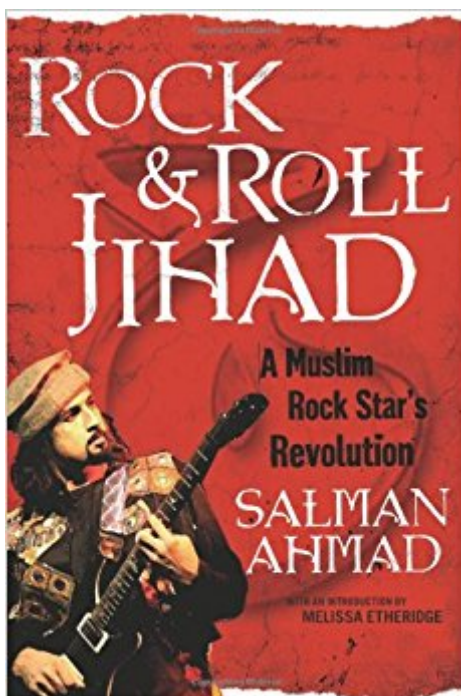


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Rock & Roll Jihad: A Muslim Rock Star's Revolution



Synopsis

"The story you are about to read is the story of a light-bringer....Salman Ahmad inspires me to reach always for the greatest heights and never to fear....Know that his story is a part of our history." -- Melissa Etheridge, from the Introduction

With 30 million record sales under his belt, and with fans including Bono and Al Gore, Pakistanborn Salman Ahmad is renowned for being the first rock & roll star to destroy the wall that divides the West and the Muslim world. Rock & Roll Jihad is the story of his incredible journey. Facing down angry mullahs and oppressive dictators who wanted all music to be banned from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Salman Ahmad rocketed to the top of the music charts, bringing Westernstyle rock and pop to Pakistani teenagers for the first time. His band Junoon became the U2 of Asia, a sufi - rock group that broke boundaries and sold a record number of albums. But Salman's story began in New York, where he spent his teen years learning to play guitar, listening to Led Zeppelin, hanging out at rock clubs and Beatles Fests, making American friends, and dreaming of rock-star fame. That dream seemed destined to die when his family returned to Pakistan and Salman was forced to follow the strictures of a newly religious -- and stratified -- society. He finished medical school, met his soul mate, and watched his beloved funkytown of Lahore transform with the rest of Pakistan under the rule of Zia into a fundamentalist dictatorship: morality police arrested couples holding hands in public, Little House on the Prairie and Live Aid were banned from television broadcasts, and Kalashnikovs and rocket launchers proliferated on college campuses via the Afghani resistance to Soviet occupation in the north. Undeterred, the teenage Salman created his own underground jihad: his mission was to bring his beloved rock music to an enthusiastic new audience in South Asia and beyond. He started a traveling guitar club that met in private Lahore spaces, mixing Urdu love poems with Casio synthesizers, tablas with Fender Stratocasters, and ragas with power chords, eventually joining his first pop band, Vital Signs. Later, he founded Junoon, South Asia's biggest rock band, which was followed to every corner of the world by a loyal legion of fans called Junoonis. As his music climbed the charts, Salman found himself the target of religious fanatics and power-mad politicians desperate to take him and his band down. But in the center of a new generation of young Pakistanis who go to mosques as well as McDonald's, whose religion gives them compassion for and not fear of the West, and who see modern music as a "rainbow bridge" that links their lives to the rest of the world, nothing could stop Salman's star from rising. Today, Salman continues to play music and is also a UNAIDS Goodwill Ambassador, traveling the world as a spokesperson and using the lessons he learned as a musical pioneer to help heal the wounds between East and West -- lessons he shares in this illuminating memoir.

Book Information

Hardcover: 240 pages

Publisher: Free Press; First Editon edition (January 12, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1416597670

ISBN-13: 978-1416597674

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #636,284 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 in [Books > Arts &](#)

[Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Religious & Sacred Music > Muslim](#) #1561 in [Books](#)

[> Arts & Photography > Music > Biographies > Rock](#) #2070 in [Books > Arts & Photography >](#)

[Music > Musical Genres > Rock](#)

Customer Reviews

The rise of Pakistan's most popular rock musician—unfamiliar to most Americans—is the subject of this well-meaning autobiography. Ahmad, the leader of the band Junoon, recounts his wealthy upbringing at an elite British school in Lahore and then as a Beatles obsessed teenager in New York. He describes his return to Pakistan in the midst of General Zia's military dictatorship, which introduced fundamentalist Muslim codes of conduct into public life. Ahmad is at his best describing the mishmash of 1960s American rock, '80s pop songs and Bollywood music that made up the repertoires of Pakistan's youth musicians in that same decade. Ahmad joins a band called the Vital Signs, which sweeps the country with its patriotic rock song Dil Dil Pakistan, even getting to meet Benazir Bhutto after her election. He leaves the group at the height of its fame to pursue artistic freedom and becomes even more popular with Junoon and its hit song Jazba-e-Junoon, which was the official song of the cricket World Cup. In what is well-intentioned but ultimately clichéd and egocentric memoir, Ahmad describes his more recent years as a self-appointed musical ambassador for peace, standing up for Muslims on Bill Maher's TV show and playing a concert at the U.N. General Assembly Hall, while still finding time to show Mick Jagger the Pakistani nightlife. (Jan.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Ahmad offers a fascinating glimpse into the complicated existence of a Pakistani whose

unconventional life bridges the Muslim world and the West. As a teenager living in a New York City suburb, he fell in love with rock, dreamed of playing guitar in a band, and though his parents looked down upon what they thought was a ridiculous fantasy, determined to wage "a rock and roll jihad." He formed bands in both America and Pakistan, eventually transforming himself into a Pakistani national icon. He played the first-ever rock concert in war-torn Kashmir and, in December 2007, became the first Pakistani musician to perform at a Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. He fills his story with colorful, often funny anecdotes of such incidentals as squiring Mick Jagger around Lahore (Jagger was in town attending World Cup play) and witnessing the 50-something rocker gyrate with a local dancing girl. Other anecdotes, especially after 9/11, are more somber. A hopeful, sensitive memoir in which music functions as a healing bond between peoples and cultures. --June Sawyers

Having grown up listening to this band with its inspiring, upbeat and revolutionary lyrics that tore down the walls of bigotry, hate and racism; I could ostensibly relate parts of it to my own life. An author who sought inspiration from some musical icons in not just the west, but the east created a unique blend of music - which soon became his trademark signature style proved that by doing so he could transcend beyond music and bridge the opposites; be it culture, traditions, religions, nations or races. The book is also a classic tale of a heroic struggle against all odds, for this band unlike many spoon fed bands in the west, was confronted with a dictatorship that abhorred freedom through musical lyrics, powerful religious elements that worked to quell musical/melodic expression, and lack of tools for mass dissemination. Yet, Salman Ahmad's band Junoon rose to new heights and became South Asia's leading rock band. The band incorporated Western Rock, yet never let go of its roots and paid homage to mystic Sufi poets. This book is also a recommended read for people in the west who wish to understand how moderate Muslims adhere to a softer side of Islam, which they believe is the true face of their religion. There is absolutely no room for religious intolerance, violence, and extremism in the true meaning of Islam. Salman engages in challenging spiritual, mental and physical journeys to distinguish the true side of Islam (a religion which literally means peace), from the side that was created as a result of the perception of a religion that was hijacked on Sept 11th 2001 by fanatics and hate mongers. At the same time, he draws parallels and debates on western talk shows with heavyweight stalwarts such as Bill Maher on his critically acclaimed show "Politically Incorrect". His endeavors are colorfully illustrated in this book. The book also bestows confidence upon the youth of Pakistan; a Muslim nation which stands shoulder to shoulder with their western counterparts in this struggle for peace and tranquility. From New York to Karachi, the book

encompasses this unique rock star's journey in vibrant colors.

While we may not see it easily, the world is in a constant and irreversible state of change--sometimes seemingly for the better, sometimes seemingly for the worse. This is also true in the relationship between east and west. While news of new Taliban suicide bombings in Pakistan and Afghanistan may not seem like the situation is changing for the better, it is on the sidelines. By "sidelines" we mean cross-cultural exchanges and explorations in areas of music and the other arts where the people--and not their governments--come together. Evidence of this change exists in our friend Salman Ahmad, a Pakistan-born Sufi Muslim rock star, who has sold more than 30 million albums with his band Junoon, which the New York Times called, "the U2 of South Asia". Although Junoon's line-up has changed, Salman continues to tour with his new band mates. In mid-January, Salman released his autobiography, *Rock & Roll Jihad*, published by Simon and Schuster, a well-written and enjoyable book which I, Deepak, had the pleasure and privilege to write the back cover notes for. Last September 12th we held the Concert for Pakistan at the UN, Salman's second concert held inside the UN General Assembly Hall. The first concert Salman held inside that prestigious world body was on UN Day in late October 2001, barely six weeks after the tragedy of September 11th. Salman holds the distinction of being the first--and possibly only--rock musician ever to hold a rock concert inside the space where Colin Powell told the world that Saddam Hussein was aiding Al Qaeda, and where Hugo Chavez "smelled the sulfur" of that ol' Diablo, George Bush. But the Concert for Pakistan was a fundraiser for the United Nations High Commission on Refugees to help with Internally Displaced Persons who have become displaced from their homes because of the war in Afghanistan that has bled over into northern Pakistan. As Salman has described the concert, "The free UN concert became a mini-Woodstock without the mud and the acid. We had Ramadan dates, shalwar kameez and sari clad women, Jews and Muslims in skull caps, diplomats doing the Bhangra and a mini planet Earth of college students, plus Roger Federer and Gwen Stefani." Through his music, Salman has tremendous ability to create positive experiences such as this concert. In 2007, Salman performed at the Nobel Peace Prize concert the year Al Gore won for his work on global climate change. This was when he met Melissa Etheridge, and shortly thereafter they collaborated on the wonderful song "Ring the Bells" which I, Deepak, had the pleasure of introducing a performance of at the eighth annual Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles in December 2008. "Ring the Bells" can be heard on YouTube. The official video for the song was produced by Participant Media whose founder, Jeff Skoll, helped organize the Concert for Pakistan. "Ring the Bells" can also be heard playing on the website of the Salman and Samina Global

Wellness Initiative, an NGO Salman founded with his wife Samina that focuses on issues important to Pakistan and to the world. Salman is also focused on peace between Pakistan and India. In fact, some of his work for peace has caused him trouble. While on tour in India in 1998, Salman repeated a line from a banner at one of their concerts for an accompanying film crew, "There should be cultural fusion, not nuclear fusion." The line came as a result of seeing so much poverty on both sides of the border, but instead of focusing on food and education, the governments of India and Pakistan exploded numerous underground nuclear bombs in a short period of time. When Salman and the band returned to Pakistan they were soon facing charges of treason by the Ministry of Culture. Believed to be subversives, Salman, Ali Azmat and Brian O'Connell, Salman's bandmates, had their phones wiretapped, they were followed and intimidated. As Salman recounts in the VH1: Rock City documentary hosted by Susan Sarandon (also available on YouTube) Salman told the government to publish every interview they gave and every word they have ever spoken in the papers and if the people of Pakistan said they were traitors they were willing to be hanged. That ended the charges of treason because Salman took the power away from the government and placed it with the people, which will always scare political leaders. Music is an expression of the human soul and, therefore, speaks to all human souls. This is why music is so important and why music is used in Sufi festivals. As Salman says in the VH1 documentary, "Music is the most subversive force on the face of the earth." It was through music that Salman and Junoon helped bring a cross-border dialogue and feeling of connection between the people of Pakistan and India. Junoon was number one in India before they went on tour in several Indian cities. In fact, while in India they won the MTV India award for Best International Group which had the effect of galvanizing the long-desired notion of peace between the peoples of India and Pakistan. Salman naturally understands the spiritual power of music because he is a Sufi Muslim. He is always fond of saying that the thirteenth century Sufi poet and philosopher Rumi said, "Follow the music and it will show you the way." So it should be of no surprise to find that Salman has the courage of his convictions and, as documented by BBC/Wide Angle in 2003 for Rock Star and the Mullahs, Salman confronted fundamentalist mullahs in a madrassah in northern Pakistan about the mistaken perception--especially among fundamentalists--that Islam prohibits music. In the end Salman was successful in getting the most conservative of the mullahs to sing a little song about Prophet Muhammad. The documentary is also available for viewing on YouTube in six parts. In 2006, Salman was personally invited by former president Bill Clinton to speak on a panel titled "Mitigating Religious and Ethnic Conflict" at the Clinton Global Initiative. Salman is also a UN Goodwill Ambassador for HIV/AIDS. He wrote a song called "Al Vida", which appears on his 2006 solo album

Infiniti, which is about a woman named Shukriya Gul, whose story inspired him. Gul's husband had died and she had AIDS. Her neighbors wanted her to move from their neighborhood but she refused. As Salman told Al Jazeera's Riz Khan on one of his One on One interview segments, "I was so inspired by Shukriya's campaign that I made a video about it, Al Vida, because I feel you can get difficult messages across through MTV and satellite television." Perhaps the best example of Salman's use of music for healing and coming together is Junoon's 2002 song No More, also available on YouTube, which was dedicated to the victims of 9/11. Salman was devastated by 9/11 because New York City was his backyard from 1975 to 1981, but also because Al Qaeda had also, as he said, "Hijacked his religion." All of his emotion is expressed in the lyrics which were inspired by a poem by Polar Levine about the attack. It is Salman's anthem for peace in which perhaps the most powerful line, especially the way Ali sings it, seems to be directed at Muslim youth: "Hold on, keep yourself alive, we will survive," but also applies to us all. Salman's guitar screams out a pain he, and we all, felt that day. Salman may also have been expressing his anger at the fundamentalists, with whom his first experience was in 1983 during a talent show at his medical school in Lahore, Pakistan. He was playing Van Halen's Eruption when a Taliban student interrupted the festivities and broke his guitar for playing "sinful and vulgar" music. This incident is retold in Rock & Roll Jihad, where Salman explains many other influences and experiences which led him to a life of uplifting music and dedication to peace and humanity. Salman has a great, self-effacing humor which he displays throughout the book. He writes that John Lennon was his hero. Anyone familiar with Salman would not be surprised to learn this. But how was a devoted Muslim man inspired by something as western and seemingly decadent as Led Zeppelin? One must read the book to find out, but it all began with a concert at Madison Square Garden that he had to convince his mother he would not become "eaten alive in this hedonistic world of sex, drugs and rock and roll". Salman writes with terrific skill which makes the reader agonize with him as he goes through the torturous process of winning the heart and hand of his soul mate, his lovely wife, Samina. You feel compelled to be there to help him when strangers try to steal his grandmother's land. Your heart will ache when you read how his separated mother and father come together for one of his concerts and approve of the choice of music for his profession instead of medicine. Don't we all want our parents to approve of us and our choices in life? And doesn't that story show us we are all connected through similarity of need for love, understanding and compassion. Despite the frustration, danger and tribulations, Salman's life almost seems like a fairy tale. With his loved and comfortable childhood, happy home life and rocker career and peacemaker cause, one almost wants to have lived Salman's life. One can almost feel the hand of god guiding him and clearing the

way for this remarkable man to establish himself and his mission for peace and commonality through music and diplomacy. His successes and achievements are remarkable and cannot be discounted as mere luck. Thirty years ago, the average American's only real awareness of Islam was the Iranian Revolution and the Hostage Crisis. Today, we have terrorism. But with Al Qaeda and the Taliban we also have the emergence of someone like Salman and everything he has inspired. Like Salman's hero, John Lennon and the Beatles, Salman has inspired the creation of other rock bands and pop musicians in Pakistan, throughout the rest of the Muslim world and even America in the emerging Muslim punk scene. Thirty years is a very short period of time in the history of humanity. While Salman is by no means a solution to the conflict between east and west--just as Lennon and the Beatles and other bands were by no means a solution to the world's problems forty-plus years ago--both Salman and other relevant musicians and bands then and now are like water on rock. They erode away the hardness that humanity faces which act as barriers to peace and compassion and separates humanity from one another. The terrorists and fundamentalists only win if they divide loving, compassionate people from one another through fear and control. That means the whole world, not just in Kabul or Peshawar. To counter their tactics and in time triumph over extremists in all religions without having to fight, we as humanity must embrace each other and follow the direction that people like Salman, John Lennon and others have shown us. Humanity must know that we can come together through music and messages of hope and unite in ways we never knew possible because we never so close to each other before. And all we have to do to get there is to listen to the music. To paraphrase Rumi, it is showing us the way. What gives one hope is to imagine the present positive change exponentially thirty years from now when the arts and technology will have enabled eastern and western youth to come together over music and sports and pop culture in greater ways, leading to economic cooperation and co-dependence which will bring about a more stable and perhaps permanent peace. With this positive imagining means we also need a realistic assessment of war, pandemic disease, famine and climate change thirty years from now and beyond so that those Salman continues to inspire to do good toward each other in the east and west will be fully aware of the challenges they face and may seek guidance and counsel from the experiences of those who came before them, such as the challenges Salman faced, with god's help, which he describes so well in Rock & Roll Jihad.

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