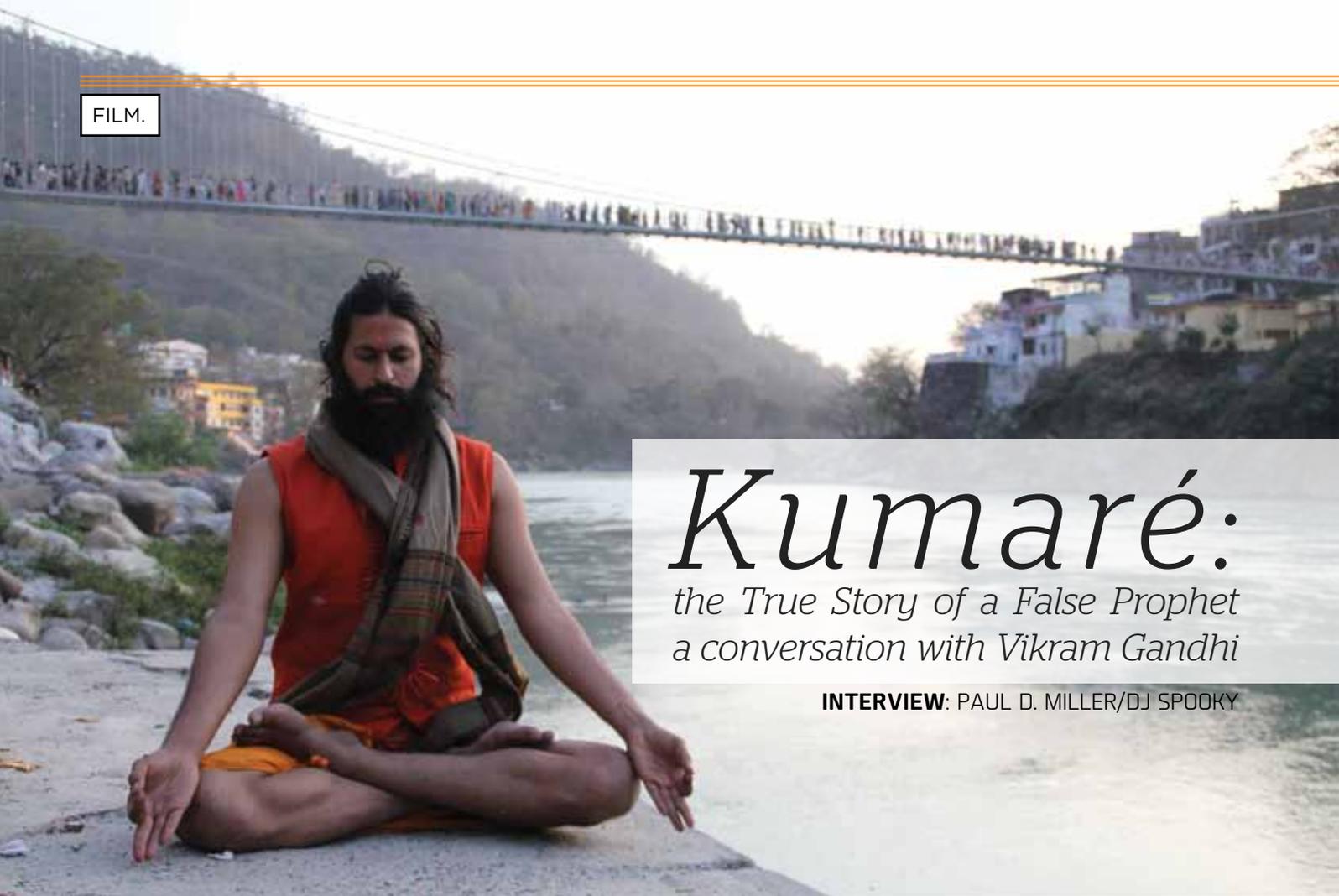


ORIGIN.





Kumaré: the True Story of a False Prophet a conversation with Vikram Gandhi

INTERVIEW: PAUL D. MILLER/DJ SPOOKY

The soundtrack to your documentary film, *Kumaré: the True Story of a False Prophet*, was really compelling; you acted, directed, and created the overall sound design for the project.

Growing up in Jersey and New York City, my walkman was filled with Stretch Armstrong mixtapes and other hip hop, grunge, indie rock, and psych rock. The soundtrack in my house was Asha, Lata, Mohammed Rafi, Anup Jalota, the pop/folk music of India from the 50's to the 80's. All of this music was heavily influenced by American music; you can hear jazz, rockabilly, Broadway, surf, funk, disco, depending on the

era. I also listened to Ravi Shankar, Vedic hymns, and meditation tapes on long car rides with my dad. So, we are talking about a lot of east meets west fusion, a masala. The music for the film ended up being my own personal masala.

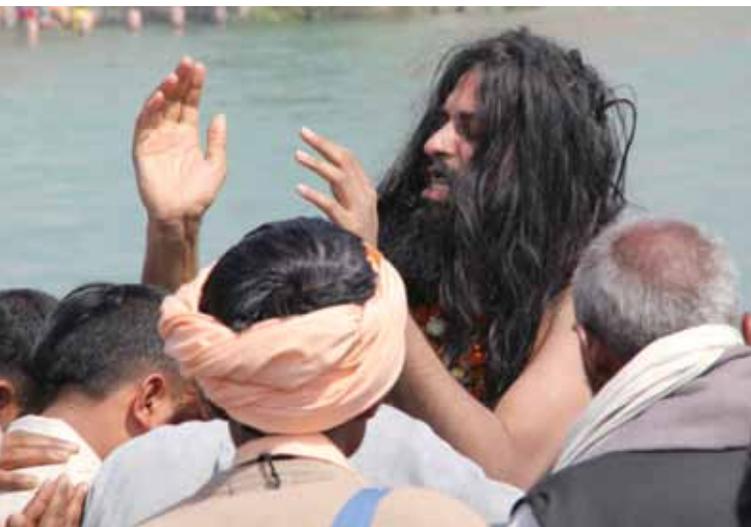
How did the mantras you “made up” affect the way the yoga sessions evolved? I guess if people believe enough in a sound, they invest it with meaning. Do you feel like that was a core issue in the way you looked at authentic vs inauthentic ideas around what is a guru?

I spent my childhood memorizing hours of Sanskrit chants, with little knowledge of their meanings. I was told this was the ancient Indian way. The meditative part was the sound of the hymn, not its meaning.

So, when I was creating the main mantras of *Kumaré*, I looked to the main mantra of Hinduism. There is the primordial sound, Om (Aum). I wanted to make a new and improved version of that, so I just made up U-A-E, pronounced oo-ah-eh. *Kumaré* is about transformation, so I called it the sound of transformation. It felt good and positive; some people even said they liked it better than Om. Who's to say they are wrong?

I also translated some corporate slogans like “Just Do It” and “Be all you can be” into Sanskrit. I remember what Swami Bua, a 115-year old yoga teacher, once told me: “English is the language of commerce; Sanskrit is the language of God.”

Who were some of the gurus, mega-church preachers, televangelists, and yogis that you looked at as models for Kumaré?



I remember I made this document where I listed inspirations for Kumaré. On it, were Joel Osteen, Yogi Bhanjan, Osho, Maharishi, Sai Baba, and even Creflo Dollar. Fashion-wise, I was emulating the Siva Sadhus I met in India. Since I am nearly 6'4" and carried a trident, I ended up becoming less intimidating by imitating my grandmother, as well as Swami Bua, who I mentioned earlier. The joke of Kumaré was the exterior, but at the heart, I wanted to just teach what I, Vikram, believed.

How much did you feel like staying in or out of character would create narrative tension?

The narrative tension is definitely the lead-up to the unveiling. The more we see Kumaré interact with people, the more we begin to like him and what he represents. There becomes an increasing contrast between Kumaré the sacred and Vikram the profane. The whole point of Kumaré was the idea of projection and how people both give their power up or feel empowered through their interaction with this foreign spiritual leader. Kumaré was ultimately teaching the same message that the film teaches. The real teacher is already in you.

American artists tend to respond to, appropriate, and transform the central tenets of eastern philosophies and religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, but people of color aren't really involved. What do you think of contemporary situations where this is happening, like many modern yoga movements?

The character Kumaré is a reaction to exactly this, the gaze on the other. Kumaré is a reaction to the western dream of India and the East. He is a character borne more out of mythology and western fantasies than reality. I did want to satire the way self-help and yoga is marketed, as well.

As per the western gaze, I think that the distorted interpretation of eastern spirituality has itself become an experience all its own. What I've learned, though, from this process, is that when it comes to spiritual experience, no one can say what is authentic and what is not.

What do you think of the material that you scripted in the context of people like Sacha Baron Cohen, who does a similar critique of "realism?" Any additional influences?

Unless I lived in a cave like Kumaré, there would be no way that Sacha Baron Cohen would not have influenced this film. The idea of Kumaré actually predates HBO's *Da Ali G Show*, but after seeing the *Borat* movie, I realized the vast possibilities of this kind of film-making.



Borat was so brilliant in pointing out Americans' provincial attitudes and embedded racism; he pushed it really far. I wanted to create a character that showed something about human nature that was more internal and universal and not reactionary. The real main difference however was that the story of Borat and Bruno was scripted before; of course, the scenes themselves were improvised and spontaneous. I, though, didn't want to know what was going to happen when we made *Kumaré*; it would have undermined the whole experiment.

Some artists identify with non-western art and thought precisely to subvert and critique what they see as the spiritually-bankrupt, capitalist West. Do you see the exchange between eastern and western models of meditation, yoga, and art as beneficial or appropriation? You probably wouldn't have been able to do this as a "white" or African American person! Thoughts?

I think if I was anyone else at all I wouldn't have done this at all. The specific circumstances of my ethnicity and upbringing gave me a unique perspective and drive to find out what was real about both cultures I was raised within.

What people fail to realize is that Indian yoga asanas as we know them were already this mixture of western and eastern ingredients. Contemporary yoga asanas, exported from India, were refined by people who knew about western physical disciplines, medical science, and who sought to innovate. We all really want to be able to lay claim to what's authentic, but this whole thing has been fusion for centuries.