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Media Framing of Yusuf Islam's *An Other Cup*:
Music, Religion, and Narrative Construction

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Introduction

This study looks into the power that news media has to define events and to interpret their meaning. Specifically, I will examine the ways that the release of Yusuf's 2006 album, *An Other Cup*, was reported by major newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom. News reports surrounding this event interpreted it in two main ways, one presenting the album as the return of the 1970s superstar Cat Stevens, and another portraying it as a politically motivated tool intended to bridge the gap of misunderstanding between Muslims and the West. Discussions about the release of *An Other Cup* suggested certain understandings of Yusuf's faith and identity, either downplaying his conversion in the nostalgic context of his former career, or emphasizing his role as a religious spokesman and ambassador in the context of his post-conversion political activity.

Background

As an avid music listener and as a musician, I have always been drawn to discussions about music. Specifically, I am most interested in dialogues that seek to understand the place that music holds in people's lives. Such discourse is often found in conversations surrounding unusual musical events, in which people try to make sense out of musical incidents that disrupt their preconceived notions and expectations. The release of the 2006 album *An Other Cup* by Yusuf, the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens, is a paradigm example of one such surprising musical event; it was the first album he released since he converted to Islam and left the world of popular music in 1978.

The case of Yusuf was not selected at random, of course. Through the influence of my parents, as well as my own individual taste, my personal music library has always been dominated by the music of the 1970s. Not least represented from this generation of artists is Cat Stevens, whose albums *Tea for the Tillerman* and *Teaser and the Firecat* are among the most listened-to on my iPod. In my fandom of Cat Stevens, however, I have often found myself to be in a minority of my generation; while other superstars of the 1970s are still household names, the name of Cat Stevens seems to be mostly foreign to my peers. This observation has led me to ask some basic questions: “Where is Cat Stevens now?” and “What has he been doing for the past thirty-or-so years?” Pursuing this line of inquiry, I discovered his fascinating story.

Cat Stevens was an icon of the 1970s. Rolling Stone magazine reports that Stevens was a “trans-Atlantic superstar whose soft, romantic, hooky, and often-mystical singles were Top Ten mainstays,” and further referred to Stevens as a “commercially and critically lauded singer/songwriter” whose music sales include “eight gold albums in a row” (“Cat Stevens: Biography”). Stevens’ own website describes him as a “leading singer-songwriter of his generation” and a “megastar,” giving an account of his rise to stardom like a fire that spread across young listeners worldwide and that consumed music charts in the U.K. and in the U.S. (“Lifeline: 1970”). In 1978, however, Cat Stevens shocked the music world by converting to Islam and changing his name to Yusuf Islam (“Biography”). He left the world of popular music, and devoted his time to studying his faith and pursuing religious and philanthropic activities (“Biography”).

Yusuf did not stay out of the spotlight, however, making news headlines as part of several controversies. For example, Yusuf suffered severe criticism for his alleged support of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, which even resulted in radio boycotts of his music ("Cat Stevens Centre of Censorship Wrangle"). Then, in 2006, he shocked the music world again with the release of his first pop album in twenty-eight years. The album, whose production was paid for by Yusuf himself, contains ten original songs and a cover of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," made popular by The Animals (Williamson). The songs feature acoustic instrumentation, and have melodic qualities similar to previous Cat Stevens albums (Williamson).

The release of this album appeals to my academic interests because it has implications for both Communication Studies and Religious Studies. For the field of Communication Studies, this case provides an example of the ways in which events are defined in public communication. For the field of Religious Studies, this case provides an example of the complex relationship that religion has with popular culture and public discourse.

Significance

It has been widely reported that music is a powerful force, affecting people on personal and social levels. Music has been shown to play a large role in the formation of personal identities; Matt Connell described the role that music plays in understanding generational identities, for example (261). Michael T. Putnam even went so far as to call music a "weapon," examining some ways that popular music

has responded to terrorism (595). A powerful example of music's social and political impact can be seen in the United States Civil Rights movement, whose demonstrations frequently involved music. Some scholars report that singing spirituals and hymns, such as "We Shall Overcome," contributed to the success and sense of unity during demonstrations in this period of time (Litwack 3). As a final example, Matthew M. Chew explored the subversive potential that electronic dance music has to empower underprivileged social groups in China (76).

Music also exists in an uncertain relationship with ideas of the sacred and the secular, leading religious figures to ask the question "Where do we draw the line?" (Turner 13). On one side, music features prominently in many religious settings. Nancy A. Schaefer argues that music is a crucial feature of conservative evangelical cultures (53). Even still, music's place within sacred organizations has been often contested. Many church members in southern United States have condemned the blues as "devil's music," for example (Gussow). And although a similar condemnation has existed against metal music, there has been a culture of controversial artists that play "Christian metal" (Moberg). There is no common agreement about the value of music, and this topic has been the center of many debates about the intersection of religion and popular culture. The music of Yusuf exists in this uncertain area. He is both a pop star and a prominent Muslim convert, which, judging by the content of news reports about his first pop album as Yusuf, appeared to require some explanation.

Theory and Method

I will examine the ways in which Yusuf's 2006 album *An Other Cup* was framed by news reports. In his book *Framing Analysis*, Erving Goffman provides a conceptual foundation for the study of framing, noting that "definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events" (10). He provides an example of the way that one event can have different interpretations, saying that "a 'couple kissing' can also be a 'man' greeting his 'wife' or 'John' being careful with 'Mary's' makeup" (10). Bryant and Miron further clarify this point, saying, "The general assumption of framing theory is that context informs our actions, behavior, and understanding" (693). William Gamson similarly claims that "facts have no intrinsic meaning," and instead "take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence" (157). Gamson then defines a frame as "a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and suggesting what is at issue" (157).

Jim Kuypers defines framing as "the process whereby communicators act – consciously or not – to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more noticeable than others" (300). Making a similar point, Robert Entman observes that framing involves "selection and salience," meaning that a frame brings certain facts to the forefront of an audience's attention and leaves some facts out, thereby promoting a specific definition and interpretation of an issue (52). It is not only facts, however, that promote the interpretation of an issue. William Gamson claims that "the informational content of news reports is less important than the interpretive commentary that surrounds it," which includes "metaphors,

catchphrases, and other symbolic devices that provide a shorthand way of suggesting the underlying story line” (158).

To summarize, framing can be taken as presenting an event within a certain context, suggesting the event to be understood in a particular way. Frames are created by presenting and emphasizing certain facts and not others, and by surrounding facts with language that suggests interpretation. I will examine the ways in which the release of Yusuf’s 2006 album *An Other Cup* was framed by news media by identifying the contexts in which it was reported. I will look for explicitly stated interpretations, as well as additional information present in the articles that situates the release of the album inside larger narratives.

Results

Two frames were found to dominate news reports surrounding the release of the album. The first frame presented *An Other Cup* as the sign of the return of the 1970s superstar Cat Stevens, and the second frame portrayed the album as a political tool. Both frames were explicitly stated, and also developed through the context in which the release of the album was presented.

Frame 1: “Cat Stevens’ Returns to Music”

“Cat Stevens’ Returns to Music” is the title of a USA Today article announcing *An Other Cup*. It is not the only article whose title portrays this message; an article in The Independent states “It’s a Wild World, so Cat’s Back After 28 Years,” and an article in the Daily News, making a similar statement (and lyrical reference), is titled

“Cat Back In This Wild World.” These titles, as well as other similar ones, reflect one dominant way in which the release of the album was presented. This frame interprets *An Other Cup* as a sign of the return of the 1970s superstar, presenting the album in the context of Yusuf’s former career.

First of all, the album is explicitly discussed as the return of Cat Stevens. An article in *The Guardian* states that “An Other Cup brings [Yusuf] back to the folk-pop idiom and a real shot at his first million-seller since the 1970s” (Snow). *The Christian Science Monitor* claims, “Yusuf’s earnest offerings pick up where ‘Peace Train’ left off” (Collins), and *The New York Times* similarly says that “The music picks up where Cat Stevens (born Steven Georgiou) left off” (Pareles). *The Daily News* concludes an article making the same point, saying, “How great to hear this sound coming back so profoundly after such a long pause” (Farber).

Some articles not only present the album as a return, but also emphasize the similarities in sound between *An Other Cup* and Yusuf’s previous albums as Cat Stevens. An article in *The Sun*, regarding the release of the album, states, “for anyone who knows and loves his music, it’s a magical moment. Something that didn’t seem possible after his conversion to Islam and rejection of the music business. The voice is calm, assured, expressive, as if he’d never been away” (Cosyns). *The Observer* makes similar claims in two separate articles, saying that Yusuf “sounds remarkably the same” (Toms), and, “The voice that skipped through ‘Moonshadow’ is wearier but intact” (Spencer). *The Washington Times*, which describes the album as having a “time-warp mission,” states that “Much of ‘Cup’ harkens back to his commercial peak, when his soothing voice made him a radio

darling” (Toto). This theme of return is summed up by the Washington Post, which writes, “‘An Other Cup,’ [Yusuf’s] gentle new folk album, has a musty, anachronistic feel, as if the singer had awoken, Rip Van Winkle-style, from an almost 30-year nap and decided to take up where he left off” (Stewart).

These explicit statements paint a picture of the Cat Stevens narrative and the place that *An Other Cup* has in it. The album is framed as the sign of the return of Cat Stevens, whose post-conversion religious and political activity are understood as a kind of absence. Similarities between Yusuf and Cat Stevens are stressed, emphasizing that although he has been away, the same person is making the same kind of music once again. *An Other Cup* is seen in light of Yusuf’s former career, and it is taken as a continuation.

The album is also situated within a larger Cat Stevens narrative through an emphasis on the spirituality present in the previous life and music of Cat Stevens. The Christian Science Monitor notes that “As Cat Stevens, [Yusuf] gently laid claim to a contemplative corner of an era’s musical landscape” (Collins). The Daily News claims, “Something otherworldly has always hovered around Cat Stevens’ spare music, a halo of quiet around the vocals, a hallowed tone of intimacy in the instrumentation” (Farber). The Washington Times observes that “Yusuf Islam is all about peace, bridge building and, oh yes, love. That was never in doubt when he went by the name of Cat Stevens and cranked out a skein of easily absorbed pop back in the 1970s” (Toto). The Sun describes Cat Stevens’ spirituality in terms of a process, stating, “For Yusuf, his music was always part of a search for spiritual

enlightenment. Here we still find him 'on the road to find out' but there's an inner grace suggesting he's been making steady progress over the years" (Cosyns).

Other articles describe Cat Stevens' spirituality as a process that has ended in transformation. The New York Times states that "the old Cat Stevens, who pondered earthly loves and sorrows and spiritual yearning, has been replaced by a song-writer who finds all his answers in faith: an Islam that promises peace, love and light" (Pareles). The Guardian, less optimistically, presents a similar theme, saying, "Islam has long abandoned his youth's crisp poetic detail for touchy-feely homily which occasionally breaks into exasperated finger-wagging" (Snow).

The Daily News sums up this theme, claiming that "It should have shocked few, then, when 27 years ago, Stevens announced he was changing his name to something religious (Yusuf Islam) and shunning the material world of pop entirely" (Farber). Yusuf is presented as having always been spiritually inclined. His conversion was not random, and was even predictable, according to this narrative. Yusuf's faith is presented as the conclusion of a life of spiritual seeking. This position incorporates Yusuf's conversion into a larger narrative, and emphasizes the connection that *An Other Cup* has to his previous albums as Cat Stevens. *An Other Cup* is shown to be consistent with Yusuf's history, and becomes simply the next album on his discography.

Frame 2: "Cat Hears the Call to Promote Peace"

"Cat Hears the Call to Promote Peace" is the title of an article in The Evening Standard that announced *An Other Cup*. It reflects the second of the two dominant

frames in news reports surrounding the album, which presents the album as a political tool. This frame is developed through explicit statements of Yusuf's perceived motivations for making the album, and by situating the album in the context of Yusuf's political and religious activity since his conversion.

First of all, *An Other Cup* is explicitly presented as the product of Yusuf's political motivations. The Evening Standard states that "[Yusuf's] back in the studio because he believes he's in a unique position to look at the current strains between the West and Muslims. He wants to make a record to help both sides understand each other" (Ramsey). The News of the World reports that Yusuf is "releasing a new album which he hopes will bridge the divide between Islam and the West" ("Cat's the Way to Accord"). An article in the Sunday Times says, "The decision to return to the studio indicates that Islam, 58, is ready to bridge the gap between his adopted religion and pop music" (Dowell). USA Today, regarding Yusuf, states, "The singer is less concerned with selling CDs than with dispelling misconceptions about Islam" (Gunderson). Finally, The Independent states that Yusuf "has been inspired to record his first collection of new songs in 28 years by the current tensions between his adopted religion and the West" (Byrne).

These statements explicitly describe *An Other Cup* as the product of Yusuf's perceived political motivations. This frame portrays the album as a tool intended to be used to ease tensions between Muslims and the West. Yusuf is presented as a member of two worlds, who is in a unique position to bring understanding between them.

Furthermore, *An Other Cup* is situated within the context of Yusuf's political and religious activity. Special attention is given to controversies that Yusuf has been a part of since his conversion. The Independent states that "[Yusuf's] Islamic faith has not always made his life easy," and then mentions that in 2004 his plane to Washington was diverted because of his name appearing on a no-fly list (Byrne). The article then reports that Yusuf has taken "successful legal action against The Sun and The Sunday Times for falsely suggesting he supported terrorism" (Byrne). The Guardian similarly mentions Yusuf's diverted flight and lawsuits against The Sun and The Sunday Times, as well as "controversy over his alleged support of the fatwa on Salman Rushdie" (Petridis). USA Today gives special attention to the cover of *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood* that Yusuf included on the album, saying that it "acknowledges the misconceptions he has faced" (Gundersen). This article also recounts the Salman Rushdie controversy and his diverted flight to Washington, and also mentions Yusuf's denied entry into Israel in 2000 for alleged support of terrorism.

Focus is also given to Yusuf's religious and philanthropic activity. The Independent describes Yusuf as an "outspoken advocate of the Islamic faith," as well as "an active member of the Muslim community in London," citing his work with charities and education, as well as "articles on the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US and the 7 July London bombings for the local and national press" that Yusuf has written (Byrne). The Sunday Times similarly mentions Yusuf's publicly stated opinions, saying, "Islam has been an out-spoken opponent of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also condemned the September 11 attacks on America as murder"

(Dowell). Finally, the Guardian states that Yusuf “started a family, devoted his time to charity work, the founding of three Muslim schools and, less successfully, an Islamic hotel” (Petridis).

Yusuf is presented as a spokesman for Islam and as a controversial political figure. He is emphasized as a prominent Muslim, and this religious identity becomes the context in which his album is presented. According to this narrative, his life as Yusuf is not connected to his pre-conversion stardom; they are mostly separate. Yusuf’s significance is as a political actor and religious spokesman, and *An Other Cup* is a tool he is using to promote peace.

Conclusion

The significance of the release of *An Other Cup* is unclear. Yusuf himself has suggested different interpretations. He has stressed his connection to his former career, saying, “I have never changed my approach to life,” and that his “motive was always to express ideas and hope for improving the world and myself” (Gundersen). Yusuf has also emphasized the uniqueness of his more recent situation, however, saying, “in the position I am today, I do feel like a looking glass, where people living in the West can view Islam, and Muslims can view another culture” (Gundersen).

News reports surrounding the release of the album also stated and suggested different meanings. Some interpreted the album as a sign of the return of Cat Stevens, and others portrayed it as a bridge-building tool intended to be used to increase understanding between Muslims and the West. The album was understood as part of a larger narrative of the 1970s superstar Cat Stevens, or a more recent

narrative about the political and religious representative Yusuf. Although Cat Stevens and Yusuf are biologically the same person, discussing the album in terms of one or the other has different implications.

Discussing *An Other Cup* as part of a larger Cat Stevens narrative suggests a certain way of understanding his faith and identity. It makes his conversion and religious activity subordinate to his music making, and elevates his history. He is understood as a spiritually inclined pop star, who just happened to have landed on the Islamic faith. In presenting Yusuf as having a cohesive and consistent life story, his faith becomes absorbed in the narrative as simply another step in his personal journey. His absence from the world of popular music is represented as a kind of wilderness experience, which is necessary for his personal growth, but ultimately a temporary change from which he returns.

Presenting *An Other Cup* in the context of Yusuf's political and religious activity has different implications. It subordinates his past, and elevates his religious identity. He is understood as a former pop star and current advocate for Islam. His conversion is then seen as a defining turning point in his life, which brought him into a new identity. However, his past is not ignored; Yusuf is depicted as someone who has unique insight into two worlds, and who has a duty as a sort of ambassador to work to build bridges of understanding.

These two narratives, however, are not entirely exclusive or oppositional. Importantly, although almost every news report showed a dominant way of understanding the release of the album, many articles contained elements of both narratives. It is possible, then, to discuss the album both in the context of his career

as Cat Stevens and in terms of his religious activity as Yusuf. In these cases, however, one story takes precedence over the other. This recognizes the complexity of Yusuf's history and identity, while still attributing a certain significance to the release of the album.

This case provides an example of the complicated relationship that religion has with identity and public image. It also teaches us that framing devices in public communication can be used to navigate these complex realities. The release of *An Other Cup* appeared to be challenging, and to require explanation. What does it mean for Yusuf to be both a pop star and a prominent Muslim convert? Major news publications in the U.S. and the U.K. seemed to wrestle with this question. Discussing the release of his album became a way of talking about Yusuf's career, conversion, and faith. These were more than just implications; ultimately, these news reports said a lot more about the character of Yusuf than they did about the music itself. Although two narratives dominated the news, they often overlapped. The revealed understandings of Yusuf's identity are complex, and involve both his career as a 1970s superstar and as a political and religious spokesman.

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