

Prasun: Okay, today's on songwriting routines, I have Aki Kumar from San Jose.

Aki Kumar: And Shere khan

Prasun: And Shere khan his cat. We're sitting in his living room, and we're gonna talk about some music. Usually we start the show with just introductions. How about you tell me how you got into this and what you're doing today?

Aki Kumar: Well, how much time we-

Prasun: We got lots of time.

Aki Kumar: We got? Alright. I got into this, you know we were just talking about this. I moved out here to a combination of tremendous luck, and a lot of back breaking work by my parents, and a lot of generosity from my brother and uncle, a big family effort to get me the heck out of India, and that was with the intention of me coming to the U.S. and getting some sort of a degree in software engineering because this was the late 90s and this software's thing was just booming, and I was starting to show some kind of positive kind of ... it appealed to me. I felt like I was a natural fit for that kind of a thing.

I moved out here, got a degree, worked in high tech, and the whole time while that was going on I was listening to 50s and 60s r&b, and roll and roll, and Beatles, and Chuck Berry, and all kinds of stuff from that time. I don't know why it was just something I discovered and thought this is cool, and I wanna listen to this and that's that, so, that was going on. In my early 20s I got together with a bunch of guys at work. I was working at the Dolby in down town San Jose, and these guys weren't that old, they were in their 40s or 50s, and they were just a bunch of classic rockers, and they wanted to get together once in one of the conference rooms and jam, and that's, and I picked up the harmonica to play and like literally the first song I played with them was Love me do, and you know, that's, "Pa pa para pap." That part.

Those guys kinda hit me to, "Hey, there's Brit rock that happened in the 60s, you should check it out." With Clapton and cream, that cool stuff. I looked into that, and from there I discovered Muddy Waters and all that cool stuff, and, while all of that stuff was going on, I said well this harmonica thing has started to look like an interesting musical adventure.

I sought out a teacher here, his name is David Barrett, and he still taught in San Jose. That was a stroke of luck because this guy is one of the best teachers in the world. I didn't know it at the time but he is. These days you buy a box of hohner harmonica and it's his picture in it. Going to him kind of opened up this whole world of Chicago blues, and Delta blues because he hit me to a lot of blues, harmonica blues, and just blues musicians, not just harmonicas, every, all instruments, so I started listening to a lot of blues, a lot of classic like, deep blues.

While all of that was happening, I started going out to these clubs here in the Bay Area, and watching the local guys, the local heavy hitters, and these guys like Gary Smith,

who's considered the god father of blues sound here in the Bay Area, South Bay especially. There's a great harmonica player named Mark Hummel. There's a guy named Rick Estrin who's one of the legends, so, there's a long list of great musicians that I was checking out at the same time.

All of this was kind of happening in my early 20s, mid 20s, and so, some point I think I was 26 or 27, I said, I wanna start a band of my own, and I got together with a bunch of guys we were all hobbyist, you know, we all had day jobs. We'd get together once a month, and play at this club called JJ's and play a small opening, one hour set in hiding because I was too embarrassed to be seen, and thankfully this was pre YouTube, before Facebook and Instagram, and Snapchat, all these stuff so, there wasn't anybody streaming whatever the heck we were doing on stage to a million people, so you could get away with doing stupid things and experimenting and taking chances. I spent a couple of years doing that and getting better.

I got into a better outfit called tip of the top, it's just more in the blues style of Delta and Chicago style that I wanted to play. I did a few years of that, and then I said, okay now I think I'm ready to do this and play under my own name, because I had gotten to know a lot of the top musicians, blues artists here in the Bay Area, and then I started doing my own band. I had a day job through most of this and, it was starting to get to a point where I'm playing at nights, club dates, going out of town on weekends, driving to Sacramento or coming back, going to work. It was killing me.

The last two years that I was employed I basically spent dreaming about not being employed, and wanting to just be a full time musician, but, the curse of the pay cheque is strong, and it keeps you kind of, there's this inertia, a static inertia, you just sit there in one place dreaming about these things. Thankfully, there was a good thing that happened but most people wouldn't view it as a good thing but, my entire group, the entire floor got laid off one day and everybody is depressed and down, and I was like "Hallelujah." I jumped up with joy. That was a moment of transformation because I said, "This is it. I'm done." Now, you can't just do that.

Obviously, I have a wife who has been supportive the whole way through and she lets me go out and pretend to be a professional musician, and thankfully, over the last five years I've been able to work pretty much five, six nights a week. Last week, I played nine shows just in the South Bay alone, so, I've been able to stay employed in that sense as a musician. I've been working on a lot of different projects, a lot of different approaches to the blues, a lot of great collaborations, and, I'm really happy. Today, just looking back at where I started, with no clue and no idea, no vision, no real sense of where I'll be headed with the music, and today I have things going in the right direction I think.

Prasun: That's fantastic, but like if things could have gone different you could have been the guy in the cisco shirt right now.

Aki Kumar: Oh, I actually-

Prasun: Sitting in a cube.

Aki Kumar: I had an offer from cisco when I was 21 and I turned it down. I could have been-

Prasun: Yeah? Maybe that was a good thing.

Aki Kumar: Yeah, maybe that was a good thing.

Prasun: Alright, so, let me ask you this question right, I mean, you're this Indian guy who's probably following the path most Indian people take right, you've come out here for school, you're doing your computer job, your computer gig and you make this change. Tell me what your family said?

Aki Kumar: They ... It's mixed always with family. On the one hand they'll say, "Oh, follow your dreams." And then the next thing they'll say is, "Well, have you found a place of stability?" They don't want you to take risks, and the two messages are mixed. Follow your dreams means take risks, right?

Prasun: Yeah

Aki Kumar: And, hold on to your day job means don't take risks, so that's been the story with the family. My parents especially, they really, they drive me nuts because my parents are the ones who planted this music bug in my head. My mum is not a musician, my but loves just, she's filled with music. She sings and listens to music. My dad was a ... he didn't have any resources, financial resources to be a serious record collector but I know, instead of feeding his kids, he spent all of his money on records. I know this for a fact, dad.

Prasun: Looks like you turned out to be a good thing.

Aki Kumar: I did alright. Well, you know he had this stash of records, and it was cool. It was classical and all genres of western music and a lot of Hindustani, a lot of Karnatic, some Bengali, what do you call it rabindra sangeet he was into all kinds of music, not as a musician, he didn't have this technical understanding of it. He just loved it, and because of that, I listened to music just coming up, or in the background, or sometimes in the foreground, whatever. So, it's their fault, right?

if I ever told them in my 20s that, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing this." They' go, "How much money are you gonna make? What your wife... is she gonna leave you? What's gonna happen? What's gonna happen when you're 40?" Typically, coming out of India I fully understand why, because things are ... it's a struggle out there. It's different than here. Over there you kinda have to really aspire and push to be at the very top of the heap. The heap of what I'm not sure but, you wanna be at the very top.

Prasun: The masses.

Aki Kumar: I don't know, right, because that's the only way out. It's the only way to survive and so you're constantly given this message to push and find stability or push for excellence. It's a good thing and a bad thing because sometimes it means you forget about who you

really are, and you try to blend in and do what you think is the right thing to do instead of doing what's truly right.

It took me a long time to come to this, getting into a state of mind rest that it's okay as an Indian guy to now not do the Indian thing. There's another aspect too, I was on a H1B visa, and when you're on that visa, I don't know if you've ever-

Prasun: Yeah, I was on it too.

Aki Kumar: If you're on that visa, you're kinda locked into this, you don't wanna take too many chances. You don't want to lose that ... your status in this country, so, for me, until I got to a point where I could ... I got a Green Card, I just kept my head down and just did the right thing. There's a lot of things. There were a lot of factors that led to this late pursuit of music in life.

Prasun: I think it's fantastic, you know you hit on a good point that the contradictions that you know parents and loved ones do, right? Follow your path, but, in the name of excellence right, and safety-

Aki Kumar: Yeah and safety.

Prasun: Getting your way, right?

Aki Kumar: Yeah, yeah. I was having this chat with my dad where he kind of told me to watch my health and then he also encouraged me to do out of town shows, and I was like, "Dad, I can't." Okay, yes I get it, I'm gonna watch my health and eat healthy but when you're on the road, you're doing the opposite of that. You're not eating healthy.

Prasun: You're just trying to survive.

Aki Kumar: You're trying to survive, and it's just that. I think the reality of pursuing your dreams sometimes is a little more tricky to even acknowledge to yourself let alone explain to someone else.

Prasun: And I get, it's hard because this is not a road that's traveled often, right? The road of, you know, go to school, get a job, get a house, get a car, get married, have kids, die, right? It's pretty-

Aki Kumar: Not there yet!

Prasun: It's pretty easy to explain than pretty easy to understand, right?

Aki Kumar: Yeah.

Prasun: I've said this story multiple times but, there's a couple I interviewed and they're actually out here in San Jose. She's from California, he is Colombian. They met in Argentina, crazy story, but they're out here now, but they were making it in Colombia, right? Their

music was making it on TV and people sort of kinda knew them, but they'd go to parties and stuff and someone would ask them, "Hey, what do you do for a living?" and they're like, "We're songwriters, we're musicians." And they'd be like, "No, what do you do for a living?"

Aki Kumar: "What do you do for a living?"

Prasun: "What do you do for a living?"

Aki Kumar: All the time.

Prasun: Right? But, it's somewhat more accepted here in America than it is in-

Aki Kumar: Oh, definitely.

Prasun: Anywhere else possibly in the world.

Aki Kumar: In India you'll get laughed at.

Prasun: Right, right.

Aki Kumar: I know many things have changed now, I mean 20 years ago you would have gotten laughed at.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aki Kumar: But you know I've developed a coping mechanism. I've developed ways to deal with that question. Just today I was, for lunch I went down to this Pho place, this Vietnamese restaurant just down the road here and the lady behind the counter, she's seen me go to that restaurant about a dozen times. We've never had a conversation, I just go there, have my soup, and so today she was like, "So ... " Because I'm there 3 O'clock and there's no one there. There's no reasonable human beings having lunch at 3:00 because everyone is at work. So she goes like, "What do you do?" I go, "Well, I'm a singer in a rock and roll band," She goes, "Oh, cool."

Prasun: She was all like, "Okay, this guy is a little bit crazy." So, let's talk about, let's talk a little bit music. How did you end up picking up the harmonica? How did it become your instrument?

Aki Kumar: My dad had a harmonica. I think all Indian dads have-

Prasun: They're hiding a harmonica.

Aki Kumar: They have a harmonica for some reason, I don't know why. I know why, it's because you know at some point it was popular in Hindi moments in the 50s, and in the U.S. harmonica was a first year instrument in the first half of you can say the last century, so, the harmonica has been around a long time, and folks from a certain generation I think

they can relate to it at some musical level. My dad had a harmonica and it was this Chinese brand harmonica, nothing like the ones are played today. What it did, it was super limited. You could maybe try to play that 'Sholay' maybe. You couldn't play it right because I think you needed a chromatic to play it.

I heard him try to play it, and he wasn't a musician but he would play tunes and it was cool, and, I tried to play it, and I said, "Okay, this is cool but I can't really play anything on this." It's missing notes and all it does is play chords and playing a single note is impossible, and, so this must be some kind of a vanity. It's supposed to be some kind of a gimmick, you know, you bring it out for a song like a tambourine and then you put it away.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aki Kumar: It's when I heard harmonica being played in the blues context here in the U.S. live and on the records, that's when I went. Well, there was something wrong with the one I had, because it was making those sounds, and that's what started this whole curiosity about the instrument, and it is truly a magical instrument because you have, as a listener you have no idea what's going on behind the scenes. You can't see it. You can see some guy cupping this metal object to their mouth, you know with a trumpet or a saxophone, at least you can see the fingers in action.

With a harmonica all you see is the sandwichy eating exercise that's going on, and the reality is a lot of subtle movements taking place inside the mouth and the tongue especially as in, you know doing a lot of heavy lifting, but you wouldn't know these things until you sat down with somebody that's enlightened and they gave you that advice, and, so, it was just like a big magic mystery instrument to me and thought let's see what I can do with it.

Prasun: I think for me it was Stevie Wonder on finger tips, right? In the album was like, "What is this?"

Aki Kumar: He has a whole album under his name. It's Stevie Wonder Reversed, it's Eivets Rednow.

Prasun: Oh, really?

Aki Kumar: That's its name, and it's all chromatic harmonica playing, and it's ... the guy is a freaking genius.

Prasun: I didn't know that. I gotta go check it out.

Aki Kumar: Check it out.

Prasun: Yeah.

Aki Kumar: It's very cool. I think it was the sound track for the movie Alfie I'll have to go look this up but, It was Stevie.

Prasun: Really, so you're actually mixing genres, right? You're ... I wanna call you like the Bollywood blues king, just playing that.

Aki Kumar: Well, I'm king because I'm the only one right now.

Prasun: Exactly.

Aki Kumar: It's not, you know-

Prasun: You're building an empire. How did you get into it?

Aki Kumar: It's not mixing so much now that I look back, I mean, yeah, it's mixing and it's fusion, but really all it is me, my musical identity. All these Bollywood songs that I grew up listening to, I'm not talking about the stupid stuff from the 80s, I shouldn't say stupid but it was really more pop, commercial and crass than-

Prasun: It's what country is today, right? Pop with a twang.

Aki Kumar: It's exactly that.

Prasun: Somebody is gonna kill me out there after I say that.

Aki Kumar: No, no, country rap crap. It's kind of that, and I really didn't like listening to Bollywood music from the 80s, from a little bit of the 90s because they were trying to take a few steps in different directions with guys like A.R. Rahman he was ... He brought in a bass, and I'm all of a sudden listening to this frequency that didn't exist in the 80s. That's it, there was no bass.

Prasun: It was like, never come below this frequency right?

Aki Kumar: All of a sudden you're hearing this thing going on and you're like, "What is that?" So, I really loved all the retro stuff though, the melodies, the arrangements, even the videos, the songs, all of it. A lot of the singers were, you know, Kishore Kumar and Mohammed Rafi, Mukesh, these guys are legends. The actors who lip synced Kishore Kumar – Dev Anand and Shammi Kapoor, the legends, so that's kind of like part of my musical identity, just those songs, and I kinda forgot about all of that, not in a subconscious way, like, consciously I didn't chase any of that, pursuing any of it, but I will always find myself singing those songs, no matter what music I was playing in the clubs.

When I was by myself, you know, making coffee or whatever, on the computer, I would be singing these songs once in a while, and I had this eureka moment about five years ago when I was singing this song – 'Ajeeb Dastan Hai Yeh' and I started thinking what kind of chords structure is this? And I realized there were blues chords. You could essentially lay that song out over a very natural blues kind of arrangement, and so I got together with my guitar player at the time, little Johnnie, and he strummed along and we made this thing work. I was like, "Let's record this." and we did that on my debut album, and that worked really well in the sense that the whole album, I think it's 13 or

14 songs, it's all real classic blues from Chicago that I'm covering, maybe one or two of my own songs, and then this one at the very end.

Folks just weren't expecting that, you know, you're doing Little Walter and Jimmy Reed and Memphis Slim, and all of a sudden this thing comes up from nowhere, and they've never heard me sing in Hindi before. They didn't know what the heck was going on, and I got a lot of positive feedback from that but not enough to really jump up and do a whole other record, but along the way, I met a couple of really cool guys. One guy named Kid Andersen was this genius Norwegian producer and guitar player. He was a multi instrumentalist and I haven't been friends with him for a long a time and then also Jim Pugh who was this phenomenal keyboard player and his career, I don't know how many decades, five decades maybe. He's been playing since he was 14 in Chicago. That's where he got his start, playing with Koko Taylor and Willie Dixon, and now Jim Pugh was 200 years old, so, he's been around a long time. Tell him I said that.

But Jim, I was talking to Jim, and he was like, "What do you have coming up, because he has this organization called Little Village Foundation where he goes out and scouts and he found out, he found Irene. Irene Espiritu, this, we were just talking about her, this Philippina Americana singer, you know, this total-

Prasun: Anomaly.

Aki Kumar: A non-obvious anomaly as far as cultures though, and he had discovered her, and he was doing a record with her, and I was hanging out with Ken Anderson this whole time kind of because we're part of the scene and I would go to the studio and help out and all. That's how I got to know Jim, and when Jim asked me what was coming up I said, "Well, I've got this idea to do this whole record with Indian music and blues." And he goes, "Yes." I'm like "What?" He goes, "This is a great idea. Let's do this." And I'm like, "Okay." that's where this whole Aki Goes to Bollywood thing started.

Once I took these songs to the studio, and with a combination of guys there, and Kid Andersen especially, we were able to crank this stuff out in a great way. I was really happy with how the whole project turned out, and the reviews were great, and we've gone I think one step even further and we've put out another record which is officially scheduled to be out on the first of August called Hindi Man Lives and it's even more aggressive, and it's-

Prasun: Awesome.

Aki Kumar: Fusion tendencies and sensibilities

Prasun: Tell me about this right Aki, this is sort of like a ... this is a ... I don't know what to say, but the market is, this isn't contemporary pop stuff right? You're-

Aki Kumar: No.

Prasun: Right? So, how are you marketing this because, like, for example would you go market this in India?

Aki Kumar: I would, but, it's tough because this is it's own thing. Like I said, this wasn't done with the notion that, "Hey, I gotta do something cool and let me find what ... some retro song." No, these were just, this was just like a moment in my life where I said, "Why not represent these two kinds of music?"

Prasun: Right, but there's some value here right? You gotta put it out there?

Aki Kumar: Maybe, I am trying and Little Village has helped, you know the first record it went out, it got a fair amount of publicity I know. I was interviewed on NPR and that did a lot for me. KQED ran a very cool video segment on me, and the word got out, and people ... there's a lot of Indians that are constantly coming to my shows and, not at the 100s of thousands but there's always new Indian faces at these events. Even at the local blues shows, and they're like, "Who is this guy? And what the heck is going on here, because they'll see me up there.

I had this Indian family that hired me recently to play at their, one of their wedding anniversaries and I went from doing like a Big Joe Turner song to straight up singing Kishore Kumar then went back and, I sang Jimmy Reeves, and they were just like-

Prasun: What is happening here?

Aki Kumar: They had no idea what was going on, but they love it, and the cool thing is, what I'm noticing is that Indian folks who come into for maybe the Bollywood appeal, they end up liking the blues. My primary audience who area just most Americans who don't speak a little of Hindi, they are now heaped to Bollywood.

Prasun: Yeah. Classic Bollywood.

Aki Kumar: Classic Bollywood, which I think it's cool, cooler than ... well, shouldn't say cooler, I don't wanna sound like an old fart.

Prasun: Oh, it's okay.

Aki Kumar: But, it's just, I like the more retro material. I don't know what the market is. I've played a lot of different kind of settings. I've played highly strictly blue grass and the audience that was very young, very diverse, all kinds of demographics there and they all seemed to just eat it up. So, I don't know if there's a specific market segment to chase. This is just for people who like something new and something they haven't heard. Hopefully they'll think it's cool, and I'm just happy doing what I, being

Prasun: Doing your thing.

Aki Kumar: Honest to myself or with myself.

Prasun: I think that's the hardest part and you're doing it which is fantastic. Are you writing original material right now?

Aki Kumar: Yeah, the first album not so much because that truly was an effort to cover a lot of songs. On the new one I've covered a bunch of songs but I did a few things. I've always written in English and written blues songs, where you listen to them and you go, "This is a blue song." But, on the new record I wrote two songs in Hindi in two different styles. One was more like a Big Band Swing, one was more in a funky Albert King style. My mum wrote some words that we put together in a crazy way. I stole a melody from this old, really old country blue grass song called Little Sadie.

I just ripped the melody straight off, of that and sang my mum's Hindi words to it, and we added south Indian ... like I had mridangam and harmonica and it's a very cool I think-

Prasun: I love it.

Aki Kumar: Fusion thing, so, that's also one step in a different direction. Here I'm not covering anything. It's just an attempt of doing something that I think might work, but, in the blues context, in the Americana context, just pulling in a few extra things to add to the sound.

Prasun: So, this is something so new for you? Writing?

Aki Kumar: I've been writing over the years, it's just that I don't ever, I'm not the kind of person that sits down and says, "Today, I'm gonna write a song." I've never been able to do that. I'm not a natural at that. I know people who are. Rick Estrin is one of these guys I know. He's somebody that I really look up to, especially as far as song writing goes, you can ... and he's honed this skill over the years. It's not like he got it for free either. He worked hard on this, but he can sit down and write a song. I don't. I'm not that sharp so I just let it come to me, and that means some days I'll write ... I have two songs in a day, and sometimes the whole year goes by I got nothing, and that's just what it is. I just keep playing music.

Prasun: Do you collaborate with someone? Or because you mentioned that.

Aki Kumar: I haven't yet but ideas have been pitched to me. A friend of mine many months ago sent me some of his Hindi poems, and I want to kind of look into that a little more. I did collaborate with my mum in a sense, because it was her poetry that I ended up putting to a melody. The whole blues world is full of collaborations anyway. Every time I take to the stage, the band is collaborating with me, there's ... I know we talked about rehearsal but that's really specifically for some of these Bollywood blues stuff which has arrangements stuff. Most of what I do is off the cuff kind of blues, and that's really a collaboration.

Prasun: What does your day look like? What does it look like? I know we talked about going and having lunch at 3 O'clock in the afternoon-

Aki Kumar: Yeah.

Prasun: But what is a normal-

Aki Kumar: It starts late, because I end up playing these late night shows and getting home at all kinds of obscene hours, and once you've done a show, your adrenaline is pumping, so you can't go to bed. I go to bed late. I wake up late. I spend a lot of time planning and booking shows because I have to stay employed and this is all a small business and that's that. I'm just on the phone or on email, contacting places and every contact is a different interaction. Every person is a different person at the other end, so I have to manage that aspect, keep the local shows pretty coming?

Prasun: How much of your time does that take? Booking gigs?

Aki Kumar: A lot.

Prasun: Okay.

Aki Kumar: And it varies because some folks are easy to deal with, some folks are not, and I have to think about, "Oh, I played in San Jose so many times this year, so maybe let me go and try and play some venues in Napa, let me go down to Santa Cruz. Let me go to Monterey. Let me go to Sacramento." So, you've got to find new venues, you've got to contact them, build up a relationship. It takes years sometimes, but I have been in the scene now doing this for a little over 10 years, part time or full time combined, so, now, I have built up some relationships and some credibility, where it's a little easier than it was before.

I do spend some time on social media because now it's just, you got to keep the fan base happy, and then you got to just be relevant, so, there's a little bit of that, that goes on, and then there's everything else, you know, there's your normal life stuff, taking care of your instruments. My harmonica is really in bad shape because I played, I just got back from Canada and I played nine shows out of that, so, now I got to maintain my harmonica. That's gonna take some time. My amp died on stage two nights ago so I gotta fix that. My replacement amp isn't acting very well I gotta fix that. There's small cables that are out of commission, and now so, my day off is really the day of catching up with all this stuff that I couldn't do. It's everything. By the time it's 7:00 or 8:00 O'clock, and that's late, I mean, by the time it's time to get out of the house and do your show, I feel like I worked full day sometimes.

Prasun: So, it's the maintenance of a musician and being a musician?

Aki Kumar: Well, yeah, you know it's ... I have to kind of generate opportunities. That's really what this is about. If you have to stay in the business, because yeah, you can say yeah, I'm gonna be a musician and you could spend 10 hours a day practicing, which I would love to do, and stay in your house and be a virtual also, but no one is gonna know or care. Ultimately there's two sides to this. You want to be a great musician or an artist and you want it to have an impact. There's a social aspect to it, and for that other aspect, you

have to create opportunities and that's difficult, especially in this day and age there's a lot of entertainment options out there. People are glued to their phones all the time.

Prasun: Yeah, tell me about it.

Aki Kumar: Right, so telling somebody, for me to tell you, "Hey man, get off your butt and drive 10 miles to this New Orleans restaurant, and eat, gumbo and watch my ass dance in front of you, or playing blues harmonica in a 1950s style band, whatever." It's a tough sell.

Prasun: It is a tough sell, but here's the thing, do you think that something is, let me see, I always have trouble ... where in the Bay Area? I think the Bay Area used to be a music city, maybe not so much anymore. I met tons of awesome rock bands have come out of here. I feel like the music is slowly beginning to pop especially in down town San Jose, and places like that. I did a gig up in Fremont in this coffee shop called Slap Face, and-

Aki Kumar: Yeah, I know the place.

Prasun: Yeah, it blew my mind. We walked in here, a bunch of guys were like, you know, white hair, holding acoustic guitars, but they were these kids, they were like all 15, 16 with their parents playing heavy metal. We were like, "Wow, why did all these kids show up and they're all playing heavy metal?, and they're all tight." So, there is some kind of scene that's kinda popping up,

Aki Kumar: I think ... I was told when I started playing music, and this thing wasn't looking really good, and they'll be times when I'll be like, "What am I doing? There's no one here, and the ones who are here don't care." I was told these things goes in phases. There's always a cycle, and I think with high tech, I think there was a boom in the hi-techness and I think some people have realized that there's such a thing as too much tech, and I think we're seeing an increase in, and how people wanting to get out, and we just cut themselves off from being connected all the time.

Prasun: I agree.

Aki Kumar: And I think a younger generation is coming up that's more aware and hipper in a sense. I've been playing a lot of these Bollywood shows with this young guitar player, he's about 23, and he plays metal and he plays blues just as well, and now he's playing Bollywood songs with me, and there's no reason for him to, not really, but I'm seeing a lot of younger folks getting into it. That makes me feel good. That said, in general, the music scene is tough. I think it's tougher now than it's been.

Prasun: In the Bay Area or just in general?

Aki Kumar: In general, I think it's in general. Revenues are down, labels are not what they used to be, and with the rise Spotify and such which is a good thing, that's further affected revenue like I can't sell audio Cd's and, because audio Cd's are just like obsolete technology. But they were a revenue generator for a lot of musicians for a long time, so, that's gone. So how do you make money doing this? Right now for me the only

answer is get out there and play, and go ... for a local show's you, it's a combination of what their club pays you for whatever deal you have set up with them, tips, whatever it might be and, hopefully do a bunch of private events, corporate events, festivals, big ticket kind of events and make some money that way.

Prasun: [Shere Khan the cat walks in] So, hey kitty?

Aki Kumar: He's got something to say too.

Prasun: He's not so sure about the music scene out here. What is your biggest challenge right now?

Aki Kumar: Just playing the harmonica man. It's a difficult instrument, and every day is a reminder that I just gotta practice more, and I'm not getting enough time because of all the things I just told you I was doing instead, so, finding time to just hone my, keep the chops up there, that's tough, but, that's it. I play a lot on stage and sometimes that just becomes the practice time, not that I'm saying practice on stage in front of people that's a bad idea, but, you get better at what you do if you do it more, and then if you repeat, so that's one of the challenges, and with Bollywood blues specifically, it's, I'm just trying to find the sweet spot where I can be on the road with a band. Getting a full band to travel with me, that's been a challenge because the money has never been good enough.

I fly internationally and do shows but it's always with bands in those those markets like I just got back from Europe and I played with a lot of great musicians there. I just got back from Canada and the backing band was Canadian. I did the same thing in Brazil and Chile, and you can do that in the blues context, because, if you're playing with your fellow blues musicians, they have the same vocabulary and the same, not the songbook but they know where you're coming from and you know where they're coming from, so you can make it work. It's like with jazz musicians, but with this new project, I got to have a tight unit and that's here in the Bay Area.

These days I'm trying to figure out how to get to a place where I can travel with this band, and this summer I've got a couple of opportunities. I'm going down to Santa Barbara to play in a really cool festival called Live Oak Festival, and just this week I got offered a spot at the Waterfront Blues Festival in Portland in July. The whole band will be flying out there which is cool.

Prasun: Cool.

Aki Kumar: And it gets me an opportunity to represent this in its best form were I've got my guys and now I can put on a show. It's really-

Prasun: You guys are really tight and you can-

Aki Kumar: No, we are ... I should without bragging. I should say this is a tight band and I'm really proud-

Prasun: There's always a great feeling.

Aki Kumar: Really proud. It really is because it's very, you feel powerful, you feel like you're at the helm of a very powerful engine or like a train or a ship.

Prasun: Or a force to be reckoned with.

Aki Kumar: Yeah, a force, and you're driving this, and so you know you can take it here, you can take it there, but if you have the right guys who know where to go with you, that's when it works .

Prasun: What would you tell ... I'd like to get advice for most people or it's someone who is sitting in their Cisco shirts, sitting in their cube now who wishes they were playing music. What would you tell them to start off with?

Aki Kumar: I would say there's no reason to give up the Cisco shirt. You can do both things. I know some of the greatest musicians I know have had a lifelong career at something else, like there's this great piano player I know, I was just talking to him yesterday. He live down the street, across the street on the other side of Hillsdale and he's one of the real deal kind of piano players around here, blues style players, one of a handful, and he's a contractor for construction projects and he works really hard, he has to get to work at 5:00 AM and he comes back and just dead tired at 3:00 PM or 4:00 PM ,but he does play locally. He's been playing his whole life and he's no less of a player than anybody I know. He's fantastic as far as I'm concerned . He's just doing what he needs to do to keep himself-

Prasun: Alive.

Aki Kumar: Alive and keep the music alive, really, if you can ... If you're working a job so you can keep your dream alive, then you better hold on to that job. It's not diminishing your dream, it's enabling it. However, if you find yourself in a position where you've committed or invested so much in this dream and you feel like you're at the cusp or the verge of breaking through, you have this ... and this is not something I can describe. I can't tell you when you're gonna feel it. You couldn't tell me, you feel I, and sometimes you have to go with your gut. That doesn't mean take a crazy risk but follow your gut, and for me I had that gut feeling for a long time, and it got to a point where I said this is a sign.

When you feel like this every day, you gotta change gears or change directions whatever, and so, I followed that instinct. I don't think there's a formula, but if in one way or another you are keeping that flame alive, that dream alive, whatever it might be, music, or art, or maybe it could be a painter, whatever it might be, keep doing it. Don't ever stop doing it, in small ways or big ways. I think that's really the trick to find that hour everyday, half an hour everyday.

Prasun: Make the time for it.

Aki Kumar: Make the time for it, because it's special. It's something that you love, right? And so you wanna nourish it.

Prasun: Cool, thanks so much for taking your time-

Aki Kumar: Hey man.

Prasun: To talk to me.

Aki Kumar: It's a pleasure to-

Prasun: I loved this.

Aki Kumar: I love talking to fellow desi's. I don't... I've kind of gotten disconnected from the Indian scene, well, I don't wanna say Indian scene, I don't have local Indian communities I kind of interact with

Prasun: same here

Aki Kumar: A lot, because I'm kind of a weirdo. I like-

Prasun: I know what you mean.

Aki Kumar: You know-

Prasun: I know exactly what you mean.

Aki Kumar: It's tough to fit in.

Prasun: You don't fit at any clique

Aki Kumar: You don't fit at any clique. I really don't. I've always been like that and it's not by intentional habit, it's just what I am, and I'm glad you feel the same way, but that, what it means is when I run into Indian folk who are into music or who kind of see things the way I do, it brings me a lot of joy. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

Prasun: Yeah, thanks for taking the time.

Aki Kumar: And come to my show.

Prasun: Yes, I'll be there.