

# YOGAChicago

*There is no instrument which can touch you as deeply as your own voice.* — Russill Paul, Indian composer/musician

Dave Stringer is an accomplished composer, multi-instrumentalist and singer. He has a special gift for bringing people together in ecstatic chant — his own version of “kirtan” — devotional, group singing. His CD, simply titled “brink” is reflective of his depth of persona, drawing from Eastern and Western elements, bits of jazz and pop, alongside an introspective tone. It’s a very good recording. Dave works and travels with many exceptional yoga teachers including Sean Corn and Saul David Ray, Johnny Kest and Daren Friesen.

This interview took place over the phone from Dave’s home in L.A. He recently returned from three weeks touring the north and southeast regions of the U.S. He brings the experience of ecstatic change to yoga centers across the country, creating a distinctly meaningful experience for those who participate in his gatherings.

**DB:** Please talk about your start as a “kirtan” singer, as a spiritual singer.

**DS:** This “thing” started for me as a call and response singer. When I was a kid, we would sit around the campfire and play guitar . . . so in a way to sit with a group of people and get them to sing has been in my experience for a long time.

In the modern era, I ended up in an ashram in India. For many years I had been making sounds that were like mantras in my own writing. Somehow they were sounds that could speak of some state that mere words couldn’t really convey. It’s as if I could tell the truth on one level, but that would obscure the truth on another level. I could speak emotionally with truth, but that would obscure the intellectual meaning. So, I started to get involved with singing just as pure sound.

At the ashram, I didn’t understand the Sanskrit they were chanting, so I experienced it simply as sound vibration. I came to India with a little accordian and a dulcimer to keep myself

entertained. I was hired as a film editor, and really didn’t know much about ashrams, or what life would be like there. Because I was an employee of the ashram, I was a separate entity- I would sit around and listen to people chant from across the road. I would then figure out the chants on my dulcimer and accordian. Eventually, I made more steps toward “officially” learning the chants. I did a stint teaching school in India when the film editing job was done. Basically, a bunch of schoolchildren taught me the chants! That imparted the knowledge in a most simple way.

**DB:** You talk about the mantras being “simply sound” that you use



to express yourself. Tell us more.

**DS:** Here’s how I can explain it. Obviously these mantras are quite old, and all refer to different deities which we could talk about for a long time, in terms of what they “mean.” My own particular quest has been to find out how these mantras relate to me as an American. I didn’t grow up in India, so there’s a part of me that already has a different lens I’m looking through the world with. So for me to have an experience of Saraswati - I understand that she is “of the streams,” and associated with learning, speech, expression and music - but I keep trying to find an image from the world I encounter every day. I’ve begun to see Saraswati in terms of the flow

of information on the Internet, in our communications via cell phones, and in the stream of traffic going by. I’m looking to see Saraswati as part of the urban world I’m living in, and the urban world as a part of ecstatic creation.

I’m primarily teaching people to chant who have not had much experience with these deities. I ask people to focus on the sounds and the vibrations. The point of singing ecstatically is to free yourself from thinking all the time. People will come to me and say “Oh! You sang so beautifully to Krishna.” If that is their experience, it’s fine with me. The truth is when I’m really singing there’s not a thought in my head - that’s why I sing. It’s to get to a

steel guitar, and it was sublime.

What you can expect is that we are gathering to fully engage one another, but . . . there’s no audience, and no performer. I want people to express themselves ecstatically, whether that means singing really loud, clapping their hands or dancing. The way the band is playing supports this, passing the intelligence of the chant between the musicians and the crowd.

For American audiences, part of the point is to see that it’s not traditional what we’re doing, but it is authentic. To sing in call-and-response fashion is universal. What fascinates me about chanting is the way that everybody has to participate — The way it brings people together in a unified experience. We breathe together, and reach towards something ecstatic. That’s a beautiful thing.

Dave Stringer will be hosting an evening of ecstatic changes at Moksha Yoga Center (312.942.YOGA) on Saturday, November 18, and a chanting workshop the following day. This spring he will release a chant-inspired asana practice in collaboration with Yoga teacher Sean Corn, as well as a CD of his own ecstatic chants.

Dave Stringer can be contacted at [www.davestringer.com](http://www.davestringer.com)

Debi Winston-Buzil is a “Kirtan-wallah”, leading monthly Kirtans, as well as teaching Yoga at Moksha Yoga Center. She also performs as a percussionist/vocalist with Solar Tribe and Marvin Tate’s D-Settlement. Contact Debi at [devorah@interaccess.com](mailto:devorah@interaccess.com).

place beyond thought, beyond form, and singing is the only way I know how to do this.

**DB:** You will be coming to Chicago to do an evening of chanting. What can we expect during a Kirtan with Dave Stringer?

**DS:** Kirtan can deliver on what rock n’ roll promises, but never quite delivered. I use a hybrid of Western and Indian instruments, partly because the sounds of the Indian instruments speak to the beyond, and the sounds of Western instruments speak to the present. Chant is really a might river that absorbs the sounds of gospel, funk, rock, Irish folk . . . I’ve never found a music inappropriate for chant. In Nashville I had a pedal