



A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

As one half of Sajid & Zeeshan, Sajid Ghafoor has fused electronic and acoustic elements to create the musical duo's distinctive sound. He's also continued to lecture in law – after taking an LLM in the UK – while he follows his dream, as he explains to **Ann Morgan**

The video for Sajid & Zeeshan's latest single *Walk on Air*, from the award-winning duo's forthcoming album *Harvest*, is stripped-back and sophisticated. Shot in black and white, it intercuts footage of the band against a blank background with whimsical sequences of children, nature, and synth player and producer Zeeshan Parwez at the mixing desk. The blend of mainstream and arthouse reflects the fusion of familiar rock chords and electronic experimentation that made the group's first album, *One Light Year at Snail Speed*, a success. Newspapers such as *The Express Tribune* praised the band for the sort of slick production and innovation that many more established ensembles struggle to achieve.

All of which is surprising when you consider that front man and songwriter Sajid Ghafoor is almost entirely self-taught. 'For two years I did not even know how to tune a guitar,' remembers the 40-year-old, who grew up in Peshawar and started playing the guitar in 1987. 'There was no music school in my city. The internet did not exist. There were no cell phones and no cable TV, so I tuned the guitar according to what I thought was right. And what I thought was right made no sense.'

In fact it wasn't until Ghafoor stumbled across a guitar instruction book in Islamabad in 1989 that he realised quite how unconventional his approach to music-making had been. Later that day he tuned his guitar and played a C-major chord for the first time. It was a magical moment.

'That was such a beautiful evening,' he says. 'I played that chord for at least three or four hours, sometimes going over to my sister and playing it at her – that really annoyed my sister, by the way.'

Armed with his new-found knowledge, Ghafoor turned to the albums of western rock musicians for inspiration. Led Zeppelin, U2 and Jimi Hendrix all provided food for thought for the aspiring performer and he was particularly influenced by UK band Pink Floyd.

'Somehow Pink Floyd gave me an understanding of the feeling of notes,' he says. 'As a musician when you're playing and experiencing [the notes] just behind the speed of the music, it's like you're surfing. It's like spiritual surfing. The way David Gilmour plays the guitar is so in sync with the band that you can't look for anything more. So I started understanding what music is and how it works.'

An open mind

Always hungry for ideas, the young musician took advantage of whatever influences came his way, getting into African music and western classical music, as well as exploring funk and electronic music. But it was in 1994, when he heard the album *August and Everything After* by US band Counting Crows, that Ghafoor's songwriting really began to take off.

'It was the first time in my life that someone's vocals actually connected with me,' he says. 'I looked at the lyrics and where it was coming from and somehow that prompted me to sit and write and open up.'

That same year, having graduated with an LLB from the University of Peshawar, Ghafoor travelled to the UK to study for an LLM at the University of Hull. Having only dim memories of the UK from a year he spent in London as a young child while his father took a master's degree, he was pleasantly surprised by what he found.

'I saw a society that respected the rights of others and did not discriminate,' he says. 'People had the decency to say "thank you" and "sorry". I was suddenly exposed to a civilization that was more civilised and was always drawn to something better.'

Anxious to make the most of his time in the UK, Ghafoor threw himself into all aspects of student life, joining a range of university groups, from the Yoga Society to the Rock Society, where he was able to indulge his passion for music. He also took advantage of the entertainment and nightlife that he had not had access to back home in Pakistan.

'My environment totally welcomed me,' he said. 'I had the freedom to associate with anyone I wanted to at any time [and go to] pubs and clubs. That doesn't mean you have to go and drink, but it does give you an outlet. You can go out and dance and enjoy time with your friends. You can go for a game of pool. You have those kind of openings.'

The social life wasn't the only revelation for Ghafoor. In contrast to the textbook-based approach to learning he was used to in Pakistan, he found that his tutors in Hull expected something different from him.

'When I did my first assignment, my supervisor called me over and said: "You've just written down exactly what's in the book. That's not what I'm looking for. You have to show originality,"' he says. 'That was a watershed moment for me. I realised that I was getting educated and I could not simply keep on doing this. I had to give her my personal analysis and tell her what I thought was right and why.'

It was an approach that Ghafoor was to carry into his own work on his return to Pakistan. After a brief stint working for an NGO, Ghafoor took up a post with a law firm, but quit after just two weeks when he was asked to represent an unscrupulous client and found himself in a difficult ethical position.

'It would have been very easy for me to prove that a certain provision of law did not apply in his case,' he says. 'A loophole would have allowed me to manipulate the system. If I had helped this person, legally speaking I would have done right – but morally speaking I would have done something really wrong. I couldn't live with that kind of pressure.'

Abandoning plans for a legal career, Ghafoor decided that teaching offered him the best opportunity to put his knowledge and experience to good use and be a positive force for social





Self-made man: Ghafoor, who taught himself to play guitar, in the video for *Walk on Air*

“WE STARTED FIDDLING AROUND WITH THE MUSIC, AND WROTE AND RECORDED ‘KING OF SELF’ IN 45 MINUTES”

change. He returned to the Law College of the University of Peshawar as a lecturer and set about putting into practice many of the techniques he had learned from academics in the UK.

‘I found I was doing more than just teaching,’ he says. ‘I was actually building characters. I remembered all those times when my supervisors talked to me face-to-face and dealt with any problems I had in life. That told me they were there for me.’

Alongside his teaching career, which saw him rise to the position of Assistant Professor and gain a diploma in International Environmental Law from the University of Oslo, Ghafoor was busy with his music too. Writing and playing at venues around Peshawar, he continued to experiment with blending world music and rock influences.

Then in 2004 he was introduced to Zeeshan Parwez at a mutual friend’s house and the idea for Sajid & Zeeshan was born. ‘He heard me play and he liked it so we agreed to see if we could do something,’ he says. ‘We started fiddling around with the music, and wrote and recorded *King of Self* in 45 minutes. When people liked it, I said: “We should make an album.”’

The decision turned out to be a good one. Picked up by record label EMI, which relaunched its Pakistan arm to release it, *One Light Year at Snail Speed*, the first entirely English-language album by a Pakistani band, got a great

response. *King of Self* won an Indus Music Award, while their third single, *Freestyle Dive*, was nominated both for an Indus Music Video Award and a Lux Style Award in 2006.

Now, after nearly five years of gathering new material, the duo are working on the release of their second album *Harvest*. Plans to launch the album in September 2011, following on from the release of *Walk on Air* in March 2011, faltered because of violence in Karachi and distribution problems, but Ghafoor remains committed to the project, which he says takes his art to the next level.

‘I have put more of my soul into it,’ he says. ‘Our first album was more like an experiment to see how things go but this time we have tried to do it more seriously. The production is better and the compositions are much better.’

Determined to keep championing musical and social innovation in the face of all challenges, Ghafoor continues to draw inspiration from the lessons he learned in Hull all those years ago. Asked if he has any advice for young Pakistanis thinking of studying in the UK, he smiles.

‘Consider yourself lucky that you are going to get this chance,’ he says. ‘Expect an educational trip that will teach you a lot. Make sure that you study as much as you can, but don’t stop having fun.’ ■

