



“NEW MUSLIM COOL”

By Jennifer Maytorena Taylor

Tuesday, June 23, 2009 on PBS (Check local listings)

Filmmaker’s Statement

I had an accidental start as a documentary filmmaker. Injuries ended my modern-dance career before it really began, and during my recuperation I spent a few years teaching in New York City and San Francisco Head Start and special-education classrooms. I started to learn that everybody has a story worth listening to, if you can just take the time and really open your ears and mind. And “normal” is usually in the eye of the beholder.

I alternated those teaching gigs with time spent living in Brazil and Argentina, at a time when both countries were transitioning to elected governments from the military dictatorships of the '70s and '80s. Watching my friends and relatives in those countries emerge from the trauma of those years, I was struck by how powerfully each country’s pop culture was helping people express themselves collectively and individually.

Flash forward to the period right after 9/11: I was working as a producer at San Francisco’s PBS affiliate, KQED, where I was offered the chance to do some pieces on South Asian youth in the Bay Area. In the course of my research, I discovered a thriving Muslim hip-hop scene in Oakland. There, an incredibly diverse group of young Muslim men and women — some of them converts and some of them born into the faith — were collaborating to create a culture that was both expressing their faith and reaffirming their American-ness.

It struck me that these young artists were using pop culture in much the same way those Brazilian and Argentine musicians had a decade earlier — to coalesce as a community after a terrible event, while making new space for individual expression that would further the evolution of a shared national identity.

Thinking of other seminal cultural and musical moments, I came up with a be-bop inspired title, **New Muslim Cool**. Then I put together a team that included my two amazing co-producers, Kauthar Umar and Hana Siddiqi, raised some initial funds and started filming.

At first we planned to make a “survey” film about American Muslim youth culture, a sort of ensemble piece featuring several intersecting characters on the road with a small Muslim hip-hop label. We imagined that film would explore the diversity and dynamism of this young American community, examine hip-hop as the *lingua franca* of youth everywhere and show how young American Muslims — like so many other people — were using new technologies to bring together faith and pop culture.

All of those cultural themes still run through the finished film, but once we decided to focus on Hamza Pérez and his family and community in Pittsburgh, the project took on a whole other life and deeper meaning. Hip-hop culture became less the focus of the film and more the context, and Hamza and his wife Rafiah’s day-to-day and spiritual life became the real heart of the film.

We followed Hamza, Rafiah and their community as they faced the ups and downs of life over three years. They confronted everyday challenges like getting to know their in-laws and coping with Rafiah giving birth by C-section, and not-so-everyday challenges, such as suspecting they were under some form of surveillance. Often, these disparate circumstances were laid directly on top of each other, so that in the space of two minutes during an interview Rafiah would wonder about a mysterious panel van parked outside her house and then ask who forgot to put the lid on the peanut butter. It was a little surreal sometimes, but so is real life.

At the outset of this project when we were thinking it would be a cool and clever film about hip-hop culture, I'm not sure any of us — the crew or the people featured in the film — anticipated how deeply we would end up exploring the most elemental processes that make us human: the search for some form of faith, for goodness, for ways to maintain hope, find forgiveness and fall in love. But that's part of the magic of making long-form documentaries. You just never know where you'll end up. And wherever that is you've been profoundly changed, for the better by the journey.

— **Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, Director/Producer/Writer**

