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## Music

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### Hip-hop's Islamic influence

MUSIC REFLECTS FAITH, BUT THERE'S A STRUGGLE TO BEAT A BAD RAP

By Marian Liu  
Mercury News

From sampling Malcolm X to evoking Islamic principles in its rhymes, hip-hop is opening eyes to the Muslim world.

Islam has flavored hip-hop from its beginnings with Afrika Bambaataa to current rappers Jurassic 5 and Mos Def. But current events have made Muslim rappers feel like they're under attack. Muslim rappers are also struggling to make their varied beliefs understood.

Some are changing their names to avoid backlash and fearing they can't pray openly without being called terrorists. Others are lacing their lyrics and album names with anti-war rhymes and provocative phrases.

“We used to go by Jihad, which means struggle in Arabic,” says Amaar Zaheer, part of a Mountain View rap duo. “But after Sept. 11, it was misinterpreted to mean holy war, and that's not the message we bring at all. Islam says to keep positive and be a role model, to make a difference. We try to reflect that in our music.”

East Bay rapper Paris, however, deliberately uses the word jihad to shock. He named his fifth album “Sonic Jihad” as a “button-pusher, a sonic assault on everything I see as unjust,” he says. Yet, because of the album name -- and the cover showing a jetliner crashing into the White House -- he knows no label will back him up and is preparing to sell his album online.

“There are countless rap records that have gunplay, prostitution of women and more. I'm not passing that as justification, but I am in heated opposition to this current administration's stance,” says Paris, a popular independent rapper who graduated from San Francisco's Lowell High School and the University of California-Davis. After having been Muslim for three years, he says he no longer is but that he's open to many beliefs.

Even the everyday rituals of Islam can cause misunderstanding, says Hashim Abdul-Khaliq, a 27-year-old engineer who raps in his spare time as a part of a Cleveland rap group called the Iron Triangle.

“We pray five times a day, but if I'm praying at work and somebody walks into the room, their subconscious is making a connection between me and Saddam,” Abdul-Khaliq says.

One of the songs he is working on says, “World War III is over oil and our minds are the spoils.”

In pop culture, Muslim rappers' faith can be misrepresented. For example, it has become a fashion

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statement for men to wear *kufis*, the Islamic prayer caps. On the cover of Russell Simmons' ONEWORLD magazine, Lil' Kim wore lingerie underneath a *burqa*.

``It looked like Lil' Kim was mocking women of Islam when she put on clothes attributed to us," says Christie Z-Pabon, who runs a hip-hop cultural newsletter. ``It was completely insulting. We purposely don't dress sexy."

Many hope their presence in the music breaks stereotypes, says Eman Tai, part of Calligraphy of Thought, an East Bay Muslim women's spoken word collective.

``We show people what real Muslims are like, not the garbage they see on television," says Tai, a Pakistani and a second-generation Muslim from San Francisco.

She adds that both African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims are increasingly getting into hip-hop.

### **Islam's poetic history**

``It's part of our history and culture in Islam," says Tai, 25. ``The traditional books of law and philosophy in Islam were written in poetry, and students memorize them with drums, basically singing out the poetry. And if you `beat' that up, it sounds just like rapping."

The connection between hip-hop and Islam was a natural one in the African-American community, where the religion already had strong roots.

``Islamic beliefs and values are seen as the standard in hip-hop," says Adisa Banjoko, a San Jose author who is writing a book on hip-hop and Islam.

For Akil of Jurassic 5, Islam is tied to cultural identity. After hearing hip-hop groups like Public Enemy, which sampled Islamic thought, and learning in high school that some of the Africans who came as slaves to America were Muslim, he started believing in Islam.

Akil listened to hip-hop groups that sampled such African-American leaders as Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan and sprinkled in verses taken from the Koran.

``These zillion references," says Fabel, lead people to find their faith, and even to find each other. He and his wife, Christie Z-Pabon, met at a Zulu Nation meeting, part of an international hip-hop awareness movement. They now manage a hip-hop online community and book concerts.

``The little beats planted in the '80s finally blossomed," says Fabel. These references may include anything from Scripture to simply moral ideals.

``Our faith is stronger than the music. We represent it. There are more moral concepts than content, so people can catch the groove and the concept behind it," says Oakland rapper M. Ishaq Abdul-Nurr.

Other rappers like AZ, have whole lines with references to Islam. He says his religion says, ``Each one teach one," so he uses his music to ``break the knowledge down."

Older Muslims are using hip-hop as a way to reach younger Muslims. Abdul-Jalil al-Hakim, owner of an Oakland ad agency, says hip-hop is the newest phase of reaching out to youth, after athletes and entertainment figures.

### **Sharing beliefs**

``They reach people our age by incorporating Islamic ideas into hip-hop," says Jittaun Batiste, a 24-year-old senior at De Anza College. She and other Muslim Student Association members all own Mos Def's albums. ``These artists use their music as a tool to talk about their struggle, their identity and to recognize us and embrace us as their own."

But many in the general listening community ``don't have a clue" that these are Islamic references, says Ted Swedenburg, a professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Arkansas, who has written a thesis on the topic.

Al-Hakim warns that although many rappers are influenced by Islam, it's hard to tell who is Muslim and who is not. Furthermore, there are many factions of Islam: For example, Sunni, Shiite, and Nation of Islam have differing beliefs. Plus, Islam and hip-hop can contradict, with one heading toward purity and the other toward commercialism.

``Muslim artists don't have a large mainstream platform," says Thembisa Mshaka, who works in advertising at Sony. ``Muslims are not driven by materialism or excess sexual behavior. None of that is part of our program but are overriding themes of hip-hop. Where is the Muslim MC's place in this? Should we hide the fact we are Muslim or downplay it and be satisfied with not reaching the masses?"

For Jurassic 5, this means being themselves while satisfying their Muslim fans and their hard-core hip-hop fans.

``I don't try to be preachy; that's not my thing," says Akil. ``I don't point fingers at other people. Otherwise I'll be pointing four fingers at myself. And if I can detect the faults of other people, it's because I have those faults within myself."

But being socially conscious means living with the underground hip-hop label, says Akil, and performing at many alternative concerts, not urban ones.

``Just like the definition of Islam is messed up, so is the definition of hip-hop," says Akil. ``But, we are smack-dab in the middle of what hip-hop is."

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