

Singer now raises voice for Islam

Former Cat Stevens lectures on tolerance, offended by Rushdie

By Mike McGrail

NEWS STAFF WRITER

WORCESTER – Listen for a few minutes to Yusuf Islam – better known as soft-rock singer Cat Stevens – talk about the Muslim religion, and you’d swear he was still conductor of the “Peace Train” he wrote about in the 1970s.

But then ask the singer of that song and other heartstring-tugging classics about writer Salman Rushdie and watch the peace train jump the track.

“Islam is tolerant. If a person does not make offense to the religion, then we are at peace with that person. But if there is an open attempt to deride our beliefs, they have to expect a strong reaction,” Yusuf Islam said during an interview at the Islamic Society of Greater Worcester, where moments before he had spoken to about 100 Islamic youths about maintaining their faith while living in the predominately Christian West.

Yusuf Islam’s talk focused on preserving the Muslim lifestyle in a secular society that throws constant temptations at the devout, and that is also influenced by a powerful Jewish political lobby he says “is not happy with Muslims taking positions of authority.” A later talk at Shrewsbury High School addressed the importance of Islamic education in the United States.

But Yusuf Islam also tackled the Rushdie controversy, which has thrust Islamic beliefs into mainstream America.

Rushdie, a British writer of Indian descent, is under a death sentence from Islamic authorities for what they say is a blasphemous portrayal of the prophet Mohammed’s wives in his 1989 novel “The Satanic Verses.” Rushdie has been hiding for two years under constant police protection in London.

Rushdie’s plight has drawn new attention over the last few months. “60 Minutes” reported last Sunday that known Islamic assassins have entered England. The Japanese and Italian translators of “The Satanic Verses” were targets of stabbing attacks this month, and the Japanese translator died.

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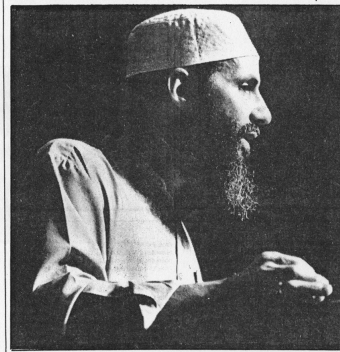


PHOTO BY JENNIFER HAUCK
YUSUF ISLAM

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Islamic leaders have rejected Rushdie's claim that he has become a devout Muslim and doubled the price on his head to \$2 million.

Yusuf Islam created a stir in the U.S. in 1990 when he was quoted as saying he supported the death sentence imposed on Rushdie by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran.

"There are some serious debates doing on, but those don't get to the wider public because they're not newsworthy. These are obviously very deep subjects," Yusuf Islam said. "From our point of view, these beliefs are sacred. In a liberal society, nothing is sacred except the blasphemer's right to blaspheme."

If supporting a death sentence sounds uncharacteristically bloodthirsty coming from a man who once sang angelic ballads about the break of dawn, chalk it up to his 1977 embrace of Islam. Yusuf Islam/Cat Stevens is nothing if not sincere, and he is obviously devoted to everything about Islam – including the consequences for violating its laws.

"I came to Islam after a long, dragging search through the marketplace of ideas, religions and cultures until I reached the shores of peace and I began to realize the universal message of the Koran," he said. "I began to realize there was another side to life – the art of living."

Yusuf Islam dropped out of the recording business the same year he embraced Islam. Though he still dabbles in recording, the voice that once sold 15 million albums worldwide is now devoted to singing the Koran.

This week is Yusuf Islam's first visit to the U.S. in 2½ years. He has visited Chicago, Washington, and three other cities on a speaking tour to promote Islamic education.

Worcester and Shrewsbury are his last stops in the U.S. before returning to London, where he is active in the Islamic community. A tape of his speech on Islamic education will be broadcast on WCAT Cable 11 at 7 p.m., Thursday, July 25.