

Kirtanmania

Devotional Chanting Finds a Growing Home in Santa Barbara

by **Beth Taylor-Schott**

Though the evening was cold on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, somewhere between 350 and 400 people bundled up and made their way to the Warren Hall. The crowd included college students, yoga devotees mostly in their twenties and thirties, families with young children, New Age-minded baby boomers, senior citizens, and a good smattering of the general population. This group paid admission and sat, on the floor, without interruption, for more than three hours in order to participate in a sing-along. Only this wasn't just any sing-along; it was kirtan with Krishna Das.

Kirtan is a type of call-and-response chanting, a devotional form that repeats mantras or the names of Hindu deities in Sanskrit. Krishna Das is easily the most popular kirtan *wala*, or leader, around—he's been

leading kirtan in the U.S. since 1994 and has eight CDs to his name—but the kirtan movement itself has grown immensely in the last decade, developing strength and diversity. Another kirtan leader, Dave Stringer, who will perform on December 7 at Yoga Soup, has been coming to Santa Barbara two to three times a year for the last five years, and he regularly draws crowds of 100 to 150 people.

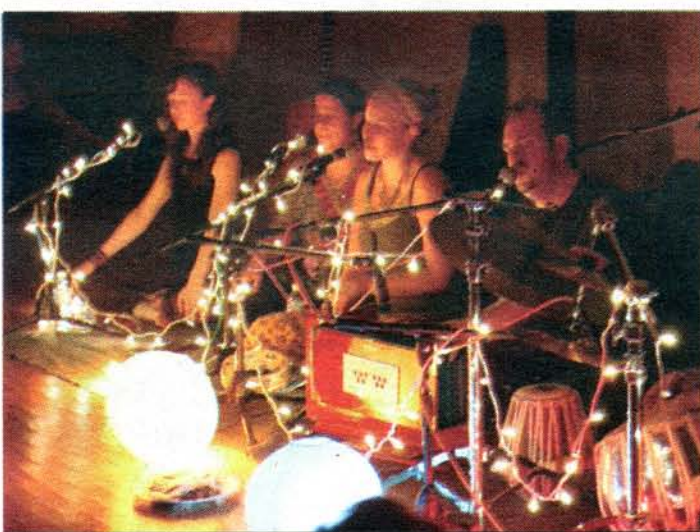
This fall has been particularly rich in kirtan in Santa Barbara. Among others, Bhagavan Das, Steve Ross, and Wah! have all recently performed at Yoga Soup. But the movement is not limited to performances by nationally and internationally known musicians. Almost every yoga studio in town offers weekly or monthly kirtan gatherings, and groups meet (at my neighbor's, and perhaps at yours) for kirtan in living rooms across the city.

There may be a particularly close fit between kirtan and the ethos of Santa Barbara.

In a recent conversation with Stringer, he insisted that "Santa Barbara has been one of the most loyal and intense crowds." As he explained, "Unlike a typical concert, a kirtan is something that people need to give themselves to. The Santa Barbara crowd is exceptionally involved. They really, really sing. They really, really dance."

The movement is also growing throughout the country and the world. Krishna Das, who usually visits Santa Barbara every year, explained his absence last year by telling the crowd that his tour used to be one big circle back and forth from California to New York, and then "other stuff happened." That other stuff, from the looks of his tour schedule, included a stop in the Bahamas and two months in Europe. Stringer just got back from Mexico City, and his current tour includes as many stops in the middle of the country as on the coasts.

Part of kirtan's popularity stems from the flexibility of the form. The contrast between Krishna Das and Dave Stringer provides a good illustration of the range of approaches. Krishna Das seemed to be leading a devotional practice for those largely already in the know. He freely told stories about his guru, and did not assure the

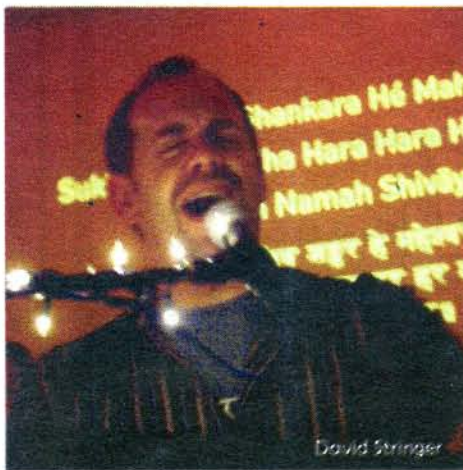


Kirtan is call-and-response chanting — shown here as practiced in Chicago — that has garnered quite a following in Santa Barbara.

crowd—as he did in the early days—that just because they were chanting *Hare Krishna* did not mean they had to wear orange sheets or shave their heads. He did not explain how to chant, and though a sheet was handed out with the words, anyone trying to follow it would have been lost, since many of the chants performed did not appear on it. Indeed, the crowd pretty much knew everything already by heart, bringing the melodies back to the ones they'd heard on the albums whenever the leader broke into anything more musically challenging.

Stringer, on the other hand, was introduced to kirtan as a musician, and he continues to be fascinated with it as an art form with its own challenges and interests. Stringer explains, "I find that focusing on it as music allows another way in for people. Before I was involved in this, if you said, 'Let me talk about my guru' or 'Let's all get spiritual,' I would have said, 'Nah, no thanks.' But when I was asked to participate in a musical experience, that was different. It easily opened a lot of doors for me." Stringer plays with a large ensemble of professional musicians and spends time explaining chanting and helping the audience see the Hindu deities referenced in the chants as metaphors for things in their own lives. Stringer insists that "yoga is not asking us to believe in things, it is asking us to experience things."

The experience of chanting is clearly one of its draws, whether you describe that experience, as Krishna Das does, as "losing yourself in love" or whether, as Stringer does, you talk about the neuro-chemical changes brought on in the brain by chanting. It's hard to resist a high that is both healthy and legal—though perhaps, judging from the enthusiasm of its fans, somewhat addictive.



David Stringer

4.1.1

Dave Stringer will be leading kirtan at Yoga Soup (28 Parker Wy.) on Friday,

December 7, from 8-11 p.m. For more information, call 965-8811.