

At one with the spirit of the music

When Krishna Das performs his yogic chanting for an audience, he sees it as a meditative way of entering the divine presence — and living out his rock 'n' roll fantasy.

By DON HECKMAN
Special to *The Times*

A performance by Krishna Das is filled with an atmosphere of spiritual togetherness. His warm, dark-timbred voice leads the way through the *kirtan*, or melodious chanting that is part of the path of devotional yoga, as his listeners eagerly participate in the call-and-response patterns of the music.

Given the joyful, meditative aspects of his performances as well as his recordings, his name and his years of apprenticeship in India, some audiences find it surprising to learn he was born in New York and raised on Long Island as Jeffrey Kagel and that he whimsically describes his performances as “just rock 'n' roll, essentially.”

Das' latest CD, “All One,” scheduled for release Aug. 9, places him in an environment that leans strongly in that direction. Co-produced with Walter Becker (Steely Dan), Jay Messina (Aerosmith) and David Nichtern (who wrote “Midnight at the Oasis”), the album — his fifth studio recording — features Das' vocals with Becker playing bass, Nichtern on guitar, Rick Allen (Def Leppard) on drums and Ty Burhoe on tablas, plus a choir of 70 voices and a 20-piece orchestra.

The title reflects the unification of the four parts of what is essentially a suite via a single unifying melody. But “All One” also has a deeper significance for Das, tracing to his years of study in India.

“It really comes,” he says, “from what my guru used to say to us all the time, which is that everything is all one, and all paths lead to the same goal, and we are all one. If there was one teaching that he stressed, it was that everybody is part of the same family, that we have the same blood in our veins and that we are all one. So since it is all one song, really, I thought it would be fun to use that phrase.”

Recorded in three days, the music blends Das' mesmerizing vocals with genre-crossing layers of accompaniment.

“It was a joy to do,” says Das, 58. “Everybody there was such an extraordinary musician, so far overqualified. I'm the slimer in this kind of gathering, you know. All I do is play a few chords and moan and groan, but these guys can really play. Every day when Walter, Jay and the others walked back in the studio, I'd say, 'Wow. You came back!' So I was getting to live out my rock 'n' roll fantasy. I grew up in the '50s and '60s with the Shirelles — all that stuff.”

More meditation than music

WHAT he really refers to has less to do with musical similarities than it does with what he views as a sense of community.

“In India,” Das continues, “this practice of *kirtan* is done with groups of people and has been for a long time. I really am not a performer. This is meditation. There's music involved. But the words are the sacred names of the divine. And every time I sit down, I am trying my best to enter into that presence within me.”

For Das, entering “that presence” is an essential part of the devotional bhakti yoga practice he began to study in the early '70s. After meeting spiritual leader Ram Dass, he traveled to northern India, where he spent two years as a disciple of his guru, Mahara-ji Neem Karoli Baba, who gave him his new name.

Das returned to the U.S. in 1973, the year of Mahara-ji's death, and in 1990 helped found the world music label Triloka. Five years later he began to release a regular series of recordings on a nearly annual basis, chronicling both studio and live appearances.

“My performances,” he says, “are very much about me doing my practice, a way of clearing out the dark places in my heart. I sit down, I start pumping my harmonium, and I close my eyes and sing. If there are 10 people there or 1,000, it doesn't really change what I do.”

“So how incredible it is that I get to do my practice so many times a week, with so many people. And, of course, because I'm in front of people, I really have to try, don't I? I want to sound good, and I want them to like me, so I really have to try.”



Courtesy HWT

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