



**SELF-EXPRESSION:**  
Some 1,200 people  
participated in a choral  
session in New York City

Buzil, "embodies the music and embraced God." The chants' Sanskrit lyrics were projected on the wall via PowerPoint. When Moksha held its first kirtans four years ago, 10 people would show up; today the sessions regularly draw 80. "This is the most happy-producing thing that I know right now," says Mark Rubin, a lawyer. "It is a combination of grounding and ecstasy."

Aaron Reed, a computer specialist in Los Angeles, attends kirtans led by Stringer. "It's like a rock concert," Reed says. "Dave infuses it with rock 'n' roll, soul and the blues." Reed notes, however, that at a rock concert, the audience gazes up at a performer

## SOCIETY

## Can You Sing Om?

Western practitioners are putting a new spin on the call-and-response yogic chant known as kirtan

By MICHELE ORECKLIN

IF HE WANTED TO, THE MUSICIAN who calls himself Krishna Das could not hide the fact that he was born on Long Island as Jeff Kagel. For one thing, there's his undeniably white skin, and when he sings in Hindi or Sanskrit, he does so with an undeniably American accent. But Das, who is known as K.D., has no desire to hide his New York roots or the fact that his musical style owes as much to the blues as to his Indian guru, Neem Karoli Baba.

K.D. is a practitioner of kirtan, devotional chanting, which originated as a component of the religious form of yoga known as Bhakti and is conducted by call and response. Chanters repeat short phrases over and over, invoking the names of Hindu gods. With the current embrace of all things yoga in this country, the ancient ritual is enjoying a vogue, and as practiced by K.D. and other prominent American performers, it has taken on a decidedly Western slant. While Jai Uttal (né Doug Uttal), Bhagavan Das (born Michael Riggs) and

Dave Stringer (his real name) chant in Hindi and Sanskrit, all incorporate Western instruments and melodies on their CDs and in their live performances at yoga centers and small arenas around the country.

In addition to the traditional accompaniment of harmonium and tabla (Indian drums), Stringer employs electric guitars and violins. Uttal frequently underscores his chanting with riffs reminiscent of bluesgrass and reggae. "You can sing chants the way they are sung in India," says K.D., whose last album, *Door of Faith*, was produced by kirtan devotee Rick Rubin, who has worked with Johnny Cash and the Beastie Boys. "However, I was born in America—I grew up on rock 'n' roll—and my natural musical emotions are different from an Indian person's."

This appeal to American sensibilities seems to be connecting with audiences eager for spiritual experiences. At a kirtan at the Moksha Yoga Center in Chicago, musicians played mandolin and acoustic guitar. An altar was set up with candles, fruit and a picture of Jimi Hendrix, who did not practice kirtan but, according to chant leader Debi

onstage, while at a kirtan, everyone participates. "It's empowering to sing with others who experience the process with you," says Reed. Greg Wendt, a financial adviser in Los Angeles, explains that kirtans allow him to "spend time with people on a spiritual path and share that passion with our voices."

Wendt says that when he chants, "the stress melts in my body and I feel this opening in my heart." But whether he is actually practicing kirtan is a matter of debate. Georg Feuerstein, founder of the Yoga Research and Education Center near Redding, Calif., says kirtan is an exclusively Hindu practice in which believers praise gods to whom they are devoted. He contends that although non-Hindus or those who do not understand what they are chanting may experience a quasi-religious feeling, "the traditionalist would want to know why divine Hindu names are being used for that purpose."

Joyce Schmidtbauer, a commercial producer in Los Angeles, says she benefits from not understanding the words. "My mind won't hold on to the meaning," she says. "Instead, it just becomes sounds that I know have power and are prayerful." K.D. agrees. "It is the very unfamiliarity of the language that stops the mind," he says. He is unapologetic about his American adaptations of the music. "As my path got deeper, the melodies came out in a more natural way for my incarnation," he says. "And I am arrogant and dull and stubborn and lazy enough to just let that happen." What could be more American than that?

—With reporting by Sally Duros/Chicago and Stacie Stukin/Los Angeles

**CHANTERS REPEAT SHORT PHRASES INVOKING THE NAMES OF HINDU GODS**