



WORLD

KIRAN AHLUWALIA

Toronto artist finds herself in labour of love By JULIA LeCONTE

KIRAN AHLUWALIA and **RIZWAN-MUAZZAM QAWWALI** at Koerner Hall (273 Bloor West), Friday (October 3), 8 pm. \$35-\$85. SWM, smallworldmusic.com

Most artists can relate to **Kiran Ahluwalia's** sentiments about the music biz. "Every CD, I've said to myself, 'This is going to be my last because it's so hard,' and every tour, it's like, 'Oh my god, this is my last tour.' It's just always such an uphill battle, really. Always a struggle."

A worthy one, though. Ahluwalia has globe-spanning fans, two Junos and two Canadian Folk Music Awards. On her sixth album, **Sanata: Stillness** (Magenta), the opening song's blues-rock guitar intro collides with her classical vocals (she sings in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu), a juxtaposition that sets the scene for a record that weaves Indian classical – which she's studied since

age five – with jazz and Saharan blues.

Sitting on the steps outside a major bank at King and Adelaide, Ahluwalia talks about her music career and how she swapped one challenge for another. At this very spot, she says, back in the early 90s when she was unhappily employed on the trading floor, a cab driver innocently told her that she looked lost.

"I was all embarrassed and I smiled and said, 'Oh no, no, no, I know where I'm going,' and then I just walked away," she recalls. "But shortly after that, on one of the many lunches I spent here, I remember thinking, 'I just don't want to go back. I'll start walking now and I'll reach home – in Markham – eventually.'"

After abandoning finance, she alternated working in cultural industries (CBC Radio, Saturday Night magazine) with one-year stints in India as a full-time music student – "blowing all my money."

But those changes bore fruit when she decided to turn a

music-studying year into a music-making year, resulting in her Toronto-made 2000 debut album, *Kashish – Attraction*.

As tough as a music career can be, the fact that she doesn't sing in English hasn't been a challenge.

"People who are not South Asian have come up to me after concerts and said that their favourite song is this one nine-minute song I used to do. I just think, 'Oh, wow. This music is connecting with them.' And I remember a CBC producer played that song, too. Nine minutes long!"

Moments like those, and the craft itself, keep the artist – who now splits her time between New York and Toronto – motivated.

"Everything else is getting harder, but the music gets easier," she says laughing. "I get up in the morning and it's like breathing. It's my meditation. It's my everything."

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