

United through music

A group of musicians are hoping to bring a greater understanding to their different faiths during a visit to Liverpool. **Laura Davis** reports

OUT of a cloud of dust they came, running for their lives like the strangers beside them, connected by their desperation to survive – any racial differences concealed by the thick grey filth covering their faces.

We did not know them before but their likenesses are forever etched on our memories, along with other images of the day the Twin Towers collapsed – human beings frozen mid-leap, captured half-way between life and death; the yellow helmets of the firefighters like beacons among the rubble; the grief-struck expressions of those crying for people they'd never met.

It is more than six years now since terrorists hijacked two passenger jets and flew them into the World Trade Center and, despite the great sense of solidarity that sustained the Western world throughout the months that followed, we are now a nation divided.

Some have forgotten that Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists and agnostics were united in their sadness as they learned of the 2,974 dead and many injured.

In the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear and suspicion, many Muslims experience daily hostility, finding themselves being associated in the minds of the frightened with acts of violence and hatred they find abhorrent.

This is the impetus behind Berakah, a multi-faith group of musicians visiting Liverpool on Saturday as part of a national tour. It is founded by Mohammed Nazam, a 46-year-old British Muslim, who believes people who are against terrorism and violence should work together to prevent it no matter what their religion.

"What we want to focus on is that there are many people out there who don't have a problem and who don't see differences in faith as a major point of contention in their lives," he explains.

"Just because you see things differently to another person doesn't mean you have to have an argument about it. Discussion and debate between different points of view is a whole other matter, but violent confrontation is unacceptable."

In 2005, Mohammed had the idea of bringing together a group of musicians of different faiths. Whether they strictly follow the customs of their religion was less important, he felt, than their familiarity with its culture.

He started out with Australian bassist Rex Hossi Horan; Mark Hinton Stewart, a pianist and film composer who worked on Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels; and singer Chantelle Duncan.



Multi-faith group Berakah use music to celebrate their differences

With all of them coming from a Christian background, the guitarist decided to look for a Jewish female violinist who he found in the form of Serena Leader, from Holland, and the group was completed with Algerian percussionist Abdelkader Saadoun.

"The three Abrahamic faiths have got so much in common, they all come from the same historic source and so they share an awful lot of themes. At the heart of all major religion is a message of peace and harmony and shared humanity and that's at the basis of what Berakah does," says Mohammed, who has been a musician and composer for around 20 years.

"All the different traditions, whether it's Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhists, Islam, Judaism, they're all different approaches to the ultimate source, whatever you want to call that source – whether it's God, or Buddha, or Jehovah. They're all different paths because we're all different people on different journeys."

"Part of living in a free society is being able to believe whatever you want to believe. That also means respecting other people's right to believe whatever they want."

Berakah's musical influences are also diverse, from cultures spread all over the world, and the group believes melody has the power to bring people together. During one concert, in a synagogue, a Muslim woman in the audience asked for a room in which she could carry out her prayers. The rabbi offered her the use of his office.

The public response to this year's Arts Council-sponsored tour, which will see them in

Liverpool for their penultimate performance, has been very positive. However, Mohammed has had to deal with criticism from some factions of his own culture.

"There's an element of the Muslim community that sees music as having a negative connotation to it and is Haram (prohibited) so I have to deal with a certain amount of disapproval because music in that particular mindset is associated with Friday and Saturday nights down the local club," he explains.

"I was raised in England and music has helped me become the person I am. If we as Muslims are going to live in Western culture, we have to find our peace with music because it's an incredibly powerful instrument."

"Muslim young people are going to be listening to music whether their parents/authorities like it or not. So isn't it better that they listen to music that is conscious and mind-expanding, rather than about drugs and bling?"

Born in Pakistan, Mohammed's family moved to London when he was a year old. He spent his teenage years in Bolton before returning to the capital when he was 16 and has been there ever since.

He believes that his background makes him a good spokesperson for people in the same situation.

"I'm not a practising Muslim. My path is one of a much more non-institutional approach to spirituality. I don't pray five times a day, simply because where I'm coming from is about a bigger picture and so I have a slightly different manner of paying homage to the universe,



Mohammed Nazam – believes people against terrorism should work together to prevent it, no matter what their religion might happen to be

or the creator, or God or whatever you want to call it.

"I'm a very good example of a lot of Muslims that you will find in this country, people who were born here or came over here when they were very, very young, who have very English attitudes to things like democracy, freedom, equality, diversity. But very few of us get the chance to speak out about it. The ones you hear from are militant and have something confrontational to say because they shout the loudest."

"This whole idea of multi-

culturalism is very young. The influx of immigrant communities into Britain is historically a very recent development, so it's going to take a long time for anything to be ironed out properly, but differences are part of what make the universe such a special thing."

■ BERAKAH is performing at the Great Hall, Hope University, Haigh Street, Everton, at 7pm, on Saturday. Tickets, priced £5, are available on the door.

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