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### Freddie Aguilar [Philippines, Musician, Political Leader]

Freddie Aguilar

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Interviewee: **FREDDIE AGUILAR**

Interviewer: Kirpal Singh

Date: 18 April 2015

Location: Singapore

0:00:23

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Freddie, welcome to Singapore.

0:00:24

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Thank you, Kirpal.

0:00:25

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Tell us a little bit about your growing up, your childhood, the family, yes?

0:00:30

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

I was the first born in my family. I'm the eldest in the family. I was born in 1953 in Santo Tomas, Isabela. I remember when I was growing up as a child, I was around five years old or four, my grandfather was the Vice Mayor in our town, and my father was the Chief of Police. So, I was growing up and I was introduced as the grandson of the Vice Mayor and the son of the Chief of Police. My father is always fond of me, because I can sing and dance, and he always very proud when he has visitors and... "Come on, Freddie, sing something for our guest, or dance something." So, he would always want me to sing or dance for his guest. I grew up...

0:01:26

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Those were the happy days.

0:01:28

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes, those were the happy days. Then we moved to Manila because my father was very sick, and it was only in Manila that they can cure him. Eventually he got cured, but he lost everything. He lost everything, the farm, the business, everything.

0:01:55

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, when you were in Manila, Freddie, you grew up mainly with Marcos? Is he the first big president you remember or the one before him?

0:02:02

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

When I was growing up it was Diosdado Macapagal that I remembered in elementary in Santa Mesa, Manila where I grew up. I was there at the age I think of six or seven. It was Diosdado Macapagal, who is the father of Gloria Macapagal, who became president later. He was the president and we had a beautiful public educational system at that time. I do remember also that during that time the Dollar is two against the Peso, one Dollar is two Pesos at that time. If my memory serves me right, we were second to Japan economically during those times.

0:03:00

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, you have seen Philippines, and the Peso obviously go down?

0:03:04

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes, yes. From the best that it was, until it went down.

0:03:09

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Would you say this was just out of very bad economic decisions, or wrong leaders, or what do you attribute that to?

0:03:16

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

It's more of too much borrowing during the time of Marcos, that's why the Peso went down. Because he borrowed so much money for whatever he intended to do with it, and all of a sudden from one Dollar is to two, it became one Dollar is to six, and by the time I was singing in Olongapo it was already one Dollar is to twelve, or something.

0:03:45

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Today is one Dollar to what, thirty, forty?

0:03:47

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

One Dollar is to forty-four or something.

0:03:48

[Kirpal Singh](#)

My god. Wow! Now, you mentioned Marcos and it's commonly agreed that the first few years of Marcos was very good.

0:03:58

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Oh yes.

0:03:59

[Kirpal Singh](#)

And then something happened, and he just went from bad to worse. Is that an opinion still shared by most Filipinos?

0:04:07

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Sadly, no more. They were, you know Filipinos, we tend to forgive people, but I personally, I can also forgive but I will never forget.

0:04:22

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right.

0:04:22

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Some Filipinos they tend to forgive and forget, but I myself, no. I will forgive but not forget, because if you forget, then the history will repeat itself again, all over again. The reason for the downfall is that Marcos was supposed to do it for the country, and all of a sudden, he realised that he's being respected by every Filipinos when he said, "I want this." Nobody would even bother to contradict him. They just followed what he wanted, and then he found out that he can control the Filipino already and what he did is instead of continuing the good two years he decided to wait for a while. I would like to do it for myself first, so he started building the crony. It was the crony that really put the tarnish on his name.

0:05:22

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right, we'll switch gears for a little bit. Now you grew up in a very happy, wonderful Isabela, and then because of your father's sickness and the move to Manila there were some stress points, I assume. But nevertheless, your childhood is still a happy memory, right?

0:05:40

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Oh, it is. It is.

0:05:42

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Then you went to university, and you were supposed to be an engineer or something?

0:05:45

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

I, I... no. My father wanted me to become a lawyer since we came from a family of politics in the north, and so he somewhat wanted me to continue the legacy of being *politikos* in my country, but I was having another dream. When I reached the age of twelve, I wanted to become a musician already. I don't want to become like my father already. But when I was younger, I wanted to be like him. So, he forgot to ask me whether I would love to be a

lawyer or not. He just dictated to me, "You are a lawyer." I was thinking, "No, I'm not but I can't tell it to his face." I was just being quiet, and without him knowing I was learning to play the guitar, and the guitar was not for me. The guitar was both for my sister, my younger sister, because she needs it in school. But after the project in school, the guitar is just hanging on our wall, in our very small house in Manila. When my father's not around, I get the guitar and taught myself how to play the guitar. I was quite a very fast learner during that time, and I learned to play a song without my father knowing. Every time my father is around, he said, "Hey, Freddie, pick up the book and read it." So, I picked up the book and read it, but inside the book is a songbook.

0:07:20

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Your notes. [Laugh]

0:07:21

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes, I'm memorising a song, but my father would see that I'm opening a big book but inside it's a songbook. So, that's how I learned to sing and play the guitar secretly from my father. Because he insisted that I should be a lawyer until we became so... we are arguing always about it. We have always arguments about it, and one day I wanted to please him, and I said, "Okay, I go to school, but not law." I said, "You told me if I don't want to take law, just take anything." I remembered he said that to me. So, I said, "Will you let me study electronics engineering?" Because I thought that electronic engineering and music goes...

0:08:08

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Will help you a bit.

0:08:10

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes... will go because I was thinking that I might be able to invent a guitar amplifier, or whatever.

0:08:18

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right, right, sure, sure.

0:08:20

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

So, I went to electronics engineering, but everything they're teaching I knew it already. Because I was also working during weekends as an apprentice of my uncle Benny, who owns an electronics shop. Everything they're teaching in first year college of electronics engineering I was learning actually in the electronics shop of my uncle. So, I became the assistant teacher of my professor. I'm not learning, I was teaching the students how to do it. I lost interest.

0:09:02

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right.

0:09:03

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes. I lost interest and after the first year I decided that I should quit electronics engineering and went to my full time singing. That's when I left home. I left my home because my father always says that, "Hey, if you are in my house, you have to follow my rules and regulations in this house." Since I cannot follow it anymore, it's only fair that I should get out of the house. Without his blessing, I took a couple of Levi's jeans, and some T-shirts and my knapsack bag with my guitar, left home. I started singing at a place owned by a friend, a friend's mother and I was making twenty pesos a night. Very happy. I was singing. Yes, twenty pesos with free meal and free lodging. So, I started my singing career in Olongapo, and that's when I realised more and more that, I did a lot of mistakes because I was alone, I have no relatives in Olongapo. When I woke up in the morning, I had no breakfast, I had to tend my own breakfast. At lunchtime, I have to do my own lunch. I have to wash my own clothes. So, I'm missing home more, because at home I don't have to cook my breakfast, I don't have to cook my lunch, I don't have to wash my clothes. I'm missing home more and more and one day I was trying to watch TV (television) but all the shows are irrelevant to me. Then I turned on the radio and even the songs are irrelevant to me. I looked at the corner and there's a bunch of laundry. Then next to the laundry is my guitar. I picked up my guitar. I always like to write songs, and so I picked up my guitar and my cassette recorder, the mono cassette recorder. I put on a cassette and then I got my pen and then I was thinking... I said, "Where did I come from?" Then, it hit me. I came from my mother's womb. I was there for nine months, and I was born. Then I grew up, and then

what did I do? Instead of making them happy, I gave them heartaches. From that position, I started strumming my guitar and started writing. *Nung isilang ka sa mundong ito* - when you were born. And then I was thinking I was in my mother's womb, and then the songs came there. I wrote it, and then singing and then played it back. Then I was crying like a fool, listening to the song and I said, "I did this to my parents." I kept the song. I was crying. Then the next day I listened to the song, it made me cry again, and I realised that I wrote a song from a prodigal son's point of view, asking the mother and the father to forgive him for every misfortune and heartache that was given to them.

0:12:40

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right, and that song is the one that then made you world famous.

0:12:44

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes.

0:12:45

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right, right. How did your father feel about the song when he first heard it?

0:12:50

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

That's... I think that's very sad because my father heard me once. I didn't even know he was there in Manila. He came once because our mayor from Santo Tomas, Isabela came down and he said, "Hey, I heard that your son, your eldest son is a good singer, so where can we watch him?" So, my father brought the mayor into the pub house I was singing in. They took the back, back seat. I don't even know they were there, and I was singing, and they heard how the crowd responded to me, and my... according to my mother, my father said, "Hey, he's quite good. Your son is quite good. I heard him." Then one day when I came back from Olongapo, because once in a while I get to take an off because they won't allow you a day off in Olongapo. You sing Monday to Sunday. One day they allowed me. So, I went home, and I showed my father the lyrics of *Anak*. I said, "Father, I wrote a song." And I let him read the song, and he was teary-eyed, and he said, "Hey, good. You understand life now. Then he put his arm around me like that, and he said, "But still you should have finished your law school." [Both laugh]



0:14:18

[Kirpal Singh](#)

A lot of people think that music is powerful, but not as powerful as politics. What do you think?

0:14:26

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

I think music is more powerful than politics, because I have proven that true in my country. Because during the time that Ninoy Aquino was killed, the song that I revived in 1980, all of a sudden became alive all over again. In 1983, when Senator Aquino was assassinated and people started singing it on the street all over again, even in hotels, Filipinos will stand when that song is played on the piped-in speaker, and they go like that. [Raise one fist up high] Foreigners in hotels are thinking this must be the national anthem, because every time this song is played all the Filipinos will stand and they put their fist like that.

0:15:18

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Isn't it *Bayan Ko*, was it?

0:15:20

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes, *Bayan Ko*. The next thing you know, of course, I was all over the rallies shouting for justice for Aquino, justice for all. All of a sudden, we are selling *Bayan Ko*, the album, all over again in the parliament of the streets, but this time all the proceeds are being given to the JAJA Movement which is Justice for Aquino, Justice for All Movement.

0:15:49

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now, you just used a very interesting phrase, the parliament of the streets. You know, your People Power and you were behind it as well and singing and all of that. So, there's a parliament of the streets and there's a parliament, parliament, right? Now, if you think of the parliament of the streets as being led by people who are really recognised, like you as leaders of the society...

0:16:10

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes. That time. Yes. That time. Yes.

0:16:13

[Kirpal Singh](#)

That time, right? That time. Then you have the real sort of leaders that the world recognises as the President of the Philippines and all of that. Now, what happen do you think, of course there's always the tension, but what happens do you think when the parliament of the street is compromised by all these leaders?

0:23:44

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Actually, that's what happened. The first People Power Revolution was very successful in getting our freedom back, our democracy back, but the leaders who sat as leaders for... after the parliament of the street revolution, the 1986 EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue) Revolution, did not deliver for the expectation of the people on the parliament of the street. So, the disgust came. Even up to now, there are so many disillusioned, because they thought that after the first revolution, the government will change and the government will become for the people, by the people, and with the people. But it did not happen.

0:17:19

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Is government...

0:17:19

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

So, the People Power, the first People Power was compromised, because the politicians become greedy all over again. And to think that at one time they were with the parliament of the streets. They were a part of the parliament of the streets. But once they become leaders, they are being eaten by the system.

00:17:47

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now you have seen at least what, you have seen that these four or five different presidents by now? Maybe even six now.

00:17:51

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Oh, yes. I met personally Macapagal, Marcos, up to the present. So I think all the presidents from Macapagal to the present President I met all of them.

00:18:01

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. Might be six or seven, right? You met all of them. You know all of them.

00:18:05

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes.

00:18:06

[Kirpal Singh](#)

And yet in some ways, I know each of them tries to be a bit different.

00:18:10

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Oh yes. They are a lot different from each other.

00:18:12

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. But overall, they have not been able to change Philippines very much, right?

00:18:15

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

No. No.

00:18:17

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Why do you think this is so?

00:18:20

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Like I said because they compromise. They are, once they are there, they forget... they forget what they were once before. All of a sudden, they are being eaten by the system, which is, you know, money, money, money. Once, I was there before, now I'm here, and now I see all the temptation here, and I cannot say no. That's what my... that's my perception. That's my observation, too. Like I was saying, our Vice President was the same. He was like me. He talked like me, he believed in the same thing I believe in. He was very nationalistic and very patriotic like me, but now he is totally different. He is now the dynasty. He is now the guy being, being accused of so much corruption. It's not his, it's not only him. There are other people like him, who have the same views, but all of a sudden, once they become like the *politico*, all of a sudden, boom, it's a complete turnaround. They forget about the people, they forget about the country, they forget about what they were fighting for before they became a politician.

0:19:44

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Freddie, a lot of theories of leadership focus on two different aspects. One is that a good leader works always with other good leaders, meaning it's a team and the other theory says that a good leader must have that tremendous personality and then the team will fall into place. What do you think?

0:20:04

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

I go with the second one, with the leader that has this firm belief that he will do this.

0:20:14

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Like the charisma...

0:20:15

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes, the charisma and the dream that I'm... Because every *politico* would say "Vote for me and I will bring you... I will give this to you, and I will do this for you." I want a leader that way, very firm. That's why I always look for the platform of government with any *politico* that I support. I want to look at the platform, and if the platform is very good then I will support him. I keep the platform. Later on, if that leader will not do anything that he promised, then I will show it to him, and show it on national TV, and say, "Where is this?"

0:20:52

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Yes, right.

0:20:53

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

So, I believe in the leaders, in the leader with a promise that he will make these changes, and then if he's very firm with that, then the people will believe in him, will come and support him.

0:21:04

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. Now, you in your music, many of the Filipinos I have spoken with tell me that you're quite a kind of stirrer of conscience, through your lyrics. You make them think and you make them readdress the whole issue of leadership. Now, music, we know from history, has been used by corrupt and political leaders to distract attention from what they are doing. But in your case, you're attracting the attention. Meaning that you're saying in your songs this is what all people are doing.

00:21:36

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

This is what's happening.

00:21:36

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, in that way, you will be recognised as a society leader, right? Some people tell me that you have even been asked to become... nominate yourself for presidency. What do you think of all this? I wouldn't mind having dinner with you, President.

00:21:53

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Me, being a politician is out of my agenda. I'm not going to go in there. I saw how damaging it was to some of my close friends.

0:22:10

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But just for a moment, imagine if you are the President of Philippines, what two changes will you make?

0:22:16

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Number one, I will change the educational system of my country because it was not made for Filipinos. It was...

0:22:23

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Spanish is it?

0:22:24

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Not even Spanish, but also American.

0:22:25

[Kirpal Singh](#)

American, okay. What would you do just for a minute?

0:22:31

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

I will ask our best scholars, the young and old, to come up with education suited for Filipinos.

0:22:39

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Is that because you believe that a good education system is one of the real answers to a country that has problems?

0:22:43

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes. Especially to our masses.

0:22:48

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Okay. Would you say free education for them? At the moment, it is very expensive, right?

0:22:51

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes, yes. We should give, which is I had... I had the free education myself before. Our free education before was really good. You see the way this is...I got some of my standing from where I came from in school. They taught it to me, to us before.

0:23:13

[Kirpal Singh](#)

What's your second change you would bring about?

0:23:15

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

The second change is that I would go back to our history and tell what the history of the Filipinos are, the way it was, the way it happened. No cover-ups. We don't have to cover because what we did is that we covered it from the beginning of our history. It was already told the wrong way. So, I want to say to rewrite the history also, hurt the people who will get hurt, but this is the truth. This is what happened.

0:23:49

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But that's going to be a very, very difficult time, right?

0:23:51

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

It is. It is. Because a lot of people will say, "No, you can't do that, because we will have to change all over and all these things and that... but I believe in the truth shall set us free.

0:24:08

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now, do you think as a country, Philippines is playing a leadership role in the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) community, or do you think the Philippines is now losing a little bit of its credibility in the ASEAN role?

0:24:21

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Little by little we are losing our credibility if we do not move, we do not move right away. I was saying this coming election in 2016 is very, very important for the Philippines. Not only do we need to elect new President, new Vice President, new Senators, but we have to do good in choosing our best *politicos* to represent the people and the country because if not then we will become a banana republic.

0:24:50

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Your most recent song is about that, right?

0:24:52

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Yes, I have written a song called, Election Time Again, in all that song I am teaching them how to choose the right *politico* who will represent not only the poor people, but also represent the interest of the people and the interest of the country.



0:25:09

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Right. So, when I was interviewing your ex-President, Ramos, he said that one of the issues with leadership is that sometimes it goes a little bit out of focus. So, now maybe it's gone out of focus...

0:25:23

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

A lot.

0:25:25

[Kirpal Singh](#)

A lot. So, do you feel that as someone who's always in a way been interested in how the politics has been unfolding and unravelling and how it has been doing more and more... I suppose destruction to the nation as a whole. Because in some provinces, for example are not even developed, right? Some are very developed. There's a lot of unequal treatment and inequity going all around. Do you feel that as a leader in the music scene this is of tremendous importance to you as a responsibility, a moral responsibility, right?

0:26:00

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

That's why I write songs. Yes, that's why I write songs about it.

0:26:03

[Kirpal Singh:](#)

Thank you so much. Thank you. Wonderful. Thanks.

0:26:05

[Freddie Aguilar](#)

Thank you so much too.