

# Country-Western with a Twist

**Kareem Salama grew up Muslim in Oklahoma, graduated in chemical engineering from OU and is sending a musical message to a world in conflict.**

BY KRISTI EATON

**K**areem Salama is taking the meaning of his Arabic name to heart.

Literally translated as “generous peace,” the country-western singer with a flair for pop is hoping his music can promote peace and freedom with people all over the world—from the oppressed in Egypt to those suffering from addiction to residents of small-town Oklahoma.

His single, “Be Free Now,” off the recently released album “City of Lights,” pays homage to all those seeking tranquility. Salama, whose parents immigrated to the United States from Egypt in the late 1960s to attend college, added the song to the album at the last minute after watching news coverage of the Egyptian uprising and revolution.

“It was inspired by the situation in Egypt, but we tried to be a little bigger than that. So many people are struggling . . . to be free,” he says.

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As a kid in Ponca City in the early '80s, Kareem Salama already had the hat, the boots and the jeans. All the young cowboy lacked was a horse.





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OU alumnus Kareem Salama has been dubbed “America’s first Muslim country-western singer.”

“It’s not just the Egyptian people. There are people trying to find a sense of freedom from a lot of different things.”

Trying to make a difference in the world is something that has permeated Salama’s musical career—from taking part in a State Department-sponsored Middle East diplomacy tour promoting greater cultural awareness to donating 50 percent of earnings from “Be Free Now” to Save the Children and starting his own foundation.

It is a far cry from his days at the University of Oklahoma, where he graduated with a degree in chemical engineering in 2002. “If you had asked me 10 years ago if [my music] could have some meaningful impact on the world or on an individual, I probably wouldn’t have thought so, but I kind of see it,” he says.

Everyone, he adds, says music is a universal language, but it is a concept that he still finds strange, although one that he believes in more each day.

“If two [completely different] people can be beside each other in a concert . . . both immersed in the same thing, they are connected. All of a sudden, this great [appreciation of] beauty makes a difference in these two people in that moment.”

The 33-year-old saw a lot of that connectivity while taking

part in the State Department tour during the summer of 2010. The month-long trip took him to Egypt, Morocco, Kuwait, Bahrain, Syria, Jerusalem and Jordan. As a Muslim American singing country and pop music in these Middle Eastern settings, he was able to act as a cultural diplomat.

“In my particular case, because I sing something distinctly American—whether it is pop or country music—without having to say anything, it demonstrates the compatibility of two things people think are incompatible,” Salama says in his southern drawl. “Even though Islam is a religion, people think it is a culture. What I do is demonstrate that in one person, all these things come together—hopefully in a good way. You can talk about the similarities, but when you see them embodied in a person, it makes them more powerful.”

Growing up the second of four children in Ponca City, Salama did not think much about being one of the few Muslims in town. “My upbringing was very normal,” he recalls. “In terms of identity, I felt like everyone else. I felt American.”

Still, growing up in Oklahoma, with its unique blend of Native American, Western and Southern influences, did play a part in his childhood and who he is today. He was the lead in his school’s Christmas play; he regularly attended rodeos and country fairs; while he does not eat pork, he enjoys barbecue.

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He initially had considered attending the University of Arkansas because a good friend went to boarding school in the state. But when both received scholarships to OU, they headed to Norman.

Salama arrived on campus like many freshmen, unsure of what he wanted to study. He decided on chemical engineering for practical reasons but found he was more fascinated with poetry, music and philosophy, spending his late teens reading the works of Renaissance scholar Michel de Montaigne.

Outside the classroom, most of his time was spent boxing at USA Stars Boxing gym. During the fall semesters, he spent every Saturday watching football—but he rarely attended the games in person. Well before the advent of smart phones and 3G net-





Ruby Duncan

This press photo for “Be Free Now,” the single from his album, “City of Lights,” features Kareen Salama with Kelley Peters. He plans to donate half the proceeds to Save the Children and toward establishing the Generous Peace Foundation, after the Arabic meaning of his name and also his first album.

works, he acted as the information center for friends wanting updates on other games. He would remain at home—home being Couch dorms his freshman year and later an off-campus apartment—to keep tabs on multiple televised games and report scores to friends who called.

He had been writing music for a while and had tried recording, but it was not until he was a student at the University of Iowa College of Law that he met local producer Aristotle Mihalopoulos and began hitting his stride. He released two albums, “Generous Peace” in 2006 and “This Life of Mine” the following year. He graduated with a degree in law in 2007.

Salama began receiving national media attention, appearing in *The New York Times*, *Reader’s Digest* and on Fox News. He was dubbed “America’s first Muslim country-western singer,” a label that Salama says is all right with him.

“The press people are the ones who started saying that,” he says. “It is certainly fine. I think to some degree, it is the truth, at least in terms of people who have had some commercial success. We’ve never seen any other American Muslim country singers.”

Salama also can add filmmaker to his résumé. He has produced two theatrical music videos, the most recent titled “1980 Something.” He ultimately would like to combine his love of music with making movies, to become an entertainment powerhouse. “Hopefully, I can put things out there that are good. I haven’t seen a good movie in a long time, so I would love to

make one,” says Salama. “I think people are really hungry for good movies and good music. That’s where I want to be.”

*Kristi Eaton is a freelance writer living in Tulsa.*



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In this decidedly un-country-western pose from the publicity shots for his first single, “Makes Me Crazy,” from the album “City of Lights,” Salama demonstrates his flair for pop.