

Kathleen Karlsen bridging traditions with Shakti Bliss Kirtan

By Rachel Hergett Ruckus Editor Mar 8, 2019



Once upon a time, Kathleen Karlsen would chant over a hibachi grill on her back porch in Virginia, putting into the fire thoughts she no longer wanted to hold. Then school started and she forgot about the chanting.

For the next 20 years, Karlsen's life was full of other things to fulfill her spiritual side. Then, a man who had just returned from India would offer up a chant at a Christmas party in Bozeman and invite others to join in.

"It was very different in a group verses the porch by myself," Karlsen said. In chanting, she found connection.

"I don't have a guru," Karlsen said. "I don't have a particular church I'm a part of at this point in my life. ...All those years I tried all different kinds of practices. This one was not just intellectual. I could feel it."

Kirtan is a Sanskrit word meaning "telling" that refers to shared recitation. There are different forms and practices of kirtan, some with religious and spiritual affiliations.

"Millions of people in the world over thousands of years have had some type of chanting practice," Karlsen said.

Karlsen said she isn't a "yogi-type person" and can't get into a lotus position, so her form of kirtan focuses on the connection within the group, as the act of chanting becomes a form of meditation. Kirtan, she said, has been shown to be useful in group therapy, as natural rhythms like heartbeat and breath sync.

"You just sit here and sing," Karlsen said. "It really does shift your brain chemistry."

Over the last three years, Karlsen has rediscovered her own identity, beyond that of a mother to five children ages 13 to 26.

"Finding your voice is a metaphor for finding who you are," she said.

Karlsen prefers to write chants in other languages, as the English-speaker's brain becomes more engaged when hearing words in their native language. She wants the chants to focus more on the sound and the practice. She draws from Christian and Buddhist and Hindu traditions, often focusing on the natural world.

"Most kirtans are a very eastern form," Karlsen said. "But you can do the same thing in any tradition, or no tradition."

In practice, Karlsen is the driving force and songwriter behind Shakti Bliss Kirtan, a band featuring her husband, Andrew, on recorder and udu drum, Marius Michael-George on tabla drums, vocalist Mahimi Giri, bassist Paul Bohak and multi-instrumentalist Leticia Iniguez, who plays violin, cello and flute with the band.

Karlsen leads the chants and plays a harmonium, also known as a pump organ. The instrument, she said, is "sort of the backbone" of kirtan.

The music is forgiving, often circular and invites each attendee to join in. "You don't have to have the best voice, you don't have to have an operatic voice," said Giri. "Just sing as you are."

To lead Shakti Bliss, Karlsen said she had to get over the fact she's not, nor will be, a professional singer. She had to learn to overcome her fear of public speaking, to use microphones and talk in public to give song explanations. Each was a challenge.

"It's a testament to the fact that I love this so much," she said.

In addition to ongoing Shakti Bliss performances, Karlsen released a book this week, "Vocal Medicine: Transformation Through Sound," which talks about the power of the music.

"The practice of singing is a very basic human thing," Karlsen said. "It's like dancing."

Attendees at kirtan events are invited to dance, or make any other motions, should the music move them.

"There's kind of a whole kirtan movement happening," said Bohak. "It's becoming more popular."

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