ibn Hazm

- Shawkani
- Qadi Iyad
- Ibn Arabi
- Al-Ghazali

Modern Scholarship

Shaykh Jad ul-Haq Ali, Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar (rahimullah) published an essay (in 1980) on the permissibility of music from a Shariah perspective. [Read it for yourself here](#). You also have the current Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shaykh Ali Jum'ah also affirming that music is halal. There are many other scholars that have spoken on the permissibility of musical expression and hopefully you have a greater understanding as to what we mean by music.

We have now concluded the Music and Islam: Wind, Strings part. We will focus the remainder of this article on some of the more salient issues in my opinion which I put under the category Fear of A Black Planet. Before concluding this section I must thank Sheikh Abdallah Adhami, Director of Sakeenah, Inc. for his selflessness in contributing to this article. Without his hours of counsel and gentlemanly corrections to my several drafts (due to my own shortcomings) this article could not have been published in good conscience. I urge you to support his efforts and visit the website www.sakeenah.org.

The Fear of A Black Planet Part

While I do not hold the view that music is haram I am accepting of those with a contrary opinion. There are some however who can't seem to do the same and have taken up the anti-music position as a sort of rallying cry. But having a different view on music doesn't explain the fervor and frankly ugliness that can come from this debate. There are several scholars and everyday Muslims who differ with the view of music being permissible but do not articulate their views in a divisive way. These next sections are **not** about them. But for the ones that are using this issue in a way that facilitates argumentation perhaps the remainder of this article will be of benefit. Hopefully we can put certain views into a social context that allows clarity to break through the smoke of confusion.

Persnickety, Pugnacious, Personalities with Pens

There are many voices chiming in (pun intended) on this issue. Bear in mind that when you are considering who or what to listen to you should be aware of personality and punditry. Let's start with personality. Some people take a more constrictive approach to issues by their very nature. Others see the world through a very narrow prism of us vs. them, black or white. Some are argumentative and thus approach issues in a manner that alienates as opposed to invites. There have always been individuals

like this. Some of our scholars have even been more constrictive by nature than others and reflect this in their rulings. So an individual's personality should be taken into consideration ESPECIALLY when we are discussing cultural expression because it is so subjective and open to biases.

Now imagine a personality with an audience. Today one has a worldwide platform to express their views without the checks and balances of editors, peer reviewers, fact verifiers or the financial constraints associated with paper based publishing. Nothing is cheaper than free! In this world of free blogs you can be a do-it-yourself pundit. Don't confuse punditry with expertise even if it carries the title "Imam". Anyone can wax poetic or not-so-poetic. The internet is basically a publishing medium and we have been conditioned to believe that "published" means legitimate. Anyone with a mouth and an opinion can have a virtual *majlis*. This would not be possible pre-Internet. Even if "back in the day" said pundit once spun a record, grabbed a microphone or played a banjo at the local hootenanny that doesn't mean he has synthesized those experiences with his new found knowledge constructively. His personal "religious epiphany" should not be used as a battle axe against others. Nor should the title of "Imam" or "Sheikh" lead one to believe that one is an expert on any issue various and sundry involving Muslims and Islam. Sometimes it is best to remain silent as articulating a point when one is inexperienced or "unlettered" on a subject may do more harm than good. Imams and Scholars should be humble and egoless enough to offer counsel on subjects they know and based on the contextual situation at hand. They are not by default THE experts on Puerto Rican History, Spoken Word Poetry or Medical Ethics. So it is important that those we reference on these issues are not simply pundits with Alpha Male personalities nor even by default performing artists who may or may not have adequate knowledge of Islam to go with their experience in front of audiences.

Fear of A Black Planet: Islam, Hip-Hop & The American Way

A final and equally important reason for a proscriptive attitude among the hardliners is the fact that much music is influenced by non-Islamic, Western musical traditions, or is produced in the Western world. Music can be seen as a part of a Western, and sometimes specifically North American, cultural imperialism. This competes with and draws attention from Allah and Islam... This reaction[censure of music and musicians] can be seen as part of the counter power strategies relating to globalization and Western hegemony...The modern hardliners have identified music as a serious rival to Islam.

-Shoot The Singer by Maria Korpe pp 15-16

The greatest American export is American Pop Culture. A major influencer of this pop culture is the Black American experience. You notice it in designers looking at urban (read: Black) fashion trends, mainstream use of popular slang (words like "diss" and "give a shout out" have made it into the common vernacular), and of course in music. Hip-Hop is perhaps the most obvious example of this influence. Muslim youth are still enamored with rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls over a decade after their deaths. The eyes and ears of Muslim youth be they Black, Arab, South Asian, Latino, or White are captivated by Hip-Hop i.e. Black Urban American culture. Not only are Muslim youth listening to the

music but more importantly to point out for our discussion they take on a Hip-Hop aesthetic. The fashion, speech and mannerisms of many Muslim youth regardless of country are of this aesthetic. This is disconcerting to many Muslims and as the author of *Shoot The Singer*, Maria Korpe, mentions above they have identified music and I would say Hip-Hop in particular as a rival to Islam.

Whilst I would share their concern over the negative aspects of Hip-Hop and by extension American Pop culture I do not agree with the wholesale rejection of a culture simply because it doesn't fit **one's** cultural comfort zone. And this cultural comfort zone is not by default the "Muslim" culture assuming there even is such a thing. Just because you may have a comfort zone made up of physically homogenous people, with no visible contributions from people that don't look like you, and you have been in a majority Muslim culture for so long where that which is cultural and what is "Islamic" have fused for you doesn't mean that my cultural expression is "un"Islamic. So Black cultural expression, American cultural expression becomes problematic for some people. We do have racism and "racialism" (seeing things through a prism of race) in our communities negatively contributing to this discussion. Reference the article: [Marry A Black Muslim Brother? Muslim Marriage Attitudes Depend on Blackness](#). You have Arab/South Asian Muslims who have issues with Blackness. But you also have many Black converts that reject aspects of their own Black culture replacing them with Arab or South Asian cultural norms due to fear of taking on nationalism (a legacy of the Black revolutionary experience post 1960's America-Yeah this can get **real deep** folks). And this nationalism has reared its head in Islam from traditionally Muslim cultures before:

"...the Arabs were too jealous of encroachments upon that sacred and superior thing called 'Arab nationality' to permit of foreign ways and customs to any great extent...."

—Historical Facts For Arabian Musical Influence (p.50) by Henry George Farmer

The word jealous should probably be replaced by "prideful" for historical clarity. We can also reference the Prophet Muhammad's final sermon where he states that there is no superiority of an Arab over a Non-Arab or a White over a Black. There would be no need to mention this if it were not an issue amongst the people. What is interesting is that you see this defensive attitude towards certain cosmetic aspects of culture. But the Arab Muslims had no problem with foreign knowledge. They preserved as we know various knowledge from other people.

So in addition to the racial aspects Fear of A Black Planet is a metaphor for all things “foreign” to traditional Muslim cultures including the mindset of even some converts to the faith who surrender their own autonomy at times to these Islamic gatekeepers. One of the manifestations of “foreign” culture is musical expression. Some Muslims feel threatened by this and thus come out against music with almost rabid enthusiasm. For many Muslims, especially those who don’t consider America or the West to be their culture, it frankly makes them mad (both angry and a bit loopy). So you have a lot of resentment directed towards the U.S. and since much of America’s culture rides on the beats, notes, and lyrics of popular song this contributes to an anti-music position.

The Boss of Me: Controlling the Muslim Narrative

Many people who articulate a rabid anti-music stance (keyword: “rabid”) or those who blog and speak out against it do so out of a need to control and dominate the Muslim narrative. I alluded to this earlier. I have witnessed, and perhaps you have as well, individuals practically bullying their way through arguments. They literally occupy bully pulpits! Their arguments tend to be less academic, intellectual or even experiential in nature but are instead more emotional, arrogant and judgmental of others. In my view they are coming from a particular cultural perspective on the matter, and maybe some character flaws, masquerading under the Quranic reference of enjoining the right and forbidding the wrong. This is reminiscent of puritanical Christianity. “If it feels good then it must be bad.” This kind of asceticism is discouraged in Islam. But their arguments can be convincing to some. We have already established that the conventional Islamic wisdom was that music was haram thus they speak in an environment probably predisposed to this notion anyway. They then juxtapose that message to obvious unIslamic examples related to music. They can reference the antics of Superbowl halftime “wardrobe malfunctions”, satanic references in Death Metal “music”, and lyrics in songs like “Blame it on the Alcohol”. No Muslim in good conscience will defend the negative implications of music. But this is already covered in the principles of Islamic Jurisprudence anyway that we referenced earlier. Islam has already dealt with this. But unfortunately you can dictate the narrative if the audience doesn’t know the story.

Conclusion

How should you use this article? Let’s start with how you should NOT use this article. **Music and Islam:** *Wind, Strings And Fear of A Black Planet* is not meant to be used for the purposes of a music debate. As the author I am not interested in debating the issue and I hope you will not spend a great deal of energy arguing with others and using this article to do so.

So how might you use this article? If you are/were in a quandary on this issue or needed some “backing” for what your soul always “felt” but could not “defend” then maybe this will help you. If you maintain an anti-music stance then hopefully you have at least gained an appreciation for where “the other side” is coming from. Perhaps I am being a bit utopic but at the very least I hope it allows us to respectfully agree to disagree then.

More importantly I hope that we can begin to have substantive discussions on the dynamics of race, culture and control of the Muslim narrative in our communities. Islam is not so much a “religion” as it is a lived experience for the Muslim. It does not exist between the pages of books. It exists in our hearts and is expressed by our souls. This article seeks to bring sakeenah to your heart and your soul. Stay Blessed.

-Brother Dash

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Brother Dash is a Muslim Spoken Word Poet and Social Critic. His performances have been broadcast to over 4 million TV and Radio households worldwide and over 100,000 have seen him live. He has written several articles on culture, entertainment and Islam. His new Spoken Word Poetry album *Spoken Soul* will be released Eid 2009.

*There are a couple of exceptions to this not related to our discussion. One example is the fact that meat needs to be properly slaughtered before it can be consumed. Also bear in mind that this maxim refers to acts not related to ibadah where in fact the opposite is true.

**Mr. Farmer was a musicologist and the foremost authority on the Arab influence on world music including post Islam. We do not have time nor space to discuss him in further detail so perhaps you should avail yourself of your local library or online book search tool.