

Nov 04, 2016 by *Salma Hasan Ali*

Rock and Roll Jihad for Peace ^[1]

Salman Ahmad, founder of South Asia's most successful rock band *Junoos*, has been on a rock and roll *jihad* (struggle) ever since his first concert at 18 – a medical school talent show in Lahore, Pakistan. Eyes closed, emotions pumped, he was ripping through Van Halen's 'Eruption' on his guitar, mesmerized by the crowd's screams, only to discover that the yelling was coming from a group of bearded students from a religious group outraged by music they considered un-Islamic. One student tore Salman's guitar from his hands and smashed it on the floor.

From that moment, Salman vowed to fight extremist forces and preserve Pakistan's rich cultural heritage. For the last 25 years, Salman has been a guitar-wielding ambassador for peace, using his music to dispel misperceptions and promote understanding. His newly released memoir "Rock and Roll Jihad" chronicles his journey, and provides important lessons on how to tap the potential of cultural personalities to help heal wounds, humanize the "other", and foster respect between the US and the Muslim world.

Salman and I went to Islamic Sunday School together as teenagers. We would gather around a ping pong table in Uncle Sultan's basement to read the Quran and learn about Islam. Salman always had his guitar nearby, using breaks to strum a tune or scribble lyrics. It was no accident that even then his guitar and his faith were in close proximity.

After seeing his first rock concert at 14 -- Led Zeppelin at Madison Square Garden -- Salman found his *junoos* (passion): he wanted to be a rock star. He spent his teenage years in New York joining garage bands, going to rock clubs and Beatles-fests, and playing his guitar until his fingers bled. His parents had other ideas.

His family moved back to Pakistan, so Salman could become a respectable doctor and not, in his parent's view, a low class musician. Pakistan had turned into a fundamentalist dictatorship under General Zia ul Haq: gender segregation was state policy, music, song and dance were considered corrupting influences, and family-oriented TV shows were banned. Salman began his mission: to shine light onto this cultural darkness with his music. He started a traveling guitar club and joined his first rock band, Vital Signs, whose hit song "Dil Dil Pakistan" became the national anthem of a new Pakistan. He founded Junoos and developed a style of music, "Sufi rock", that merged conventional rock with Sufi poetry, the guitar with the tabla – a fusion of East and West that mirrored his own blended identity as a Pakistani-American-Muslim.

With more than 30 million record sales, Salman went on to become an international rock star – often called the "Bono of South Asia". More importantly, he used the power of music to challenge the status quo, bring attention to sensitive issues, and galvanize millions to believe in new ways of thinking.

I experienced it first hand. Almost thirty years after our Sunday School days, Salman and I

met half way around the world, in a place that Led Zeppelin had sung about at the New York concert: Kashmir.

Madanjeet Singh, founder of the South Asia Foundation, had sought out Salman to perform the first ever rock concert in war-torn Kashmir. It was a bold move, but Ambassador Singh understands the power of culture to promote peace. The symbolism of a Pakistani band performing in Indian controlled Kashmir was not lost on any of us. Especially not the detractors. Days before the concert an umbrella group of Kashmiri militant organizations had passed a resolution to stop the show. There were death threats against Salman and his band and anyone who tried to attend.

But on a hot May afternoon in 2008, music blasted through political divisions and guitar riffs silenced the guns. With the Zabarwan mountains as a backdrop, and the majestic Himalayas and Dal Lake in full view, Salman and his band performed for more than two hours. Music gave voice to silenced sentiments and breathed hope to new possibilities, as Salman sang “meri awaz suno, mujhe azad karo” (“hear my voice, give me freedom”). More than ten thousand young Kashmiris – some in headscarves, others in school uniforms – sang, danced, waved their arms, and yelled for more. For a moment, a war zone felt more like Woodstock. When Salman started singing “Sayonee” (soul mates), Junoon’s most popular song and a huge hit in India, things reached a feverish pitch. Once wasn’t enough. The crowd joined in, drowning out the band: “Chain ek pal nahin, aur koi hal nahin,” (“Life is hard, there is not a moment’s respite; but we have to go through it, there are no shortcuts”).

“This has been a ten year tryst with destiny,” Salman told the crowd. Junoon had first played in India in 1998, but his dream had always been to perform in Kashmir. His promoter had said, “It’s not the right time,” “Not yet”, and finally, “Not in your lifetime.”

Just after the concert, I asked Salman how he felt. “I have performed all over the world, but I’ve never felt like this,” he said. “And I don’t think I ever will. I hope this junoon spreads the message of love and friendship throughout South Asia, throughout the world.”

Salman dubbed the concert a “jihad for peace.”
