

Ni Main Jana Jogi De Naal (I'm Going to Go with the Ascetic): Where Will Qawwals Go Beyond Shrines?

Shumaim Rashid '26

This summer, my research followed the echoes of **Qawwali**, a centuries-old Sufi devotional music tradition. Qawwali is more than performance: it is prayer, storytelling, and a shared pathway to the Divine. Traditionally sung at Sufi shrines (*dargahs*) in South Asia, hereditary musicians called Qawwals carry forward devotional poetry (for Allah, the Prophet Muhammed, his family, and Sufi saints) through intricate rhythms and soaring melodies. Its goal is to induce *wajd*—a state of spiritual ecstasy—where audiences feel momentarily dissolved in divine presence. Historically, Qawwals belonged to marginalized communities, yet they have been the custodians of an art form cherished across Pakistan and India.

What began as a plan to follow hereditary Qawwals through Lahore's sacred shrines and commercial venues transformed—due to visa restrictions—into a journey through diasporic stages in New York and Texas. The change in geography sharpened my central question: *what happens when a tradition built on embodied devotion and sacred space is lifted into new cultural worlds?*

Over ten weeks, I attended multiple Qawwali performances in Texas and New York, watching sacred music reanimate community centers, cafes, and even a church. I conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews with two celebrated ensembles: Ustad Nizami's group, descendants of Mian Tansen—the legendary father of Hindustani classical music—and the Abdullah Manzoor Niazi Qawwal group and the Abdullah Manzoor Niazi Qawwal group, heirs to a 700-year musical lineage rooted in Delhi's Sufi tradition. In their stories, I heard both pride in their heritage and candid reflections on navigating new cultural and economic realities—teaching Western students, adapting setlists for diverse audiences, and balancing devotion with livelihood.

Through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and audiovisual documentation, I traced how Qawwali's core—its poetics of surrender and ecstatic soundscapes—remains intact even as its settings change. Watching a crowd in a church in Austin dance in ecstatic devotion or a group in a NYC cafe fall silent at the name of the Prophet confirmed Qawwali's power to create sacred presence far from the shrines that once defined it. These insights now feed into my honors thesis, *The Jurisprudence of Ecstasy*, which examines Qawwali as both devotional practice and commentary on Islamic authority and cultural legitimacy.

The summer's recordings and fieldnotes are already forming the backbone of a digital archive I am curating to preserve Qawwali's diasporic forms. I am also in the early stages of editing a documentary film that weaves performances, interviews, and reflections into a public-facing resource. Beyond academic outcomes, this project taught me that preservation is itself an act of devotion: to follow the music where it travels, to listen deeply, and to honor those who carry its lineage forward.



With Ustad Ghulam Farid Nizami (on the right) and his son (in the middle)

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