

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

ALI AKBAR KHAN
EMPEROR OF MELODY: THE NORTH INDIAN CLASSICAL MUSIC TRADITION

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Cooley Crawford
in 2006

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Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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Ali Akbar Khan

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SERIES PREFACE

The American Composers Series of oral histories, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1998 to document the lives and careers of a number of contemporary composers with California connections, the composers chosen to represent a cross-section of musical philosophies, cultural backgrounds and styles.

The composers in the series, selected with the help of University of California faculty and musicians from the greater community, come from universities (Andrew Imbrie, Joaquin Nin-Culmell and Olly Wilson), orchestras (David Sheinfeld), and fields as different as jazz (Dave Brubeck, John Handy and Allen Smith), electronic music (Pauline Oliveros), and the blues (Jimmy McCracklin). Also in the series is an oral history of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic*, commissioned by San Francisco Opera for the 2005 season, and an interview with David Harrington, founder of Kronos Quartet, which commissioned more than five hundred new pieces in its first three decades. Various library collections served as research resources for the project, among them those of the UC Berkeley and UCLA Music Libraries, The Bancroft Library, and the Yale School of Music Library.

Oral history techniques have only recently been applied in the field of music, the study of music having focused until now largely on structural and historical developments in the field. It is hoped that these oral histories, besides being vivid cultural portraits, will promote understanding of the composer's work, the musical climate in the times we live in, the range of choices the composer has, and the avenues for writing and performance.

Funding for the American Composer Series came in the form of a large grant from art patroness Phyllis Wattis, who supported the oral histories of Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and subsequently from the Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to tape-record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to California history. The office is headed by Richard Cándida Smith and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Caroline C. Crawford, Music Historian
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INTERVIEW HISTORY: ALI AKBAR KHAN

The oral history interviews with Ali Akbar Khan were videotaped over several sessions in the teaching studio at the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael, with cups of strong tea coming from the kitchen and students greeting “Baba” in the formal manner as they arrived for class.

Ali Akbar Khan, a virtuoso of the *sarode*, founded the College in 1967, twelve years after he came to the United States and performed at New York’s Museum of Modern Art at the invitation of Yehudi Menuhin, who called him “the greatest musician in the world.” That MOMA performance was the first ever given by an Indian classical musician in this country, and it launched a grand interest in the musical artistry of India. Khansahib taught at the college until his death in June of 2009.

In the oral history, Khansahib discusses his early childhood and education in a large Muslim family in East Bengal (Bangladesh), in which music and magic were an important part of daily living. His father, Baba Allaiddin Khan, one of India’s most famous musicians, designed for his son a strict system of voice and sarode lessons and practice until well after he was a hundred years old. The sarode is a stringed instrument in the lute family, smaller than the sitar and with an unfretted metal fingerboard.

Khansahib made his debut at age thirteen and during a long life in music has collaborated and recorded with musicians of diverse backgrounds, including Ravi Shankar, who studied with and was adopted by his father and married his sister. In 1971 Khansahib and Ravi Shankar performed a benefit concert for Bangladesh organized by George Harrison at Madison Square Garden.

Khansahib speaks haltingly because, as he explains in the oral history, speaking was discouraged by his strict father in favor of music practice. He spent many hours studying vocal music, upon which all Indian classical music is based, as well as various instruments. He talks in the history in his heavily accented and charming English of the strict discipline to which he was subjected, of the raga, which is at the heart of Indian music, of magic, dying and rebirth. Many of the stories are repeated in the text, emerging as major life themes.

Khansahib became music director of All-India Radio in Lucknow in his early twenties, and subsequently as a Mumbai-based composer, wrote the music for Sayjit Ray’s *Devi*, and Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Little Buddha*, among other films.

One of the high points in his life was receiving the title of “Emperor of Melody” from his father, a longed-for sign of approval. He says of his music: “Because God sent me ... I think I am the messenger, doing my duty...I only know how to play music, that is all. When you understand music, the music will guide you and change you...All the good qualities in your soul will become permanent...then you start thinking better things.”

The text was edited by Khansahib's wife Mary, who sat in on the all of the interview sessions except the one in which their son Manik was present.

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March, 2010

Interview #1: April 24, 2006

Begin Audio File 1 04-24-2006.mp3

Crawford: Today I'm at the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael, talking to Ali Akbar Khansahib about his life and work in music. Music in your family goes back to the sixteenth century.

01-00:00:58

Khan: Right.

Crawford: Would you talk a little bit about the importance of that history in the music of North India?

01-00:01:05

Khan: Well, that sixteenth-century music is by Haridas Swami, who is the guru of Mian Tansen. Mian Tansen was the court musician of sixteenth-century Emperor Akbar. He was the court musician of the Emperor Akbar, in the sixteenth century. And then from Tansen, the family tradition was continuing all up until now. Only my father [Padma Vibhusan Acharya Dr. Allauddin Khan] was the last one, the last disciple of that family. He carried a real kind of old style of the sixteenth century and he taught me, myself, and we are carrying the same traditional music still, and my sister, Annapurna, we two persons only are carrying the real what you call North Indian classical music. And there are many, many disciples of my father, hundreds, they messed up with their own ideas, new ideas, fusion music, and this and that. Even they changed the ragas.

There is one raga, for example, when it was raining so. Any time that happens, this is nothing new. It's raining so much here, and we had a party and this and that. I said, by the way, I just told my students, "Learn the rainy season raga. Then rain maybe will be—rain will be kind to us and not make so much rain. There will be no need now."

Crawford: So you performed a rainy season raga, is that what you're saying?

01-00:03:45

Khan: Teaching. Teaching students.

[Mary Khan, Ali Akbar's wife, takes part in the interviews, as his younger son Manik does. They are referred to as MKhan and SKhan.]

MKhan: The raga exists. He taught within that raga, compositions, he created compositions.

Crawford: I see. Directed toward the rain and the rainy season.

01-00:03:49

Khan: Yes, we have all seasons of ragas.

Crawford: And ragas for all times of day?

01-00:04:04

Khan: And all the particular times of the day. You can't sing or play morning raga in the evening or anything like that. Four hours, five hours time, you have. There are seventy-five-thousand ragas.

So I started teaching, and then the rain becomes very gentle, but not going away. So I tell the students, maybe the rains want to hear more of their own raga. Let's say now, "Just go," to the summer seasons raga.

Crawford: And did it work?

01-00:04:51

Khan: Yes, of course! For five days, there was no rain.

Crawford: Well, let's go back to your early years. You were born April 14, 1922, in what is now Bangladesh, and started studying when you were three, principally with your father.

01-00:05:04

Khan: Yes, my father. The whole thing, I learned from my father. So my father, and my father's elder brother—he was a devotee of Kali. I learned tabla, *pakhawaj*, and other things from his elder brother. My father's elder brother, Fakir Aftabuddin. I was very young and then he told my father that "I gave him the knowledge of rhythm, now you will give him the melody of music, of sarode."

Crawford: So was it determined that you would be a musician? That this was to happen in your family?

01-00:05:59

Khan: You mean me?

Crawford: Yes.

01-00:06:06

Khan: My father, because I'm the only son.

Crawford: The only son, and then there's a sister, who later married Ravi Shankar.

01-00:06:10

Khan: Yes, yes. Because in our family, the elder person who is a teacher, they choose if this person can be a musician or not, the top. And then, if they feel like that, how they understand, then they always say, "Ok, you have this instrument, you don't play that instrument." They teach you all kind of things, and they choose that you are good for this, you are good for singing, or you're good for tabla. And then they start teaching you and then taking you along. My father used to practice almost twenty-three hours.

Crawford: Your father practiced twenty-three hours a day?

01-00:07:11

Khan: Twenty-three hours, for forty years.

Crawford: How can that possibly be?

01-00:07:16

Khan: It's learning and practicing. Because he learned from his teacher, and then came home and sat down. And he had long hair. He put a rope and tied back his hair, because sometimes he'd take little naps, and then the rope [pulled his hair].

Crawford: He didn't sleep.

01-00:07:54

Khan: [chuckles] Yes.

Crawford: He didn't sleep. And you, as well.

01-00:07:57

Khan: No, no, no.

Crawford: Is it true that you practiced up to eighteen hours a day?

01-00:08:03

Khan: No, no, eight hours a day. [laughter]

Crawford: Eight hours a day.

01-00:08:07

Khan: Sometimes eight hours a day, sometimes more. Sometimes. And not only practice, learning also. Learning all the time, anytime.

Crawford: Always music? Or were there other subjects?

01-00:08:20

Khan: I have to go to school. Because my father was a court musician in the central [school] of India, a place called Maihar—all the royal family and all the big officer's kids used to go not to public school, but at the palace.

Crawford: The court school, in the palace.

01-00:08:55

Khan: In the palace. And guarded, well guarded with all the watchmen?

Crawford: Or guards.

01-00:09:08

Khan: Yes. That way, you are not wasting any time. We are not doing something wrong. So all the princes', princesses', ministers' sons went there. My father was the guru of the king, so we were taught like this.

Crawford: And so did you live in the court?

01-00:09:38

Khan: No, no. It was for the school time.

Crawford: For the school time.

01-00:09:43

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Your time in school.

01-00:09:44

Khan: And the palace was very near to our house.

Crawford: What was your day like when you were very small?

01-00:09:55

Khan: All days are like that. My father doesn't want me to sleep, because he didn't sleep. Twenty-three hours, that meant one hour he left for taking food and for a little shopping, and also without luxury food. But we have, well, our—what do you call it—our very great grandfather was from the very rich family. What do you call it—landowners—so there is no question of money. But my father, he loved music like anything and his father used to learn from this family of the sixteenth century, and Swami Tansen, from that family.

Crawford: Your father was at Maihar?

01-00:11:26

Khan: He was a guru at Maihar, the name of the palace. He was the guru.

Crawford: How did they decide what you would play—you've played a lot of instruments.

01-00:11:40

Khan: My father taught me. He tried all the instruments. And then he decided that I'm good for—I should learn every instrument, and then he decided that I should choose one. And of course, sometimes you like to play this instrument or that instrument for fun, it's ok. Because my father can play two-hundred instruments.

Crawford: Oh, my!

01-00:12:16

Khan: And he learned Western classical music, too.

Crawford: So he played keyboard—

01-00:12:23

Khan: Everything.

Crawford: Everything. Wind instruments? Brass?

01-00:12:27

Khan: Yes. Even bagpipes!

Crawford: How did he learn? What was his exposure?

01-00:12:35

Khan: He used to learn because he was in Calcutta when he was eight years old. Eight years old, he ran away from his house. And then he met Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansadev's disciple's brother. Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda is the disciple of Swami Ramakrishna. And his brother's name is Habu, it's a shorter name for Habu Datta. And he learned that at that time, Calcutta was completely under full control by British India.

Crawford: Yes.

01-00:13:42

Khan: So the musicians from Europe came to Calcutta. They have got a symphony orchestra, and he learned with them, all kind of instruments. Then my father found him. And he got my father all kinds of Western instruments and notations.

Crawford: And notations.

01-00:14:15

Khan: And notations, and then my father, from that notation, he made his own notations for Indian music.

Crawford: When was Indian music first notated?

01-00:14:29

Khan: It started not many, many years ago. I can say sixteenth century, it started a different way. Not in many details, just the wording of the song. And then you have to learn by heart everything [else].

Crawford: But the melodic lines.

01-00:15:04

Khan: Sometimes they didn't write and they didn't use the melodic line; you have to learn by heart that one.

Crawford: How much improvisation is there in the raga?

01-00:15:20

Khan:

Well, it's not improvisation, actually. There are three-hundred-sixty different kinds of exercises. Just like you have all kind of things, materials; you can make a house, you can make a car, you can make many things with those materials. So those exercises are good for any kind of music. Classical music. It's different here, classical music.

Once you learn, then you'll get the idea. First thing, this music, what I play, this is a music to give you peace to your soul. We have got two *atmas*. One *atma* is where we are talking about this and that. Then *param atma*, the other soul is on top of that. It is sitting there, like a Buddha. If you don't do right things, he won't say anything. If you do the right thing, then he will take you to the right place.

And the other one will say, "Ok, let's jump from the Golden Gate Bridge," and they will enjoy that. "Oh, sure, sure, why not?" Great fun in that. [laughter] But that *param atma* is the soul of the sound. Through this sound, you can reach to God. It's connected. It's like the ocean. And people say improvising. It's not improvising, because at least you learn three-hundred-sixty exercises.

Crawford:

Those are fixed.

01-00:17:38

Khan:

Those are fixed. And then you have to learn thousands and thousands of fixed compositions. What's left to improvise?

Crawford:

So when you are performing your work, it's the same. The tonalities don't change? The cadences don't change? Mary, go ahead and help.

01-00:18:00

MKhan:

Well, as far as Western perceptions of this, it's totally improvised.

Crawford:

Yes, that's what I'm trying to get to.

01-00:18:12

MKhan:

I know. But he's talking a little deeper. That if you've learned, let's say within one raga, you've learned many hundreds of compositions. And you've learned exercises all of your life, you know, so many patterns are just the similar patterns.

What he's saying is, what he used to describe to the students is, once you've learned so many compositions, as you're playing, you're unknowingly bringing out lines that you've heard so many times, and it's somewhere, but you're putting them together differently.

Crawford:

Yes, ok.

01-00:18:47

MKhan:

So that it's almost like he's saying, "How can you create something new, when there are so many fixed pieces? But you're putting it together. So in that way, you're improvising.

Crawford:

That's a very good distinction.

01-00:19:00

Khan:

And also, it's like a family. Sometimes you think about your grandmother, and your grandmother comes to your mind. So that many kinds of good sections of music, which is already composed, it comes out, and you put it the proper way. But you can say one way that you compose on the spot while you're performing.

Crawford:

That's what I wanted to establish. Exactly. Well, more about your family. Did you have a large family? I don't mean children, but I mean uncles and aunts and--

01-00:19:48

Khan:

Oh, yes, my father had five brothers. Five brothers, and their children and their family. And it's a big family. We had a very large family, and rich family. But my father lived in a small village. It's called Shivpor, in Bangladesh.

And at that time, all the *sadhus* [holy men] at the temple of Lord Shiva. The Lord Shiva [temple] somehow [they] established they'll bring him there, and then they want to move that old statue to Bangladesh. It's very big statue. It's called Tipara. Tipara, East Bengal. And in that state, after Emperor Akbar, Tipara was the king and he maintained the culture of all classical music; not only music, all good things.

And the other brothers, they've got so much land, and so many ponds, we don't need anything. Only we need to buy salt and some spices from market. Otherwise—

Crawford:

So you were self-sufficient.

01-00:21:53

Khan:

Yes. I mean, full of fish, full of chicken. Like a farm, there.

Crawford:

Like living on a farm.

01-00:22:04

Khan:

Yes, thousands, thousands. Each brother had the same number of things.

Crawford:

How do you measure it, in India? How do you measure the land?

01-00:22:17

Khan: Well, we have got, like—what do you call it—I can't think of the name of an acre. It is similar.

Crawford: I can find it, that's ok.

01-00:22:25

Khan: No, no, they say acre there.

Crawford: There was a lot of musical activity? Your uncles were in music?

01-00:22:35

Khan: No, no, no, this was at the temple.

01-00:22:38

Khan: In that temple, all the kinds of *sadhus* used to come and sing there, all the prayers and everything. And my father was supposed to go to school. And he always left on time, and his parents know that he is going to school. But he always goes to temple and sits down there and listens to their music all day.

Crawford: Ah.

01-00:23:16

Khan: And when this school time was over, with the other group he came home. Then the headmaster says, what happened to him? They talk to his father, "I didn't see your son come to school. Is he ok?" "Sure, he's ok. He goes to school."

So then his mother advised to his father that, "Better you go to check." And when he went to school, he's following from far away, and going to this side was the school, and the temple, to that side. He was all day there. And also playing tabla with them. My grandfather also learned music from the same family of the sixteenth century. My grandfather liked it. "Good, very good." But he had to say something to his wife that it's true. He doesn't really go to school. He likes music.

Crawford: And it was all right with the father?

01-00:24:57

Khan: His father.

Crawford: With his father?

01-00:25:00

Khan: Yes, his father. My grandfather. But my grandmother was very, very annoyed, really angry. Very short temper. The whole village—she's like a Hitler. The whole village, the people were afraid of my grandmother.

Crawford: Of your grandmother?

01-00:25:24

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Why?

01-00:25:26

Khan: She was short-tempered. She beat anyone. And short, also.

Crawford: Short but strong. Did you have a very strong relationship with her?

01-00:25:39

Khan: I never had a chance to meet her.

Crawford: You didn't know her. You only know her through your father.

01-00:25:50

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: What about your mother, Madina Begum? What are your memories of your mother?

01-00:25:53

Khan: My mother's memories, I remember them. We had a family, it's like a blessing. For example, my mother's mother, she's also a saint. They are like a saint family. So she was also a saint. My mother told me that when she was a small baby, in the night, when they go to sleep, then that the cobra snake comes out from her [mother's] hair, two or three, like that. So they always stay in my grandmother's hair—

Crawford: That your grandmother had cobras in her hair?

01-00:27:04

MKhan: Snakes. She had matted hair.

01-00:27:07

Khan: Yes, yes, *real* cobras.

Crawford: They really believed they were cobras?

01-00:27:10

Khan: They are cobras, yes.

Crawford: And did that give her her personality?

01-00:27:17

Khan: It's like that. Always we had a cobra in my father's house, also. I played some time with them, and they're so big. They've got a red mark here, the king cobra. And always, my father and mother, they used to follow, once a year, the Cobra Day. The whole of India, they feed cobras milk, in a silver a cup or

a golden cup, and make a nice festival. And then one person calls the cobra, the king cobra. The cobra comes.

My mother used to do like that, and I always stand behind my mother. My father never goes out at that time. My mother goes behind the house and used to call, “Here cobra-baba, raja-baba, cobra-baba, it was the father, please come and have your milk.” And he comes. He was very long, when I was young; and then it becomes shorter and shorter. And he’s got a mustache. And he’s got a nice mark, a *tilak*, like that. And he’s got a stone also. In the night, the light comes from the stone, and then he goes hunting.

Crawford: Is there a relationship between the cobra and music? Is it true that you played music to the cobra?

01-00:29:08

Khan: No, no.

Crawford: No. Well, what was the idea of feeding the cobra milk?

01-00:29:14

Khan: The idea is because they are all saints, another kind of saint.

Crawford: They’re also holy.

01-00:29:20

Khan: Nothing to do with the music. But somebody, my grandmother—yes. So to stay there in the night they used to come out and my mother used to get scared. Grandmother she told her, “No, it’s nothing really. They’re not going to harm you. They’ll just take a little fresh air and then go back again.”

Crawford: What a story!

01-00:29:48

MKhan: The snake line, you know, of spiritual people, on his mother’s side. So it was passed on.

Crawford: Because there’s a holiness relationship.

01-00:29:59

MKhan: Right. Spiritual.

Crawford: Spiritual relationship. So when you say that your family was saint or sainted, how did that develop?

01-00:30:11

Khan: It developed because my family are seventh generations, actually, in Bangladesh. The great-grandfather was the last one. We were Hindu, not Muslim. Brahmin, pure. High-class Brahmin, seven generations back.

Crawford: Your family was not Muslim.

01-00:30:46

MKhan: Originally [Hindu].

Khan: After that, then we're Muslim. I'll tell you the story. [Great-grandfather] was a kind of saint. A devotee of God. We call *sadhu*.

And then his wife died, and there was no one in his family who stayed there. He wanted to leave. But he's got one son. Only one son. One son, and he gave all his properties and house, land, ponds, whatever it is, to friends or to poor people.

And one friend is a very good friend, he gave his son to him. And said, "He's too young. Where I'm going, I can't take him now. So please, you keep him with you. And if you send him to school so that he grows up, please bring him to me. You will let me know."

And he went to the state, Bangladesh's biggest state, Tripura, like the capital of Bangladesh, Tripura. The British, they used to call it Tipara. East Bengal. Tripura. And the king was just like Emperor Akbar. He was almost like that. All the artists, musicians, painters, all the court musicians of this king. He went near to his village, to the mountains. Seven mountains, big mountains and there were seven mountains together. High mountains.

And there were thousands and thousands of what we call Kookies. They don't dress. And they eat human bones, human meat. Any meat. Even if their father died, they'll eat him also. Very uneducated there.

Crawford: They are cannibals.

Khan: Yes. And he was going to this [place]. He's finding some nice, quiet place. And they found one very old, broken in half, damaged, one temple. Mother Kali temple. And then he repaired that. And then he made a statue of Mother Kali. That is a lady goddess.

And these Kookies, there are thousands and thousands, they used to come, the old men. They want to kill him, eat him, you see. But anyhow, they have not so much courage or something.

But when he comes, he calls them and gives them some food. This kind of thing. And then he used to sing prayers. And when he sings prayers, they used to like that music, so that slowly, slowly, one man to thousands and thousands of Kookies, they come down and sat down, that particular time, and are listening. He's praying to Mother Kali, doing all kind of things, and they're watching.

They are not allowed to come down from the mountain to the city. Only once a year, they come with fruit to give their respects to the king. And so that day, all the citizens of the big city [are] ordered to stay in their house and close their doors for twenty-four hours.

Crawford: Because they were coming down from the hills.

01-00:36:15

Khan: Because they'll eat them. So anyhow, once a year, they would come like that to this land. So then after some time, his son, a little grown-up, was going to school. And then he learned six or seven kind of different languages. Sanskrit.

Crawford: What is the son's name? Can you give me the son's name?

01-00:37:04

Khan: Yes, the name—what it is?

01-00:37:15

MKhan: He has it written.

Khan: I didn't remember—Dinanath. Dinanath Devasharman. Devasharman is a Brahmin title. Just like Khan. It's like Banerjee, Mukherjee, a Hindu name, Hindu caste. So Devasharman is the highest Brahmin. A kind of priest.

So he learned all these languages. Seven languages he learned by this time. He was like eight years old. His friend was also very old, and he could die any day. And he knew where to go. And by the time those Kookies, who eat people, they know Dinanath Devasharman is coming, a small boy. They didn't disturb him, they let him come. They also guard, so that nobody can come to the mountain.

So he said, "I'm old now. Now you give me responsibility, whatever I can do." Because he has not only responsibility, also property, money, everything, and whatever he needs for education, he gave to his friend. You have nothing to spend from your pocket. Just look after him, send him to the right place.

Then he became known, and he started his study there. And then his father also is a very learned pandit. The very highest. Then he studied all these languages. He taught him over seven languages. Writing, talking. And then those Kookies liked him. They liked him. And they became like a family. So they request of his father that, "Can he go with us and play with us?" He says, "Sure, go." Then they also started liking him and saying he was the right person to become a leader. So he became a leader.

Crawford: Of the Kookies.

01-00:40:16

Khan: Right. The Kookies taught him how to fight. And they used darts. What do you call that? Darts. So they were expert in that. In that time, British came to India, and the *Zamindars* [landowners] started giving trouble to the citizens in all places of India. And they started taking too much tax. Taxes and that. And the poor people, they have to give everything, and they're not poor, but they have no money, they have to eat themselves.

So at that time, one lady in history, her name is Devika Chaudhurani, was the leader to save these people, like that, to do something. She wants powerful men, and my grandfather she selected. And there are others, four or five members, they are so strong. And she always toured in the boat. Big boat.

Crawford: Who was this woman?

01-00:42:18

Khan: She was some queen.

Crawford: Not a goddess, but a queen.

01-00:42:24

Khan: A queen. She was not a devotee or anything, but she wanted to fight with the British.

Crawford: We're talking about colonial times.

01-00:42:34

Khan: Yes. So, at that time, my grandfather becomes like a Robinson.

MKhan: Hood. Robin Hood.

Crawford: Helping the poor.

01-00:42:54

Khan: Yes. When everyone is sleeping he puts money under the pillow and disappears. Nobody knows who gave the money. But the poor people are getting their good money. They became a big gang. And then war started. Then he got more military men, from those Kookies.

Crawford: How are we spelling Kookie—Is it K-U-K—I? [Kookie or Kuki is correct]

MKhan: I've no idea.

Crawford: I'll write it phonetically and we'll look it up later.

01-00:43:23

Khan: Yes. Yes, these people eat the human body. They eat always their mother, father, when they become old. They put them on some roof, then from there they push them and they fall down, and they—

Crawford: Alive?

01-00:44:04

Khan: No, no, they say if we're born from them, why should we throw them out? We'll keep them inside.

Crawford: Reborn?

01-00:44:15

Khan: No, it is more—

MKhan: It's more like recycling.

Khan: Then they put their mother and father in their body. Because they kept them alive. And now their body will go in the earth for nothing—

Crawford: This is not symbolic, this is real.

01-00:44:31

Khan: Yes. Right.

01-00:44:33

MKhan: A number of cultures do this.

Crawford: Reverence for ancestors.

01-00:44:40

Khan: You will find in Calcutta. I forget the name now, but it's in the book, all the names. They're all the helpers of Devika Chaudhurani. There's a big war, and everything, and the British started catching them, killing them. The British killed many people.

One time, my grand grandfather was in some mountain and many, many feet down was the Ganges. And he was hiding there, standing there. And some bullets came and made him wounded. He could not control himself, and fell down from the mountain, to the water. Then how many days he was in the water, he doesn't know.

Then after some time, he found, when he came to his senses, that a very old man—very old, maybe ninety or a hundred years—he used to come every morning and evening near the Ganges, to walk on the side. He's the highest Muslim, Sayed, and he had a granddaughter. So he saw that my grandfather had fainted and all that, but he was a Hakim, also. Healer. He said he's still alive. But he can't carry him.

Then again he went, not so far, to bring his granddaughter, and both of them carried him. Also, he was the number one Muslim in the caste, because there are one, number one, number two, number three, like this. Sayed, Patan, there are so many names I forget now.

MKhan: The fellow who rescued him from the side was Sayed, a Muslim of the first caste.

Khan: And my great-grandfather was a first class Hindu. He was Brahmin. But after six months, he became ok, and then he said, "Thank you very much. Can I go?" He says, "Of course you can go." And he left home, their home, and she's a beautiful girl—she's grown up by that time. It takes three years to—

MKhan: Heal him.

Khan: And he left in the morning, and by the evening, again he comes back. And says, "I'm sorry, I didn't say thank you." But he said, "I'm very ungrateful. I just said nothing. I didn't give you any thanks, and I didn't do anything for you. Now I'm ok. What do you want me to do?" I am agreeable for that. Then that old man knows that the young girl likes him, the Muslim girl likes him. The grandfather knows. Also, he was the leader of that village; of all Muslims, the highest priest. And everybody respected him, like next to God.

Then he requests, "If you want to do something for me, then I'm getting old. I have no one behind me. I have no one after her—after me, there's no one to look after her. Do you like to marry?" "Oh, sure. Whatever you say, I'll do it."

Then he says, "You are a Hindu?" He says, "Yes. A Hindu." "You have to become Muslim. Can you do that?" "Sure. Because you saved my life." Because he was also first-class Hindu, and he was also a first-class Muslim.

Then they get married. And again he went to his gang [for] sometime, not so much. And he's got many, many properties, many, many money, [much] jewelry. Like emperor of money. Then he died, the great-grandfather, and then they have a kid. And that way, we become Muslim.

Crawford: What a wonderful story. It's probably more complicated than you've told me, but you can embellish it later. So your family then, was Muslim. The music isn't religion-based at all, is it?

01-00:52:54

MKhan: Yes, there's nothing about religion in the music at all.

Crawford: Well, that's an hour. That's probably a good place for us to stop today.

Begin Audio File 2 04-24-2006.mp3

Crawford: You told me your father did not allow you to talk.

02-00:00:00

Khan: My father never allowed me to talk at all. He said, "Don't use your voice for anything except music. Just try to understand, feel what is the music note." If I

call someone, he will come and beat me. “Why are you shouting? Why are you calling someone?”

So I was not allowed. And when I went to school he said, “Don’t talk.” So even when I was twenty-five years old, thirty, I could not talk so much. I can feel. I can understand. But whenever I want to talk, I always mess up.

Still, I started teaching here and in India, then naturally I have to talk. So by just talking, what I can say now, something sometimes will come wrong, because I have no habit from my childhood.

Crawford: Does it bother you to talk, because of your father?

02-00:01:27

Khan: No, from that then I say it’s very nice because when you don’t talk, you talk inside so much. It’s a good thing. You feel many things inside. And when you talk, then you get only one thing, what you talk. [laughter]

Crawford: That’s interesting. Not our way of thinking, so much as your way of thinking. But why was that? Is that general in Indian education? Or was it because of the focus on music?

02-00:02:05

Khan: The focus on music, because if you don’t talk, you keep your mind very neutral, peaceful. Then slowly, slowly, you start thinking good things. It comes in your heart, your soul. You start getting new, good things. And when you talk, then you can lie, also. And a little this, a little that, little tricks, and make you more monkey and monkey. [laughter]

Crawford: So has that been a lifelong practice?

02-00:02:52

Khan: No. No, no. My point is that when I talk, sometimes I have to think how to talk. And I have to tell you. Because when I talk [to] myself, then I don’t need to tell me what I am talking.

Crawford: Talking diminishes thought. And peace.

02-00:03:20

Khan: Yes, talking, I have to compose. It’s like cooking food, going shopping, hunting this, killing this, then cooking, then serve, then eat. So many processes. It’s like that.

Crawford: You didn’t have any extraneous activity in childhood.

02-00:03:44

Khan: Yes. In music, I can talk like anything. With music, I don’t talk, just comes out. And I become a listener. I listen. Somebody talking, I listen. I listen, but sometimes in talk, I found many things are out of tune. [laughter] When

people are talking. Very out of tune. But in music, the first thing, you should not do [it] out of tune.

Crawford: Well, let's talk about your schooling, if we could. Other than music, what lessons did you have at home?

02-00:04:47

Khan: I used to go to school. I did my matriculation up to the 10th class. And after that, my father thought, and he didn't like that I should go to college and this and that. My father liked to travel, to go to Bali and this and that. So I wanted to become the principal in the palace, a small teacher, and then he gave me eight hours, sometimes twelve hours, sometimes six hours practice. There was no limit time, because my father is getting old. He lived a hundred and ten years.

Crawford: I know.

02-00:05:51

Khan: My mother lived to a hundred-five. My sister lived over a hundred. And now my young sister is alive. She's five years younger than me.

So sometimes in the night I'm sleeping, and my instrument is next to my bed. I was on the second floor this side, and the other side is quite far away, but if you keep the door open, then you can hear. My father's voice is like a lion. So big voice. And then one time, "Ali Akbar." At once, I take my instrument and I have to go slowly a little bit because steps are there. Then, "Ali Akbar," two, and before he's going to say, "Ali Akbar," I was just there with my instrument next to my father. And if third time he'll call, and he doesn't get any answer, he'll come. He'll come to my room and start beating. Nothing else. So that's the kind of punishment. I'm not allowed to talk. Even if I'm not allowed to talk to my mother. I'm not allowed to talk to *anyone*, just practice, practice. He will say, "Well, what do you want to say? All night you'll talk?"

Crawford: This must have been hard on your mother.

02-00:07:50

Khan: Well, yes. But at that time, the ladies have also that kind of training, they had from their parents. They have to keep quiet; The husband is like a god. There were many good things and bad things there. But my mother always balanced everything very nicely. Food. All kinds of luxury food. She used to spend money. Meat, chicken, we ate lamb, vegetables, sweets, fruits. Everything there. But eating time, five minutes. By that time, we all get up; otherwise, he will beat you on the spot. Throw all your food on the floor. His temper, he's so short-tempered because he suffered, because he wanted to learn music and his teachers tortured him.

Crawford: Your father was short-tempered.

02-00:09:10

Khan: Because of his teachers and whomever he met. He slept in Calcutta on the floor for many, many years.

MKhan: Because he had run away, he was just a small boy, so he had no help.

Crawford: And that would have been frowned upon, of course, to break the family tie.

02-00:09:33

MKhan: Well, also to have no money, no background, exactly. So he didn't get good treatment from his teachers.

Khan: So he suffered a lot. Because he loved music. And he wanted to get the right teacher, one teacher. But he has to go to two hundred teachers, and he learned two hundred instruments in this way, and after that, if somebody tells me to practice, if somebody says this word, I just think that I'll take this person and kill him on the spot.

MKhan: He hates to practice! [laughter]

02-00:10:29

Khan: Yes. I was so sick that I prayed something would happen. I had to play one program in Calcutta, and I didn't practice, and I just went and played. People said, "Oh, you played very good." There's no practice, nothing. So that is what I've done. My father knows that. He's so monkey. I got a nice job in Lucknow. Lucknow is a small city.

Crawford: Was that your first job at All India Radio?

02-00:11:06

Khan: All India Radio, yes. That was my first job.

Crawford: And your father?

02-00:11:11

Khan: So he arranged it. My father arranged it because my mother said, "What he's learned is ok, give him a little freedom." Maybe they were talking for years and years, and he agreed. So they called me to work. He went there and talked to the station manager. "Give him some job. Any job. Gate man or not even music. Or anything to clean or something."

Crawford: He was punishing you.

02-00:12:00

Khan: That way, also. And they said, "No, no, no. Your son plays very good. He can play, and he can compose for the orchestra." "All right, you're right." Then they said, "How much money shall we pay?" My father said, "No money, no money. No money." "Something." But he said, "Well, how much do you want

to pay?" So they said, "Five-hundred." "Oh, five-hundred is, too much. You will spoil him. A hundred-fifty." [laughter]

Crawford: He was a hard man!

02-00:12:50

Khan: Yes. And a hundred-fifty paid rent and food.

Crawford: Oh, you weren't living with your father. You were living in Lucknow now, yes.

02-00:13:00

Khan: He used to come every month there to teach and check what I'm doing. And he heard that most of the time I go, every day, from morning till night, midnight, just watching movies. But there's no work so much. I had to compose for the orchestra. They come for one hour. And some days I do broadcasts. That took half an hour. There's nothing to do. You sit down in the office.

Crawford: They were happy with you.

02-00:13:40

Khan: They are happy, yes. And of course, they all listen to me, love me. And I spend my time-- Sunday morning, I go to four movies--one in the morning, and then one in the afternoon, one in the early evening, and one late evening or night.

Crawford: Sounds like a lot of fun.

02-00:14:07

MKhan: And drink Coca-Cola.

02-00:14:10

Khan: And then there's only four movies in the whole town. So the same pictures I had to repeat.

Crawford: You saw them many times. You're telling me that you chose to do this, because you really didn't want to practice. You had practiced an awful lot.

02-00:14:31

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: What do you tell your students, then.

02-00:14:35

MKhan: "Practice!"

02-00:14:38

Khan: I say, “You should practice, of course. But make one limit; not too much.” Not too much. Sometimes my fingers, they started bleeding. And my father said, “Don’t stop. Play. Let them bleed. The doctor will make you all right.”

Crawford: Did your father feel that you weren’t disciplined, in the way that he was?

02-00:15:11

Khan: Not only me; he punished all his disciples very strictly, because the first thing, in those days, no good musician wants to teach, except if their sons are good and they’re all right, they don’t have any bad habits or anything, then they teach; otherwise they also don’t teach their own son.

So for my father it was very difficult to get a good teacher, and when he got a teacher, then he was so talented that he can learn two hundred compositions in one day. And he spent thirty, forty years learning. But to prove to his teacher how honest and sincere he is, it takes him five years. I appreciate everything, because in those days, he said there is no education. He didn’t go to any school, nothing. But he can himself play and start reading different languages except English.

He came to Europe, also, one time. Then he studied a little bit of English. Otherwise, he’d just bring the book and somehow figure out writing with a pencil. He spent the whole day doing that.

MKhan: One year when we all went to their family home, I took a very long archival footage of the house. Because his father actually built the house, also. He was like a Renaissance man. He could do just anything.

Khan: Anything. He was amazing. He could make a boat.

Crawford: He built the whole house?

02-00:17:21

MKhan: He built the whole house. It’s huge. And he just did so many types of jobs. And so I wanted to really take footage. I took all around the yard, the house, inside, outside. But we got into his rooms, which they’ve left intact. And one room is a greeting and teaching room. We have pictures. It stems from his father. The entire room is covered in photographs, which I meticulously shot. And then the next room is his sleeping area. Again, photos *everywhere*. And instruments. So many types. Because he played so many.

But there was a curtain. And I asked him, “What’s behind the curtain?” It was a door. So we asked if we could go in there. One of our sons, from a bag of keys, you know, got into the game of trying to figure out which key would open this big, old, fat lock. We get in there—and I have it all filmed really slowly—my children opened all the drawers and he had all these books that were writing books, that were filled with Hindi/English—like he’s saying—

practicing. He always taught himself. He was always learning. And drawers filled with odd things. He was amazing.

Khan: Very good gardener, also, farmer also.

02-00:18:58

Khan: Farmer, also.

MKhan: He did all the gardening. But it's very unpretentious. Very.

Khan: But he never killed any animals. What do you call that? Scorpion.

Crawford: He would not kill a scorpion.

02-00:19:11

Khan: No. No snakes, no scorpion. The snake used to come and listen to him while he's playing, eight or nine hours. He allowed everyone. Let them hear or not hear; they come to some kind of sound; they can feel it. And all the Maihar orchestra, the students, disciples and he ordered, "Don't kill them." So one time he was cleaning and cleaning dirt from the garden. And then the scorpion bites.

And it's still there, talking to him, "Stupid. You bite me for nothing?"

MKhan: Oh, instead of hitting him off, he let him stay there.

Khan: And he was talking to him. And slowly, slowly, he put him [on] the ground. And then he starts shouting to my mother, calling to us. So the other gardeners coming, they want to kill him. "No, no, no, no, no. Let him go. Let him go." And then he shouted. He had a hundred-four temperature. One week, he suffered. But more suffered us, because he's so short-tempered.

Crawford: Oh, because he was hurting. That's a very strong bite.

02-00:20:49

Khan: Yes. If any student comes and can't sing SA, he gives them one nice [slap]. He had a very strong hand. Some students, they have to stay in the hospital for three months.

Crawford: Your father taught you to the end of his life in 1972. He was a hundred and ten?

02-00:21:10

Khan: Yes, he was getting old.

Crawford: What was the teaching?

02-00:21:18

Khan: To learn, there are so many things. Because first thing, there are three-hundred-fifty exercises, and seventy-five-thousand melodies. Six seasons. And [for] each melody, at least you have to learn five-hundred fixed compositions.

Crawford: By memory.

02-00:21:51

Khan: Yes, yes. By memory, you have to learn. Then after that you can write it down for the future. But whenever you want to practice, you don't touch your book. And he will listen, and he will come and make you correct it. First, he will give you a nice slap, and then at once, everything comes into your mind.
[laughter]

Crawford: What was that?

02-00:22:22

MKhan: He says after a few good slaps, everything comes into your mind.

Crawford: If you're not getting it right. To correct that. Well, what did you do about languages, languages being an important part of the education? What was your first language?

02-00:22:39

Khan: My first language is Bengali.

Crawford: Bengali.

02-00:22:43

Khan: Yes, Sanskrit, Bengali, and then Hindi and English. That's the four languages I know.

Crawford: You learned your languages at school?

02-00:22:55

Khan: Yes, at school. My mother tongue is Bengali. At home. But I, of course, learned in the school. We have got teachers, Bengali teachers and school masters. And Hindi, English, and a little bit of Sanskrit. And then my father wanted me to become a kind of pure Muslim, and grow a beard, and go to mosque. And for that also, he hired a teacher to teach Koran. And that part, I never understand what to do. And I've done everything in front of them, and my father was very particular about that. He believed in all kind of religions. Christianity, Hindu, Muslim, all. All religions. He said, "God is one, but there are all these things."

Crawford: And was he a religious practitioner?

02-00:24:20

Khan: Not that kind of orthodox. Because it's only my father's place where any caste Hindu, pure Brahmin, Christian, Muslim, anybody comes and eats in our house.

MKhan: People that would not eat at—you know, if you're a pure Brahmin, you don't eat other people's food. You don't ever even drink water. But pure caste would still come to their house and partake in all of their food. Pure about religion. I mean, about spirituality, I guess you could say. Belief in God. But not secular, into a lot of different religions.

Khan: Because on one side he was so kind a person like I never see. Like one monkey fell down from a tree, and broke a leg or hand, something, and he was standing there asking people, "Can you please help this monkey?" "No. He'll bite me, he'll bite me." So he's waiting one hour; nobody helps. Then he carried the monkey himself into the house. Mother says, "Well, what is that? Oh my, he's a half mad fellow!" Then he put him nicely on the bed, then he went to the hospital, and said, "I want to bring a doctor. But he [the doctor] said, "I don't need to go. You take this medicine. You take this monkey, give him nice food." The monkey—

Crawford: Your father prepared all this for the monkey.

02-00:26:25

Khan: But the monkey wants to bite him. He said, "I'll also bite you." and then they become friends. Then he becomes ok, he can walk, he's eating nice food, nice fruit. And then he used to sit on my father's chair before you go to his room. And my father goes out. That monkey doesn't allow me to go in that room.

Crawford: How was your mother with the monkey?

02-00:27:01

Khan: We were ok. But the monkey didn't like my mother so much. But my mother used to feed him, also. So he was quiet, just watching the food, and then there's no water and he's looking for the water. My mother said, "Son, everything's ok." And we had birds in my house from outside. All in the night. Anything's happening, rain, they want shelter, they come to our house. And sit peacefully. And they get food, also.

Crawford: Your mother was tolerant.

02-00:27:53

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: How were your mother and father married? How did they meet?

02-00:28:02

Khan: That was an arranged marriage because my father ran away to learn music. There were five brothers. Then his mother and father thought maybe if they

bring him somehow and get him married, then maybe he'll stay here. So one brother, the elder brother, went to Calcutta and took a couple of months or a month to find him. They find him. Then he said, "Our mother and father are getting old and can die anytime. They want to see you, so come one time with me." But he doesn't want to go. But anyhow, then they say they're getting old. So he went and he saw nothing, nothing like that. They already arranged a marriage, and married done, and he can't say no to his brother. In our custom, who is one year elder than you, then you have to listen to everything he says. You can't say no.

MKhan: They tricked him.

Khan: They tricked him. But they got married. My mother was a little girl.

MKhan: He was only sixteen, and she was about eight.

02-00:29:54

Khan: Yes, something like that. She used to sleep with my grandmother. So one night they let them sleep together. Separate rooms. So she was a young, young girl. She's gone to sleep. And he took out all of her ornaments and made a packet and disappeared! To Calcutta. [laughter]

MKhan: Left her on the wedding night.

Khan: And bought instruments.

Crawford: He was not going to do this.

Khan: Afterwards he made it [up] double to my mother.

MKhan: Much later in life— She waited for him, through trying to remarry her. She waited and waited.

Crawford: Oh, so it was a long absence.

02-00:30:45

MKhan: Oh. He didn't actually reunite till he was about thirty. Until he had settled with his final teacher, who became his teacher, of this lineage.

Crawford: What a story.

02-00:31:00

Khan: So he left, gone again. They could not catch him. Anyhow, afterwards, my grandfather and grandmother died.

MKhan: Can I ask a question?

Crawford: Yes, please.

02-00:31:19

MKhan:

One thing that is, I think, so interesting for people is this music is so powerful, and being that you benefit from the power of music by playing it correctly, at the correct time, you had so many occurrences in your childhood that we would call sort of magic. Or unusual occurrences around music and the power of music.

Your father being such a serious man and such a serious musician, he had such energy around him and the house, that occurrences happened that weren't very normal for most families. And some of those stories are really interesting for people. I don't know if that's something that you want to share. Like Saraswati.

Khan:

He used to see them sometimes, and the goddess of music. They used to come and listen. He played for them. One story happened with Ma Sharda from the temple. Maihar is the place where my father was a court musician. So he was teaching the king only. The king hasn't got a voice to sing. His voice is like a donkey. But somehow he called some friend and his friend, and his friend. And he [Allauddin Khan] didn't know where he's sending him in the state. At that time the states, they have rules. The king can give an order for hanging anybody.

Crawford:

The king can hang anyone.

02-00:33:38

Khan:

Yes. The British, they gave this in some states. Maihar is one of them where many people hang. I have seen in my young age one or two. So anyhow, he said, "We want to give you a salary. How much you want?" He said, "I don't take money for teaching. And I never take money from anyone. Even one penny."

MKhan:

His father didn't charge.

02-00:34:21

Khan:

Or even one handkerchief. He will feed them. Ravi Shankar used to stay in our house. He'd feed them. They have soap, toothpaste, toothbrush....

Crawford:

He didn't need the money, because the family was wealthy.

02-00:34:37

Khan:

No, after my grandfather's death, everyone had taken their parts and became separate. But anyhow, he was there [in Maihar]. He said, "I don't take money, a salary, from anybody." Then he said, "All right, there's a temple," Sharda temple, a very, very strong temple. It has five-hundred, three-hundred steps to go up. Still eighty years- or ninety years-old ladies or man can go there.

MKhan:

It's a big pilgrimage temple now. Currently. Still.

Khan: So then he said, “Now you are my guru. I can’t pay you.” But Mother [Sharda] had a treasure—what do you call it—department of money.

MKhan: The temple.

Khan: “If he wants to give you some, then he said, that it’s ok.” So he didn’t take any salary from anywhere his whole life, only used to get those days, five-hundred rupees. And five-hundred rupees, too much in those days. Because in ten rupees, the poor people, with ten rupees, they feed their ten people for a month.

Crawford: Ten rupees.

02-00:36:32

Khan: Yes. So one rupee’s rice, so much, whatever they eat, the rice. So ten people for a month, it’s ok. So five-hundred is a lot. So he used to take that money from the temple, not from the state. The money came from the Sharda Mother’s treasury. And then he didn’t take a single penny from any student. All his life. Only when he performed, he never made any bargain. He’d say, “You don’t need to pay me.”

Crawford: He had no contract when he performed.

02-00:37:26

Khan: No. “Just send me a ticket, third-class. I’ll come in time and so you give me a place to stay, sleep. I’ll perform, and come back.” But those people were nice. They used to give some money.

Crawford: In the audience?

02-00:37:49

Khan: No. Other artists take their fee, complete fee. With so many students.

Crawford: Where did he perform?

Khan: All over India. Conferences. All over. The big states, rajas, kings wanted to hear.

Crawford: What part did the temple play in their life?

MKhan: What relationship with Ma Sharda’s temple? What kind of a relationship did he have?

02-00:38:17

Khan: My father, he became a devotee of Ma Sharda. Then after many, many years what I heard from my mother. The whole night, my father used to practice in his room. Not practice, play. We call it *Sadhana*, which is more than practice. It’s research. More than research. So he would do that. Four o’clock [in the morning] in summer time, my mother comes out from her room to go to

bathroom, and sees one day a very young lady with a red sari. Beautiful. Because at that time, the moon was there, the moon days. She's coming out from my father's practice and sleeping and library room and living room, and opens the door. And then, a big veranda is there and she is walking slowly, slowly. Very nice. Very nice-looking. And then opens the main door, then goes away. And my mother wants to catch her.

Crawford: She wants to—?

02-00:40:21

Khan: Catch her, you see?

MKhan: It was in the middle of the night.

Khan: With that lady. My mother was also a devotee of this temple. This temple it's still here and hundreds, thousands and thousands of people coming every day to the temple. And half of these people come to my father's tomb. Every day.

Crawford: Oh, at your house.

MKhan: He built a tomb for his parents on that property. We'll show you.

Khan: So she planned, oh, this old man is doing some monkey business, so from now on, the whole night, I won't sleep. I'll keep the doors open and when she comes, I'll catch her."

Crawford: This is one of your magic stories. [laughs]

02-00:41:24

Khan: Uh-huh. And months and months coming nothing happened. And full moon, something like that. So she's coming out, after listening to music. And my father, his tears were coming out and he's not watching when she comes and when she goes. Anyhow, she almost was going to catch her. But she disappeared.

Crawford: But she comes with the full moon?

02-00:42:04

Khan: [Over Crawford] No, she came out from my father's room, and music is going on. And then comes to the veranda. And then main door opens, and before my mother runs with this stick and everything and wants to catch her, she disappeared. What's it called? Disappeared.

Crawford: Vanished.

02-00:42:29

Khan: Yes, vanished. So then my mother comes to the real senses. After many, many years, one day she asked us, please see to my father, if he was [in a] good mood. "What is that girl that comes with a red sari in your room at four or five

o'clock. She comes out, and goes. I want to catch, I want to beat her, but I could not." Father said, "Oh, my God! You didn't beat?" "No." She said, "I didn't see. She disappeared." He said, "You don't know who? It was Ma Sharda." Then my mother sat down on the floor. My mother was also a devotee of the same lady. And so she said, "Please forgive me, forgive me. Ma Sharda, please forgive me." That kind of story does happen in his life.

MKhan: This was not a person who was in the body. It was a spirit. Ma Sharda has been there for centuries, in that temple.

Crawford: Their temple.

02-00:44:00

MKhan: It's actually a mountain. And on the top of the mountain is her temple. And then Maihar is around it. The town is actually around the mountain.

Khan: And there's a statue there. And the statue, she is not allowed to anybody to change to her dress, make her nude. When they go to temple, they put all kind of dresses [out]. She takes a bath and puts the old clothes near the door. And there're big locks, such big locks, and they open the door with a big key because all of the valuable things are inside. Jewelry. And take all the used clothes and sends them for washing. Nobody's allowed to touch her, or change her dress.

Crawford: This last story, I don't understand.

02-00:45:25

MKhan: The statues in India, they put clothing on them. And so they'll wrap the sari, and put jewelry on the statues. So he's saying that no one— So there are people who take care to take that clothing off and wash it, put on clean clothing. But with her, no one's allowed to do that, because her statue would be nude. So they would leave a pile of clean everything and lock the big gate. Because also jewelry's in there. People give it to the temple. So the main man would lock the door and leave. By next day, that clothing would be off, and the new clothing would be on. Every day. Still. Every day.

Crawford: What was your father's explanation about the woman in the red sari?

MKhan: I don't know if it needed an explanation.

Khan: She came to listen. To my father.

Crawford: She came to listen, ok. So that was enough for your mother. And your mother asked for forgiveness for--

02-00:46:26

MKhan: For her bad thoughts.

Crawford: For her bad thoughts. Oh, that's a wonderful story. So let's have some more stories like that. [they laugh] That's very important, I think. Very important to the history.

02-00:46:35

Khan: In my father's notebook is written. "To reach the goal for real music or for real anything in your life, you have to be born at least three to four times." So he already [was] born two times. And the third time he's going to [be] born. He liked Western classical music very much from the beginning. Always, he allowed me to hear Western music—Beethoven, Bach, Schubert, this kind of music. But no other kind of music. Not even Indian ragas from others, because you always hear something different, or the film music he hates.

MKhan: What was it about being born over and over?

Crawford: Rebirth?

02-00:48:03

Khan: Yes, yes. He's supposed to [be] reborn. So he came up to Europe, and then he gets the news from the king, where he was court musician. "Your son is not practicing. He's flying kites." [laughter]

Crawford: You started early with this practice. [they laugh] This non-practice.

02-00:48:34

Khan: At once he quits the tour [and goes] home. But at that time, there was no plane to go to Europe. He went by boat. So one time it happened in my experience, I remember. First I had something, typhoid or pneumonia, and cholera or something like that, and my father also had a spiritual teacher we call a saint. They are both very good friends. And he also came at the same time in Maihar. The name of the place, Maihar. The same time as my father. And they met somehow. And he actually went to that mountain, Ma Sharda.

MKhan: This is a different spiritual man, who became a friend.

Khan: And he lived a hundred-forty years. Also, he didn't die. He was telling, for ten years, all of his students, "Please put me in the room and close the door. Seal the wall.

Crawford: In other words, not burial. No burial.

MKhan: Alive.

02-00:50:31

Khan: He sat down like the Buddha. He used to do that you see. Many times, he leaves the body for one month or two months just lying. One student only comes and sees that [there are] no bugs, nothing harming. And in the night, all the tigers and lions come there. There are factual stories, and for twenty-four

hours he's got an oven and a fire with sandalwood, and so much fire. Like a heater. And all the tigers and lions and bears, in the night they use to come and surround him. And behind is a small spring water going on, natural. So when he wants to drink, he just pours a cup of water. And it's so beautiful, sweet water.

That way, sometimes one month, two months, they leave the body like that. And then he goes everywhere. Trilok, there's one lok, two lok and trilok with heaven. Ramakrishna Dev also done in the earth. Somewhere he used to go. So anyhow, he was to stay all day under the tree.

"And my father knows how to build a house." And then my father had about a hundred students of orchestra. It's called Maihar band. Maihar orchestra. So all the boys they built a nice simple house. And my father always, every morning, he goes up five-hundred steps to pay his respects to Ma Sharda, and down to come out. And then a lower height than the temple. We call him Rampur Baba. Rampur Baba.

Crawford: This is his name?

02-00:53:32

MKhan: This is this fellow's name. The Baba of Rampur, which is an area of India.

Crawford: Rampur, ok.

02-00:53:43

Khan: And he lived hundred-forty years; my father was a hundred-ten. So my father's elder brother, also, he's a devotee of Kali. Devotee of Kali. He can see Kali, he can talk.

Crawford: Did your father experience rebirth in his hundred-and-ten years?

MKhan: He was saying that he had already lived three times in music, and this was his fourth birth, his father.

02-00:54:30

Khan: The fourth, but he's going to [be] born in this country, he told me.

MKhan: Oh, that was his third.

Khan: And he's on the fourth one. So I don't know where he is.

MKhan: Oh, he's telling you that his father told him that he will be born a fourth time here in America. But he's telling you he doesn't know about it. Because he loved Western classical music so much.

02-00:54:56

Khan: So I had cholera, and the doctor said almost I was dead. The treatment was going on, the doctors were there whatever it is at that time, there were not

very high-class doctors. MDs, maybe not MDs. Then I was sick for months and months, and then all the students of my father's, they went to Rampur Baba and gave him a message. And also, he made me like his special guru. So I became like a disciple of Rampur Baba, too. And he loved me very much. Due to his blessing or I don't know, I don't remember, I [was] born.

And he always—every month, he wanted to see me, every week; my father used to take me. Then when I was sick the doctor said, “He's dead now. He's dead. There's no pulse, nothing.” So they told my father, and my father went to market to buy fresh white cloth to cover the dead body. And then my uncle, he was also a Kali devotee, he was there. He came and he made a few rounds around my body and put his right or left foot on my chest. And that time, my father was bringing that cloth from the market, and tears are coming because I'm his only son, but he can hear somebody singing. And Rampur Baba sent some white burning dust.

MKhan: Ash.

Khan: And told all the students to put it on my forehead, that's all. And he said, “He's not dead. Go see.” Then I just sat down and I start singing *Rag Megh*. *Megh Rag* is the king of the rainy season. My father could hear my voice and at once he threw the cloth on the floor.

Crawford: So were you conscious all this time?

02-00:58:26

Khan: I was dead.

02-00:58:27

MKhan: You don't remember any of it.

Khan: I don't remember anything.

Crawford: But no consciousness about a passage or--

02-00:58:35

Khan: No. Mother and all these hundred people, students, doctors—they are all there. They say he's dead. And it becomes three, four hours, five hours. Or maybe more. Then they said, “Now is the only thing, to bury him. That's why he went to get—

Crawford: They were ready to bury you, in the burial cloth.

02-00:59:02

Khan: In the cloth, yes. And then I was singing the song, but my eyes are closed. Nobody can look at anyone, there's such wonder. Everyone was shocked. And then maybe I opened my eyes, and then I don't remember

Crawford: Maybe they accepted it as death because you had been sick.

02-00:59:38

MKhan: Right. For a long time. He died. He was declared dead. No pulse for many hours. For many hours.

Crawford: When was this?

MKhan: How old were you?

02-00:59:48

Khan: Six or seven or eight or something.

MKhan: Only the last few years, maybe two years ago, his father left behind this huge collection of hand-written composition books. Right? Like a hundred composition books. I brought them back, with his help, about seven years ago. And we've scanned all of them. There were about twelve-thousand pages of Bengali. His father had been writing compositions. And one day, I brought out one of the books. And he just happened to open the page—about two years ago—and he said, "That's the second part of the song I sang when I died." He just went right to it. And I was so surprised, because that story, you know, was such an unbelievable story, that that could happen. But then that he could, so many years later—He said, "I never can remember the second half of that composition." [laughs]

Crawford: What purpose did that serve? There must have been some sort of destiny involved in the death and the rebirth? How did your father explain that?

02-00:61:23

MKhan: Did they think there was a reason why you died and came back? Or just not your time to go, or—

Khan: They didn't think like that? Those days, they didn't want to talk about those things to small kids.

And also, I never talked to my father, except yes and no. That's all. Whole life, two words. Only two words.

MKhan: It wasn't discussed around him.

Khan: Only two words. Only, I used to talk sometimes to my mother, to give this message to my father.

[End of Interview 1]

Interview #2: May 4, 2006

Begin Audio File 3 05-01-2006.mp3

03-00:00:00

Crawford: All right, we're recording. This is May first, 2006, interview number two, with Ali Akbar Khansahib. Good morning.

Khan: Good morning.

Crawford: It's a beautiful day here.

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: I wanted to start this morning by talking more about your parents. We talked about their temple, the temple in which the family was involved. And I wanted to ask you more about their religious practice.

Khan: I already mentioned that we are from Bangladesh. East Bengal. And our family, seven generations, up to seven generations or five generations, we are there. And then my [great-great] grandfather was a very great knowledgeable person. He actually knew seven different kind of languages, he graduated in that, and he was a kind of devotee. He was like a *sadhu*, saint. Our whole family is like that. And of course, music always was there. And music means, real good music, always you find the best people, really devoted and very, very neat and clean persons, you find the right kind of music there.

Crawford: The family had high status.

Khan: Right.

Crawford: They were not musicians?

Khan: They are not musicians, but that comes out because they did their mantras and this and that; everything they had to do for melodies—ragas in morning time, evening time, afternoon time. We have got twenty-four hours of different scales. Same scale, like a do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do, only these notes. We say Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni. So seven notes. And then [there is a] lower octave, middle octave, higher octave, and higher, higher octave. This higher octave is not possible for the voice. But at least we are going to find that on the piano.

Crawford: Not possible for the voice?

Khan: You won't get the natural sound.

Crawford: The tuning is the same in the West?

- Khan: Yes.
- Crawford: It's similar, in the basics, to the Western tuning.
- Khan: Yes. Yes. But the sounds we use Sa, Re and Ga in such a way they are flat and natural. And there are many microtones. And each time, every hour of the day, the microtones are changing.
- Crawford: The microtones are changing?
- Khan: Changing, like a sun. Sun is not in one place—the sun is always moving. According to that, all the microtones of those and these melodies they're also changing. This kind of music, you need at least to learn for forty years from your teacher; then you can understand a little bit. Not like a small, ordinary school, [where you] get a degree and some theory. But practical, they have no idea. The practical: just like you can see without glasses, eye glasses; you can read very clearly any small letter, the very, very small letter. You don't need microscope, nothing. That kind of ear and throat you have to train so that you don't need *anything*. You can see everything better than a microscope.
- Crawford: You told me that you were working on a raga for rain, or opposed to rain. Does that relate to the microtonal changes in the music?
- Khan: Yes, yes. I'm not working, it's already worked. In old times, whenever they really needed water somewhere, like Rajasthan desert, [because there was] no rain for a long time, then they sing all these melodies. They tune the vibration, microtones and the melody, in such a way that it is like a telephone number to dial to somewhere in India, or anywhere you see, person-to-person, then you can say hello. Like in the same way this old system by this note you can dial for the king of the rain. We call that *Megh Rag*. *Megh* means the king of the rainy season. But we don't believe nowadays because now in modern times, nobody wants to believe. Even in their mother, father.
- Crawford: You are talking about a breakdown of traditions.
- Khan: Yes.
- Crawford: Is this music related in any way to the Vedic hymns, to the temple hymns? Mary told me the other day the music is not closely related.
- 03-00:07:58
Khan: Actually, when God created this universe or something in heaven, the first thing he created was six ragas. Ragas means male. Rag. Nowadays, we always say everything is raga, everything is raga, everything raga. It's wrong. There are only six main ragas that he created, composed in such a way, that the

sound is coming are particular from your body, from your soul. From your body, from every corner, every part of your brain, that kind of thing.

That means you are giving real medicine with these sounds. So he composed six ragas. Rag means male and ragini means lady. And then he found his best disciple is called Lord Shiva.

Crawford: Yes?

03-00:09:28

Khan: Lord Shiva. You don't just jump into these songs—you have to learn at least three-hundred-sixty different kind of exercises for voice, just like yoga. Three-hundred-sixty. My father learned all these things, and taught me.

And then he learned from Brahma. Lord Shiva was the disciple of Brahma, Vishnu. Lord Shiva thought there's only six male [ragas] that will become experts. Because in those days, they are not so slow there, they can learn anything within an hour, you see. Not a year, hours or minutes or seconds.

Crawford: How do you deal with that personally, coming from this tradition?

03-00:10:54

Khan: Those exercises, those teachers and principles, how long you sleep, what you eat, what you think, everything including that. Because if we are thinking something, even to think about some movies, Oh, that movie is so good. And here you want to practice something.

Then the whole thing will be spoiled. Just like a carton of milk, and some dirty flies go inside, they spoil the milk. Then you can't drink it, you have to throw the whole thing out.

So those principles are very simple. Like clean water. It's very simple to find and drink. If you don't care, then you drink something wrong, and then naturally, your body won't take it. Your body is just like the pure Ganges. Like if you go to Ganges to clean their outside skin, but they can't clean it.

Brahma is the same. Ramakrishna Paramahansadev, my father met him, and Swami Vivekanand, my father met him, and also his brother Habu Dutta. He learned from him all kinds of music: Western music, instruments, all kind of Western music.

In those days in India, we had not so much Indian instruments improved, but the good instruments, we received in the British time. [British brought instruments to India around 1858.] Like a piano, cello, saxophone, bagpipes, everything. Everything's available, but only for music people can make, and mostly they can sing. And to sing you don't need any extra instruments because God has already given that to you, and you don't need any extra to waste.

Crawford: Let me ask your son, because he's sitting with us, how what you're talking about has been applied to your upbringing. And now that you're a student of music as well—

03-00:13:45

SKhan: About learning? Are you still comparing it to the gods when they were learning?

Crawford: Well, and talking about the idea of music fitting in with a whole disciplined life. What I'm thinking is your father is saying this is not found here.

03-00:14:05

SKhan: No. Well, I mean, if you compare it to how he grew up, when he was raised by his father, my life has been completely different. I mean, being born in America, I was given a lot more freedom by him and my mother. His father, his whole life was sacrificed. Everything that he could do, any free time was all devoted to music and studying and practicing.

I was distracted a lot. I'm kind of a late bloomer into this whole Indian classical music. I've been around it for so long, but I just didn't really catch ahold of it. I think maybe I was too close to it to actually see what I had here, just to see the opportunity I had to learn from such a great master. I've grown up with his teachings around me since before I was conceived.

You know, it's been around me my entire life. But comparatively to how he grew up, when it was a trained discipline, it's been different. I'm starting a little bit later. I've taken what he's taught me from outside of music and try and adapt it to my life. But with him, he didn't have any free time, so it's just like, you know, every second was devoted to practice. So that disciplined lifestyle is much different than mine.

Crawford: And he didn't try to press you?

03-00:15:26

SKhan: Force it on me? No, [for him] it wasn't a choice. He was born into the music, so it was immediately--from age three, that's when his first lessons were. And then on to now—he's eighty-four—it's been always music.

Me, he never forced it, because his father and him, it was a much different relationship. And he didn't want me to have any sort of ill feelings toward him. He hoped I would play, but kind of left me to choose for myself.

Crawford: That makes sense, doesn't it? Well, maybe we can talk a little bit about Kali. I think your father was a devotee of Kali. Was he?

03-00:16:14

Khan: My father was a devotee of every religion, and he gave to them in a very honest way, through music, when he was doing his job in Madhya Pradesh. The name of the place is Madhya Pradesh in central India, Maihar.

Crawford: Yes, that was the court where he was involved, wasn't it?

03-00:16:57

Khan: Yes, he was in Madhya Pradesh. There was one mountain like a volcano. And then many, many years [later], somebody find out that on top, to go there, they made people [climb] five-hundred or six-hundred steps to reach that.

Crawford: This was a pilgrimage temple, was it?

03-00:17:44

Khan: There was a little hole, and you can't see anything. But some person threw some silver or a rupee or something in that hole and put his ear [to the hole], and after five or six days, he [could] hear the loud sound that the rupee coin made, like the gong [makes a gong-like sound].

My grand, grandfather, he was a devotee of Kali, which is a real devotee. And he knew many languages, five or seven. Like Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali, English, French, all kind of languages. He was a maestro of that. And he read them. And he would say, "When you pray, you need some music also. When you pray, in a serious way, very sincerely then they come.

They come, you can see them. And if they're really happy with your work, they give you a blessing. And that is the award. That is the biggest award. And when you get that award, then you don't need anybody's award."

Crawford: Who was coming?

03-00:19:52

Khan: The gods.

Crawford: The gods.

03-00:19:54

Khan: Yes. God is one, but in so many, so many different ways.

Crawford: You have experienced this?

03-00:20:02

Khan: Hm?

Crawford: You have experienced this?

03-00:20:05

Khan: Yes, but in different ways. I have that experience when I learn, practice sometimes eight hours or nine hours, six hours. My father never left me alone.

Six hours sitting and checking every second. Every second. “It’s not right. This is not right. It’s not right, the way you did it.” Like that. Many, many years. More than twenty years.

And then to make the right melody, you can play the notes, like you can make a medicine, but if you don’t know the proper measurement and proper this, proper that, what to put in that, then medicines don’t work.

The same way [with] these microtones, these music tones. The time, because one sun, they don’t stay in one place, one place. You can see sun rising different ways. So all the microtones of each note, like do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do. So first you fix the “Do.” It’s like a sun or god whom you believe. And from there, you start. From there, you start. And then because that is your goal, from there you start going up and up and up, and then down and down and down. Then the sun sets.

So for each hour, we have a different kind of melody, raga. We call rag. Six ragas, and thirty-six raginis. Six ragas means male melody, which were created by Brahma, and he taught Lord Shiva. And Lord Shiva made six females for each raga, [which] becomes thirty-six. And when it becomes thirty-six, then their family. Each raga is like that for rainy season. So from six ladies they have daughters, granddaughters, son, and this and that. Came out total, from six ragas, seventy-five thousand [melodies].

Crawford:

Whoa!

03-00:22:34

Khan:

Seventy-five-thousand. Lord Shiva used to play dumaru’s and all kinds of things. And there are hundreds of them. Not only six, not only sixteen, or not full beats but two-and-a-half, three-and-a-half, eight-and-a-half, it’s gone up to hundred-ten, the last one. The last one, you could count a hundred-ten. Like Brahma Tal. It happened thousands, thousands years before. Nothing new. But what happened thousand, thousand, thousand, million years, and like that, we are missing all these things. But somehow in one family, my father was only the last one. And I’m the only son. And my sister.

My sister got married. But my father wanted to give me that learning that I have done my whole life. My father lived a hundred-ten years. And there is no single day that he is not giving the music, all the time thinking, teaching, playing, composing. Teaching not only me. I learned from him when he was even seventy or eighty years old. I used to learn from him every day, even eight hours.

Crawford:

All his life, practically.

03-00:25:30

Khan:

Yes. I had to learn from him sometimes eight hours, every day, every month, every year. A limited time, food. Best food, but only five minutes, we were allowed to eat.

Crawford:

You said you had only five minutes to finish a meal. I wanted to ask you more about that. But when you were practicing and he said, “No, no, that’s wrong,” he’s talking about the microtonal developments, ascending, that relate to the sun, no? What was wrong?

03-00:26:04

Khan:

No, no. Many things. Like, putting your finger on the nose.

Crawford:

Like?

03-00:26:13

Khan:

Like somebody who makes a statue and puts the finger, instead of [in the] finger place, on the nose. That is wrong. If there’s a melody, it’s like one note to another note, how will you go? It’s like you have to go by boat; or you can’t take boat, you can’t take plane, you have to walk one mountain to another mountain, then you can reach to that particular place.

Ragas are also like that. How should I say? Some people’s noses are so sharp that they can smell everything. And they can tell you at once. And some people’s eardrums are so sensitive that they can hear sounds coming, different kind of sound, and can tell you the direction, it’s coming up south, or north. From this room, from that room.

So that way, you have to train the whole thing. Twelve hours, six hours, nine hours, every day you have to practice, and must not hear any outside noise. Even birds. Close all the windows, everything, keep nice place to get fresh air to come into your room.

Even when you’re practicing, you should not stop whole thing. Eat with one hand, and play with the other hand. Then change the other hand that’s practicing, put in your hand, and practice. To take something, water or something, use the other hand.

So nonstop, like a heart, you can’t stop. The music sounds, it’s like that. Sometimes I feel that [when] I’m performing, the first thing when I go to a stage, I feel where I am—who are these people? And I have to play for them. What shall I play? I become so nervous, and then my meditations, my ragas, my teacher, God--and after five, six minutes, then I’m in the audience.

Crawford:

Are you with the audience?

03-00:29:33

Khan: I just think that I'm also becoming the audience, and I'm listening to this music.

Crawford: Is there anyone else but you who can practice that way today? Who lives that way today?

03-00:29:45

Khan: No. My father was like that.

Crawford: I know your father was. Your father eventually gave you a special title, I think.

03-00:29:56

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: When did he do that?

03-00:29:59

Khan: Everybody is giving titles, government giving titles, many people getting titles, and according to the sources they can reach, they can get a title. My father used to always to tease me, "Oh, the maestro is coming, the maestro is coming, the doctor is coming, doctor is coming. Doctor of music. Maestro of this." And all the audience is sitting there. It was such a situation, at that time. He's going on, going on, going on.

Then one day, after many, many years, one day he was alone and we don't [often] have a chance [to be alone] except with music. Always there are some people, some students, some disciples.

One day, no one's there. It's evening time. He used to do *namaz*, pray five times to God. That is the evening, after sunset. And then he says to me, "Hey, Ali Akbar, come here." So I say, "Yes sir."

I [had] never seen my father's eyes. Always my eyes are down. He's so powerful that you can't take it. It's always like that, "Yes." There is no "No." Whatever you can do, you have to say yes, and you have to do it. If you can't do it, then he will help you to do it.

So he said, "You got so many the titles, 'Sangeet Samrat,' 'Bharat Ratna.' The government of India gave me 'Padma Vibhushan,' 'Padma Bhusan,' and there are many, many, many of those. They're all here somewhere.

So my father also, he has many, many funny titles [for me]. "He's not a human; he's a—what do you call it? 'Bhoot?'" "Bhoot" means nobody can see him. That kind of title beyond. Just like there is no word which you can say impossible, that is his character. There is nothing in this world which you can't do.

Crawford: There's no impossible. Nothing is impossible?

03-00:33:38

Khan: Everything is possible. Everything in life. So he says, "All right, I'll give you "the Emperor of the Melody" [*Swar Samrat*]. And that was a great honor for me.

My mother was sometimes--she's not allowed to interfere for anything. He's beating me, or eight hours no food, nothing. Some days, one line I could not play, no food. He said, "If you make it just now, you'll get your food."

And it sometimes took me eight hours and I never slept-- I used to think that he is getting older, and also, maybe he can't hear so clearly. And also he can't see so clearly.

I am doing ok. I can hear ok. He said, "No, no!" It took me twelve years to reach there. And after twelve years, he told me one day, "Yes, now you are reaching that place." Still he said, "No, you've not reached." [laughter]

Crawford: But you got something to eat when he approved.

SKhan: It's *Rag Marwa*, yes?

03-00:35:23

Khan: No, no. It's one raga, it's the microtones. It's like do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do. The "do" is fixed. The fifth note, also fixed. But according to the other notes, they have microtones.

Crawford: Oh, the first and fifth do not have any microtones.

03-00:36:00

Khan: They are just like earth.

Crawford: We were talking about improvising, and it's not the Western way of improvising.

03-00:36:09

Khan: It's not improvising, actually. Everything, you have to learn by heart. And everything by heart, and you don't read books. Your soul becomes the book.

Crawford: Yes.

03-00:36:22

Khan: You don't play anything new. It is just playing like a book, but the book's inside. It's like you love someone, then you don't need his picture all the time in front of you. You will just close your eyes, you will see that way.

Crawford: Let me back up and talk about your work at Jodhpur, that you told me the other day, which you took in 1944.

You told me your father was not happy with your practice and so he got you a job at Jodhpur, right? As the court musician. What did that involve? Was it difficult for you to leave and go settle there?

03-00:37:12

Khan: No, no, no. My mother said that all the time he is here—I'm the only son—I can't go anywhere; if I have to go, I have to go with my father.

Crawford: And no arranged marriage for you.

03-00:37:32

Khan: It was arranged.

Crawford: Oh, there was one.

03-00:37:35

Khan: Arranged marriage, but not for me. Because my mother's getting old, and my sister died, and she was feeling lonely. Therefore, with arranged marriage, you can get a girl.

Crawford: A daughter, but not a wife so much. How old were you?

03-00:37:56

Khan: Well, I was sixteen.

Crawford: Sixteen.

03-00:38:00

Khan: My mother said, "Send him to some other town for a few days." Then I was in Lucknow, A place in India, U.P. [Uttar Pradesh], a very nice place full of art and artists. And then so my father said, "All right." So he took me there and he used to broadcast from there every three months. And everybody respected my father very much. Anywhere he goes in the whole town, when he goes people stand up and touch his feet like a father. Like the church father, that kind of feeling.

So that officer of that radio station, All India, it's called All India radio or broadcasting, All India Radio. And he said, "Can you give some job to my son? Because his mother says that he's very bored that he's always in the same house." So they say, "Yes, sir. It will be a great honor to have your son. What will he do?" He said, "He can clean your floor and [laughter] like that. Clean the pictures and—And sometimes he will play music. Maybe he can help you for that." "Oh, no, sir."

Then he said, "How much pay can you give to him?" The station director, he was so nervous. At that time, like five-hundred dollars per month. A lot.

He said, "Five-hundred rupees." My father said, "No, no." And he shouted. "You'll spoil my child. Give him only a hundred-fifty." A hundred-fifty, you

only will give to the gateman, watchman. He gets that kind of salary. It's a very, very low-class standard. He said, "No, he will spoil." A hundred-fifty also is enough for me. But I'm used to that, because it is the first time in my life, I am free. And I used to see four movies every day.

Crawford: You told me. [laughs] And he didn't approve of that, when he found out.

03-00:41:29

Khan: Then he found out. And then he wrote everywhere, everywhere which king likes music, all the time to hear music. At that time, they didn't have any long playing recordings. In Jodhpur there was a young boy, young king, and my father can go to any state and get very special attention, because he didn't sit with the other people. There's one chair for my father; one chair for the king, that way. And other officers were on this side.

And at once, he sent me a telegram, "Pack your things and go to Jodhpur, and leave the job." At once I packed, I told the station director. The station director was also very [laughs] scared of my father. Because once he gets angry, he will beat anyone, even king.

Crawford: Really beat?

03-00:42:55

Khan: Yeah, with a stick. So short-tempered. So I went there, and then I found that that king had no radio, nothing, nothing. And I said something, but he wants to hear music every day, eight hours. So he found that this is the right place for me, where I can't get out. [they laugh]

Crawford: You had to work hard.

03-00:43:27

Khan: There were bodyguards there, and sometimes I want to go for a cigarette but the bodyguards don't allow me.

Crawford: Really? What was the setup in the court? What was it like?

03-00:43:39

Khan: The court, boring. [laughter] They don't understand music, but they are talking, and they will have five minutes rest. And then in the end, if you want to go to sleep, the queen is also there. Then at that time, he listened half an hour, and goes to fifteen minutes and then [makes snoring sounds].

Crawford: Oh, but if you stopped playing, he would wake up?

03-00:44:07

Khan: No, I don't stop, because the queen is still awake.

Crawford: And she's the Maharani?

03-00:44:13

Khan: She's the Maharani. She's still alive. Then she gives me a sign to please go to get some sleep. No tabla, nothing. Only my solo, very, very wonderful ragas. And once I get involved, then I play my own way, learning, practicing. And that [was what] my father wanted, actually.

Crawford: Did your father attend, ever?

03-00:44:56

SKhan: She's saying sometimes at the palace, was Dadu there?

Khan: Yes, many musicians used to come. I arranged music conferences there, then I want to build a college there, and I want to build a studio there, everything. Jodhpur was the biggest state, one of the biggest states of India, with a lot of money, everything. And so we planned everything. And then after that, independence come. All the kings say they have to give that all up, everything, and the poor fellow can't do anything.

Crawford: Everything was taken from the king?

03-00:45:51

Khan: Taken from him. Then after that, he died. The king died. Maybe politics matter, I don't know. I also didn't sign any contract, as every court musician did. But he gave me all the best titles in the court. When I used to go to any state, the king has to stand up for me. That kind of Hathi Swarupa, Palki Swarupa, that kind of thing. Then he will put on something gold and the whole state will know that your position is this.

Crawford: Oh, you wear something to indicate that you're attached to the king?

03-00:46:50

Khan: Like a passport.

Crawford: I see. What was it?

03-00:46:55

Khan: It's like a gold churi.

Crawford: Bracelet, or anklet?

03-00:47:05

Khan: Not for ladies, for men. On your leg. It's called *Sona Swarupa*. It shows the respect. So that if I'm going in a car or walking anywhere in the city, the whole crowd will stop, give me the road, and I'll go.

Crawford: Great respect.

03-00:47:33

Khan: Great respect. There are four. I got all the four. *Hathi Swarupa*, *Sona Swarupa*, *Palki Swarupa*, the last one is something else. And he also died, and

then I just took my car—I got a small car—packed my *sarode*, everything. And even I didn't tell anyone. But nobody asked me anyway, "Who are you?" In the gate, everything, bodyguards, guns all this, aiming to kill you. And they said, "Who are you?" I said "*Ustad*"—which means the king used to call me maestro.

Crawford: Yes. It's equivalent of maestro?

03-00:48:27

Khan: Maestro, yes. So I had to say, "I'm *Ustad* of Bapji, the king." At once they take out the guns and put them up, and open the door, hold the door.

Crawford: But the king had died when you left?

03-00:48:50

Khan: I was somewhere in Bombay, and that day I was on the train. And then the next morning, I was in Jaipur. Then on the radio, I heard that this happened. A crash, a plane crash. At once I left for Jodhpur because Jaipur and Jodhpur are not very far. But everybody used to love him. He was very nice, looking after poor people. And that day, actually, all the kings signed and gave all the states to the government. And he didn't want it. He didn't want to sign.

Crawford: That was a demand on the part of the British.

03-00:49:51

Khan: No, on the part of the—no, I don't understand politics so much. Maybe the British—maybe the Congress. Congress. Because at that time, they want to keep everything. And all these kings will get a salary.

Crawford: I see. They become civil employees, almost.

03-00:50:21

Khan: Yes, just like that. I don't know how the British do in London.

SKhan: The kings would end up working for the government, no?

Khan: Yes, the lands, tax, all goes to the government.

Crawford: I was going to ask you that, how the British affected your family. Or was your family not political?

03-00:50:56

Khan: No, no. At that time, my grand, grandfather was not involved. Because my grandfather had a temple in the mountains of Tripura state. Tripura, one of the biggest states in India, in Bangladesh. And there was one kind of people in the mountains, they don't any clothes, always nude. And eat human meat, human body.

Crawford: Oh these were the Kookies.

03-00:51:55

Khan: Yes. When their parents died, then they say, “These parents, our parents, why should we throw them outside? Because they brought us, and we also keep them in our bodies.” It was that principal of life. In that time, British came. And then all these things, *Zamindar* and all these, they’re all getting under control. I don’t understand politics much so I can’t explain to you very nicely.

Then my great-grandfather, who was a Kali devotee, who actually built a temple in the mountains, his son became the leader of all these Kookies, and he became against all this kind of thing that is taking money away from poor people, also. And then this grandfather was working like what do you call? Robin Hood.

Crawford: Like a Robin Hood, yes. Giving to the poor.

03-00:53:40

Khan: Poor, yeah. People of the city.

Crawford: So the impression was that the British were dealing with *Zaminder*. Did they hinder the music? Were the British hard on music?

03-00:53:55

Khan: Everyone loved music then.

Crawford: It was ok for women to sing, for instance.

03-00:54:04

Khan: Women—not at that time, so much, women singing. Like the queen and everything, they got their own players, they sing in their own palace. Not performing or—nothing like that. Those things came afterwards.

Crawford: They came afterwards. So after Jodhpur, did you go on to Bombay then?

03-00:54:31

Khan: Yes, Bombay. And then I didn’t ask my father at that time, and I got the offer. At that time, one of my friends was a very big film producer. He wants a music director, and then he heard me. He said, “Just compose this song.”

The poet was sitting there. I composed, and at once I got the job as a music director. And I made that old film, doing all background music, songs. And all the great, great artist singers, ladies voices and gentlemen voices, they sang. And it became very big hit in their mind. Then I get five pages of letter from my father. It said, “At once, you leave the job, leave film. Otherwise, I’m going to announce you are not my son.” Whatever. How would you say that? That he will declare that, “You are not my son.”

SKhan: Is there a special term for that?

Crawford: Maybe dispossessed.

03-00:56:15

SKhan: You can dispossess a child?

Crawford: Is that what he's saying, exactly?

03-00:56:20

SKhan: He's saying what his father said was, if he found out he was doing film music—yes.

Crawford: I see. Oh, we might say, "I'll disinherit you." But I'm not sure that's quite the same thing.

03-00:56:30

SKhan: He meant declare him as not his son anymore. Just like write him off pretty much, and just be like, "You don't exist anymore."

Crawford: Because film music was so low. [The films: Satyajit Ray's *Devi* and *Hungry Stones*]

03-00:55:38

Khan: Low, yes, very low. My father said, "You are going to hell now."

Crawford: How did you feel?

03-00:56:49

Khan: Then, because I was outside for so many years, I got the courage to write, at least write to my father. I wrote, "No, my idea that the classical music, these poor fellows, taxi drivers, cooks and the porters, they will never go to any music conference, and they'll never have a chance to hear real music. Actually, they go to see movies. And I'm using only classical way. Classical styles, serious styles, little lighter styles, that's all, nothing else."

So he said, "I'm going to declare that you are not my son." Then I didn't reply anything and was quiet. Then I left Bombay. He said, "At once you leave Bombay, go back to Maihar." So at once I left Bombay, but I didn't go to Maihar. I've got a car, and I drove to Calcutta. [laughter] Then I say, "Now I'm going to play a trick with my father." I opened a music college. So [he was] very happy.

Crawford: Very happy. Let's break here. That's the end of an hour, and I'll change the tape. Thank you.

Begin Audio File 4 05-01-2006.mp3

04-00:00:01

Crawford: You've just handed me a book that has the ten rasas of ragas, and they're listed by name and by the emotion that is expressed.

04-00:00:16

Khan: Well, there are more. These are the main rasas, but there are more. Just like Ramakrishna Paramahansaday, Swami Vivekananda, all the great saints. Many more kinds of rasas they created, or they learned. Other great, great things. There are many more different kind of rasas they created or they learned.

Crawford: Many more. But these are the basic ones?

04-00:00:50

Khan: But these are the basic ones.

Crawford: And how do you bring these into your music?

04-00:00:55

Khan: It comes due to the melody. Melody, you compose old-time. And the combination is just like how you make coffee. For example, coffee. Sweet, strong, mild. That kind of thing is how you build, make it up. And then the food also is, like how you make rice. One kind of rice, Chinese rice, Indian rice. So there is a way how to do it. So those are technical things will help you.

Crawford: Almost like a recipe.

04-00:01:54

Khan: Yes, like a recipe.

Crawford: Your son was in the class I attended yesterday, and said you were talking about wonder.

04-00:02:11

Khan: *Chamaskar*. Wonder.

Crawford: Thank you. So maybe he would express how that was reached. What was it that was remarkable about that session?

04-00:02:22

SKhan: Just how much he expressed it in the music. He sang a piece, and I sang one melody, and in a second, you felt wonder. It's very amazing to feel that expressed so vividly.

Khan: It's like what we call *chandra grahan*, *surjya grahan*, when Rahu comes and eats the sun, once a year. And it becomes dark for a second.

Crawford: Eclipse?

04-00:02:51

Khan: Yes. That kind of wonder. That is *Chamaskar*. But I don't like to see that. Many people don't like to see that, because it brings bad luck. And then the

grandmothers will make a comment, “That sun’s taken loan, half a penny, from that Rahu.” We call Rahu who eats. I’ve never seen that.

So, he made the rules, Rahu. “Every year, you get punishment for a second because you didn’t pay your loan taken from me, half a penny.” Same thing with the moon. My mother always brings the copper big plate, copper, puts water in that, and then says, “Don’t [look at it] straight.” It’s like an insult. Because it’s like an insult to the sun—therefore, they watched through the water and the plate.

Crawford: Don’t look toward the sun?

04-00:04:46

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Why would that be an insult to the sun?

04-00:04:49

Khan: Just like shameful, and disrespectful. Like somebody changing their dress, getting nude, and you’re watching.

Crawford: I see. A sign of disrespect.

04-00:05:08

Khan: And also, it can bring you bad spirits. It makes your body for some time sick and ill, but you don’t know. So the special copper plate, water, clean water, and then you can see very nicely, and also it will give the respect. And from that water and copper, it also will give you some kind of power [so] that you won’t lose power.

Crawford: This was a teaching of your mother?

04-00:06:02

Khan: No, I’m telling for everyone. My mother said all old people used to do in India, everywhere.

Crawford: Everywhere.

04-00:06:13

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Talk a little bit about your mother and how you related to her, in this very musical household.

04-00:06:21

Khan: Well, my father left when he was eight years old, as a young boy, to learn music. Because in the village, there’s no place to learn, and it was very difficult, because my father’s mother thought that he should go to school, then college, and become a doctor or lawyer or something, not musician. Because

they all night play music. They don't go to sleep, don't eat good food, all kind of things. And also it became fashionable. You needed the right kind of dress and all that.

Anyhow, my grandmother was very short tempered. And my father used to go to school every morning with the other brothers and other boys. And there was one Lord Shiva's temple there. And that Shiva is really the king of Tripura. Manik Bahadur was his name; he's an emperor, like the next biggest king, like Emperor Akbar.

Manik Bahadur had a dream that Lord Shiva wanted to be established, and he should go to this village where my father, grandfather had the house, and the property. Not only for him, but for the statue, a lingam of Lord Shiva, which was so big.

One day the king came. And he liked it, and he said, "No, don't put it in this small village. Bring it to the palace, I'll put it in the palace." They bring one hundred elephants to pull, and they can't pull. That means Shiva doesn't want to go there.

Crawford: Oh! [laughter]

Khan: It's a factual story. So from that place he left when he was eight, he left to learn music, because in those days, after the British, they think music's not too good and music spoils everything. These people drink, they smoke. That kind of [thing]. And after that, music becomes lazy. Singers, dancers.

Crawford: What caused that? The change to laziness and lack of discipline.

04-00:09:59

Khan: After British, no discipline. After British, after them [1947], when all the states finished, they kicked out all these musicians. And many kings have many queens. Like, three-hundred-sixty queens of Wazid Ali Shah of Lucknow. Lucknow is one of the biggest, wonderful cities. So many, three-hundred-sixty or three-hundred-something. How many days in a year?

Crawford: Three-hundred-sixty-five.

04-00:10:45

Khan: He married three-hundred-sixty-five. And like that, many other kings, they have ten, or twenty, and they have their own children. And when Aurangzeb came, the last king, he was a very great lover of music. But he can't tolerate that it be treated in such a way because in the night [there were] parties, so he ordered that they burn all the instruments and kill all the musicians. And all the queens gave them money and sent them away.

Crawford: Who ordered this?

04-00:11:44

Khan: Aurangzeb.

Crawford: He was the last king.

04-00:11:46

Khan: Yes, he was a king. But he was not nasty, but other people say he was nasty, but he was a very, very nice person, a nice man. But he didn't like that music should be used like that, given disrespect. You see?

Crawford: I understand, yes.

04-00:12:06

Khan: But he also loved music, the minister. Everyone loved music. So the minister planned something and made a trick with the king. He said, "I'll do one thing. I'll bury all the instruments." Then nobody can take [them]. And these queens make some budgets, some money, and give it to them, and send them out of the state. He didn't want to kill anybody.

The musicians would not have their hands broken if he would do something like that. Then he planned one year more than thousand instruments, and very privately, told to musicians, put a number and made a big grave. Number one, number two, number three, put like that. He made a big procession that the king should see: "If he asks me I will tell him this is a funeral of instruments."

So from now, no instruments, no music, nothing. And musicians, that day have a number, they're that day, number-one group. Maybe there's a hundred number one, two, three, four, five only. They will go in the dark when the king's sleeping. They will take, by number, they will take their own instruments.

And then, all the queens, they were learning from these teachers, from the musicians, the princesses.

Crawford: They were studying with the teachers.

04-00:11:55

Khan: And now, they didn't have so many ornaments that they can run the whole life, so they said, "All right, we'll provide for one or two musicians. On condition they will teach our daughters. So they teach our daughters, and then when we have no money, they will dance and sing for the public. And by that, we can earn money." So from that, all this low class started. The ladies and prostitutes and all these things.

Crawford: When was this?

04-00:15:39

Khan: You'll find it in the history of India. Before [the] British.

Crawford: It's before the British came. Tell me the king's name again.

04-00:15:59

Khan: Aurangzeb.

Crawford: And so the point of the story is, that's when the quality of the music changed?

04-00:16:14

Khan: In this way it's gone. Low-class. This music was not in the palace. It was always in jungle, and all the musicians, they have to worship. And slowly, slowly, they came to the temple, enter the temple [for] some prayer, dancing to god. Devotional kinds of things. Which looks nice.

They started dancing also, music also, singing also, in the temple. Then if the kings had time to go to temple, and they like the girls and this and that, they start bringing them to the palace. Give them nice salary. That way, they entered in the palace. The king's name was Allauddin Khilji.

You'll find in the books, all these things. Then slowly, slowly-- Emperor Akbar came in the sixteenth century, and this is twelfth century.

Crawford: Oh, we've gone way back now, before music was in the court because your family started in the 16th century in the Akbar [court].

04-00:18:09

Khan: Sixteenth century, our family started.

Crawford: I see. I know now when you're talking about.

04-00:18:15

Khan: Twelfth century, in that time, different person. The king's name was Allauddin Khilji, K-H-I-L-J-I or K-double-L.

Crawford: All right, well that goes way back. Let's come back to--

04-00:18:44

Khan: To my mother.

Crawford: To your mother? You want to say more about your mother?

04-00:18:48

Khan: Are you asking?

Crawford: Well, I would like to know more about her life. What her day was like. Were there servants in the house?

04-00:18:57

Khan: No, because my father has five brothers. And there are five wives. And many relatives. Many relatives. And a big house, they have a lot of money, everything. So they have to cook, clean—almost two-hundred people.

Crawford: You all lived in the same area, or same—

04-00:19:33

Khan: Well, same house.

Crawford: Same house!

04-00:19:34

Khan: Big house.

Crawford: You've seen this house, I think.

04-00:19:38

SKhan: Yes.

04-00:19:41

Khan: One side one house on east big house, west another big house. Four brothers are together, and one brother, who is elder, very elder, he left them. He didn't like them. And they also don't like him. So he's living one mile away.

Crawford: [laughter] A mile away. A whole mile away.

04-00:20:18

Khan: Like that. And then we have got thousands of thousands of acres land. So there's nothing to buy.

Crawford: Yes, you were almost self-sufficient.

04-00:20:30

Khan: Yes. Seven lakes, and seven ponds. So there's fish in there. And boats are there and that kind of thing. Only they had to go to market to buy salt.
[laughter]

Crawford: Only salt?

04-00:21:02

Khan: Salt and sugar.

Crawford: Your mother had a lot of relatives around, a lot of company.

04-00:21:14

Khan: Every day something was happening, marriage, someone's children born, some funerals were there. So many things happened.

Crawford: Did women stay home? Did the wives stay home, mostly?

04-00:21:29

Khan: Yes. All of us boys, at least fifty young boys, having breakfast one morning in one house and dinner at another house. Like that, therefore they could share. And also that was our, like, entertainment. And school.

Crawford: Well, your one uncle was very musical. Were there younger children that were very musical, besides yourself?

04-00:22:07

Khan: Afterwards, they become musical. Before that, music was there, because my grandfather also learned, and he used to pay. He was a rich man. And he learned from very great musicians. They used to come in his house to teach these boys.

But my father was more fond of music, and he didn't go to school, therefore, he was not allowed to like music. My grandmother was very strict with him, and due to her he left. My grandfather used to say, "Here is nothing. If you go to Calcutta you'll see great musicians there." Then another chapter started.

Crawford: Did you want to ask something?

04-00:23:08

SKhan: I didn't know that.

Khan: Then another chapter. My father's chapter. Like a big bible.

Crawford: How much of the estate is still there?

04-00:23:22

Khan: It's still there. It became Bangladesh. Still, we have a house, land, but I can't take it, because all our relatives, they have taken loan money, loans.

Crawford: Oh, they've taken loans on the property.

04-00:23:44

Khan: Yes. I don't know how many, but a lot. And they had their own property, also. And also because I'm an Indian citizen; therefore, I can't keep any property. But they're using it. They're using a lot of our property, four or five places.

Crawford: Family is still there.

04-00:24:15

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: And the house that your father built?

04-00:24:18

Khan: Yes, some of those are broken, and need repairing. Not only my father, there were five brothers which were there working. They can do everything. We have wonderful carpenters, wonderful musicians. Then my one uncle only

became famous for making instruments, musical instruments, which my father taught also to him.

So that way it was a big family. I remember that there were about a hundred-fifty people that used to be working in the field all day, the workers. They used to sleep—they have a big place to sleep in the night. Get up five o'clock. And all the ladies of the house cooking all night food for them. Sometimes they cook one day before. And a ton of rice, and sardine fish, they already cooked.

They used to, all the workers, they eat this much, one person. They have no lunch, nothing. Just a little tea and in the night again big dinner at night some food. But in the morning for breakfast they eat *so* much.

Crawford: The biggest meal in the morning, before work.

04-00:26:23

Khan: Yes. And they're all day working. Sincere because they have their own fields. They are not-- there are some employers there that hire them. But always my uncles, my father, his brother, they're all working under water and everything.

Crawford: For the rice?

04-00:26:49

Khan: For the rice. There's so many things growing in the water that we call jute. From that, you make jute.

Crawford: Oh, yes.

04-00:27:03

Khan: White, brown. And then they supply them—there's no cash money. You can exchange the jute for anything you want to buy. Gold or sugar or salt, no cash.

Crawford: This was a big body of people. Was it the servants who cooked?

04-00:27:37

Khan: No, we never called them servants, because we had some relationship [with them], like if somebody's called uncle, somebody's called-- So for me, very difficult to find out who is servants.

Crawford: Because it was like a family.

04-00:27:59

Khan: Like a family.

Crawford: Well, let's take you to Calcutta then, and what happened. A new chapter.

04-00:28:03

Khan: Oh, yes, and it's long. [laughter] In Calcutta, I opened the college. This same college. And then I invited the Governor of Bengal, my father and all the biggest musicians opening day. My sister played all night. And my father was very happy. He taught in my school. I put [it] in my name, Ali Akbar College of Music because my father's brother's brother-in-law, he already opened, before me, in my father's name, the Allauddin Music School. Therefore, I can't have two with that name.

Crawford: And where was the other school?

04-00:29:29

Khan: In Calcutta.

Crawford: Also in Calcutta.

04-00:29:31

Khan: Yes. Before me. And my father didn't make any objections. And then I started privately, writing for films like for Satyajit Ray's *Devi* and Tapan Sinha's *Hungry Stones*. These movies.

In *Hungry Stones* I gave all classical music. I told my father that the ordinary people never get a chance in their life—just like a taxi driver, a cook, rickshaw driver, and then all this, the porters—they never go to any music festivals. They won't hear any Beethoven and Bach, music like that.

Crawford: They wouldn't have music in their homes.

04-00:30:38

Khan: No, there's nothing, no recording player, nothing. They only go to movies, to see all kinds of fighting and this and that. But at least if you're introducing a little classical music in the film, then at least some music will go inside, indirectly, to their ear.

And this was very successful, because every laborer class, taxi driver, they liked one film. And slowly, slowly, little, little bit, classical music [caught on]. All the other music directors, they also started mixing half classical music, half rock and roll and this and that. That kind of thing happened.

Anyhow, to the producer, I said, "I won't tell my father, go and see this." Then he told me to take him, so of course I drove him and put him in the front row, and I left immediately and was standing on the road by my car because he will come with a stick [laughter] and beat me.

Then the producer, he said, "No, my father was smoking a cigar," and even he didn't take over the full chair but was sitting half way, like this. He was already angry, and already is ready to [leave].

Crawford: Why did he agree to go?

04-00:32:49

Khan: Because he loved that producer. He called him son. So that way. And then slowly, when the title music starts, raga Kaunsi Kanada, pure raga. Then slowly, slowly, my father is back [in the chair]. I was getting the report every minute, and then he came out. Practically, I was [frightened]. Then he came, and I was not very sure. I thought he's telling everyone good; or maybe he'll come to the car and he'll beat me.

But then at the car he finally said, "Yes, this is good. This music, you should make more, more, more." Before, he said, "I'll announce all over India that you are not my son."

Crawford: When you were in Jodphur, he said that.

04-00:34:11

Khan: When I started in Bombay, in films. So I had the college and film, then Yehudi Menuhin came in '55 and brought me here.

Crawford: Your father was finally accepting the films truly?

04-00:34:33

Khan: That picture was *Hungry Stones*, written by Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore was a great poet, and the number-one knowledgeable person. He's rich also, and all the universities in Calcutta, he spent money to make those universities.

Then I had to stop, because I came here in '55, and nobody knew anything [in the U.S.] Even many people didn't know where India is. Some people heard. It was Swami Vivekananda who came first.

Swami Vivekananda became the first disciple of Paramahansadev. He came from India. So sometimes I had to say I'm from that country. Otherwise, people used to think we have only snakes and tigers.

Crawford: I'm afraid you're right.

Well, this was in the mid-fifties, so talk about how you met Yehudi Menuhin, who was responsible for bringing you to this country, the first classical musician from India to perform and record.

04-00:35:54

Khan: In 1955, he wanted to make a festival on *Omnibus* with Rockefeller, in New York. They arranged this program. Ravi Shankar was also supposed to come, but he could not come. I came myself, then I played. And on that particular day, my birthday and his birthday are the same day.

Crawford: Same birthday?

04-00:36:33

Khan: Same date, or I'm the fourteenth of April, and maybe he's the fourth. I am on income tax day. And people are not very happy about that. [laughter] And then he's also in April, a different date. But he [Menuhin] invited all the great musicians, whoever is at that time in New York. It was a big festival that Rockefeller arranged at the Museum of Modern Art. So all night, the party went on, and he was playing, and he was very happy.

I liked this place very much, and they liked playing the music. Rockefeller's daughters wanted to learn tabla not sarode. They'd become very fond of learning tabla. At that time, my drummer was another drummer. A very nice, very learned person, Chatur Lal. That is the first time I made a long-playing record in here, not India. Because in India they said, nobody's going to listen to Indian classical music for more than three minutes.

Crawford: In India, they said that?

04-00:38:13

Khan: Yes, at that time, people were very scared by classical music, because the singing [vocalizes]. They can't take it in those days.

Crawford: They were scared by it, frightened by it?

04-00:38:42

Khan: They didn't like it.

Crawford: It didn't seem part of the culture?

04-00:38:47

Khan: No. Not culture. Before, all the kings used to love it. And naturally, kings invite their own relatives. So they used to come and they started liking it. But the public never had a chance even to listen from outside.

So they used to buy all folk tunes, *ghazal*, cheap music, three-minute records. They will make five-minute records. Then they make five-minute records. Then I said no, make long-playing [records]. So those producers of India said, "Oh, no, nobody will listen" I am the first person to make a long-playing record in New York [of Indian classical music.] For *Omnibus*, or what you call it. Angel records.

Crawford: *Omnibus*, Alistair Cooke's program, was a very popular television program in the 1950s and 60s, and it was for Angel Records that you recorded Indian classical music.

04-00:40:00

Khan: Immediately, I made the record and it started selling like anything. And immediately, India started long-playing records.

Crawford: What was Menuhin's exposure to Indian music? Why was he interested?

04-00:40:17

Khan: He learned, and he used to go perform in India everywhere, from a young age. He went there many times. And he was not only interested in music, also he was interested in yoga.

Crawford: Yes, I remember. And he studied the music seriously.

04-00:40:51

Khan: Yes, and his first wife was an American. He's from America. His second wife was British. They established in Europe, in England. He used to call me. He has his own Bach festival there, Yehudi Menuhin, so I used to come to that and do many, many programs. Some programs we played together. Not duet. We'd play on the stage same time. Not same time, first him, then me. Like that. Bach festival. Bach.

Crawford: At the Bach festival?

04-00:41:39

Khan: Like that. One very learned lady's name was Dr. Rosette Renshaw. She wrote and had a lot of money and wrote a book [about] many recordings, and many artists, all over India. She used to call me brother. She invited me, and my father also liked that lady, because she's very, very learned. Not married.

She lived in Montreal and she invited me to teach all the Mothers Superior Indian music.

Crawford: Where was that?

04-00:42:39

Khan: Montreal University. These are all ladies. Mothers Superior. I came three, four times. They're very nice, but they are learning nothing. They are comparing the melody, how Indian music melody is, notes and rhythm. Sometimes it's like a whole composition written in eight beats, eight beats, eight beats, and when they finish that, they stop. Then again it starts.

So I say, "You can continue, you can count eight, eight, eight, eight." I said, "You can start, but when you stop, then repeat, two full beats are already gone there." Those kinds of things. [laughter]

Crawford: What was your impression of New York, of this country, when you came?

04-00:44:03

Khan: New York. I liked New York then. New York at that time really was very good. More peaceful than now.

Crawford: Very peaceful.

04-00:44:20

Khan: Very peaceful and good food, people are nice. Everybody comes out from their restaurants or their shops looking at my Indian dress. And they are asking questions, "Where is India? Oh." I had to explain to them. They said, "Oh, you have a lot of tigers and snakes. [laughter] How do you sleep?"

Crawford: They thought you slept on a board with nails, is that right?

04-00:45:02

Khan: Yes. But there was not so much interest in Indian music. Then in '65, Mr. Scripps opened [an Oriental music school]. They are rich people. At the university here, in Berkeley.

Crawford: Was there a Mills College connection?

04-00:46:23

Khan: No. I came two times, three times but the way of teaching wasn't in the old way. That way, it can't be learned.

Crawford: Oh, so you were working in Berkeley?

04-00:47:20

Khan: No, not Berkeley university, but with the Scripps family at Asian Society for Eastern Arts.

SKhan: It was the school where he first started having classes in Berkeley. I forget what the actual association is called, but he was talking about that school.

Crawford: We will get the name of the school.

04-00:47:35

Khan: You will get everything from Mary.

Crawford: Ok. What did you do in the interim? What did you do after 1955? Did you go back to India?

04-00:47:48

Khan: Yes. I was doing very good, because I was a court musician, and music director, everything was coming up. Because everything was coming up, I became more famous and there was more money. So at that time, in '65, they invited me to ASEA. Balasaraswati invited me, actually, she requested me to come. She was a very great dancer of Bharatnatyam, but she died. Her daughter also died. Then I brought all the students to teach, Nikhil Banerjee and other people because I didn't like to teach this way.

Crawford: You didn't approve of their system of teaching.

04-00:48:59

Khan: Yes. But the students say they wanted to learn more. "So we'll go to India." But if I take about a hundred students, how can I manage them? I don't know any officers to get the visas from. I have not so much money to provide them food or a house. Or even if they want to pay for everything, I have no time to go arrange all these things.

Then I said, "All right, I'll come for three months every year. And then I'll go back." So they are happy, you see. I came two or three times like this. And then gradually, I started inviting more good students to come. I had over ten-, fifteen-thousand students in those thirty years. They came from everywhere, Canada, Europe, many, many different places, India, here.

At that time, George Harrison and Pandit Ravi Shankar were doing for the Beatles. Everyone's smoking ganja, and incense in their hand.

Crawford: Where was this?

04-00:50:46

Khan: Here. In New York, everywhere. And I was always kind of feeling sick. Slowly, slowly, I'm bringing them, giving them, telling them, "You enjoy the music this way, not that way."

And then suddenly I saw that kind of group almost disappearing. Disappeared. Otherwise, always they have got long hair and incense in their hands. In the halls, they are going with the incense. One time I came, he invited me [Ravi Shankar], with George Harrison and me in New York. It was some big hall; like, thirty-thousand people come there. There are all these people!

SKhan: That was the Concert for Bangladesh.

Crawford: Yes. At Madison Square Garden in 1971. [A UNICEF benefit with Harrison, Bob Dylan, Ringo Star, Eric Clapton, Ravi Shankar and others]

04-00:52:04

Khan: Yes. So those things.

Then I found that it was very difficult for me to get the visa and this and that, and I start liking here, and family's here. My good friends all became very old, and then they started dying.

So slowly, slowly, I went to the same number. 215 West End Avenue is this one, and 215 was that other house also. I went down there. I was collecting one dollar, two dollars, three. There was no money for a house, because people can't pay so much money.

Crawford: You were trying to buy this location for your school?

04-00:53:05

Khan: Yes, and I bought it. And somehow, in a few years, I collected a hundred-thousand dollars to pay advance. Then one of my disciples, these are rich people, Daisy Paradis, she gave some money to get this. She has a foundation. Every year, they send some money. And whatever I perform, my other teachers, whatever money comes, sometimes we make ten thousand, something. I give all to the college.

Crawford: Mm-hm.

04-00:54:06

Khan: And that way, I can run the staff. Then I found the staff was making their own rules and had their own ideas on that. And then I said, "I don't want that. I want a music school; it's not a business school. To learn, come with a very pure heart and love, otherwise, go."

So even my son was a director. I paid good money for him and he didn't agree, so I said, "You have to leave." So he said, "Yes, I'll leave." There were so many directors. When did we start the college?

SKhan: Did you start the college here, in this building, in—

Khan: Not this building, my [first]college.

Crawford: The college in Calcutta was founded in 1956, and the one in Berkeley was founded in 1958, according to your biography. The present one was started in 1968?

SKhan: In America I think it was '65.

Khan: No. In '65, I was with the Asia Society for Eastern Arts.

SKhan: Then it was '67.

Crawford: '67 here?

SKhan: Yes. '67 or '68, but I believe it was '67.

[There is a pause in the tape. It resumes during a conversation, so dialogue is missing.]

Crawford: Why did they pay you so little?

04-00:56:04

Khan: Because they are schoolboys. They have drink, they have fifteen days there, and their food, for their car expenses, everything, hall rent. They have hardly any money, and they gave me ten dollars. I say, "Ten dollars? I have to pay

more than that to the hotel.” [laughter] These are Indians. So I never get any money.

For many years, people never offered me anything, any money. And I had some friends, Bengalis, [who would say] “Please play for Mother Durga [festival].” Then, of course, I can’t say no to Mother Durga. I played. And no money, nothing. But somehow I saved some, taking from the school some money for food.

And at that time I used to pay one-hundred and fifty dollars for renting a nice house in Marin County, two-hundred or a hundred-fifty, I managed. Hundred-fifty. And then it became two-hundred, two-hundred-fifty. I said, “All right.” Then it became three-fifty. I said, “No, I’m leaving. I’ll buy a house.”

So then I was walking in San Anselmo, and saw a nice house for sale and they offered it for forty thousand. I can sell now for how much?

SKhan: Quite a bit.

Khan: Yes, a lot of money. And then also, I’ve taken a loan. I pay ten-thousand in advance, and then every month, some money. And now it’s my own house. The same thing with this building. But those people came here, or anywhere, they all were-- I didn’t find them honest.

Crawford: You found honest people to deal with.

04-00:59:19

Khan: I didn’t.

Crawford: Oh, you did not find honest people.

04-00:59:22

Khan: I didn’t find any. Not only in America, but anywhere.

Crawford: They tried to take advantage?

04-00:59:28

Khan: Yes. They have no courage to give something. They always want something.

Crawford: That’s very sad.

04-00:59:46

Khan: Yes. Everywhere. But I didn’t want it; I just wanted that music, that this music should not die. Today, at least ten-thousand people, they can play a little bit, sing a little bit. But maybe one day, their grandchildren, or children of the students, will become good musicians. Who knows.

Crawford: That’s your hope—that the ten thousand students you have taught will carry on the tradition.

04-00:60:22

Khan:

This is my hope. My hope is—even God also hopes that one day the world will become peaceful, so who am I? But I have a little request and demand to God, because God sent me. I think I am the messenger, doing my duty. That's all. I didn't come for name. Those people who came for name, they've got a lot of money. Million, million dollars. My own relatives [do also]. They know how to talk, party, drink, they flatter. I only know how to play music, that's all.

Crawford:

Only! We're going to stop there. Thank you so much.

04-00:61:20

Khan:

Thank you.

[End of Interview 2]

Interview #3: September 27, 2006

Begin Audio File 5 09-27-2006.mp3

05-00:00:00

Crawford: This is interview three with Khansahib Ali Akbar, for the oral history office, in September of 2006. We're talking about recording. When you first came to this country in the 1950s, you were the first, the very first classical Indian musician to perform. You had a big television appearance with Alistair Cooke, and three concerts. And then of course, you made the first long-playing recording of Indian classical music. What was the response?

05-00:00:37

Khan: Yehudi Menuhin actually was very fond of all good things, especially art. And he loved India, because he liked yoga. Yoga and Indian food and music. He heard me, also my father, and other musicians, of course, and he liked [the music]. Somehow, he arranged a festival. There was a long plan for some festival on *Omnibus* in New York. So he wanted to arrange, to bring some musicians, and he brought one dancer, Bharatnatyam dancer, lady dancer, and then we all friends were playing, and also Pandit Ravi Shankar, a disciple and a student of my father.

Crawford: And your brother-in-law.

05-00:01:55

Khan: Ravi Shankar was a disciple of my father. And then becomes son-in-law also. He married my sister. Actually, I was teaching him everything, indirectly. because he takes time to learn. And then he used to give me—actually, he rented a house next to my father's house. And that's the only place Father allowed me to go.

So, sometimes he gave me tea, one cigarette, and for that, I always went there. And whatever he asked, then I taught him. Like even rhythm.

Crawford: You taught him too, as well as your father?

05-00:03:01

Khan: Because he wants to know before he goes to my father, not one day, but many days. And then the time comes, like a morning raga time comes, and [my father] he says to me, "Sing." So I sing. Maybe sometimes absent minded, or I didn't take care. But he [Ravi Shankar] sings very perfectly, and my father said, "I didn't teach him. He just listened to you, just now, and learned."

Crawford: He learned from you.

05-00:03:44

Khan: Yes, he learned from me for months and months.

Crawford: You play different instruments.

05-00:03:49

Khan: I play all kind of instruments.

Crawford: Did you teach him sitar?

05-00:03:52

Khan: Sitar. I have to show him sometimes other techniques, which he was not aware of. Mostly, I taught everything. But we are very good friends, and I promised that I don't tell my father; I don't tell anyone else. Like that. Then we started playing a duet with father's permission. And at that time, Yehudi Menuhin became very interested to take us, both of us, for [his television show] *Omnibus*, in New York, in 1955.

Crawford: You were both on the *Omnibus* program?

05-00:04:44

Khan: Not both, because he didn't go. Somehow, he didn't want to go or couldn't make it.

Crawford: That's right, Menuhin asked him to go.

05-00:04:58

Khan: He wanted both of us.

Crawford: He couldn't go, so that makes you the first.

05-00:05:02

Khan: He couldn't go. Makes me the first, yes. But he came to America as not a musician, but as a dancer, with his brother, Uday Shankar [in 1932]. Uday Shankar was a big name in America and Europe, he was a dancer. So he used to dance at that time with his brother. He was very young. And his father was a minister, actually. In Rajisthan, Udaipur state. And therefore, he used to go to Europe, used to stay in Europe more than in India, for business..

Ravi Shankarji is not the only brother. Uday Shankarji is the elder brother, then Rajendra Shankar, Davendra Shankar, and then Ravi Shankar. There were no sisters.

He [my father] was actually a director or teacher or guide, a friend, and he told Uday Shankar: "Why don't you go to India and learn Indian art, Indian dance, Indian everything, and bring it here to this country? If you bring some Indian things then maybe people will like it." So then he brought the dance.

They toured all over Europe, America, everywhere. And Ravi Shankar's mother [Hemanginee] was very interested. Very interested.

I was supposed to go with my father [in 1935]. But at the last minute, I changed my mind, because it's a big boat, black boat, big ship. I said, "I don't want to go." Anyhow, he agreed, ok.

Then his mother, Pandit Ravi Shankarji's mother, requested my father, because his father is very busy and his brother, you know, is also busy touring, and nobody has time to look after him. She said, "Will you please teach him like your son?"

So my father liked him. He was a talented boy, and my father said, "Oh, yes, sure. I promise from today." He promised even while boarding the ship. It was leaving in a second, and his mother was saying good-bye. Ravi Shankar's mother was a very nice lady. She was a very nice lady. And my father said, "I promise you that from today, my son will become the younger son, and Ravi Shankar will become elder son." I treat him like he was my own brother. So from that day, my father is taking care of him, teaching all kind of instruments, too, on the tour, but he was a student interested in dance.

Crawford: I know from reading Ravi Shankar's autobiography, *Raga Mala* [Element Books, Ltd., 1997] that your father adopted him in 1935, and that you and he were as close as brothers. And that he married your sister in 1941.

Well, you and he have become incredibly popular in our country. What is it that Western ears hear? What are they looking for?

Khan: I was the first man to come to America. My father came up to Europe. Music, what everyone believes, even nature believes, it's a message of God. You didn't learn this in an ordinary school, in college music class. I already mentioned that this music actually, *Nada Brahma*, was created by Brahma. He created everything, then he wanted to create this music also, because through sound can give more things to the whole world, not only humans, but nature, everything.

These sounds give them food. Like the flowers, trees, fruit, everything. Food, any kind of thing like this. Water, animals, anything. Through the sound they get all kinds of treatment, and they become healthy and smart and talented. So this is what we call *Nada Brahma*. The sound of the God.

Crawford: So when you told your students in the class, "Speak to God," that's what you meant?

05-00:12:21

Khan: No, not students, because they [were], in history, *rishi*, *muni*, they all learn from great, great musicians. And they already know [this].

But these things never performed for the public, only in the temple. If they are to perform some house or some place, then only they prepare to perform in temple, in front of the goddess statues, everything. Otherwise, only alone in the forest; only for them.

And then all kind of human, animals, any kind of thing—God created everyone, just sat there—and they listen to the music all night. The tigers, my own special teacher in Maihar, Rampur Baba, in the night he used to have a wonderful place in the mountains.

In the evening, after four o'clock, there was nobody allowed to stay there because all the tigers and strong animals used to come there, and all night, they used to stay, due to fire also. In Tansen's time it used to happen same thing also. All night the animals would listen to music and when they see the sun, slowly they move. And hundreds of animals, not just one kind: the lion, the tiger, the snake. Everything. Deer are there, crows are there, birds are there, but nobody harming to anyone, all listening to music. And slowly, slowly they move.

And also they have to stop the music for a little while for morning, wash up and eat some food, and then again. So like that. It's only in twelfth century somehow, the king, Allauddin Khilji, who actually wanted to bring music to the court. They found Gopal Nayak, Amir Khusro, these kinds of people. And they started in the court, in front of the king and audience also, and royal family. Otherwise, it was always like a prayer. He got all these players, raga players. But you don't need anyone. You only need to see yourself, and know the God.

Crawford: That's a beautiful picture. I'm interested in your approach to teaching, which is within an oral tradition that we don't have. When you tell your students about the raga, what do you say to them?

05-00:16:31

Khan: Raga, they want to know the name of the raga. Nowadays everybody, even a small child, also wants to know all kind of things name. In the old time, nobody cares, because animals, birds, flowers, they never ask, "What raga."

If it's timely, they ask; if it's untimely, the sound didn't match that particular time to them. And they just live or die. People want to know the name of the melody, what it means, what raga. In classical music, *Nada Brahma*, there are so many hundreds of kinds of moods which are created. And it is most powerful and essential that your brain, your mind, your soul, everything is through that sound, from childhood, from the mother's womb. Then the child is born and they become good musicians, they are very powerful persons.

Crawford: Yes. Let me pause here. [sound file stops, re-starts]

All right. Well, how do you explain the great popularity of the raga, and of the music that you've brought to this country, *in* this country.

05-00:18:34

Khan: Well, I never thought like that, and I didn't learn like that, and my father didn't want me to learn that.

Crawford: No, I understand. That's right.

05-00:18:44

Khan: Because he said it is one kind of prayer, a duty to God, and get freedom of your soul, body. And when you die, you will die very healthy, peacefully, and again be reborn, if you can't complete.

So there was not any kind of way of thinking, only hours and hours of correction of notes and sound. My father learned from all these great teachers, and he taught me just to practice. He wanted me to practice at least twelve hours. Twelve hours. But he used to practice more than that. Almost twenty-two hours with the music.

Crawford: Do your students practice that way?

05-00:20:07

Khan: No, no. Nobody. Nowadays, it's become so easy that they learn some few things, some popular music—some big things. They perform, and the audience likes [it], and they get some money, so why do they want to practice?

They become famous name in the box office. It's become a business. But the music is not for the business. Music is like a food. Like food is necessary, essential. You have to eat some food. Even you're human or animal or whatever. Bird, ant, anything, they have to eat food to live, keep their body alive. So if the body's alive, then your soul will be there. And your soul won't leave you. And you get more courage.

And give you more new kinds of knowledge. Therefore, it's very essential and necessary to hear the right kind of notes. And also, these chords were already created. God created food also. Otherwise, how will you know what to eat, what not to eat? So he created all these things for us, to become the happiest person. He always planned this planet to look like heaven, and we are creating what we're making heaven to hell.

Crawford: How are we doing this?

05-00:22:23

Khan: We're destroying.

Crawford: We are destroying what God created. By war?

05-00:22:30

Khan: Yes. War, fighting in the home, and how you talk with father, mother; the father, child, always want to kill each other; always some jealousies there; always something you feel you didn't have. You have less, and therefore, you should have that. And that you can have by fighting, or by stealing, or by any way you choose. But real music, when people ask music, for just an example.

When a child calls in a sweet voice, “Mama,” calls his mother, how do you feel at that time? That’s not music, but that word, that touch, at once your whole mind, body, everything becomes so sweet, so peaceful. “Oh! The child’s calling me, mama.” That you love and you say, “Oh, my dear. My sweetheart. My baby.”

Music is more than that. Then you can use [it] to make money, to get some ornaments or something, if you sell it to make money, and put them in your living room.

Crawford: Does that affect the music?

05-00:24:20

Khan: What?

Crawford: If musicians are playing for money, as some of your students do.

05-00:24:27

Khan: Yes, yes. If they’re playing only for money to make them happy, see he and also it is, instead of giving them to drink milk or very good water, it is giving nice wine and alcohol, it’s not good. Music, also, can bring worries and money. You can add in that and make it some new kind of sexy music, this music, that music.

Crawford: Bollywood?

05-00:25:14

Khan: I have no interest in Bollywood. My father only allowed me eight hours, nine hours practice, and one hour to walk; there were all kinds of strict rules, very simple, and nice food, and practice, and learn music and listen to music.

That way you will learn music, sweet music. Even you don’t need to understand. Only you’re learning what he’s telling you. You’re learning, learning, learning; one day you will learn. Like child tries from childhood, how to walk, falls down, and so get some hurt. And then one day you’ll can walk, he can run, he can do everything. So this is the way music is. Your mind and soul build up like that.

Crawford: In the sixties, many American musicians gravitated to your music. They found something there they wanted to learn about. The Beatles, for instance. And Coltrane and Philip Glass.

05-00:26:43

Khan: Yes, I don’t know.

Crawford: You don’t know how you affected the Beatles, say?

05-00:26:50

Khan: No, no, no. I have nothing to do with them, anything. And I have never played this kind of audience. One time I had to play with my friend Pandit Ravi Shankar and George Harrison. He's a disciple of Raviji. This was a show to get some money for their purpose. [Khansahib refers to the 1971 Concert for Bangladesh]

I heard many, many wonderful musicians, even many young generations of course, mostly they didn't have a chance to hear them. But in the old time also, many artists were big names. They didn't get any chance or any opportunity to hear old kind of musicians. But I myself did. Because my father never would leave me alone, and I was nine years, seven years, from that time, on the stage. Even if I can't play everything and lie down, he didn't mind. He made a little place for me on the side, and I was sleeping there. But while sleeping, I'm also listening to music.

And the audience, also, they listened in such a wonderful way. Somebody's tears are coming, somebody's smiling, somebody was so peaceful that they didn't need to take any kind of drugs to become like that. That is the music, real music. But money becomes so big, important.

Crawford: India, too?

05-00:29:10

Khan: Everywhere. Maybe some other place, also. I don't know, I have not seen heaven or hell. And in New York nowadays, they also need money.

Crawford: In heaven?

05-00:29:30

Khan: [laughs] Yes.

Crawford: Well, is there an afterlife, a heaven?

05-00:29:37

Khan: I have no idea, but what I heard from my guru. Heaven is heaven. You can't explain. Like when you get love, or love your mother or father, brother, sister, there is not any show business. You don't sell any tickets for that. [chuckles]

Crawford: When you write a raga—because you still compose--

05-00:30:12

Khan: No, I don't write.

Crawford: You don't write now? But you did.

05-00:30:16

Khan: I used to write sometimes, because the thousands and thousands of compositions, and that is not possible for me to learn, in this life, completely.

So some few lines I like, I write down. Because this music doesn't need to be written. This music, just like you are thinking something good for God, it's happening inside. So what will you write? Because there's no language.

Crawford: You have said that.

05-00:31:11

Khan: Because you have to learn at least thousands and thousands of fixed compositions. Fixed compositions. From these fixed compositions, you steal yourself, your own things, and improvise from that. So there's nothing new coming.

Crawford: What affects you—audience, performance space—when you are performing?

05-00:31:50

Khan: When I perform. Because my father actually taught me how to perform. He said, "Just don't think anything; the sound will tell you everything."

So when I perform, after fifteen minutes, I become the audience. And I will be with you on the chair, not on the stage. I'm listening [to] the music from there. And that music is coming from heaven, from your guru.

The guru is performing, the guru is saying everything, everything, and you are just like a microphone or machine, and the sound you are catching and hearing. What's happening that time, you don't know. Because you are not playing with the notes; notes are playing you.

It's like you go and take money and go to that place with all the gambling, it's like that. You give one dollar in machine; if you are lucky, and you get a thousand dollars. It's like that. But this one dollar, the real dollar, if you use for your food or for a poor fellow and give to him, then it's more pleasure and peace for your mind.

But when you have one dollar, or if you didn't get anything and you have no more dollars, you become upset. You are ready to kill someone to get another dollar. But that person didn't have food for many days for a child, and [with] that one dollar you buy food and feed that child or animal and see how happy they feel. And that happiness, you don't get in gambling.

Crawford: Let me ask you this. When you're working on your raga, what determines mood and time? If you can say that.

05-00:34:44

Khan: God already fixed time. God fixes morning, evening, early morning, like that. Brahma created the melodies, he already fixed the notes. And not only notes, there are many, many microtones there.

Crawford: You've said there is no improvisation as we understand the term in music.

Khan: Improvisation, I don't think, is in real classical music. You [play] just what you learn. You are playing that music.

But in a different way. There are many kinds of shirts. Ok, then you choose. Today I will take the white one. I'll choose the blue one. So like that, you choose some notes. And then you can say it's the rainy-season cloth. This is for the winter, because it was made like this, so thick. Thin, you want for a hot country. You won't use warm cloth.

Real music is your soul. I believe we have two souls. We call one *atma*. *Atma* is the soul. And *param atma* is above the soul. Above the soul, more powerful, which is directly connected with the god. And that, only you can get when your guru, your teacher shows the way.

Crawford: Do you have that relationship with your students? I think you do.

05-00:37:16

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: They're your disciples, and you are their guru.

05-00:37:19

Khan: When they're disciples it means disciples.

Crawford: Mm-hm. With the teaching of the music, are there disciplines, such as diet, meditation, exercise?

05-00:37:32

Khan: I'm interested, like in old time, with my father, I had to go through that. But I'm not with them [the students] all the time.

My father used to watch me twenty-three hours. I can't watch them twenty-three hours. But whatever I tell them, if they listen, after some time they realize that yes, it's good for them. And when they realize it's good, and do it, then they start following.

And those are real music lovers, and they want to learn music. They also will be prepared to sacrifice anything whatever their teacher or guru advises. Like when a doctor says, "I'm going to cut your leg. Otherwise, you can't walk." You have to believe that, that doctor, allow him to cut, then you see that you can walk.

It depends how much faith you have. And how your teacher teaches. If teacher is teaching monkey business, what do you call it—he's just teaching you for making money, they're not teaching.

I came with five dollars in my pocket. Nobody gave me more than that for many years. One time I played somewhere, for a full house in New York.

The students, they organized that and tickets were sold. I had to stay there three days, and after the program, when the time came to pay me, pay me money, myself, my tabla player, and tanpura player, one friend was in the car. I said, “Ok, give me the money.”

So he just took out five dollars. I said, “Five dollars? We have so many people, and we have to pay hotel.” And all the students said, “We worked so hard and we have to eat morning, evening, good food. And we have to hire the cab. All the money’s gone. There is only five dollars left. If you want to take it, take it.” I said, “No, I don’t want it. Maybe this five dollars, it’s good for you, too. Take this five dollars.” So I never earned any money.

And then after working, teaching, now I can see people who don’t know how to play music. They are earning thousands, thousands dollars a week in tickets sold, and they are happy. Even now, I am paying by my own pocket, all the expense of college, this and that, and salaries. I have had so many directors I’ve had to change.

They say, “We love music.” But I find out they don’t—of course, they like music no doubt—but also they can’t get any job. No doubt. But also, they love money. So that money is also going away [to them]. That also.

Every year, I have to play three or four concerts, benefit for the college. All the money comes, and then the office staff, they get it. If there’s some money left, I can take it. I take some for myself.

Crawford: You got a MacArthur Fellowship. I’m very curious about that.

05-00:42:19

Khan: Yes, I got that.

Crawford: You were the first Indian musician to receive a MacArthur. 1991, I think.

05-00:42:23

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Did that help your efforts with sustaining the college?

05-00:42:30

Khan: That money, of course helped because I never had so big amount of money in my life, anywhere. With that money, I got a house for myself, for me. I bought the college. And then I have so many students come who have no money, but they want to learn music.

Fifteen years and I don't charge them. I say, "Ok, you learn free. Just help the college to be clean a little bit. You do that and do that." That way, the whole Indian music, really nice classical music my father brought to Europe. I'm as a messenger, taken everywhere. That only, I know.

I didn't come to make my money. I can earn more, eight times more money, in India than I can earn here. But I don't want that. I'm here because I have to teach. And when I teach, they have no money to pay me. And when I teach, I have to give my time. Not five minutes or ten minutes. It's not like a doctor's interview. I have to give hours and hours and months and months.

So all these musicians, Nikhil Banerjee and famous musicians, they learn from me. They used to learn from my father afterwards, because they are so afraid, like they're going to a lion. So they always try that maybe last minute I'd teach them, maybe for many months.

My father [would] say, "Play this one." And they can play. My father used to tell me, "See how talented this boy? One hundred percent better than you." But he didn't know that really, I teach. All these things, he really learned from me. He didn't know that.

After many years, then my mother told my father, "These boys, they have no brains. Your son has worked with them. It happened." Then father kept quiet and said, "Oh." And then many musicians, they became famous and made so much money.

And MacArthur gave me how much? I don't remember. of course, how many hundreds do you need? I will not say a number. But my other fellow professors, they got more money than anyone, and they had a nice house, swimming pool, everything. I even have a broken bathroom. [laughs]

Crawford: Values. Different values.

05-00:46:09

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: But that's a big part of your legacy, isn't it, that you've taught ten-thousand students?

05-00:46:17

Khan: Ten-thousand.

Crawford: How important is that to you?

05-00:46:22

Khan: I think I'm like a messenger because my family was really much connected. Like, my father met Swami Paramahansadev Ramakrishna. My father met him when he was a young boy, when he was only nine years old. And the family

of Vivekananda, and then his brother Habu Dutta. Habu Dutta actually learned all Western music instruments and Indian music.

My father learned from him, also, and got the idea how to write Western music. Everything happened there. Calcutta was really-- people say at that time--heaven for art and music, good things, in those days. Even at my young age, also. Even go back fifty years. It was so nice.

Still, people are so—I mean, to understand something, often you need a little background in your life. Some nice background. Just like if a person has no culture, no sense of good things, he can't enjoy real Indian classical music. It's just like animals. I mean, you give some medicine to an animal, he'll throw it away. Because he doesn't know.

Crawford: And how do your students prepare, because the traditions are so different?

05-00:48:52

Khan: I have to bring from my father whatever I learned from my guru's old traditions. So they can do that, little by little, they come back after two years. And many students, like George Ruckert, are there. James Pomerantz, Daisy Paradis, many students.

I tell them how to do and see everything, because all these ragas you have to practice in time, timely. Not morning raga in the evening, not evening raga in the morning. It's like food. You don't eat first-class dinner early morning, when you have morning tea.

So everywhere, they have rules already there, created for them. God made them. We follow what the guru says: You have to be a nice person, you have to be a clean person. If you want to learn really good music, then you have to be a very, very nice person. I don't mean that you have to become a *sadhu*. But like a simple person, simple food.

And then no lies, no liars, no cheating, and try to help each other with whatever they can help. And somehow they manage to survive. That feeling nowadays, you won't find. In old time I've seen many people, they're going, watching one village to another village.

The village people at least from another village run to them, stop them to say, "Where are you going? Or where are you coming from? Oh, you already walked so many miles. Please, have some food. Take some water. Take some rest. If you want to take a little rest tonight we can make nice food for you. Tomorrow you can walk again."

So that kind of people are all over in the village, in jungles and forests. There is not much car roads. Most are bicycle roads. But walking they become

friends for one hour, and they always remember that time when they had no kind of postal service.

I was born in that kind of village. Everybody remember everybody, and they feast. There are no poor fellows, because at that time, all these fellows have their own land, own ponds, own everything, except they have to buy sugar or some other things like spices.

Otherwise, rice is there, fish is there, chicken is there, egg is there, goat is there. They don't eat cow because the cow, it gives milk. So everything was there. You didn't need to go anywhere to beg. But nowadays, you do.

Crawford: In your village in India, would that still be the same?

05-00:53:28

Khan: Some places. Very rare. Now the whole world is changed. Now the whole world, after television, has changed. The village people, they are now more fashionable than city people.

Crawford: Well, let's look a little bit at the 1970s. Let's bring us up to date. 1971-- You want to pause for a minute?

05-00:53:58

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Khansahib has just told me that he is only now learning to talk.

05-00:54:06

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Because, why?

05-00:54:10

Khan: People don't know what is happening. For them, they've never seen those days when I came, without talking, it was so peaceful. So admirable. And nowadays, if you talk, it's more problem. Music, the same. Also music, also.

Crawford: I understand. Talking interferes with life as you have lived it.

Well, you've received so many awards. Virtually all the music awards there are. Are there any that stand out for you?

05-00:54:51

Khan: Awards?

Crawford: Your own government has awarded you so many honors.

05-00:54:59

Khan:

Yes, it's nice to see, because those awards are nice, very nice. But the awards which I received from my guru, my teacher--I received hundreds of awards, and he used to say in public, or at some private house with some talk or music going on, and when I enter he used to say, shout, tell everyone, "See that gentleman, suited and booted, coming? He's a big maestro."

That is me, actually. He's telling the public, and the public is laughing, the audience is laughing, because he'd say, "He's a maestro, he's an *ustad*, he's a doctor of music! See? See? And I can't play even one note, but he's become so much!" But I used to feel so embarrassed.

Then after many, many years, one night, one evening, nobody's there, my father called me. He said, "Ali Akbar, come here." I said, "My God. He never called me like that." Otherwise, he always called me, "Hey. Come here." Like that. Because that's the way— he's full of [chuckles] affection.

So then he said, "How many awards have you received up to now?" I said, "I don't know," because whatever I received, even I don't know the record because people have kept it, or some are there. So that day, he says, "I will give you an award." He says, "I'm giving you an award. The Emperor of Melody." That award, I received [from] my own father, my own teacher, my own boss. And that is so—I've never seen God, but I've seen my father. I get more happy with that.

Crawford: Oh, I should say so. Let me change the tape now.

Begin Audio File 6 09-27-2006.mp3

06-00:00:00

Crawford: [sound check; sound file stops, re-starts] I would like to talk to you about some specific things that were important. For example, the Concert for Bangladesh, 1971.

06-00:00:20

Khan:

Actually, I don't know what happened with that money. And we made the recording and everything. They are all great musicians involved in that, and complete that. And I signed a contract, also, that I would also get a little share. But where has that money gone? It's gone, of course, wherever it's gone, some places, I know. But the big bosses said, "We don't know."

Crawford: You never had any money from the concert, or from the recording?

06-00:01:04

Khan:

Not a single penny. They say "Money came, we already sent it." So we tried to get it, but whoever received it, received it.

Crawford: What do you remember of George Harrison?

06-00:01:22

Khan: I know him a little bit, yes. George Harrison also owed me money, He said, “Sure, sure, sure,” but he never sent me.

Crawford: But the money was to— It was a benefit for Bangladesh.

06-00:01:40

Khan: Of course, but our other expenses--we were not supposed to pay for food or hotel or anything. And then they made a record. And now they are selling that, and they're getting royalties from that. The artists should be getting their percentage.

They are taking their percentage. They are giving it to other artists, but they never gave anything to me. I have got all of the letters that my wife wrote. They say, “No, we already sent [money] to you. If you didn't receive payment, it's not our responsibility.”

Crawford: So you gave up on that.

06-00:02:32

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: How were you invited? Who invited you?

06-00:02:41

Khan: My gurubhai, Pandit Ravi Shankarji, invited me to the show. He's my very good friend. When he was learning, I was arranging his program everywhere. I'd say, “Give him a half hour, and I'll play and make my fee lower.”

And also the other people get a chance to hear the new artists, and if they can play, and have courage, then it will help them to become a great musician one day. So I've done that for every body.

Whoever came to my father, mostly they learned from me; they got all the small points which make them strong. My father used to tell me, “You see how talented these boys [are]? You're no brain. You're a donkey.” I had to hear this.

This happened in childhood, and we're all happy and laughing. At that time, I didn't know who'd become famous, and make some money. I never thought about money. What God's given me, and blessings of our friends, music admirers, whatever they've given me, love, it's enough for me.

Crawford: It's enough for you. Does your son play for money?

06-00:05:26

Khan: He gets some money. Nowadays, everybody—even your child, if you ask if he will clean your car, your child will ask you to pay the money for cleaning the car.

Crawford: Mm-hm. [they laugh] Well, that same year, 1971, you played at the Monterey Jazz Festival with John Handy.

06-00:05:51

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: What was that? How did that come to be?

06-00:05:54

Khan: No, we became friends, myself and John Handy. And then he said, "Let's play together. No one has tried this experience." And he's a very nice person.

Crawford: He lives here, doesn't he?

06-00:06:10

Khan: Yes. We played many years together. And we have some recordings, also. We have done some recordings in Germany.

Actually, there's no time for anymore. No time for me. Because we are all working with other artists. At that time he has performances there, I have performances there. But sometimes we get a chance then we learn something together, record it and it became very popular that time.

We still meet each other. We don't mind playing—

Crawford: We're talking about John Handy. When you play together, what do you talk about? How do you make your music together?

06-00:07:19

Khan: We feel the same things. When you meet someone, how do you fall in love with that person? Because you like this person. You like that person-- I don't mean just liking, you feel devotion, and also love. You like that person for something which you really wanted to get, wanted to feel or hear.

It is so even [with] animals. You give a little something, he'll know you. Whenever he sees you, he'll come to you, ready to give you his service.

Crawford: You don't talk about it. But when you play together, you just play.

06-00:08:30

Khan: No, no, we learn. Composition, you have to learn. The melody you have to learn. You have to learn the time, and then the attention [to] which rules. Without that, you can't call it music.

Crawford: Oh, so he plays with you. It's your form.

06-00:08:50

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: That's interesting.

06-00:08:56

MKhan: Or sort of even jazz. I mean, there's a theme, and then they improvise off the theme.

Crawford: You both improvise.

06-00:09:08

Khan: At the museum I played with Julian Bream, also.

MKhan: Same idea.

Crawford: Would you talk about the Western scale and the microtones and how that works out in your music.

06-00:09:22

Khan: That is for something a little more higher.

Crawford: Higher.

06-00:09:31

MKhan: I think he's saying that's a little higher stage; that the microtones will come in when he's doing things more classically oriented.

Khan: There are real microtones there, many useable and un-useable, but to play music, real music that you—it's like medicine. There are so many medicines. But all the medicines don't work. You have to find the one that works.

So those microtones your teacher teaches you. Like one story, my father's teaching me some composition, and for twelve years he says, "No, this particular note, this microtone is not coming."

So I used to follow his fingers. Then I used to see how far he goes. I used to do just like he did. Everything I learned: how he sits down, how he moves, how he makes a sound, how he shapes the striker, this and that, everything.

Still he says, "No, it's not coming." Then after twelve years, one day he says—he heard some recording of mine, and then he said to somebody, not me, "Here, now he's touching the right microtones." So what is that? The same notes. But only he can understand how those are very great, great.

Something happens in classical music, microtones. The microtones, all kind of microtones are there. But those are just sounds. Entertainment sounds, drama sounds, effect music sounds. A vampire's coming and you want to show in the film, background music. There are microtones also there, but it's like a different way to make that kind of feeling.

Crawford: The right microtones, as you put it, could be recognized by your guru, your father, in this case.

06-00:12:28

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: Explain further if you can.

06-00:12:31

Khan: The microtone system is just like a star, and sun and moon, they're how far, and what connection can connect these sources?

MKhan: A microtone only deals with a particular note.

Crawford: Right.

06-00:12:51

Khan: A sound.

MKhan: Right, the sound produced near that note.

Crawford: A very particular sound.

06-00:12:55

Khan: The note is there, like a person, you're a person. Some person likes some person too much, and becomes a devotee. But he is also a person. Why become devoted? His all system of life, those microtones are there.

Therefore, morning, evening, why do you go to temple? Why do you go to church? These are also microtones.

MKhan: Not all notes use microtones, in the scale.

Khan: There are thousands, thousands of varieties. And the microtones are the life of the music. You go to breathe, like a very great person, your soul needs that kind of microtone for their breath.

Crawford: They are prescribed.

06-00:14:05

Khan: You have to do it. And learn it.

Crawford: Yes, and learn it.

06-00:14:10

Khan: And learn it.

Crawford: Ok, good. Well, let's see. We talked about the MacArthur Fellowship, and that was important. Then you had two concerts in 1997 that were important.

06-00:14:28

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: For the celebration, the fiftieth anniversary of independence. Were those very important for you personally?

06-00:14:38

MKhan: Does he remember them?

Crawford: Do you remember them? One was at the U.N.

06-00:14:42

Khan: You ask me how many concerts I played in my life.

Crawford: [laughs] I know, it's very difficult.

06-00:14:48

Khan: Ask me how many halls. I only remember one hall. One whole world. I just go play on the stage and go back to hotel, and I go back and sleep, and next morning, fly to another town. Like that. You ask anybody if they remember which hall we played, who came and listened.

Crawford: So Carnegie Hall, nothing that would stand out for you?

06-00:15:20

Khan: All of the halls look to me the same. I have nothing to do with the hall. The hall is not going to help you play. I have to help myself.

Crawford: So the hall, the audience, the day, the weather, that doesn't really affect your performance.

06-00:15:36

Khan: Yeah, sometimes, some places really-- More important is the audience.

Crawford: Yes.

06-00:15:44

Khan: Not the hall. You can play outside, but if the audience is that kind, it's different.

Crawford: What about the audience?

06-00:15:55

Khan: Audiences are the same. There are very good audiences everywhere. But different, different kind of energy, they have. When I was young, it was a different kind of atmosphere, energy, everything.

Nowadays, it's a different kind of energy, different kind of attitude, different kind of approach. Very rough. Those fine things: softness, kindness, love, what do you call them? Those things are missing.

Crawford: They're missing.

06-00:16:48

Khan: They're missing.

Crawford: I'm so surprised.

06-00:16:51

Khan: Not like before.

Crawford: But I think your audiences are very reverent.

06-00:16:54

MKhan: Are you talking about audience, or the world?

Crawford: Oh, in the world. Well, we touched on the greed and the lack of peace. But I think that's what people find in your music, is the spiritual.

06-00:17:11

Khan: Yes.

Crawford: And don't you receive that?

06-00:17:13

Khan: Yes. Therefore, God created this so that at least something he would leave for us that we can enjoy our life, all these things. So if someone likes music, any kind of music—it is like food. That particular dish, he always wants to eat. Whatever you eat, you should get some water, nice water to drink. Then you'll feel satisfied. For example.

So in music also, those [who] are old people they have a way of listening, understanding. Not only music, everything is different and more healthy for them also, and for the people also. Nowadays, nothing's happening. If you hear music, loud music, after some time you go to the doctor to get some hearing equipment.

That kind of effect, after-effect, is happening with many things. Not only music. But music, it keeps real place to lead to your heart, to your soul.

Crawford: But there are thousands of people who respond to your music, to Indian classical music.

06-00:19:25

Khan: It doesn't matter if they respond to me or not. Sun, the sound itself, is like the sun. The sun is not Indian, not American sun, and it affects everyone according to the place where you went.

Crawford: So you're talking a general change, you sense a general change.

- 06-00:19:49
MKhan: Yes, I don't think he's talking about audiences in general, I think he went off on a different track.
- 06-00:19:58
Khan: Audiences here, nowadays, they are like your family. Everybody's family, their brother, their sister, their dad. But how many families they are very happy to see their own family? Always some fight or something, so music's also becoming like that.
- Crawford: Yes. When I came to the class, the students were taking the class, and I think you were videoing the class, as well. And Mary was writing. What were you writing?
- 06-00:20:53
MKhan: The notation from the composition.
- Crawford: Oh, ok. Do the students see that?
- 06-00:20:58
MKhan: Yes.
- Crawford: I have in this album here, I notice that the scale is demarcated, it's written down. Do the students see that? Do they see notations?
- 06-00:21:09
Khan: The students, if they can't notate it themselves-- It's up on the board right now.
- Crawford: And that's how they remember intervals.
- 06-00:22:16
MKhan: Well, it's literally note by note. Instead of a staff, each and every note is on there.
- Crawford: I see.
- 06-00:21:25
MKhan: And it's relation to the beat, any ornamentation, how you slide into it, how you slide out of it. Every single thing is notated.
- Crawford: Oh, so they learn that system of notation.
- 06-00:21:33
Khan: I had to teach all these things. Not only the notation, even how to clean the instruments!
- Crawford: Yes, you were talking about preparing your instrument when I came. But I didn't hear a vocal preparation. Is there a vocal preparation?

06-00:21:52

Khan: Yes, yes.

Crawford: This was an advanced voice class.

06-00:21:54

MKhan: Oh, that is in the beginning class, more. There are a large set of exercises.

Khan: It's your real instrument. Your own body and mind. More difficult to control to make it perfect.

MKhan: Shona, maybe you could talk for a second about your father's vocal teacher, his first teacher. I'm thinking of Nulo Gopal.

Khan: Yes, Nulo Gopal, he was the first. He [Allauddin Khan] learned and he could play two-hundred instruments.

06-00:22:54

MKhan: Your father.

Khan: He learned everywhere, even on the street, when some beggars or any musicians played something, he'd stand there and he liked that and he'd say, "I like your music, and I want to learn. You become my teacher." They used to laugh, but anyhow, he was very serious.

He was a young boy, I think twelve or fourteen years, or more young. That way, he learned. Then Western classical music, also; he learned saxophone, bagpipes, all Western instruments.

Crawford: This is your father.

06-00:23:55

Khan: He learned from the best. In the British time in India, all the best musicians used to come from Europe, and Indians went to Europe. Every palace had Western music and instruments—they had to show they had a piano even if they don't know anything: "See, this piano's from London."

The spoon, fork, plate, costly plates—these kinds of things. So already the raja, maharaja, king, queen, had those businesses.

My father, therefore, learned over two hundred instruments. Any instruments, he can play. Sometimes beggars played only a one-string instrument, small, like a violin, like a cello. And he learned from one beggar, and then he started playing rag. And he heard the rag. Sounds different, quite different, and quite beautiful.

Crawford: It was a different music that he would play?

- 06-00:25:38
MKhan: No, he's saying that he would play raga on this one-stringed instrument.
- Crawford: Oh, he really played raga?
- 06-00:25:42
Khan: Yes, yes.
- Crawford: How had he heard raga?
- 06-00:25:45
Khan: Raga?
- Crawford: The beggar. How had he heard raga?
- 06-00:25:48
Khan: Raga means when you become like a nice gentleman, educated, nice dress, a nice way of talking. So that person, the beggar, maybe he's very educated. But he dressed like a beggar, then you don't give the disrespect to beggars. You don't feel anything like that.
- But in [that] dress, if he talks some philosophy, then your mind and ear will open and you'll say, "My goodness, this person is not a beggar."
- Crawford: Yes. Well, do any of your students go to India?
- 06-00:26:38
Khan: Yes, everybody.
- Crawford: All of them try to go.
- 06-00:26:41
Khan: They're going now. They are going more than me now.
- MKhan: Just one second, if you would. I don't know if you mentioned this before, when she was asking about vocal practice and about exercises—how do you get ready for vocal practice. That's why I was asking to talk a second about Nulo Gopal, because he was your dad's first singing teacher. He learned singing for eight years.
- Crawford: Can you spell that?
- MKhan: N-U-L-O-- it's not his actual name-- it's a nickname. And the Gopal, G-O-P-A-L.] But then how many exercises?
- Khan: Three-hundred-sixty exercises.
- MKhan: Vocal exercises.

Crawford: To prepare for a lesson or—

06-00:27:28

Khan: Yes. You have to sing. Whatever you want to learn, first you have to learn by singing. The real instrument is your own voice. And an instrument is an instrument. It is not your real body. That effect you have to bring on that wood from your real hand.

MKhan: So first he teaches vocal class, then instrumental class. All the instrumentalists have to come and understand singing first, to be able to render in their voice, *then* put that in their instrument.

Crawford: That is a marvelous tradition.

06-00:28:11

Khan: Yes. So that way, the music will go to the right place.

Crawford: These students that I heard, they all are instrumentalists, as well?

06-00:28:24

MKhan: A few are straight vocalists, but most of them are instrumentalists.

Crawford: I noticed that in that extended piece, probably raga, they blended their voices very well. They seemed to have a very nice voice blend.

06-00:28:43

MKhan: Everybody was trying to hit pitch. [they laugh] Working very hard, with him sitting there.

Crawford: To have to hit pitch.

06-00:28:51

MKhan: On pitch.

Khan: On pitch. But sometimes, they sound like a witch. [they laugh]

Crawford: You were accompanying, Khansahib. What was the instrument you were using?

06-00:29:03

Khan: It's called a harmonium.

Crawford: It's a harmonium.

06-00:29:16

Khan: Yes. And actually you can see the note. Like a blind person gives someone his hand and he makes him walk, takes him to one place, to another place.

Crawford: So you always accompany them to some extent?

- 06-00:29:40
Khan: In the beginning.
- Crawford: When they are singing.
- 06-00:29:42
MKhan: In the vocal, yes.
- Crawford: How far do they go? Do you have students who are performing everywhere?
- 06-00:29:51
Khan: Singing, yes.
- Crawford: And so they are deeply into the classical Indian tradition.
- 06-00:29:58
MKhan: Well, anybody that comes from here is deeply into the tradition.
- Khan: They have to learn vocal.
- Crawford: Last time we talked, you said, “I have ten thousand students.”
- 06-00:30:09
Khan: Yes, students.
- Crawford: You said, “If I can teach them to sing a little and perform a little”—but you didn’t really mean it in that sense.
- 06-00:30:13
Khan: Up until now, in this college, ten-thousand students are coming? But they don’t stay a long time. Some stay a long time.
- MKhan: Some a session. Some, twenty years.
- Crawford: Yes.
- 06-00:30:38
Khan: One session, two sessions.
- Crawford: Is that frustrating for you?
- 06-00:30:42
Khan: No. Because they are learning good things. They are not learning how to smoke or drink.
- Crawford: That’s a thought! [they laugh] And that was my other question. What other discipline that surrounds the music do you talk to them about? I know you were with your father twenty-three hours a day, and you’re not with your students, but--

06-00:31:07

Khan: The music itself, slowly, slowly, when you understand music, the music will guide you and change you, and all bad things will-- slowly, slowly they go away. All the good qualities in your soul will become permanent, and bad things will be out. Then you start thinking better things.

MKhan: If you were to ask the students—because we have done this, just to see—what was one thing that you would say about [Khansahib], that he would tell you to do in class? And that is, practice. Practice. Practice. [laughs] That's the key.

Crawford: And do they practice?

06-00:32:11

Khan: They practice. Before they used to practice more, because at that time they didn't need to work so much to get money. But nowadays, everywhere, you need money first to stay even in one room, in one place. So that takes away all the energy and time. And when you come home, there is not so much energy left to practice.

Crawford: Whereas in your village, everything was taken care of for you, by family?

06-00:32:51

Khan: In the old time, you were in the forest, you see, to eat fruit. All kind of foods are there. You don't need to buy, you don't need to ask anyone. Water, clean water; you don't need to pay for that. Everything was free. And then you chose to go under a tree and practice. You had your own place.

Like a bird doesn't go and get a certificate and pay money for the land. Now those freedoms are gone.

And then the schools are making money, and you don't get the best teachers. Maybe they have got degrees themselves, but maybe they are not the best teachers—maybe nobody knows them. They are not famous like Beethoven, Bach, Mozart not like that; not that kind of standard. Also, you need a special kind of god gift.

Crawford: Are you pleased with the way the tradition goes on?

06-00:34:31

Khan: Yes, it depends on how you were born, what kind of family. [Maybe] that's a family of butchers or they have a different kind of business.

MKhan: But is your music here going to be carried on is what she's asking.

Khan: Yes, yes, it will be, slowly. It's dying other places, this music, because they are copying all different kinds of music, they are interested in that, the younger generation.

Now slowly and slowly, they're coming back. They want a normal life. Normal kind of things. So they find in this raga, in this music. Like to find a real father and mother, not adopted.

Crawford: Your sons both perform.

06-00:35:37

Khan: Yes, they are performing, also learning.

Crawford: And learning. Well, always learning.

06-00:35:42

Khan: Yes. But this stage is not performing, this is learning how to perform. Then the stage comes, after many years of performing, then you can say you're a performer. This is also student training, how to perform.

Crawford: Yes. Well, would you talk a little bit about the archive?

06-00:36:11

Khan: About the archive, my wife can tell you more than me.

MKhan: You know something. You know all of your classes are recorded, and *so* many concerts.

Khan: Yes, these things will be one day [in the archive]. Because we are missing that. We didn't have any recordings or any books from the very, very great artists, born on this planet and performed, and gone back to heaven. There was not any recording, not any writing. Nothing left.

My father actually started that, so this should not die, and people should know.

MKhan: The writing style was also from his father. Then other musicians began to write as well.

Crawford: So you're really carrying on the work of your father.

06-00:37:27

Khan: Yes, then other musicians. They also created and trained many good musicians. They're also gone. Almost every good thing is dead. People are no more alive in this planet. Maybe they're coming back, I don't know.

MKhan: And so much of the tradition, this Indian music, was oral tradition. So, so much of it is, like he's saying, great people came and went and—

Crawford: Weren't documented.

- 06-00:38:04
MKhan: No, not at all. And the people who learned from them have also passed, and it was all in their heads, and they didn't write any of it. So what had passed had to be done by memory.
- Crawford: And so that's what you're trying to do is to document.
- 06-00:38:20
MKhan: Yes. His father left behind *many, many* composition books.
- Khan: He's doing his whole life. He said he was born many times, just to learn music. And last, he will be born in Europe, and America.
- Crawford: Yes?
- 06-00:38:47
Khan: He said that.
- MKhan: Yes, so we've documented all of his compositions.
- Khan: He used to dream like that. He used to say, "I have been born many times. Many things I've learned, but only one thing I missed. I want to [be] born out of India, in Europe or America, and learn their music, and find out and compare—" Not compare, actually; to know all the styles of good music.
- Crawford: He did that, in his lifetime as well.
- 06-00:39:30
Khan: Yes, because he could play two-hundred instruments. And all kinds of music.
- Crawford: He could play the saxophone—that surprises me.
- 06-00:39:37
Khan: Yes, saxophone.
- 06-00:39:39
MKhan: Saxophone's actually popular in India. Saxophone has become a popular instrument in India. And especially in the south.
- Khan: Piano, is very popular from the beginning. In British time, if you want to show them how much you love their art. You would find, actually, pianos in the house. Pianos and plates and teaspoons, knives, these kind of things.
- Crawford: Your father had a very curious mind. [Khan chuckles] He encompassed everything. For instance, to talk to a beggar about what he heard a beggar playing.
- 06-00:40:31
MKhan: You know, he also could build. He built his own home. He was a very interesting renaissance type of man.

Crawford: Indeed. Will you go back? Will you go back to India?

06-00:40:48

Khan: No, I'm no longer young enough to go back.

Crawford: I think you're very young.

06-00:40:53

MKhan: You might go back. He went this January; [laughs] he was there this January.

Khan: No, because my friends, my generation are all dead. Finished. And those children, they don't know me, and I don't know them.

No, I feel [at] home here because whatever I see here, I know them. And for me, the place is not so important then where I see this music getting the right place, the right respect, that people love it, people understand. That is my place.

Crawford: That's wonderful. Well, we're well into the second hour. I think we'll stop briefly.

[sound file stops, re-starts]

Crawford: Perhaps you can give me some details about the archival work you are doing now.

06-00:42:01

MKhan: He is associated with the Smithsonian Institution now. They began something called the National Digital Archives, National *Recording* Archives. What is it actually called? Might be the National Recording Archives.

They've only done it three times now, three years. And in the second year, Mickey Hart was instrumental in having Khansahib's music nominated and accepted.

What they do in a year is part of the Library of Congress, and they take fifty-- This is pretty amazing, really, if you think about it. Fifty audio recordings is what they choose, from the 1800s to current times. Fifty for the *whole* period! In a year. So they choose fifty audio recordings. They can be baseball games, presidential speeches, anything that's audio.

So the second year, Mickey encouraged me to choose ten endangered and top concerts of Khansahib and say why they are important, would be important. He was chosen--eighteen hours of his music deemed necessary to be archived and preserved by the Library of Congress. He's, like, between Bruce Springsteen and the Beatles, in that year! It was from the 1970s, this collection.

06-00:43:39

MKhan:

It was last year that this happened. And so if you go to the Library of Congress and you type in National Recording Archives, I believe is what it's called. Like I said, this is the third year, I think, now.

Mickey was really instrumental in encouraging me to do that. He documents, and he has a huge collection of drums from around the world and numerous things, but he just understands the value of preservation. And so he's been very helpful to me in creating the library, and in encouraging, being able to discuss, you know, aspects of it.

Crawford:

That is a marvelous legacy.

06-00:44:30

MKhan:

One of the really wonderful things about talking to Mickey is that he really understands. And for you, I'm saying, it might be a really nice conversation. He'd be coming at Khansahib in retrospect and in terms of preservation, all his memories about all the years he was around the school.

And then John Handy has actually performed with Khansahib, but Mickey hasn't. You know, they didn't play together.

Crawford:

The two of them would add important angles on the music—a different dimension. I will look into that, to see if we can document even further than we've been able to here.

[End of Interview]