

Indian harmonica player creating waves globally



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Though music has remained an unerring passion of mine right from a very early age, the harmonica had always been an alien instrument for me, and it was only recently that I began to appreciate the immense musical possibilities associated with the harmonica. Thanks to my friend Abe from Suzuki who introduced me to its limitless possibilities, and who helped arrange a music concert for harmonica virtuoso Jia-Yi He in our city earlier this year, I have been encountering quite a few harmonica players and enthusiasts in our region.

Sometime back, I came across another Indian who has been creating waves with the harmonica in the global circuit. His recently released album, *Tip of the Top*, has been earning rave reviews from people all over! Besides being one of the finest Blues harmonica players in the world, the fact that he is of Indian lineage makes me feel more proud to talk about him.

Born and raised in Mumbai, Akarsha “Aki” Kumar’s suburban, middle-class roots and Silicon Valley credentials present an unlikely backstory for one of India’s finest blues harmonica players. Aki’s appreciation for music began at an early age; while neither of his parents were formal musicians, they exposed Aki to the world of music from the start. Aki remembers music playing around the house since his childhood days, be it jazz, classical, Hindustani or classic Bollywood oldies.

After moving to the San Francisco Bay Area, Kumar pursued a successful career in the high-tech industry but deep down he knew that he had a greater calling. He picked up the harmonica to join an informal musical group with a few colleagues, but he soon found a richer appreciation for the instrument and the raw, emotive power of American blues. After exhausting the available avenues for self-study in print and online, he decided to pursue formal studies under David Barrett, a blues harp (harmonica) virtuoso and one of the most authoritative sources of information on the subject. Aki was also very fortunate to discover a thriving music community in the SF Bay Area, one that included modern blues harp legends Gary Smith, R.J. Mischo, Andy Just, Mark Hummel and Rick Estrin, among others.

Over the years, Aki studied the styles of various American harp masters, specifically the post-War greats: Little Walter, Sonny Boy Williamson, Big Walter Horton and George Smith. His own playing and vocals reflect elements from these players blended in with a signature sound of his own. Aki’s progress from an enthusiastic student of the blues to a dynamic stage performer has been rapid, earning him recognition as a rising blues star. In the last few years he has appeared with some of the premier blues artists in the area, including Kid Andersen and Earl Thomas. He has also shared the stage with some of the finest contemporary harmonica players alive: Gary Smith,

Aki's newest venture, Tip of the Top, is a collaboration with Bay Area blues veterans and has been the culmination of his journey through American roots music. The group performs vintage blues with subtle flair and a respect for the deep history of the genre. Experts and aficionados agree that only a group with raw talent and a true appreciation of the art form could produce a sound so authentic. Aki and his band can be seen performing regularly at various venues and festivals in and around the San Francisco Bay Area.

The best thing is that you can watch him live as he performs at Blue Frog in Mumbai on December 23. So all you music freaks, especially if you're into the harmonica, don't miss this chance to see him perform live in Mumbai. And by the way, don't forget to cheer for our very own 'Aki' Kumar!

Aiyushman Dutta

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BY AIYUSHMAN DUTTA

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