

Japa Liner Notes

Kirtan is a folk form that arose from the Bhakti movement of 15th century India. The Bhaktis wrote ecstatic love poems to the divine, and went around singing all the time. Their message was simple: Cultivate joy. See the divine in one another. In the eyes of Love, we are all the same. This was, and still is, a radical message. They taught Sanskrit mantras to common people using simple melodies, accompanied by handclaps and finger cymbals and drums.

Kirtan is consciousness-transformative, directing the singers to vanish into the song as drops merge into the ocean. From a linguistic perspective, Sanskrit is the mother tongue of many modern languages, and a kind of periodic table of elemental sound-meaning. The mantras are primarily recitations of names given to the divine. But perhaps the true understanding of the mantras can be found in the sense of unity, well-being and timelessness that they elicit. The mantras quiet the mind, and the music frees the heart. Ecstasy is both the process and the product.

The primary musical feature of kirtan is the use of call and response, a figure that also deeply informs bluegrass, gospel music and jazz. Kirtan is not a piece of dusty ethnomusicological taxidermy, it's a living, breathing organism spreading its genes out into the world. The Bhaktis had no use for orthodoxy. They saw the expression and form of the divine in every direction they looked. From this perspective, even music that cannot be characterized as traditional can still be expressive of the Bhaktis' original intention.

Inquiring into the origin and nature of the universe, both Western science and Eastern philosophy arrive at the obstacle of the mind. How can the mind come to see beyond itself? Is it all just a matter of chemistry? Even if it is, doesn't that deepen the mystery in unexpected new directions? Isn't it amazing that you can now look at an MRI of someone's brain, and see how chanting changes it? Singing, we move ourselves into a field out beyond questions and answers. Encountering bliss, the mind is still.

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