

'The music of yoga': Agnostics, Christians find spiritual benefits in kirtan's Hindu chants

RN By Siobhan Hegarty for God Forbid

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In the 1990s, American musician Dave Stringer went to India for a pay cheque and came back with a calling.

Hired by an Indian guru to make videos, he was tasked with translating the philosophy of yoga and the music of yoga, known as kirtan, into film.

"I was dropped right into this whole ashram world without any knowledge about it at all," recalls the Grammy-nominated producer, a leading figure in introducing "new kirtan" to mainstream music audiences.

"I was not invested in something happening ... but the experience of sitting to meditate for the first time was powerful.

"Every evening they had these ecstatic chants, and you could be in with a thousand people singing together — there was something incredibly transformative about it."

The ecstatic chants are a key feature of kirtan, which originated in India 500 years ago as a method of sharing the philosophy of Bhakti yoga.

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PHOTO: The musicians at Govinda's are Hare Krishna, but their kirtan sessions are open to all. (ABC RN: Teresa Tan)

It grew into mantra-based devotional music, spoken or sung in Sanskrit, the liturgical language of Hinduism.

And unlike yoga, which has been largely transformed into a secular practice in the West, kirtan remains a form of worship.

"As a kirtan singer, because we are singing names of [Hindu] deities, it's a sort of predicament or paradox," says Stringer, who was raised Christian, but now labels himself agnostic.

"These Hindu deities are understood, even by most Hindus, as psychological metaphors and because our culture and our minds traffic in stories, they're useful.

"My way into it started experientially; I perceived it as beautiful nonsense, and it turns out you can have a fantastic experience from there."

The original fusion music

Though it started off with very simple accompaniments, kirtan now makes use of a wide range of instruments of various origins.

"Old kirtan was played really simply with the instruments they had available to them, namely things like finger cymbals," says Stringer.



PHOTO: Finger cymbals are some of the oldest instruments to be used in kirtan. (ABC RN: Teresa Tan)

"One of the first instruments that came in was the sārangī, which is a kind of bowed fiddle, and the interesting thing about it is you mostly heard it in brothels."

Stringer says the Mughal invasion in the 1500s brought skinned drums, and other Muslim instruments, to India and to kirtan practice.

But it was the British who introduced the harmonium — now a staple of the new kirtan sound.

"[The harmonium] a little pump organ that was brought on ships basically to play Christian hymns to convert the 'heathens', which they were spectacularly unsuccessful in doing," Stringer says.

"So kirtan over the centuries has adapted instruments from brothels, from Muslims, and from English imperialists."

The presence of European, American and Australian hippies in India during the 1960s and 1970s delivered yet another change: the acoustic guitar was welcomed into musical worship.



PHOTO: Tablas and other hand drums keep the beat in kirtan. (ABC RN: Teresa Tan)

Inadvertent mindfulness

Online editor April Smallwood says the religious nature of kirtan was neither a drawcard nor a deterrent when she first attended.

"I became addicted because of that first experience," she recalls of her visit to Sydney's Hare Krishna organisation Govinda's.

"I didn't really know what the chants meant, or what I was saying, essentially, but that helped me become more present because I was just focussing on pronouncing the words correctly.

"I noticed after that session, even four days afterwards, I was on a continued high."

Ms Smallwood says the musicality of kirtan helped her achieve a state of mindfulness that was far harder to obtain through traditional meditation.



PHOTO: April Smallwood enjoys the joyful nature of kirtan as an alternative to traditional meditation. (ABC RN: Siobhan Hegarty)

"I find kirtan really effective because there's not much that's asked of you; you're not really required to concentrate or be still," she points out.

"Within seconds of chanting I already feel like I've left my regular self at the door and I'm just there to enjoy and give thanks and participate in a really beautiful ritual."

Govinda's founder Pratapana says kirtan is "the science of self-realisation" — and religion does not have to be a part of it.

"You might say: 'Well, I don't want to chant Krishna's name.' That's OK. Go and chant whatever name of God you have," he says.

"It's not a sectarian or institutional kind of religious experience ... it's open to anybody whether they're religious or not, and whether they believe in God or they don't."

Is kirtan the new church choir?

Group singing and chanting is neither new, nor limited to Hindu worship.

Choral refrains are central to Orthodox, Anglican, Catholic and Evangelical church services, while Buddhism also makes use of chanting before meditation.



PHOTO: The harmonium, originally from the UK, is now synonymous with Indian music. (ABC RN: Teresa Tan)

Stringer believes humans possess an inherent desire to connect through song.

"People used to go to church to sing together," he says.

"The problem is if, for so many legitimate reasons, you don't want to get involved with organised religion anymore, unfortunately you throw one of the best things out — which is that experience of singing en masse with people."

"Kirtan has helped people reclaim that musicality and say: 'I really love singing with a group of people, and I like the spiritual impact of it, but without the dogma.'"

Ms Smallwood says the religious roots of kirtan don't clash with her own Christian beliefs, but the spiritual nature of the practice is something everyone, regardless of religious persuasion, can benefit from.

"[At kirtan] you're expressing your soul; you are leaving the worries of the mind behind, which is particularly important in this day and age where everything is so hectic and busy," she reflects.

"It's just basically a chance to sit back, stop the thought process, and to smile even."

Topics: religion-and-beliefs, ancient-religions, music, hinduism, meditation-and-prayer, sydney-2000