



Griffith Journal  
of Law & Human Dignity

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# GRIFFITH JOURNAL OF LAW & HUMAN DIGNITY

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Special Art Issue 2015

Published in August 2015, Gold Coast, Australia by the *Griffith Journal of Law & Human Dignity*  
ISSN: 2203-3114

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## WHY BLEND IN WHEN YOU WERE BORN TO STAND OUT: A STORY OF RAP, RELIGION, AND RIGHTS

SUKHDEEP SINGH A.K.A L-FRESH THE LION\*

*This narrative explores the experiences of an Australian Hip Hop artist and the religious and cultural discrimination he has faced in the music industry. The narrative identifies some telling double standards experienced by Sikhs in Hip Hop, and reflects on the irony of oppression occurring in a musical genre founded on rejecting conformity and encouraging originality. Above all, this narrative speaks to the importance of recognising the humanity behind both our artistic and personal choices and urges readers to celebrate their individual creativity.*

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\* L-FRESH The LION is a rapper and is renowned for his powerful presence, inspiring live shows and thought-provoking hip hop lyrics.

## I INTRODUCTION: MY EXPERIENCE

Very early on I made myself a promise — never sacrifice my sense of self for anybody or for any opportunity.

After I sent them my set of press photos to help promote the shows they told me I couldn't be on the tour anymore. They said I needed to change my look if I wanted to stay on. My turban and beard are more than just defining visual features. They have nothing to do with fashion. To me they are the continuance of a rich and inspiring legacy. They are gifts that keep me grounded and focused; they reflect my personal, inner spiritual journey.

I told them I would not compromise my identity for anyone, that I would not disrespect myself, my family, community, or ancestors, and that I would prefer to miss out on this tour than sell myself short. After a few days of discussion between my team and theirs, everything was eventually sorted. I didn't need to retake any photos. They were going to use the ones I sent them. It was all-good — a hiccup on what ended up being such a valuable tour experience.

This was during the very early stages of my music career. I had been offered the biggest tour opportunity of my life. I was going to be traveling with some notable names in the Hip Hop scene. I was nervous and excited. I never thought I'd be challenged in this way. Well, I take that back. I had been preparing for a challenge like that since I started on my path as a practicing artist and I've been continuing my preparations ever since. That's the harsh reality of the music industry — it can be very fickle.

## II I AM A HIP HOP ARTIST

I am a Hip Hop artist who happens to be Sikh. I knew going into it there would be moments in my journey that would ask me to choose between an opportunity and my faith. I knew my appearance would be challenged many times along the way. So well before any of those experiences actually happened, I prepared myself mentally.

Although this particular experience left me with a feeling of disappointment and frustration, what I found more upsetting was that I needed to prepare for more. Artists face rejection on a regular basis. They become accustomed to it. They accept it and push even harder towards their goals. It is easier, although still quite tough, to accept

rejection that is based on feedback relating to creative ideas. But what about rejection based on an individual's personal choice of religion? When did that become something that an external third party felt like they could have a say in?

On reflection, what I also found disappointing about this particular experience was the fact that it happened on a Hip Hop tour. Hip Hop is a culture that was manifested in a climate of racism, oppression, discrimination, and segregation by a community of people who were marginalised. They created their own way of being when society did not want them to be. Early Hip Hop practitioners created and redefined themselves and their surroundings in order to uplift themselves and their communities. It rejected conformity and encouraged originality. "Hip Hoppas" strive to stand out.

This is why Hip Hop resonates with me so deeply. I felt the other artists on the tour would cringe if they knew what I was being asked to do. It goes against the core of what Hip Hop is about. But that just goes to show that sometimes those working behind the scenes to put on tours, whilst being fans of Hip Hop music, have no interest in applying the principles of Hip Hop culture to their every day lives. Nor do they treat their tours with that level of cultural understanding and respect — to them it is a business and they need to sell tickets.

### III BEING A SIKH IN THE HIP HOP INDUSTRY

I don't mind answering questions about my faith when they are genuine, sincere and respectful. In doing so, I feel I'm helping my community. Sikhs have a history of standing firm in our beliefs — upholding the defining features of our physical appearance in the face of imperial oppression. When forced to choose between death and religious conversion, we refused to cut a single strand of hair and compromise our way of living. Instead of removing our turbans, we chose to battle oppressive regimes and remove them from seats of power in order to protect universal human rights.

So, you can understand why I was so firm in my response to that tour promoter, and why I can get frustrated when I repeatedly get asked at a show if people can touch my beard or if they can see the hair beneath my turban. Furthermore, whilst a majority of other artists are able to pursue their careers without a single question being raised about their personal faith and inner spirituality, it's often the first question that I get

asked. Many times, it's the first box I get put into when journalists try to describe me to their readers or viewers.

Every now and then I find myself wondering whether my appearance has been at the centre of conversation when people in positions of power are making decisions as to whether to include me or not in any given opportunity. Maybe it doesn't get brought up at all. Maybe it does. I don't know. I remind myself that it's not a very useful thing to sit there thinking about but sometimes I can't help it — I am not a novelty, I am a human being.

#### IV LESSONS?

Having said all this, don't be misled. I am not an angry person. I find myself laughing about these experiences all the time. But occasionally I wonder if my laughter serves to hide my frustration so that I don't offend anybody with it despite me being the one whose dignity has been offended by having my personal, life-long, spiritual journey trivialised. I often sit and think about my role in Hip Hop. Not just locally, on a national level, but also at an international level. What impact can I have? Can I be a positive force in the world? If so, how can I do that? What do I need to build? And what can I do on an everyday basis to work towards that goal?

My personal spiritual journey definitely plays a role in shaping who I am as an individual and that inevitably comes out in my music, just like it does for any other artist. I suppose the difference between me and many other artists is how visually obvious my spiritual journey is. It's there. It can't be hidden. And I'm okay with that. When challenges such as the one on that tour present themselves, I view them as opportunities to further build my core values.

There's a saying I've found I live by, which is appropriate to share in this instance. I use it as a constant reminder as new tests emerge: 'Why blend in when you were born to stand out?'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A sentiment often attributed to Dr Seuss.