

# Inside the Chant with Krishna Das

## Kirtan Music Transports Listeners to a Deeper Place

by Robin Fillmore

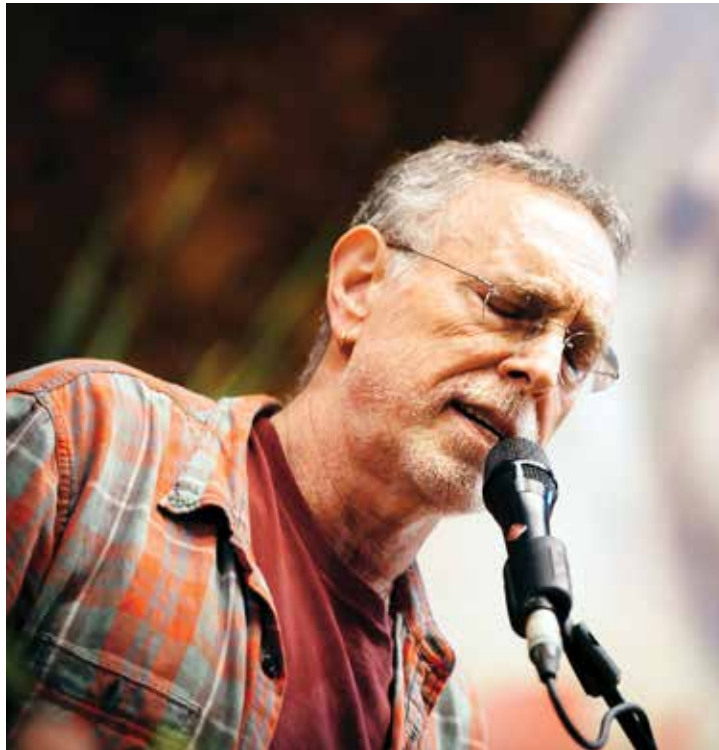


Photo by Payal Kumar

Influential spiritual leader Ram Dass has described Krishna Das (Jeffrey Kagel) as an example of someone whose “heartsongs” open channels to God. The Grammy-nominated kirtan artist, long considered yoga’s rock star, consistently plays to sold-out crowds worldwide. The Long Island native’s journey has gone from being a member of a popular rock band to going to India, where as a student of spiritual leader Neem Karoli Baba, the trajectory of his life and music shifted and expanded.

His 1996 debut album, *One Track Heart*, focused on updated chants from the ancient tradition of bhakti yoga, followed in

1998 by *Pilgrim Heart*, with a guest appearance by Sting. Since then, a steady stream of 14 albums and DVDs produced on his own label have provided the soundtrack for yoga classes everywhere; the soothing rhythmic chants performed in a deep, rich timbre complements instruction in the spiritual element of the exercise.

Das’ specialty, kirtan, updates an ancient tradition of devotional chanting as meditation accompanied by instruments. A kirtan concert invites audience members to join in the experience through chanting, clapping and dancing and is characterized as a journey into the self that also connects us with each other.

### **How would you introduce your music?**

Across the country and around the world, yoga practitioners are chanting the names of God in tongues including Sanskrit, Hindi, Punjabi and English. They're taking kirtan music out of the temples and the yoga studios and into dance halls, universities, cathedrals and other unexpected places.

In the last decade, India's traditional call-and-response form of chanting has been reinvented by modern devotional artists blending traditional kirtan with modern genres such as rock, rhythm and blues, hip-hop and electronica—breathing new life and devotion into yoga's sacred chants.

### **What does kirtan mean to you?**

For me, kirtan is all about the music. The more ways I practice sustainable health, balance, love and music and immerse myself in a spiritual life, the more I realize that all issues distill down to simple facts. Everyone wants to be loved and happy, and to avoid suffering and being judged.

Looking at our lives, we start to see how we hurt ourselves and others and how what happens to us in daily life can

be difficult to deal with. We recognize that we must find deep inner strength so we don't get destroyed by the waves that come and try to toss us around.

Little by little, all of our awakening practices work to transform our life. They move us from being externally oriented and reactive to being established within and quietly responsive. We come to have a wider view that life can effectively contain and envelop the different facets of ourselves and the world.

### **Why do many consider a kirtan event a transcendent experience far beyond the music?**

There are two things: the music and where the music is carrying us. In this case, it's the names of God, of divinity, that are real and inside us. We can call this higher sense anything we like and aim in that direction according to how we identify with it.

If we want peace in the world, then every individual needs to find peace within. We can't create peace or happiness with anger and selfishness in our heart and mind. We can release ourselves from a limiting storyline, whatever it is, and touch a

deeper place for a while. Then, when we return to our day, we are standing on slightly different ground because we have trained ourselves to let go a little bit. It's a gradual process that takes time and effort, but it's a joyful practice.

### **Do you see a shift in thinking echoing that of the 1960s that positions us to do better this time?**

In the 1960s, everyone thought they were going to change the external world, but they forgot they have to change themselves, too, and little work was done inside. Today, while most people keep trying to first rearrange the outside world, more are now doing the necessary inside work, as well.

The key is to understand what's truly possible. If we don't understand how we can be happy and at peace in the middle of a burning fire, we won't recognize the tools available to create that kind of light for ourselves and others.

*Robin Fillmore is the publisher of the Natural Awakenings of Washington, D.C. edition.*