

interview:  
**Dave  
Stringer**

by Felicia M. Tomasko



Photo: Adam Latham, angelackam.com

A master of the art form of *kirtan*, devotional call-and-response chanting, Dave Stringer claims he's seen the inside of more yoga studios than anyone around. Mention Stringer to people in the yoga community you hear a surge of unsolicited comments. "I had Dave at my studio, and he rocked the house," one Midwest studio owner said. A retreat center manager leaned forward to tell me that of all the music teachers she had ever seen, he was the best. "He took a group of beginners, many of whom had never held an instrument before, and has us all in rhythm by the end of the first *kirtan* round."

The qualities that make Stringer a great musician and performer have led to an impressive touring schedule of not only the coasts, but every stop in between. On

stage and in person, Stringer is possessed of a wry insight and a quick laugh. A few days before leaving on a whirlwind tour of Europe and on the brink of the release of his new CD, *Divas & Devas*, we sat down to talk about everything from his spiritual name to yoga and *kirtan* as performance art to his press kit's declaration of his status of one of the leaders of the New American *kirtan* movement.

**FMT:** I'm going to start with your name. Dave Stringer. You're one of the few *kirtan* singers with an English name.

**DS:** Part of it refers to how I got involved in this. I wasn't signing up for yoga or interested in being anyone's devotee. I went to India because I was hired to go there to make some films. And at some point in my involvement with the Siddha yoga ashram, I felt moved to get a spiritual name. So I went up to ask Gurumayi for one, and was told that I already had one. I went, "What do you mean?" And she

said, "Dave, in Sanskrit, means God, or shining, bright or light."

As I thought about it, it felt to be a way of saying, "Keep your name, that's your name." I think if I had been given a spiritual name, I probably would have used it, but it just didn't happen.

**FMT:** How long have you been touring?

**DS:** I started touring in 2000. I've played 100 or so events a year, which often means I'm playing five or six nights a week in one city or another. At some times, it's a tremendous adventure, at other points, a tremendous hassle. And at all times, that road has just kept leading me back to myself, my awareness, my habits, my traps and my *dharma*. When I first started to do it, many yoga studios were just opening. The past 10 years have been a tremendous explosion.

**FMT:** You produced your first CDs yourself and worked with Spirit Voyage on your upcoming CD. How has this been different?

**DS:** For one thing, when you do it yourself, you have a greater illusion of control.

**FMT:** The illusion of control, not necessarily the reality.

**DS:** Right. Any time you do anything that involves collaboration, there's a surrender of

control and an illumination that comes from other people. I can't control what happens in a *kirtan*. I can set events into motion. But even if I told other people in the band what to play, it wouldn't necessarily come out that way, because there's a crowd that's interacting with us, that's what makes it exciting.

The story of "How I got into yoga" is vast and complex and endlessly fascinating.

I sometimes have a feeling that years of hard work is progressing me to a place of what I hope is greater ease. There was a time when I found my *mantra* was not being helpful: "It's very difficult to be moving a band around the country in a van," trying to deal with uncertainty with complete evenness of mind and good humor. Those things have turned out to be the benefit of doing this; that state of peace and ease. But there was a time that I struggled.

**FMT:** That becomes your *mantra*: "This is so difficult."

**DS:** That just made it harder. I realized I just had to keep saying, this is fun; this is easy. I keep using that word, ease, as my *mantra*, and indeed things have gotten easier. I have an awareness of a community that's emerged that I feel like I belong in everywhere. At the same time, I'm also recognizing that there's only so much time in my life so it's been difficult to pull my energies back a bit.

**FMT:** There's only so much water for so many seeds.

**DS:** Right. Self-effort and grace are required, but we need to get those into balance. If it's all about self-effort, there's no room for grace. There needs to be room for surprises. I'm discovering that leaving a certain amount of space everywhere in your life allows you to be flexible. Clearly you need space in your yoga practice, that's one of the first questions in an *asana*, where's the space, where can you move? Instead of butting up against an obstacle, can you find the spot? Can you find where you're open and move from there? Can you use your breath? Those are all contemplations of space. If your credit cards are

maxed, that's a drag. You need some space. You need space in your relationships; space to contemplate an article you're writing.

**FMT:** You can't leave everything in.

**DS:** No. It's really about not every possibility, but this possibility. And if you think about it, life is this way too. You know, all of us have all these plans and things we're still making, all of these possible lives that we think that

we'll live, but one choice at a time, we're living this life, these possibilities. The older I get, the more I'm aware that I was making decisions before without realizing how fundamentally important they were. I think we all look back and go, "Oh, wow, I gave no thought whatsoever to making that particular move in my

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**LA YOGA**  
AYURVEDA AND HEALTH

OCTOBER 2007  
VOLUME 6 / NO. 8  
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**SITTING DOWN WITH: DAVE STRINGER**

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life,” and yet, everything is traceable back to that.

**FMT:** Like going to India?

**DS:** Like going to India. But sometimes we do things out of duress, too. I went to India because I was broke; because I needed a job. You know, it's a really funny way to get into yoga. And that's just my story. One thing that's been a pleasure in traveling and meeting so many people is hearing their stories. The story of “How I got into yoga” is vast and complex and endlessly fascinating.

**FMT:** It is endlessly fascinating. Had you done yoga before India?

**DS:** I went to India in 1990. I showed up at the Center for Yoga in Larchmont in about '88, because my back was bad at that time, and some friends said, “Oh, you should try yoga, that will make you feel better,” and it did, actually. But I grew up in a period of time there was a lot of guru awareness and part of the thing was BEWARE, do not join the cult, which is why I resisted going to India in the first place.

**FMT:** But you needed a job.

**DS:** But I needed a job.

**FMT:** Thinking about *asana*, you've played often in teacher trainings and workshops, while people are practicing *asana*?

**DS:** Right.

**FMT:** What do you think happens in that space with music?

**DS:** I was playing a retreat, well, actually, I was playing a workshop with John Friend, I think in Atlanta, and he turned around at one point and said, “This is performance art.” And I said, “Yeah, it is.” And because it's always been my attitude when we're accompanying a yoga class, that the yoga teacher is the conductor and we're the orchestra.

It's an interesting mediation because we not only have to be listening to one another, but we have to be quite focused on whoever is lead-

ing the class, and I mean laser-beam focused. They're focused on leading the class, so I don't want them to have to make a special effort to direct the band. I like that it's a state of hyperawareness that you get in because you're not only watching the instructor, you're also feeling the vibration of all the people in the room. When we do something, it changes that vibration.

I remember discovering how powerful that is. I was playing for a class; they were doing 108 sun salutations, and we were playing, and at around round 57, the tabla player and I looked at each other and said, “We're not getting anywhere.” So we dropped it, and there was this huge gasp. The whole

room went, “Don't stop.”

I understood in this moment how they were depending on us. We had reached this wall, and they had reached a wall, too. They were counting on us to move through it; they were hanging onto us for dear life.

One of the things I like about yoga and *kirtan* is that it breaks down the wall between performer and audience and what's subjective and what's objective. You have to participate in what's going on. So much modern entertainment involves just checking it out and maintaining some ironic distance.

**FMT:** Right.

**DS:** Yoga and *kirtan* do not allow ironic distance. That makes some people very uncomfortable. We're all involved in this thing together. That requires a different kind of responsibility as a performer and a different kind of awareness.

Playing for a yoga class it's not really a dance performance, but in itself it's a work of theater in which everyone is responding to one another. One important thing I've found in playing music for yoga classes is that if I breathe with the class, I'm right with it. That seems to be the key. If I can find my breath in a place of synchronicity with the class, everything goes effortlessly.

**FMT:** It's back to that ease, back to that *mantra* of ease.

**DS:** Right. I realize I've had to show myself how focused, disciplined and how hard I can work, and learn how not to do that. Now I'm coming back to this state of awareness, that the universe organizes itself on these principles.

**FMT:** If you think about Patanjali...

**DS:** Right.

**FMT:** How he talks about *asana*. *Stira sukha asana*.

**DS:** Right.

**FMT:** Steady and comfortable. With ease.

**DS:** It's true. But sometimes, I think, you have to go through that discomfort to understand the importance, you know?

**FMT:** Yes. It's like that contrast.



**DS:** It's paradoxical, to suddenly have this awareness: Oh, I don't have to work so hard. You know maybe I could just do less. It's the same thing with production of music. I think we tend to do a lot in many areas to mask our insecurities, you know. People make complicated food, complicated arrangements for songs, because they're feeling like that basic thing they do isn't enough. I'm learning how to do less in recording and have fewer musicians in a show. It still seems to be a mighty army, just naturally, and maybe I'm accepting that too. I take a certain delight in being the ringleader in the circus, I guess.

**FMT:** Do you listen to music when you practice?

**DS:** No. Because at most times there's music going on in my head, I don't feel so much impulse to put it on from the outside world. Often, I don't want to be distracted from my own awareness. I sometimes find if I'm listening to music when I practice, it can direct me outward when I want to be directed inward.

And I'm not making music for people to practice to. If anything, my *kirtan* records have been more recorded to sing along to in the car and I'm always stunned to find that people use it in practice; it's rather raucous. You can use any kind of music for practice.

**DS:** Yes, exactly. And there are times when I show up and I'm all jangly. And music can have the effect of kind of pushing me into a place where I need to be.

At home, though, if I want to hear music, I sit down and play it.

If they had electric guitars in 15th century India, they would have used them. They didn't have those sets of instruments. But we have those sets of instruments here, so we use them.

I find it funny we have this music for yoga; anything that you want to choose to accompany your practice is music for yoga.

I'm not criticizing the use of music in *asana* practice because at other times I quite enjoy it, and sometimes I'm grateful for it, because it actually makes things easier.

**FMT:** Especially when you're on 57 of 108 sun salutations.

**FMT:** Did you perform or play music before *kirtan*?

**DS:** I have played the guitar and the piano since I was a kid. I also played lap steel, mandolin and dulcimer, mostly stringed instruments. I played the trumpet for a while. I wish I hadn't given it up when I did, but

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some people say I sing like a trumpet player.

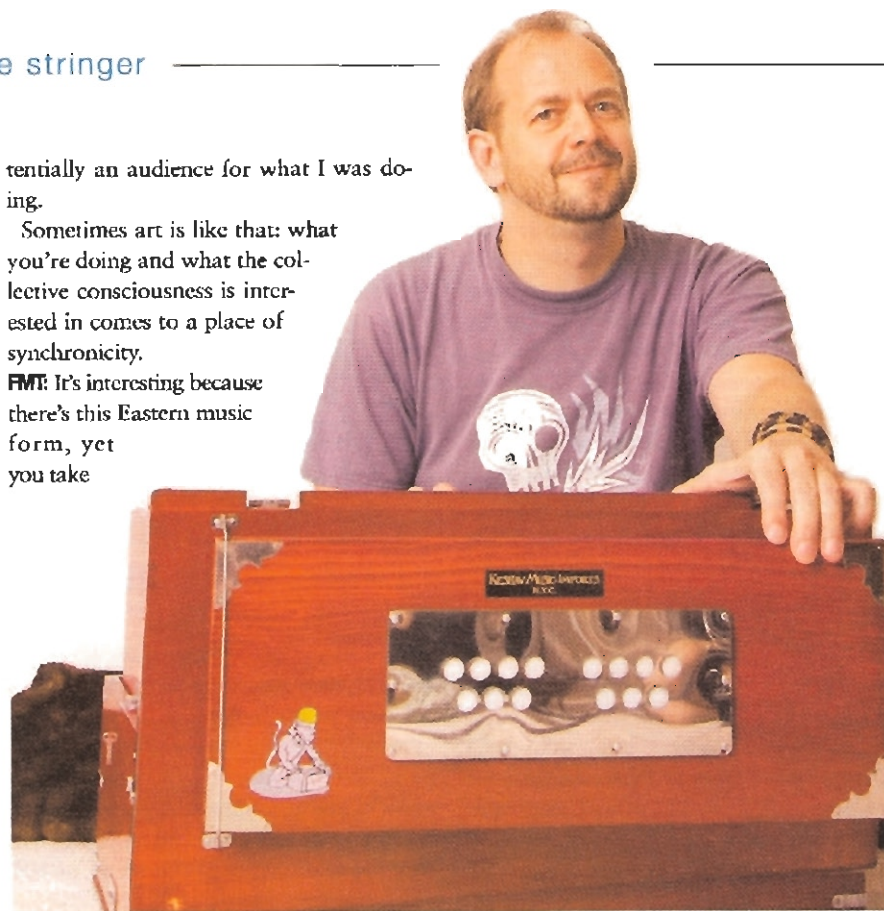
There were different things I was doing casually, but without any eye whatsoever to trying to make a living. I made a number of recordings when I was in my early 20s, which if you listen to them, are not so different from what I'm doing now. I didn't know anything about *mantra*, but I sang in a lot of invented languages. I had the opportunity to present those to people at some major labels, who said, "We don't understand this." It was difficult for me, because at the time, it was very heartfelt, and I felt rejected. I was working in the film industry as an editor, anyway, and I just kept doing things privately. But for a while, there was a massive loss of confidence. It was years later when I picked it up again and I realized that I hadn't changed that much.

I realized that what had changed were the times and with my discovery of *mantra* and the advent of the yoga world, there was po-

tentially an audience for what I was doing.

Sometimes art is like that: what you're doing and what the collective consciousness is interested in comes to a place of synchronicity.

**FMT:** It's interesting because there's this Eastern music form, yet you take



contemporary Western setting. And most of us in the U.S. have grown up with and become indoctrinated to a certain way of hearing music.

**DS:** Right. The important thing for *kirtan*, for example, is to get people to participate. I know I'm not going to reeducate people's ears to an Eastern way of hearing things right away. It took me considerable time to reorient my own ear. If you can't get people to participate in the first place, there's no space to get the rest of your message across.

In America, getting people to practice *kirtan* involves certain adaptations. More people are going to come if they think it's going to be fun, if they perceive the level of musicianship to be high, if I make an effort to speak to them in some language they are going to understand. I'm explaining what we're doing and why we're doing it to make people feel comfortable.

If they had electric guitars in 15th century India, they would have used them. They didn't have those sets of instruments. But

we have those sets of instruments here, so we use them.

**FMT:** What do you say to how it says on your promotional material that you're a leader of the new American *kirtan* movement?

All of us have all these plans and things we're still making, all of these possible lives that we think that we'll live, but one choice at time, we're living this life, these possibilities.

**DS:** Somebody else said that.

I know there's this thing going on and there's a number of people taking chances and reformulating *kirtan*. That process would be going on whether I was involved in it or not. To the extent that I have influence over it is really to the extent that I've just gone and played a lot of shows, and gone back to Green Bay, Wisconsin; and Chattanooga, Tennessee again and again.

There is a new American *kirtan* movement and it's much more dynamic than what's going on in India. I wouldn't call it more abundant than what's going on in India. I'm not sure that *kirtan* itself, the impulse behind *kirtan*, is interested in becoming a

museum piece. I think that as long as it continues to be stated again and again in whatever the local music vernacular is, it continues to have relevance.

LAYOGA

Divas and Devas is released in October. Dave is touring throughout Southern California this fall. [www.davestringer.com](http://www.davestringer.com)

# LAYOGA

AYURVEDA AND HEALTH

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The humming of om is in fact one of the oldest and most widely practiced techniques of yoga, according to yogic scholar Georg Feuerstein. The whispering breath and raucous joy of a *bhajan* are integral to yoga, and these sounds possess the power to heal. The articles in this issue explore the meaning and medicine of music.

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