

Soumya Vajpayee

In an era where independent releases outnumber film songs, Akriti Kakar has consciously refused to be defined by playback alone. The singer, who has straddled film, folk, *ghazals* and *bhajans*, is betting big on her own compositions at a time when streaming pays little and algorithms demand relentless output. It is a tough economy — one where making a music video costs more than what streaming returns, and where live shows have become the only sustainable revenue model. Her new single, *Oh Jaanu*, with Euphoria's Dr Palash Sen is both a throwback to the MTV-era indie pop she grew up on and a reminder of why that culture needs a 2.0.

Excerpts from the interview:

Alongside playback, you're also an independent composer and singer. How liberating does that feel?
It is very liberating, but also scary, because everything rests on your shoulders. The joy is in the freedom to express what you really want. An artist should not be defined by a particular genre. I have so much fun singing folk, *ghazals*, *bhajans* and film songs like *Lag Jaa Gale*. If I keep waiting for film songs to happen to me, I will have a very small discography to show my grandchildren.

Did Bollywood never offer you enough space as a singer and composer?
I needed to go out and hunt for opportunities. It is predominantly a male-driven world and sometimes it makes you question whether you are good enough. When nobody is controlling your creativity, it's so much better. I had composed a song called *Jobless a few* years ago and given it to my team as part of their bank. One day I was called to composer Suhail Sen's studio thinking it was for singing. Filmmaker Tigmanshu Dhulia walked in and started singing that very song — I had forgotten about it. He wanted to buy it. It was used in *Milan Talkies*. It was a great feeling. I never went door-to-door asking for work. Hopefully my independent music will become the channel through which people realise I can compose.

What is the brutal truth about money in indie? Can you survive without films or shows?



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There is no way an independent artist without many successful releases can run a home on YouTube and streaming money alone. What you spend on making a song and video is way higher than

what you normally recover, unless the song does shockingly well with lakhs of streams and millions of views on YouTube. Then some money starts coming back. But in the absence of events, I don't think one can survive, especially in a city like Mumbai.

Are live events the only real revenue model left for indie artists then?
Yes, live events are truly my bread and butter. I cannot bank on streaming money. That's very uncertain. I don't release music month on month. If I did, maybe I would have something that consistently pays me back. But the amounts are not what we are used to living on. To

MUSIC

‘I can’t bank on streaming money to live’

As she drops her new single *Oh Jaanu* with Palash Sen, the singer on the return of OG indie pop, why live shows remain the only real revenue model for independent artistes and doing fewer film projects

live a decently comfortable life, you have to churn out music every few weeks so the algorithm, listeners and platforms know you will be consistent. But even then, it is not possible without live shows. It is very important to keep doing them.

When you sing your independent songs at events where people only want Bollywood hits, do you feel disrespected?
Not really. Not all Bollywood songs are hits either; same with independent numbers. I do sing a few of my independent songs on stage. I tell the audience this is closer to my heart because I cre-

ated it, please give it some extra love, and they do. We really underestimate our audiences. The system is crooked in a way that money drives popularity and reach. If independent music had that kind of budget and muscle power behind it, it would give everyone stiff competition. That's the only missing component. Everyone wants Bollywood, but I try to sneak in my own music and they happily accept it.

You've said indie is tougher. Is Bollywood actually easier than being independent music in 2026?
When you get a confirmed Bollywood song, singing it is easy. A song is a song, you have to give it your all. Bollywood is harder because once you sing it, you don't know if your voice will be retained. Indie has its own challenges — its reach, whether radio will play it, whether people will talk about it. Both have their own pros and cons.

Your new single with Dr Palash Sen, *Oh Jaanu* — Euphoria defined indie pop in the 90s. Is this indie pop 2.0?
I really hope the OG indie pop comes back. When we cracked *Oh Jaanu*, I felt it wasn't like the 100 other songs happening right now. I have never thought, 'Is it reel-worthy?' I can't work backwards in music. It has to come from excitement. Visually, it was challenging, but audio-wise I knew it had to be a duet with someone who has that madness, zest and positive spirit and believes in the whole indie pop ideology. Indie pop today for the youth is about using words like *baarish* and *barsaat* with a guitar. But indie pop in the 90s was a whole culture that later got dissolved into film music. Younglings today have no idea about it. Many people told me the *Oh Jaanu* video took them back to the MTV era.

What did Palash bring to the studio?
He is more than 100% present when he says yes to something. I told him I don't hear anybody else on this song apart from you. Today people ask 100 questions before doing a song. He didn't even hear the track and just said, '*Chalo*, I'm going to do it.' That trust meant so much. His niceness shows in his persona and voice. That's why he has sustained for so long and will continue to live in people's hearts. For the video, we had six looks and he did them so enthusiastically. He brought so much energy to the set.

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Speaking of looks, from Parveen Babi and Zeenat Aman to Marilyn Monroe and Bajirao-Mastani — the video is quite unique.
I'm a deeply filmy person. When you hear *Oh Jaanu*, you instantly think of the disco era. The lyrics by Geet Sagar are quirky, so we wanted the video to be quirky too — what if Gabbar and Basanti were a duo? Music videos let you take those liberties to pay tribute to icons. If there is a costume party, people dress up as Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson, Gabbar, Basanti, Monjulika, Parveen Babi, Zeenat Aman, Amitabh Bachchan's *Don* look or Bajirao-Mastani. These are iconic characters. I thought it would be cool to dress up as them and play with their body language.

A lot of playback singers are turning composers. Is it because film music doesn't give creative control?
As a playback singer, you are not supposed to have creative control. You are an instrument executing the composer's vision. You can offer creativity in how you sing, but if you disagree with the composer, you are not the right fit for that song. If you want to do something beyond that, do your independent music. If the songs are truly great, they will find their way to the same composers, directors and producers who will then want you to create.

Would you rather be remembered as a film hit singer or as Akriti the independent composer-singer?
I would just like to be remembered as a singer and performer. If people remember my songs, that's *sone pe suhaaga*.

What are you working on next?
My dream project, the third season of *The Big Band Theory*, is in the works. We plan to shoot it at the end of September. It's a precious IP.

Melodies from Indonesia

Indonesian musician Ngartini Huang blends traditional Chinese guzheng with modern global influences to create joyful, serene melodies



Narendra Kusnur

Growing up in the Indonesian city of Medan, Ngartini Huang watched a lot of martial arts movies. Besides their storylines and action sequences, she was enamoured by their background music. That inspired her to learn traditional Chinese instruments like the guzheng and pipa, ultimately leading to a course at the prestigious Sun Wen Yen Music School in Shanghai, China.

Ngartini was in New Delhi last week to perform at the Soundscapes of India showcase festival, organised by the Indian Performing Right Society (IPRS) and curated by MusiConnect India. She says, "I was happy to be invited, and it gave me an opportunity to create awareness about the beautiful instrument guzheng through my performance."

Also known as the Chinese *zither*, the *guzheng* is said to have been first played over 2,200 or 2,300 years ago. It contains a minimum of 21 strings stretched over moveable bridges on a soundboard made of Paulownia wood, commonly available in China. The *pipa*, on the other hand, is a Chinese lute with a pear-shaped body.

At her show in the capital's Dr Ambedkar International Centre on August 29, Ngartini only played the *guzheng*. She was accompanied by Aldo on flute, Zakky on keyboards and Lana on multi-percussion. Dressed in a Chinese *hanfu* jacket and wearing a traditional Indonesian necklace, she was a picture of joy as she smiled and swayed while playing. Even the band members danced in performance.

According to Ngartini, as the *guzheng* is played a lot in classical Chinese music, the artistes normally have serious and formal expressions while playing. She



says, "I have tried to change that. I want the audience to feel happy and even my compositions are written keeping that in mind. But I maintain the peaceful and serene nature of music the instrument has to offer."

The Delhi set began with *Jadeite*, a composition inspired by her love for jade. "It's a stone I always wear," she says. Another song was *Au Revoir*, which means goodbye in French. She explains, "It was a song I wrote for my daughter when she got married, and was meant to indicate that all goodbyes need not be sad. They can be happy too."

Ngartini also played a tune called *Pink Raga*, where the colour's choice was inspired by Jaipur. She adds, "In Indonesia, raga means soul. In India, it has a musical connotation. So I decided to use that just to establish a connection."

The other Indian element at the show was the addition of the right drum of the tabla to the percussion kit. She says, "The drummer Lana had to practise a lot because the instrument was new to him. But now that he has got the hang of it, he may use it in the future too."

The musician points out that though her roots are in traditional Chinese

music, she focuses on bringing a unique fusion of traditional and modern styles to the world stage. "I try and incorporate diverse global influences in my compositions," she says.

One of her main objectives is to collaborate with talented young musicians from North Sumatra, so that she can reflect the rich tapestry of her Indonesian heritage. "My aim is to not only showcase the beauty of the guzheng but to highlight the creativity and innovation of emerging artistes from my community," she says.

As a torchbearer of Chinese culture, Ngartini has been actively involved in promoting the Four Arts of China — Qin, Qi, Shu, Hua, a traditional concept encompassing *guzheng*, chess strategy, calligraphy and painting. To popularise the *guzheng* and other traditional instruments, she has created a music academy in Medan. Ngartini says her performance at Soundscapes of India may just mark a new beginning, as she plans to understand how to collaborate with Indian musicians.

● Read the full interview on www.freepressjournal.in/weekend

Between two worlds

Verus Ferreira

Neeru (Neeharika Shyju) is an Australian vocalist, composer, and songwriter whose music transcends geographic and stylistic boundaries. An alumna of the prestigious Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School (VCASS) and currently refining her craft at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, her expansive sonic palette seamlessly weaves together Indian classical, Western classical, Celtic folk, jazz, and cinematic idioms.

Neeru writes from the perspective of a life lived between cultures—rendering her deeply sensitive to the nuances of language, atmosphere, and the universal stories that connect us.

Moonbow is her concept album, released on 5th September, is a breathtaking 12-chapter sonic odyssey that chronicles a single night from dusk to dawn. It is her most profound artistic statement to date, establishing her as a distinct and brilliant new voice in the global contemporary landscape. Arranged chronologically from 7:30 PM to 5:30 AM, each track represents a specific hour and emotional state guiding the listener through wonder, confrontation, expression, love, and finally, peace.

The 19-year-old talks about her album and how she manages to retain her Indian roots in her music.

Excerpts from the interview:

You wrote, composed and arranged the EP *Moonbow* yourself using live instrumentation. What was one thing you refused to compromise on?
It was crucial to me that the sonic palette sounded natural. I wanted to ensure that the human essence was retained. By using live instrumentation, I feel I am able to create a deeper connection with listeners.

Did the dusk-to-dawn concept come first, or did the songs naturally fall into different hours of the night?
The concept definitely came first. The night has always fascinated me, and I wanted to create something that explored that part of the day. However, I must admit that the exact timing for each song was assigned afterward.

Writing in Australia, far from Kerala and Oman, did your debut become a way of exploring your identity?
Absolutely. Living in so many places has shaped my view of the world, and I believe this musical exploration of my identity will be an endless journey as I move across future chapters of my life.

One of the songs, *Painted Maiden* explores the expectations of femininity.
Throughout my life, I've observed the



Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

unspoken expectations placed upon women. To me, this song is a release of empowerment—the painting metaphor resonated with me for this reason. Each individual gets to choose how they want to portray themselves.

Your music blends Indian classical, Celtic folk and jazz. *Sailor's Horizon* is an explicitly Celtic jig. Do you aim to blur musical boundaries or celebrate their differences?
Everyone draws the line of musical boundaries in different places. My aim is to continue learning about how musical elements are treated across the world and implement that into my work. I don't intend on forcing fusion, but rather letting the lines blur naturally.

Aurora ends the EP on a hopeful note of love and connection. Why did you choose that ending?
When coming up with the night-based concept, I thought the most appropriate way to end the album would be a lullaby-like tune. I suppose it's a way for me to remind listeners that the darkness is where we truly find and value the light in our lives.

Los Angeles-based producer, engineer and mixer Adam Kagan credited you with combining pop

Australian singer, Neeru, brings Indian classical, Celtic folk, jazz and Western classical into a deeply personal musical journey

sensibilities with real musical depth. Your comment?
I was very honoured to work with someone with so much experience in the music industry. His feedback is a huge motivation for me to continue developing my craft.

Academically what have you done until now and if not music, what would be your choice of career?
I graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School in 2025. Apart from music, I really enjoy scientific research in relation to human anatomy, so if not music, something along those lines would be interesting to explore.

You've taken risks as both a singer, on stage at the show *The Talent* and a composer. Is it harder to trust your own voice on stage, or your own music in an orchestra?
With each new performance, I feel more at home with my creative practice. That said, it is slightly harder for me to trust my own music with an orchestra, as I don't have total certainty over how it will be interpreted by others. It can be vastly different from how it sounded in my head.

● Read the full interview on www.freepressjournal.in/weekend