

Wallahs to Watch



SEÁN JOHNSON

When Seán Johnson evacuated New Orleans in August 2005, he took a few changes of clothes, his harmonium, and a box of music and mystical poetry. Hurricane Katrina hit the next day. Unable to go home, Johnson embarked on a kirtan tour to raise money for hurricane relief—and to collect himself. “The kirtan was very therapeutic,” he says. His music is as much a product of his New Orleans roots as it is of formal study. “There’s music in the water, in the air, in the heat and the humidity here, and in the way people walk and talk,” says Johnson, who grew up listening to jazz, hip hop, and rock, and sang in the city’s children’s choir. In college he studied the singing style of his Irish ancestors and got hooked on Middle Eastern music. Later he apprenticed with South Indian musician and author Russill Paul. “When I lead kirtan now, it’s a really rich brew of all these traditions.”

Home Base: New Orleans, Louisiana

Website: www.seanjohnsonkirtan.com

Can’t Miss: When he’s not touring, Johnson teaches yoga and leads Monday evening kirtans at Wild Lotus Yoga, the New Orleans studio he founded in 2002. His 200-hour teacher-training program, Soul School, blends bhakti and hatha yoga. www.wildlotusyoga.com

Coming Soon: Johnson is helping raise funds to convert a 55,000-square-foot warehouse in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans into a healing center, which will include a second Wild Lotus location as well as a food co-op, an organic café, and performance and gallery spaces.

SNATAM KAUR

Snatam Kaur’s day begins at a time when many musicians are heading to bed. At 4 a.m., she and her husband begin morning *sadbhava*, two-and-a-half hours of Kundalini Yoga and chanting and prayer in the Sikh tradition. When she’s on tour, they’re joined by bandmates and crew. “As an artist, a lot of my inspiration comes at that time, a lot of the tunes and ideas for future albums,” says Snatam, who has churned out six solo albums since 2002. “It’s my well that I draw from.” Snatam’s parents turned to Sikhism shortly after she was born. She learned kirtan from her mother and musical improvisation from her father, a former manager for the Grateful Dead. Her kirtans include Gurmukhi chants drawn from Sikh scriptures and English aphorisms composed by her spiritual teacher, Yogi Bhanjan, who brought Kundalini Yoga to the West in the 1960s.



that we share are considered to be a technology of transformation—almost like opening up a medicine cabinet.”

Home Base: Espanola, New Mexico

Website: www.snatamkaur.com

Can’t Miss: Snatam will be among the musicians performing from the world’s most mystical sites as part of Project Peace on Earth, a globally telecast event scheduled for September 2009. www.projectpeaceonearth.org

Coming Soon: She will release a children’s album that includes “Feeling Good,” a song Snatam wrote at 15 and rediscovered while flipping through old journals. An accompanying DVD will feature an interactive yoga class for children.

WADE IMRE MORISSETTE

Wade Morissette had just started college when his roommate handed him a copy of *The Mystic Path to Cosmic Powers*. He dropped out; cosmic powers intrigued him more than environmental law. Over the next decade, the Ottawa native traveled to India four times, studying with yoga masters and spiritual teachers, including K. Pattabhi Jois, T. K. V. Desikachar, and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. At the Osho meditation resort in Pune, he was given the Sanskrit name Atmo Sargam, or “innermost scales of music.” Morissette had grown up in a musical household, studying piano, guitar, and a West African hand drum called *djembe*. His twin sister, Alanis, had risen to stardom singing about heartbreak and revenge scenarios. “Getting that Sanskrit name lit a fire under me,” he says. He resolved to seek God in song. “At the end of the day, it is a practice. At the end of the day, I’m really not trying to sell records.”



Home Base: Vancouver, British Columbia

Website: www.wademorissette.com

Can’t Miss: He will teach yoga and lead kirtan in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Vancouver as part of the Yoga Health Festival, a 10-city tour, September–October 2008. www.yogamonth.org

Coming Soon: Morissette’s first book, *Transformative Yoga: 5 Keys to Unlocking Your Inner Bliss*, will be published in 2009.

DAVID NEWMAN AKA DURGA DAS

Less than two months after taking the bar exam in 1992, David Newman opened a yoga center in Philadelphia. He’d give it a year, he figured, and fall back on his law degree if Yoga on Main failed. “I never had to go back to practicing law,” he says.



Krishna Das and Bhagavan Das came to sing at the studio, reawakening Newman's passion for music. Their guru, Neem Karoli Baba, "installed himself in my heart," says Newman, and chanting became the keystone of his yoga practice. "The kirtan represents my inner world, and my musical presentation represents my present incarnation as someone who's crazy about guitars and loves the singer-songwriter idiom," says Newman, who fronted bands in high school and studied music in college. His non-traditional presentation has found fans in kirtan's birthplace. Recently he signed a deal with a New Delhi-based record company to distribute his music in India.

Home Base: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

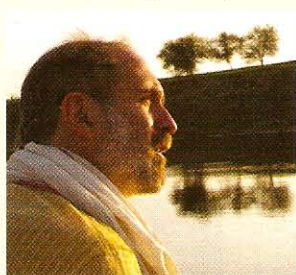
Website: www.davidnewmanmusic.com

Can't Miss: Newman and his wife, percussionist/singer Mira, will host Kirtan College, an intensive training program at Kashi Ashram in Sebastian, Florida, Feb. 14-22, 2009. www.kashi.org

Coming Soon: Newman's fifth album, his first for Vancouver-based Netzwerk Music Group, will be released this September.

SHYAMDAS

In 1972, a teenage Stephen Schaffer traveled to India seeking Neem Karoli Baba, aka Maharajji. He returned eight years later as Shyamdas, "servant of God." In



the intervening years he'd found not only Maharajji, but also a master of devotional yoga named Goswami

Prathameshji. "He was the best kirtan singer I ever met," says Shyamdas, who lived in Prathameshji's home and sang in his temple. Shyamdas spends more than half of each year in India, studying the languages, literature, philosophy, and music. He has written or translated more than 20 books about the devotional path,

which are published by an Indian press. He's a scholar who downplays the virtues of scholarliness. "Kirtan isn't about how much you know, that's for sure. Kirtan is about how much you feel."

Home Base: Upstate New York and the Vrindavan area of India

Website: www.shyamdas.com

Can't Miss: Shyamdas will host a "bhakti immersion" and kirtan weekend at Ananda Ashram in Monroe, New York, Sept. 26-28, 2008. www.anandaashram.org

Coming Soon: He plans to release an audio book about "the life of the intoxicated kirtan singer."

DAVE STRINGER



Dave Stringer didn't go to India in 1990 to find a guru. He went because he was broke and couldn't refuse a job shooting films for the first Siddha Yoga ashram.

"All the images of people sitting in meditation 'blissed out' were actually a turnoff for me rather than an enticement," he says. At the ashram in Ganeshpuri, the skeptic became an enthusiast in short order. "The experience of chanting, which was at first total nonsense to me, was strangely compelling, not only musically but in terms of how I felt—completely ecstatic," says Stringer, a trained jazz musician. About a decade after returning to Los Angeles, he traded his career in film editing for one in kirtan. "I don't ask people who come to my kirtans to believe in it. I ask them to suspend their disbelief for a long enough time to give it a go and see what happens."

Home Base: Los Angeles, California

Website: www.davestringer.com

Can't Miss: Stringer will lead chanting at the Big Island Retreat with Ram Dass and friends in Pahoia, Hawaii, Nov. 5-10, 2008. www.ramdass.org

Coming Soon: His fifth album is scheduled for release in September. Stringer's spring 2009 tour will be recorded for a live album to be released the following fall.

BENJY AND HEATHER WERTHEIMER

AKA SHANTALA

They met 10 years ago at a songwriting workshop in Portland, Oregon. (He recites the exact date



without the slightest pause.) She was a part-time folk singer as well as a therapist and yoga teacher. He'd opened for Carlos Santana, scored music for the internationally syndicated soap opera *Santa Barbara*, and studied classical Indian music with masters Zakir Hussain and Ali Akbar Khan. In 2000, the year they wed, Benjy was invited to play an Indian stringed instrument called *esraj* during the *shavasana* portion of a workshop by Anusara Yoga founder John Friend. Live accompaniment to yoga practice became a specialty of the Wertheimers, who record and tour as Shantala. The couple has released two chant albums and tours for about nine months of the year. "One of the great joys is coming back to the same locations year after year and seeing how the community is growing," says Benjy.

Home Base: Portland, Oregon

Website: www.shantalamusic.com

Can't Miss: They will accompany Anusara Yoga classes and lead kirtan at the Yoga Journal Conference in Estes Park, Colorado, Sept. 21-28, 2008. www.yogajournal.com

Coming Soon: Shantala will release *LIVE in love*, which was recorded in the summer of 2006 in a Buddhist meditation center in Portland.

"Ganapati" by Ragani,

from BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

"Ganapati" is my first pick because it invokes Ganesha, the remover of obstacles. In India, it's traditional to sing a Ganesha song at the beginning of kirtan. Ragani, an American woman, studied Indian classical music with Swami Rama and other masters. The arrangement incorporates Indian and Western instruments, the traditional call-and-response format, and non-traditional techniques like harmony. Her velvet voice is spellbinding.

"Angels' Waltz" by Sada Sat Kaur,

from ANGELS' WALTZ

Sung in the centuries-old language of Gur-mukhi, this "Govinda Hare" chant is a perfect driving song—especially for an energy boost. Kaur's commanding vocals may inspire you to belt out your own.

"Hari Krishna" by Sheetal,

from LOVE OF AGES

A heart-searing song that opens with Sheetal's haunting improvisational vocals and morphs into a longing lament. The steely quality of her voice is typical of Indian classical singers (though Sheetal is first-generation American). This slow tune is arranged in an eerie minor key.

"Govinda Jaya Jaya" by Donna De Lory,

from THE LOVER & THE BELOVED

Donna De Lory was one of Madonna's backup singers. I like her breathless vocals and artful electronica arrangement. It's a modern take on an ancient chant. One medley weaves English lines about love into the chant until it becomes a melodic tapestry.

"Aja Uttama" by Dave Stringer with

Karnamrita, from DIVAS & DEVAS

This is a fun duet. Dasi Karnamrita's classical Indian vocals are complemented by Stringer's soulful, bluesy American voice. They play off each other really well. It's an uplifting *bhajan* (devotional hymn).

"Aad Guray Nameh" by Snatam Kaur,

from CELEBRATE PEACE

There's a peacefulness and purity to this song—almost like a hymn. Kaur starts off by herself, and then a chorus joins her. The chorus becomes bigger and bigger, and the harmonies become richer and more layered until, suddenly, I feel like I've been transported to a heavenly, ethereal church.

"Govinda Hare" by Krishna Das,

from PILGRIM HEART

Some chants are imbued with a natural sweetness, and this is one of them. Das says that one of the words in this Krishna chant, "Prabhu," is a very sweet, intimate way of saying "Lord." He writes: "In this song, we sing to the great Friend, to the feeling of love that we have for our best friend." It's a song filled with longing.

"Amba Parameshwari" by Shantala,

from THE LOVE WINDOW

To me, this soothing song to the Divine Mother feels like a spiritual lullaby—very calming and comforting. Heather Wertheimer's angelic vocals enhance the mood.

"Namah Shivaya" by Pandit Rajmani

Tigunait, from PULSATION

Drawing from the oral tradition of the Himalayan sages, Pandit Tigunait preserves the meter of this Shiva mantra, so it's one of the most classical kirtan songs on our list. The chorus sticks to the main mantra, *Namah Shivaya*, while Tigunait varies his call with Sanskrit names of the Divine. It's a booming, energetic chant.

"Hari Om Shiva Om" by Deva Premal,

from EMBRACE

This chant honors Shiva and Vishnu, Premal explains in the liner notes, and "is a celebration of the masculine principle." Her rich, sensual voice brings it to life, and the atmospheric, Eastern "cool jazz" arrangement, layered with gentle percussion, bansuri flutes, and textured harmonies, casts a spell on me every time.

Listen to these songs online. Go to YogaPlus.org and click on "The Yoga+ Playlist."

To hear our top picks from the other artists profiled in this article, click on "Yoga+ Playlist: Bonus Tracks."