

Written by Mike Schulz

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Her first CD, *Kashish – Attraction*, earned her a Best Global Album nomination at the 2002 Juno Awards, the Canadian equivalent of the Grammys. Her second, 2003's *Beyond Boundaries*, received the Juno for Best World Music Album of the Year. Her latest, 2011's *Aam Zameen – Common Ground*, made her a two-time Juno winner in that category.

Consequently, the estimable world musician and frequent touring artist Kiran Ahluwalia must be feeling relatively secure about career longevity, yes?

“No,” says the Indo-Canadian singer/songwriter, with a laugh, during a recent phone interview. “Oh, *God*, no.

“I mean,” she continues, “I released my fifth CD last year, and I’ve been doing this full-time for 12 years now, and I definitely feel like I have enough gigs lined up for the next two years. But there really isn’t any security in my portion of the industry. So you kind of have to have short-term plans – a year down the road, two years maximum. Because after that, who knows what’s going to happen?”

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Given the trophies, plaudits, and fans that Ahluwalia has amassed to date, “continued success” seems a pretty fair prediction. Appearing at St. Ambrose University’s Galvin Fine Arts Center on November 9, the New York-based musician will perform material from her award-winning albums plus, as she says, “some new songs that are not recorded.” And in doing so, she’ll likely be introducing numerous Galvin guests to the Indian-music stylings that Ahluwalia has been praised for, with the *Washington Post* describing her work as “austerely lovely,” and the UK’s *The Observer* calling the artist “a powerful woman who has a depth of character in her wonderfully pliable, expressive voice.”

The possessor of a clear and confident soprano that fully captures the haunting, lyrical emotionalism of her songs – compositions that are performed entirely in the language of Punjabi – Ahluwalia was born in northern India, and credits her parents for a love for music “that started, basically, as soon as I came out of the womb.

“Indian music was a very serious passion for both of them,” she says, “and I was definitely singing complete songs by the age of five. So they put me in Indian music classes, and took me to all sorts of concerts when I was young: Indian classical concerts, Indian pop, Indian folk.”



Yet Ahluwalia says that her parents – and eventually Ahluwalia herself – were especially taken with the musical forms of ghazals (pronounced “guzzles”), which are Indian love poems set to music, and Punjabi folk songs. “That’s what they loved the most,” she says. “They would sing them all the time, and so that’s why I chose to sing them as well.

“Ghazals,” she continues, “are kind of like ballads. They’re melancholic, they’re slower, they have lilting melodies and intricate rhythms. And so they’ve kind of always been paired well with Punjabi folk songs, which provide a nice, upbeat contrast to ghazals. Every time I went to a ghazal concert, I would also hear a couple of Punjabi folk songs, and the effect of that kind of concert stayed with me longer than any other kind of music.”

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At about age 10, says Ahluwalia, “we migrated to Canada, and then I continued my music classes part-time throughout high school and university.” But despite her strong affinity for singing and writing the music of her heritage – with Ahluwalia calling ghazals “the music that gave me the greatest comfort when I wanted to find solace” – she says she didn’t give much thought to a career as a professional musician.

“I don’t think I dared to *hope* for that,” says Ahluwalia. “Because that would have been just too ludicrous an idea – to be in a predominantly English-speaking country and try to make a living singing in a foreign language. I couldn’t have even *dreamt* that.”

Instead, Ahluwalia went on to receive a bachelor’s degree in international relations, followed by an MBA in finance, and embarked on a career as a bond trader. Yet in between her pursuit of degrees and jobs, Ahluwalia says she also routinely spent months studying music in India.

“And whenever I came back to Canada, I still didn’t feel like *working*,” she says with a laugh. “Not in a nine-to-five job anyway. I felt like working on my music.”

Happily for Ahluwalia, though, “in the 1980s, very slowly, there started to be what were called ‘world music’ sections in CD stores. If you wanted to hear Korean singing, or Indian singing, you didn’t have to go to Korea-town or India-town to find CDs. You could actually go to your local record retail store and there would be a department for world music. And as this scene started to grow, I started to find friends and ways of performing my music from time to time, and realized I could have a career in it.”

Her decision to gradually transition away from finance and toward a music career, says Ahluwalia, initially came with “a very deep feeling of failure. ‘Oh, I can’t make it in the real world.’ And I really had to tell myself over and over and over again that I wasn’t a failure – I was actually moving ahead.”



For roughly “10 to 12 years,” says Ahluwalia, “I would go back and forth between India and

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Canada. I would do a year or a couple of years of music in India, and then come back to Canada for a while. I'd perform on weekends here and there, but it was mostly to make money and save, and then I'd go to India to do music again."

But at the end of the 1990s, she says, "I was working for a record label at a San Francisco office they decided to shut down. And when they shut down that office, I thought, 'You know, before I look for another job or go to India for music, I'm going to do music here, now, in North America.' And that's when I recorded my first CD."

Together with musicians she collaborated with in Toronto and "a couple of Indian instrumentalists who I knew from the UK," Ahluwalia recorded her debut collection of ghazals and Punjabi folk tunes, and the critical success of *Kashish – Attraction* led, she says, "to my getting a manager, and then an agent, and then – lo and behold – I started getting concert bookings."

She also started getting the aforementioned raves and awards, and currently spends some three months of the year touring while also composing new songs and occasionally performing with one of her husband Rez Abassi's jazz ensembles in New York City.

"I consider myself lucky," says Ahluwalia. "Very lucky. To be able to find a life that I could truly be able to *live*, instead of just going through the days. And that's the way I've lived for the last 12 years.

"Of course," she adds with a laugh, "I still never really *know* that I'm not going back to finance."

Kiran Ahluwalia performs at St. Ambrose University's Galvin Fine Arts Center (2101 Gaines Street, Davenport) at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, November 9. For tickets and information on the evening, call [\(563\)333-6251](tel:5633336251) or visit SAU.edu/galvin.

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For more information on Kiran Ahluwalia, visit KiranMusic.com .