

focusinterview

DAVE

STRINGER

DAVE STRINGER IS A PERFORMER AND RECORDING ARTIST
BEST KNOWN FOR HIS WORK AS A KIRTAN SINGER.

What is Kirtan music; how would you describe the practice, rhythms and sounds?

Kirtan is one of the world's oldest forms of consciousness modification through music. When you sing very intently for a long period of time, you undergo neurological changes, which produce the massive secretion of chemicals and neuropeptides that give you a feeling of bliss and wellbeing. This is obviously a modern understanding of it. The ancient world didn't have such language, but the effect is the same. When you sing or dance intently, you create a feeling of joy or bliss or transcendence, and that feeling arises from chemistry that's inside your own body.

What Kirtan endeavours to do is not only create a feeling of bliss on an individual level, but on a collective level. You are singing with a group of people and you are entering into this state with often hundreds or thousands of other people. It's a really beautiful feeling to be kind of caught up in this incredible wave of joy.

Somehow the process of singing just naturally makes you feel better. Your head could be full of all kinds of stuff and simply the act of singing or dancing tends to disperse that or transmute it – something heavy into something that's light and joyful. It doesn't matter what kind of state I begin singing Kirtan in, I always end up with a feeling of lightness and a feeling of connection to everyone around me.

I have a sense of perspective on my life, and compassion and joy for other people. There is an old history to this though: Kirtan is distinguished by a musical feature called 'call and response'.

The teacher sings out a melody or a mantra, and people sing back. This is probably the oldest way of teaching music to people and many forms, not just in India, but most kinds of music have their origin in this kind of form. So in Kirtan, you start out singing slowly, and then with each repetition you naturally speed up, until often the piece is going two, three or four times as fast as when we started. There is a feeling first of surrender in this slowness of it, then a feeling of being caught up in the wave of excitement. The wave ultimately breaks, and you're left in a place of silence.

But it is not silence as you normally experience it; it's silence that seems somehow intelligent and ecstatic and expansive. There is something very comfortable about it. One of the other unusual things about a Kirtan concert is that unlike conventional music concerts, where everybody applauds afterwards, in Kirtan people clap their hands in the midst of it, and at the end the room falls into a really profound expansive silence.

It's quite unusual to sit in a room or hall with a large number of people with everybody just quiet. It's very remarkable, and it's not something I have ever cued people to do. It's just the response from people after singing for 30 minutes.

> So it's a bit of a spiritual thing?

Yes, it is a spiritual thing. The history of Kirtan is that it came out of what was called the Bhakti movement. Bhakti literally means 'devotion' in Sanskrit. It was kind of a reformation in India that occurred in the 14th/15th/16th centuries, contemporaneous with the renaissance and reformation in Europe. In India what it was doing was reclaiming spirituality from the realm of priests, temples, rituals and obscure mystical knowledge and claiming it in a very popular way.

The idea was that if there was love to be found or a divine to be connected with, that the place to connect was within your own heart and your own practice and your own experience. You didn't need a priesthood or any special knowledge in order to make this connection. That singing and dancing and connecting with other like-minded people was the quick way to get there.

So the entire contemporary yoga movement has, in fact, spread out of this understanding. Yoga was once the province of an educated elite cast, and the Bhakti movement began spreading the ideas of yoga in a popular way around the 15th century that has continued, until now there are yoga centres in places like Port Macquarie.

> How has Kirtan music evolved since it first came about in 15th century India?

Part of what happened is that as the contemporary physical Asana movement, which is the word that is used for yoga poses, as centres became established, it focused more on the physical aspects of yoga. People found that they still ended up having experiences that you have to call spiritual. These fundamental questions of who am I, how did I get here, what does it mean to be alive, what should I do with my life?

All of these questions arise in the process of yoga practice, and yoga studios have become meaningful communities where people meet. In some ways, unintentionally, communities have taken on the role of churches where people can connect on a spiritual basis and also often on a basis of service. Kirtan started being offered in the yoga studios in the west, after people experienced it in India, where it was mostly found around gurus and ashrams.

When yoga studios started offering it, by

putting it in a different context it became separated from a particular teacher and instead, more a way for everybody to get together and engage in something that was, well, fun. Ecstatic, but also rich and meaningful.

Music has always served communities, and in this case as the yoga community has grown, the music that serves that community has also grown. A lot of musicians hanging around yoga studios would start to play drums or other instruments to accompany yoga classes, and many yoga communities now have lively music scenes around them – either Kirtans, or dance events, or musicians who are playing for classes. Music has always existed in a meaningful place at the centre of our communities and in the transitions of our lives, so it's not an accident that music would become a central part in the yoga movement.

I am an unusual Kirtan singer in that I found my way into it not because I was interested in yoga or seeking anything in particular, but I found myself working in an ashram in India 20 years ago. I was a filmmaker and I was hired by an ashram to come and live there and make some films for them. So I encountered Kirtan and much of the meditative and ecstatic tradition, not because I was seeking, but because I was responding to whatever was around me, and I found without really knowing much about it that it still led me into powerful experiences.

So I became interested in how other people would also experience this if you took belief out of the equation. I was just going to 'try' this chanting or these yoga asanas and see what it did for me. It kept having a very interesting profound, beautiful effect on me, and I kept going forward. I have always tried to look at this from the perspective

of somebody who walks into the room knowing nothing about it. Doesn't want to sign up for some guru or cult, or doesn't really want to become involved in some 'in' group at all, but instead is seeking refuge from some problems in their life, or perspective on it. I have tried to view this more from the perspective of science and art, than religion. I think that has made it user friendly for a lot of people.

Undeniably, there is a profound spiritual experience available to you. What I'm not trying to do is manage how that is for you, or say what it should be. Yoga is really a practice of self enquiry, as opposed to a system of answers. It's more a methodology of asking questions, and I have seen Kirtan as a yoga practice which is focused on me asking questions of myself.

> Describe your travels to India. What inspired you to become involved and make Kirtan an everyday practice?

I was a musician before I went to India; I just wasn't a professional musician. But, I had been a musician since I was a child, so I was really captivated by music and I also understood Kirtan, it's call and responsiveness, in the way that singers would sing out a catchy phrase and it would get stuck in people's heads and they would sing back.

So I saw it as a kind of elemental, spiritual Pop music and as I started to examine the tradition more closely, I realised that it used purposefully the instruments that were available, not on a Classical basis, but on a Folk basis. I understood that the tradition itself was to connect and to use what is available to you.

So Kirtan is 'traditional' in the instruments it uses, because these instruments seem traditional – but when you look further, they are not. Generally you will see a harmonium, which is a little pump organ, and tablas, which are tuned drums. They both seem very Indian; however, the British brought the harmonium to India hoping to convert the Indians to Christianity, and they intended to use it to sing hymns. But the Indians thought it was a cool instrument, famously got rid of the British, but they kept the instrument.

The tablas have their origin in instruments that came from Persia in the reign of the Moguls, so they themselves are not 'traditional'. But they have become instruments that are typically used. I like those sounds, which is why we used them, but at the same time I'm very free to use guitars, bass, trumpets or violins. I have used all kinds of instruments as part of the palette, because I'm also trying to create a compelling musical experience for people, and entry into that spiritual part just naturally flows behind.

> You have given Kirtan a bit of a Gospel / Jazz feel?

There is a heavy dose of Jazz and Gospel in it, and part of that is because the call and response tradition is deeply in Jazz and Gospel. Also, I'm an American and I have played all over the world now – but initially with American audiences and experimenting with what causes them to respond. If I'm really Indian about it, it doesn't seem authentic, and people just look at you. Add a beat or sound of a guitar or Gospel music to it and people became involved and excited.

The first thing for me is that if people aren't singing back, it's not a Kirtan. As I have now in the last five or six years played many times in

Europe and Australia (this will be my fourth trip to Australia in four years), I have found that any place that has a western culture, using western instruments as part of the ensemble creates more interest and causes people to sing back.

I think it's important to point out that neither Kirtan nor yoga are some kind of dusty ethno-musical logical or spiritual museum piece; they are living traditions which are very much right now going through an incredible period of creativity. When people say, "Oh, your Kirtan is not traditional", I just smile politely and then try to educate them on what exactly the 'tradition' is. The tradition is to use the popular vernacular and the instruments that are available to you. I'm actually a very traditional Kirtan singer.

> What is it like to see the tradition of Kirtan becoming such a popular trend?

It's really become a world music, which has been a really exciting thing to be part of, and yoga culture has become a world culture. The past three years I have played music in 18 countries, and the experience has been actually kind of the same everywhere I go.

First of all we are singing in Sanskrit, which is a language that no one really speaks or understands, so it's effectively nonsense to everybody. Although ... a kind of beautiful nonsense. If you study linguistics, many modern European languages ultimately go back to the Sanskrit. So, in a certain way it can be said that it is the language of all; it has a kind of familiarity to it. It's full of beautiful feeling sounds and it feels good to sing it.

But the fact that it feels nonsensical is because what we're trying to do is go beyond our thoughts and our mind into a place of pure awareness and experience a feeling of being very present and alive now, unencumbered by our minds and all of their complications and worries.

Mantras have traditionally been used for this reason, as tools to give the mind something to do so that the practitioner can begin to become aware about the fact that not all is mind. When I first started to meditate, I thought I was in my mind; then somebody said, "Well, why don't you watch your mind? It never occurred to me. But that simple idea that I could watch myself, observe myself thinking, changed a great deal.

> What is your view on the benefits of yoga and Kirtan music?

Historically, the traditions and philosophy of what we now call yoga were sung. The ideas of yoga were spread by singing. The Asana movement came much later, and yet most people encountered yoga first through the physical practices of it and only later found themselves exploring the philosophical and spiritual aspects of it. So they go together; the way they are related is through breathing.

When you practice yoga, what makes it different from a lot of other forms of 'exercise' is that you focus on your breath and you use your breath in a very mindful way. Similarly, when you sing or chant mantras, you have to make the same move. When you become aware of your breath,

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it changes your relationship to it in a profound way. You also slow your breathing down, and it becomes more regular and even.

There are neurological changes that occur when you do that. It's easy to experiment with this: when you slow your breathing down, you produce large amounts of neuropeptides called anandamides. 'Ananda' means 'bliss' in Sanskrit, and it's a term that describes a variety of chemicals released from the brain such as dopamine, serotonin etc. These are produced in large

amounts when your breathing is slow and regular. If you breathe in an erratic or short and shallow way, other classes of chemicals are produced, and those tend to give you a feeling of anxiety.

So simply by slowing your breathing down, your body produces a feeling of calm. That is very useful, when you realise that your state is very much under your control and concentrating on your breathing gives you that control.

It's also useful to other people. I remember when I was living in India, somebody asked the teacher in the ashram, "What good is all this chanting, meditation and yoga in a world full of suffering? Isn't this just some kind of special rarefied environment where we are all congratulating each other about how spiritual we are? How good is this really for the rest of the world?"

I thought that was a good question, and the reply was quite instructive. She said when you chant, practice yoga or meditate, you free everyone else from your bad vibe, and that is very useful to everyone else. If you think about it, it's as simple as that. If you become aware of yourself and enable that state of awareness to be modified, it's nicer for others around you. They don't need to know anything about yoga in order to be affected by it.

So on a simple level, yoga is simply asking that we become aware of ourselves and the effect that we have on others and to engage in simple practices, which make us nicer people.

> What do you enjoy about touring and

sharing your practice and experiences with others?

One of the things I really enjoy is that there is great intelligence and creative passion in everyone. It's easy to say that, but in my experience of travelling around the world, singing has given me this experience again and again.

Kirtan is a collective art: on the one hand I'm working with other musicians, but the crowd itself is part of what we're doing. The crowd changes what we do, and I see again and again how there is an intelligence that is greater than any individual, but that we are all somehow connected to. It's a thing of wonder to witness that in action.

This process of travelling around and meeting people all over the world has actually given me greater faith in humanity, greater faith in the wisdom and generosity of humanity – and that has been a beautiful experience.

> You will be coming to Byron Bay, Bellingen and Port Macquarie this March. What do you enjoy about coming to Australia? What can people expect?

I have found Australia to be a place really quite open to new ideas. Australians seem incredibly enthusiastic, friendly and welcoming. So I enjoy myself there quite a bit. I have some old friends, Australians who lived in Los Angeles for years, moved back to Sydney and Melbourne, so I had initially a core group of friends which has now expanded exponentially.

I'm starting to feel actually quite connected, and I now have friends all over Australia, so I think it was last year's trip, the third time, that I found myself actually feeling quite at home. My travels have allowed me to see quite a lot; it's become a yearly event, and the deeper my friendships and connections with Australians are, the more I love Australia.

I live on the west coast in America, and there are some things in California that are very similar to a lot of Australia, in my experience. There is a similar sense of possibility, certain aspects of the landscape – even the abundance of food and wine. Some of the artistic sensibilities ... a lot of things remind me of California a little bit. It's an easy cultural transition for me to make.

> Thank you Dave.