



ALI AKBAR KHAN

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BY BILL AMATNEEK

## Swimming the Oceans

Steve Gorn, an old college friend, was visiting me in Mill Valley. We had played in a band together at Penn State, modestly called the Jazz Spokesmen. Steve led the group, composed for it, and played sax and silver flute. After he graduated, Steve fell in love with the bansuri flute and moved to India to study the instrument and immerse himself in the culture.

He was staying at my home that week while on a North California tour. One of his concerts was at the Ali Akbar College of Music in Kentfield. The college was founded by Ali Akbar Khan — Khansahib, he is called — who is a master of the Indian sarode, a 25-string, un-fretted, plucked instrument. Khansahib's playing drills down to the center of my being, and it was the renowned violinist Yehudi Menuhin who called him, "possibly the greatest musician in the world."

I drove Steve to the concert at the college, a blissful evening of Indian classical music. Afterward, while Steve was relaxing in the greenroom, Khansahib phoned and invited Steve over to his home for a reception. Since I was driving, I got to tag along.

I'd had a standoff with my dad on the phone that day, so as we drove we started talking about fathers and sons. I asked Steve how he had related to his father, a professional pianist who had passed away four years before.

"My father was not supportive of my jazz saxophone playing," Steve said. "He had called it 'primitive.' And as to my Indian flute playing, he simply couldn't hear it.

"But when he died, I wanted to honor his life. With the help of some of his old cronies, I held a memorial service at home and invited a hundred of my father's friends and relatives. The plan was for anyone who felt the spirit to stand up and say something about my father.

"I spoke first, and when I was halfway through I made a casual, maybe slightly sarcastic remark about my dad's non-support of my music.

"Immediately a friend of my father's stood up and said, 'You're wrong Steve. Your father was very proud of your music. He always told me when you had a record coming out or when you were playing a big concert. Once we were together in a restaurant, the radio started played your Indian music ... and your father went wild. He stopped everyone who passed our booth and said: "Ya hear that? That's my boy Steve playing!"' "

Steve turned to me and said, "I felt this was a message to me from my father. Maybe he had been listening all along."

We drove in silence, and then Steve continued, "But have you heard about the relationship Khansahib had with *his* dad?"

Steve told me that Ali Akbar Khan learned his music from his father, Baba Allauddin Khan, who was revered in his time as an *acharya*, a master, the most knowledgeable person in his field. As a boy, Khansahib would awaken, dress in the dark, and put in a four-hour practice session before breakfast. Then he'd take a long lesson from his father, a second practice, lunch and a quick nap. A third practice

session followed, and finally a lesson from his father that went deep into the night.

Ali Akbar Khan followed this eighteen-hour a day regimen, within the environment of a formal Indian court, until he left home to marry. Then he took lessons from his father every time he visited home, until Khansahib was fifty and his father was in his hundreds.

That's a lot of instructional time with dad in any man's culture, and it made me wonder about the relationship of this famous father and famous son — what it must have been like.

Khansahib's cottage looked warm and homey as Steve and I pulled up. His number one American student, James Pomerantz, opened the door. Behind him were Ali Akbar's wife, Mary Khan, and then Khansahib himself. We removed our shoes and they led us through the house to a dimly lit sitting room. Various religious symbols lined the walls: there were Buddhas, crosses and altars, pictures of Hindu and Moslem saints.

Khansahib asked us about drinks, and since he was drinking Scotch, Steve and I went for the same. We took seats in a circle and Jim brought us the round. Steve had first met Khansahib twenty years ago, so they had much to talk about.

But finally there was a lull. Though I was sitting across from Ali Akbar in the circle, the circle was small. I leaned forward, put my elbows to my knees, and I was *this* close to his face. Even then I couldn't read his age, he was so vital, so I said to him: "Khansahib, may I ask, how old are you?"

"I am sixty-nine."

"And what religion are you?"

Mary and Jim laughed. Khansahib smiled and gestured to the display of assorted religious icons: "I'm all religions, as you may see."

“Khansahib, you have had a long and productive career. At age sixty-nine, what are your music goals?”

Jim asked Mary, “What did he say!”

“He asked him what his music goals are,” Mary replied. “This I want to hear!”

Khansahib said, “Oh yes. I have definite music goals. I want to swim the oceans of the world. I want to swim in all the music oceans.”

“What kind of music is your favorite?”

“Oh, Indian music, most certainly, and Western classical music, Bach and Beethoven. But to me, Indian classical music has heart. So much music I hear, like this rock and roll, has no heart.”

We all smiled at that.

“Khansahib,” I said, “you have learned a lot of music in your life.”

“Yes.”

“Much of that music you learned from your father.”

“Yes. I learned much from my father.”

“Over a long period of time.”

“Yes, a very long time. And after my father died, I continued receiving music lessons from him.”

“Then could you please tell me this, Khansahib: All his life the son hears the father telling him what to do. After a while the son wants to say, ‘OK Dad. Enough already. I heard it!’ And yet you had to take instruction from your father as both a son *and* a music student for a very long time. Please tell me this, Khansahib, how did you deal with that?”

Khansahib’s dark-brown eyes lit up. The master sat up tall in his chair and he grinned widely with the wisdom I sought. *This* question he was going to enjoy answering.

“That’s easy!” Khansahib said. “I hated my father. Yes, I learned much music from him. But I hated my father ... sometimes.

“I hated ... that he *made* me practice. I practiced so much, I had no chance to play. So I was *fifty* before I started *loving* music.

“When I started loving music, I started loving my father.”



STEVE GORN  
THE 6<sup>TH</sup> & B GARDEN, NEW YORK CITY, JUNE, 2002

BY HALLIE LAKSHMI GOODMAN