



Chant as liberation

BY JILL FRASER

IT WILL BATHE YOU, UPLIFT YOU, AND TRANSPORT YOU: ALL IT ASKS IS THAT YOU SURRENDER TO ITS VOICE AND WITNESS WHERE IT TAKES YOU. CHANT HAS FOUND ITS WAY OUT OF ASHRAMS AND THE LOFTY REALM OF SANYASINS INTO THE HEARTS OF THE INNOCENT AND UNSUSPECTING. MANY OF THESE ARE CAUGHT OFF GUARD AND UNPREPARED FOR THE DEEP AND MOVING JOURNEY AS SOUNDS OF MANTRA SLICE THROUGH LIMITED REALITY AND OPEN UP THE POSSIBILITY OF ALL THAT IS.

Sacred Earth

"For us it's like we step out of the way, remove our personalities as much as we can and let spirit do its job," says Jethro Williams, who along with wife, Prem Alihay, form the Sunshine Coast-based duo, Sacred Earth.

"The response is often a hand to the heart," adds Prem. "Mantra touches people's inner most cores and has no barriers. It's impossible not to feel the love and devotion to God in mantra, no matter what your belief or religion. It's a yearning to know true spirit and ultimately to go home to God."

Deva Premal and Miten

Once content just to fill a meditation room at Bhagavan Sri Rajneesh's (Osho) ashram in Poona, India, the audiences of Deva Premal and husband, Miten, now top 200,000 and CD sales have reached the 400,000 mark. They have been enjoying the dramatic rise in popularity of kirtan (devotional) music internationally for 15 years.

"There's no doubt we're riding on the wings of these chants," declares Miten via phone from their home in Germany, pointing out that despite constant travelling year in and year out they've only ever missed

"No matter how tired I am as soon as I sit down and start chanting in concert I feel myself being rejuvenated."

Chant artists agree that it is never about the act of performing. For them, the experience of singing publicly – regardless of the size of the audience – is still an intimate occurrence, an extension of their own private practices.

Krishna Das

US-based Krishna Das, who joins Deva and Miten as the world's highest selling chanters, is a pretty cool dude, legacy of his former life as a rock 'n' roll singer.

Quipping his way through the interview he admits, "I didn't come out of the kirtan closet until 1994". KD (as he is affectionately called) lived through "many dark nights of the soul" before being led to his Guru Maharaj-ji. But it wasn't until 21 years after Maharaj-ji passed away that KD had an epiphany and realised chant was his dharmic path.

Describing the experience he says: "I was standing in my living room and there was a flash, a sudden knowing that if I didn't start singing with other people, strangers who didn't know me and didn't even know what chant was about, I would never be able to fully clean my heart of all the garbage and dark places I'd kept locked up in there.

Chanting imbibes the experience of this moment as being the ecstatic totality. There is a freeing of the perception of what you think you are to what you already are,

“I chant for the sake of my own heart,” he says. “But there’s really only one heart that pumps in this universe and we’re all part of it.”

KD, who has chanted with many of the pop world’s biggest names, including Madonna and Sting, has gained great insight into the level playing field that chant creates.

“These people are kings on the planet with massive kingdoms and the power and the means to get whatever they want. Yet they recognise that they’re still not happy.

“That’s huge, man,” he exclaims. “Most of us have never had enough of anything – money, fame, sex – to really know that happiness can’t be found in any of that stuff. But these people have been to the end of the line with all that and they’ve hit a wall and developed the wisdom that happiness comes from within. That’s why they chant, as a means to get to that place.”

Sharman Okan

Another Sunshine Coast dweller, Sharman Okan, spent most of her youth living in ashrams in Australia and India. She was blessed to have in her audience the esteemed presence of Osho and Paramahansa Muktananda.

“I was in India with my Guru, Paramahansa Satyananda and ended up spending quite a bit of time with Muktananda in a remote village. I met Osho on a street,” she laughs recalling the fateful day. Both asked her to sing for them and their respective reactions have remained with her.

Muktananda, who commented “when she (Sharman) chants, her devotion calls me from my silence, and I cry the pure tears of prem (love)”, would always cry when he heard her song.

Osho went into deep meditation when she began chanting and later remarked: “Her (Sharman’s) singing transports people to the place of possibility, the place of pure potential. This is where freedom is truly born.”

Her Guru, Paramahansa Satyananda, would without fail, get up and dance.

“He didn’t dance a lot. So that was always a sign that the chant was really happening,” says Sharman, who now lives “a householder’s life” with three children while pursuing her own inner journey, essentially through chant.

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So what is it about chant that stirs the emotions and liberates the soul? Sharman has been chanting for over 30 years and has often been asked this question.

“Chanting the divine name of Gods/Goddesses/All That Is has been recognised through the ages as being one of the quickest and most graceful ways to experience the play of ecstatic consciousness,” she says explaining that whilst chanting it is apparent “that there is nothing separate to attain.

“Chanting imbibes the experience of this moment as being the ecstatic totality. There is a freeing of the perception of what you think you are to what you already are, naturally ecstatic.

“Children move into this space very quickly and spontaneously when they chant”, she says adding, “while chanting the usual separation of self and divinity falls away naturally”.

“There is an extraordinary co-creative dynamic that occurs between the chant leader, the responding chanters, the musicians and the chant or mantra itself. It’s as if there is no separation between the universe breathing in and out and you breathing in and out. In other words, the chant becomes a fully co-creative experience.”

Prem and Jethro were into music “with a more aggressive beat” when they met five years ago and are well aware of the effect that different styles of music have on an audience and an artist. They were part of a touring group of musos who consumed large quantities of alcohol and played gigs in rowdy venues, all of which were contrary

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to their increasingly devotional lifestyle when they were not on the road.

“So four and a half years ago we gave up playing music professionally and took up yoga,” says Jethro. “We did a yoga teacher training course and the only music we played was at kirtans. We did that for about 18 months and when we started making music again as Sacred Earth we drew from that space.” Referring to their music as “devotional but not strictly traditional mantra” he says; “what we try to do is create a space for meditation and introspection to happen”.

“The music was given to us like a gift from spirit,” continues Prem. “When a song is coming we can actually hear it around. We can be gardening or swimming and one of us will say that there’s a song around and suddenly there it is. Not once have we sat down to consciously write a song.” Their focus is to honour all aspects of spirit. “Totally non-sectarian,” declares Jethro.

“I believe music is an expression of existence because we choose to live a dharmic life and direct our attention on inner awareness, daily meditation and yoga practice, that’s what comes through. I have to be

careful not to meditate too deeply on stage,” he chuckles. “The other day I totally missed where I was supposed to come in.”

Miten agrees that chant needs to come from “a huge well of stillness” and being on a public platform is secondary to attaining the pure nature of chant.

“If it’s not happening we’ll stop the song, even if there’s a thousand people in the audience. The most important thing,” he says, is to honour the space we are all in.”

Mata Amritanandamayi (Aamma) sums up the reasons for the growing popularity of chant like this:

“Darling children, to gain concentration in this dark age of Kali, bhajan (chant) is better than meditation. By loud singing other distracting sounds will be overcome and concentration will be achieved. Bhajan, concentration, meditation, this is the progression.

If bhajan is sung without concentration it is a waste of energy. If sung with one-pointedness, such songs will benefit the singer, the listener and also nature. Such songs will awaken the listeners’ minds in due course.

Bhajan or devotional singing is a spiritual discipline aimed at concentrating the mind on one’s beloved deity. Through that one-pointedness one can merge in the divine being and experience the bliss of one’s true self.

It matters not whether one believes in Krishna or Christ, Mother Kali or Mother Mary, a formless God or even a flame: A mountain or an ideal such as world peace can be meditated upon while singing. By letting the mind expand in the sound of the divine chanting each one can enjoy the peace born of one’s inherent divinity.”



Jill Fraser is a journalist; a regular contributor to the Herald Sun arts pages, Woman’s Day and the ABC magazine, Limelight. But above and beyond that she is a chanter who has fallen in love with the music of all the above-mentioned artists.

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