



Kirtan Call

Dave Stringer's Western upbringing led to worldwide success in an Eastern art form

Dave Stringer is an unassuming man with a true passion for what he does.

Schooled in both the sciences and the arts, and a skeptic by nature, the former Elm Grove resident discovered his life's work while editing a film in India.

Stringer sings and writes kirtan music. Kirtan, from the Sanskrit "to sing," is an ancient form of call-and-response devotional chant. Rooted in Indian mystical tradition, it originated from the Bhakti yoga movement during the 15th Century. It was a way of passing on the yoga teachings to people with little education.

During the 1970s, the Beatles' interest in yoga introduced some of the practices to the world. But the kirtan genre is not well known in the United States except among devotees. Stringer is aiming to change that with his more mainstream recordings — think Sting singing a form of Gregorian chant with required audience participation.

To be truly understood, kirtan must be experienced. The audience sits on the floor facing the song leader and

musicians. The Sanskrit lyrics are projected on the wall behind the musicians. The leader sings a verse and the audience sings it back. This back-and-forth continues until the piece builds to a crescendo and then drops back to a satisfying finish.

An evening of kirtan is often hosted in yoga studios. Stringer has performed in venues all over the world. His work has garnered profiles in national magazines including *Time*, *Billboard*, *In Style* and *Yoga Journal* and he's seen as the leader of the new American Kirtan movement. Locally, Stringer and his Chicago troupe of musicians did a concert at Brookfield's YogAsylum and drew participants from as far away as Chicago, Madison and Green Bay. But you'd never know you were among musical royalty. "He's an exceptional individual who's very approachable and down-to-earth," says Pam Bliss, owner of YogAsylum.

His down to earth nature was apparent at his Brookfield appearance when he arrived in blue jeans and a western style shirt, rather than more Far East attire.

Growing up in Elm Grove and graduating from both Brookfield East High School and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Stringer never dreamed his career would take him down this path. "I'm sort of a late bloomer in terms of this music thing," he says. "Normally you do it in your 20s, not your 40s."

Stringer's mother, Barbara Ericson, who still lives in the Elm Grove/Brookfield area points out that Stringer has always had a passion for music. "Dave took singing lessons when he was a child. He's done music for years." He just didn't pursue his music as a profession immediately following graduation.

But music was supposed to be an avocation, not a vocation. "Making a living as a musician is a risky thing," admits Stringer. "But I realized I would not be happy with myself if I wasn't a professional musician."

On the five-year academic plan after switching majors several times, he graduated from the University of Wisconsin with degrees in philosophy and communication. "My approach to being a stu-

dent was taking what I was interested in," admits Stringer. "I studied physics and then I decided I didn't want to do that so I studied music and found that everyone was on track to be a band director." Inkling of his future path were beginning to bubble up when he studied jazz and performed with the UW's gamelan orchestra, an Indonesian musical form that utilizes percussion and brass instruments.

Stringer earned money for school working in a Madison-area film studio, which eventually led him to an internship with Columbia Pictures in Los Angeles. As the only one of his college peers who had a job in film following graduation, he spent most of his nine-year stint at Columbia being a professional film editor.

"Being an editor is a way of moving forms in time," he explains. "People who had experiences as musicians became good film editors."

His West Coast work built a set of

fell apart. So Stringer made a quick call to India to determine if the job was still available and within a week had tied up loose ends in Los Angeles and found himself on a plane heading toward his future. Little did he know that life-altering changes would soon occur.

Because Stringer went to the ashram as an employee rather than a devotee, he was able to look at things in a different way — how events actually affected him rather than just accepting things as they were. Viewing the experience objectively, he felt that it was worth pursuing.

"I came to understand in India that my very need to 'turn over every stone' was actually a profound spiritual practice," he says.

Yoga is actually a set of practices, not a belief system or religion. It's oriented toward having a person draw his or her own conclusions. Yoga believes that truth comes from experience, not a particular text. "It provides a conceptual framework compatible to ideas of sci-

tend to feel better for reasons you can't explain when you're finished chanting."

"The popularity of kirtan has really exploded in the last couple of years," says YogAsylum's Bliss. "People are craving that connection to spirituality."

Kirtan asks practitioners to free their thoughts and then delivers them to a state that's very still. "Experiencing it I found was very profound even though I had no idea what was going on," says Stringer. "I've been introduced to various traditions and practices and they all pretty much require you to learn a sequence or take a course. With kirtan you were invited to sing and to watch what happens."

Drawing parallels to the way very skillful jazz musicians will watch the audience's reaction to their playing, with kirtan the barrier between the audience and the performer dissolves. "There's really no audience and no band," says Stringer. "Everyone is an artist and a performer and we're all the audience

“Kirtan is just another extension of the music I play in general. It's a way of speaking to people and making them feel something with the music.” Dave Stringer

connections, which ultimately led to a moment of its own. During his time in the City of Angels, Stringer had been invited to meet a lot of Indian spiritual leaders, but never became a practitioner. "Probably one of the reasons I never signed on with any Indian gurus is that I felt uncomfortable in the company of true believers," he says. "I didn't want to sign up for anyone's program, but in the process of saying 'no' I stayed connected to those things."

A friend of his worked as a film editor in an Indian ashram. When she decided to come home, Stringer was happy to connect her to people he knew in Hollywood. The friend's employer in India asked her if she knew a replacement film editor and Stringer's face popped into her mind during a meditation session. But the deal came with a few twists and turns.

"I established it was a paying job and talked to them," says Stringer. "I discovered that the money wasn't what I was used to being paid." Plus he had already lined up several months of work, making it a seemingly inopportune time to accept the offer.

But suddenly all of the future projects

ence," says Stringer. "It says, 'Put down the book and look at what's in your own experience.'"

Yoga is manifested in various contexts from the physical asanas to different forms of meditation to spiritual texts like the Bhagavad Gita to chanting. The only common thread running through them is that they must be experienced.

"As a Westerner, it's difficult not to be influenced by the ideas of science," says Stringer. "But yet as we investigate our internal lives with science, yoga holds that the state of our heart is actually under our own control. The work we do in life is to control it. The way we are and the way we respond to the world is how we change the world." Growing up Lutheran, Stringer was familiar with traditional religious beliefs and practices. But the first chapter of the Bhagavad Gita surprised him when it begins not with faith, but with doubt. "It was inviting me to test anything I heard against my own experience," he says. "I was also very taken with the chanting."

Traditional chanting brings to mind pictures of monks in hooded robes. But the form of chanting known as kirtan is, he says, "incredibly un-idealistic." "And you

because we're all in this together."

Kirtan's intention is that many voices come together as one voice. Contrast that with Western music where when we sing, we find our place in the harmonies and assert our individualism.

When the ashram leaders got wind of Stringer's interest in kirtan, they invited him to participate in the chants.

Afterward he would return to his room and attempt to re-create the melodies on his accordion, an instrument similar to an essential kirtan instrument, the harmonium. Christians actually introduced the harmonium, which sounds like a small organ, to India.

By this time the film editing job had ended and Stringer had enough money in the bank to stay at the ashram for a few more months. He taught fourth grade in the ashram's school to fill his time.

Actually, he says, it was the students who taught him. "As anyone who teaches knows, the line between the teacher and the students blurs," says Stringer. "The kids knew a lot of traditional kirtans so one thing we did is sit around and sing. None of the adults taught me. I learned the kirtans by sitting around and singing with the 9-year-olds."



Photography by Wild West Studios

Dave Stringer (center) performed at YogAsylum in Brookfield this year with musicians from the Chicago area. Stringer is playing the harmonium, an instrument used in Kirtan which is similar to a small organ or accordion.

In Eastern music, the melody line moves against a central reference tone and the objective is to not ornament the melody in the way Westerners do by singing harmony. Stringer ran into an artistic conflict at the ashram when he would unconsciously break into harmony while chanting.

His instincts began telling him to figure out a way to use this musical form. "I asked myself with my background and experiences, 'How could I make that experience more accessible to other people more like me?'" he asks.

Returning to the United States, Stringer began adapting the art form toward performing it publicly. He gathered together various acoustic and rock musicians around the country and has since recorded three albums. Scott Schenke, one of the members of Stringer's Chicago band, sings and plays guitar and the dholak, a two-headed drum that sits on its side. "I was playing in a rock band and a friend heard me playing a lap steel guitar," he says. The friend invited him to play with the kirtan band.

Schenke has played with Stringer on and off for three years, performing in rock clubs, yoga studios, even churches.

"All music is uplifting and spiritual and joyous," he says explaining his decision to perform kirtan.

"Kirtan is just another extension of the music I play in general. It's a way of speaking to people and making them feel something with the music. I like this type of music because the feedback is so strong."

Stringer's Chicago band became, if you'll pardon the pun, "instrumental" in arranging his love life. After a performance in Traverse City, Mich., Stringer invited his musicians to stay at his family's cottage in Northern Michigan. Included on the guest list was Dearbhla Kelly, a yoga teacher from Dublin, Ireland, who was also a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of Illinois-Chicago. "We met in a place that's quite intimate and close to my family," explains Stringer. "The relationship first manifested itself as a transcontinental friendship and then got more complex."

"I've known Dave for about a year," says Kelly. "The relationship was on a slow burn. He's a very intelligent, compassionate and perceptive person. He's also interested in the seeking, the quest. His art, his music, is a way of making

sense of the world and of the drama of what it is to be a human being. We connect on a philosophical level," says Kelly. Besides the philosophical connection, it turns out there was also something deeper there because the couple is now engaged.

According to Kelly, Stringer is as good in the kitchen as he is on stage. "He puts as much love into his cooking as his music," she quips. "He's a domestic god."

As he attempts to chart a path through both his Western upbringing and Eastern experiences, Stringer sees himself as an iconoclast. "I probably read more science than spiritual books," he admits. "As an artist I'm trying to resolve all of these things into one. I'm trying to look at things through the lens of science. Yoga extends where the divine is in many directions."

And while he would never have predicted this would be his life's work, Stringer has definitely found his place in the universe. "Use everything that happens to you for your own illumination," he says in a tone of blissful surrender. "All roads ultimately lead you to where you are going." ❧