

In conversation with Frieha Altaf

The fashion icon, media mogul and actor talks to Instep about why she started her own podcast, her views on fashion and why telling the truth allows us to tap into our human side.



the media infrastructure. "At that time, we didn't know what it would be. But he is the one who suggested this idea." Frieha confesses Turhan also wanted to hear those stories and how they shaped her. The existence of Covid-19 fueled that idea further as did the rains (floods) in 2020.

"During Covid-19, leaving the house was not plausible. The flood also created a situation where the house had to be renovated in 2020." Ideas began flowing when it came to renovating including and particularly the basement... "We decided to soundproof it and convert that space into a studio for Turhan's music as well as myself which would allow me to do stuff, content creation within the house."

"I was very reluctant to use celebrities at all [when it came to who the guests would be]. The problem with celebrities is that they're scared. A lot of abusive relationships have been going on where they give interviews to various people and some other people will pick it up and cut and paste it in a manner that make the celebrity looks bad. "They're human beings, they make mistakes and there are all kinds of people out there. Some are intelligent, some are ambitious, some are very caring and you have to take everybody with what they have. Every single person I know including my maid, my cook or my best friend - everyone has a story. And that journey makes you who you are."

"I was, however, so opposed to certain things like I told my son that I will not do a Koffee with Karan. I can do it. People have come up to me a lot of times and said that you're the Karan Johar of the industry." But not looking for ingratiating views or create what might feel like an interrogation rather than an honest conversation, Frieha's was looking to traipse into uncomfortable territories, storytelling and taboo subjects. "All the stories that Humayun Saeed spoke about were unknown to me from encouragement by Nadeem to follow his passion to giving tuitions to his brother's paralysis."



Fashion icon, Lux Style Awards creative director, PR mogul, actor... there is an endless list of roles that Frieha Altaf has played over decades and continues to do so. It isn't just the sheer volume of work but also how instrumental Frieha has been in to that ensuring that structure we call the performing arts gets bigger and better. Is there anyone else who could've done this? Probably not. You need a heart of gold and an exterior built of steel that is strong enough to survive in this cutthroat world. She has both. I'd argue she developed those skills given the society she has been working in for years.

Beyond professional gigs, Altaf has been a single mom, supporting two children who have grown up and are now doing things their way. Frieha admits that while they have her unconditional support, she is letting them carve their own path. It is, in a way, about learning and unlearning from each other.

However, when Frieha Altaf started her own podcast called FWhy (ft. Humayun Saeed in the first episode), two things came to mind.

There is obviously a level of comfort her guests share with her that allows them to speak truthfully. But is she joining the rat race of talk shows. It can be rather confusing to watch an actor-host interviewing another actor with the former being a guest on another celebrity show. We have so much content of this design that it is overwhelming. Why did she - Frieha Altaf - feel there was a need for her to enter this race.

The conversation begins with a forthcoming and articulate Frieha Altaf who takes the volley of questions I throw at her and answers with a level of passion I didn't expect. Impervious about certain ideas, she knew what she didn't want to do.

"The problem in Pakistan is that we're not individuals," begins Frieha Altaf, "You're either married to somebody or somebody's daughter, somebody's wife or someone's son and you have to protect your family. I've noticed slowly that as you get older, you're freer to observe and call things out as they are."

In the case of her first guest, she reveals that all the stories Humayun Saeed spoke of during her interview were previously unheard.

"No one knew those stories and I wanted him to share them and needed to give him that confidence to tell the truth." She recalls that during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, artist and musician (and her son), Turhan James came up with the notion to create more digital work. "Turhan is now running the digital leg of our company," she says. It was Turhan who noticed that Frieha Altaf's experiences, activism needed a place to start within

casted/interviews. Maybe because so many exist that it almost creates cognitive dissonance and it also requires endless hours, which she doesn't have. "I'm not interested in people who don't tell the truth. I'm interested in people who will tell the truth and their stories, which will inspire others. But people are scared and obviously so because they believe they will be judged. Pakistan is one of the most judgmental nations I've ever come across."

So, if Karan Johar was a big NO, who was Frieha Altaf inspired by and she is very clear about that person is: Oprah Winfrey. "There is no one like her. The reason she is so amazing is because she is so honest. Her own story makes her relatable to people. She was allegedly raped at the age of 14 and how she had to bounce back and survive. She became one of the biggest entrepreneurs, being an African-American and being a woman. You become so oppressed even in a country like America." Oprah Winfrey's story inspires Frieha. "For her to make it was the story. It is inspiring to see how real she is, she will ask the hard questions. Even if Meghan Markle (and Prince Harry) want to talk, they will go to Oprah Winfrey first. In a speech where she was being given an award, she said that the truth sets you free. We, however, are a country of secrets."

In Frieha's views, she shame and punish people too much. She notes that we need to stop because every one of us is flawed. So, this judgmental attitude towards each other needs to be done away with.

"We need to understand what happens and why it happens and what is the journey? How do you change your mind? How do you go from A to Z? What I might've thought of when I was 25 and how I think now is completely different. So, it's very important to share that journey and inspire people and let people come forward, let people relate and let people feel." And that is what FWhy podcast will reflect.

What other talk shows or podcasts are doing is, Frieha admits, something she is ambivalent towards. In fact, all these morning shows, for instance, says Frieha, are cartoonish and she can't watch Pakistani morning shows. She's got that right. An artistic person who is inspired by art and collects it while trying to decipher what a piece of art is saying and the aesthetic of what the artist is Frieha has deliberately added that portion to her FWhy podcast in a nuanced manner. It will change with every episode. The idea is to expose those who view her podcast to art and allow them a chance to interpret it in their own way and maybe even get inspired by it. As for her other accomplishments, Frieha is the creative director of country's modern and consistent award ceremony, Lux Style Awards. It isn't

easy but she certainly has put a great deal of herself in it and does her best to ensure that the show moves with the times. When I probe her on the possibility of what the next LSA will reflect, Frieha confesses that while the show is delayed because of the devastating floods, what she can admit is this: "We're entering the third decade so it will be a different show. Data suggests that over 60 percent of the country is under the age of late twenties. Between 15 and 28. If we look at that, it's a huge amount of young people so the show has to be relatable to them."

Closing this part of the interview, as a person who has seen fashion represented through Carnival de Couture, something seems lacking in fashion weeks and is still not rivaled by the defunct showcase.

"Fashion has been dead for three years now. Everything goes online on Instagram or Facebook and people are selling online as well. Some names such as Hussain Rehar and Iqbal Hussain among others have emerged in the past few years," Frieha says. "But a lot of garbage does find space because they are able to get celebrities to model the clothes and then put them up on Instagram."

"However, it is not fashion. It is not curated or edited. The editorial has finished. Magazines those exist anymore. Fashion weeks have finished. And they were a place where you saw many collections that gave opportunity to young and older people to showcase their work and now there is no platform. "Those who can afford it will do their own shows. But the Karachi-Lahore divide between Maheem Khan and Seher Saigol was a big problem. I don't know but this decade old relationship divided the fashion weeks. I don't even know if it's Maheem's fault or whose fault it was but it did happen."

Frieha notes that Mumbai and Delhi in India have separate fashion weeks and there are fashion weeks happening in Miami but the ones that matter the most are London, Milan, Paris and New York. She describes how fashion weeks in Pakistan weren't getting the eyeballs they needed and even sponsors pulled out. "They felt like they weren't getting anything out of it. I'm lucky that I haven't taken sides and so I've been able to work with both fashion councils. I don't agree with the notion of two fashion weeks instead of one. But yeah, maybe this is the time for me to do something on my own where united fashion can come up." Frieha credits Lux Style Awards with respect to fashion. "Like you noted, Carnival de Couture was top of the line show. Content is always king and if you showcase s**t, it's going to become a shit show. If you're only going for A+, it will be a great

Of global triumphs and cross-cultural rom-coms

The last few months have shown that our artists and creatives have the ability to shine at an international level. Films like the upcoming What's Love Got to Do with It? will hopefully help continue that trend.



sults she would have hoped for, much to the dismay of her mother, Cath (Emma Thompson). When her neighbour, Kaz (Shazad Latif), decides to follow in his Pakistani parents' footsteps by opting for an arranged marriage, Zoe decides to film his journey, following her childhood friend from London to Lahore to marry a stranger - Sajal Aly's Zoya - chosen by his parents.

It's a joy to see Pakistani culture take centre stage in a foreign flick. Jemima Khan has described the project as "a celebration of all things Pakistani, [and] a love letter to my old friend Pakistan", and given the credentials of its filmmakers, the movie will hopefully take a respectful, insightful look into a very different approach to finding love.

Films like this will hopefully put a positive spotlight on our country and help our talent - both in front of and behind the camera - gain recognition and earn the chance to explore other international projects. 2022 has shown us that we have the ability to shine at a global scale. Here's to our creatives continuing to impress and making a mark, breaking barriers, and taking our entertainment industry to even greater heights in the months and years to come. Helmed by Indian director Shekhar Kapur and also starring the likes of Shabana Azmi, Asim Chaudhry, Jeff Mirza, and Mim Shaikh, What's Love Got to Do with It? is a StudioCanal presentation produced by Working Title Films in association with Instinct Productions and will be released in January 2023.



If you are passionate about Pakistani entertainment and have spent the longest time frustrated with the quality of our output and feeling like you're stuck in the timeline that's meant to cause you maximum disappointment, then you'll be relieved by the recent developments in Pakistani music and cinema. Turns out you were actually in the most rewarding of alternate universes after all, for Pakistan is having a spectacular moment in global entertainment and it's absolutely glorious.

Within a span of months, we have been blessed with our very first Grammy winner (Arooj Aftab), our first major superhero gracing the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Ms. Marvel), the global recognition of a local song ('Pasoori'), and the unprecedented success of the film Joyland that has earned critical appreciation at both the Cannes Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival.

We are on a roll! And it doesn't stop here. There's more on the horizon, including a British movie that pays homage to Pakistani culture. Penned by Jemima Khan and starring talent from both Britain and South Asia, the romantic comedy What's Love Got to Do with It? takes a cross-cultural look at love and is all set to arrive in cinemas early next year.

Its premiere at TIFF was well-received, and we can see why based on the trailer. The clip introduces us to Lily James's Zoe, a documentary filmmaker whose efforts to find love on dating apps haven't yielded the re-

Stressed, depressed, at least we have cake!

We know we just mixed up two of your fav graphic tee slogans slash Instagram stickers, but we haven't had dessert in a while, and that's all we can think about...



While dessert is not my favorite part of any meal (the part where someone puts a huge thing of braised or roasted red meat in front of me is my favorite part), there are times you have to have to have to have dessert. Just a little meetha to tide you over. However, the odd Snickers bar doesn't cut it anymore. Sometimes all one needs is a dessert, just prepared by someone for them.

You won't be surprised to know I have a lot of opinions on dessert served or sold in Karachi. Here are some things I haven't stopped thinking about in a few days: Firstly, the kheer and rabri at Delhi Rabri House. It is always fantastic, always rich and sweet, and nostalgia might be the motivation here, but no one quite does it like them. For good measure they have everything from rabri ice cream to kulfi so the days you feel that hankering for thanda, meetha something but don't quite know what, this is your spot.

Then, to further this nostalgic desserts theme, the one that always comes up is Shama's/Nando's malt cake. While I respect both popular opinion and the cake, have you guys had Shama's lemon chiffon cake? It is super, super, super delicious, specially if you don't love really sweet desserts. The one that has held my heart for a couple of months now is the Eton mess at Cote Rotie.

It looks and sounds like it should be awful, but just... strawberries, and meringue, and whipped cream. It's literally a just-ingredients, non-actual-food concoction that shouldn't be good, but is. Here's one everyone can have, no matter where they are in Pakistan: Subway cookies. Chocolate chip cookies are a step above candy bars, and a step below dessert you'll have to eat on a plate or container. They make me miss the original Espresso cookie, but to

