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Yoga Centers Become Live Venues *Chant Artists Find New Outlets For CD Sales And Performances*

By Ray Waddell

Nashville – In a classic example of niche marketing toward a target audience, “yoga-centric” acts are taking their music to such nontraditional but logical venues as yoga centers and yoga retreats and conferences.

Kirtan chant artists like Bhagavan Das, Krishna Das, and Dave Stringer have long made their recorded music available at yoga centers. Increasingly, the trend includes live performances as well.

“It works as a lifestyle event because yoga centers play a lot of that type of music anyway,” says Jesse Lombardi, GM of Laxmi Recordings and former head of the Yoga Marketing Co. “Yoga conferences and conventions are another main draw for these artists. This is an organic thing that’s blossomed over the past few years, and it’s absolutely growing.”

BUILDING A COTTAGE INDUSTRY

Tom Frouge, GM of Triloka Records – the label for acts like Das – adds, “We have built a bit of a cottage industry on yoga centers. It’s a very targeted, attentive audience, very interested in new music.”

Carlos Menjivar, who books the talent for well-known yoga studio Jivamukti in New York, says the studio works as a venue, with capacity for as many as 500-600 people. “It’s almost like a concert hall, with a stage and a sound system. We don’t have chairs, but sometimes we use blankets for seating arrangements.”

Yoga centers can be fulfilling venues for artists. “From the perspective of a musician, these places are beautiful to play because the audience is really focused and incredibly respectful, and when things are set up right, the atmosphere is conducive to great playing,” Stringer says. “The downside is these places generally don’t have sound systems, so as a performer we have to haul around and set up [production], which adds a few more hours to our setup.” Sometimes the

concerts are free, but Menjivar says they typically charge. “If an artist like DJ Cheb I. Sabah comes in from California, he needs to be paid,” he says, certainly not sounding like a typical talent booker when he says Jivamukti has a different objective in mind than simply turning a profit.

“The main thing for us is not to bring in an artist to make a buck,” Menjivar says. “Our major concern is to make sure the artist is trying to achieve a different state of consciousness and elevate people via their music. In that way, we provide a service to the community and uplift the consciousness of the people. We want to promote peace and inner dialogue within oneself.”

Stringer built much of his yoga-center circuit by playing the retreats or conferences.



“The conferences tend to be regional, with people from a large area, and when I play I get invitations to play individual studios,” he says. “Increasingly, we’re getting yoga studios to cooperate in co-promoting shows at larger venues to bring the entire community together. We’ll get two or three yoga centers to come in together and bear the promotional and financial responsibility and hold the concert at a neutral venue.”

Peachtree Yoga owner Graham Fowler says Stringer’s fall visit was his third to the facility. Fowler has also brought in another, similar artist, Prem Joshua. “The No. 1 objective for bringing musical artists is to have fun and get people from the yoga community together in a different way from just the yoga mat,” Fowler explains. “The atmosphere and camaraderie are great.”

INTIMATE INTERACTION

Stringer notes that the center can be an avid promoter of an artist. “One of the benefits of playing these places is the crowds are intensely loyal, and we tend to build a grassroots following this way. Promotion tends to happen on a very personal basis. If my CD is playing on a local – usually NPR – station, and there is an article in the local alternative weekly, that helps, but people more often hear my music in their yoga class, played by their yoga teacher.”

Stringer says most yoga centers sell music. “They generally have a little boutique with 50 or 60 titles, and [playing the studio] means my CDs will get significantly more display and play. I’m happy to be in Barnes & Noble and Borders, but they have thousands of titles, and finding something can be difficult. At the yoga studios, I’m visible.”

Fowler explains that the live music itself generates audience involvement. “Kirtan is a call-and-response thing, and Dave will sing something and then the audience sings it back. It starts to create a feeling of, instead of the audience just receiving, actively participating in the music.”

Fowler charges \$18 per person for an artist like Stringer, who will draw 80-120 people. “I’ve yet to make any money on it, but I don’t care,” he says. “If I had my druthers, I’d make money, but the key thing is to bring people together. It’s good for business to give people the feeling that Peachtree Yoga is a good place to hang out.”