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Where is the Sultan of Pop to match Michael Jackson?



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More than a week has passed since the world's attention turned towards Los Angeles, and Michael Jackson fans continue to mourn the loss of a remarkable performer. While the drip of fresh revelations adds more confusion to the circumstances surrounding his death, more than ever we are reminded that he was an icon who ushered in a new era of music while breaking down racial barriers. Jackson's music carried a message that the world responded to. He was a uniting force, capable of transcending boundaries and borders, religion and ideology.

His legacy reminds us all of the sheer vastness of human possibility and ambition. Although his personal story was fraught with struggles and sadness, his music breathed life into his frail body and created a larger-than-life persona that was, if only for the moments he was on stage, invincible.

More than any other performer before him, Jackson was instrumental in the creation of a pop culture that saw no color lines. Although he himself was a prisoner of a perceived racial inferiority, he encouraged all of us to look beyond our exteriors. His music was a force that embraced and responded to a universal desire to be moved and captivated.

Jackson's musical gift enabled him to touch the lives of millions – and Muslims were no exception. At a time when growing social chasms continue to alienate Muslims from the rest of the world, Jackson's death is particularly poignant. It can serve as a reminder to Muslims of the power of art to make a positive impact on society through fostering integration.

Muslims throughout the world reminisce about the great social and cultural contributions that our communities once gave to humanity. Yet, in today's world, we are sorely lacking in the fields that most speak to the masses – we have done little to encourage relevant Muslim contributions to the arts. Jackson's story is a testament to the ability of culture to unite. And, as I say goodbye to the King of Pop, I can't help but wonder if Muslims will ever give rise to someone like him. Do we have it in us to produce our very own Sultan of Pop?

Today, globalization has consolidated culture to such an extent that artists have the potential to reach millions around the globe with their messages. Websites, blogs, and online video and music sharing make the dissemination of artistic expression easier and more relevant than ever. The accessibility of pop culture has enchanted a global community that is now more likely to know the lyrics of a popular song than to know the capital of Bangladesh. Although Jackson's rise to stardom preceded the information age, his music withstood the changing nature of entertainment. A shifting technological landscape notwithstanding, Jackson's celebrity demonstrated the increasing ability of pop culture to dominate social discourse, making artistic expression one of the most important means of communication in our time.

In keeping with this brave new world, a Sultan of Pop could be the most effective method of humanizing the Muslim diaspora. Coupled with the Muslim world's vast resources and potential, a Muslim superstar could, like Jackson, shake the very foundations of our perceived differences by appealing to our need for entertainment.

In fact, just as Jackson embraced and responded to our innate love for the arts, Muslims around the world once recognized the necessity of contributing to the enterprises that shape culture. In centuries past, Muslim culture became a part of the broader community in the same way that Michael Jackson's music has become a part of our living history. Reflection on Islam's integration into countries throughout the world – from the Far East to Africa – leaves little room for doubt that it was through theatre, novels, music and visual art that Muslims enhanced society and streamlined their integration into it.

Yet, despite the need for Muslims to begin cultivating cultural expressions that will allow us to relate to the rest of the world – geared towards a global audience and the changing nature of entertainment – we seem either too consumed with the political struggles of our communities or too heavily influenced by a religion that discourages artistic expression. As a result, we continue to neglect our responsibility to enrich ourselves through art.

Perhaps we have entered a new era in which many Muslims feel that culture will do little to help us regain a place in the world as respected members of the global community. This may explain the lack of resources for struggling Muslim artists, the debilitating censorship that our governments continue to impose on the art that is produced and the ostracizing of thinkers, philosophers and artists from religious discourse. However, throughout history we have countless examples of Muslims bridging psychological spaces through the cultivation of culture. Here in the West, for example, Maulana Rumi remains America's best-selling poet. Anyone can relate to his message of love, longing and surrender. A religious scholar in his own right, Rumi saw the wisdom of focusing on his own humanity as a means of relating to others. And to this day, almost 800 years later, the timelessness and universality of his poetry continue to resonate. As Rumi seems to have so poignantly understood, there are certain experiences that unite us all.

These shared experiences – our love, our pain, our fear and our hope – transcend all our other differences. In his own way, Jackson contributed to this collective consciousness by leaving his mark on the world as a man whose artistry changed music forever and whose fallibility made him perhaps more human than most.

In the next few days, Jackson will finally be laid to rest, and the questions surrounding his death will slowly begin to be answered. The shock of his demise will eventually subside, but the legacy and impact of his music will continue to inspire and unite us. Regardless of Jackson's own troubled life, he understood that music was a language that did not need translation. He used his gifts to fulfill our need to be moved and entertained.

Perhaps someday the world will come to know a Sultan of Pop who will manage to affect us as much as

Jackson has – someone who is intuitively able to bring us closer together. And when the day comes that this Sultan of Pop will begin to break down the barriers that insist on Muslims' difference, I am sure that he (or she) will be as affected by Jackson's music as we have all been.

The passing of Michael Jackson the man is testament to our mortality – yet the continued survival of Michael Jackson the artist proves that there are some messages and modes of expression that truly do live on in us all.

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