

Raleigh - Durham, NC

Good Vibrations

By Mark Schultz

DAVE STRINGER knows he should have a New Age answer, like the sound of flowing water, when asked for his earliest musical memories.

Any answer, really, other than the real ones: the sound of his father typing and his mother vacuuming.

"Actually I find vacuums, and mechanical drones, fascinating," the Los Angeles-based composer says. "Any kind of mechanical drone like that, I find by careful listening you can hear a song in them."

In fact, Stringer, a "kirtan" or spiritual singer, says he's composed a number of chants sitting by a ventilation fan at the pool where he swims laps. Later, he'll sing them in his head as he swims from one end of the pool to the other. And then back again. Just like a chant.

Unlike singing that focuses on words, chanting emphasizes how the words make you feel as you recite them. The fact that Stringer chants in Sanskrit helps. You can't get hung up on the lyrics.

A lot of people's first experience with chanting is with Hare Krishnas at an airport, or say, East Franklin Street. Stringer knows some people probably won't come to one of his concerts because that's all they know about chanting.

"It's funny," he says. "That may have been my original introduction to it and it may have had something to do with my original resistance to it."

His resistance?

"Oh sure," Stringer says. It wasn't

until a film editing job took him to India that Stringer says, practicing yoga and chanting, he came to appreciate the ancient practices' meditative aspects.

"Yoga essentially makes the point that everyone has a spiritual component," he explains. "Yoga wasn't asking me to be specific [about a religion]. I just found that my body - in the process of confronting its limitations - ran into something spiritual."



Chanting worked the same way. Since Stringer didn't understand the mantras being recited, he initially experienced the repeated phrases as simply sounds or vibrations. He encourages his audiences to do the same.

In fact, a Dave Stringer "concert" is a free-floating experience. Last year at Triangle Yoga, with the lights dimmed and shoes off, people sat cross-legged, danced or lay back on the wooden floor as Stringer's powerful vocals washed over the room.

This year's concert will again feature group chanting but also more conventional songs off his "Brink" CD, a concession to people who've told Stringer they enjoyed the kirtan but really wanted to hear him sing alone too. He is a great singer.

Radio is beginning to pick that up. Duke's WXDU is playing "Brink," thanks to disc jockey Marty Smith, who hosts the Saturday "New Frontier" program. "There's a lot of really bland New Age music out there," Smith said. "Stringer's got a great set of pipes and knows how to use them. ... I could see this doing well on a soft rock station."

Not too long ago Stringer got a call that a classic rock station in L.A., KLOS, was playing "Hey Shiva Shankara" off his new CD in progress "Japa." (A true musician, Stringer's released a five-song version of the album because that's all he could afford to record. When he sells enough copies he'll go back into the studio to finish a full-length CD.)

That chanting is making the airwaves may seem surprising.

Not to Stringer.

"Any time you have music that has really simple words, that is really catchy, that causes people to sing along, you have the essence of great pop music," he says. "What I'm trying to do is locate kirtan within the stream of pop music. We can talk about the mantras or not talk about the mantras. The words are meaningful but also meaningless. ... It's a beautiful thing."