



Muslim comedians fighting prejudice, armed with punchlines

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By Sharaf Mowjood
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Jihad, homegrown-terrorism, Sharia law, and mosques. Mention any of these terms and most people in America will associate it with

Islam and Muslims. Say the word "Muslim Comedian" and most will think it is an oxy-moron. Can Muslims really be funny? Dean Obeidallah, and Negin Farsad are not only professional comics, they are also Muslim and are quite funny.



"It could be more challenging for us, they could give us hurricane names," says Dean Obeidallah. "Turn on the news, 'Hurricane Mahmoud is coming! Run for your life, Mahmoud's a killer'".

Born in New Jersey and living in New York City, Obeidallah, a former attorney, has found his calling as comedian. Addressing controversial issues and stereotypes through the lens of comedy, he has created a niche as an Arab-American comedian, working both the west and east coasts.

Not everything has been funny though. According to Obeidallah, and fellow comedian Negin Farsad have both felt a rise of Islamophobia.

According to recent polling, nearly half of all Americans admit to feeling some prejudice towards Muslims. Both comics felt inspired to do something about it. They figured that the best way to deal with intolerance is to make fun of it.

"We realized that most people who are against Muslims had probably never met a Muslim before," says Farsad. "So we thought we go to them and introduce ourselves."

Instead of performing at the cosmopolitan comedy club circuits like most comics, Obeidallah and Farsad along with fellow comedians Maysoon Zayid and Omar Elba organized a comedy tour called, "The Muslims Are Coming!" They took their act to southern Bible-Belt states, where some of the strongest feelings, actions and responses of Islamophobia have occurred.

"We really wanted to put our comedy where our mouth is," says Obeidallah. "Go to the areas where no comedians every venture to, no non-profit, or progressive cause would ever organize or engage in."

The inspiration for the comedians to embark on a tour like this came from the 1960's Civil Rights movement. "Brave people like 'The Freedom Riders' and other civil rights groups went down to places like Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia to engage with people they did not understand, or have stereotypes with," says Farsad.

Armed with punch-lines and jokes, they drove from small town, to small town, throughout Georgia, Alabama, Florida and Tennessee performing free shows at local venues.

"It's challenging now to have a Muslim last name, but there is one benefit- we are probably immune to identity theft," quips Obeidallah in an Alabama show. "Criminals want to take easy names that don't get attention, not Abdul Musa Rahman Abdallah. I have an Arab-American friend born in the US whose first name is Osama. He can leave his driver's license and credit cards in a crack house, no one wants to be him."

The Muslims found southern hospitality and provocative conversation with the people they encountered. They set up booths in town squares with banners and fliers passed around saying, 'Ask a Muslim,' inviting residents to ask them anything, even about their own identity as Americans.

"You know there's only one kind of American, and that's American," says a local resident to Farsad, to which she responded that she is an American Iranian. The resident replied, "If you want to be mainstream then you are no longer an Iranian American. You are an American."

After touring the south, the comedians took their act to Arizona, Utah, Idaho and various parts of the Midwest, with free shows and booths.

"We want to answer the tough questions, we encourage people to ask the tough questions, talk about the stereotypes that are lingering in your mind," says Obeidallah. "I think comedy is a fun way to try and do just that."

Editor's Note: Harry Smith's full report, "Laughing Matter," airs Monday, Dec. 19, on Rock Center at 10pm/9c.