

A Musician on the Brink

by Dan Liss

Dave Stringer is a musician, singer and songwriter who will be in Atlanta as a presenter at the Southeastern Yoga Conference, August 21-25 at Stone Mountain Park (800-599-YOGA, www.southeastyoga.com), and he will also be doing a concert at Peachtree Yoga (404-847-YOGA) Saturday, August 31 at 8 pm. His new album, **Brink**, includes both original songs in English and his arrangements of traditional chants. I talked with him recently about his life and music.

How did you get interested in Indian music?

I was editing videos and movies in LA, and I worked on music between film projects, because it is episodic work. I sang in church choirs, and was classically trained. In India, I had my first experience of the use of mantras for transcendental effect. When I encountered the music, it uncovered a lot for me. I lived in India for year and a half. Spiritual music joins people's voices together for unity, so even though it was a different kind of spiritual music, I could still feel that connection.

Eastern music doesn't have same conceptions of harmony that we do; it parallels the spiritual idea of throwing aside differences to merge into one, where the western idea tries to create a greater whole by finding harmonics. The fact that the language cannot be immediately understood is an advantage, because the Sanskrit is the root language of modern languages. I write my own mantras, using emotions as my guide.

Tell me about a few of your songs.

"Checking the Arithmetic" started as just sounds that formed words, and erupted into English. Questions I was asking myself worked their way into my music. That was the same way I wrote "River," so you could say the subject arose out of nonsense sounds. Mamak Khadem from Axiom of Choice taught me Persian for "I and Me," and that was my biggest stretch because the Persian music is so different from everything else I'd been exposed to. "Corpse Waiting to Happen" is about

how we should live our lives fully but remember that even in the midst of everything, we're still just corpses waiting to happen. At first this thought depressed me, then it cheered me up. "Shivo'ham" was different. I was writing a song like that and then stumbled onto the text. All the songs in the world are already there, like a giant ocean and you can just take a bucketful.

How does your recording differ from your concerts?

I like to do call and response chants with songs in concert. If chanting is meant to alter your state emotionally spiritually, it should do that regardless of your beliefs. I ask people to throw themselves into the experience and see how that feels; the mystery lies in the sounds themselves. The experience is universal. Babies already have an inherent vocabulary. I've had gospel singers with me in concert, singing mantras. I invite people to regard it as nonsense and just enjoy themselves singing with me. I have to work a little bit at giving people permission to cross the threshold. Then we have to cross, and I find myself accompanying the audience, which raises the question: if everyone is participating, who is the audience?

People want to be engaged in ways that are more transformative. We only passive forms of entertainment during the last century. In Shakespeare's time, hecklers were common and the text allowed for that. Before CD players or satellite TV, if you wanted music you had to make it and people had instruments in the parlor.

You've got some great people with you on your CD. How did that happen?

I added more instruments to my show like bass, drums, electric guitar, so it's not exactly world music. I use ethnic instruments, and some of them are now in American vocabulary, and American musicians have added an American touch. I noticed in college that I was the only one in my class that could improvise, and

moving from classical to other forms of music freed up my musical expression, and this is also true of the ways today's musi-

cians are working with traditional ethnic instruments. I've known Suzanne Teng for a while. Greg Ellis and I were working on my recording when the first Vas record was made. I've known Hans Christian of Rasa since the 80s. They just happened to get recording contracts before me.

Do you practice yoga?

Yes, I took up yoga before I went to India because my back hurt. I had friends involved with gurus, but I was determined to stay away from that, so I at first turned down the job in India. A few months later, I was broke, so I changed my mind. While I was there listened to what was being said, absorbed concepts of eastern thought. While I was there I taught 4th grade, and looked for ways to mix music biology and other subjects. So we went out and collected water buffalo bones and made marimbas.

When I came back I did volunteer work teaching yoga, meditation and chanting to prison inmates at Terminal Island. They were good students. Because of cutbacks on recreational opportunities in the prisons, some of them turned more to spiritual pursuits, and in a way, the disciplined life in prison is conducive to yoga practice. Working on one level with kids, and on another with inmates, helped me learn to relate to wide array of audiences.

What about Brink, the title cut? What are you on the brink of?

It's about being at the threshold of discovery and transition. I don't want to say any more than that, because it would ruin the sense of mystery.

