

Ali Akbar College of Music Archive Selections (1960s-1970s)

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Essay by Madina Khan (guest post)*



Ali Akbar Kahn

To narrow down the life and art of a musical giant to ten works is, essentially, impossible. Ten works cannot convey the depth, stretch, struggle, and triumph of a man who walked in this world with the single-minded hope of spreading the love and devotion of his music to as many people as possible; ten works cannot cover a life steeped in practice and tradition. However, Maestro Ali Akbar Khan was an individual who left a trace of himself in every note he played on the *sarode*—every dip and intonation was composed and performed with reverence, and in this way, perhaps these ten works will be enough to pull you into his legacy and leave you craving more.

The classical music of North India is one of the oldest continuing musical traditions in the world, it dates back thousands of years. Ali Akbar Khan's father, the late Acharya Baba Allaiddin Khan, is acknowledged as one of the greatest figures in North Indian music of the 20th century. Their family traces its *gharana* (ancestral tradition) from Mian Tansen--a 16th century musical genius and court musician of Emperor Akbar--to Mohammed Wazir Khan, court musician of Rampur State and Baba Allaiddin Khan's *guru* (teacher).

Ali Akbar Khan (1922-2009) was one of India's most accomplished classical musicians. Though considered a "National Living Treasure" in India, he was admired by both Eastern and Western musicians for his brilliant compositions and his mastery of the *sarode* (a 25-stringed, fret-less instrument). His life took on an epic stature--from a sheltered small town boy, living in the shadow of his great father, to performing in the major classical music venues around the world. He would go on to receive numerous awards and titles, even the elusive MacArthur Genius Award. Yet, it was his humility and his humor that stayed with him his entire life and drew many people to him as a teacher and friend. He was known to say, "I am just a music lover."

Born in 1922 in East Bengal, Bangladesh, Mr. Khan began his studies in music at the age of three. He studied vocal music from his father and drums from his uncle, Fakir Aftabuddin. His father also trained him on several other instruments, but decided finally that he must concentrate on the *sarode* and on vocal. For over 20 years, he trained and practiced up to 18 hours a day.

His father was a legendary taskmaster; this meant that Mr. Khan was groomed to be a musician of the highest degree. Playing with friends and choosing what he would do with his life was not an option for the young Ali Akbar. His father continued to teach Mr. Khan until he was over 100 years old, when he ultimately died in 1972 at the age of 110. After his father's death, Mr. Khan would continue to learn from his father in his dreams. Often in his adult life, he would awaken from sleep with a new composition taught to him during the night--a phenomenon he embraced.

Ali Akbar Khan gave his first public performance in Allahabad at age 13. In his early 20s, he made his first recording in Lucknow for the HMV label, and the next year he became the court musician to the Maharaja of Jodhpur. He worked there for seven years until the Maharaja's untimely death. The state of Jodhpur bestowed upon him his first title, that of Ustad, or Master Musician.

At the request of the late concert violinist Lord Yehudi Menuhin, Mr. Khan first visited the United States in 1955 and performed an unprecedented concert at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He also made the first LP recording of Indian classical music, and the first television performance of Indian music, on Allistair Cooke's "Omnibus"--where he sowed the seed for the wave of popularity of Indian music in the 1960's.

Mr. Khan founded the first Ali Akbar College of Music in Calcutta, India, in 1956. In the early 1960s, he was asked to teach a group of Mother Superiors at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. With them, he explored the similarities between Gregorian chants and the old *dhrupad* style of North India.

In 1965, he came to Berkeley, California, to teach for the Asian Society of Eastern Arts. Little did he know at the time that he would forever remain in California, spreading the teachings of his father. Recognizing the extraordinary interest and abilities of his Western students, he decided to open his own school where he could teach on a regular basis.

In 1967, the Ali Akbar College of Music was founded in Berkeley and moved to Marin County, California the following year. He then maintained a regular teaching schedule of six classes a week, nine months of the year for the next 40 years. It was his father's request that drove Mr. Khan during his life: the desire that he would spread the music of India as far and wide as possible. Establishing the AACM in California allowed for a home base to be built outside of India, where the bright-eyed musicians of the West would flock for years to come to study at his feet. To this day, it has become a pilgrimage of sorts for musicians to find their way to his prestigious building. Much like Mr. Khan, it is an unassuming and humble space, steeped in history and filled floor to ceiling with passionate devotion.

Ali Akbar Khan's father left behind such a wealth of material that he felt he was always learning new things from him. He continued his father's tradition, that of the Sri Baba Allauddin Seni Gharana of Maihar and Rampur, India. Now, his family and students in California are following in his footsteps, moving forward with the vast amount of work Mr. Khan has left behind. In 2015, the AACM opened its Ali Akbar Khan Library, a passion project of Mr. Khan and his wife, and director of the AACM, Mary Khan. The Library currently houses over 8,000 hours of classes, concerts, video, audio and more. With the preservation of this immense collection, the

training of future students is now something unprecedented in the classical music world: a wealth of audio recordings directly from the source of the tradition.

The ten pieces selected to be a part of this incredible Registry are a sampling of some of the most profound and transformative pieces in the archives of the AACM--iconic performances, with an array of some of the greatest Indian classical musicians in the world. One piece in particular is a 30-minute *raga* by Mr. Khan's father, Baba Allauddin Khan; a perfect introduction to the true history of Mr. Khan's legacy.

While it is difficult to summarize the life of Maestro Ali Akbar Khan—or of any great artist whose work extends far beyond any one tangible thing--by listening to these pieces you will be able to hear from him in his most direct and personal form of communication: his music.

“Real music is not for wealth, not for honors, or not even for the joys of the mind--it is one kind of yoga, a path for realization and salvation to purify your mind and heart and give you longevity.”--Ali Akbar Khan

Madina Khan is the youngest child of Mary and Ali Akbar Khan. She studied fine art painting at University of the Arts London and is currently living in the Bay Area.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.