

Prasun: Okay, today on singer song writer routines, I have Aireene Espiritu. Did I say that right?

Aireene: Yes.

Prasun: She's got an amazing story and we're gonna hear about it today. How about we start with introductions. How did you get to be a song writer?

Aireene: Well, actually, it was right after college I was hanging out at this café, the Owl and Monkey Café in San Francisco in the Inner Sunset and I happened to come upon open mic night. I had no idea what open mic was. So I just hung around and I was just hooked and I was amazed. All these amazing song writers of all different levels.

But what actually captured me the most was those who, not necessarily have a great voice or great song writing songs, but just they just sang their heart out and I just thought, wow. It didn't really matter. You could just feel where the song was coming from and it was about their feeling.

So, I thought, "Hey, I want to do that." I just kept coming back and going back, and going back, and going back and I was inspired by it. That's how it all started.

Prasun: Wow. So did you have previous music experience?

Aireene: No. Just I grew up with my uncles playing in the living room and every holiday we'd all get together and the two guitars, my uncles, they play guitar and they just play Filipino folk songs and sometimes old pop music songs on the guitar and everybody would sing.

I didn't really. I would just kind of hide in the corner and listen and laugh. We had a good time. Every Christmas we used to do that. I just grew up ... and my uncles always played the records. That's what I grew up with. I always loved music. I took a guitar lesson in college.

My first instrument was the flute in fifth grade. And I love the flute, but when we moved from New Jersey to Yonkers, there wasn't any flute teachers so I stopped and I was really bummed about that because I really loved playing the flute.

Prasun: So, the music started young with the flute, but did you think that this would be like a career, this what you would do?

Aireene: Oh no.

Prasun: How did that happen? What was that transition?

Aireene: I just did it for fun. I never thought that it would be a full time thing because I thought I would never live sustainably as a songwriter musician. I just kind of did it on the side and I played in cafes or I would play with other bands as a backup singer.

Then I took a break for a while, for a long time. I still sang at other people's bands, and I sang for the Glide ensemble in San Francisco, this gospel choir, if you haven't heard of them. So I did that. But never ... I stopped writing my own stuff until I met this one guy and he was an amazing song writer and we did a duo together. He inspired me to write songs again.

And we were also a couple. We did that for five years. And then we broke up and we were moving out of our place and I got laid off. Three things, three top stresses of life happening within a span of three months.

Prasun: Wow.

Aireene: Then I said, "You know what? I don't really feel like looking for another job and I can't afford to get a new place," and so I just said, I want some ... I put my stuff in storage and I said, "I'm just gonna rebuild my music as a solo artist and I started writing some more and I'm just gonna play until I can't play anymore. That's how I stumbled upon doing it.

Now, eight years later, this is my eighth year. I still don't have a place. I have a mailing address and somehow I'm still doing it. Whenever I worry, whenever I stress, "Where am I gonna stay?" Or, "Where am I gonna get ... How am I gonna pay my bills?" I don't have to worry mortgage or rent, but like all the other stuff. Something always comes along every single time, so I know that I'm gonna be okay.

I don't know how long, I'm still at it for eight years.

Prasun: That's amazing. That's the universe is telling you something there.

Aireene: Yes. Exactly. It's been long enough that I know I'm gonna be okay.

Prasun: Yes. That's fantastic. Maybe a little diversion here, no place. You sort of find, I feel, kind of embraced this thing about minimalism.

Aireene: Yes.

Prasun: Tell me more about that. How did you ... Most people crave either buy a house, and the bigger house, and the nicer car, and you said, "Forget it all," eight years ago.

Aireene: I've already was living as a minimalist, because I moved from a one bedroom to a tiny little cottage. I already had to get rid of two thirds of my stuff. I was already living on minimal stuff. But that's now in storage and so I just have my instruments and I have a little kitchen equipment, my little portable kitchen that I take with me. My clothes, like a one suitcase and some camping stuff and that's it.

Prasun: Wow.

Aireene: I mean, I still ... It's still a struggle because it's like, "Oh, it would be nice if I had this or it would be nice if I had that." So it's always a revolving.

Prasun: Yep. The ups and downs of it?

Aireene: Yeah, yeah.

Prasun: That's amazing. I can't imagine letting go of, I have too many guitars.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: For example. I can't imagine.

Aireene: How many guitars do you have?

Prasun: Oh gosh, I haven't been using them, but I think I still have 10.

Aireene: Wow.

Prasun: Yeah. And who can humanly play 10 guitars at a time?

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: Just something definitely went wrong there.

Aireene: I bet they each have their own personality.

Prasun: They do. They do have their style and their personality, but I've been slowly letting go.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: And holding onto a couple that's my dream, just to hold onto maybe one electric and one acoustic.

Aireene: That's not gonna happen.

Prasun: Yeah. We'll see. Tell me how your day goes. This sites about the routines, right? How do you ... What does like a normal day look like for you?

Aireene: Every day is different. I meditate every morning, or I try to every morning, and I write. Every morning I have to write, and if I don't write it, I fell a little bit off. It's just ... it's not necessarily song writing, it's just a morning brain dump. You just kind of write whatever's on your mind.

And then, I try to schedule some time to book gigs and it's overwhelming because there's venues that you're following up with and you're always searching for new venues, then you're always ... and wherever you are, you're trying to figure out how to connect the dots if you're doing a tour. Some people don't get back to you until this date, and then sometimes it doesn't coincide with where you're gonna be, so you have to go do a circuitous route.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: It's always, and it's always you have to be in a certain mindset and sometimes I don't want to get in that zone. Sometimes I put it off. But I really try, and to be honest right now, I'm a bit tired of it so I'm taking a long break.

Prasun: Fantastic. Yeah.

Aireene: It's been a few months and I kind of came upon a new project, actually, called a Color Coded Symphony and it's kind of my way with dealing with racism. What it is, is it's a park concert in the dark where we play familiar and unfamiliar songs. Like I had my friends play Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star and Tagalog, Hindi, and Dutch, and Russian. It's like going from familiar to unfamiliar and then we play some other sounds.

Then we turn the lights on and the audience as they walk in, they fill out an ethnic origin card so when the lights turn on, we play. We have a featured artist from a country. The first time we did it was in the Philippines. Then we pull from the ethnic origin card and we play 30 seconds of a rhythm of that country or region.

After the 30 seconds the whole band performs and improvised piece inspired by those 30 seconds.

Prasun: Oh wow.

Aireene: Anyway, so the idea is to kind of get ... encourage curiosity about other cultures, and I want to take it to ... We premiered it at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum last September. Now, I'm working on that's my focus now, part of why I haven't really been booking a lot of shows.

I want to get grants to areas that aren't so exposed to diversity. It's overwhelming. There's so much to learn. Anyway, that's my focus right now. I diverged from your original question. What do I do with my day to day. It's different every day sometimes.

Prasun: Well, you're telling me what you're doing currently so that's important. Writing every day, when did that start?

Aireene: Gosh, I don't remember to be honest. I really don't remember.

Prasun: So, tell me what was the job you quit? What was the job you left eight years ago?

Aireene: Last job, I've done many different jobs. The last job I did was for this wonderful, small little production company, media production, they did ... Half the company does documentary films, and the other half did like corporate training videos and so, there are probably like six of us total. We worked out of their home in their attic.

I'm still in touch with them. They're really cool people. I was there for I think, god, I don't even remember. Maybe at least five, seven years. It was like the little family,

really, really sweet deal. And then they had a budget cut from their biggest client and so they had to lay a couple of us off.

That was my last job.

Prasun: Okay. So it was somewhat related to the arts. I was wondering if you went for something completely ...

Aireene: Different?

Prasun: Different to arts all together.

Aireene: Well, before that I mean, I worked in different industries. Like before that I worked for education before that and then I worked as a contractor for ... I worked for a greeting card company. Then I did some contract for Wells Fargo dealing with their online banking, online bill pay project.

Prasun: Okay.

Aireene: So just like I dabbled in different things. I didn't really have one skillset, I guess.

Prasun: Maybe that is ... I feel like that's like some characteristic of a creative person, right? It's kind of hard to just be in ... I don't know whether it's admire people or wondering like how someone can be so focused in the same career for like 50 years of your life. You know?

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: Someone where I work just retired a few weeks ago. 46 years, started doing the same thing and that's like absolutely brilliant, but I can't imagine myself doing that for 46 years.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: Let's go back to the song writing. Do you sit down, do you have a focused agenda and say, "Hey, I wanna write 10 songs by XYZ date and I wanna start putting them in front of people by another date? Or is it just organic?"

Aireene: No. No.

Prasun: Okay.

Aireene: It's organic and sometimes that can be frustrating because it takes forever for me to finish a song. And maybe because I can't focus, but an idea will come and then I'll focus on it but then I'll get stuck and then I'll get frustrated and it'll go away. Then something else will come on.

Sometimes they just end up in the closet for like eight years and then something will trigger it and then I say, "Okay, now it's ready to be finished and then I feel like it's up to the song when it's gonna be done, like I have no control.

But sometimes I think that's BS 'cause other people can dish out a song in ... five songs in one week. And I'm always amazed at how they do that.

Prasun: Yeah. I mean ...

Aireene: So maybe it's just a matter of focusing on it and I just don't have it.

Prasun: I think it depends on person to person. Someone that I interviewed, maybe it's couple interviews ago, all we talked about was mindsets right there in the interview and growth and she had these 15 mindsets that she believes in and one of them, excuse my french, was I think ass to the chair. Literally just sit down and get it done.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: Don't leave till ... even if it's a crappy first draft, you have to get it done. I think that works for some people and it doesn't for others. I talked so someone else and he believes in just ... If he starts he's just gonna sit all the way through and finish something, which is amazing, 'cause for me I get verse, I might get a chorus. I have pages and pages of verses that don't connect to each other and I'm hoping someday it'll all just connect.

I don't think there's a right or wrong way to do this.

Aireene: Yeah. I think you're right. It's about each individual personality.

Prasun: Perhaps if ... I think last year I was at ASCAP the expo and there was this guy, Ashley Gorly and I think he has like some ridiculous number of 35 number one hits or something.

Aireene: Really? Wow.

Prasun: Yeah, yeah. It's ridiculous. He's just like pushing them out but a lot of it is like bro country kind of stuff.

Aireene: Bro country?

Prasun: Yeah, yeah. This is a term I just learned. I didn't know that.

Aireene: I've never heard of it before.

Prasun: Yeah. But he's got 35. And you know, these guys have insane numbers. They write 200 songs a year and maybe they'll convert five and if they do five that's amazing. That's an amazing number.

Going back to bro country, I talked to someone else from Nashville, and they were talking about that's where the money's at. If you're looking for money, and we kind of sort of got into that gender thing. Seems like bro country sells and men and women can write for a country ... a male country artist, but it seems like a female country artist has to sort of write by herself or get it from another female artist, or writer. It's just really weird dynamic.

I haven't figured it out yet.

Aireene: Yeah, that is weird, isn't it?

Prasun: But, since we're on the topic genres, so you're ... where would you put yourself? Americana folk?

Aireene: You know, I say Americana, but I think Americana has gotten so many different ... it's like a big umbrella now.

Prasun: Yeah, yeah.

Aireene: It's like a mix of everything. So now, because it's such a mix of a lot of things, it's almost confusing. To me I think. Maybe it's just my perception of it.

Prasun: No, no. That's exactly what you're saying.

Aireene: Yeah. And so, but I would say it's more folky, it's a little bit of folky and rootsy and gospely blues. That's where I would say, 'cause some of it is folk, some of it is blusey, some of it ... There's a little bit of gospel in there.

Prasun: Yep.

Aireene: Then my latest project is under this nonprofit called Little Village Foundation. I don't know if you've heard of them.

Prasun: I haven't.

Aireene: It's run by ... It's started by this guy name Jim Pugh and he used to be Robert Cray band's keyboardist.

Prasun: Okay.

Aireene: I think he stopped working for Robert Cray maybe in 2014 or 2003 and he said, "What am I gonna do now?" And so he kind of stepped back and he said, I wanna give back. So he started this nonprofit label, and he goes around and he looks for artists that he believes should be heard by a wider audience.

Prasun: Oh wow.

Aireene: And heard me play at this folk conference, folk alliance.

Prasun: Yeah. I just heard about that.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: I feel like I'm so behind.

Aireene: It's okay, there's so many. But this was the western region, far west. And I was just playing in this, one of the hotel rooms with my ukulele, and so he asked me, you know, "Can I record you?" And he says, "What do you think about recording ... doing a tribute to Sugar Pie De Santo?" This R n' B artist from the 50s.

So, the label pays for all the recording, all the printing, and the press, and we got to play several festivals and other venues. All the money goes to the artists. All the sales goes to the artists. So, we did this tribute to Sugar Pie and it kind of organically grew.

We were just sitting around taking a break from the recording sessions, and I said, "I had just started recording, looking for people who record who play in their folk music in their back yards. And I said, listen to my uncles are playing Filipino folk songs.

And I just recorded my uncles and he said, "Why don't you record ... Let's put your uncles on the record." So, I got my uncles and they'd never recorded in a studio before they've never played outside our living room. And we got ... it was like the most amazing experience. My uncle's in the studio. So, they're in the album too and they sang, we all sang a Filipino folk song and that was just the coolest thing.

So, it's a combination tribute to Sugar Pie and some Filipino folk songs and I added another American folk song in there. Anyway, he records us, I forget where I was going with this.

Prasun: Oh, in genre.

Aireene: Oh, genre. Yes, yes, yes. So anyways. Now, I've got this kind of expanded this whole thing of what I do. Now, I get to do some old R n' B stuff. Which is a complete blast. I got to play with these amazing artists and so it's really ... It's been an amazing journey after playing ... We released the album in 2016. And so now, it's kind of like, if sometimes I play solo and I play all this original stuff and now I'm incorporating other things too and so it's kind of broadened the venues that I play.

Sometimes I play solo, sometimes I play with my band, the Itch. I mean, Aireene and the Itch. Sometimes I play with The Little Village Band per se. It's been really cool.

Prasun: Yeah, I agree with you. America is such an umbrella term. Again, it's some other conference someone was asking, again I forget the artists. They're pretty big. And the guy was like Americana's everything like you know, blues, jazz, roots. He's like, except for country, which is pop country with a twang.

Aireene: Oh, so you didn't include pop country in there?

Prasun: Yeah, yeah, yeah. You can tell there's this animosity with what is modern country I guess.

Aireene: Interesting.

Prasun: Which is just pop with a twang.

Aireene: Interesting. What kind of music do you play?

Prasun: I feel like I'm under the same umbrella. I love folk stuff like Avett Brothers and Mandolin Orange. I don't know if you've heard of them.

Aireene: Yes I have. Yeah.

Prasun: That's where my frequency goes. I was really excited when I looked you up and I'm like, "This is beautiful," because I feel like this a genre which is ... I don't know if this is the right thing to say, underrepresented by minorities?

Aireene: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Prasun: It's kind of like ...

Aireene: It's true.

Prasun: Let's be honest. If someone comes to your concert, they're not expecting you to sing the things you were singing. Right?

Aireene: Yes.

Prasun: Right?

Aireene: Yes, exactly.

Prasun: It is a little bit of uh, little mind. I see that I'm sometimes playing stuff ... That's why I was really curious as to how you got into it.

In your concerts are you doing Tagalog and English, or is it just-

Aireene: It's mostly English, sometimes I'll pull in a Tagalog and sometimes when I'll play ... It's amazing to me sometimes when I play, I mean, I don't have a lot of Tagalog songs, but when I play this one song, called Arosna, people keep bringing it up, people who don't even understand the language and I'm surprised because I didn't expect them to really like it, but I guess they appreciated it and I guess maybe they can feel the music, even though they don't understand the words.

Maybe that's what it's about, just ... I guess we listen to different styles of music. We may not understand ... Brazilian music is so gorgeous. I have no idea what it means, but it's beautiful. Anyway, yeah. But I would like to learn more songs in Tagalog.

Prasun: So, I guess I'm trying to figure out how to ask this question. There's a pretty big Filipino community in the Bay area. Do you see Filipinos coming to your concert? Are you marketing towards them so to speak, or is someone else taking care of that for you?

Aireene: Oh, I do everything, except for things that are related to The Little Village. I've played for Filipino community groups before and they ... and sometimes I wonder if they'll like my music. I'm sure you go through that too.

When I play the Sugar Pie stuff, everybody loved it. When I play my original stuff, I don't think it's ... at least my experience, I don't think it's the kind of music they like to listen to usually. But sometimes I wonder maybe I'm just not putting myself out there enough.

Prasun: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aireene: You know what I mean? Most of the people that I know that are Filipinos, don't really listen to Americana.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: But maybe these are just my friends. Maybe there is a market out there, but there's also those who like to support our fellow Filipinos regardless of what you play. Yeah, I haven't really explored it too much.

Prasun: Yeah, I was just interested 'cause-

Aireene: I would like to.

Prasun: Yeah, it might be worth it to see if ... I'd be curious if you found yourself in a, like a Filipino event. If you market yourself, I'd love to hear what your results are.

Aireene: Yeah. What about your experience?

Prasun: Me? So, I don't market myself. I would say I may, I don't know what to call it, like a musician in hiding. Whenever I get an opportunity to play, I will play. I play with a couple of guys at a coffee shop. We have like a coffee shop gig once a month. But, I still haven't actively ...

I think haven't left my day job and started to focus enough on this. It's happening, but it's a slow, slow process.

Aireene: But do you see your audience in ...

Prasun: I don't ... At least I don't imagine a lot of Indian people showing up to like a folk Americana thing. I think that would be a very small crowd.

Aireene: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Prasun: I am gonna interview someone at the end of the month, his name's Aki Kumar.

Aireene: Oh yeah, he's also in the Little Village. Yeah.

Prasun: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's like, here's a guy who's Indian who's like ... He's singing Bollywood songs and somehow he fell in love with the blues and jazz, right? Like how did this happen?

Aireene: Yeah. Yeah.

Prasun: It seems like there's a few of us that sort of like, I don't know, mixed things up. But what I'm curious is, how you build an audience with almost ... It's like you have two different audiences. How do you get them together? Where are those people or are they all musicians as well?

Aireene: That's a good question.

Prasun: I'm still trying to figure out the right question to ask. When you write your original material, do you have like a set group of people that you go to for critiques or-

Aireene: No.

Prasun: So how do, or is it like you don't care? I'm just gonna write what I'm writing and it is what it is.

Aireene: Yes.

Prasun: I love it.

Aireene: There was one time when my last ... The album before Little Village, I put together like a full album and my producer, his name is Ed Tree, there's one song. He says, "You know, this doesn't sound finished."

But sometimes I get impatient and like, "Just put it in there." But what was great was like, "No. Doesn't feel." So in that sense, I'm like, "Well, okay." So I stayed up all night to finish it 'cause I was on a time schedule and I finished that it ... And it was really good advice.

Most of the time I just do it on my own.

Prasun: Okay.

Aireene: 'Cause I think, I don't know. I'm sure there are people that can give good advice, but I think it's all subjective.

Prasun: It is. I mean, it's like, are you trying to sell? Are you trying to make a number one hit on some chart, right?

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: Or something else.

Aireene: Not to say that I don't. If people say, "You know, I really want ..." I'm open to receiving feedback if they hear something. I'm always welcome to that. But it's up to us to pick and choose what feels right to incorporate.

Normally I don't ... during the process I just do it on my own.

Prasun: But I think you also mentioned earlier, as an artist, sometimes when you're performing, sometimes you're not feel the vibe from the crowd, right?

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: So, you are gauging. You are getting some feedback internally.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: When you get that, do you process it and then you can go back and think, "I wonder why the energy wasn't there?" Or ...

Aireene: I don't really ... I guess I have. But, it's really hard to tell because sometimes it's just whatever ... Maybe it's my mood that I presented it that nobody ... Sometimes I'll play something and I thought it was crap and then somebody, like just one person will come and say, "Thank you for that song."

Or sometimes, I'll think a song is crap and everyone thinks it's like the most requested song. I just ... I try not to over analyze what the audiences reactions are, 'cause you just don't know.

Prasun: Yeah. I think it's hard. I've heard everything. People using their children, if they're trying to sell to that audience.

Aireene: Oh, interesting.

Prasun: Yeah, yeah. Then there are people who have a said trusted source to go to to get critiqued. Other song writers. I think this was a big thing in Nashville. The co-writes and ...

Aireene: Oh yeah.

Prasun: Talking about co-writes, do you collaborate with someone or are you mostly solo?

Aireene: I have, just as an exercise. I try to do it. But because it's hard for me to finish, it's really hard for me to ... But I have done it before. I was at some kind of song writer kind of retreat, residents kind of thing. A friend of mine invites seven of her songwriting friends, and we just for seven days, we just write all day during the day or hike or whatever and then in the evening we'll share what we've been working on.

You don't have to finish it, just share. This other woman, my friend Rita, she's like, "Let's write together. Let's write this song." And I kind of hesitatingly, "Okay." And we did and we were able to finish the song, mostly because she was very focused. This is what it's gonna be and that's ... So, we finished it because of her ability to focus and finish the song and she's been doing it for a longer time than me, so she was able to really hone it down.

Whereas, if I were to do it by myself, it probably ... My direction would probably ...

Prasun: I think finishing is definitely a skill.

Aireene: Yes.

Prasun: Right? Something I'm working on. Trying to close off on things I start. I'm definitely a starter and not such a great finisher.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: Let's talk about challenges. What are some challenges you're facing as a songwriter musician today?

Aireene: The challenges is really is being overwhelmed with so many tasks that you do by yourself. It's running a business. You have to deal with the marketing, you have to deal with booking your show. And they're all full time jobs. Taking care of yourself and making sure you take breaks and just have a mental break.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: And trying to manage exhaustion, because it's exhausting. I make sure I have a lot of alone time because it's putting yourself out there and it's just ... I'm already overwhelmed just telling you it's overwhelming.

It's managing the business, is the hardest thing I think. Of course, thinking of ways to sustain financially and to live. That's the hardest part. It's always the puzzle. You know how to survive doing this. I probably won't be doing this forever. I can't. It's exhausting just driving from place to place, packing, unpacking, and all that stuff.

Prasun: Wow. But you've done it for eight years now, right?

Aireene: Yeah. Yeah. But I'm starting to think, "Well, it would be nice to have a place, like a sanctuary." I'm actually just starting to think about this recently. It would be nice to have a place, a sanctuary for me. Like when I'm done on the road. I just wanna go there and have my place and my place only and with my things.

I don't know how I'm gonna do it.

Prasun: I love it. Joshua Tree.

Aireene: Yeah. Joshua Tree?

Prasun: Yeah. A few years ago I went over there and it's just beautiful and I just ended up buying some dirt.

Aireene: Oh really?

Prasun: There's nothing on it yet. But, there's some dirt.

Aireene: Nice. Joshua's Tree's great.

Prasun: It's absolutely beautiful. That is definitely overwhelming. How about like for performances and stuff? I guess that's part of it, right? Trying to find the gigs and lining it up.

Aireene: Yeah. And also, it's easiest when I just play by myself, but if I have a band. And every venue is different. I have to coordinate set lists and who can come, and who can do it? Do we need to rehearse? Luckily, some musician ... And of course, I have to pay them and luckily some musicians, you just give them charts and of course, I have to write charts and it's just coordinating everything but the performance. Yeah.

Prasun: What did your family think when you made this change? I'm just curious to know.

Aireene: You know, naturally, of course, they're gonna worry. But, they've always been supportive. They've never said, "What are you doing?" They've always said, "Okay." But I'm sure they worry inside.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: But they've never discouraged it. It's always been ... Whenever at all the significant shows I've had, they've all been there. And you know, I have a Filipino family, it's pretty big.

Prasun: But pretty strong I've noticed.

Aireene: Yeah, yeah. So, I've been really lucky and grateful. But, they're very, very supportive.

Prasun: That's fantastic. I think that's really important, right?

Aireene: It really is. Yeah.

Prasun: 'Cause I feel like, as a minority, there's some expectation of what you should be career wise or as an adult.

Aireene: Yes.

Prasun: And you know me, that's like, "Oh no, what did he do wrong?"

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: So, I'm always curious when people make that move. It's like, "Wait, so what does your family think about this?"

Aireene: Fortunately, yeah. Fortunately, they've never said, don't do it. It's always been. It's funny, you know, the first year that I started doing this solo on my own, there was like two freak out moments, like, "What am I doing?" But I woke up one morning with keys in my hand. It was my big aha moment. Like, "I'm never gonna be homeless. I'm gonna be okay, 'cause I have all these keys where I can go."

Which was amazing.

Prasun: Let's talk about that aha moment, 'cause this is what I'm trying to understand from people who made that transition from, I don't know what else to call it, but conforming and being normal, so to speak versus not normal. A musician.

I know you said you had these incidents happen to you and they all happened within a three-month span, but what was that moment like you're like, "You know, I'm just gonna do this. Let's see where it goes." Did you say, "I'm just gonna try it for a few days, six months, come back to it."

What was that mind-

Aireene: I feel like I didn't have any other choice.

Prasun: Okay.

Aireene: I feel like, "Well, I'm not ready to look for another job. My mind is not there and I can't get a new place. So basically what happened was I put my stuff in storage and I went to my mom's in Vegas and I'm like, "What am I gonna do now? I don't have a job and place." And my mom said, "I'm gonna go visit your grandma in the Philippines. Do you wanna come?"

I said, "Sure." And I said, "Well, I'm gonna be in the Philippines anyway, I may as well explore southeast Asia." Saw my family in Philippines and I went to ... I had a friend in Bangkok, so I saw her in Bangkok and then I did some traveling on my own. Then went

to Cambodia and it was during that trip by myself from Thailand and Cambodia, I said, "You know what? I'm gonna start rebuilding my music and just see where it goes."

I wasn't really looking towards the future, I was just saying, "What am I gonna do now?" I built my website on my little laptop while I was pouring hard outside in this little hut. Built my website and I booked like a cross country tour, basically contacting all my friends that I haven't seen in ages who have moved all over the country. And I said, "Look, you know I wanna do this cross country tour. Can I stay with you?"

And I haven't seen them in ages, so it was like, kill two birds with one stone. Play and visit friends I haven't seen in a long time. It was amazing. It was also good exercise for me because I haven't played solo in a while. I was always part of this duo and I was always just the shy one. I was too shy to talk to people and I just let him do all the talking and it was great.

But now I had to force myself. My survival to do things on my own and so yeah, that's how ... I just said, I'm just gonna do this and then I just kept going and going and going and then here we are.

Prasun: Wow. One step at a time.

Aireene: Yeah, it was one step at a time. I didn't have a mindset of, "I'm gonna do it in this certain time." I just said, just gonna do this now and see where it goes.

Prasun: Yeah, and actually do it.

Aireene: Yeah. And I think it took me getting laid off of my job and moving out of my place and ending this relationship to really ... The worst thing that happened to me became the best thing.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: Because, I thought, "I can't do this full time. How am I gonna pay the bills, and how am I gonna ... "

Prasun: There's something about storytelling, there's always this inciting incident, right? Something that kicks off the story, right?

Aireene: Yes.

Prasun: I think that's what you're describing here.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: Was it always this yearning inside of you that you knew that the music was important and you weren't paying attention to it?

Aireene: It was ... Yes. When I took a break from writing my own stuff, and when I started doing it again, I thought, how could I let it go? I'm never gonna let that happen again. It was like, "This is mine. I'm not ... " It's like a baby. You don't wanna ... You're not gonna let anything happen to it. It's like you're defending it and protecting it.

Yeah, it's never gonna go away.

Prasun: Yeah. I think you're describing that you found your calling, right? And you pursued it, which is fantastic. What advice would you have for someone who's maybe where you were eight years ago, kind of sort of wondering whether they should take the step.

What would you tell them to do? What would you ask them to do if they came to you asking for advice?

Aireene: Just believe in yourself.

Prasun: Yeah?

Aireene: Believe in yourself and do it. You only live once and just do it. My last job, I always joke around with my boss, one of my bosses. Amazing Dan and Dana. I don't know how we came upon this thing, but we're like, "Just eat the fucking cookie."

Prasun: I love it.

Aireene: My advice is, just eat the fucking cookie.

Prasun: I love it. I love it. Okay. Oh my gosh. Okay. I'm gonna have to use that. I'm gonna totally steal that line.

I agree. There's definitely a lot of resistance to eat the cookie. I guess, it would be great if you even blogged about your daily experiences. It would be great to read that. I think a lot of people don't know what it's going to be like day to day. And it's not easy, right?

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: No one said it was easy, right? And maybe that's it. Maybe there's ... it's easier not to eat the cookie and just relax.

Aireene: It's true. And it's also a lifestyle. Not everybody. I don't even think about it. But I guess, you have to really be, I guess, okay with not having to have a home or you have to give up a lot of stuff.

You have to give up a social life sometimes.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: It's being okay with that and being okay with carrying your luggage from A to B all the time. Not being your familiar surroundings all the time. I wake up grateful every day. I mean, really the thing about traveling so much and living in different places, sometimes under other people's roofs, is that you really appreciate the little things.

I appreciate every day that there's a roof over my head. I have more ... I feel bad for the people that are homeless and I'm grateful for my friends, even though I don't get to see them regularly. I just wake up grateful. And if I die tomorrow, it's okay. I feel like I've done everything I wanted to do.

Prasun: You've written a fantastic story, I think. Oh my gosh. There's so much in what you just said. I'm trying to digest and trying to ...

Aireene: How did you get to do this? How did you start at doing this?

Prasun: This thing? The songwriting thing?

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: I just said screw it, I'm doing something. I think I've always had this entrepreneurial kind of streak, kind of like want to do something different. Keeping day job, doing well in that, but knowing that there's a lot more to life and you know, I'm sure a few people who listen to this will probably be mad at me, but, I didn't want to live the same story.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: That everybody else is living, where I go to school, go to college, graduate, get married, have kids, have a dog, have a house, have a car, have a mortgage, have a job, and then die.

Aireene: Right?

Prasun: I didn't want that to be my story. I'm reading this book, and I cannot remember the title of it, but, he's talking about writing stories, and he's talking about your life being the story and that has really affected me, so every morning I get up and, "What is today's story," right?

I am going to make today memorable.

Aireene: Wow.

Prasun: But, as I started doing that, I started doing everything with a Silicon Valley type of mindset. I'm like, "How am I gonna monetize this?" If I'm gonna put all this effort into this, how am I gonna, six months from now, how am I gonna say, "This is what I did, and this is how I'm gonna take a lot out of it."

That mindset, I think was ruining everything. It was the wrong place to start from. Everyone says, "Okay, maybe you shouldn't be doing this labor of love projects or passion projects," as some people call it. And this is what this is. I'm going out there and listening to people's stories and putting it out there and I'm getting to hopefully expose people to other artists they've never heard or music they've never heard.

I'm just enjoying it and I did not see a dollar number attached to it at the end of it. I am completely okay with that.

Aireene: That's great you get to collect all these stories.

Prasun: So that's what this has been. But what you were talking about is, there's so much depth there. There's ... It's not easy. It's a lifestyle, but you've become used to it. Most people will never get used to it.

I talked to this Columbian, actually, she's Californian, he's Columbian, and they met in Argentina. Another crazy story. But they're based out of San Jose now. But they were making it big in Columbia. But they would go to parties and talk to people and they would turn around and someone would say, "What do you do for a living?" And they'd say, "We're musicians, we're song writers."

They're like, "No, no. What do you do for a living?"

And that's since you talk about being grateful, we live in a country where it's okay to say we are musicians or songwriters, and that's an accepted thing. Anywhere else in the world, people are like, "Oh, okay. No, no. She has no career, or he has no career."

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: "They're just screwing around," or something.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: I am grateful for that, for being in a place where the arts is still sort of looked at as a viable thing maybe. Tough but viable. But, it slipped my mind. I'm sure when I listen to this again I'll remember.

You said being grateful and earlier you said meditation. What other practices do you have to sustain your energy and your mindset?

Aireene: I make time alone a lot because it takes so much energy to first of all put yourself out there and all the things that you do to book gigs. Then you perform, and then you have to meet with the people afterwards and all that takes a lot of energy and I'm exhausted at the end of the day.

I make sure I make have a lot of time to myself. I think that's part of also giving up, making time for friends and family sometimes. I'm trying to be better at it, but it's still hard when you just want to just sit there and stare at the wall.

Prasun: Yeah, totally.

Aireene: But yeah.

Prasun: I agree. I think that's the tough part of ... you can maybe as a term, well you kind of look at it like you were saying, as a business. Sometimes growing that business means giving up a lot of things, right?

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: I think people are not really good at that just yet.

Aireene: Here's a funny story I like to tell. During the first year that I was on the road, I had two freak out moments and the both same scenario. I'm at a grocery store and I'm next in line and I'm watching the person in front of me and for like five minutes I'll start to freak out. What the hell am I doing?

They get to go home in their own kitchen, cooking in their own pots and pans. But it would only last like a few minutes because I would think, "Well, you still wouldn't want to live any other way." After the second time I thought, "I can't keep freaking out like this." So I got a little tub and I put all of my essentials in there and I got my own hand blender. I got my own spices and all the things that I cook with.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: So anywhere I go I've got my kitchen and I haven't freaked out since.

Prasun: I love it. I love it. You have a portable kitchen.

Aireene: Basically, home is wherever I am.

Prasun: Yeah. So, you're staying put right now, but what's your usual look like? Are you constantly on the move and going from gig to gig?

Aireene: It varies. It varies and you know, I also house sit sometimes. I found that my current demographic is from maybe 40s all the way up to 60s. A lot of them in the 60s are retired. This is how it all started. And it just kept going. Those who are retired and love to travel, would you wanna house sit?

'Cause I play a lot of house concerts.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aireene: They're the ones that ... Doing house concerts is more sustainable, I think, 'cause all the money goes towards the artist. They bring their own audience. So they started traveling, people there starting to retire and so, I started house sitting. Sometimes, whenever they plan on traveling, they call on me, "Hey, do you wanna house sit?" So then I'll book shows around that area.

Prasun: That's beautiful.

Aireene: Yeah. So it's like a combination of house concerts, and house sitting, and I get one free night because I have a Marriott credit card. I get one free night to stay at a Marriott.

Prasun: Sweet.

Aireene: Yeah.

Prasun: I love it. I love that you've actually gone and just done it and built something. Thank you so much for taking the time and talking to me.

Aireene: Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Prasun: This is super exciting. Are you playing anytime soon?

Aireene: No, not at the moment.

Prasun: Okay. Okay.

Aireene: Yeah. Yeah.

Prasun: I'll keep track for your schedule-

Aireene: Okay.

Prasun: And try to come out and see you.

Aireene: Sounds good. Thank you.

Prasun: Thank you so much.

Aireene: Thank you.