

Title: Sami Yusuf
Sub-title: And then There Was Sami
By Amy Mowafi

Preacher or Pop star? Sami Yusuf, the Islamic singer with the best-selling voice of an angel and the personality to match, insists he is neither. But as Amy Mowafi discovered during an exclusive Enigma interview, this is a young man most definitely on a mission.

His clenched fist, void of aggression but packed with passion, is gesturing determinedly through the air. “Strength,” he says. “Islam is about strength.” He straightens his back; chin tilted upwards, a manoeuvre of defiance, an attempt to personify the “greatness” of his Islam. “There’s a story,” he begins, “Umar Ibn AL-Khattab once smacked someone because he saw him walking like this...” He gets up, shuffles along the floor, head bowed down, shoulders hunched, re-enacting the 1500-year-old episode. “We need the Arab world to be united. If united, it’s a force, it’s a power. We are not supposed to attack anyone, but be strong and honourable.”

Sitting in the surprisingly trendy Cairo offices of his production company Awakening, his voice trails off into low whispers and then crescendos suddenly. His hands never rest; always underlining, underscoring, imploring you to listen, learn and become a better Muslim. It is impossible not to get drawn in. He eloquently careers back and forth from Islamic history to the psyche of today’s youth, from surahs to Sufism, from music to politics, all via countless hamdullillahs, subhan’allahs and mash’allahs (praises to God). He peppers his public school English with Arabic words - from classical to Egyptian slang - and then, five minutes after the original question had been asked, he momentarily falls silent, waiting for the next question and the signal to re-dive into a heady avalanche of riveting words.

His faded jeans, button-down checked shirt and side swept hair belong to a Gap advert; his words belong to a preacher and his eyes to the contented wise man of storybooks. He is Sami Yusuf, Islamic singer and religious inspiration. But does that make him a pop star or preacher? Yusuf is adamant he is neither.

“I don’t want to be a pop singer, it’s not me,” he says. “I am doing something which is not just music. It is more than that. A lot of things are involved and it’s a big responsibility. I am reinforcing those ideas that all human beings hold dear - to respect your mother, that killing people is wrong, that hitting someone is wrong, that oppressing people is wrong. I want to remind people to follow their hearts.”

And despite the thousands around the world who hang on to his every religious lyric, he insists, “As an artist I would never want to preach to people, and Islam is not a religion of preaching. Rather I want to share. I’ve been brought up in the West and would not like someone coming up to me and saying this is right and this is wrong. I make a clear distinction between telling people what to do, and talking about situations. With my music I’m explaining how I see Islam, according to my understanding of how I see the world. That we live side by side, that we respect religions, and that we can live in a

modern society. I want to remove this idea that religious people stay in mosques and unreligious people go to discos. That's not the case, there are shades of grey and purple and green. Artists from Mozart to Bono are sharing their experiences and the things they want to communicate with the world."

Yet when Yusuf is on stage, simple lyrics such as *Imla' qalbi bil yaqin / Thabbitni 'ala hadhad din* (Fill my heart with conviction / Make me steadfast on this religion), riding along his famously smooth voice, the audience's reaction is pure pop. Time magazine called it a "Beatle-like frenzy" – girls screaming, boys whistling, a jungle of hands waving manically in the air. Throughout it all, Yusuf remains stoic. A prerequisite, one assumes, of his piety. "When people are screaming my name and cheering, I don't take it seriously. I block it out. It's in my subconscious, I don't take it consciously. Fame is a big test. Some of the scholars of Islam have noted that fame is one of the biggest diseases of the heart and of spirituality. They say fame is the worst thing a person can seek. It's a big test. This world is very short and we are indeed extremely insignificant, so we can do things in a good way or a bad way and we need to accept that reality."

Yusuf's own reality is light years away from what he imagined for himself. A British citizen born in Iran to Azeri parents, the 26 year old Yusuf spent most of his life in London, where all he wanted was "to get married, save up a few thousand pounds and buy a house with cash...a very simple life, a very basic life." But his father, a composer, poet, and musician, understood that his talented son was destined for bigger things. "I think in a way my parents were grooming me from a young age." Yet musical success was never something he intentionally sought out. "I didn't even want my picture on my album cover," he says. But as Yusuf says, "Allah has his own plans." Those plans would turn out to include intensive studies with professors from the Royal Academy of Music in London, a best friend who ignored Yusuf's pleas for a simple life and vehemently insisted he should "use his talent do something for Allah and for humanity," and eventually, two internationally best-selling albums. "The chain of events was destined," he says.

The 2003 release of his first album, entitled *Al Mu'allim* (The Teacher), sold in the hundreds of thousands. Even in conservative Saudi Arabia, sales topped 100,000. Although Yusuf initially intended his music for Muslims living in the West, it captured the imagination of audiences across the Middle East, topping the charts in Turkey and Egypt. Then the release of the first "Islamic music video" for the album's title track turned him into an overnight Islamic heartthrob - an idea that Yusuf is visibly uncomfortable with. Yet would the young boy, who learnt to play a multitude of instruments before his tenth birthday, have become an international phenomenon were it not for his much talked about "boy band" looks? As always, "Allah only knows." But his "philosophy" was that whatever he did "it had to be dignified and respectable." And he likes to believe the frenzy has little to do with the superficialities of the music industry, and everything to do with Muslim youth having finally found someone who speaks their language and who truly represents them.

With his fan base in place, 2005's My Ummah(My Community), catapulted him to superstardom, granting him a level adoration no one expected a man who sings about religion - and Islam of all religions - could elicit. "The time was simply right," says Yusuf. "Had I arrived ten years ago, it might not have worked. We're living in a world where people are really thirsty for spirituality; the Muslim world especially. Wallhi (I swear), it's because post modernism and modernity as we know it today has eliminated religion completely, and it has really failed."

Of course, build someone up, and the inevitable moment arrives when you have to pull them right back down. Yusuf's ongoing moment in the sun might not be mired in controversy, but the critics are still making themselves heard. There is a minority for whom music and Islam are entirely incongruent. Add legions of infatuated fans to the mix, and as far as the critics are concerned, it's a recipe for hell. In April of this year, Yvonne Ridley, the controversial British journalist who converted to Islam after being captured by the Taliban, openly slated Yusuf in the now infamous article Pop Culture In the Name of Islam. "Eminent scholars throughout history have often opined that music is haram (forbidden in Islam)," wrote Ridely. "And I don't recall reading anything about the Sahaba (the prophet's companions) whooping it up to the sound of music. Don't get me wrong. I'm all for people letting off steam, but in a dignified manner and one which is appropriate to their surroundings." The source of her angst was a Yusuf London concert during which she watched "Sisters in their 20's, 30's and 40's, as they squealed, shouted, swayed and danced...security guys looking dazed and confused as they tried to stop veiled sisters from standing on their chairs." After watching Yusuf proclaim his love for Britain, she provokingly went on to say, "What sort of life is there on Planet Sami, I wonder? If he is so proud to be British, why is he living in the great Middle Eastern democracy of Egypt?"

Despite the sharp words, Yusuf refuses to be drawn into a war of ideals. Instead, in one single, calmly worded open letter, published in several on-line Islamic publications, he said, "The obsessive fascination of fans towards any celebrity...to the point of hysteria and hero-worshipping is definitely unhealthy not to mention un-Islamic. Of course, as Muslims, we are required to abide by certain etiquettes in whatever situation we may find ourselves in. However, I definitely did not see girls dancing or behaving indecently in any of my concerts. To state otherwise is a gross exaggeration if not an outright fallacy. And if indeed that did take place then let's deal with it in the true Prophetic tradition - a tradition that imparts love, mercy, tolerance and wisdom." He ended with, "Yvonne, let us work together as fellow Muslims and Britons in building a better future for our community and all human beings and strive to make our world a safer, more peaceful, tolerant and prosperous place."

Today he simply says. "She's a nice lady, she wants to be a good person, and I'm sure as person she's trying her best. She's a mother and a sister but in life it's very difficult to be balanced." And, typical Yusuf, he quickly dismisses the negativity, and grabs the opportunity to use her comments as a positive launch board from which to discuss the state of society today. "Unfortunately being balanced is not very fashionable these days. Human beings want spice; they want to be on the right or the left. But we're living in

troubled times and we need moderation and we need to bring some sanity and normality to these times. One of the greatest blessings we have from Allah is to have aql saleem (a sane and healthy mind), yet the way people think today is very sad. So people who have a talent and influence have a responsibility to do something positive with that.”

He then talks at length about the peaceful manner in which Muslim world should have reacted to the Danish cartoons; about the world’s misunderstanding of Islam, and about the rahma (blessing) of the prophet Muhammad. He talks of spirituality in Hollywood, about Tony Blair’s ignorance of the real problems that afflict Western Muslim youth, and the importance of having young Muslims working in the media. He touches on the idea of female Islamic singers, and while he refuses to say if the principal is haram (religiously forbidden) or allowed, he feels it would only cause unnecessary controversy at a time when Muslims have more pressing issues to attend to. He discusses Malcolm X, submerging himself in the tale of the man who went from pimp to inspirational leader simply “because he had Allah so he had everything.” He praises Bob Dylan, but says in today’s world a singer needs to be more direct with his message and his lyrics, “People are so confused they just want to know what’s happening. There’s no time for metaphor and symbolism.”

And when asked about his private life, his eloquence dissolves into silence. Minutes pass until he finally says, “I’ll tell you something- write this – this is important: From the beginning, from the outset I’m a very private person. People try to take pictures of my wife, but I don’t let them. Privacy is something from Allah to be preserved. Not because you have anything to hide but because it is yours; it’s sacred.”

So all we do know is that his wife, whom he married a year ago, is a German convert who spends her time between England and Egypt where Yusuf is currently based. “Egypt is a very special place to which I have a very strong bond,” he says. “And of course the Prophet did pray for the Egyptians.” We know that earlier on today, he finally managed to spend a few hours with his in-laws, who have on a visit to Cairo for nearly six days, but have hardly seen their son-in-law because of his unbearably demanding schedule. “I went to sleep at 7am this morning because I was preparing for a concert and had to wake up two hours later.” And we know his wife has shouldered a “big responsibility” by marrying Yusuf, and that she is “an endlessly patient really wonderful woman who is really very nice.”

Of course, Yusuf was bound to choose well, his only guidelines being those provided by God. “I feel very sorry for a lot of sisters and brothers,” he says. “Because they’re looking for ‘the one’, but there is no such thing. If someone proposes and he has good akhlaq (manners) then you should marry. It is as simple as that, but we make it so complicated. And that’s the reason you find people in their 30s who are not married. Have some prerequisites, which Allah made clear, say bismillah (In the name of God), do istikhara (prayers for guidance), and then marry.”

As simple as that? Maybe not. But on Sami Yusuf’s planet it is, and perhaps that’s the reason why he became a pious inspiration to young Muslims across the world. When

listening to Yusuf, in song or in speech, they have access to a world in which, as long as you have Islam, then everything will be just fine. And so in the end, it seems, that while God may not have granted Yusuf the simplicity he has always craved, through Sami Yusuf, God may have granted it to millions.