

MANTRA AMERICANA II LINER NOTES

Mantra Americana II is all at once profoundly devotional and playfully irreverent. It's made of motifs that are borrowed and repurposed, but it's also a wholly original work of art. It manages to be both blasphemous and orthodox, thoroughly modern and still grounded in tradition. It's a tree with Indian roots growing in American soil, bearing fragrant fruit that tastes both familiar and exotic.

Kirtan is a folk form of mantra chanting that arose from the 15th century Bhakti movement of North India, at the same time as the Reformation was occurring in Europe. Both movements emphasized a direct connection between the human and the divine, unmediated by a priesthood. The message of the Bhaktas was simple: Joy is contagious. We all come from the same light, and it is reflected in everyone. See the divine in each other. In the eyes of Love, we are all equal.

This was, and still is, a radical message. The Hindu Upanishads were first translated into English in the 19th century and their ideas echoed in the work of Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson and other writers of the American Transcendentalist movement who read them. Eventually they became deeply embedded in Western culture and spirituality, to the point where few people recognized their source in the Eastern world.

The mantras contained in these songs are sung in Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi. These languages are unfamiliar to many American ears, but the meanings are already implicit in the sounds. No translation is necessary to be moved by their beauty. They speak of both the agony of separation from the beloved, and the bliss of reunion. Perhaps the true understanding of the mantras can be found in the sense of unity, well-being and timelessness that they elicit.

Contemporary spiritual life in the West is currently undergoing a paradigm shift away from the certainties of faith and belief, and toward practices that investigate the ambiguities of experience. For the artists on this album, both yoga and music are paths of inquiry into the nature of love and consciousness. Singing, we move ourselves into a field beyond questions and answers, where the heart is free, and the mind is still.

The Christian cathedrals of Rome are literally built with old marble from the Pagan temples the popes tore down. Swept away by new cultural forces and political realities, the stones were repurposed. The myths and metaphors were translated, transformed, and transmitted again. This is how art and culture build, and remain relevant. A church is built upon the rock of every age that came before.

As Kirtan has evolved, it has absorbed and reflected many different musical influences with origins outside the Indian world. The Bhaktas used whatever instruments were at hand to express the music, drawing equally on drums brought from Persia by the conquering Moghuls, harmoniums from the British empire, and folk instruments played in brothels.

Kirtan has always been a recombinant art, and remains so in the modern day, easily absorbing the instruments of Western classical, jazz and popular music. It's not a dusty museum piece, it's thriving art and practice, reinventing and renewing itself right now at yoga studios, on front porches and in concert halls all over the world.

The primary musical feature of Kirtan is the use of call and response, a figure that also deeply informs Bluegrass, Gospel and Jazz. Yoga points toward awareness of the essential oneness of things, so to align the individual-dissolving Eastern tradition of Kirtan with the individual-expressing Western traditions is no contradiction. They both arise from the same impulse toward expressing what is ecstatic and liberating and transcendent within us all.

--- Dave Stringer