

washingtonpost.com

## Saudi Hip-Hop's Painful Birth

Advertisement

Selection in MTV Contest Brings Joy and Misery for Group Defying Strictures of Muslim Kingdom

By Faiza Saleh Ambah  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Friday, February 22, 2008; A16

JIDDAH, [Saudi Arabia](#) -- For many years, the members of the Saudi hip-hop group Dark2Men performed mostly in living rooms for their friends. They hid their pastime from relatives who view singing and dancing as shameful in this strict Muslim kingdom where concerts, theaters and movies are banned.

But that all changed last month after the group auditioned for a hip-hop competition on [MTV Arabia](#) -- launched in November as the latest addition to the MTV network -- and became one of eight finalists from the [Middle East](#).

The channel produced a video clip of Dark2Men that aired in late January and flew the finalists to [Dubai](#) for the contest finale, which was taped Thursday and will be broadcast across the region next month.

"We used to sing about scratching our way to the surface," said lead rapper Hani Zain, 27, a gangly computer programmer at a bank. "We finally made it to the light."

In a kingdom where the Koran serves as the constitution, Dark2Men's rapid ascent from obscurity to the waiting room of pop fame has brought its three young members a mix of elation and misery.

[Saudi Arabia](#) is home to Mecca and [Medina](#), Islam's holiest places, and the group's tenuous leap into the realm of MTV is in many ways the story of the kingdom's own struggle with the effects of intrusive Western-style modernity.

There are no nightclubs or concerts in Saudi Arabia because of social and religious codes that also ban alcohol and the mixing of unrelated men and women. Local radio and television stations play mainly Arabic pop music. With those limitations, the group's biggest ambition had been to cut a CD.

What they got instead was a television appearance viewed by thousands in the Arab world.

Their fathers, who had never seen them perform, were ashamed and angry as they watched them rapping and dancing in the video on television.

Their fiancées, in a country where women are not allowed to drive and must cover their hair and wear a cloak in public, were unhappy about the trip to Dubai, where men and women mix freely and alcohol is readily available.

The time they needed to spend on practicing and attending the competition put them at risk of losing raises and promotions.

"This should be the happiest time of my life, but it's really the most difficult," said Tamer Farhan, 24, a human resources assistant at a hospital who taught himself English by watching American movies and television shows.

The video, for their song "The Journey," was filmed in the studio and around [Jiddah](#)'s landmarks, and in it, they rap about the group's rise:

"Hard life but I'll be sticking to it. Bad times but I'll be going through it. All I know is that I know I can do it. Be strong and never lean down to it."

Farhan seemed shy in front of the camera. Zain, sporting sunglasses, moved like he had been performing for the cameras for years. Maan Mansour, 25, looked straight into the camera and made the effusive hand gestures of Western rap stars.

"There are a lot of Saudi rappers, but they're underground because of the wrong impression people have of them," Farhan told MTV's "Hip HopNa" co-host Qusai Khidr, a Saudi rapper who has lived in [Florida](#). "We would like people to hear our words and listen to our message before they judge us."

After the video aired, the group members met at a pizza place, and their moods shifted between excitement and despondency.

Farhan said that when hip-hop was just a hobby, his father was tolerant and his fiancée was confident that her parents would not discover he was part of the group. But now that the group has been on television and could win a recording contract, his father fears that his son will leave a steady job to become an entertainer. His fiancée said it was only a matter of time before her parents found out and ended the engagement.

Farhan, the eldest of four siblings who has worked since he was 13 to supplement the family income, said his father's disapproval was especially hard. "All my life, I've tried to make him proud," he said.

Mansour, who raps in English and Arabic, recounted how his father, a retired school principal, threatened to disown him a day after the video clip aired. "He said the whole neighborhood was talking about his son prancing around and dancing and singing like a jester on television," said Mansour, an equipment sterilization technician at a hospital.

Zain said he had agreed with his fiancée that if his music career started to hurt their relationship, he would cut down on performing and concentrate on writing lyrics and composing music. "I love this girl more than I love singing," he said.

The group's biggest challenge, Zain said, was to prove to their friends, families and fiancées that they are as serious about their religion and their culture as they are about hip-hop.

"If you're a rapper, people immediately assume that you are into the things they see on television. We don't want to be them, we want to create our own style. We rap about problems faced by young Saudis and we promote Islamic values," Mansour said.

Zain said the name Dark2Men was about shedding light on the hidden difficulties Saudi youths face. The "2" stood for the number of members in the group when it was founded in 1999. But Zain said the other founding member, a friend of his, left the group because he did not want to hurt his reputation and anger his family.

Zain met Mansour at a mosque, and Farhan joined them later.

The feeling of being under siege and misunderstood by society has turned the group's members into close friends, they said.

"People don't understand us here. They think being part of a rap group means you're less Arab or less Muslim or you want to imitate the West," Zain said.

A song written after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, which were carried out mainly by Saudis, focuses on how the group views faith:

"We're the ones who care about women and family, we're the ones who care about neighbors and community, and after all that how dare you people call us terrorist. I'm proud to be Muslim. Islam is the deepest peace. And no matter what they say or do, I am, I am, I'm Muslim."

At the airport in Jiddah before leaving for Dubai, Farhan said his father had given him a good-luck gift that morning. He stretched out his hand to show a watch with a black leather strap.

Zain, wearing his ubiquitous sunglasses and black hooded sweat shirt, said he had "never been so scared and so excited."

"All my dreams are now staring me in the face," he said before taking off. "Everything depends on what happens in Dubai."

#### Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

**Ads by Google**

**[Upload Your Rap Song](#)**

Hip Hop Battle of The Bands. Grow Your Fanbase & Be Discovered  
[www.OurStage.com](http://www.OurStage.com)

**[Backgrounds & Layouts](#)**

Layouts, Backgrounds & Graphics. -hip hop artists Download!  
[Myspace.LayoutsPimp.com](http://Myspace.LayoutsPimp.com)

**[The YouTube Of Hip Hop](#)**

Watch & Create Great Rap Videos Powered By The People  
[RapSpace.TV](http://RapSpace.TV)