

In a dimly lit room overlooking the dark Balinese jungle, I sit on a yoga bolster in a crowd of a hundred and watch musicians set up. It's my first kirtan experience and I am entirely unsure of what to expect. A few squeezes of the harmonium bellows later and voices all around me join together for the first mantra. While words are provided at some kirtans, this session is not for beginners, and I have to settle for humming along. Even when a few distinct sounds begin to emerge, my knowledge of Sanskrit is limited to the names of a handful of yoga poses and so my participation is musical mimicry. In the middle of so many singing voices I am brought back to my Canadian family's singular acknowledgement of its vague Christian roots. Nearly every year we would find a caroling service in town and sing along, always surprised by the rarely heard third verses, always glowing by the end with the spirit of it all. By the time I sit down at my first kirtan here in Bali, it has been almost a decade since those annual caroling forays, but as more chanting voices join in and someone reaches for a harmony, something feels familiar.

Kirtan is a form of devotional practice that dates back to the beginnings of Bhakti yoga in 15th century India. The word kirtan means singing, praise or eulogy in Sanskrit, and variations of the call-and-response chanting practice are a central part of Hinduism, Sikhism and some strands of

Buddhism. Generally, an individual-musician or group of musicians chants mantras and provides accompaniment on instruments such as the harmonium, the tablas, hand cymbals and drums. The assembled crowd responds in kind and the mantra is repeated with rhythmic and energetic variations until the chant is brought to a natural conclusion by the kirtankar, or kirtan performer. But kirtan initiates would

argue rightly that this sort of description does little to capture the spirit of kirtan — they would say it says nothing of what raises one's hands to the sway of the music or brings one back to sing another round of *Lokah Samastah Sukino Bhavantu* (may all beings everywhere be free and happy).

Kirtan music has travelled a long way from the remote Indian Ashram. Bands

Repeat After Me

by
Meredith Lewis

and singers such as Krishna Das, Bhagavan Das, Ragani, Jau Uttal and Wah! play to packed concert halls around the globe. Dave Stringer is a kirtan musician from the US who encountered the practice while working on a film project in an ashram in India. Twenty years later Stringer travels the world as one of the central figures of the American Kirtan or New Bhakti movement in order to share his own style of kirtan. I caught up with him while he was at home in Los Angeles.

From the start, Stringer speaks a language I understand. "I'm a reluctant yogi and actually sort of an agnostic," he tells me within ten minutes of establishing our Skype connection, "it gives me a one eyebrow raised sort of view on this whole movement. . . I don't ask people who come to my kirtans to believe in it. I ask them to suspend their disbelief for a long enough time to give it a go and see what happens." Kirtan is a form of yoga, he explains, "[and] yoga doesn't ask us to believe in anything. It asks us to practice and examine our experience until we can witness the truth in the book of our own heart."

I have enjoyed the practice of yoga in its various forms for years and I add my own Om's and Shantis before a final devotional Namaste at the end of every class. However, I know I am able to accept the physical aspects of yoga more easily without wondering about which traditions I am misinterpreting. Stringer has a really good point to make here, one that strikes a real chord with me. Stringer argues, "it's important to point out that neither Kirtan nor yoga are some kind of dusty ethnomusical, logical or spiritual museum piece; they are living traditions which are very much going through an incredible period of creativity right now."

Moreover, Stringer points out "the Bhaktis had no use for orthodoxy. . . they saw the expression and form of the divine in every direction they looked." and that this means that every evolution of kirtan has the potential to express the original vision and spirit of the Bhakti movement. In a short crash course on the socio-political origins of the Bhakti movement, Stringer explains that kirtan is really a folk music movement. "It arose in the streets," he tells me, "not in the temples." The original Bhakti movement was a general popularization of knowledge, previously held captive and secret by members of the high priest caste. Music was just the vessel for getting the newly available knowledge out there.

"People have accused me, when I have re-imagined this as a rock band, of not being traditional," Stringer chuckles, "but my response is that you don't know the tradition. The Bhakti tradition itself was upsetting to people — it really challenged conventional social norms. Lovingly, but a challenge nonetheless. So the tradition is that the singers invent the songs and they do it in such a way that the people are moved to participate. So when you look at it this way, what I am doing is entirely traditional."

In an historical twist that adeptly illustrates how alive the kirtan tradition has always been, it turns out that possibly the most symbolic kirtan instrument, the harmonium, is not 'traditionally' Indian. European missionaries brought the instrument to India in the mid-19th century where it quickly became popular and is now central to many genres of Indian music. Suddenly, the line that extends from the church organ accompanying my own culture's 'holiday mantras' to the adapted Indian hand-pumped harmonium played by devotees in every mandir or gurdwara in the world

"I would prefer to say that what we are doing is authentic in the way that it arises. People constantly want everything to fit in some box...and to me it is a waste of our time to get involved with these arguments. The essence of what we're doing is already pure...the essence of the philosophy is not encumbered by whatever it mixes with. To insist on purity is in some way to insist in a kind of mummification or death of the thing which is really a process, a living thing, and messy. I am personally willing to be alive and messy and see where this is going in a way that feels vital to me in my own voice."

David Stinger



All photographs courtesy of David Stringer

comes beautifully back full-circle to the harmonium played throughout my third kirtan experience.

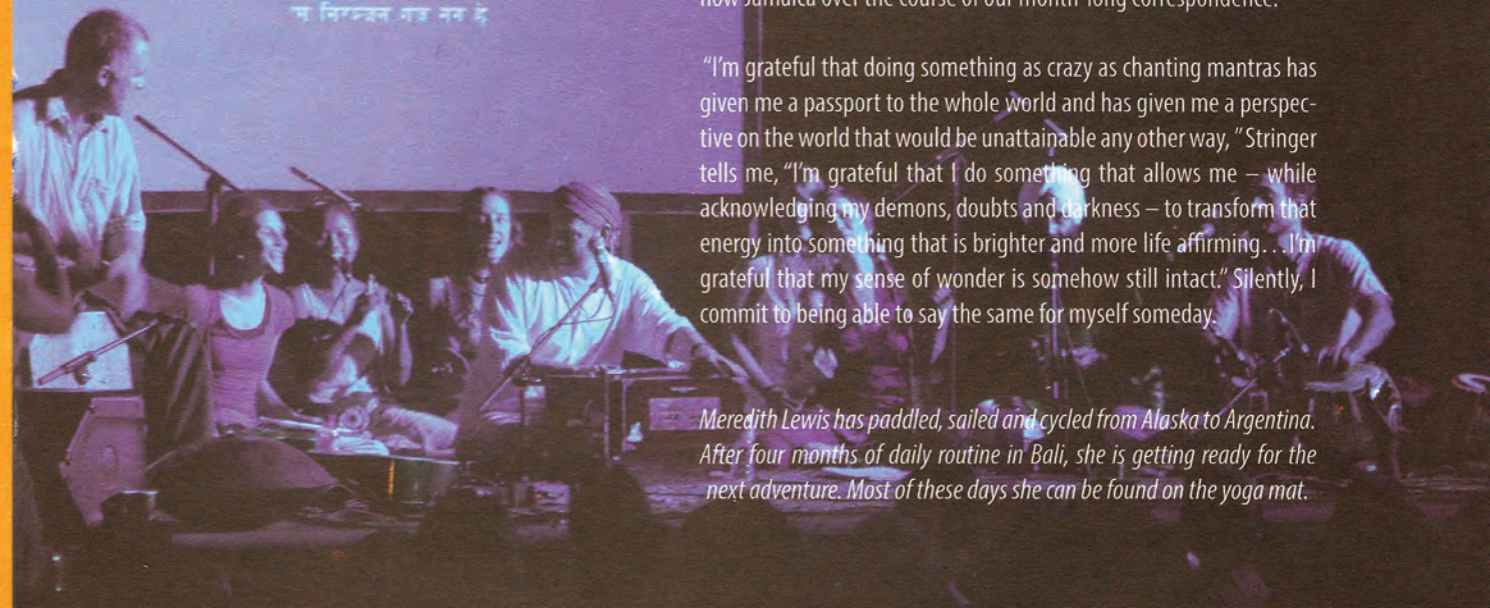
Kirtan first became popular in the west in the sixties, brought back to hippie communities by travellers with experience in Indian ashrams. Stringer chalks some of his success up to being in the right place at the right time – specifically Los Angeles in the decades following that first wave of exposure. After a few kirtan sessions and my chat with Dave Stringer, I feel like I have been able to put aside some of my skepticism; traditions evolve and I understand this is one reincarnation of an ancient practice. I still don't understand Sanskrit, but I see that in accepting the mantras for what they are instead of trying to deconstruct each phrase, I may be closer to the spirit of kirtan. Stringer goes so far as to encourage me to put aside the question of whether or not kirtan is really a Hindu practice at all. His perspective is that it need not be. He suggests we look at the rituals and ideas in another light: one way of articulating some ideas about spirituality and human existence. "The gods and goddesses are beautiful metaphors in a long human tradition of speaking to the truth of our existence through the invention of stories. In some ways, Stringer theorizes, "a piece of fiction can get us closer to the experiential truth of things than can a recitation of facts".

I realize now the same can be said for the way that many – my spiritually ambiguous family included – have decided to wear the sometimes-uncomfortable yoke of culturally inherited religious tradition. The lyrics of "O Come All Ye Faithful" may as well be a Sanskrit mantra for the extent to which most Christmas carolers analyze the words.

"Maybe what I'm doing," proposes Stringer, "is repurposing rituals in a way that allows them to continue to be meaningful in modern life even though their source is very old. I don't think to be modern we have to throw everything out from the past. If the mantras work when we sing them, then they simply work. I don't need to create something new".

Gaja Nana Hé Gaja Nana
Gauri Mano Hara Priya Nandana
Pashupati Tanéya Gaja Nana
arama Niranjana Gaja Nana Hé

ॐ नमो दे गज नम गौरी मनो हर प्रिय नन्दन
पशुपति तनेय गज नम
ॐ निरञ्जन गज नम दे



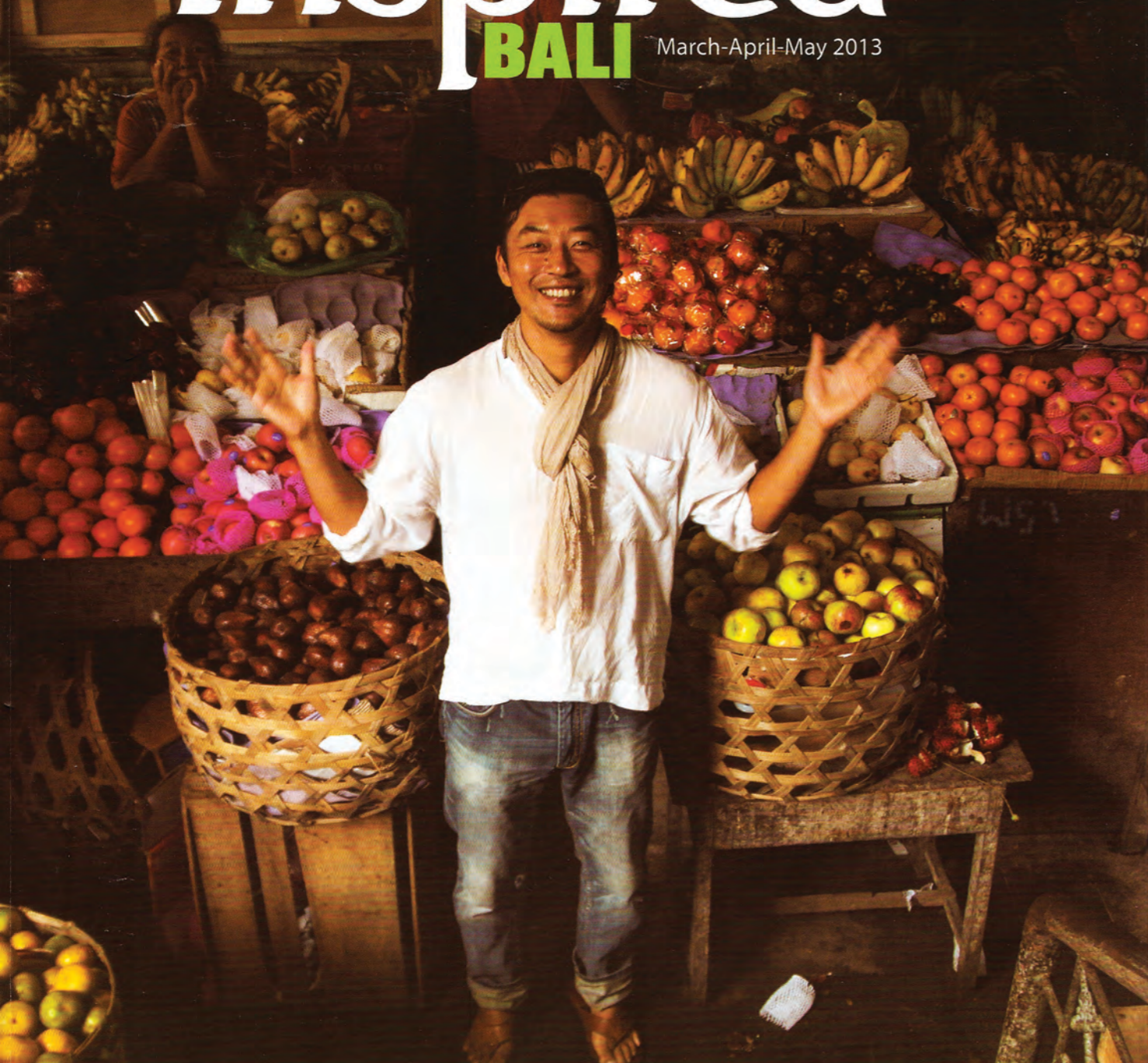
We finish our conversation on a personal note; I ask about the kirtan-filled life that has taken Stringer between Costa Rica, LA and now Jamaica over the course of our month-long correspondence.

"I'm grateful that doing something as crazy as chanting mantras has given me a passport to the whole world and has given me a perspective on the world that would be unattainable any other way," Stringer tells me, "I'm grateful that I do something that allows me – while acknowledging my demons, doubts and darkness – to transform that energy into something that is brighter and more life affirming...I'm grateful that my sense of wonder is somehow still intact." Silently, I commit to being able to say the same for myself someday.

Meredith Lewis has paddled, sailed and cycled from Alaska to Argentina. After four months of daily routine in Bali, she is getting ready for the next adventure. Most of these days she can be found on the yoga mat.

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