

The voice of Islam

For those who have never heard of Sami Yusuf, type his name into the YouTube website and prepare to see a pop video unlike any other. Glossy images of the Hagia Sofia mosque in Istanbul fade atmospherically into those of the Egyptian pyramids as swirling voices chant evocatively in the background. But, as the drum-beat kicks in, the viewer is transported dramatically from sweltering Middle Eastern bazaars to a workaday London street. A bearded young man wearing a tailored business suit strides on to a red London bus. "Oh Allah protect me and guide me, Oh Allah don't deny me from beholding your beauty," he sings, before getting up to offer his seat to a clearly delighted old lady.

Later in the video, the kindly Yusuf instructs wide-eyed children at an Indian madrasa, the scenes interspersed with him delivering a PowerPoint presentation to earnest colleagues of mixed ethnicity at a regional sales meeting. For many viewers, they are, perhaps, a confusing series of messages.

Model behaviour like Yusuf's is hardly the stuff of rock 'n' roll legend but probably explains why the 27-year-old British singer is virtually unknown in his own country, at least among non-Middle Eastern music fans. Elsewhere in the world, in Turkey and the Gulf states in particular, he is one of the hottest acts around.

The video in question was recorded to promote the song "Hasbi Rabbi", which translates from Arabic as "My Lord Is Sufficient". It is taken from Yusuf's second album *My Ummah: God Is Cool* - a record which sold at least one million legitimate copies but many times that number of bootleg versions and illegal downloads. The track is the most popular ringtone in the region, and can be heard pulsing out of mobiles from Istanbul to Riyadh. Yusuf is, according to *Time* magazine, Islam's Biggest Rock Star.

Yesterday, Yusuf was back in London, where he grew up, to promote a peace concert at Wembley Arena to highlight the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Darfur. He appeared at a news conference alongside Baroness Vadera, the International Development minister, having just returned from the troubled Sudanese region on a fact-finding trip backed by the Government.

He urged his fellow Muslims to face up to the genocide being perpetrated by the Islamic regime in Khartoum against minority black African pastoralists. "I saw the poverty. I saw the destitution of the people, the orphans. I saw grief, agony and pain - people in desperate need," he said. "It is all very well seeing it on the news but it is nowhere in comparison to being there and witnessing it with your own eyes. It is like torture."

The Darfur concert, organised by the charity Islamic Relief, is already being described as the Muslim Live 8 and comes amid growing concern over what some have described as the "shameful" response of Muslims in Britain and elsewhere to the events in Sudan.

Joining Yusuf on stage for the event on 21 October will be Outlandish, an Islamic-Christian hip-hop group from Denmark, and Kareem Salama, an American-Muslim country-and-western star who has sung about, among other things, the pressures facing US soldiers sent to Iraq.

Yet while Yusuf has evoked comparisons with such Western chart-toppers as Robbie Williams - at least in terms of popularity and the devotion of his millions of fans - he has turned his back on the bad behaviour associated with many rock stars. He prays five times a day and is currently fasting for Ramadan. "Every grandmother would be proud of me. I am the perfect grandson," he admits.

But while his fans' parents are clearly impressed with his impeccable morality - his audiences transcend the normal generational divide - he says his music should concern people rather than his religion. "I never intended to be a clean-cut singer, a Muslim singer or a religious singer. All I ever wanted to do was make good music. I have an issue with being labelled a religious singer," he says. "I see myself as an artist who is versatile and who sings about whatever inspires him."

Yusuf prides himself on his musical adaptability - drawing on Middle Eastern tradition as well as hip-hop and even Western classical music. He says he would even one day love to sing with Bono or Sting.

His life story makes him perfectly placed to draw on such diverse cultural strands. Born in Tehran, where he lived until he was three, he is an ethnic Azeri. His grandparents left Baku in Azerbaijan when it was recaptured by the Bolsheviks after the First World War. The family arrived in Ealing, west London, in the early 1980s and settled well.

"British society is among the most tolerant, open, liberal, multicultural and inclusive in the world," he says. "For me, home is the UK, home is England, home is London. I went to Azerbaijan recently. I got a big presidential welcome but I still felt like a stranger."

Growing up in a musical family - he was taught by his father who was also a composer - Yusuf eventually studied composition and piano at the Royal Academy but left after only eight months. He now continues his studies at Salford University and still considers himself a student despite his international pop star status.

Having nearly given up music to pursue a legal career - he was talked out of it by a friend - he says he was "spiritually awakened" at the age of 16 and has studied Islam and Arabic in Egypt, dividing his time between Cairo, London and the home he shares in Stockport with his wife Maryam, a German-born convert to Islam. He remains fiercely protective of his private life. "Maryam didn't become a Muslim because of me. She did it by herself through her own research," he insists.

In 2003, he recorded his first album, *Al-Muallim (The Teacher)*. The lyrics are sung mostly in English but also include Arabic, Urdu and Farsi, as well as some Turkish dialects. The album was an instant hit, charting in Turkey, Jordan and Egypt. His second album was an even bigger seller.

But with Yusuf's success came criticism. Some Muslims, including the British journalist Yvonne Ridley, who converted to Islam after being captured by the Taliban in Afghanistan, have questioned whether what he is doing, alongside the adoration and wealth he has at his disposal, is compatible with the teachings of the Koran. Others wonder whether music itself should be *haram* (forbidden).

Yusuf admits to being uncomfortable with the hysteria and hero-worship commanded by pop stars, describing it in an open letter to Ridley as "unhealthy and un-Islamic". But his concerts remain a million miles from the average Ricky Martin gig. In Saudi Arabia, he performs to segregated audiences of men only. Where women are allowed in, the excitement never spills over into mixed dancing. The Saudi crowds observe what one spectator has described as an "unspoken decorum".

He remains respectful of his critics but is always ready to argue his case. "Some people say a lot of things that many of us would not agree with," Yusuf adds. "But music is a universal language which has united people for thousands of years and will continue to keep doing so."

"Fame is not something that I crave and it is not something that drives me. It is nice being recognised sometimes but people like you for different reasons. Some want you as an idol on a poster in their room; others like the message. Others see you as a sex symbol it is true. I do get the occasional immature person saying they want to marry me. But in general the message I get from fans is one of respect for what I am doing."

Yusuf does not shy away from tackling controversial themes in his lyrics and videos. He has criticised Muslim rebels from Chechnya for the Beslan massacre and the French government for banning headscarves in schools, as well as singing out about the oppression of "our brothers and sisters in Palestine and Lebanon". But he accepts there is a minority of Britain Muslims who do not share his benevolent view of their adopted country. "The world we are living in is a very angry world, not just among Muslims," he says.

"Certain segments of the Muslim community do feel there is an onslaught on their faith and culture but I don't think that is the vast majority. Each religion has a normative feel, be it Judaism, Islam or Christianity. The feeling in Islam is one of balance and the majority want to live their lives, get along with their neighbours and be good. The overwhelming majority of people in this world are good and goodwill will shine through."