

## **Souls lifted in songs of praise**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

I AM with a group of people who have gathered to sing devotional music. Music that praises God. Praises existence.

Such music has become increasingly popular all over the world. In America, and on our own shores, there is a huge resurgence of interest in gospel music. In California and New York a form of Hindu chanting known as Kirtan has taken off with small, non-commercial artists such as Jai Uttal and Krishna Das finding their albums being picked up all over the place.

Meanwhile it is becoming increasingly common to find hymns by Gregorian monks, or spiritual music from, say, 12th-century nuns, being mixed and fused with more contemporary rhythms or harmonies and put on to commercial CDs.

Aboriginal, shaman and African tribal prayers are being dubbed on to popular albums in a bid to reach the spiritual essence, along with sacred Sufi music. Buddhist chanting is attracting widespread interest around the world. The Gyuto Monks of Tibet have been touring here with great success, teaching and singing their low-octave chants.

It seems devotional music has finally left the pews and the temples, left behind the blue-rinse set, or the choirboys in their lovely white tunics, and done what it had always done in the black church groups in the US, become funky. Praising the lord has never been so much fun. Nowadays it is common to walk into a cafe, or party, and find devotional world music being chanted and hummed by the hip, the groovy or the inspired.

So I've come to join a choir and sing praises to heaven. The choir I am with for the week is basically gospel. Which means that the name Jesus is mentioned continually. But those people who are non-denominational or who, like me, call God by another name - can replace the name Jesus in their mind with their own version of the source: Allah, Brahma, goddess, the universe, as they sing a prayer to the loving energy that sustains us all. The creator, with all its earthly names and incarnations.

The point isn't whether you are banging a tribal drum and worshipping nature or chanting Om in praise of Hindu or Buddhist deities, you are raising your voice in joyous praise, and as they say in gospel circles: "Mamma, it feels so good." World-renowned choir director and singer Tony Backhouse, who has taught gospel and other forms of music for 15 years, agrees there is a resurgence of interest in devotional music, with people gathering in choirs around the country as never before. "Part of the growing fascination comes from spiritual hunger."

He says people want to pray. "But many of us have been inoculated against worshipping via song by having small doses of drab singing in our churches and temples during childhood."

But, he says, in recent years people are realising the joy of lifting their voices. "It's not only devotional song that's exciting people spiritually. Singing anything puts us in touch with a deeper part of existence. When you sing, your heart is

filled with love and expansive joy. It reaches straight to the essence of things, call it God or self."

So I'm sitting here raising my voice with the group. Lately I've been buying Kirtan albums, listening in bliss to the chants, feeling myself moving towards unearthly joy. But there is nothing in the world like singing oneself, in a good choir. It's like reading about sex versus having it.

Surrounded by many voices, all lifted to the heavens, all in different harmonies, answering yours, joining yours, other people gazing into your eyes, a public piercing of souls: it's the reason we give thanks. For this closeness, this intimacy with other humans, this ability to connect, share our ecstasy with each other, merge as we create joyous sound.

I had a similar experience in a recent yoga class when the teacher, herself a huge fan of devotional music, encouraged us to chant. As we joined her, the energy rose higher, higher, and the voices become more passionate, more intense. Those who dared open their eyes were smitten with the realisation that no one is really separate. We are all God's children, birthed from the same source.

Perhaps it is a chemical release that comes from lifting the voice, perhaps it is a euphoria that comes from breathing in more oxygen as one does during song, but something otherworldly is happening to us choir singers. It is in our eyes, our voices, the expression of bliss on our faces.

And I just want to tell people who may be frightened to sing praise because of bad childhood experiences: move on. Move. Groove with it. Because you are missing out on the greatest high on earth.

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