



## Music and Mantra

It's almost extraordinary to think Sanskrit mantras are sharing top billing with rap and hip-hop at the top of the US music charts. But that's not allowing for the magnetic appeal of mantra diva, Deva Premal and her partner Miten. **Louisa Harding** has long been a fan.

### Mantra Goes Mainstream

When Deva Premal and Miten released their latest recording this year, a rather amazing thing happened. Perhaps not surprisingly, their CD *Dakshina* hit the number one selling spot on Amazon.com's New Age music list. For such a well-loved musical couple, whose previous CDs have sold in the hundreds of thousands, this was perhaps foreseeable. More extraordinary though, was the number 14 position their CD reached on the mainstream US chart - here was an album of ancient Sanskrit mantras woven into contemporary music, rubbing shoulders with the slickly marketed, massively popular mainstream acts that usually fill such lists. This was a sign that the thirst for beautiful music that transforms one's life has gone mainstream, and that such music could no longer be corralled in the "New Age" holding pen!

Deva Premal says she and Miten don't even warm to the rather limiting label of "New Age" music when attempting to categorise what they create, preferring instead the description "sacred contemporary music".

"I think that really says it in a nutshell," she says. It's prayer in music, it's ancient prayers set to music in a way that appeals to us as Westerners. Miten and I like to be able to bring the ancient mantras and the ancient prayers to people so that they enjoy singing them, in a way that they just can't help but sing them."

Their music is simultaneously sensual and transcendent, earthy and angelic. Even as you sing along with Deva's heavenly voice chanting "Om Mano Padme Hum", you're grooving with Miten's lyrical instrumentation too, moved by the ambient soundscape they jointly create. Many commentators have remarked on the palpable absence of ambition or ego as a driving force or presence in their music, and Deva Premal attributes this, in part, to the way in

which their musical union was conceived. She and Miten met in India when they both converged on Osho's commune in Pune 15 years ago, and proceeded to make music for the meditation gatherings held there daily.

Miten had been a successful rock musician who had worked with recording artists such as The Kinks and Ry Cooder, and opened for Fleetwood Mac during their 1980 "Rumours" tour. He had left the world of rock behind, sold all his guitars and devoted his life to his spiritual search, disenchanted with the cynicism and plastic-fantastic phoniness of being a product to be marketed in the music industry. He'd lived the life of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll and found it ultimately unfulfilling. (Still, it's nice to have tried it!)

**'Deva Premal's parents sang (the Gayatri mantra) to her in the womb... and she herself sang it to her late father at the time of his passing.'**

Deva Premal was a young German woman learning Shiatsu, who had been steeped in music and mantra during her unconventional childhood in Germany. She was a classically trained musician on both piano and violin, but never believed herself to have a gift for singing.

They met in India, they fell in love, they shared a love of music, and Miten encouraged her to find her exquisite voice.

"That was a kind of apprenticeship for me in Pune, being able to start my singing there," Deva Premal recalls. "Because every time we sang there, people would all have their backs towards us because we were playing for meditation, we were just making the soundtrack to a meditation basically, so it was not focused on us and it was not giving us some kind of egotistical satisfaction.

"It's exactly what I still feel I'm doing when I make music now, except people are facing us now. It introduced me to that feeling of service to the whole, and giving whatever was needed in that space, it was so precious. And we learnt a fine sensitivity to what music brings more silence, rather than what music is entertaining. When you play for people who are sitting in silence with their eyes closed, they are so vulnerable and so open, you have to be so sensitive and respectful to enhance their space rather than intrude on it, and that's what I feel I learnt there."

Deva recalls that for years Miten was regarded as "The Musician" and she was "The Girlfriend" who lovingly, joyfully did backing vocals to his music as it came back to him after his disenchanted years, refreshed by his spiritual devotion and cleansed of the egotistical motivations that drive so much contemporary non-sacred music making. Then, after seven years of making music like this - Deva Premal's harmonies supporting Miten's voice - she gently rediscovered the mantras, returning to them with new appreciation after leaving them behind since the saturation of her unorthodox childhood.

"I never thought I'd become a singer. I just didn't think I could sing. I grew up with music, with violin and piano, but I didn't have an outstanding talent with my voice," she laughingly recalls.

"And then I found Miten and I realised 'Wow, I can sing a little'. I supported Miten for many years, which means singing second voice in his songs, and then when I was 28 I rediscovered the mantras. That opened my voice up in whole new way, so I realised I had something to give also, with me singing the lead part. The mantras opened this whole world up for me."

The mantra that Deva Premal is most renowned for is the Gayatri, an ancient mantra reputed to be one of the oldest on the planet. Deva Premal's parents sang it to her in the womb and during her childhood as a lullaby, and she herself sang it to her late father at the time of his passing, so its place in her heart and life can only be imagined.

"The Gayatri mantra is said to be the oldest mantra known to man, and there are different opinions as to how old it is, but I've heard estimates of 8000 years," she says. "Basically, it's a prayer to the sun, asking for all beings to be enlightened, to see the light, so it's a very universal prayer. It stimulates all the energy centres in the body, so it's very purifying for the one who sings it and the one who listens to it. I think it's maybe the most widely known mantra in India. I've been hearing it ever since I was born, so that's a special connection."

When I ask her if she can say what the Gayatri mantra means to her, or what its effect is on her, she answers, "It's indescribable. When you sing it you feel a certain way and to put it in words is very difficult. It's like a benediction. It's transformed my whole life."

After seven years of singing mantras which have brought her to the attention of the world, the transformation wrought by mantra in Deva Premal's own life is abundantly clear. She has been dubbed by some music writers as "the Enya of mantras", perhaps unfortunately so, depending on how you feel about Enya! Whether you'd like to compare her to Enya or not (no prizes for guessing I'd rather not) Deva Premal is certainly the popular face of Sanskrit chant, and after living much of her adult life centred on it, she is as passionately sure of the power of mantra as ever.

"Most mantras are in the Sanskrit language, and Sanskrit is like Latin in that it's

an ancient language. In those days they were very familiar with the effect sounds have on the body, on the energy systems, on the chakras. It's like medicine - it's like every word, every syllable had a certain purpose to address a certain issue in your life or to open a certain chakra. And so just like with a medicine, you don't really need to know what's in it. You know if you take your medicine that it does you good, but you don't need to know all the ingredients. Somehow the mantras are like that - you don't need to know which syllable is for what, you just take it and it makes you feel healthy and whole."

She and Miten travel the world, singing and, paradoxically, creating spaces of silence and stillness. Their concerts are not concerts in the normal sense of the word, where the audience is divided from performers. Instead, concertgoers participate in the singing, and there is so great a sense of communal harmony in the group that applause rarely arises because there is no star act performing entertainment for the crowd. Instead, there is just a group of people celebrating life.

**"Somehow the mantras are like that - you don't need to know which syllable is for what, you just take it and it makes you feel healthy and whole." - Deva Premal**

"It's celebration, it's silence and it's peace," Deva Premal says. "The message is really clear from people after concerts or from the CDs - it's incredible what healing has happened from the music, in relationships, in people's hearts, and in physical healings. Our music's purpose is to bring peace and silence and joy and gratitude into people's lives, and I know these words are so overused these days, but they really are the ones that I need to use."

With fans as diverse as the singer Cher, who will only do her yoga asanas to the sound of their music, (don't let your mind go there!), spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle and a certain His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the appeal of Miten and Deva Premal's music seems near to universal, and growing. Deva Premal says that if the endorsement of these stellar fans helps spread the chanting of healing mantras, then she is happy.

"Our main interest is that the mantras go out as much as they can. We feel if more and more people end up singing them going shopping in the supermarket, or hearing them wherever they go, it's only going to be beneficial for the planet. Cher and the Dalai Lama publicly sharing their enjoyment of our music just helps the mantras to go out into the world even more, so we are grateful," she says.

In a world wrestling with some dark prospects and forces, Deva Premal sees mantra as one subtle but potent way we can cast some light. "It's the balance - as it gets more crazy and dark on the planet in some respects, the other side is also getting stronger."

"Miten and I travel all the time, and we meet this family or community of people everywhere who are working to bring more light on the planet. This community is getting so big now, and also it's not confined anymore to people who we might think of as "alternative". So I feel it's very beautiful what's happening on the planet, I guess especially because it's getting so crazy we're all more ready to be open to the moment and bring more love and light into the world."

For about a year now, one audio tape has been almost constantly in my car's tape deck, looping around and around when I choose to have music playing in my car. Call me arrested, but I

can't bring myself to remove this tape of Deva Premal singing ancient mantras with the contemporary musical accompaniment of her husband Miten and so, on and on, in an infinite loop it goes. Traffic gridlocks and stop-start irritations barely touch me as I cruise around in my big tin can, bathed in the sweet and joyous music this couple makes.

Remarkably, I never tire of hearing this tape, never feel jaded with it or "over it". Before being invited to interview Deva Premal for NOVA, I hadn't really stopped to wonder why her music remains so clear and fresh after all these listenings, and why my body and being seem to want me to play it again (and again), Sam. The opportunity to speak with her revealed some answers to these questions and offered a glimpse of the creative and loving heart that fills her voice with such luminosity. Deva Premal spoke to NOVA from her home in Germany before she and her musical-and-life-partner Miten made their way to Australia where they will be giving concerts and holding a weekend workshop in January.

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