



Australian musician Ben Lee rehearses inside his home studio in Los Angeles, California. — AFP photos

In age of Trump, an indie rocker explains Islam

Distraught by the treatment of Muslims in Donald Trump's America, indie rocker Ben Lee felt he could seize on his own skills to encourage understanding. The former frontman of the group Noise Addict has recorded an album of songs about Islam and, hoping for the greatest impact, geared them toward children. With chipper arrangements that would be at home in kindergarten classrooms, "Ben Lee Sings Songs About Islam for the Whole Family" explains the religion's core beliefs with references to the Quran.

Lee, an Australian who lives in Los Angeles, said he knew the power of songs through his career and also by observing his seven-year-old daughter. "That's the beauty of the pop song—you can say anything, and if you say it in two and a half minutes with a catchy chorus, it becomes digestible," said the affable 38-year-old. "I think I'm at the point in my life where you start realizing that any lasting effect that you're going to have on the human race is going to be through the influence you can make on the next generation," he told AFP with a chuckle. Lee will donate all proceeds from the album to the American Civil Liberties Union which has aggressively challenged Trump on rights issues including his sweeping ban—since suspended by the courts—on travelers from seven Muslim-majority nations.

Non-literal take on faith

But Lee does not see his album, which came out yesterday, as political. Instead, he is hoping to bring a nuanced understanding of religion. Lee, who grew up Jewish, said he had reached a spiritual "fork in the road" where he could no longer take religions literally but wanted to appreciate them. The album's goal "is to focus on the commonalities and on beginning to think mythologically about these cultural narratives—and introducing children to thinking in that way as opposed to thinking literally," Lee said. "All of these religions are like Greek myths or Shakespeare. They provide great insights into humanity."

The music on "Ben Lee Sings Songs About Islam for the Whole Family" is upbeat and direct. On "Ramadan," Lee strums a folk-rock guitar to maracas and a bit of jazzy piano as he explains the holy month of fasting. "Ramadan, oh Ramadan / We're so happy when you come / And sad to leave you when you're gone / We'll miss you, Ramadan," he sings. On "La Ilaha Il Allah," Lee turns the core Arabic-language creed of Islam "There is no God but God"—into a campfire-like sing-along alongside religious stories. Lee then goes into a rocking chorus to tell the religion's meaning on "Islam Means Surrender."

Full respect intended

Lee said he has read much of the Koran and studied Sufism, Islam's mystical movement that embraces music as a spiritual path. More conservative Islamic schools, notably the Wahhabis who dominate Saudi Arabia, frown on music in religion. Lee said he fully intended his album to be respectful. "I'm not depicting pictures of Mohammed (PBUH)," he said, in reference to Islam's general prohibition on images of its prophet, "I'm singing songs." "I would never want to do something that's perceived as an insult." Lee has been working on five separate albums on major religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism—but said he hurried out his latest work in light of current events.

Lee, who has collaborated with leading alternative rockers including Liz Phair and Dinosaur Jr's Lou Barlow, in 2013 put out an album on his experiences with ayahuasca, the psychedelic brew from Amazonian shamans. "I've always been interested in taking fairly fringe concepts and making them palatable," he said. In a political climate that some have described as "post-truth," Lee said his look into religion was all the more timely. "All religions—no matter how much they've been misinterpreted by fundamentalists and by orthodoxy and literalists—at their core are about a search for truth," he said. — AFP

RIHANNA DELIGHTS AT HARVARD RECOGNITION

Rihanna never went to college but the R&B superstar voiced delight as she was presented an award by Harvard University for her humanitarian work. "So I made it to Harvard! Never thought I would be able to say that in my life, but it feels good," a beaming Rihanna said to students' cheers at the prestigious US university Tuesday evening. Harvard named the 29-year-old singer its Humanitarian of the Year, pointing to her projects that include an advanced center to treat breast cancer in her native Barbados and support for girls' education around the developing world.

Rihanna said she had set up her first charity at age 18 and remarked: "People make it seem way too hard, man." "You don't need to be rich to help someone, you don't need to be famous, you don't even need to be college-educated," she said, while joking that she wished she were. "I want to challenge each of you to make a commitment to help one person, one organization, one situation that touches your heart," she said. "My grandmother always used to say, 'If you got a dollar, there's plenty to share.'" Rihanna, who was discovered by a music executive while still a teenager, has also set up a scholarship program named after her grandparents for Caribbean students in the United States. — AFP



This file photo shows Conductor Alan Gilbert on stage during the Carnegie Hall 125th season opening night gala at Carnegie Hall in New York. — AFP



This file photo shows British musician Chris Martin and members of the band Coldplay on February 24, 2016. — AFP

Coldplay releases piano ballad in surprise new music

Coldplay on Thursday released a piano ballad in surprise new music by the English rockers to mark frontman Chris Martin's 40th birthday. "Hypnotised," described by the band as a "new non-single song," is the first track off an EP entitled "Kaleidoscope" announced for June 2. "Hypnotised" starts off with dream-like chimes and piano with hints of Sigur Ros before turning into a more traditional rock ballad. The song—in which Martin confesses he's "never gonna be a saint" but finds renewal through love—is accompanied by a soothing video with images of the sea.

A Coldplay statement described the EP as a "sister release" to the band's last album "A Head Full of Dreams," which featured a song called "Kaleidoscope." Besides "Hypnotized," "Kaleidoscope" features "Something Just Like This"—

Coldplay's recent collaboration with chart-topping New York electronic duo The Chainsmokers—and three yet-to-be released songs. Coldplay, which has enjoyed worldwide success since its debut album "Parachutes" in 2000, had hinted that "A Head Full of Dreams" may be its swan song when it came out in late 2015.

Coldplay has gone on a marathon global tour for "A Head Full of Dreams." An Asian leg opens on March 31 in Singapore before second rounds through Europe and North America. The group will also headline a new Global Citizen festival in Hamburg on July 6 to press leaders of the Group of 20 major economies to work to end extreme poverty in the developing world. — AFP