

This Being Human
Ep. 15 – Asad Ali Jafri

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, curator and cultural visionary, Asad Ali Jafri.

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

People don't understand, because, of course, the U.S. is exporting popular culture everywhere, how integral Muslims have been to the creation of American culture, and that American culture is not what it is today without that intertwining with Muslimness.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Asad Ali Jafri is the consummate DJ. He's one of those people who often operates behind the scenes, but whose influence is felt far and wide. Asad was born in Kuwait but moved to Chicago as a child. And it was through the local hip hop scene that he really found a home for himself in America. His connection to hip hop led him to community organizing and the broader art world. Over the years, Asad has become the creative mind behind major festivals and events in the contemporary Muslim world. Under his leadership, Chicago's "Taking It To The Streets" Festival became one of America's most important hip hop festivals of the new millennium. He has curated innovative programs at places like the Shangri-La Museum of Islamic Art, Culture and Design in Honolulu. And he's currently the executive director of the South Asia Institute in Chicago. We spoke about that journey, the work that's exciting him right now, and some of hip hop's Islamic connections.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Asad, we've come a long way from asking our imams and religious leaders if music is - is haram, haven't we?

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

Absolutely. And in fact, just for the record, I don't think I've ever asked a single religious leader that question. So it's funny to me because I almost sometimes feel like a foreigner in those conversations because I learned about them. They weren't inherent to the communities that I grew up in.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I want to take you back. I want to take you back to the unlikely place that your journey begins, Kuwait.

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

Yes, indeed.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What brought your family there? And growing up in those early years of your childhood in Kuwait, did it feel like home?

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

That's a really good question. I mean, my father was born and raised in India, went to Aligarh Muslim University, eventually went to Pakistan for a year or two, but had his heart settled on going to the US. And studied in the US, was in the Northwest. Sometime in the 70s, my father went from the US to Pakistan to kind of have the arranged marriage with my mother, who was born and raised in Karachi, and they moved back to the US, moved to Nigeria, as I said, and then eventually to Kuwait. It was almost utopian in some senses because my father was working as an expat. And he also had the privileges that come with being an expat, right? So he had these tickets to going back home, which I thought was just free airline tickets to go explore the world. Because our home wasn't really defined. So we would either go to Pakistan sometimes. Sometimes we'd go to the US, sometimes we'd go to Europe. We'd just go places, right. And and, you know, you had an apartment and it was furnished and all those other things that I just thought were part of being a professor, to be completely honest, growing up. And it was a very international group of folks, cause we lived at a university campus. So my neighbours were from Sudan. Then I had other neighbours from Kenya, but the interesting thing for me was I would claim that I was American because I had a U.S. passport and I remember my neighbours saying to each other, "no, no, no, he's not really American." And I kind of knew I was faking the funk, to be honest, because I didn't look the part. But I didn't really know what I was, because we were in Kuwait and I knew I was definitely not Kuwaiti by any means or had anything to do with it, because I was told that often by kids. I remember being either bullied or made fun of for being South Asian. So, growing up, it was this weird kind of dichotomy of not clearly understanding my own place and my own identity and then being thrown over the world, you know, through these travels. And in 1990, the Gulf War happens and it kind of changes everything for us. And I think that's when reality really hits hard for me and really starts forcing me to understand my place in the world.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

And like you said, your world turns upside down. Take me back to that moment and particularly that decision that your family made to leave Kuwait, and where do you end up after that?

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

It was an extremely strange, strange experience, my father had taken me to the US and my mother had taken the rest of the children, the other three, and gone to Pakistan. I think we were in the Chicagoland area at some relative's house, and we were watching CNN, as one does in the - in 1990. And we heard actually that Kuwait may be invaded by Iraq. It's one of those things where I also heard that there's a tornado coming to the Chicago suburbs. You know, you hear it. You don't know what you're going to do about it. You're like, "it'll come, it'll go," you know, you're fine. So we then go back to Kuwait, for I think it was a night or so. I remember sleeping there in - with my father, in the bed. And then we leave to Pakistan the next day. And I believe it was when we arrived in Pakistan - we are again, watching CNN International now, and we see the tanks invading Kuwait. And I think we literally missed it by maybe 24 hours or so. And as a kid, you don't understand what's happening. This is your home. This is the only home that I've known. And it does completely turn upside down. And we don't know where to go and what to do. And you know, days turn to weeks turn to months. And I think, I think like two or three months in, my parents go, "OK, you all need to be in school." So we decided to move to the U.S. and I was in fifth grade then. And, you

know, one thing I'll - I'll just relate, the thing that I remember, and I'm sorry to say this, I really thought, "wow, these kids are not smart at all," because I really felt that the American standard of education was very different than the international standard of education. I was used to being in Kuwait and the fact that they didn't know geography and, you know, all those other things. But I was put in my place when I lost the spelling bee for spelling things the English way as opposed to the American way. I'll leave it at that.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

[laughs] Well, that's such a commentary on being American, isn't it? Like you grew up in Kuwait saying you were American, now you are suddenly in America. What does it feel like to suddenly be American in America for the first time?

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

Well, we weren't in America for the first time. We visited there quite often and we would go there at summers. But it was, it was the first time that I knew that this was a potential home. And I say potential because it wasn't it wasn't an immediate decision. I think for the first year we weren't sure if we were going to go back or not. We were watching the news and we were living with my cousins who were in their 20s, two brothers and in their relatively small duplex house with our family of six, sleeping in the basement, not knowing where we would be. My father wasn't sure what he was doing for work as a professor. My mother got a job really quickly in the village of Bolingbrook, which is the suburb that we were in. And it was just, it was radically different from anything I imagined. I knew that I wasn't necessarily accepted, to be honest. And it was, all of my -- the different identities that I belong to started coming into play immediately. People didn't know where Kuwait was, to be honest. People didn't understand who I was. And later on in middle school, especially, the Muslim thing started coming up as well. I also remember being exposed to hip hop culture heavily. And I was exposed to Public Enemy somehow because a kid in my class had an album. And I think, and I cannot remember, but I think it was *Fear Of A Black Planet*. But I just remember seeing an album cover that made me think like, "what is this?" And I want to know more about it. And of course, if you turned on MTV or anything else, hip hop was the music of the day. There was Hammer and Vanilla Ice and all that. But I remember there was also people like Guru from Gang Starr that were like a judge on *Lip Service*, for example. So this was all happening at the same time. And the number one thing that I think I got into slowly was Rap City on BET. And I'm exploring and learning about for the first time - Wu-Tang Clan. And that wakes me up in a in a completely different way. It's still got that underground flavor. It's raw. It also has -- I wouldn't say - I want to say it has more Islamic or Muslim references, but I don't know if that's true, but it has enough Muslim references, while being really good and really clever. And it gave me knowledge, to be completely honest. KRS-One gave me knowledge, Guru gave me knowledge. And Wu-Tang Clan definitely gave me knowledge.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

When you think back to your growing awareness of - of hip hop as a, as a - as a culture, as a kind of a civilizational language, as a movement, is there a core nugget of knowledge that you kind of look back to and maybe even still hold onto?

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

I think looking back, it's just a knowledge of self, right? And it is this idea of like in order to be a master of self, you have to first have knowledge of self. And later on, I was able to realize that that's really in line with my own spiritual understanding. At first, I didn't want to be Desi, South Asian, mistaken for an Indian or Arab kid, to be honest, because that wasn't looked at as cool. So I didn't like my hair, I used to you know, I eventually had like a bald fade. I didn't want to be the nerdy Desi kids in school that were - there's only a handful. I would rather be mistaken for being a Latino kid or something like that. And the black and brown kids in my school were definitely the cool kids and I was into those cultures in a real way. We started breaking in school. We were tagging in our notebooks. I was sharing all the underground

music that I was into. I became that kid. And we were into rapping and having cyphers. We were all freestyling right in the lunchroom. So, it was a really great hub for that. It was outside of Chicago, but we had that Chicago culture because kids and families would move to Bolingbrook when people had to kind of leave the city and go to somewhere else that was more affordable perhaps. So, there was like this kind of amalgamation of all those things happening. And eventually I started, you know, and I could drive -- going into the city and going to record stores. And of course, that changes your whole perspective from having to order mix tapes online from New York, not online. At that point, it was like mail order catalog - to going to like your local place and then going into the city and going to the vinyl record stores. Not being able to afford buying a record player or a vinyl record but buying the cassettes because they were the cheapest and being happy with that.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Asad really got into breakdancing for a while. But he quickly realised that the thing he loved most was sharing music with people. So he saved up his money, bought some turntables, started a vinyl collection, and became a DJ. He called himself DJ Man-O-Wax. When he moved a few hours south to study finance at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he didn't really feel at home in any of the student groups. He tried out the Indian Student Association and the Muslim Student Association - but he wasn't comfortable in any of them. The place where he really felt community was at underground hip hop concerts.

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

I saw this community of people that didn't necessarily know each other, but it was kind of like we gave a heads up, a peace, a "what's up" type of thing. We might have talked about albums or tracks. We might have recognized our gear, because we were wearing different things that reference stuff. But we weren't a community as such. And eventually I was like, "I need to start an organization." And what that enabled me to do was bring people together. And what I thought was -- now it wasn't just one group of people, right? MSA was all Muslims. ISA was all Desis. Like this thing was all this. It was people from all of these different things. And what was great about it, it wasn't just hip-hop heads either. There were house-heads that were coming. There were other folks that were coming. And we, we, we felt like we were about something, and we wanted to change the world. So when 9/11 happens and I'm in college at the time and I hear it on the radio - and I'm like, what are we going to do? The folks that organized were the same folks that organized for hip hop stuff, the anti-war folks came out. And then we got all the anti-war folks, the leftist folks, even some of the anarchist kids coming together. And we're all together saying nah we can't have a war here in Iraq or Afghanistan or, or all this kind of stuff. And we come together. There was also like, you know, pro-Palestine movements happening on campus. We all connected and we didn't know why. And then this was the time when all the hate crimes are happening and all of that. And that kind of put me into this activism mode that I was kind of part of because of hip hop culture regardless. But it gave like a, a name, a place, a goal, a mission to it.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This is when things really started to go in a different direction. Asad became disenchanted with his finance degree, so he quit school and moved to Chicago, where he got more deeply involved in community organizing. Through grassroots groups, he started teaching classes, bringing people together for meetings, and creating space for conversations that otherwise hadn't been happening. This work brought him to IMAN, the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, where he became the Director of Arts and Culture. In that role, he took a local festival, *Takin' It to the Streets*, and expanded it, turning it into arguably one of the most influential hip hop festivals of the new millennium, featuring some of the most exciting artists of the day. The festival took place in Marquette Park, an infamous park in Southwest Chicago where in 1966 Martin Luther King Jr. was confronted by a violent white mob.

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

You know, I'm going to take you to 2010, because I think that was the biggest *Takin' It to the Streets*. That was the Urban International Festival. That was a hundred artists. That was, I think, twenty thousand people. That was across the city of Chicago, but centered in Marquette Park. The historic Marquette Park. Not only did the incident happen with Dr. Martin Luther King, there was also in the 80s, one of our own members of our Hip-Hop community was like, "I was there in the late 80s and neo-Nazis were there booing me off stage as a black woman on the mic." So, I mean, that's not ancient history, right? So, this is a place -- and then there's still issues in that neighbourhood. The southwest side, it becomes, it's Black, it's Latino, it's Eastern European, it's Arab. It's all those different communities together, right. And on that day, we wanted to see radical transformation and say that we're going to show the world that this park exists. It's big, it's large, it's historically important. But we are here, and you can come to this side of town and not be scared and not be, you know, have all those things in your mind. And if you're in Chicago and you're in Millennium Park seeing our free concert with Tinariwen, you should also come to the southwest side. And I think the success for me on that year was, I think the Chicago Reader, some publication said World Music Festival, your move. Right. It had become as big as one of the greatest festivals and we were partnering with them anyway. So it was all good. But you go there and you see all these vendors, you see all these food, you see tons of beards and hijabs and kufis, and you see people from the neighborhood. And you see people from the hip hop community. You have Tinariwen headlining, but you also have Mos Def or Yasiin Bey -- coming on there, you know, ending with the call to Maghrib prayer, you know, and him coming up there just being like *as-salamu alaykum*. He knows where he is. And you have all sorts of community and there's and there's ceremony going on from our First Nations communities. We even hired an architect to design and build a prayer structure and connect it to the bazaar so that people - if they wanted to go pray can go do that. And in that day, we wanted to imagine what was possible. So it's art, activism, social justice, spirituality, all happening at the same time in one day, starting at 10 a.m. and ending at around sunset. And you have thousands of people. You just look around and all you see is a whole bunch of people, a brownish rainbow, honestly. And I think I mean, I still look back and think it was an amazing feat.

ABDUL-REMAN MALIK:

I have a small favour to ask you. If you enjoy this show, there's a really quick thing you can do to help us make it even better. Just take five minutes to fill out a short survey. This is the Aga Khan's first-ever podcast and a little bit of feedback will help us measure our impact and reach more people with extraordinary stories from some of the most interesting artists, thinkers, and leaders on the kaleidoscope of Muslim experience. To participate, go to agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey Once again, that's: agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey. Thanks for listening to *This Being Human*. Now, back to the interview.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You go from organizing events, festivals like *Takin' it to the Streets*, grassroots arts and cultural activism. You go from that to an office in a Kuala Lumpur skyscraper, working at the World Islamic Economic Forum. What is going on? Did Asad do the unthinkable and go back to his finance degree and sell his soul to the corporate devil?

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

That's a - that's a really good question. Remember, we talked about knowledge of self. Right? And for me, the ultimate is doing something that brings this community or communities that we label as Muslim together. How can I have my parents there who would come and support all my work from my deejaying to all that stuff, be there and feel connected in an authentic and relevant way, not just in a way that this is what the kids are doing. And I realized - and I knew this, thanks to hip hop and trying to at least acquire

knowledge of self in some Sufi way as well, is that we have to be real to ourselves, right? I have to be real to myself. So what was happening at that time is I start traveling the globe a bit more. And somehow, I believe it was in 2011, I find myself in Kazakhstan at the World Islamic Economic Forum. When I tell you that the email I got I thought was a scam -- and I was like, "OK, how are they trying to get me here?" But I go to this forum and I was asked to speak actually about arts and social change. But I find out that they're doing a festival called The Marketplace of Creative Arts. And I was like, "well, I think you need a DJ and I can be that DJ." And when they heard that, they're like, "of course you can. Great." So we're in Astana. In Kazakhstan, if you haven't been, it was a really trippy experience for me. And the people organizing the creative arts part as young Malaysians - and also an international group at their base in Kuala Lumpur - it's connected to the work that I'm doing in Chicago and it's connected to the conversations that I think we've either started to have or were going to have is that we know that there's hubs that exist across the globe where Muslim culture is being produced in this way, where people are doing stuff that's innovative and edgy and can we argue avant garde? And this is this this exists. How do we connect that? And I WhatsApp my friend Fazal, who is one of the key organizers of this Marketplace of Creative Arts, and say, "you know what, you guys have something here and it needs to grow. And I think you need someone to help it grow. And I think you kind of need me to help you make it grow." And before I knew it, honestly, I had gotten rid of all my stuff, sold it, giving it away, except for my records. Got on a plane and went one-way ticket to Kuala Lumpur, not knowing what the setup would be, not knowing that I'd be wearing a tie in an office, not knowing any of that stuff. I just knew that I needed to do this work. And Malaysia was calling, and I had never been there. And it was the best decision I could have made at the time.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Tell me about one moment that you're most proud of during those years that you were involved with the World Islamic Economic Forum in Kuala Lumpur.

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

That's a really good question. I mean so I started the MOCA Fellows program. I started a program that was a leadership development for artists because I thought we were supposed to be connected to this economic forum. And we launched this series called Think Talk, which is probably... I think was the coolest thing for me, which still kind of goes on. And it was basically, what can we do for Kuala Lumpur? Because this is an international forum, right. How do we bring people together right here in the city that way? And so we started this series where I was like, OK, we have a guest speaker. They talk for like 15 to 20 minutes. We have a guest artist. But the main thing is that we have at least 45 minutes of discussion with community. And I think in Malaysia, even though sometimes I was sad because I didn't know where I belonged and all of that, it made me realize that I don't do arts well, I don't do curation well. What I do well I think is bringing people together. That's what my life's work really needs to be. And the arts are a vehicle for that, and I love them, that's the passion. But I'm not the best this or the best that. But I think I'm really good at bringing different people together. And I think I knew I was doing that work in other places. But living in Kuala Lumpur made me realize this is what I need to keep doing.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Asad has continued to do this type of work, travelling the world as a consultant, curating programs at the Shangri-La Museum of Art, Culture and Design, and in his current role as the executive director of the South Asia Institute in Chicago. So with all of these experiences under his belt, I wanted to get his view on what it looks like to be Muslim in popular culture today.

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

That's a great question, and I struggle with it, to be honest, because in order for me to answer what it looks like to be Muslim in popular culture today, I have to start defining it. I've

tried to not define it specifically because I know that Muslims need agency of that identity now more than ever. But when I think about pop culture and being Muslim, I mean, I have to think about shows like *Ramy* with Mahersala Ali, right? And what that does for our community. I have to think about all the music that I continue to listen to and the amazing musicians that are out there, that are making that happen, especially within the hip-hop framework, within the jazz framework, within the newer music frameworks. People like Zain Alam and Humeysa, people like Plus Aziz and Kwayziana, people like Zeshan B. And I think people don't understand, because, of course, the U.S. is exporting popular culture everywhere, how integral Muslims have been to the creation of American culture, and that American culture is not what it is today without that intertwining with Muslimness that's been there since the beginning, right. And I don't think that we can discount that. And I don't think it's as easy as saying, "well, we have Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar." I mean, I know. And those - and not to take away from their legacies and their importance, but I think in the language that we use, in what we watch, in how we interpret things, in what we eat, in the way we analyse what we're watching, I think Muslim culture has been an integral part of all of that. And, of course, that's connected so deeply to Black culture here in the US. And I think people are just starting to think about that, and I think because when this happens in the world, you're on the defensive as Muslims. But if we really explored openly the myths that exist within the US that are attributed to Muslimness, Muslim spirituality, Muslim culture, it's embedded in the soil. And the roots have taken place and the branches are growing and, you know, it's all there.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Asad Jafri, what does this being human mean to you?

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

This being human is a collective interpretation of all of our lived experiences here on this planet.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

That is a beautiful way to conclude. From someone who curates, selects and connects incredible human and cultural experiences, Asad thank you so much for joining us on *This Being Human*.

ASAD ALI JAFRI:

Thank you so much for having me. It's been a wonderful conversation.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

This Being Human in an Antica production. This episode was produced by Ebyan Abdigir. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's Executive Producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

This Being Human is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum go to www.agakhanmuseum.org.