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MUSIC

This Muslim Rocker Preaches Tolerance To a Strong Drumbeat

By Mary Kissel | August 15, 2006 | Jakarta, Indonesia

"Why did I choose an Arabic beat? Because the Muslims think it's a Muslim song. It's not! It's a universal song."



Mary Kissel/The Wall Street Journal

So explained Dhani, the pony-tailed, baby-faced founder of one of Indonesia's most popular rock 'n' roll bands, Dewa, on a recent afternoon here. Blasting a track from the group's latest album, "Republic of Love," Dhani explained how his faith, Sufism -- a mystic, tolerant form of Islam -- informs his music. Despite appearances, Dhani, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, is a very different kind of rock superstar. He's promoting moderate Islam -- vocally -- in a linchpin country in the war on terror.

Crammed into the back seat of his minivan while Dhani lounges upfront, I struggled to scribble down his words, barely audible as the booming bass shook the seats. "Wahai jiwa yang tenang!" ("O serene soul!"), blared the opening riff from the first song, "Warriors of Love," with a strong drumbeat backing it up. The tune's title in Indonesian, "Laskar Cinta," is a play on "Laskar Jihad" ("Warriors of Holy War"), Indonesia's homegrown, al Qaeda-linked terrorist group. But the song couldn't be more different from what they preach; Dhani sings about religious freedom, weaving in Quranic references easily recognizable to Dewa's primary audiences in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, and neighboring Malaysia.

It's a conscious strategy; a cynic might even dismiss it as a marketing ploy. Dhani explains that he tucks messages of tolerance and peace beside Western, straight rock beats and halting, syncopated Arabic rhythms. Western-minded types and even radicalized Muslims buy his albums -- and, one hopes, his tolerant vision, too. So far, so good: The group's new album is on track to sell a million legal copies in Indonesia alone; estimates put the volume of pirated versions at three to four times that number. The current disc's lead track was No. 1 in Indonesia for three weeks, running from last December to January, and the video reached MTV's top 10 chart. EMI plans to release an English-language version of Dewa's music into foreign markets soon.

It's ingenious, and infectious; indeed, some of Dewa's tracks could easily be mistaken for those of a Saudi Arabian pop band -- one whose members listened to Queen and classic rock as kids. But as the final verse of "Warriors of Love" fills the car, it echoes this holy verse: "O mankind!

We created you from a single soul, male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another, and not to despise each other." A tad more thoughtful than "Bohemian Rhapsody," and not exactly what Dhani's hardline Islamic groupies are taught in their madrassas.

Dhani, 34, is an unlikely proselytizer for peace. His grandfather participated in the Daru Islam Islamist guerrilla movement, which counted among its members the terrorist group leader who plotted the Bali bombings a few years back. Dhani's father, Eddy, followed in his father's footsteps, figuring prominently in an organization bent on preaching Wahhabism. Dhani's Indonesian-born mother, Joyce, proved a more moderating influence -- she converted from Roman Catholicism to Islam when she married. (But "she learned Islam from me, not my father," Dhani confides quietly.)

As a youngster, Dhani attended a Wahhabist school. (Wahhabism, the prominent Muslim sect in Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia, promotes a strict observance of Islam; Sufism is historically dominant in Indonesia, among Muslims.) But the Wahhabist message didn't sit well with Dhani: In his teens, the young rebel dropped out of high school and started Dewa, also sometimes called Dewa 19, a reference to a personnel change when the band members were 19 years old. The name, an acronym of the founding members' names, ironically means "God" in Sanskrit. The group's catchy tunes caught on quickly; today in Indonesia, Dhani is a superstar on par with Bon Jovi or Bono.

Yet Dhani's message is arguably far more powerful -- and meaningful -- than those Western rockers' ditties. Since the fall of Suharto's autocratic regime in 1998 and the advent of democracy, support for hardline Islamic political parties in Indonesia has grown. While such groups are by no means supported by the majority, mostly moderate Javanese, recent events -- such as public calls to impose sharia, or Islamic law, the prosecution of the editor of Playboy's Indonesian edition, and virulent anti-Western demonstrations -- speak to Wahhabism's creeping influence on the archipelago, as does a quick count of the scarves on women's heads in metropolitan Jakarta.

Dhani has responded not only through his music, but by joining a small -- but growing -- group of religious moderates who are trying to educate Indonesians about tolerant forms of Islam. Organized by LibForAll, a small U.S. foundation based in Winston-Salem, N.C., its members include former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, a great Sufi leader; Abdul Munir Mul Khan, a prominent former member of the governing board of the Muhammadiyah, one of the world's largest Muslim organizations; and Azyumardi Azra, an outspoken Islamic intellectual, among others.

The risks are great for vocal religious moderates like the ones affiliated with LibForAll. Last year, after Dewa released an album that featured the word for "Allah" in Arabic script on its cover, Dhani was labeled an apostate. Fearing for his wife, Maya, and their three children, Dhani moved them into a hotel. Only when Abdurrahman Wahid held a press conference supporting the rock star did Dhani feel safe enough to move them home again.

Dhani seems unperturbed by his mission. When I asked him about it, he laughed, talked about his faith (his children are named after Sufi saints), and turned the car stereo up.

As we crawled through traffic, one of Dhani's troupe reminded me that Dhani isn't the first to have this calling. In a neat historical parallel, Dhani's savior and mentor, Mr. Wahid, is a direct descendant of Siti Jenar, a 16th-century Sufi prophet who also preached tolerance in the face of a militant Islamic group in Java. He was executed for his faith, and legend has it that his blood

sprayed "Allah is good!" in the sand as he died. He was later heralded as a true prophet of Allah. In the notes for his latest album, Dhani thanks Syekh Lemah Abang ("Reddish-brown earth") -- a reference to the town where Siti Jenar once lived.

Dhani laughed again when I asked him if the story of Siti Jenar's death is true, and if he's been compared to the prophet. He nodded, and smiled. And then he turned the music up again.

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