

Cultural chords

Muslim artists look to break pop boundaries

P By Vicki Terwilliger
op music “boundary benders” Fajjr Khan and Ali Andre Ali say it was a meal during Ramadan that brought them together.

The new recording artists celebrate their South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures with their music while hoping to dispel stereotypes of people of Islamic faith.

Fajjr, Schuylkill Haven; and Ali, Brooklyn, New York, are set to release their first EP (a short version of an album) this year after working with Grammy Award-winning producer Shafiq Husayn in Los Angeles and a music producer from Future Fires Entertainment in Manhattan, New York. It’s been two years in the making.

“We met in college. We were freshmen living in the same dorm at NYU. We met during Ramadan, because we were both fasting and he was looking for a place to break his fast. Our RAs (resident assistants) connected us, and said you can show him, and take him to the mosque. That’s how it began,” Fajjr said.

Since that meeting, the two have collaborated under the band name *fajjr + ali* and joined with Nate Raring, drummer; Steve Beres, guitarist; and Quentin Moyer, bassist.

They describe their songs within the bendable genre of indie pop rock. The eight original songs on their EP are: “Without You,” “Got To Be,” “Shivers,” “Gone,” “Big Lights,” “First Part of A Dream,” “Solace” and “Spacewalk.”

“Our recorded music sounds a little bit different. It sounds ‘rockier’ when we



*Fajjr Khan, Schuylkill Haven, performs “Without You” during practice with *fajjr + ali* bandmates.*

perform live. There’s a lot of influence from hip hop, jazz and R&B in there that sneaks in. That’s why pop is a nice umbrella word to use,” she said.

“It’s something that we thought

about, because our faith is what brought us together. It was hard in the beginning, because we really wanted to define our music and what we were doing. It has more to do with how we pursue it, and

our principals," Fajjr said.

"I think we both have strong values that come from our faith, and that forms what content we want to create. Although we're not creating religious songs, we know that we don't want to promote drinking alcohol or sex, or things that are very common in the music industry," Ali said.

"We like to bend the boundaries of what pop is. Our song 'Got to Be' is very standard, like a song you'd hear played on the radio. Our other recorded songs sound more jazzy, or like an R&B song," he said.

In addition to being Muslim, the two 27-year-olds have also shared in the grief of losing a parent. Fajjr is a daughter of Pakistani parents, Rubina Tareen and the late Dr. Sultan Khan, who was an ear, nose and throat doctor in Pottsville. Ali is a son of Essam Ali and the late Carol McClellan-Ali. Fajjr's father died of brain cancer shortly after Ali had lost his mother. He wrote the song, "Wishing," after her passing. Both are vocalists, musicians and songwriters.

Fajjr began singing in elementary school, performed in high school musicals at Blue Mountain, and with the Schuylkill County Chorus. She didn't have any formal singing lessons, until her college studies at Alvernia University, Reading. She transferred there from NYU, majored in theater and graduated in 2014 with a bachelor's degree in performing arts. She also plays piano.

Ali grew up in Newburyport, Massachusetts, played the piano and saxophone, and got his bachelor's degree in drama from NYU in 2013.

After Fajjr left NYU, the two stayed in touch. Ali connected her to a manager who had a casting call for a commercial, and was seeking Muslim girls who wear a head scarf. She auditioned and got the commercial assignment in New York.

For his senior thesis, Ali wrote a play with original music and taught Fajjr one of the songs. A former manager saw their video performance of it, and eventually helped them get connected with Husayn.

"It was a fascinating experience for us, because we had never recorded anything like that professionally," Ali said.



Ali Andre Ali serves as keyboardist and vocalist for fajjr + ali.

Fajjr said there could be a short film, or feature film, in the works using their music, and that Pennsylvania, or Schuylkill County, could be used as a venue.

"My mother and my family have been absolutely incredible," Fajjr said. "Without them, we wouldn't get to do any of this. My mom always encouraged me in the arts. She could tell I was passionate about it ever since I was young. She used to say it's important for Muslim girls to have representation. Not just Muslim girls, but Muslims in general. We still lack representation in the media, and what representation we do have isn't always great."

"We were very much into cultural music growing up, the movies, the music," Tareen said. "Even though I grew up in a Muslim country, they weren't really conservative, and it wasn't something outlawed. My family was really interested in listening to music, but no one pursued it."

"She made her own noise and let everyone notice. I would say she has a gift from God," her mother said of Fajjr, the youngest of five siblings.

fajjr+ali is still seeking a record label,

which would have agreements with digital distributors.

"If you had a label, they would do all of that for you. As independent artists, you have to go through a third party organization," Ali said.

"You can pay a small fee and submit your music to them and they will put it online for you on all of the digital stores. We used a website called Tunecore," he said.

"Without You," "Big Lights" and "First Part of a Dream" are among some of their favorite songs on the EP, they said. "First Part of a Dream" is more electronic, according to Fajjr. It's about when you lose someone and you close your eyes, and you hope to see someone in your dream.

They performed it at an open mic, and there was a girl there who said that it touched her so much.

"She said it reminded her of her brother who she lost. Because of that song, it was the first time that I realized how it can touch and affect others," Fajjr said.

Their music can be purchased on any online streaming platform, like iTunes and Spotify. To learn more, visit the website, fajjrplusali.com.

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