

A Conversation with Kiran Ahluwalia

David Gregory

I first heard Kiran Ahluwalia sing at North Country Fair, by the shore of Lesser Slave Lake, in Northern Alberta. I was bowled over by the beauty and emotional power of her performance, and I was not surprised to find my youngest daughter sitting in rapt attention at the front of the stage, tears streaming down her face.



Two years later, on a warm summer's evening in July 2002, backstage at the Calgary Folk Festival, I had the chance to ask Kiran to talk about herself and about the material that she interprets: the folksongs and ghazals of northern India. The following is a slightly edited transcript of her replies to my questions. I have taken the liberty of making a few changes to the order in which we discussed various topics, and I have eliminated a few repetitions and unfinished sentences, but I have tried to retain the rhythm of Kiran's speech so that you will still have a good sense of the flow of our conversation. The CD to which she refers is *Kashish/Attraction*, which was released in 2000. The recording project she mentions at the end of the interview resulted in her new CD, *Beyond Boundaries*, released this December (2003).

I began by asking Kiran about her background, her family, and her early life.

Kiran: I was born in 1965, in Bihar [Northern India]. I'm not too sure how they came to move, but both my parents as children lived in what is now Pakistan but was then undivided India, and as children they both migrated to parts of India. They

are Punjabi, and they are Sikh. My mother's family migrated to New Delhi and my father's family migrated to Ranchi, but we say we're from New Delhi because we spent [most] time there. My father first got his Master's degree at the University of Michigan, in the States, then he went back to India, then he got married to my mother and they had me. Then my father wanted to do his Ph.D. and got a scholarship at the University of New Zealand to do a Ph.D. there. He was studying sheep blood – he's a micro-biologist – and I was very young when the three of us, my parents and I, travelled to New Zealand. I spent the first five years of my life there, and then went back to India, and later came to Canada in the 1970s. A better economic life, that was the reason that they came to Canada. I myself basically have grown up in Toronto, but I did my MBA in Halifax, at Dalhousie University. I have spent five to six years of my adult life living in India, studying this kind of music full-time, and also two years in New York and a while in San Francisco.

David: Did you start singing when you were going to school in Toronto?

Kiran: Oh, earlier. My parents, when we were in India, they put me in school. They started my music lessons, actually, like many parents put their children in the music and dance lessons of their culture. I was put in the music and dance lessons of North Indian music. So I started music in India, and then when we migrated to Canada they sought out teachers here in Canada for me, and I learned here. I learned from two people, Kishan Ramchandani and Karuna Bharat in Toronto. And then I studied music part-time while going through school, high school and university, and it was after university that I just wanted to live my life for one year and do something that I'm really passionate about, just for one year of my life, so that's when I decided to go back to India and study music for one year. Indian classical music. It's very common to study this kind of music privately, and that's what I did. I studied with a lady called Padma Talwalkar in Bombay. But the whole reason for me to study classical music was to be able to sing ghazals well, to have some knowledge [of the musical structure of ghazals], to improvise in

ghazals, and to be able to compose [melodies] for this kind of vocal music.

David: So how did classical music lead to ghazals?

Kiran: When I went to India the first time, I never thought that I would be able to do this kind of music professionally. I never thought that I would reach a level where I could do it professionally and I never thought that there was a market for this music, living in Canada, and being an Indo-Canadian. At that time I was just learning how to be a better musician for my own sake, and what I wanted to sing was ghazals, and classical music was going to open up my voice, teach me the voice culture that I wanted, and going to give me a good basis from which to improvise in my ghazals. So this was always at the back of my mind, that I wanted ghazals, but I wasn't able to find a good ghazal teacher. So I studied classical music for many, many years. Now, when I learn classical music, that's a [very] rigorous and structured process. In Indian classical music, how it works is that you have a short composition, and that can be written down, and when you start to learn classical music it is written down, but really, after the beginning stages, when you reach an advanced level, you memorize it by listening to your teacher, you never write it down. You write down the words, but you don't write down the melody of it, because you just learn it by listening to it. And then, 95% of Indian music is improvisational, so then you just learn how to sing and improvise within it, but it's not written down. You remember your licks, and your sort of ideas – you remember your ideas – but to actually execute that idea and then to come back to the rhythm is all improvisatory.

David: Did you find it hard to learn Indian classical singing?

Kiran: When I'm in Bombay learning from Talwalkar there are times when I'll do nothing but study and practice. The last time I was there I would get to her house at around nine o'clock and practise with a tabla player, a rhythm player for about an hour, and then other students of hers, two or three other students of hers would come and we would learn from my teacher until about noon, and then I'd go home for lunch and in the scorching one million degrees heat of the Indian summer I would come back to her house at about three o'clock, three-thirty, sort of ready to pass out, but

gearing up all my energy for another session of practising and stay at her place until about eight o'clock, either practising or listening to her. So there were days when I would practise for six hours perhaps, or seven hours, with her. I would have breakfast at home, lunch at home, and then in the evenings I would have tea with her, tea and biscuits. You certainly do have to get your body accustomed to sitting like that, for that long, and you have to get yourself accustomed to not having snacks in between. So that's very rigorous, and that's usually six days a week, but there have been times when I've been there twenty-one days in a row. And of course your brain is mush, after that – but your voice is very good. (laughs)

David: You never lost your desire to sing ghazals?

Kiran: I still kept looking for a ghazal teacher. And I went to various places and tried different teachers, but it just didn't work out – they weren't going to be able to teach me – they weren't really maestro-level teachers. And then finally I found a man named Vitthal Rao, who's one of the last living court musicians of the King of Hyderabad. I found him in Hyderabad. I knew of him, I knew he existed, and I had heard his recordings. So I phoned him and asked him if he would be gracious enough to teach me, and he said, "Sure, just come", because he's a man of legendary kindness, and whereas I had to audition for my classical teacher – she's very nice as well – but I had to audition for my classical teacher – my ghazal guruji was open to anyone to come to him. So I was in Bombay, and I didn't know a soul in Hyderabad, and bought a ticket to go on the train to Hyderabad and got to Hyderabad about six o'clock in the morning. This was in the early '90s. And basically I started to make a small life for myself in Hyderabad, and get settled there for a length of time, to learn from him.

David: How long have you been studying with Vitthal Rao?

Kiran: It's been about six years. I stayed with him for a little less than a year to start with, and then I keep going back as often and for as long as I can. When I'm in Hyderabad, every time I'm there I find accommodation to stay in, so I either rent a place basically to stay, or if I have a friend, or if I make friends I can stay with a friend for a long period of time – so my routine when I'm in Hyderabad learning ghazals is that typically in the

morning I'll practise two hours by myself, and then I'll have my lunch and then I'll go to Vitthal Rao's at about two p.m. and stay with him in his studio until about eight p.m. And what happens between two and eight p.m. is that he will sing, his students will be there to listen, we will listen, he will teach all of his students one by one, and we are welcome to stay and listen, which we do, and many times people will come into the studio to listen to the students and so sometimes we're just called on to perform, right then and there! How many students? Some days it can be two, sometimes I can be there alone, and sometimes it can be twelve at a time - it's an informal setting.

David: Tell me more about ghazals. They are Urdu poetry set to music, aren't they?

Kiran: Yes, ghazals are primarily in Urdu. There are Punjabi ghazals as well, and ghazals in other regional languages of India, but it started as an Urdu tradition. They are said to have originated in Persia, in a Persian Arabic language, not Sanskrit. Sanskrit is a Hindu-based language, but they would probably have been written initially in whatever the popular language of Persia would have been at that time, which I believe was Persian [Arabic]. And then there were lots of invasions into India: soldiers and everyone from that area of the world, Persia and Afghanistan, came into India, and new language was created, which was Urdu, which is a mixture of Sanskrit and Persian. Now, this is my understanding. I'm not a scholar of languages, but this is my understanding of it. So they came to India in about the fourteenth century and that's how they arrived there. Of course, the Urdu has gotten simpler. Ghazals can be very, very highly literary song-forms and nowadays there are a few ghazals that I sing of some great poets in the 18th century and some great contemporary poets as well, that are - the words are very hard, and the majority of the audience that is Urdu-speaking cannot understand it because you have to have studied Urdu to a great extent to understand them. So as the years, decades, centuries go by, the Urdu gets easier - we use more common man's language.

David: Are ghazals an exclusively male form?

Kiran: Not really - because a lot of the 18th century Sufi mystic poetry is written from the woman's point of view even though it was a man writer, so men sing it and women sing it. Ghazals are primarily written from the male point of view, but

the folksongs, a lot of them are written from the female point of view.

David: Do they reflect an upper-class, urban life-style?

Kiran: Do rich people listen to ghazals, you mean? No, not really. Well, you don't find ghazals in villages so much, but you definitely find Punjabi folk music in the city. It might be a pop version of it, but the basis is folk. And in the cities it's called bhangra. In clubs, in dance clubs, the music called bhangra, the basis of that is Punjabi folk music that you find in its raw form, in its roots, in the villages. So Punjabi folk music is all over the place, everywhere, in some form. Ghazals, on the other hand, are more of an educated form because the poetry can be hard to understand - it's more of a literary type of a song, a literary type of a musical genre.

David: But wasn't it originally part of the court culture of the ruling elites?

Kiran: Well, all Indian music and art and culture at some time was kept alive by the courts, just as Western classical music, the great musicians; Mozart and Beethoven, were commissioned by the courts in Europe. In the same way Indian music also at one point had major funding and support from royalty, but, when the royalty broke down, as did the music of Europe, so did the music of India have to find other ways of surviving. Although there are lighter ghazals as well, but you won't find a ghazal concert happening in a village, really. They happen in the cities.

David: In night-clubs?

Kiran: No, ghazal music is not done in a night-club. In concerts, or at music festivals, outdoor music festivals, but mainly concerts. Because of the romantic ambience there's supposed to be more of an intimate evening, you know, quiet and intimate. You're trying to set a certain romantic mood when you're creating a ghazal concert.

David: Is ghazal-singing still a living music in India? Are there many ghazal singers?

Kiran: Yes, of course, there are lots and lots of ghazal singers. Only about four or five maestro singers, but there's lots of other people.

David: How do you learn ghazals?

Kiran: Learning ghazals? Well, ghazals have a structured melody, which you can improvise in as much as you want. It's like jazz, you have your melody, and you can improvise a little bit or you can improvise a lot, so there's lots of freedom in ghazals to do what you want. And again, in ghazals we don't write down the music, we don't write the notes or the melody or the rhythm, we learn that just by hearing. But we write down the words.

David: The words are quite old, aren't they?

Kiran: One of the songs I sing – it's not really a ghazal – is very old. In the fourteenth century a man named Amir Khusro wrote some lovely poems, two lines from a poem I've taken, the two lines are

Rainee chadhi rasool ki,
sau rang maula kay hath,

and I've done an experimental piece on the CD, track # 5, and I've called it "Sau Rang". That's an experimental piece because it's just me on voice, it's not traditional with any instrument, it's different layers of my voice, and I've given myself a vocal drone instead of having my tanpura. I'm the one singing the tonic and giving myself a vocal drone, and then on top of that I've layered some improvisation and then on top of that I've layered the words being improvised. So those are 14th century words to which I've improvised. Also on the CD the ghazal "Yaar ki" is written in the 1860s by the last Emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar, and the melody is composed by my teacher Vitthal Rao, who's a contemporary musician, and then there's a song, a Punjabi folksong, that's not on this CD but the lyrics are again 18th century but the melody as I mentioned was just composed about a year ago. These are all I can think of just now. But there are other ghazals that I sing that are 18th century as well; I sing quite a variety of them. I sing not only the old ones, but also new ones, by writers that are living right now in India. And then the project that I'm really excited about is composing the music for ghazals written right here in Canada, ghazals that were written last year. Of the Canadian poets one of my favourites is a man named Rasheed Nadeem. He lives in Toronto and he's written a lovely Punjabi ghazal for which I've composed [a tune], and then there's a lady named Tahira Masood – she wrote a ghazal, she lives in

Toronto as well. She wrote a ghazal that I've also composed [a melody for], so those are two, and the rest are in progress.

Dave: How do you go about composing tunes?

Kiran: Well, it rarely comes to me in a flash. Once, it came to me in a flash – actually, O.K., a couple of times it *has* come to me in a flash, like when I was doing "Sau Rang" within twelve hours – it was noon and at noon we were aware that we have to go into the studio the next day, and I have to make some sort of music that a dancer commissioned me to make; I have to create something. It was at noon that I discovered this and I got these words, and within the twelve hours, by midnight is when I had it sort of worked out, the main theme, but when we got it to the studio there were other ideas I had, so that's when we layered my voice on top of it. So sometimes it comes right away. But I would say the majority of the time it doesn't come right away; or what does come right away I'm not quite happy with, and then sometimes I compose two or more melodies for one song, until I'm happy with all the parts of it. It's not really a conscious decision. For example, "Awara", on the CD, is not traditional at all. That tune is not traditional and it's very hard to say: "O.K., here's the line, here's my Canadian influence in this song and here's my Indian influence in this song". I can't draw a line, but living in Canada and living in India I've had influences from India and influences from Canada, so when I regurgitate a tune it's those influences that are coming out. For example, "Awara" is not traditional, that melody just isn't going a traditional Indian way, but it's still in the tradition, but a slightly different style. And then "Ik Ranjha", for example, is a pretty traditional basis, like the way the melody's supposed to be structured is there, following the traditional Indian structure.

Dave: I've noticed that when you perform, you sometimes use an instrument, but not always. Why is that?

Kiran: I play a drone instrument called tanpura. It's a wooden instrument that has a long neck. The bottom of it looks like the bottom half of an hourglass and it's got four strings on it and it gives me my tonic and my fifth and it's a reference point for me. It gives me two notes and then I'm on my own to find the rest of the notes. But I have an ensemble of four people. The four players are

myself, a tabla player, which are Indian drums, an acoustic guitar player, and a harmonium player (harmonium which is a bellowed keyboard instrument). I'm happy with that ensemble.



The harmonium is said to have originated in Germany and came to India from Germany, and started off being sort of placed on a table with pedals, but because we do Indian music sitting down on the floor, the Indians adapted it to have it be playable while sitting on the floor. So it actually came from Germany to India - and now, of course, you know, it's Indian because it's in almost every Indian concert from pop to ghazals to classical to folk. The guitar? Well, maybe that's also part of my Canadian influence, that I've grown up in Canada, a place where I've heard a lot of acoustic guitar. Folk festivals are full of guitars - and so maybe that's my influence, being an Indo-Canadian. I love the harmonium, which is an Indian instrument, or at least I consider it an Indian instrument, and I love the acoustic guitar, which is not traditionally an Indian instrument.

Dave: Now, not all your material is ghazals. Some of your songs are traditional Punjabi folksongs, aren't they?

Kiran: Yes, because I am Punjabi, I also have an interest in Punjabi folksongs. And, you know, ghazals are slow and lovely, but I like sometimes breaking up the ghazals with some jovial, toe-tapping folksongs. And the folksongs are traditional. I'm not too sure if there's a traditional way of learning them - I guess there is - but how I learned them is travelling in the state of Punjab. It's sort of dangerous to travel alone as a woman there, so I recruited a friend of mine, Kusum, and we travelled Punjab, and we travelled into small villages in Punjab, on the side of India, and in Pakistan, and I met with folk musicians there who I was able to meet with, and I studied their music, and observed and took in the way they sang and

their melodies, and that's how I learned the folksongs. How I went about collecting my Punjabi folksongs was that we got to Punjab, and I basically phoned lots of people - I did lots of research before landing in Punjab and tried to pick up names of folk musicians and find out where they lived. And these are folk musicians that some of them have never recorded before. So it was sometimes quite a journey just to get into these small villages, where one phone exists at the general store, and that's it. And there was no way for me to contact these musicians, I just showed up at their doors, basically, and explained who I was, and asked if I could just basically listen to them for one afternoon, or I could listen to a couple of their songs. So that's how I picked up the music. Also, I've been hearing recorded Punjabi music since I was a child, on cassettes. But I wanted to find something that wasn't recorded, that was my purpose. Because I just thought that was really neat. Because what's recorded is a lot of pop and I wanted to find the true folk music, which isn't recorded, yet. So that was one thing I did.

David: When you collected folksongs, did you tape-record the singers?

Kiran: Yes, I taped them. I taped the folk musicians, yes, to remember their melodies, because they were not recorded, and their music isn't written down. So then, what I did, is, I also studied, like, 18th century folksongs from Punjab, written by 18th century Sufi mystic poets. By advertising to everyone that I met that I'm interested in this work and want to find out more about it, then someone would say: "Well, here's a poet, and he's got a Ph.D., and he's written a book on this 18th century poet", so I would go to him and I would say: "I would like to learn more about this poet and I would like to learn more about his folksongs". For example, in Pakistan, in Lahore when I went, I found a man named Najam Hussain Sayed, he wrote a book on Bulle Shah, an 18th century Sufi poet. Bulle Shah wrote a song, actually many songs, but there were a couple of poems of his that I ended up studying, with this man, Najam Hussain Sayed. One is called "Ik Ranjha mai nu lori da". This is based on the folklore romance between a man named Ranjha and a woman named Heer. So I studied the words with this teacher, Najam Hussain Sayed, and then I tried to hear all sorts of different recordings of this song. When I came back to Canada I composed my own melody for it. Also, once I found out this

song was based on the story of Heer and Ranjha, I sought out books on the romance of Heer and Ranjha, to study the real story of this love affair, because the song is only about a point of view, it is only about Heer, the woman, trying to find her lover, Ranjha, and asking others to accompany her on her hard journey across the river through whatever kind of hardships she has to go through; she's asking for her friends and society to help her find her lover, Ranjha, and it was a forbidden love, so she's almost helpless, asking for the help of society. So I found a lot of books...the story is written in Urdu, but I could only read the English translations, so to be able to study the actual Urdu instead of the various translations that I picked up, I also started learning Urdu as a language, which I haven't perfected yet, but I'm learning.

So there are all these different ways of studying folksongs – one is to meet the folk musicians and to observe how they sing, one is to study the text and then the third is to study the background of that text, – and the fourth is to start studying the language in which the background to that text is written.

David: What language are the folksongs in?

Kiran: The folksongs are in Punjabi, but Punjabi is a language that can be written in two scripts. It can be written in the Punjabi script, which is called Gurmukhi, in India. But on the Pakistan side of the border Punjabi is written in the Arabic script, Urdu. And because in the 18th century most of these literary novels and poetry were written in Urdu, that's why I wanted to learn the Arabic script, even though it's really Punjabi that I'm reading.

David: How many folksongs do you sing?

Kiran: Well, Punjabi folksongs are easier to perform because they're lighter – ghazals are much harder to perform. So I can perform a vast number of folksongs. The ghazals are the much, much harder song-format to perform. So the folksongs – generally in this tour I've been performing four of them. Two are on the CD, two are not. One is "Rut sawan di", track #7, the other one is "Koka". There's another folksong that I sing called "Meri, gori, gori". This is a folksong about a girl who is trying to convince her lover to buy her golden bangles – jewellery is very important for the village girls! And then, what's the other one? Oh, "Ik Ranjha", the one with the tune I composed about the man named Ranjha and the woman named Heer.

Koka Kiran Ahluwalia (transcribed, Begula Gurekhi)
(recitative)

(guitar-through recitative) Ve-ha — ni-ya —, ve-ha-niya —, Ho —

Ah Ho Ah (drum begins at start of verse!)

(verse 1)
Ve-ha-niya koka kara va dere maiya koka, Ve-ha-niya —, koka kara va dere maiya koka,
Kara ke kaula nibhona nahi, Ho kara ke kaula nibhona nahi, dehta saha
do-hta, Ve-ha-niya koka kara vadere maiya koka, Ve-ha-niya — koka kara vadere maiya

(recitative)
koka, ha — niya, kara va de re (interlude)

David: Please tell me something about the traditional singers you recorded.

Kiran: One of my favourite musicians was a man named Puranchand Vadali. He lives in a village called Guru Ki Vadali, which is in the district of Amritsar in the Indian side of Punjab, and he was amazing because his improvisations were very classical-based, they were sort of heavy duty improvisations. He was a heavy musician. And yet he was doing all this heavy improvisation in simple folk melodies – you know, a very intriguing musician. All vocal, it's all vocal – with harmonium [accompaniment]. A lot of the folksongs that he did were written in the 1800s by these giant Sufi poets such as Bulle Shah and Shah Hussein. These poets, whatever they wanted to write about society, they tended to use folkloric, romantic tales to tell their tales.

David: So the actual songwriters were not peasants but of higher social status? And the folksongs were quite literary in nature?

Kiran: They were [composed by] educated people. Of course, a lot depends on how you interpret their songs. Their songs can be interpreted to be about God, but their songs can be interpreted to be purely romantic as well. Who knows? Who knows what was going on in their minds, truly you can study and study what's been written but will we ever know the truth?

David: Were there any other folk musicians that you particularly remember?

Kiran: The rest of the people – there were simpler melodies and I forget the names of a lot of the musicians. Puranchand Vadali, because he was such an "awesome cat", as they say, he'll be forever ingrained in my memory. There were both male and female. Manpreet Akhtar is one lady that I recorded. She sang *a cappella* – sometimes it was with harmonium, and sometimes *a cappella*.

David: Had you thought of recording a complete CD of the Punjabi folksongs that you have collected?

Kiran: A whole CD of folksongs? I don't know because it's really the ghazals that I love. I know the folksongs go over well with Western audiences, because they're more rhythmic and they're faster. I will see: maybe....maybe one day a full CD of folksongs only.

David: What are you thinking of next?

Kiran: My future plans? As I travel across the country for these tours I also look out for Canadian-South Asian poets, writing in the ghazal format and in the Punjabi folk music format, and I go to many recitals, poetry recitals in the South Asian community in Toronto, and I try to seek out writers. I will try to compose a body of work for the next CD. Some of the ghazals won't be written by Canadian writers, but I'm still trying to find enough material. I haven't decided yet, but that's certainly the idea I'd like to do. The majority of the songs will be contemporary ghazals. But I'll include a couple of folksongs as well.

