**Mr. Kishon Khan**



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Age: 35

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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah

Mr. Khan is well established in World Music and Latin-Jazz scenes as a performer, composer and arranger. His international world fusion project ‘Lokkhi Terra’, mixes Bengali folk with other world traditions from Cuban rumba to Nigerian Afro-beat, representing a British-Bengali approach to this heritage.

I am Kishon Khan. I am thirty five years old and I live in North London.



**How did you get involved in Music?**

When I was very young I was forced to learn piano and when I got older my interest in music got general. I took a jazz course when I left school and to be in university. Then I got a band as a hobby in university where I studied something totally different. Then I fell into playing music professionally because I played from a young age. I started playing with different bands and musicians and learning different types of music.-so for me accidentally. As a youngster I knew nothing what it would be to be a musician professionally. It is not something I would do as a young age because I thought I would be a doctor or an economist because I played the piano from a young age. I found that I was making money playing piano through university and then when I started travelling after university, I also found out that I could get a job in a band or playing piano somewhere. That’s how I fell into music.

**What do you mean when you say ‘you were forced?’**

Forced means, I started when I was four. To be honest I hated classical lessons. Now I thank my mother every day for forcing me into it. I was told to go to piano lessons. Even though I loved piano lessons, I hated the educational side of it. When I got old enough to go to piano lessons by myself, I bandaged my fingers together and said “I hurt, falling” and got to lots of trouble. I was taught classical piano”.

**Where were you born?**

I was born in Dhaka. I came here just nine months of age. I was born just before the Independence War (of Bangladesh). So I came here partially due to the war. So I came here during the Independence War.

**Why learn Piano?**

It was choice of my parents. As a toddler I liked the sound of the piano and would rush up to it. It is nothing to do with me. It is luck so far I am concerned. It is funny that when you start learning an instrument and when you then listen to music, whatever music, naturally you get drawn to the music with the instrument in it.

**Why Jazz?**

I get described as a Jazz musician. There is very little, if you mean American Jazz, I don’t really play much of that music. In my teenage years I have listened to lot of American jazz. I was studying just after leaving school, before University, it is a wonderful music to explore from and improvise and there is a wonderful energy, especially, for me, jazz of the 40s, 50s and 60s. So that time when I was very young, I played it because I loved it. I would say when I started travelling and tried to compose my own music in a more sophisticated way. I used broad genre of jazz, meaning improvised music and I would bring in lots of other influences of music that I have been listening to at a young age. For example Indian classical music, if you look at it, there is *raag* scale, theme & mood and jazz is the same. For me jazz is music for musician who would like to improvise. That is how I describe myself rather than a jazz musician.

**Do you play any other instruments apart from the piano?**

I play percussion so I play congos and various percussions. I play because percussion in music is very important because what distinguishes different types of music whether it is continental, African, Bangladeshi music, Indian music, it is not only the words, melody but it is far tougher to nail what you call the swing, how it actually move. To study different type of music you have to play percussion, to understand how different swing works. When I go to Bangladesh and I like to do with Bangladeshi music it is very important that I am using some form of Bangladeshi percussion.

**Do you play any Bengali instrument?**

I play *dhol* but I will be embarrassed if I played it in Bangladesh.

**How about Harmonium?**

I can play the harmonium physically but really the harmonium is there to back up melody and I have to know the melody. If I know the melody very well I would probably know how to play.

**Were you exposed to Bengali Music?**

I was exposed to lot of Bengali and Indian classical music growing up but more from family going to Bangladesh Centre from the 70s to mid 80s. My mum sings and she constantly sing all over the home whether it is traditional or Indian songs and then going back to Bangladesh regularly, I have been exposed to lot of Bengali in the family. When there would be visiting Bengali and Indian musicians coming over my mum would invite them and I would listen to them. As a youngster I wasn’t aware of its relevance. As I was going into my teens my opinion about music became much more important to me especially when I started to listen to other world music which had the same motive and energy, I could see lot of similarities.

**Is there any particular type of music that you are interested?**

When I was growing up, mum would sing folkloric songs, river songs, and typical Bengali revolutionary songs more to do with her generation. My real knowledge of Bangladeshi music changed when I went to Bangladesh after my university just to stay there for a year and I went travelling around with local musician in Bangladesh and that’s when I discovered *Baul* music. There is a huge variety of music in Bangladesh. We went to East India as well and some of the *melas* there. To be honest, I can study for ten years only one of these type of music. My awareness of Bangladeshi music at that time in London was limited. I couldn’t differentiate different type of music. It is only when I took a keen interest when I went o Bangladesh. That’s when I kind of knew different type of music. My Bangla is not brilliant. Apparently, I speak Bangla like a four year old. When I travelled Bangladesh by myself it took me a while for me to get to know some Bangladeshis who could translate it to me in a way I could understand. Sometimes growing up here, especially the older sons, you learn a form of Bangla which is far different than the Bangla back in Bangladesh. If I wouldn’t have brought up with the music I listened it would have been far more alien to me.

When I went travelling around *melas* in Bangladesh in 1991, I then went to Dhaka, and tried to mix lot of music what I have heard, like what I am doing know. I found among my own peer group that there was virtually no interest at that time. Maybe I didn’t meet the right people. Music in Bangladeshi identity, I found lot of bands at least in Bangladesh who were keener in rock or kind of music -- to me had no connection to the music spectrum. I would say since the late 90s there was a band called Bangla which I recorded on my first album, that they were doing was the reason I happen to get involved. I found a bunch of young musicians, who very progressively understood what it meant to have a Bangladeshi identity and were very aware of our musical heritage. As far as I can see that started off a trend of revolution of a whole new generation, suddenly becoming much more aware of how incredibly our musical heritage is. Anyone interested in music suddenly had a huge pot to pick from there and I think lot of people were kind of unaware and just needed to be sure that, look do this thing, without reflecting to the older generation and it has lot of relevance to our generation. Especially looking at *Lalon*, whose lyrics are incredibly progressive and incredibly relevant today makes me proud to have people in most *bustis* (slums) in Bangladesh singing with such progressive lyrics. So there are young people here who want to make aware of what actually our musical heritage is and would take a natural interest in it. Problem is making aware of it and not associating it with something our folks sing at home or go to some cultural event.

**What memories do you have going to cultural event in Bangladesh Centre?**

My memories are at the age of nine being forced to walk like a cat walk with a *lungi*on. Trying to take Bangla as meaningless, when I was very young and trying to get out of it. I liked it but again I was very young in the 70s and the situation in London was very different and I was never sure as why I was there. To be honest, I was interested in meeting kids of my age than the event itself but in hindsight I am really glad that my mum took me there because there is lot of influence that you are not aware of. I used to think why I was there but actually you are meeting kids of Bangladeshi background also being brought up here and you realise that there is something positive being brought up here and having a Bangladeshi Background. It also gave me the ability, especially in my teens, to see what my community was about. There is lot of amazing things in our community. This was again more in hindsight.

**That was more in hindsight in your childhood but what about these events now?**

In my 20s and 30s more so. In my teenage years probably not. In my teenage years it was more of wanting to break way from family and exploring more and more on my own which I am not familiar with. In my 20s and 30s, yes, because I found it musically interesting and even still now with all the Bangladeshi *melas*. There are certain things that are important and explain my identity. I have been to lots of *melas*. Lots of *melas* in East End--*Bangla Mela* last July. *Mela* in Walthamstow. Lots of *melas*, not only South Asian *melas* but world music. Five years ago there was a gigantic *mela* near Spitalfields.

When my mum wasn’t living here, I missed her cooking, so any *mela*, I went straight there just for the food!

**Do you know any Bengali based artist here in the UK?**

I know plenty. Especially, unfortunately, our South Asians in the jazz scene, there is not enough of us, so we stand out and we all get to know each other. About the traditional Bengali singers here in the UK, I am more getting to know them now in the last two to three years. I have been spending much more of my effort going back to Bangladesh, I have to say. I want to start doing a mixture of both. I have been trying to go back to Bangladesh more and more because socially we need to start seeing music as a way out of poverty as opposed to older generation who see music as a way into poverty.

If you go to other poor continents, if you go to other part of Africa and you go to Cuba and Latin America, music is like sports. It is seen, it doesn’t matter how much money you have, if you have a talent it can take you somewhere which very few professions can. So if people are born in the *bustis* in Bangladesh, the very few professions they can get into without having huge amount of money behind them, except sports and music. That’s why I find such fascinating areas that should be really promoted rather than frowned on by the older generation and just seen, what is seen on TV, as pop, as an ego thing.

**You talked of *bustis* (slums), is it relevant here to our community in the UK?**

Absolutely! Our community here is from a very social background, in terms of how much money they have. If you just look in East End, there are lot of kids, whose family are really struggling in terms of financially or they would send lot of the money back home. For me, this is precisely the community that should be targeted. If you are not interested in becoming a doctor or a lawyer and if you haven’t had the support that pushes you education wise, you may still have huge amount of talent where things like money is not of such importance.—sport and music being the main two ones.

If you look at our nation and country and our history, we have such a history of musical talent. Just because a whole part of the population have moved here doesn’t mean that getting rid off that talent. It is precisely our type of community should have these arts pushed up a bit and try change the older generation’s view of what it means for their child to go into music.

**Does you mum have her own collection of Bangladeshi or Bengali music or records?**

She does but I would say the ones I tended to pick were instrumental ones which were more lenient towards Indian classical side that was before I been to Bangladesh to spend long time with musicians there.

**Tell us about your experience in Bangladesh. The people you met or the *melas* you went to?**

It was all over. I went to *mela* in Kushtia which celebrates *Lalon*. I went to a *Lengta mela*–there was a *fakir*called lengta—not every one was naked in the *mela*. I went to *maizbandar mela* in Chittagong Hill Tracks, right to the Mirpur local *mela* in Dhaka. I was travelling around with a bunch of local musician who had visiting *baul* musician come over and they would follow them. I met them by bumping into a blind flute player in the street and asking him where I could meet musicians not from the actual scene. He took me to a local *busti*. Fifteen years ago Bangladesh was the most wonderfully safe country, maybe things have started to change now. You can go into *bustis* and this was in Dhaka initially and they took me to Comilla and all the other *melas*. What I found was that people were really charmed by an idiot who spoke Bangla so badly! I was interested in what they were doing and people treated my incredibly well. From there I met a whole bunch of musicians who I started going around with and spending most of the year with them. For me it was also the first time I met Bangladeshis outside my social background. The criticism is about lot of affluent, especially people of my age, sometimes they actually don’t know anyone outside there social background. Now they are my friends, the set of musicians and they taught me a lot about what it is actually to live in Bangladesh—it brings up my romantic images as well.

**What was your parents or guardians reaction when you went to the busti with this blind flute player?**

I was really lucky. My *nani* (grandmother) was outraged. My mum was happy because I finished my degree and I told her that I needed some time. Overall my family was happy because I was bought up here and compared to my cousins I was the youngest, so everyone have done a little bit of education, I cannot read or write Bangla, so I think they were happy that I am spending time in Bangladesh. For me it was important because I came back here with a different view of what it means to be Bangladeshi. Little things, like all the chaos in my life made sense.

**Were you involved with affluent bands in Bangladesh?**

When I initially went to Bangladesh I hanged around with *baul* troops, I did not get involved with affluent bands because I found that they are basically rock bands. I actually did not get on with that music, I did not get any connection. When I went to Bangladesh regularly and when the ‘Bangladesh’ album was just done in1998, initially the lead singer is my second cousin. Initially, I asked by my family members to see how these guys were doing. What made me to get involved was that I was very impressed with them because they had a nice open attitude to music and I found that they understood about *baul* music and the music they were taking from. When I say that as much as long the generation before, the people in the rock bands, as much they probably understood rock music better than me, the music they were mixing with had no relevance and that’s where I found the fusion odd. I found ‘Bangla’ as the first group which they have actually hung around with proper folkloric musicians and a result the fusion I found much more genuine. It wasn’t about making money or a being a pop star. It was just interesting music and really proud of the heritage and I wanted to do something new and progressive. It was also important for people who liked Bangladeshi music, some people criticise fusion because, they say, *Lalon Shah* should be kept traditional. No one is arguing that you should have traditional music. If you look at what *Lalon Shah* himself actually wrote in most of his music, he would have been appalled, I am convinced, if his music is then suddenly made academic and has to stay one way. He would really promote progression and change. For me these young musicians were just continuing that mental, and there is a whole host of them, generated from that time. Even now when I go back and listen to Habib in Bangladesh it makes me really proud, it is not my music I have to say, he has done a brilliant job in taking modern production and actually showing people that something exciting about the music world.

**There are lots of groups here where they sing folkloric songs in ware houses and disused factories. Have you been to any of these events?**

I am ashamed that I don’t know enough about that and I would like to know more about these groups. In the last year I was busy getting ‘Lokhi Terra’ together. The reason why I haven’t is, personally, I have spent lot of time, in the last ten years, travelling and doing what I started off doing in Bangladesh. It kind of set a template for me to do it.

**There is lot of *baul* music happening here apart from what is happening in Bangladesh**

Yes, I would like to find out more about it. Even in terms of teaching workshop or little collaboration. The main *baul* person we have been doing work with is called Rab and he is based in Dhaka and he come over here. I find him amazing. For me it is getting the music out of my bedroom or living room and actually showing it as a valid art form. This is how most genuine music starts around the world, actually putting Bangladeshi music in the world music map. Music from everywhere is getting so much recognition, especially India and Pakistan. I don’t know why Bangladesh is left out, when its heritage is just as strong.

**Is the Bangladeshi community aware of the music you do?**

There is a whole bunch of us that we won’t be known to wider Bangladeshi community purely because we don’t play what it would be regarded as traditionally Bangladeshi music. There is a whole bunch of us, myself, Zoe Rahman, Idris Rahman, and Robin Banarjee where we got into music as more session players, playing lots of types of music. So I will play to an audience purely from Mauritius playing in a sega band. I would play predominantly to a South Asian audience if I am playing with a Pakistani or an Indian band.

**If you were to expose your music through radio and TV what impact would you have to the Bangladeshi community or the Bangladeshi youths here in the UK?**

I think the older generation may not understand a lot of music that we are playing. When we bring in Bangladeshi influence we are mixing it with other influences we have been brought up. I think the younger generation will find a lot of relevance in it because whether we are playing in a funk band or drum & bass band or Bengali fusion band, these are music which is relevant to them and relevant to their lives and especially growing up in London. Personally, all my music, reflect me growing up in London and being a Bangladeshi growing up in London more recently. So if I am involved with an Afro-beat band which is nothing to do with Bangladesh, it still is not Afro-beat like Nigeria, it is Afro-beat from London. In fact having a Bangladeshi playing in that band makes it something which it would never had happened. I play with lot of Cuban bands and there is lot of interest when, there is the Cuban singer I sometimes work with, and who introduces me from Bangladesh, I only get the one Bangladeshi from the audience coming up to me and which is so nice, I have to say. I think more young Bangladeshis have to be shown that it is easy to make your own decision what you want to do. If you have talent you can go for what you want to go for and not to be restricted by many things that hold everyone back, whether it is money or whether it is meeting with right people. Those are the things I would like to promote, especially in our community like us, when I chat to friends from Kenya, from Nigeria, they have similar stories actually, like their parents want them to become doctors or engineers, which is great but if you have the opportunity and talent then musically you can earn more money than any other profession and even if you don’t you can make a decent enough living.

**I guess you haven’t gone out to promote yourself as someone of Bangladeshi origin to the Bengali community?**

Not to the Bengali community. I haven’t because I found the music functions surrounding our community here are still very retrospective. They are very much taking a little slice of what’s going on in Bangladesh and putting it here which is relevant but more to the older community. I think things have suddenly changed, especially in the last ten years. People of certain age still remembers the 70s and 80s here which was a very different atmosphere for a person of colour to what it is in the 90s onwards. I think as things loosen up people will be confident. In the 70s you have racism constantly. The difference is that our generation stood up a bit better. I think our generation is also aggressive, which is a sad thing as well, I guess it was needed.

**Can you tell us a bit about ‘Lokhi Terra’?**

Lokhi Terra for me is a project I had in mind for a long time. As much as I haven’t been necessarily working so much in the Bangladeshi community musically, I have always been kind of very proud to be Bangladeshi and promoted it in whatever bands I played. So my idea of Lokhi Terra is to take music from back home and our traditions and mix it with other music I have been bought up here, very much London sound, mix it with music I have connection with back home. I am convinced that if you take from whatever generation of Bangladeshis and put them in surroundings of part of Africa or Latin America it will feel very much at home in the approach to music and why music is there.

Like you say the jam session that goes in East London and many households here that is exactly what goes on in other communities and I think as a Bangladeshi growing up in London, after a while you not only see yourself as a Bangladeshi but one of many immigrant communities being growing up here and you find connections. For me Lokhi Terra is me trying to reflect that, as a Bangladeshi who is being brought up with a Nigerian, with a Cuban, with a Brazilian, with an Indian, with and European and all of us trying to find a commonality rather than trying to concentrate on our differences. So with that band, it is mixing whether it is a *baul* song, river song or different types of traditional songs with music from Africa, Latin America and try to find common ground in the continents. I think for me it is actually what I see as world music. Lot of people say I claim the world music scene. For me the music Industry here has a very colonial view of what world music is. When I play with a Cuban band for me it is not world music it is Cuban music. If I play with a Bangladeshi band, it is Bangladeshi music and it is not world music.

Bands like ours, mixing Bangladeshi music, with African music, with jazz music, with Latin music, for me that is world music and that’s what we are trying to promote. Lokhi Terra is simply that from a British Bangladeshi point of view.

**Do you have plans to play it to an all Bangladeshi or Bengali audience?**

I would like to. It would be interesting to see the reaction. I would like to take more bands over and I am trying to approach British Council to take bands over there. If we can also start a dialogue musically and showing how people are doing well here back in Bangladesh, it will start a circle of improving the community here and there will be something to be proud of. I think Habib will be very good at it because he was based here for a while. Suddenly there is this excitement and there is whole lot of young people considering that. The other interesting thing is that I chat to lots of Bangladeshis, who go home regularly here, the things like Pop Idol, here seems a kind of a joke. People watch it as much as they can. Back in Bangladesh they are uncovering serious talents in different part and the whole approach is totally different. If we can have that approach to our community here that would be very interesting.

**Do you have any new album coming out?**

For me I will start doing an album with my uncle in Bangladesh, who was a poet. So we are trying to put some music around there. I am trying to take some bands back to Bangladesh just start some dialogue. I am trying to meet more of my community, in arts, here. There are lot of us we have been doing our own things and there is not enough.

I have a Cuban funk band and I have an album out with them. That band is called ‘Motimba’. Lokhi Terra, we are just finishing the album now and hopefully it will be out end of this year or beginning of next year. I have two other albums in my computer, completely different projects. For me writing is continuous really.

I have spent a lot of time in Cuba. It is one of the ideas I say about looking at music differently and socially. This really got enforced when I was in Cuba. When you walk around in Cuba because of the situation there, if your son or daughter is a musician they are more likely to make money than a doctor or an engineer. Just the way the government has put in the money in art and sport. That’s the only country in the world where I have been stopped by the police and I have said “I am a Musician” and they would let me go. This really forced the idea that music should looked at differently in our community. Motimba reflects the fact that I have been there. It is a similar sort of thing-- it is mixing modern type of Cuban music with music from here in London. It is a kind of funky Salsa. I went to Cuba in my mid-twenties and I have done a fair amount of travelling in South Africa and some time in India. I went to Cuba by mistake, two months to take a study break because I found that I spent all my time here earning money rather than studying. I went there without any connection and I couldn’t speak Spanish and I then spend two years there, six months at a time and come back. Recently, I have been spending most of my time in Brazil, very similar again, really have an open attitude going there. Brazil is so Bangladeshi. They have the same form of attitude to sentimentality, same attitude to family, same attitude to food. For me as a Bangladeshi, I feel very comfortable in these places. When I went to South Africa, I felt comfortable much more so than anywhere in Northern Europe, where there is lot of difference with our culture. As I had a jazz background it was easy for me to get involved in playing in Cuba and Brazil. Now I have the connection and now I play with Cuban community here. If you are a British guy and you want to learn about Bangladeshi music you can learn it here in East End but you will never learn it like in Bangladesh. It is same thing with any other type of music. I discovered my own music when I went to Bangladesh.

**Any memorable events you can remember in the 80s?**

Musically, in the late 80s, when I got involved in professional music scene doing gigs. It is the first time I realised that you can make money in music because growing up I never associated money with music. For me 80s and 90s was just about hoping Thatcher would get out of it, honest. That’s all my time I bothered about. I did a lot of gigs till the age of twenty five and then I started doing it professionally for a living.