

Soul Interview- Photos of modern day spiritualists

Being a seeker means inevitably crossing paths with amazing people. Here I attempt to photograph and tell stories of spiritualists I had a privilege bouncing into. People in all traditions share the same urge for spiritual upliftment and need for answers. We are all the same spiritual beings, but wearing different dresses. This is what this blog is about.

MONDAY, MAY 2, 2011

Dave Stringer- Kirtan Pilot



Interview with [Dave Stringer](#)
Sydney, March 2011.

That was my first meeting with Dave. I met him during his Kirtan tour in Sydney's area. I liked the guy straight away. Dave is a musician who's successfully marrying two worlds of music. Born and brought up in the Western tradition he's exploring the spiritual aspects of Kirtan and spiritual music of India.

Q: How can the material connect with the spiritual in doing Kirtan?

A: Spirit can be involved in the way you manage your money, or your organisation. I got a great deal of realisation having to confront these very things. I'm trying to make something accessible for people, and in order to do that it involves, you know sound gear, rental cars, airplane tickets, hotel rooms and all this kind of stuff. I wish I could live in the world where I could walk into the grocery store, and they would say: (impersonating Indian accent) Hey, Kirtan-walla (Indian way of calling a Kirtan musician), with our compliments, you can feed yourself with whatever you like. But that's not the way it works. You know, the airlines aren't happy to give me a first class ticket because I'm going to sing mantras. Therefore I need to deal with the modern world. It seems that some people are frustrated, that they have to take this thing on, but if they're determined, they will eventually find their way through it. The Kirtan audience was never bigger then now. In the last 4 years I played in over 15 countries a year, and I can see it growing.

For example the Kirtan scene in Sydney has grown amazingly. We had about 180

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ABOUT ME



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people at the show on Sunday night. There was at least that many people on Wednesday night, and they have sold that many tickets for my next show this coming Saturday. Just two years ago it wasn't that big. If people are frustrated, then these obstacles are in their own eyes.

Q: Could you name a few people who have influenced you the most? Both, in your personal life, as well as in your career.

A: Musically first. I can honestly say, that this entire movement (Kirtan movement) owes hugely to George Harrison. I remember myself being a kid and listening to the eastern aspects of the Beatles, and how that certainly had an effect on my thinking culturally. That's just there. A few years before that happened we were not aware of these things. That is not just to say that this

influenced me, but rather understanding that music can have this spiritual capacity to it, and that can be integrated into what I'm doing. Similarly listening to John Coltrane had the same effect on me. But in the way, which maybe doesn't seem related, listening to modern composers like Steve Reich, who are interested in the effect of repetition on the mind, have also influenced me in a lot of ways. Paintings of Mark Rothko, where the subject itself was a perception have influenced me. The writings of John Cage have influenced me. There's an artist in the US names James Turrell, who's entire work is with light and creating infinite spaces. That influenced me. I was influenced by my first encounters with frontiers of science, and reading books by Heisenberg. So, all of these things were brought to bear upon my art. Even reading poets like Wallace Stevens, or Ted Hughes influenced my direction as an artist. I'm a consumer of art and science, and whether these things seem to be validly spiritual, or not, they still influence the way I'm make the music.

Q: Do you have mentors in your personal life you look up to and take guidance from?

A: Yes, certainly. Those people will sometimes serve for a time because I learned not to invest everything into one teacher; otherwise one ends up being disappointed. I believe in the idea, that everybody has something to teach you.

Q: I'd like to ask you about your "Flight School". What is it all about? When I heard about it for the first time, I thought: "well, Dave must be a pilot".

A: I did actually take flying lessons. And since I was a little boy, airplanes have always been some sort of totemic object in my life. Maybe that was just fore shadowing the relentless world of traveling. But I did a

year-round school and took flying lessons. Now I can take off and pilot an aircraft. At some point I realised that getting all the certifications was actually a lifestyle, and an expensive one. And from there you are either going to become a commercial pilot, or a hobbyist with a fairly unlimited budget. For example my father in-law is now a retired pilot, and when I see him we do touch and go's. I have periodic chances of flying an airplane, and at this point in the case of emergency I can take off, pilot and land an



airplane. So that's there, as this whole mythological dream of flying was there since I was a kid.

I found this quote in the book "Peter Pan" which says: "If you can't teach me to fly, then teach me to sing", and that's what it's referring directly to. To fly, in some ways, means to drop the weight of the world and to travel to the other realm. That can be outer, but that also can be inner. So that metaphorically stands for what we are doing with Kirtan. Even in the practice of my Kirtan there's a long rolling towards the take-off, and then there's a point when the jet takes off. What I'm trying to teach people to do is to pilot this aircraft and to do so skilfully. I think that the Kirtan scene will grow bigger as people will get better. Originally it was enough to have a love in your heart and to know little bit about Kirtan. Now, when there are enough people doing it, more and more you need to be good and to know what you're doing. You need to learn how to be a skilful musician, but also to be skilful at working a crowd. To actually be an entertainer, and I mean like the French source word for entertainer, which means to "hold between". Kirtan means to facilitate and experience and there are certain techniques which are useful and can be learned by people. What I was trying to do was to put a workshop together that is not about Bhakti tradition, or about philosophy per se, although these things are deeply relevant to what we are ultimately doing.

My experience is, that there's a musician inside of everybody and it's actually important that this is cultivated. This idea that the artists are somebody else is actually a delusion. For art to have resonance and for art to continue to grow, as a powerful cultural force it is necessary that everybody be a little bit of an artist. This is what I'm trying to cultivate in people.

Even the smallest desire to become a musician is incredibly powerful. I have found from people's feedback, that it's a very powerful experience that force in you. So, on one end I'm trying to give skills to people, who are already musicians- here is how you arrange the Kirtan and make it happen. At the same time I'm helping people who don't necessary have any skills to enter into that experience of being a musician. It works in the way that the people who are skilful are put together in bands with people who are not musicians yet, so they have to deal with each other.

Q: Do you teach them other things to?

A: It's all about playing. We put them into bands right from the beginning and on the last night they all lead Kirtan. In the case of this upcoming retreat we will probably do four bands. It's a very intimate atmosphere, as I need to have a teacher for every 6 people because bands become unworkable if they are bigger than six. We go through each group and basically produce it. We listen first to what people are playing, give suggestions and hold the space for them in order to make some music. Sometimes it means breaking things down very simply. You can make great music out of something really, really simple. That turns out to be a very powerful process. Not only for people who have skill, but also for people who don't have any. At the end of the retreat each of the groups will lead the Kirtan. Then they realise, that map of the territory is not actually a territory, and all your plans go out the window if you actually play in front of the live audience.

Q: So that's how you teach to fly? You push them out of their nest and let them learn flying?

A: Yep, that's what we do. And it's always ecstatic. Even though the first hours feel like people are going to kill me.

Q: Is that because singing is one of the most challenging things for us to do in life?

A: Right. And people just need to jump into that.

Q: Why do you think we suddenly become so self-conscious when it comes to singing?

A: Because there's very little we can do about our voice that we can conceal about ourselves. Especially when there's just pure singing, and on the top of that it's Sankarit. You can't even get behind some "meaning" to copy the attitude. We are afraid that people will find out what's really on our minds, and it's terrifying to be that naked and transparent in front of others. With time you get used to it. I often go into the Kirtan with an idea, that everybody can read my mind. It doesn't mean that I need to clean up what's on my mind, I just need to be exposed in that way.

Q: Do you have people who sometimes get stuck and blocked and they can't sing?

A: Yes, for sure. I remember this one guy during my Kirtan in Toronto. He was sitting there the entire time with his arms crossed and looked totally miserable.



In the past I used to chant with my eyes closed, but then I

realised that chanting with my eyes open was more powerful. For me it's important to keep looking at people, and making the connection to share that space. It is encouraging and sets the whole thing in another way. So I'm periodically scanning the crowd to see what's happening and I keep looking at this guy. Finally at the end he got up to leave and stood at the door. Just before leaving he looked at me as if to say goodbye. It seemed interesting to me as through the entire time he was looking so miserable and now he's standing at the door clearly trying to make some connection with me to let me know that he's going. I was thinking: whatever, see ya. The next day I have received an email from this guy. That experience had just blown him open and changed everything for him. He said: I can't tell you how grateful I'm, and how fantastic it was.

I thought to myself: "you haven't even sung."

I learned then not to judge people too quickly during my concerts.

Similar things happen during my retreats. Some people make huge leaps, some move a few inches, but for both it is an enormous progress.

Q: How did it feel when you received such an appreciative email?

A: I don't take it personally in the way that I see myself as a powerful person. I think: Wow! This is powerful! This actually turns out to be powerful even if you're directly not participating in it.

Q: How do you take it, when somebody comes to you and tells you that he, or she felt that came from you? They appreciate what you gave them personally.

A: I don't take it on. I can't hold that space for people. I believe, that whatever they experience it's coming from them. It's very typical in humans to project that onto somebody else, but I'm just a facilitator. I'm responsible in the sense that I showed up and caused this event to happen, but it's injuries to others and me if I take it personally. I'm not trying to set up some teacher-student relationship, or some power-dynamic.

Q: So you don't perceive yourself as a transparent via medium channelling the energy?

A: Well, you could make that case, but I don't see myself that way. When people come

to my retreat and tell me they want to learn from me, I'm happy to do that. But I also learned how to step out of that space. When it is time to teach I teach, but I'm not trying to hold that space when that's done. It could seem, that I'm investing myself in some kind of delusion I don't really need. I can see the temptations. There were times when I sung for thousands of people, and I thought: Wow! I moved that crowd.

You can see then, how you can get drunk on that, but I also see a capacity there for danger. My tendency is to hold up a mirror and reflect people's stuff back at them. If you see something beautiful don't try to project that on me, but see your own beauty. I feel humble for being part of it by facilitating, but I believe that nothing can work outside of going inside, unless the inside is already there. For example any drugs work when you take them because you already have the chemistry to support it. It's like, when you smoke marijuana you already have Cannabinoid receptors in your body and that's how it works. It's like cats get high on catnip, and can't have enough of this. You may think: wow, give me some of that, but it doesn't do anything to humans. It doesn't work for our chemistry. Anything exogenous, or coming from outside, has an endogenous, or coming from inside, receptor. Otherwise it wouldn't work. Somebody can tell you: I'm gonna give you the experience of your true-self, and it works. But how is that possible? It was possible because they have just woken up something, which was already inside of you. In physics there's a phenomena called sympathetic vibrations. That means that any two objects tuned to the same frequency will vibrate at the same frequency. It's like if I put my foot on the sustain pedal on the piano and let all the strings open to ring, and then I hit tuning fork across the room, a string which is tuned to that will go off.

And this is what happens with people who have some experiences while chanting. In the process of chanting they have somehow put their foot on the sustain pedal, and all I have done is to hit the tuning fork. And then the string, which is already tuned to that within them rings, but they're making the mistake saying that I'm the causative element. I mean: yes, I hit the tuning fork.



Q: That's a beautiful way of explaining it.

A: The thing, which you feel vibrating, is inside of you so don't make me responsible. Take the responsibility for what's already in you. This is the big defect of the West that we are trying to address here. The West makes the Divine the exogenous, whereas the East by immediately looking inward for the Divine is essentially discovering the Divine mechanism within us. I'm not saying that the God is not "out there". I'm saying that, saying that He is "out there" doesn't preclude that he is inside too. And since "out there" can be pretty faraway or subject to all kinds of perceptual difficulties it seems that it's rather better to cultivate my sense of being "in here". And if I have that perception, then if I look in any direction I can see it. That seems as a better

perception to have.

A: Thank you very much for your time.

Q: It has been a pleasure to talk to you.

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