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Activism through Diasporic Musical Practice: An Interview with Amirtha Kidambi

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Based in Brooklyn, Amirtha Kidambi is a vocalist, composer, improviser, and organizer whose work brings together musical practice and activism. Taking influence from the musical worlds of punk and Black experimental and creative music, but also from the Euro-American avant-garde and South Asian devotional music, Kidambi emphasizes a crossethnic, crossracial approach to music-making. In albums like *Holy Science* (2016), *From Untruth* (2019), and *New Monuments* (2024), created with her band Elder Ones, Kidambi brings together ideas from South Asian devotional practice with what she sees as a political imperative to advance ideas and feelings about liberation in the context of experimental music. Her general artistic project can be characterized as one that negotiates relationally with institutional power—like that represented by the Western academy—but that always links back to a collective struggle against domination. Having taught in various musical capacities at The New School, Bennington College, and Brooklyn College, she emphasizes the need for nonhierarchical teaching methods, which she links to the way she works with Elder Ones. However, she also works outside educational institutions by cofounding collectives like South Asian Artists in Diaspora (SAAID) and Musicians Against Police Brutality.

If Kidambi, in her article “Universal Consciousness,” also in this special forum, traces a history of Black American music that eschews spiritual escapism and that instead gives liberation movements their spiritual content, then in this interview, Kidambi places herself within this lineage. Here, she lays out the constitutive dimensions of a musical practice that is, in fact, continuous with activism: pedagogy, collective organizing, and transnational exchange.

We were interested in how Kidambi figures Asian religio-philosophy in both art and activism, two modes of bringing together a public that, again, are inextricably linked for her. What struck us from our discussion was how she denaturalizes South Asian religio-philosophical concepts and musical techniques in ways that expand conceptions of temporality and lineage. For example, she engages with Hinduism as a framework for understanding political struggle cosmically: Her explanation of today’s global conflicts in terms of the Yugas (the Hindu cycle of epochs) provides a personal understanding for the long arc of liberatory truth. That is, she turns Hindu cosmology toward her activist aims. Additionally, in an innovative gesture, Kidambi has repurposed the harmonium away from *bhajan* singing,¹ one of its more common environments, toward improvisation in an experimental punk setting. By also merging the ideas of the harmonium and the synth (she calls the harmonium the original analog synth, or “*analog* analog synth”), she places herself among multiple aesthetic genealogies, citing such artists as Edgard Varèse, Charles Mingus, and Eric Dolphy. This type of circulation across different aesthetic and political commitments surfaces interesting implications for transnationality. By recontextualizing these concepts and techniques, what Kidambi conjures up is not the trite offering of music as a universal language, but rather music as a series of relations that are common yet culturally specific, a facilitator of transnational dialogue. In other words, Kidambi’s experimental musical practice, specifically in its diasporic context, sublates universalism in favor of a transnational circuit of solidarity.

Kidambi’s music can be found on Bandcamp and major streaming platforms. We spoke with Kidambi on Zoom in February 2026. The following transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

Varun Rangaswamy: Given that this special forum is invested in both theoretical interventions into the idea of religio-philosophy and the circulation of cultural practices (as related to Asian religio-philosophy), we

wanted to speak with you because you work in an interesting way with music as a convergence of theory and practice. I was thinking about the separation of theory and practice that is so prevalent—both the separation and the urgency to undo the separation—in various discourses. Starting very broadly, how do you think about that convergence, and are there any other reflections you have about it? And how does your connection to your South Asian heritage factor into that convergence?

Amirtha Kidambi: I've always been in a hybrid space. As a South Asian American—an Indian American—my identity is already a hybrid one. I'm also a scholar-performer. I've been teasing out more over the years what those dualities mean. I've always been very interdisciplinary from the beginning of my engagement with any kind of academic research. In undergrad, I majored in vocal performance and minored in peace and conflict studies. I also DJed at the radio station, was the musicology chair's research assistant, and organized on-campus activist events like a teach-in on Sudan.

To go further back, the raising of my social consciousness and historical understanding of my identity started with 9/11. September 11 was the catalyst to having to think about myself in the American social and cultural context—and globally—because the US then started these new imperialist wars, and I was immediately very much against them. I was forced to confront it because of my identity as a Brown person. I spent a lot of time trying to assimilate, especially at that age, and then, suddenly, I could not assimilate. There was a really hard line of what felt like, "go back to where you came from, which we're going to assume is Afghanistan, or whatever." The first song I ever wrote was around 2002, and we had just read Erich Maria Remarque's antiwar novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928)² in high school, and my favorite band was Rage Against the Machine at that time, and that's immediately where I went. I was just starting to learn guitar and wrote this long antiwar song. So, hybridity, scholarship, musical performance, and political awareness have always been linked together for me. I think their separation started through school. For example, we didn't talk about the Iraq war in our music classes at all. At the time, I saw Saul Williams open for The Mars Volta,³ and he was on stage talking about the war very explicitly. I realized then that music and politics are connected: Saul Williams was an example of a musician who was drawing on the decolonial framework of the anti-imperialists and recognizing that capitalism and colonialism and

imperialism are inextricably tied. Those systems are not outside of the analysis of history, or sociocultural analysis, which music is inherently part of.

As I went on, my education imposed another separation: I was told I was a vocalist and not a scholar or composer. My studies were classical, and when I got to my master's program at Brooklyn College, I was doing vocal performance with an emphasis on contemporary performance practice. In that context, I was a performer, but there was no designation for doing research alongside performance. My advisors and I called it an emphasis in musicology, so I did a research recital. One of my advisors was Salim Washington, a saxophonist and researcher-performer who was also a Fulbright scholar and played in the saxophonist Fred Ho's Afro Asian Music Ensemble.⁴ I started to have these models. The first class I took at Brooklyn College was called "Jazz Musicians as Intellectuals." It was the position of the class that musicians were knowledge producers. We read Fred Ho; pianist, composer, and scholar Vijay Iyer; and composer and scholar George Lewis.⁵ We also read about jazz vocalist Abbey Lincoln.⁶ So Salim Washington was already starting to go in the direction of combining scholarship and performance. By the end of that degree, I also started to improvise more because I also realized that there was something problematic about how I was inherently positioned in the classical world as a minority voice: There was a total erasure of my identity as a performer because it was all about the composer's identity. The performer is a blank vessel for the vision of the composer. And jazz has its own rarefied air, but where I was really finding community was in the improvised music scene.

VR: How does improvisation figure for you in the composer-performer-researcher paradigm? You've mentioned elsewhere that the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) has been very influential for you.⁷ They responded to the racialization of jazz and improvisation by undoing the separation between composition and improvisation.⁸ How have models like this influenced your work?

AK: During my time at Brooklyn College, my research was starting to coalesce around the Black Arts Movement as a socially engaged movement of artistic self-determination. The AACM was probably the most influential part of that movement, and another one was the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra [the Ark], formed by Horace Tapscott in Los Angeles.⁹ I was researching the connections

between the Black Panther Party and the Black Arts Movement, which Larry Neal describes as the cultural arm of “the Black Power concept.”¹⁰ All of these movements were inspiring forms of organizing, so I wanted to go toward improvisation in the context of my own organizing. At Brooklyn College, I was part of a composer-performer collective that held events in downtown Brooklyn in a coworking space. We had something called Performers Forum where performers discussed their practice.¹¹ The Forum challenged the idea that these discussions should only happen in academic environments; we thought that they should happen in informal settings as well, that we should have them amongst each other outside the university. We had Robert Ashley come because we were performing his work.¹² We also invited violist Jessica Pavone, saxophonist Darius Jones, and electronics musician Sam Pluta.¹³ We went into our communities and accessed our connections with improvisers and composers.

That’s how I started to explore my voice as an improviser and as a composer myself. In addition to being involved in the improv community, I was also involved in the DIY music scene. Then, I started to organize with organizations like Musicians Against Police Brutality and people like saxophonist and composer Matana Roberts.¹⁴ We co-organized a benefit at the Silent Barn.¹⁵ I was curating a concert series called Tongues that put South Asian musics side by side with improv and experimental music. This was not just a fundraiser event. There were musicians playing and there was a panel that *Democracy Now!* streamed because I had invited activists and organizers.

This is where my band Elder Ones started: improvising for these benefit concerts, starting to write compositions, and those compositions inherently having a protest element to them. But again, I did this without being seen formally as a historical researcher or as a composer in these academic spaces.

VR: It’s interesting how you forged a relationship between musical practice and activism without fitting neatly into a disciplinary position. I know you started a PhD in ethnomusicology at Columbia, which you later left. How did you navigate your disciplinary fluidity within that academic space? You have clearly been engaging with the intersection of South Asian spiritual traditions, Black American experimental music, and activism in your work for quite a while, but not in the way a traditional ethnomusicologist might.

AK: I applied to ethnomusicology not because I saw myself as an ethnomusicologist, but because I did not know what else to apply as. Once I got to Columbia, I felt it was the last place that made sense for me. I had no ethnomusicology background. I was only being read as an ethnomusicologist because the research I proposed in my application was about Black musicians and their engagement with South Asian spiritual traditions, specifically Alice Coltrane.¹⁶ I grew up in the community of Sathya Sai Baba, whom Alice Coltrane also followed, so I felt like I had specific insight. Because my own music was somewhat in that same aesthetic realm, with the harmonium and the blend of multiple musical cultures, some professors seemed to be under the impression that I was studying Carnatic music. They assumed that I was going to do my fieldwork in India, but I was actually going to do it in Los Angeles.

The thing was, I was very clear that I was a performer. I was going to be on the road, and I wanted to make the PhD work, but I saw it as part of my whole artistic trajectory. I still wasn't comfortable saying that performance was part of my practice, that it was a research tool. For example, I was in a Robert Ashley opera, rehearsing twenty hours a week, and that was my first year of the PhD. And I thought, how am I going to do this physically? How am I going to get the necessary number of hours of fieldwork for my thesis while also doing this Robert Ashley piece? Ana María Ochoa [Gautier]—an amazing decolonial scholar who gave me a lot of the language and the framework of theory that I have now, works by Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, and her own book, *Aurality* (2014)—suggested that I do something around my performance work.¹⁷ I had access to Ashley's archive, I was at his house every day, and I had access to all his tapes in his tape studio. I was a performer in his work. Why hide that fact? Why not blend the historical, the archival, and the theoretical? That's what I ended up doing for my thesis. But that was when some Columbia faculty began to position me as a cultural insider of India. Politically, I started to realize it was not the right path. So, I quit after a year and left with a second master's. I had to figure out my own way.

I started teaching at The New School, where I was redoing their music history curriculum for very little money. Then, I got fired because I was doing liberatory work and because they have terrible labor practices. (You can see how many times their faculty have had to strike in the last several years.) Now, at Brooklyn College, I'm creating classes that engage students intellectually, artistically, and politically. I taught a seminar called "Critical Improvisation and

Collaboration Techniques.” We were reading a lot of critical writing and doing historical research. We were also reading a lot of writing by performers, composers, and improvisers themselves. It was very multimodal. We were doing critical listening, having discussions, and playing and improvising together.

So, this is how I research, this is how I teach, this is how I do activism and organizing. The way I interact with my band is similar. I don’t want to reproduce classical music’s hierarchical models. My bandmates have the agency and ability to be self-determining.¹⁸ Alice Coltrane did that, too, as her bandmates say. There is no separation between theory and practice. There is no separation between activism and organizing and being a musician. Improvisation is social organizing. We are organizing each other, in relation to each other, in real time, in the context of our time. It was a very organic process that I was not necessarily conscious of but that I developed over time. I developed the tools to name it, and not just name it, but, in that same spirit of self-determination, claim it.

That is where I’m at now. But it’s emergent, so I’m constantly reforming and rearranging the relationships. Sometimes I’m inhabiting a certain space as a professor. Other times I’m on tour or doing neighborhood solidarity work. We’re doing a benefit concert soon, and we’re going to do resource sharing between sets.

Now I’m able to talk about it more coherently, but, again, none of this is entirely conscious, and that’s why I would say it’s embodied. My body is a tool, my body gives me information and knowledge. I interact with other bodies, not in an extractive way, but in a way that synthesizes knowledge, information, sound, and creative perspectives through playing and talking. This is how decolonial practice looks beyond theory. We are the vessels, and so are our ancestors, and so is our community. It’s not just about going to the library or doing detached ethnography. It’s about having dinner together and making sound together and facing crises collectively.

Bowen Du: I want to pick up the pedagogical thread you’ve introduced. Part of this special forum’s focus is on reception, and you’ve made me wonder how pedagogy might offer a disruptive way to think about reception. Taken reductively, reception might align with a unidirectional banking model of education, in which a student or listener passively receives information. You seem to be enacting a much more dynamic process of transmission. You

describe pedagogy in nonlinear terms that subvert traditional disciplinarity, and I'm curious as to how you'd connect your in-class pedagogical practices with your on-stage pedagogical practices, as it were.

AK: Some of the most formative theoretical texts that I came across in the last decade were bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) (there's a great section in there called "Theory as Liberatory Practice") and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968).¹⁹ I started reading those partly because of the work I was doing at The New School, and I needed to ground myself in other ways to think about curriculum development. Those texts taught me a very simple idea: I don't want to reproduce in my teaching or in my music the same systems that I'm trying to get free from. If I now think of myself as an abolitionist, if I am working toward collective liberation, then I can't use patriarchal, colonialist, and capitalist hierarchies in the classroom, in my band, in my music-making, or with my audience. bell hooks especially speaks to this in a deeply relational way, down to friendships and love relationships. You can't be a socialist in one context and then, in your relationship, put all the labor on your partner. It struck me how things are pedagogical in every facet of life and how we have to be intentional about thinking through hierarchies.

In my New School classes, I had student artists who were grumpy about learning history because of how history is usually taught. I asked myself, how do I engage with them as artists? Not by thinking of myself as the great artist, as the teacher with all the knowledge, but rather by asking students what their practice is. I designed creative projects to go alongside research projects and related them all to each other.

Then, I was a visiting professor at Bennington College. There are no disciplines there. Undergraduates have a thesis project, but they don't have a major. They just take classes that relate to the changing way their topics unfold. That school is deeply tied to the work of the improvisers who taught there, like jazz drummer Milford Graves and free jazz trumpeter Bill Dixon.²⁰ I wanted to go back to that history and think about how I was situated in that community and then do similar things. It's about students' agency. So, I don't lecture anymore. Some students want lectures, and I say, "sorry, that's not what we're doing." I don't set a traditional syllabus, I have a framework. My syllabus operates like my music. There are themes and there are sections, but they are very mutable. In my music, at any moment, my bandmates can offer input. We have discussions, and the music constantly changes. Our sets and

albums are always emergent. It's the same with my students. I want to know them, and I want them to know me. We have discussions while being aware of what happens in the world, and that changes what we do in class. So, we call it a living syllabus. (It's not my term. I've seen other people use it.) We're improvising together at all times. It's relational, and it has to do with where we're at on any given day. And I always have to be ready to abandon the plan and zoom out to the big picture. I'm also constantly trying to radicalize them. I'm not so shy about that. I'm open with them about the frameworks that I am trying to work with, the systems that I'm critiquing, and I show them how to reinforce those critiques.

BD: I think this adaptability you're describing is very admirable. Earlier, you said that improvisation is social organizing. In the context of teaching with a living syllabus, it seems that we could make a similar statement, that pedagogy can be an improvisational act as well. How does improvisation become a pedagogical method, a mode of reception, outside of the classroom?

AK: Performance practice, including improvisation, is pedagogical in that we learn from it. The artists that I have been most interested in were teaching me from the stage explicitly. Saul Williams does that very clearly. Nina Simone talked during her performances.²¹ That was part of her performance practice. She directly implicated and engaged the audience, sometimes in ways that were not comfortable. Angel Bat Dawid does this really beautifully.²² She says things like, "Y'all are white back there, what do you feel? How do you feel consuming me right now?" She's really direct, and then by the end, there is healing that happens, but the discomfort is part of her performance practice. I also learned about Leonard Peltier,²³ the Indigenous activist—who was the longest political prisoner in the history of this country—from a Rage Against the Machine concert.

This kind of teaching from the stage is now part of my own practice. I talk to audiences about the songs. "Dvapara Yuga (For Eric Garner)" was one of the pieces on my first record, *Holy Science*. Even though it was wordless, I talked to the audience about it. There were more police killings happening and the 2016 presidential campaigns were underway. We played the release tour in Cleveland the night of the election. I remember saying that Tamir Rice was killed in 2014 less than a mile away from the venue we were playing in,

something I noticed when I was looking at the map.²⁴ It was something even the people in the audience, who lived in Cleveland, weren't aware of.

And I wrote the song "Third Space," from my last record, *New Monuments*, in response to the 2021 killings of Asian women in spas in Atlanta, Georgia.²⁵ It was complex because it was both about yellow peril and paranoia about the Asian other during COVID, and it was also about this man, the killer, fetishizing, exoticizing, sexualizing, and dehumanizing these women. I wrote the song about that specific incident, but it was also about the Third Space, Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and identity.²⁶ Similar to Édouard Glissant's writing, the Third Space is about what emerges in the colonial encounter. One of the lines from the song is, "you don't belong here, they don't belong here, we don't belong here." In the context of that line, I was also thinking about my own identity in the black-white paradigm of American culture and about my consciousness raising after 9/11. I say all this on stage. Then, when the *acute* phase of the Palestinian genocide started (because the genocide in Palestine preceded October 7th), this song started to feel different to me. Genocide, to me, is the obvious escalation of systematic dehumanizing. And colonialism is a string of genocides. I talk about the Bengal famine when we talk about what is happening right now in Gaza.²⁷ And I connect that to what I've learned about the starvation while visiting a colonial prison in Ireland, and about El Conflicto while in Colombia.²⁸

I'm constantly reworking what the songs are to me in real time. I write a song about something, and I explain that onstage, but I also explain what's happening in the world currently and how I'm seeing the song here and now. It feels a bit more hierarchical or one-directional in the sense that I'm the one onstage, but I always invite people to come talk to me at the merch table. Because we're improvising, I may not hear what they have to say or think in the show, but I feel it. I view myself as part of the collective in how we raise consciousness. There's a Huey P. Newton quote about how the revolutionary's job is to expand consciousness.²⁹ I also think that's the job of the artist. And that's what Nina Simone says when she says it's an artist's duty to reflect the times.

So, we are teachers in the sense that we can be part of the expansion of someone's consciousness. Elders are part of that, shamans and spiritual guides are part of that. Artists have always had that role. And music, I think, is even more specifically situated, because it is a communal activity, whereas in the fine arts and the visual arts space, you have to think super creatively to

figure out how to take a piece of visual art and make it relational. There are artists who do this, but, in music, it's built in.

I've had many people tell me they learned something or got a reading list from the concert. One of our songs right now is called "The Wretched of the Earth," and I'll ask, "who's read it?"³⁰ There's an Ursula K. Le Guin quote in the lyrics. There's a reading list in the set.

VR: The idea of a musical performance as a reading list is interesting. It strengthens the discursive element already present in music-making, but you make explicit connections to specific thinkers and encourage the circulation of critical thought in a really conversational form (i.e., talking or teaching from the stage). You also have a podcast, *Outernational*,³¹ which, of course, is also a conversational form. How does the way you communicate, through conversation, your relationship to activism as a musical practitioner also apply to other areas of your work?

AK: *Outernational* is definitely also part of this idea of pedagogy. I talk to artists about their creative practice, how music is connected to liberation, and how they do specific work as activists or organizers or educators. Those conversations are not one-directional; we don't directly teach the audience. I learn from the artist through conversation.

When it comes to my university teaching, that back-and-forth element of conversation extends to my relationship with my students. I have four one-on-one sonic arts MFA students right now, and we've started to make a cohort. That's not part of the school's structure, but we decided to do something biweekly or once a month where we all come together. That was an idea some of them had, and I reinforced it. That's the cocreative. I'm using that word all the time now. We are cocreating. And I would say this is also true of my scholarship. The next scholarship I want to do is something collaborative. I don't want to be the single voice in it. That's what's most generative, the cocreation. I think that has come a lot from my pedagogical work. It has taught me the value of the idea that I am not the keeper of the knowledge. I'm a facilitator. It's the same in a concert. We are exchanging energy all the time. Improvisation doesn't work without that.

BD: You've touched on how reception takes many different forms: aural, visual, textual. And as you were saying, all of those things often happen at the

same time. So, in relation to everything you've been saying about how you teach both in the classroom and from the stage, I was wondering how you've dealt with expectations. You spoke about problematic and racialized assumptions people had about the work you do and about your connection to South Asian religio-philosophy. How do you deal with those types of racialized expectations, good or bad, in these more receptive environments? How has that affected your musical process?

AK: I think being read as a South Asian artist is a perpetual issue. In the beginning, it was "to my benefit." Looking back, I realize that a lot of the interest in my work was an interest in my identity. My first record with Elder Ones, *Holy Science*, really engaged with questions of identity for myself. I play harmonium on that album. My harmonium had been in my closet. I brought it to New York, but I wasn't going to bhajans, even though that's the only reason I had it. I never really broke it out and played it, except maybe sometimes when I was meditating. But the impulse to use the harmonium in my music was very natural. I just pulled it out of the closet one day and started improvising with it as a drone, and then it started to feed me bass lines. I don't know why the harmonium had bass lines. That's not what that instrument does. [Laughs.] I would play a bass line on the harmonium and just repeat it over and over again, and then improvise over it, and then a composition or an idea would form.

That was how I started making my own music. It was through this instrument that I grew up singing with in South Asian devotional musical traditions. I think the labels and the journalists who were writing about my music immediately thought of it as spiritual jazz like Alice Coltrane's. That was not an association I minded, but there was a point where the label suggested doing an animated music video with Hindu gods. I just said no. They're not comic book characters. Thankfully, they agreed, but they didn't even see that as problematic. That first album had titles based on the yugas in Hinduism: Kali Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, Sathya Yuga, and Treta Yuga. I knew the label's suggestion was problematic, and I felt it. The label was trying to capitalize on the Hindu elements and exoticize me. It was complex because there were Hindu and Indian themes, and those aspects of my identity are important, but I didn't want them to be flattened or exploited. So I thought about it in terms of engaging with reception, with how the album and Hinduism are being written about, where they're being placed.

My next record, *From Untruth*, became more overt with titles like “Eat the Rich,” “Decolonize the Mind,”³² and “Dance of the Subaltern.” Part of the impulse for writing that record was that theory is so inaccessible to the general population, so I thought, what if I took theory and turned it into almost protest slogans, things that you would chant at a protest? I had gone to the Muslim ban protest at JFK³³ and started writing “Decolonize the Mind” right after that.

As I started writing more from this critical framework, I felt people were less interested in me. There was a review that came out in *The Wire* that was problematic enough that I had to then write a letter to the editor. They had put my work and Rajna Swaminathan’s work together in the same review. It wasn’t clear why; our work is so different. We are colleagues and friends, but there was no association in the outer world that someone could point to. The article said that we both emerged from the Brooklyn Raga Massive scene, which I have no affiliation with whatsoever, and which Rajna was actually having a really problematic affiliation with because of the patriarchal nature of that scene. They got my whole story wrong, they never researched it, and they misquoted the lyrics. So, in my letter to the editor, I had to drop the c-word: This is colonial bias.

I realized, at that point, when I started naming systems, that my music was getting more electronic and noisier, harder-edged, and actually more authentic to me. I’m really a punk kid. I grew up listening to socially conscious Hip Hop that similarly names these systems. As I was becoming more authentically myself, I was becoming less and less legible to the market, to capitalism, to academia—these are all markets, right? I started to understand that, if I don’t perform my Indian identity in the way that they want, then it fits their curatorial vision less.

VR: I noticed that you will be doing the Princeton Hodder Fellowship this coming year. Congratulations! How are you dealing with legibility in that context, especially when, as you say, the academic market often calls for us to commodify ourselves?

AK: It’s honestly surprising that I got this fellowship by being myself in my application. I was really not filtering. My focus for the fellowship is on class struggle and class consciousness. Some of it is about the first labor union in India, which was formed in Tamil Nadu, where my family is from. A lot of my

research interests right now are about labor as a site of antifascist and anticolonial resistance—such as the South African antiapartheid struggle, PLO and PFLP in Palestine. And in India, the first labor union was one of the big forces of anticolonial organization against the British. The farmers in India right now are one of the greatest forces of opposition against Modi and the fascist regime. I have many more examples.

So, there are ways in which I have found a path to move in a forward direction. The easier and more lucrative path would have certainly been to lean into the image of the spiritual Indian lady. I have no doubt about that. But I just kept not doing that, and I could see the tension, because the arbiter is generally a white man. There are so few curators, there are so few label owners, there are so few academic chairs who are not white men, to this day. If that is always your audience, it's very difficult to navigate. Because of that, I felt I had to do the thing that's authentic: I really tried to ground myself in where I was and what was most pressing for me at any given moment, and that generally tended to be the socially engaged aspects of things. My identity didn't become less important, but it was always contextualized in this more collective and service-oriented way.

VR: In relation to your orientation toward social engagement, you've been both accepting and critical of South Asian religio-philosophical ideas. There's a 2019 Bandcamp article, for instance, called "Elder Ones Instill Avant-Garde Protest Music With Hindu Philosophy" that focuses on your album *From Untruth*.³⁴ On the other hand, you've also been critical of the effects of caste on the Indian diaspora.³⁵ I'd be interested to know more about how South Asian spirituality appears affirmatively in your approach to activism through music currently, but I'm also interested in how you navigate the contradictions you have pointed to, mainly, the current spread of Hindu nationalism in Indian diasporic communities.

AK: The spiritual part of it for me is dharma—what is my dharma in this world, and my karma?—and stepping into the realization of why I'm here right now, in this birth, in this life. It's not detached from the spiritual traditions, it's just that that's not going to read that well to someone who wants me to play in a yoga studio or something. These are real requests that I get. I would much rather create music that gets people activated to actually go do something instead of spiritually bypassing.

It's tricky, but I would say audience responses have changed completely in the last decade. There are so many different, interesting types of folks who are engaging with my music. There are so many more young people. There was a Tamil bass player who came up to me at Le Guess Who? festival and was just sobbing during the concert. A lot of the folks I'm meeting want to engage with my music because of the content of the music, and they're coming from so many different identities, but there's a huge swath that are South Asian radicals who feel outside of their own community. And I think that feeling of being an outsider is, for me, about recognizing that I am Indian American, but I don't feel really connected to the Indian American community, however that's defined, and certainly not to the more hegemonic parts of that community. I couldn't be more disgusted with the patriarchal, Hindu nationalist, and fascist leanings.

But I know there are so many more people besides that. Goan American filmmaker Suneil Sanzgiri and I collaborated to create South Asian Artists in Diaspora (SAAID) (which we didn't continue, it ended up being a single engagement).³⁶ We invited Zohran Mamdani in 2021 to talk to Prachi Patankar, who is an anticaste activist and the daughter of Gail Omvedt, the Ambedkar scholar.³⁷ That was a diaspora activation that was centered around radical politics. It was a COVID fundraiser, but it was specifically for communities that had been marginalized and left out of NGO-type support. The Indian government also denied manipulating the numbers.³⁸ Folks in Hijra communities, Adivasi Indigenous communities, and Dalit communities were never going to get aid, so we started connecting with mutual aid in India and raised twenty thousand dollars at MoMA PS1 to equally split between multiple mutual aid organizations.³⁹ That was, for me, a different side of Indian, or rather, South Asian diasporic community. We invited a lot of Bangladeshi people, Pakistani people. We thought about how to disrupt the idea of what South Asian artists sound like, what they look like, of what kind of work they make. Our curation was very experimental. We had a South Asian comedian who's super raunchy [Pranav Behari]. We had a queer South Asian poet do a set that was very personal to him [Shiv Kotecha]. We also had people who came from the synth world, or noise, or improv.⁴⁰ I think that the more I'm authentically myself, the more I bring in communities who resonate with me. They're not just South Asian, they're Latin American, they're all kinds of folks.

So, in terms of reception and audience, a good friend of mine in New York, Piotr Orlov,⁴¹ who's a curator, but very grassroots, said to me, "I think the times are catching up to your music." That was a really amazing thing to hold. I don't know if I have been able to integrate that into myself yet. This is his perspective, but I do feel like there is something about this moment where maybe more and more people are ready to receive these uncomfortable messages.

BD: I hope that's the case. The idea of the times catching up to your music makes me think about what lies ahead. I feel like there is an orientation toward the future in your work, which is also just part of being an activist, right? It's a stake on the future, on a collective future.

AK: When it comes to being a musician and activist, the AACM looms so large for me—it's hard to understate how influential they are.⁴² The AACM is kind of modeled, if you read George Lewis's book,⁴³ on the Black Panther organization, down to having free breakfast programs and free music programs and calling it the AACM because it sounds like the NAACP.

Art Ensemble of Chicago, one of the ensembles of the AACM, has this tagline of sorts: Great Black Music from the Ancient to the Future.⁴⁴ If we think about it from a Hindu perspective, we can look at the ancient and the future as meeting, because time is cyclical, not linear. We can also look at this current era as the Kali Yuga, which is the "last" of the cycles when we're furthest away from the understanding of our universal consciousness, when we're furthest away from the point of understanding our oneness with the divine and with each other.

The next era is the Satya Yuga, which is the Age of Truth. It's a cycle, and it's returning to that understanding of our collective humanity, our oneness, and that can only be brought about by being in the greatest point of darkness. We just had a holiday called Maha Shivaratri, which is about destruction. Shiva is a destroyer. Everything has to be destroyed to be built again. You have to be in complete darkness to be able to see light. When I think about the future, I think about regeneration, not necessarily just about moving forward. We have to regenerate. It's nature.

VR: To get a little more into the technical side of your work, you spoke about how you started to reach further into technology and electronics after *Holy*

Science. Do you connect your use of electronics and technology to your ideas about futurity as well? And how does your activist approach to music-making inform your use of electronics?

AK: For me, I'm not really using super futuristic electronics, I'm not even using software. I have a pedal. At the moment, the drummer in my band plays modular synth, and everybody else is using pedals. It's more about texture and timbre and being able to expand the palate. I was sent this pedal by Jeff Snyder, who's at Princeton.⁴⁵ During the pandemic, he sent me and four other vocalists this pedal. Having this pedal was playful experimentation.

The AACM was always so interested in all the tools available. (George Lewis was one of the first computer musicians in the sense in which we know it now.) They were just interested in all the possibilities, and I think that's what I'm interested in, too: playing around with creative possibilities and all the emergent, generative things that can happen. The incorporation of new technology has also partly been about moving toward my bandmates. If Matt [Nelson] processes through pedals, and Jason [Nazary] plays modular synth, and Alfredo [Colon] uses pedals, and Lester [St. Louis] just started bringing this bass synth, then it feels natural to come toward each other in that way.

In my first real engagement with experimental music in college, when we started getting into the twentieth century, my favorite composer was Edgard Varèse.⁴⁶ I connected to his music so much, it's hard for me to even say why. And then I found out that he worked with Charles Mingus and the Jazz Composers Workshop.⁴⁷ And Charlie Parker's favorite composer, other than Stravinsky, was Varèse. As an improviser, these are my ancestors, Mingus and Eric Dolphy and all these folks.⁴⁸ I somehow just ended up being part of the continuum, but I love *musique concrète*⁴⁹ and tape music. I love tape, I love analog sounds. And I always say, the harmonium is just the *analog* analog synthesizer. It's the original analog synth. If you listen to the harmonium, the waves, the sound patterns, they have this squarish synth sound to them. So, it made so much sense to me to put the harmonium and the synth together. It's really just an expansion of timbre and texture, and it provides more language as an improviser.

In terms of an investment in the future, I guess there are people who truly don't seem to care about that investment, or maybe they're just so isolated that they don't really understand reality. I remember reading in 2017 about the techno-oligarchs, as we're referring to them now, about how

Facebook executives don't let their own children use social media and about the investment in life extension technology, and I thought, whoa, they know where this is going, and they think that they can live beyond it, or isolate themselves from it.

I wrote a song called "Loot the Future," from my new record,⁵⁰ in response to the LA fires and Luigi Mangione⁵¹ and about how [techno-oligarchs] play with our future, how they are robbing us. Wanda Sykes—comedians are super influential to me—has this amazing line about how, when you walk through the projects, you might get robbed of what you have on you that day, but on Wall Street, you can get robbed of your future.⁵² That's way worse, you know? All that was in my head. They're robbing us of our future, and most of us, let's say the 99.999%, cannot afford not to care about the future.

Ultimately, though, I think in order to have an investment in the future, or a collective future, you have to be optimistic. I think a lot of what I write about and think about feels or sounds dire. I think the times are dire, but reading *Parable of the Sower* during the pandemic made me think that there's something really optimistic about how that book shows collectivity and communalism and the formation of new traditions.⁵³ I'm reading an amazing book right now called *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of The New York Commune, 2052–2072*.⁵⁴ It's speculative fiction. It's an oral history written by two current oral historians who're pretending they're writing it in 2072 on the twentieth anniversary of the New York Commune, which is a commune that forms amid capitalist collapse.

That's what I really understand abolition to be: being able to imagine another way, a different way that society can be organized. Being able to imagine a different possibility—that's creative work. That extension of imagination is creative work, and that's what we can do as artists. That's the ultimate power that we have, the ability to imagine things differently. It's our superpower, and the future is part of that imagining. Onward. That's all we can do.

Notes

- ¹ A *bhajan* is a form of devotional song, often sung in a collective, ritualistic setting.
- ² Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A. W. Wheen (1928, Vintage Books, 2025).
- ³ Saul Williams is a Hip Hop artist and The Mars Volta is a progressive rock band; for more, see Saul Williams, <https://saulwilliams.com/>, and The Mars Volta, <https://www.themarsvolta.com/>.
- ⁴ See Salim Washington, <https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/people/salim-washington/>. Fred Ho was a saxophonist, composer, and activist who pioneered fusion music in the 1980s, combining African American, East Asian, and Pacific musical practices in his Afro Asian Music Ensemble, which he created in 1982. For more, see <https://discoverfredho.org/afro-asian-music-ensemble/>.
- ⁵ For more, see Vijay Iyer, <https://vijay-iyer.com/>, and George Lewis, <https://music.columbia.edu/bios/george-e-lewis>.
- ⁶ For more on Abbey Lincoln's life and political activism, see Allison Keyes, "Remembering Jazz Singer and Activist Abbey Lincoln," *NPR*, August 14, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/08/14/129203432/remembering-jazz-singer-and-activist-abbey-lincoln>. See also the forthcoming book (July 2026) Ada C. M. Thomas, *Aminata: Abbey Lincoln's Song of Faith* (Rutgers University Press, 2026).
- ⁷ Grant Phipps, "Amirtha Kidambi's Music is Drawn to Catharsis and Community," interview with Amirtha Kidambi, *Tone Madison*, March 24, 2022, <https://tonemadison.com/articles/amirtha-kidambis-music-is-drawn-to-catharsis-and-community>.
- ⁸ George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 360–61.
- ⁹ Horace Tapscott was a jazz pianist and composer who founded the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra in 1961. For more, see Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, <https://panafrikanpeoplesarkestra.com/>. See also Horace Tapscott, *Songs of the Unsung: The Musical and Social Journey of Horace Tapscott*, ed. Steven Isoardi (Duke University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁰ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (1968): 29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144377>.
- ¹¹ Performers Forum met monthly at Exapno, a New Music community center in Brooklyn, roughly from August 2011 to December 2012.
- ¹² Robert Ashley was an American contemporary composer widely known for his operas. For more, see Robert Ashley, <http://www.robertashley.org/>.
- ¹³ For more, see Jessica Pavone, <https://jessicapavone.com/>, Darius Jones, <http://www.dariusjonesmusic.com/>, and Sam Pluta, <https://www.sampluta.com/index.html>.

- ¹⁴ For more, see Matana Roberts, <https://www.matanaroberts.com/>.
- ¹⁵ The Silent Barn was a DIY musical space located in Brooklyn. For more, see Jenn Pelly, "Lessons from the Closing of NYC's Silent Barn, A DIY Institution," *Pitchfork*, May 24, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/lessons-from-the-closing-of-nycs-silent-barn-a-diy-institution/>.
- ¹⁶ For more on Alice Coltrane's music and life, see Franya J. Berkman, *Monument Eternal: The Music of Alice Coltrane* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010). We also recommend reading Kidambi's article, also in this special forum, "Universal Consciousness: Black Music, Hindu Thought, and Decolonizing the Spirit."
- ¹⁷ Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Duke University Press, 2014).
- ¹⁸ Kidambi's bandmates in Elder Ones include Jason Nazary (drums), Alfredo Colon (tenor saxophone), Matt Nelson (soprano saxophone), and Lester St. Louis (bass).
- ¹⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994, Routledge, 2021); and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th ann. ed. (1968, Continuum, 2000).
- ²⁰ For more, see Milford Graves, <https://www.milfordgraves.com/>, and Ben Young, *Dixonia: A Bio-Discography of Bill Dixon* (Greenwood Press, 1998).
- ²¹ For more on Nina Simone's life and music, see <https://www.ninasimone.com/>. See also Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 2nd Da Capo Press ed. (1991, Da Capo Press, 2003). For more on the political activism of both Abbey Lincoln and Nina Simone, among others, see the forthcoming book (October 2026) Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Freedom's Gate: Maya Angelou, Lorraine Hansberry, Abbey Lincoln, Miriam Makeba, and Nina Simone Live at the New York Nightclub That Shaped the Civil Rights Movement* (W. W. Norton, 2026).
- ²² For more on Angel Bat Dawid's music, see Ari Shapiro and Noah Caldwell, "Play It Forward: Angel Bat Dawid Knows How to Deliver Emotion through Song," *NPR*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/05/984421378/play-it-forward-angel-bat-dawid-knows-how-to-deliver-emotion-through-song>.
- ²³ For more on Leonard Peltier, whose prison sentence was commuted by Joe Biden in January 2025, see Nick Estes, "Leonard Peltier's Story Isn't Over Yet," *The New Yorker*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/leonard-peltiers-story-isnt-over-yet>.
- ²⁴ Eric Garner was murdered by a NYPD officer on July 17, 2014. For more on the protests that followed a grand jury's decision not to indict the police officer, see Oliver Laughland, Jessica Glenza, Steven Thrasher, and Paul Lewis, "'We can't breathe': Eric Garner's Last Words Become Protesters' Rallying Cry," *The Guardian*, December 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/dec/04/we-cant-breathe-eric-garner-protesters-chant-last-words>. Tamir Rice was murdered by a Cleveland

Division of Police officer on November 22, 2014. For more on protests sparked by a similar decision not to indict the officers involved, see "Tamir Rice Protesters March to Prosecutor's Home, Demand Resignation," *NBC News*, January 1, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/tamir-rice-protesters-march-prosecutor-s-home-demand-resignation-n489071>.

- ²⁵ For more, see Ailsa Chang, "For Asian American Women, Misogyny and Racism are Inseparable, Sociologist Says," interview with Nancy Wang Yuen, *NPR*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/19/979336512/for-asian-american-women-misogyny-and-racism-are-inseparable-sociologist-says>.
- ²⁶ For more, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994, Routledge, 2004).
- ²⁷ For more on the Bengal famine of 1943, see Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- ²⁸ For more on the Colombian conflict, see Steven Dudley, *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerilla Politics in Colombia* (Routledge, 2004); and Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (Zed Books, 2005).
- ²⁹ See "The Correct Handling of a Revolution," in Huey P. Newton, *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (Vintage Books, 1972), 16.
- ³⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (1961, Grove Press, 2004).
- ³¹ To listen to *Outernational*, see Amirtha Kidambi, <https://www.amirthakidambi.com/outernational-podcast>.
- ³² Kidambi explained that this title comes from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (James Currey, 1986).
- ³³ Lauren Gambino, Sabrina Siddiqui, Paul Owen, and Edward Helmore, "Thousands Protest Against Trump Travel Ban in Cities and Airports Nationwide," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/29/protest-trump-travel-ban-muslims-airports>.
- ³⁴ Liz Pelly, "Elder Ones Instill Avant-Garde Protest Music with Hindu Philosophy," *Bandcamp*, April 1, 2019, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/amirtha-kidambi-elder-ones-feature>.
- ³⁵ Kapil Seshasayee, "#8 Amirtha Kidambi," interview with Amirtha Kidambi, *Desifuturism.com*, n.d., <https://www.desifuturism.com/interviews>.
- ³⁶ For more, see Suneil Sanzgiri, <https://www.suneilsanzgiri.com/>.
- ³⁷ For Prachi Patankar's reflections on her mother's work, see Prachi Patankar Omvedt, "My Mother, Gail Omvedt, Was a Romantic and Humanist," *The Wire*, February 19, 2022, <https://thewire.in/rights/my-mother-gail-omvedt-was-a-romantic-and-humanist>.

- ³⁸ For example, see Soutik Biswas, "Why India's Real Covid Toll May Never be Known," *BBC News*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60981318>.
- ³⁹ MoMA PS1 is an alternative art space in Queens. For more on SAAID's event at MoMA PS1, see "SAAID Presents: Performances in Response to South Asia's COVID-19 Crisis," MoMA PS1, 2021, <https://www.momaps1.org/en/events/86-saaid-presents-performances-in-response-to-south-asias-covid-19-crisis>.
- ⁴⁰ For a bit more on South Asian Artists in Diaspora's event at MoMA PS1, see MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/7186>.
- ⁴¹ For more, see Piotr Orlov, <https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/clive-davis-institute/453308570>.
- ⁴² "The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) was founded in 1965 in Chicago by a group of musicians who sought to build and sustain a creative community and new platforms for experimentation and innovation in music"; home page ("AACM Turns 60!," *The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians*, <https://www.aacmchicago.org/>
- ⁴³ See Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*.
- ⁴⁴ For more on the Art Ensemble of Chicago, see <https://www.akamu.net/aeoc.htm>.
- ⁴⁵ For more, see Jeffrey O. Snyder, <https://music.princeton.edu/people/jeffrey-o-snyder>.
- ⁴⁶ For more on Edgard Varèse's life and work, see Edgard Varèse, <https://brahms.ircam.fr/en/composer/edgard-varese/biography>.
- ⁴⁷ For more on Charles Mingus's life and work, see <https://www.charlesmingus.com/>. For more on Varèse's interactions with Mingus and other jazz musicians in New York in 1957, see Brigid Cohen, "Enigmas of the Third Space: Mingus and Varèse at Greenwich House, 1957," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2018.71.1.155>.
- ⁴⁸ For more on the life and work of Eric Dolphy, see Vladimir Simosko and Barry Tepperman, *Eric Dolphy: A Musical Biography and Discography*, rev. ed. (1974, Da Capo Press, 1996).
- ⁴⁹ *Musique concrète* is a style of electronic music first developed by Pierre Schaeffer.
- ⁵⁰ Amirtha Kidambi, "Loot the Future," Track 2 of Amirtha Kidambi's Elder Ones—Live at Le Guess Who?, November 7, 2025, audio recording and mix by Marc Broer, *Soundcloud*, <https://soundcloud.com/leguesswho/sets/amirtha-kidambis-elder-ones>.
- ⁵¹ In 2025, wildfires in Los Angeles, "fed by bone-dry conditions," burned for more than three weeks (Emily Dooley, "Protecting LA's Trees While Learning Lessons for the Future," <https://www.ucdavis.edu/climate/news/after-fires-protecting-las-trees-while-learning-lessons-future>); "Luigi Mangione," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luigi_Mangione.

⁵² See Wanda Sykes, "Why You Should Invest in Weed - Wanda Sykes," Comedy Central Stand-Up, November 15, 2019, video, 6:04, https://youtu.be/HnP1c_Bi13E?si=V5vXPd982_hRIB-K.

⁵³ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (1993, Grand Central Publishing, 2019).

⁵⁴ M. E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi, *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of The New York Commune, 2052–2072* (Common Notions Press, 2022).

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