

Chanting

in Europe and the UK

Wah! checks out the kirtan and satsang scene



The first light of day is barely visible on the horizon, when I hear the music. I am staying at Shekinashram in Glastonbury and Elahn Keshava has started the early morning chants. His melodies waft through the corridors of the converted coach house and stables, drawing my attention away from the winter cold, away from my dreams, away from my plans for today; I rush downstairs and enter the meditation room.

Elahn sits comfortably on the floor, holding the edge of the harmonium in his lap, singing quietly. Around him meditation cushions create a circle on the floor. I sit on one, others are soon taken and the circle is filled. Elahn sings a line of chant and the small gathering of ashram residents and guests sings back. The melodies wander easily into my heart, we sing and meditate together. As the sun peeks around the Tor Monument at the top of the hill, our hour of chanting and thirty minutes of silent meditation come to a close. We gather in the kitchen and share breakfast and great conversation. Is it such an unusual way to start the day? Apparently not. Many people in Europe and the UK are using mantra and meditation to enhance the quality of their lives.

Craig Pruess, film composer for *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Pride and Prejudice*, believes in the healing potential of music. Music is made of sound vibrations, and vibrations are the intelligence which creates life, says Pruess. A physicist will demonstrate that the body is mostly empty space and what we put in that empty space determines who we are, what kind of day we have and what we accomplish in this life. According to Pruess, "If there is coherent, life-supporting vibration introduced into a person's life (through music, good company, or the healing elements of nature) then harmony and balance will prevail.

Music has a big role to play here." According to Pruess, each of us has the capacity to "tune ourselves up" each day, elevating our minds and hearts to help us through our tasks in balanced, blissful and beautiful ways.

Pruess uses mantra to elevate, both in his personal practice and his day to day work recording, composing, arranging and performing. Elahn Keshava leads the Glastonbury community in chant every day. Deva Premal and Miten perform mantras at evening gatherings all over the world, joining people together and creating

blissful vibration through song. Chloe Goodchild performs and gives sound workshops, helping others use their voices as tools for healing. Greek recording artists Satyaa and Pari add grooves to mantras, making singing fun, juicy, accessible. What do all these artists from different countries and varying musical styles have in common? Many of them learned chant and meditation in India.

Deva Premal and Miten, who have spent the last fourteen years creating CDs and concerts of sacred music, remember their time in India. "Our teacher gathered with us for an hour in silence with eyes closed in meditation and music would sporadically fill the silence... Everything was so silent! You'd be aware of the birds singing, the wind in the trees... the rickshaws honking outside the ashram gates... everything was contained in the silence of the meditation," says Miten, who plays guitar for the duo.

"When we returned from India, we saw so many people hungry for the silent moment. We created an invitation for people to open up to the chant. We didn't get technical; everyone was included. Once our voices opened up, our hearts opened, the tears of joy would come... and eventually, harmony and a disap-

pearing into song would take place." Deva Premal and Miten had many loving and blissful moments in India at the ashram, experiencing Sufi dance, silent meditation, and chant. "When we left India, our intention was to re-create the vibe of those amazing Sufi dances. We wanted to share the joy and depth that we ourselves had experienced in those meditations."

Chloe Goodchild went to India after learning classical Indian vocal music in the UK. She was led to the devotees of female saint Ananda Mayi Ma and experienced a transformative 'no mind' experience while she was there. Although much of Goodchild's life has been involved in facilitating voice and sound workshops in UK, Europe, Ireland, USA and Canada, it was her experience in India which proved a turning point and which laid the groundwork for her book "The Naked Voice" and subsequent CDs.

Temporary deafness in childhood led Goodchild deeper into the path of sound. She used mantra and chanting because it calmed the nervous system, opened the heart for deeper self-awareness and stronger witness consciousness (observing and listening to oneself and others without judgment). Says Goodchild, "Mantras are words



of power; they are vibrational medicine and have the ability to shift negative emotions into positive human feeling.

Chanting is effortless, relaxing and uplifting in the midst of life's pressures and tensions. The simple recurring melodies of devotional chants and mantras are accessible to singers and non-singers alike." Her performance for HH the Dalai Lama during his peace talks in Belfast and collaborations with Coleman Barks, the Rumi poet, as well as a host of jazz musicians, film composers, and stage artists has brought her healing vocals to a wide variety of audiences.

Satyaa and Pari were born in Greece, but their longing drew them to Lucknow in India, where they experienced chant and meditation as an ongoing daily lifestyle. "Our teacher was a Krishna bhakta (devotee) throughout his life and loved bhajans and chanting very much. On many occasions, he called for us to sing for the people gathered there. Singing in front of our teacher, a self-

realised being, was the most transforming experience for us." As they tour Europe offering chant and mantra, they feel a continued connection to divine happiness through song. "Because we are singing we're getting happiness, and because we are happy, we just have to sing! It is both the cause and effect of our divine happiness! It is great to sing and feel your own heart dancing in your chest and feeling how this dance expands and touches others."

So is chanting a group you belong to? Do you have to sign up at the door? Give away all your possessions? Satyaa Pari put it this way, "Music and love are universal. Europeans like to chant and to sing to God – which in essence is their own heart – because they have a thirst, a desire to find a source of deeper happiness within themselves. We see this thirst in people everywhere we travel!" Meditation and mantra chanting leaves a melody that lingers in the heart.

Anyone from any walk of life can benefit from its practice. The



chants have a positive, healing vibration which can linger in the body/mind for hours, days, even weeks after chanting. Indeed, the experience that these artists have had with various yoga masters, gurus and saints has left a lifelong impression on their hearts so much so, that they want to come out and share it with people everywhere. "Singing with people creates a feeling of intimacy that is very dear to us," says Satyaa and Pari, "It is our main focus." The gift of love and presence they received from their own teacher allows them to connect with people from all walks of life. There is no group to sign up for, no lifelong commitments - just pay at the door and enjoy the evening.

The Singing Buddhas gather in a hip commercial area in the center of Zürich, converted many years ago from an old factory into shops, offices, and a dance/yoga space where Singing Buddhas perform. Veetkam Strickler, Pedro Hasler, Nutan Bloch and Anugraha Hamblin lead songs, chants, and Sufi dances to cre-

ate sacred space for their participants. "Remembering the happenings of song and dance with Peter Makena in the late Seventies we wanted to gather again and sing. We started coming together privately and it was very popular. Eventually it grew to seventy people and we needed a suitable space that could accommodate all friends of song and celebration," says Veetkam Strickler, percussionist for the group. Offering a monthly program on Fridays and two weekends a year, the Singing Buddhas give chanters in Zürich a place to gather and meditate.

All these performers had an experience of meditation that changed their lives. From it, came a unique form of musical sharing. Many call it kirtan, a call and response style of chanting. Others call it satsang, a gathering for meditation. These artists focus on bringing healing and sacredness into people's lives. You can find them this summer at festivals and performance venues.



Elahn Keshava www.shekinashram.org
 Craig Pruess www.heaven-on-earth-music.co.uk
 Deva Premal & Miten www.mitendevapremal.com
 Chloe Goodchild www.thenakedvoice.com
 Satyaa Pari www.satyaa-pari.com
 Singing Buddhas www.singingbuddhas.ch

Kirtan takes place every Friday night at: Shekinashram, Dod Lane, Glastonbury 7.30pm - 9.30pm. No charge.

Wahl is a musician, writer, healer and spiritual seeker who travels the world singing and expanding sacred intention. You can reach her through www.wahmusic.com

Summer festivals of sacred music! Come check it out!

Rainbow Festival (Baden Baden, Germany) 14-18 May 2005
www.rainbow-spirit.com (English, French)
www.rainbow-spirit.de (German)
 Performers: Satyaa Pari (chanting), Peter Makena (chanting), Grooving Spirit (spirit-pop-music), Stephen Walters (satsang singing), Christian Bollmann and Chris Amrhein (overtone singing).
 Glastonbury Music Festival (Glastonbury, UK) 24-26 June, 2005 www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk
 Rumour has it that 2005 will offer a full day of sacred music on one of the stages.
 No Mind Festival (Ångsbacka, Sweden) 8-15 July 2005 & 16-23 July 2005
 Performers: Danny Becher (chanting), Chris James ("Big Sing"), Eric Roche (guitar), Pernilla (tone healing)
www.angstacka.se