



## *D*AVE STRINGER

The Los Angeles Times declared the experience of chanting with Dave Stringer “a departure from ancient kirtan. Stringer’s performance shaped the experience into a far more compelling musical encounter.” He has been widely profiled as one of the most innovative artists of the new American kirtan movement in publications as diverse as Time, Billboard, Yoga Journal and In Style.

Stringer’s sound marries the transcendent mysticism of traditional Indian instruments with the exuberant, groove-oriented sensibility of American gospel, and he is regarded as one of the most accomplished singers in the genre. His work create a modern and participatory theatrical experience, using as a basis the ancient traditions of kirtan and yoga, which are open to a multiplicity of interpretations and accessible to all.

Initially trained as a visual artist, filmmaker, and jazz musician, Stringer’s formative experiences with chanting occurred when film-editing work brought him to the Siddha Yoga ashram in Ganeshpuri, India, in 1990. A subsequent period of residence at the ashram laid the foundation for his continuing study of the ideas, practices, and music of yoga.

Since 2000, Stringer and an extended family of accompanying musicians have toured North America and Europe tirelessly, developing new venues for music and expanding the audience for kirtan. He has introduced chanting to many seemingly unlikely cities and, through his repeated visits, has been instrumental in the development of a number of

*thriving local kirtan communities. He has also served as a volunteer who teaches meditation and chanting to inmates at a number of correctional facilities in the United States.*

*An articulate and engaging public speaker, he probes the dilemmas of the spirit with a wry and unorthodox sense of humor. Stringer frequently works in tandem with masters of Hatha-yoga, creating related music for workshops led by John Friend, Shiva Rea, and Gurmukh, among others. Of particular note has been his friendship and collaboration with yoga teacher Saul David Raye, with whom he has realized a number of CDs.*

*Based in Los Angeles, Stringer has also produced varied recordings with other significant World Music artists, including Azam Ali, Vas, Axiom of Choice, Rasa, Suzanne Teng, Shaman's Dream and the Open Door Orchestra. Chant artists Donna De Lory, Suzanne Sterling, and Girish first began their careers in the genre after spending time in Stringer's performing and recording ensembles. His voice also appears on numerous soundtracks, including the blockbuster film "Matrix Revolutions" and the video game "Myst." The CDs he has produced under his own name – "Brink," "Japa," "Mala," and "Divas & Devas" – are favorites in yoga studios throughout the world.*



**Let's begin with some background: where you were born, family situation, and so on.**

Okay, the obituary thing.

**[laughter] Yes, exactly.**

I was born in St. Louis, Missouri. I grew up in Chicago, and in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My mother's a Midwesterner, and my father's from the deep South. On my father's side, many of my family are religious fundamentalists.

**What denomination?**

Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Evangelicals. On my mother's

side, we're from Mennonite stock, later becoming Presbyterians and Lutherans. I would say, looking through my family tree, there's a deep sort of spiritual searching that seems to be going on.

### **Siblings?**

I have a younger sister and a younger brother. My sister is a year younger than me; I guess we're what they call Irish twins. She and I taught each other to sing, basically. She has a gorgeous, gorgeous voice, and she mostly sings in the church. She's not by any means conservative. The thing about growing up in Wisconsin is that what you encounter there is the religious left, not the religious right. They're all Lutherans. They're all Swedes and Norwegians and Germans, and they come from a whole different religious tradition—in marked contrast to my father's deep Texas roots.

### **Okay, So, let's move on to early spiritual memories. Was there a fascination with the East from early on, or was it primarily Western spirituality?**

Well, my father's Baptist background and my mother's Presbyterian background had them looking for an alternative and both of them had kind of left where they came from. They ended up settling on the Lutheran church.

I guess the opening chapter of Dave's spiritual life began in the backyard of our house. I'm about four years old, or five, and I'm playing ball with my father, who was trying to teach me how to catch a baseball. The more he throws baseballs at me, the less I am able to catch them. This reached a point where suddenly I'm just frozen, stunned, and can't even move. My father is so angry and so frustrated at my inability to do what he wants that he burns a baseball right between my eyes. Like, you know, right into the pineal. He just flattens me, and I lay there, on the ground . . .

### **You mean he actually threw it at you?**

Yep. He threw it right at my head.

**Oh, God.**

This is important later on. I don't want to complicate this story with our subsequent relationship, but, I'm like five or something and I fall to the ground, crying. My father comes over, kind of looks at me, snorting derisively, and walks away, leaving me with a bloody nose on the grass. My mother comes running out to look after me.

**I can't believe this.**

Yeah, that's how it started. I love my father very much and have done a lot of *sadhana*, spiritual practice, with him over the years. But in that moment, I'm lying on the ground, stunned. Now, while there, I experienced an amazing flash of light that occurs when you get a baseball thrown at your third eye.

**Right. [laughter]**

But that, squared with what I was contending with, led to a certain realization. Here was a force that I thought was loving, and yet, he had visited something entirely unloving on me. It revolutionized my conception of reality. It left me to pick up the pieces on my own, but it also brought me to a new level of awareness. At the same time, another loving source came to my rescue—my mom. Somehow, this dual experience, of love and non-love, made me question the nature of being, and I asked for the first time in this life, “What is the soul?”

**How did that connect with the soul? Was it like, “Who am I really?” Was it that kind of thing?**

“What am I doing here? What does this all mean?” That was the first time I remembering asking those questions because I was in a place of pain. The world had initially seemed to be a place of love. But then idealism ended. I saw another side of life. And everything kind of opened up. You see? A force that had created me, and appeared to love me, also dealt a blow to me. How was I to reconcile a force that was both loving and fearsome? So, in a sense,

my father came to represent, I guess, a kind of Shiva energy — the destroyer. Initiation by drama, by impact, through something that involves struggle or pain. And it does say something true about the universe, but it's not the whole truth. There's also . . .

**Vishnu—the preserver. There's the positive, nurturing side of reality.**

Both are valid. I finally came to a point of honoring my father for opening me up to that other side. That wasn't his intention, of course. But he had his own issues, and we've worked through that. In the end, he showed me that life is a balance, that it's got two sides.

**Nevertheless, this is a tough lesson for a five year old. But it brings to mind the Chinese word for "obstacle," which has a dual meaning—it also means "opportunity."**

Exactly. So, for me, that kind of experience embodies the dual nature of reality. And it sparked initial thoughts about the soul and spirituality.

My next spiritual memory brings me back to when I was nine years old. I'm in Sunday school and I was given this Bible, and it was like one of those things comparable to your first communion or something like that in a Lutheran church. They inscribe it, "On this day..." You know the drill. I remember sitting in Sunday school, thinking, "I don't relate to this. I don't relate to this outer God. I don't relate to this vengeful God. I don't relate to this judging God." And I still have that Bible. Now here's the interesting part: In the back of the book, I wrote, in my nine-year-old hand, something vulgar about the church. It was a common obscenity. And then, you see, I crossed it out, and under it I wrote, "Excuse, please."

In a sense, here was my declaration of independence from a system of thought that was going to tell me what to believe. On the other hand, in asking to be excused for my emotional response, I was also asking for redemption or forgiveness. Those are really loaded Christian words, you know. But there's a mood in there, like a step back and a step forward. And sure enough, I found myself, even in my teen years, circling around Christianity.

If you grew up in the Midwest, at that time, there were certainly Jewish people, but not much more religious variety than that. Actually, there were Lutherans, there were Catholics, and there were Jews. That was my neighborhood. There weren't Muslims. There weren't Hindus. And so everything had to be, at least for a time, found within the context of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. If I were going to find anything, it would have to be from within those parameters.

And there were certain things I liked about the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The passionate Christ appealed to me, but the judgmental God of the Bible, well, no. It sounded like a mafia God to me. It's like, "You see what I've done for you? If you don't obey, if you don't worship me, I'm going to mess you up. I'll take it all away. I mean business." That never really squared with my own experience of what love should be, must be. So, after that, I found myself trying to find God in the mystics, as it were. I mean, when you're eleven years old, or whatever, people don't say, "Hey, here's the Christian mystics; read this." But you eventually find it on your own.

**Sure.**

Later, my father had a copy of a Gnostic text, specifically one translated by Elaine Pagels. I read that at some point, probably when I was in junior high, and that started to open up another aspect of Christianity. Here you learned to take on Jesus's qualities and to become like him — that was the path.

**There's also *The Imitation of Christ*. I found that, too, when I was in high school.**

Yeah, yeah. And, actually, I was blessed when I was a teenager: My church had this young 27-year-old pot-smoking pastor, the assistant pastor, who was the youth minister, of sorts. He presented an entirely different picture of Christianity, emphasizing service and compassion. So we ran a little coffee house in the church, and folk singers would come through. We would do musicals, your usual gospel stuff, and Jesus Christ Superstar and stuff like that. Inevitably, I would play Judas.

This was the 1970s. You know, post-Vietnam, take-all-the-drugs-you-want '70s. So I got a much broader view of Christianity at this point, which, in a sense, has sort of stayed with me.

**Let me ask you a question here. You were talking about the vengeful God of the Bible, and that you were attracted to the compassionate nature of Jesus. Now, I was going along the same road, the same line of thinking, when I was younger. But then what happened, consistently, was that I encountered Christians who said, "Jesus is the only way." Although the personality of Jesus still rang true for me, there was this exclusivist Christian idea, even amongst very, very liberal Christians. They seemed to say that unless you surrendered to Jesus, you were going to go to hell. So I would always wonder, "What about people from before Jesus's time? Or people from other lands?" I wondered about them. Were they all destined to Hell, simply because they didn't know Jesus?**

You're right. This troubled me back then, too. It troubles me now. But the teachings of the East helped me with that, and they actually helped me reclaim Christianity. Because to say, "Jesus is *the* way" — that's a bit misleading. I read it more like the Taoist would: Jesus is "The way." And if you find "the way" — however you find it and whatever it means to you — you have found Jesus, in one form or another.

**Oh, I see.**

I find congruence there. The way of the Christ *is* the way of the Tao — it simply means the way to the Truth. Finished. It's not meant to be sectarian. We are free to seek the company of teachers and the example of teachers that can show light on that way, and we have to walk this path ourselves. This is true Christianity, or Hinduism, or whatever. Call it what you will.

One thing I still have a tremendous problem with, though, is this idea of needing to be saved. In fact, the whole idea of sin is a bit strange, isn't it? Well, I can reconcile sin in terms of *samskaras* or *karma*. Okay, we did something in the past, and the fruits or reactions await us. Fine. And I can see that, yes, we come into this life

with a set of tendencies, and we have to deal with them. If that's sin, then okay. But I don't like the way the word is used, how spiritual leaders tend to use it to manipulate people; so I won't generally use it. There's something more important than sin: There's a sense of whether we're on the way or we're not.

**True. I agree. But, at the same time, we should be consciously aware—we should take stock and notice if our activities are pulling us away from our spiritual path. In this sense, we need to avoid “sin.”**

Of course. Sin, as you say, refers to those things that pull us away from grace. And so, yes, we should avoid sin. But this idea of a reckoning, if you will, of some God that's up there with a check sheet, keeping score—that doesn't work for me. The other thing is related to sin: this need to be saved. My experience now in meditation and yoga and chanting has to do with immanence, the presence of God—I guess you can call it the perceived presence of the Soul, the Atma, or whatever. But there's this sense of an intelligence, a presence of love that exists from form to form, but that's not bound by form. With such a beauty permeating our being, I don't know that I need to be saved. I know that I need to work toward cultivating my awareness of that transcendent being, and that if I am to be saved—if we're still going to use that word—it's in developing my capacity to deliver myself to that supreme goal. Grace is required, no doubt. My free choice involves making the necessary effort to shift my awareness—to be in alignment with ultimate reality. I must act. I can't wait for being saved. I must save myself.

**Yes, it's not just about faith but about exerting some effort. In fact, the Bible says, “Faith without works is dead.” But perhaps the idea of being saved originally applies to the guru principle—the idea of meeting someone who sets you on the path and who gives direction.**

Right. I believe that. Again, when Christ says “only through Me,” he's referring to a general principle. It's what I now see as the guru principle.



**In fact, Jesus was the guru in Palestine, 2,000 years ago. If you look at that New Testament verse—"No man comes to the Father except through me"—it uses an extremely present-tense form of the verb. The Greek word is *erketai*, which means "can presently come." In other words, at that time, and in that place, Jesus was the guru. But most people don't read it that way; they prefer an exclusivistic Christianity.**

Interesting, but, yes, the guru for that time, and others arise as the need presents itself. But the important thing is this: Only through that guidance, through that awareness, will you find eternal life or wake up to that aspect of your nature, which has, in a sense, always been here, will always be here.

**Well, that's certainly a more mature understanding than usual . . .**

Right. And there are Christians who come to exactly these conclusions. They're usually the mystics. Unfortunately, Christianity has barely tolerated its own mystical tradition. In fact, the Church has systematically silenced them, often for political reasons. Islam has a similar attitude toward its Sufis. That's just the way of things in this current age, the Kali-yuga.

**Chanting is a big part of that mystical tradition. All religious scriptures talk about the efficacy of chanting, but it's downplayed in the more conventional forms of religion. It's the mystics who seem to give chanting its due. So, let's begin by hearing about your introduction to the mystical East.**

My initial encounter with things Eastern was when I was kid, when I was twelve. I got into a discussion with a Hare Krishna guy in the airport in Miami.

**Gee, I wonder if it was me.**

Really?

**Well, it's not beyond the realm of possibility.**

Ah. I would say my motivations weren't entirely spiritual. I was at a point in my preadolescence in which things that pissed my

parents off had tremendous positive value to me. Talking to a Hare Krishna guy while waiting to change planes was probably just a calculated way to upset my parents.

**[laughter] Right, right.**

So he was talking to me about the *Bhagavad Gita*, which, honestly, I'd never heard about until that point, and we were actually having a kind of interesting discussion. My parents got really upset . . .

**They were right there with you?**

No, they were a little ways down. I had wandered off a bit. Then, it was like, "Where's David?" And when they turned around, they saw me talking to a guy with a shaved head and an orange robe. So it was like, "Oh, no!" You had to see them: They're waving their hands and everything, trying to get me away, and suddenly I realized I had to go. So I took the *Bhagavad Gita* and ran off with it. In effect, I basically stole the *Gita* from a Hare Krishna guy when I was twelve. You know, in the yoga world, we say that everything you do incurs a certain amount of karma, and I look back and I say, "Steal the the *Bhagavad Gita* when you're twelve, and you're doomed to read it when you're twenty-five." In fact, even to finish working that one off, you may have to spend the rest of your life chanting Krishna's name. [laughter] So that was planted right there, in my life, and I actually did read through it a little bit at that time. It sat on the shelf for a very long time, sort of sleeping and unfolding.

**Like a time bomb.**

A time bomb, yes. So there was that experience, and I guess as a musician I was attracted to Eastern things, too: a lot of the George Harrisonisms, you know, were really some of my favorite tunes. Even when I was a kid—when I was nine, I taped George Harrison's *Within you, Without You* on an old reel-to-reel with a splicing block. I cut it up into a bunch of pieces and put it back together in a kind of random, different order, creating a kind of otherworldly sound. This technique is called "musique concrète."

But those things — mystical, psychedelic, Eastern — appealed to me then in a way I couldn't really explain at the time. Eastern-tinged music touched me in a really significant way. I was exposed to that early on. I went to summer camp for a couple of years, in fact, where the chaplain would lead the hymns with an interesting instrument: the *harmonium*. [laughter] Right. I remember thinking back then, "One day I gotta get one of those," which indeed I did.

**From here did you move on to a more pronounced interest in India and things Eastern?**

Well, I didn't, actually. This is the funny thing. I ended up in India not because I wanted to go there. There was a point at which I put all things spiritual down — it wasn't for me, and I was sure of that. I moved to Hollywood to work in the film industry. I continued to be a musician, though . . .

**What did you play?**

Well, I studied with the jazz singer, Eddie Jefferson, for a little while as a singer. I'd pick up other instruments, too, and really get into them, like xylophones and accordians. And I played in a number of ensembles, with these instruments. I played in Gamelan orchestras, where we played in two tunings: *sléndro* and *pélog*, which are five and seven degree scales that don't really conform with Western scales at all.

I made experimental films, too — I created soundtracks for those films using basic musical forms, electronic techniques, tape manipulation, oscillators, and so on. Come to think of it, I got a job as a film editor when I was still in college. I was 19 — I just needed a job and I wandered into a production agency. Because I had been a musician they felt they could make me an editor. Go figure. So I became an assistant film editor for some time and Francis Ford Coppola happened to come through Madison, Wisconsin, while I was going to school there, to make some political commercials. The short version: They were looking for people to come in and help and I ended up working for Dean Tavoularis, who was

Coppola's art director at the time—I became his assistant. That got me some connections in Hollywood and ultimately I got an internship at Columbia Pictures Studio for a summer, which had me moving out to California. I went back there with a whole gang of friends after college, mostly intent on making a living in the film industry.

### **Where did you go to college?**

The University of Wisconsin at Madison, which is sort of the Berkeley of the Midwest. I mean, Madison's tremendously wide open for a city of its size. It's a very cosmopolitan place. Anyway, I moved out to Hollywood with a lot of my peer group from college and we started working in the film industry. I still had ambitions as a musician, but it seemed wiser to be making a living doing something that people actually paid me \$2,000 a week to do—I could get back to the music later.

### **True.**

So that's the background, and because of that I spent much of my mid-20s devoted to the world of sense pleasure. That was my life, and spirituality was very far away. Now, I had my initial contact with yoga because I had a back problem that wouldn't go away. Some friends started practicing yoga in Los Angeles in the 1980s and said I should come. So I went, and it helped my back. I was really indifferent to the "OM" part of it, the chanting, the metaphysics. I was ensconced in Hollywood life and couldn't care less about the spiritual stuff. Guess what? I was also very depressed at that time. A couple things happened. As much as I was engaging the sensual world, I was also extremely weary of it. Hollywood was not really serving me in my quest for meaning. I was enjoying, but I felt vacant—nothing really mattered. But Hollywood was cool. Ultimately, believe it or not, I came to see it as a great and holy place.

### **Hollywood?**

Yeah. People come to Hollywood with all kinds of expectations—

fortune, fame, self-fulfillment of a certain kind—and are generally greeted with nil. And so you say, “I want,” and the universe says, “No.” You try to control the timing of things, and you simply have to wait. In the face of all your attachments and desires, the universe says, “no,” and you spend a tremendous amount of time staring at the void. You have all of your needs and wants and ambitions—along with stark refusal from the universe.

The doors of Hollywood open sometimes to those who are somewhat desire-less, and also to those people who are incredibly driven and ruthlessly ambitious. Ultimately, of course, there’s a price. But so you spend a lot of time staring at the void, at emptiness and disillusionment, and ultimately you start to ask those questions again: “What am I here for? What does this mean?” There are a lot of people dealing with that in Los Angeles and I think this is one reason why yoga is so popular there, why it is one of the epicenters of things yoga right now.

**That’s an extremely interesting take on the Hollywood experience . . .**

Well, it’s true. People have a lot of time on their hands, often with more money than not. Or even without money, it’s a place where you really have to stare into yourself and ask what all this means. So many of the things that Hollywood offers turn out to be specters, *maya*, illusion, and you have to contend with that, and also, in turn, with yourself. So there are a lot of spiritual opportunities there, underneath the surface. And I have met many, many, very spiritual people in Hollywood, all trying to come to grips with this paradox of seeing beyond the illusion. But at the same time, they’re working to create it. That’s the paradox. But I found, pre-India, my world had kind of collapsed. I was so depressed I couldn’t get off the couch.

**Sounds serious. This was no doubt a turning point.**

Yes. Somewhere in the mist of all this I had a compelling dream: I was moving at high speed through a formless void. Strangely, there was little visual imagery in the dream, and there was no sound. There was almost no content. I really can’t describe it. But

I felt myself moving extremely fast and somehow the universe around me was endlessly branching out. There was a thunderclap and a sort of lightning bolt at the base of my spine, and an electric current surged upward in my body. My head and heart exploded into this ball of white light. I woke up feeling intense love, with everything, and I felt myself to be in great intimacy with everything. It was like the whole world was somehow part of my being. In every direction I saw nothing but love. There was complete oneness.

**That’s a bit different than a baseball zeroing in on your head.**

A little different, yeah. [laughter] I didn’t want to move from that spot—from the place where I attained that awareness. There was a problem, though—I couldn’t hold onto it, and I fell back asleep. In this same dream, a grandfatherly voice appeared and gave me this little blue spark. It seemed to be the smallest thing in the universe and yet it contained everything within it. He gave it to me, and he said, “Meditate on this,” and then he went away.

**A spark?**

A spark, yes, a little glowing blue thing. It was big and little at the same time, inconceivably. He said to meditate on this, and I didn’t really know how. I had been to a few yoga classes at this point, and so I sat and tried to meditate. But it really didn’t work. Now, that grandfatherly voice . . . it was like some sort of guide that appeared to me. So I maintained a relationship with the voice, at least in my head. Some time went by. I’d been invited on several occasions to meet a number of spiritual teachers and I refused. But some friends of mine eventually became involved with Gurumayi Chidvilasananda of the Shaivite lineage, traceable to Swami Muktananda and, before him, Swami Nityananda. I’d been invited to meet her. Actually, I’d been invited to meet Swami Muktananda in the 1980s, before he took *maha-samadhi* [passed away], but I wasn’t into it.

So a friend of mine had become involved with this ashram, and she befriended someone there who had been a longtime devotee

and was told that it was time for her to leave the ashram—to go out and make a living for a time. She—this ex-ashram person—had been editing videotapes and things for the Muktananda organization in India, and when she came to Los Angeles she was given my name as a contact, somebody who might be able to help her get a job. So she called me up, using the name of our mutual friend. As it turned out, I was able to help, and I got her some work. So that was fine. A few months later, she called me up and said, “Hey, do you remember me?” I did. So she said, “You know who Gurumayi is, right?” I said, “Yeah, and if you’re going to ask me to come have *darshan* with her, you should know that I’ve been asked 500 times. The answer was no then, and it’s still no.”

But that wasn’t her intention. “No,” she said. “It’s not that. They need someone to go to India to make some films for them. They asked me if I knew someone who could do the job, and I sat down in meditation to see who might be right. And you appeared to me as the person who was meant to go.” I was a bit surprised—and suspicious. I responded like this: “Well, that’s really an interesting way of getting a job. *It is* a job, right? I don’t have to join the ashram or anything like that. They’re hiring me to go to India and to do some work for them, and that’s that.” She said, “Yeah, why don’t you just talk to these people.” I did just that—I rang up some of their representatives in New York, but the money they offered kind of sucked compared to what I was accustomed to. So, initially, I turned the job down. There were a few other things brewing in my life at that time, too, all of which I was counting on as coming through. But a few months passed and nothing else materialized, and now I’m dead broke. So I had a brief moment of clarity. I began to ask myself: “Hey Dave, you ever been to India?” The answer came quickly: “Ummm...no.”

“What do you think the odds are that you’ll ever get another job in India, paying you to go there?”

“Well, probably kind of minimal.”

“Well, you need a job now, dontcha?”

“Well, yeah.”

So I called them up, and I said, “Hey, is that job still open?” They

said, “Well, yes it is, but we needed you to go some time ago and, as it now stands, you’d have to leave next week,” I said, “Hmm. Well, okay, I can do that.” And once I committed to it, I stood by and watched how a million things came together, almost miraculously, with hardly any effort at all. They worked out the visa thing for me as well as a bunch of other stuff. I mean, in a week I was on a plane to India.

**Amazing. How long did you stay?**

Initially, I was there for four months.

**Did you go with someone?**

I met one of their representatives in New York, changed planes at Kennedy, and he met me there, and . . .

**I mean, to go to India without any knowledge of Indian culture can really be a trip. That’s why it’s good to go with someone who knows the region.**

Somebody from the ashram came with me and escorted me around. We flew from New York to Bombay, where we went to the ashram in Ganeshpuri. When I got there, within hours of arriving, they showed me to my room and I fell asleep. It was a very long flight, of course, and I was extremely tired. And so I fell into a dream. Actually, this dream was almost identical in every way to the dream I had had several years before. The only difference being that before it was like a bolt of lightning at my spine; this time it appeared that a snake was uncoiling in my spine. At the same time, the same burst of light, the same feeling of love everywhere, intimacy with the universe – it was all there again. Some time after that, a few hours later, I was taken to meet Gurumayi, and she laughed and laughed and laughed. She seemed to know something that I didn’t. Her laugh was saying, “Look how long it took you to get here and look what you had to go through to reach this point.” I looked at her, and I was not expecting an encounter with a guru to be like this. She’s a beautiful woman, full of delight and just laughing and laughing, always laughing. I said, “Well,



Gurumayi, I had this strange dream a few hours ago and . . .” She looked at me straight in the eyes and said, “snakes, snakes,” and she started laughing again. Amazing. Then I look up, and there’s a picture of Swami Muktananda on the wall. I look at it and I say, “That’s the guy! That’s this grandfather dude who showed up in my dream.” She wasn’t surprised.

**How did you know it was him? You didn’t see him in the dream, right? No form.**

I knew. It’s funny how you know those things. I didn’t see him in the dream; he was just a presence. But I looked up, and there he was. I just had that feeling like, “Oh, there he is again.”

And I looked back at my life at that time, realizing that in some ways even my disbelief, my resistance—all this stuff brought me to this place. It *had* to be like that. I didn’t want yoga. I didn’t ask for it. I wasn’t seeking it, and yet, in some way, I was heading toward it just the same. So there I was, and now I was all lit up with this expansive feeling of ecstasy. I just wanted to hang out there and see if I could remain in that place forever. For me, this brings to mind the *Bhagavad Gita*, which begins with the doubt of Arjuna. That’s actually very powerful for me. Christianity kept asking me to have faith, but I didn’t have faith. Along comes yoga, and it says, in effect, “Start where you are—start with what you have.” The doubts of Arjuna speak to most people today. We’re not coming from a place of faith, not really. At least I wasn’t. I was on the battlefield and I didn’t want to fight; I had given up. I went for a life of illusion. I could see how I had been searching through that lens, and I could see how yoga was going to use everything I had in this process.

The job, as it turned out, was not for me. It didn’t work out. They wanted an online editor, and they got an offline editor. So in effect, they’d hired the wrong guy. The funny thing is, I had this astonishing spiritual experience upon arriving there—so, on another level, I *was* the right guy. So there was much consternation about all of that, and they tried to figure out what to do with me . . . I mean, I was there. Anyway, they gave me talks by Swami

Muktananda and Gurumayi, usually discoursing for an hour or two at a time. They wanted me to edit them down.

**They gave you audiotapes?**

Videos and old film footage and stuff. They asked me to go through the material and cut each topic down into fifteen-minute versions that would be suitable for showing to beginners, which I was. So for the first four months that I was in India, I spent each day listening to Swami Muktananda and Gurumayi talk about their realizations regarding the philosophy of yoga, quoting from the Upanishads, later scriptural sources, and so on. I digested that information and edited it into fifteen-minute packets about various spiritual topics. It was a tremendous gift that I was able to sit there and basically absorb Eastern philosophy. And more than that: Not just listen to it, but process it into little packets, which increased my understanding of it. In the meantime, I'm going through all kinds of spiritual changes and I just wanted to stay in India. I couldn't think of any good reason to go back to Hollywood at that point.

**I understand. And they were paying you for this, correct?**

Yes. They were quietly depositing each paycheck in a US bank account for me. After some time, I realized I had plenty of money to just stay in India. So I did. Instead of editing, they gave me some *seva*, some service, to do in the ashram. They had a school across the road. They told me to go teach at the ashram's school, which I wasn't really qualified for, but in some ways it was perfect. I found myself with a bunch of eight and nine year olds, with no set curriculum. I could more or less just invent the teaching schedule, and the classes.

**Were they Indian kids or Western kids?**

Indian and Western. So the instruction was actually in English. At the school, there was an old *harmonium*. I had come to India with a couple of Western instruments, not really knowing what I was going to do in my spare time. I brought a little Appalachian dulci-

mer, which is portable, and this little Chinese accordion, which is also very portable. Initially, when I was in the employee phase of working in the ashram, they didn't really invite me to the chants. All that stuff was going on, but I wasn't a part of it. I think if I had been a seeker there, somebody would have taken me by the hand and said, "Hey, this is this, this is what is going on, this is what it means." But, no, I was there on business. On some level, I was free to kind of ask questions or not. And so the chants would be going on, either kirtans or classical *bhajan*, but there were also everyday text chants where various *gitas* were sung as part of the ashram discipline.

**By various *gitas* do you mean *gitas* from the *Bhagavata Purana*, or the *Gita Govinda*, the *Bhagavad Gita*?**

Yeah, all of it, as well as various *stotrams*, traditional songs, etc. So there was a vast amount of textual material that was being chanted. I would by and large hang out across the road from the ashram and listen. Just listen. I learned how to play some of the kirtans on my accordion or on my dulcimer. It was only when I started working at the school that I actually kind of jumped into the kirtans in a systematic way. There was an old *harmonium* there, as I said, and the kids knew a lot of kirtan, a lot of traditional kirtan. We would sing every day before school, so, in effect, the school children taught me how to chant the kirtans. The ashram had an official strategy on how that was done, but at that time I wasn't really invited into it. I mostly chanted with nine year olds. That's how I really discovered kirtan.

**Were you inclined to it right at the beginning? Did you like the sound of it, the feel of it?**

Yeah, that was the thing. From the very beginning, I found the ashram music really compelling. I didn't think, "Oh, this is weird." I found it really beautiful and it affected me in a way that was totally Other – it was beyond mind and beyond understanding. I also found that I could memorize Sanskrit very easily, as if I already knew it.

**Without studying the language? Just through the songs?**

Yeah, I could just memorize the verses, so I found I was able to chant quite easily. Even without knowing the language, it still had an effect on me. I guess this is important still, because my way into kirtan was not as a seeker, not as a devotee. It just happened.

**It happened organically, in a spontaneous way.**

Right. So, here I am. I don't think of myself as a seeker of things Eastern, and yet I just found myself in a ringside seat, you know? It's interesting, though—musically, I had been writing things in that vein, even before going to India. Now, looking back, it seems as though I was trying to create mantras on my own. But these were clearly baby steps, the fledgling endeavors of a newcomer, carrying on from some past life. I would sing “wordlessly,” if you know what I mean, and, more than writing songs, per se, I really loved to sing without words. Scatting, humming and vibrating incoherent sounds. So when I encountered mantras for the first time, I realized that I had in some ways already been in a process of trying to discover them within myself. They seemed very familiar. All of a sudden I was exposed to a whole tradition of music, of singers who were in some ways like me. What I was trying to do was to use sound that would transport me beyond my mind.

Okay, so, while in India, I encountered real mantras, and not only did they seem very familiar to me, but they were also intoxicating to sing, delicious to sing. They're liberating to sing. And since I was sitting in the middle of it, I started to discover the meanings of the mantras, the meaning of these obscure sounds. I began to learn that in Indian history there was a long tradition of songwriters, ecstatic poets, who went around singing of that experience. The *bhakti* movement itself is a very interesting phenomenon in that it was amazingly democratic, theologically. *Bhakti* poets told us that love itself was equally present in everyone, and that no priesthood, in the end, could ultimately be the arbiter of that. It was revolutionary, especially at that time, in Medieval India.

They were teaching simple mantras to people who were by and

large uneducated, even though many of the *bhaktas* themselves were educated and came from noble Brahmin families. They renounced all that and went around singing their ecstatic hymns of love, often for crowds of people who were from lower castes. Some of these poets and spiritual leaders, of course, were from these lower caste families themselves.

**They broke down the boundaries, opened up the tradition for everyone.**

Right, they broke down those boundaries, first by refusing to recognize the caste system, which permeated India, as it still does. Actually, it took enormous courage—their message was that God’s love was not constricted by those categories.

**They were reminiscent of Jesus in some ways, weren’t they? He’s like the ultimate *bhakta*.**

Exactly! They’re saying, “Look inside yourself! Cultivate ecstasy in your own being! Do this first for yourself and, by that, you are in effect doing it for the whole world. The world is affected by your vibration. Yes, you can memorize the Vedas, but that’s not going to take you there. You need more. You need love. Cultivate this experience in yourself.” For me, especially given my history with Christianity – that was a very potent message.

And so I also started writing kirtans, like the *bhakti* poets. At first, I felt guilty about writing such things. Most kirtans are traditional, written by adepts, and they are passed down by serious practitioners. People would tell me, “Oh, this one is very old and it was handed down,” etc., etc. The implication was that somehow these were all written already, you know, at a more sacred time, and there was no need to write any more. “How dare you try to write them yourself.”

**Tradition gave them some authority.**

Right. But when I encountered the tradition in a deeper way, I realized that these singers were inventing the songs; that’s what they did. In their ecstasy, they were inventing the songs, and the fact

that they had done it then did not in any way mean one could not do it now. There's a similar phenomenon in Christianity, where 2,000 years ago, Jesus's time, is idealized—that was the time to be alive! But really we're here now. We need to bring this into the modern era. That's what the *bhakta* poets were doing in their day. It's useless for us today to act like a *bhakti* movement from the fifteenth century; we need to adapt it to modern times.

**When you talk about the devotees who wrote songs way back when, are you talking about people like Surdas and Tulsidas, people like that?**

Absolutely. Mirabai. Yes. But also, thousands of nameless *bhaktas* who came up with some tune that caught on. Everybody started singing it, and eventually the song survives the singer.

**And all of that material was based on the Vedic tradition as well as on personal experience.**

Right.

**And so if you know the tradition and you're having your own experiences, why not write original songs today, in modern language, that really speaks to people, to our contemporaries?**

Exactly. I started to do it and I found that people liked it—the songs actually worked! It's interesting that when you're writing a kirtan, in the instance of its inception, it's a very ecstatic process. The best things I've ever written took all of maybe two or three minutes. It was just sort of there. Now, for those listening to the kirtan, or taking part in the chanting, their appreciation will be commensurate with their realization, with what's going on inside of them.

**I can see that. If one is *rasik*, that is, a cultured listener, one can feel the *rasa* and the *bhava*—the feeling and emotion—of what you're trying to get across. But someone who's not spiritually cultured, might not.**

Right. There have been times when I'm trying out a new kirtan and the crowd would sing it back differently. I feel myself think-

ing, “No, it goes like this!” But they’d sing it back, and they’d be like, “No, it goes like that.”

As an artist, in some ways, I also had to pry my fingers from the process – to avoid trying to control it and instead allowing myself to serve it. That’s a process that’s still unfolding, the process of seeing the kirtan as an act of surrender.

**It’s an art. One has to learn to see kirtan as give and take. The people responding to your chanting are as much a part of the process as the person who writes the songs and the person who’s leading.**

Right. It’s like the universe in miniature. In kirtan, everybody, in effect, is at the center of the universe, theologically and experientially. What you do has a direct impact on what happens around you. If you really get into a kirtan, you can experience that – trying to surrender to a bigger and more expansive consciousness than the one we’re ordinarily limited by. But everybody’s both leading and following, in terms of our relationship with the divine and with love itself – we come to see ourselves as both leader and follower.

**It’s a *mandala*. It’s circular.**

Correct. It strikes me as being enormously significant – yoga and religion ask us to open up in this way. But I’ll tell you, traditional systems can close you down just as much as open you up, depending on how you approach them. When I was in India, at the ashram, they had a very specific way that they liked to do kirtans, and you departed from that at your peril. My instincts as an artist were pushing against this. I saw virtue in it, but I also saw virtue in doing things my own way.

**This is always difficult. When an artist, especially, joins a spiritual movement, they tend to run up against this wall. They’re asked to do things in a traditional way, and then their creative sense says, “But we can also do it this way, too, and in that way.” I guess the trick as an artist is in seeing the virtue in the tradition and adapting it without losing its essence.**

Exactly. But if you're too inventive, you're almost always put on a trip. In my case, I spent a lot of time singing in choirs. Where I was coming from, to sing harmony, for example, was an expression of great bliss. Still, they'd accuse me: "That's your ego!" And I'd be like, "No, that's my bliss. It's your ego that's telling me not to do this." So we would go back and forth.

**But the evidence you gave, and I think it's legitimate, is that one *can* do this. That's what they were doing in 15<sup>th</sup>- or 16<sup>th</sup>-century India. They were coming in the tradition—respecting their predecessors, whether Vaishnava, Shaivite, or Shakta—and yet they weren't just singing things from the Vedas; they were making up their own songs and their own melodies and their own ways of doing it.**

Exactly.

**So it's definitely legitimate. I think the only question is this: Exactly *who* has the right to create or to invent? Who can write kirtans on behalf of their tradition? This would be the one bone of contention, I'm sure. Maybe they would say you have to be accomplished in your particular practice before you can assert your individuality, before you could presume to create on behalf of the divine.**

That's what I came to; I surrendered as long as I could. I kept trying to be a good boy and to do what they wanted, and it was not without attainment. I saw the message in it. The idea that the singer surrenders himself to the song, that the artist surrenders his own needs to the effect of the experience—these are all important things to know and to appreciate. One needs to realize, "Look, it's not all about you."

**Right.**

But water always seeks its own level. You can't stop it. People have to use the talents God has given them, right? That being said, if an unqualified person starts his own kirtan, it will lack juice; it won't have that spiritual potency. So, buyer beware. I continue to struggle with that. Once their rules were removed, I still found that there's an inherent *dharma* in the chant that you can't depart



from. It's like, this is what the chant wants. I boomerang when I work against it and I'm ecstatic when I'm there, when I'm going with the flow. So let's see where it goes.

**Let's backtrack a little at this point. So, you were in India becoming more involved in the Siddha Yoga tradition of Gurumayi. Did you take initiation in that tradition?**

I didn't take *sannyasa*. I didn't become a monk or a swami. But I received initiation in that I was given what they call *shaktipat*.

***Shaktipat*, right. The transferal of spiritual powers by touch. And did you get a name?**

You know, it's interesting, I went up and asked for a name and Gurumayi said, "You already have one." I said, "What?" She said, "Dave. It means God."

**Oh, right, Deva, the Sanskrit form of it.**

Right, as in Gurudev or Mahadev. I really wanted a spiritual name, though. [laughter]

**For our readers: Could you briefly define Siddha Yoga?**

Siddha Yoga is based on Tantra and Kashmir Shaivism, which are non-dual traditions. The directive of Siddha Yoga is very simple: Look within yourself to find God. With focused intention, become established in this loving and ecstatic awareness. In the light of this consciousness, open your eyes and heart to the world.

It's not an easy matter, of course. In the experience of *shaktipat*, you are able to glimpse what feels to be the truth of your being, and you understand that everyone has the potential to see this within themselves. But you can't hold onto this experience.

**Yes, in Vaishnava traditions, they say that the bliss of the impersonal Brahman usually leads to fall down, because the soul thirsts for interpersonal relationship. The idea of being one with God has certain limitations, but impersonalists tend to ignore these limitations, and they identify with God. This identification cannot stand. Along these**

**lines, the *Gita*, in the beginning of its Twelfth Chapter, advises theism as opposed to monism, or worship of a personal divinity as opposed to an amorphous void. Krishna says that it's difficult for personal entities—like us—to maintain any kind of relationship with a nonentity, or an abstraction, even if it's a divine abstraction. He therefore asks Arjuna, and through Arjuna, each of us, to enter into a relationship with Him—people interact with people, not with concepts. That's why, yes, for the impersonalist, for the person who identifies with God, it's difficult to maintain spiritual realization.**

But it can be accomplished. It requires a great deal of practice, or *sadhana*, to maintain this awareness at all times. The dishes still need to be done, and the trash still needs to be taken out. You can't spend all of your time chanting and meditating, so you of necessity start to look at everything you do as a kind of spiritual practice. As you do this, you start to see God in everyone and everything.

It is most especially difficult to see this when you are under intense pressure, when you are in the grip of your own attachments and disappointments. The genius of the ashram environment is that it models the world in such a way that you have to accept responsibility for your own spiritual progress, and it uses arbitrary and capricious situations – and, often, difficult people – to accomplish this. On one level, it's a kind of cross between an encounter group, a mental institution, and a minimum security correctional facility. Which sounds terrible, but the effect is that you start to see yourself reflected everywhere. Heaven or hell – it turns out to be pretty much your own call.

**I understand. Really, you get out of religious institutions what you put into them. They can act as a conduit to the divine. Or they can aid in your stagnation. It's up to you.**

The fact is that movements are composed of people. All kinds of people come to all kinds of movements. You might see it like this: There's a clear source, or a clear spring of water that erupts from the earth, and people cluster to drink from it. Now, even if the water itself is pure, the people drinking from it might not be. So

spiritual organizations are composed of people in progress, people on a spiritual path. That's already a good starting point.

**I agree.**

I think the question is this: "What can this person or group teach me?" Without them being finished in their process, is it possible in *my* process that they can be uplifting, that they can take me further? By extension, if this world is not finished or if it appears to be imperfect, can it not, nonetheless, teach me? Is it not, in a sense, my guru?

**Right, very good. It brings to mind the Eleventh Book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, where one finds a list of twenty-four gurus—in addition to a perfect master—who can help us along the way. These are creatures and aspects of nature from which we can learn, like the earth, air, sky, fire, pigeons, pythons, the sea, elephants, fish, and so on. For example, air blows on both sweet and foul-smelling things without any discrimination or preference. From this, the spiritual aspirant should learn how to live in the world, unaffected by the dualities of life, like joy and sorrow, and by the objects of the senses. In this way, air is to be seen as a sort of guru.**

Beautiful. That's fantastic.

**It's along the lines of what you were saying . . .**

That's great. I'm glad to hear that it's grounded in tradition in that way, too.

**Okay, but let's bring it back to kirtan. How did you become a well-known Western *kirtaniya*?**

Hmm. Well, let me begin by saying that I had artistic conflict with Siddha Yoga. It became difficult for me to continue doing music in their temples. At the same time, a yoga studio in Santa Monica, California, called Yoga Works, began wanting to offer kirtan on a regular basis. This would have been in 1997. They asked me to come and start leading a Sunday night kirtan.

**How did they know about you?**

Someone had visited a Siddha Yoga center and had heard me sing. So they asked for me—they were looking for somebody and so I said I would do it. At the same time, I began to teach meditation in the prison system.

**Can you talk a little more about that?**

I was doing weekly *satsangs* in two such places, mainly: Terminal Island Prison, which, I know, is a bit of a chilling name, and in Chino, too. Terminal Island is a federal prison and Chino is a state prison—both in Southern California.

There's actually people doing meditation in prisons all over America; yoga is big behind bars. That's a whole other story. In fact, I did a kirtan once at Folsom Prison, you know, as in the Johnny Cash record, backed by an inmate rock band. It was really great. So I was beginning to do this outside of the spiritual organization that fostered it at the invitation of different people. It necessitated a change of tone. You can't talk to people who are incarcerated in that sort of flowery, spiritual organization-type language. They just don't buy it. The point is to get them to participate and to have an experience. You have to change your tone and your terms.

I look at my teachers in this—school children, ashram people (keepers of the *dharma*), and incarcerated ex-drug offenders. All of these people have taught me ways to look at kirtan and diverse ways to approach it. I have to say, chanting in prison is quite a liberating experience. [laughter] Liberating both because of what inherently happens when you're chanting and in the sense of exploding your preconceived concepts.

**You mentioned three teachers—the children in India, the ashram people, and the prisoners—but actually the most important one is the fourth one: the Paramatma, the Lord in the heart. Right? From within you, you were getting guidance that helped you sing kirtan.**

Oh, yes, of course. Of course. That's ultimately the primal one, the essential one. I guess, just as you said, there's the perfect teacher

and then there's your dog. You can get the same thing from both, in a sense, if you know how to access the divine. It comes from within.

But then in the yoga studios, people weren't focused on a particular teacher or a particular tradition, not for the most part. In the yoga studios, I had to make this open to anyone, without regard to whether you were, say, a Shaivite, a Vaishnava, or a Shakta — or just someone who wanted to feel good about themselves — without regard to whoever your primary teacher may or may not be. Many of the people who came had just been practicing yoga *asanas* for some time and had heard that chanting was a way of deepening their practice. They wouldn't necessarily know anything about it.

So I consciously brought myself back to where I was when I was a beginner. In effect, standing across the road from the ashram, listening to the chant, I realized that I was affected by the chant without knowing anything about it. I guess what I'm saying is, as a kirtan leader, I've put my trust in the sounds, in the experience itself, and said, "First you give people the experience, and you let the inherent stuff affect them in the way that it does. After that, let their own interest take them further."

**When I interviewed Krishna Das, he said something very, very similar: "Have faith in the chant, in the sound of the chant." He just chants with people and allows the spiritual potency to do the rest.**

I do that, too. Yes. But I feel like I'm trying to function on several levels here. I have also found that if I don't explain what the chants mean, at least on some level, people spend the whole time wondering what they're chanting. And then they miss the experience. So I do offer an explanation. The deities evoked in the mantras, for example — I try to explain them in general terms: "These are different aspects of the way we encounter the divine, or love, or whatever name you want to put to it. This one evokes its fierce and terrible aspects; this other one its compassionate aspects; its ability to move through obstacles, etc." I try and put it in those terms, and often I even use Western, almost scientific language.

**That's good. People need a basic idea, at least. Then they can chant in a more comfortable mindset. The mantras can do the rest.**

Right. This is where, in a sense, as a Westerner, I'm finding my way into this, too. The Western scientific methodology says, "Gather your facts, gather your experiences, and draw your conclusions from that. Can someone else come to the same conclusions through the same experiment?"

**This is what makes something a science.**

Exactly. So what I'm saying with kirtan is, "Okay, don't believe in it. Let's drop that part of it. How about if you just sing these mantras? Tell me how you feel right now. Now sing these mantras. How do they make you feel? Did it shift the way you felt? What happened to you during the process of chanting?" In this way, they can see the science of chanting in action.

**"The science of chanting in action": This brings us to your CDs. Let's devote the remainder of our conversation to what you've personally done with kirtan on your commercially available works; let's talk about your approach to the practice of chanting. You might mention some traditional kirtans that you like, but mainly your work, what you've done.**

Well, this draws on my background as a jazz musician, by way of group improvisation and all that. I mean, the melody is defined, the mantra is defined, but in the tradition that I'm coming from, the chant speeds up. Like this kind of wave develops: it starts slowly and then each time it comes around the speed of the chant increases incrementally. So you can end up chanting it two, three, four times the speed that you started with.

**It sounds like certain forms of Bengali kirtan, which also start slowly and then build up to a crescendo.**

There's actually a whole kind of art and science to doing that. Certain drummers are very expert at that and so purely from an arrangement standpoint, it's going to come around again. The idea is to both advance the narrative in terms of shifting the

arrangement slightly, so it has compelling interest, musically, but never to leave the space OF the kirtan, if you know what I mean. So you want to keep people in the pocket of it, in the bubble of it, in the space of it, but you want to shift it slightly. So this can mean the drummer slowly changes rhythms, or the cymbal player starts playing with a different accent. In my case, I add harmony to it, with multiple layers. I will tend to play with fairly large ensembles, too. I'll often have six or eight musicians accompanying me, and so we've developed a whole kind of art of Western kirtan—the bass player comes in, the bass player drops out. The violin player doubles the melody, the violin player creates a counter melody. An electric guitar player may play something spacious and then all of a sudden, something chunky. I've found that kirtan as a form is allowing me to quote from a lot of traditions of the world. So we're able in the space of a single kirtan to morph from a traditional Indian ensemble into a funk band and then into a bluegrass band and back again. This is what you'll find on my CDs.

**How would you define a good kirtan? What are its hallmark signs?**

A good kirtan is indisputable. Everyone involved can feel it. Now *that's* science, to go back to what we were discussing a moment ago. Experiment and observation. You engage in kirtan, with full heart, and it gets a particular result. If you can repeat that experience with some certainty, then that's what science is all about. That's the science of kirtan.

And then the music stops. That's science, too. It's so intoxicating to sit there with a group of people and to not move, to scarcely breathe. Time has stopped. Desire has stopped. Mind has stopped. If even only for a fleeting instant, to sit at the edge of that stillness is just such a profound thing. If without believing it, it has the capacity to take you to that place, then something's really happening. So if you add a component of intention to it, *then* let's see what happens.

**So a devotional attitude can help?**

Intention always helps. But people have to start from where they are. That's fine. All I can do is show up and sit down and start chanting. Beyond that, I have to trust that the practice itself is what's powerful. I'm just there to serve it; I'm just an instrument in this thing. In that sense, it lets me off the hook—it has increased the depth of my heart because it asks me not to posture. It asks me not to pontificate, not to take myself too seriously. If anything, I tell jokes. I found a way to do that. Since we're often sitting cross-legged when we chant, in the lotus position, or in a facsimile thereof, I guess you'd call me a "sit down" comic. Sometimes I tell stories that are meant to put some light into the thing, some laughter into the experience, to say, "You know what? We can be spiritual without taking ourselves too seriously." I just want to invite people into the process, to share with others the beauty and magic of kirtan.

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**For more information contact:**

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