

Rock star's activism moves many Muslims: Salman Ahmad as Islam's Bono

by [Omar Sacirbey](#) in the [January 24, 2006](#) issue

One of Salman Ahmad's earliest gigs was a talent show at King Edward Medical College in Lahore, Pakistan, where he was studying to be a doctor. Moments after he strummed his first chords, Islamic fundamentalists barged in, smashed Ahmad's guitar and drum set, and broke up the show.

Ahmad quipped that he wasn't scared as much as confused about the incident. "I thought rock musicians were supposed to break their own instruments," he said with a smile.

Little did they know at the time, but those fundamentalists helped spawn the international stardom of a performer whose faith-based music reaches millions of Muslims, prompting comparisons to another do-good rocker, U2's Bono.

Perhaps more important, by promoting interfaith understanding, Ahmad has become a pivotal figure in the war between moderate and extremist Islam.

"That one incident really changed the way I started thinking. I realized that if there are some people who feel threatened by music, and what music means for people, then I should do more of it," Ahmad, a devout Sufi Muslim, said in an interview.

Ahmad, 41, is best known as lead guitarist of Junoon, a Pakistani-American rock band. Wildly popular throughout South Asia and among the South Asian diaspora, the band has sold 25 million albums—as many as Nirvana, ZZ Top and Janet Jackson have sold in the United States. Many of Ahmad's songs have topped MTV India's music charts for weeks on end.

But fame has never been enough for Ahmad, who has parlayed his popularity into lobbying for Third World development and building bridges between the Islamic and Western worlds.

“I can’t imagine anybody else out there who as a single person can make a bigger difference than Sal,” said Polar Levine, a Jewish-American musician with whom Ahmad has collaborated since the September 11 terrorist attacks. “He’s not making music as a sales unit or to get babes. He’s got an agenda.”

Born in Lahore, Ahmad moved with his family to Tappan, New York, when he was 12. There he grew to love Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, and bought his first guitar. He also maintained his Pakistani-Muslim roots, speaking Urdu at home, fasting during Ramadan and perusing the Qur’an. Ahmad returned to Lahore for medical school and after graduating chose music over medicine, figuring that if he failed at rock ‘n’ roll he could always go back to doctoring.

He never picked up a stethoscope again. Junoon, which Ahmad formed in 1990, created a distinctive sound—electric rock braided with Pakistani folk music and lyrics that draw from the Qur’an and Sufi poets like Rumi and Baba Bulleh Shah. He quickly won a following that has grown over the years.

“My inspiration comes from a lot of these Sufi poets, and the fact that they saw the world as one,” Ahmad said. “I’m a believer, and a lot of my music and my life take inspiration from faith. And the Qur’an is a huge source of inspiration.”

Consider Ahmad’s handling of “Bulleya?” an Urdu poem with a title that means “Who Am I?” It appears on Junoon’s fifth album, *Parvaaz, the Flight*. “It’s about this inner quest, which is really the foundation of Sufism, finding out who you are,” said Ahmad, referring to the poem put to music. “Before you judge the world, go and find out what you stand for.”

Despite Ahmad’s deference to Islam, not all Muslims approve of him and Junoon. His group was banned from performing in Pakistan from 1996 to 1999 after referring to government corruption in a song and protesting Pakistan’s and India’s nuclear testing. After fundamentalists won local elections in Pakistan’s northwest Peshawar region in 2002 and outlawed all music as un-Islamic, the BBC, in the documentary *The Rock Star and the Mullahs*, chronicled how Ahmad challenged fundamentalists to show where in the Qur’an music is forbidden.

They couldn’t find the evidence they sought, but they still held to their views.

Yahya Hendi, a Muslim imam and chaplain at Georgetown University and member of the Islamic Fiqh (Jurisprudence) Council of North America, says there is “absolutely

nothing” in the Qur’an or Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) that prohibits music.

On the contrary, Islam needs musicians like Ahmad, perhaps even more than it needs religious leaders, Hendi says. “Music is a universal language. Every human being connects with it. Not everyone connects with religious voices. Musicians can put out the message that Islam is a religion of love, compassion and peace better than clergy,” he said.

A second BBC documentary, *It’s My Country Too*, follows Ahmad as he visits American Muslims living in post-September 11 America. Ahmad has been showing the film at college campuses across the country to promote discussion about fighting extremism and developing dialogue between people of different faiths. He says the vast majority of Muslims are moderate, but that they need to do a better job of explaining their religion.

“Everybody says, ‘It’s a religion of peace.’ Well, all religions are religions of peace. But what does your identity stand for?” he said.

Ahmad was greatly affected by October’s devastating earthquake in the disputed territory of Kashmir. It claimed nearly 90,000 victims, including Ahmad’s aunt and cousin. The tragedy has put Ahmad on a fund-raising tour, including a concert in Norway that helped secure a \$25 million pledge from that country’s government. He was critical of the Pakistani government’s hesitancy to accept aid from Israel, a country it doesn’t recognize.

“We have to get out of this mind-set of the politics of division,” he said. “When there’s a tragedy, you’ve got to do what’s required.”