

ROLLING STONE

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Ali Akbar's 2000 Year Old School

BY TIM CAHILL

SAN RAFAEL, Cal. — It looks a little like an urban commune, this Ali Akbar College of Music. Rusty pickups and Volkswagen buses fill a dusty back yard and the college itself is a single rambling brownshingle house: creaky, comfortable, its rundown condition masked by a wealth of foliage. On the lower floor, an advanced class is sitting in a dark, wood-paneled room lost in an orgy of tuning instruments. There are six sitars, five sarods, two tablas and a tambura.

The students sit crosslegged, shoeless. A certain joy is in the air in anticipation of the lesson. And there is the simple pleasure of playing with such beautiful toys: the sarods with their 25 gleaming strings and their polished steel fretless fingerboards; the sitars, three times the size of a large acoustic guitar, with their twin gourd-like resonators and raised metal frets; the tambura with its carefully carved fist-size tuning knobs, its polished wood grain, and its intricately patterned Indian trim.

Among the students are Darby Slick and Peter Van Gelder, former members of the defunct, influential Great Society. They rock gently in their positions glancing at their friends, nodding and smiling ever so slightly.

"Be a receptive student," the college manual reads. "Avoid asking questions in class. Do not wear shoes, smoke, or eat in class and do not point the soles of the feet at the instructor." These rules, plus \$200 tuition, are the dues one pays to study under Ali Akbar Khan. There is no bureaucracy. The college is administered by advanced students who are clearly not getting rich. There are no books, lectures, or tests. All theory, composition, and execution are taught directly from the instruments.

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The instruments are in tune. Some students work through simple finger exercises. A door opens and a man in a white linen suit walks into the room. Everyone stands. Ali Akbar Khan nods in perfunctory acknowledgment and sits on the floor with his back against the wall. The students sit once again. There is some slight, nervous tuning. Khan says nothing, yawns expansively, finally gives a soft command in Urdu. The students break into a run from a midnight raga that, for all its incredible rapidity, is somehow, strangely, both lulling and sensuous. The droning tambura offers layers of sound to complement the intricate melodic variations of the sitars and sarods while the tablas are perfect, present in rhythmic flurries, deep and moving.

Khansahib, as his students call him, settles back against the wall and lights a Players cigarette. He strikes a characteristically languid pose: one hand on the back of his neck, the other stretching above his head like a man coming out of a deep sleep. He seems preoccupied, even bored. One journalist has suggested that he looks like a man nursing a terrific hangover, but with his coffee, cigarette, and white suit he looks more like a bored druggist. Towards the end of his cigarette, his left hand begins tapping time in a barely perceptible motion.

Ali Akbar Khan is a man who commands tremendous respect in his own country, both as a performer and a teacher. He was given the President's Award and was the State Musician of Jodhpur. In the West he has been called

by one critic "the most sensitive, intuitively masterful musician of our age."

He is the son of the most famous living Indian musician, Dr. Alauddin Khan, who at the age of 112 plays 200 instruments. He is the direct musical descendant of the most famous Indian musician, the legendary Tansen of the 16th Century court of Akbar, who purified and codified 2000 years of Indian music. The tradition or *gharana* he founded was passed on through his sons and his sons' sons until the turn of this century when the sons of Wazir Khan died prematurely. Rather than let the tradition die with himself Wazir Khan chose to teach it to Alauddin.

In the West a great performer is seldom also a great teacher. Ali Akbar Khan chooses to be both. "My aim is I'm going to play up to some time, then I'll die. If I am selfish, everything dies with me but my father and I don't want that. How I feel and how my father feels, that the teacher is next to God and the teacher thinks of the students like his own son, his own child, and therefore they try hard to teach them."

He founded the Ali Akbar College in Calcutta in 1956. In 1965 the American Society of Eastern Arts invited him to teach for the summer in Berkeley. He taught only 12 students. In 1966, perhaps because of the Beatles' well publicized association with Ravi Shankar (Khan's brother-in-law), there were 60 students, and the next year 80. Citing the dedication and discipline of American students, he decided to form a branch of his college in California.

Now, sitting in the wood-paneled room in San Rafael, he finishes his coffee and stubs out his cigarette. Someone strikes a false note, someone else another and suddenly the whole raga disintegrates. The tablas keep time and Khansahib sings the proper notes in demonstration. A half-hearted attempt to follow falls apart quickly. Khan reaches for his sarod, tests the tuning, makes a minute adjustment, and demonstrates the proper notes and tempo. The class follows again, and this time they are on properly. Khan listens, holding his instrument. His face shows slight animation, and one crossed knee begins to move — slowly, quartertime.

The future of Indian music in America is uncertain. If the college is eventually accredited, a small number of teacher-performers will go to high schools and colleges in an effort to spur interest. Already, many San Francisco musicians, among them Mickey Hart and Bill Kreutzmann of the Dead, Dave Getz of Big Brother, and Jerry Hahn, have taken courses at Ali Akbar College. Peter Van Gelder, formerly of the Great Society; "When I was in rock and roll five years ago it was expanding and we felt it was up to us what rock and roll was going to be. Now it's up to us what music is going to be, and I think this will be a part of it." Alauddin Khan, in his 112th year, stated that he firmly believes he will be reincarnated in the United States.

Ali Akbar Khan is not specific about why he prefers teaching in America, but there are theories enough among his students, a number of whom have been to India. The majority say that in India, classical music is in one of its periods of decline, and coupled with the industrial revolution young Indians are reluctant to spend the time to become a master musician. One American who studied for three summers with Khan went to India to continue with him and was placed in a fifth year class, a class some Indians had waited as long as eight years to get into. Khan denies there is any difference between American and Indian students; still he has been spending more and more time in America.

The single window in the small room is steamed over and one of the tabla players has opened his shirt. Khansahib is working with his sarod. He breaks into a run of such bewildering complexity that his students ignore their instruments and sit in numb awe. There is something transcendent in his playing, and his experience is inspiration. He slows his tempo and nods to the students. They follow, faltering now and then, but everyone finishes the same moment and in the sudden silence the room expands with a sense of accomplishment.