

CD REVIEW by Merle Molofsky

GATHERING IN THE LIGHT: BAIRD HERSEY & PRANA WITH KRISHNA DAS

Produced by Baird Hersey Bearsville, NY 20007 www.pranasound.com

Baird Hersey founded the choral group Prana. Hersey and Prana perform using throat singing techniques that originated in Asia. Tibetan monks use throat singing as do cultures from regions such as Tuva, and the altai region of Siberia. The throat singers of Tuva are known for their virtuosity. Other cultures such as the Inuit and the Xhosa, and other African tribes, also use throat singing techniques.

The film Genghis Blues is a documentary about the American blues singer Paul Pena, who first heard throat singing on his short wave radio, and who traveled to Tuva to enter the Tuvan throat singing contest. It is a marvelous introduction to throat singing, as well as a tribute to Paul Pena.

Baird Hersey is a master of throat singing, and trained his chorus, Prana, in these techniques. Throat singing is the production of overtones, harmonics using vocal chords. Once a throat singer sings a tone, he/she then produces the harmonic tone, the overtone with that note, singing both tones at once. Most singing techniques involve shaping notes by shaping the mouth. Throat singing also shapes the throat as well as the mouth. In addition to using the throat's resonant capability, throat singing involves tongue, jaw, velum, larynx, and lips. Hersey and Prana are masterful throat singers.

Krishna Das has dedicated his vocal talent to chanting the names of Deity. Specifically, he chants the names of Hindu deities, using traditional Hindu chants and traditional Hindu chant technique. He also composes his own chants. He is a star of the kirtan circuit. kirtan is a sacred chanting assembly. People get together to chant the names of God and other ritual chants.

Together Hersey, Prana, and Krishna Das create a synergy of sacred sound.

Krishna Das is a chosen name. Das means servant in Hindu. Krishna Das means servant of Krishna. Thus Krishna Das serves Krishna by chanting Krishna's name. Krishna Das serves God by chanting the names of God. The practice of kirtan involves studying the names of God. It is a form of devotion involving singing and teaching.

Of interest in understanding what Krishna Das has accomplished is some background. Before he changed his name, his original name is Jewish. His birth name is Jeffrey Kagel. He chants the names of God. Why are Jews forbidden to say the name of God? The tetragrammaton, the four letter name of God often rendered in English is Yahweh or Jehovah. To name something is considered in Judaic thought an attempt to control that thing. In Genesis, God gives Adam dominion over the animals, by telling him to name the animals. To name God is an attempt to control God. In the time of the first Temple, God's name was not limited to four letters, but actually was 72 letters long. 72 is a sacred number, with special significance in Judaism. In traditional Jewish thought the letter chai is the number 18, and means life. Thus 18 multiplied by four is 72. The sacred name of God is multiplied by life. God's creation, human souls, are reflections of the divine illumination God shares with his creation. In addition to the sacred significance of 72, another name of God can be rendered as 13 times two, or 26.

In the time of the temple only temple high priests were permitted to pronounce God's name. They had studied all 72 letters, the sequencing, and the intonation, traditional cantillation of God's name. And much more, including the meaning of each letter, and the meaning of such letters in various combinations. This is related to Kabbalic thought.

The high priests are called Cohenim. Cohen is a familiar Jewish name. People with the name Cohen or variations of such are descendents from the high priests. Krishna Das's original name, Kagel, is a variation on Cohen. Therefore he is descended from this priestly caste with permission to chant God's name. Thus his calling today, a kirtan chanter invoking the names of God through song, is the same calling as that of the high priests of the temple during the time of Moses and Aaron and thereafter.

What I find fascinating about this is the notion of identity. Whether or not Krishna Das is conscious of the meaning of his original name or the link between being a kirtan chanter of the names of Hindu gods and a high priest of ancient temple times in Jewish tradition, with the specialized knowledge of the names of God, somehow the dual identity exists. A part of me wonders whether DNA is manifesting in his destiny.

Of course how we form our sense of ourselves, how we consolidate our identity, how we discover our true selves, is integral to all human experience and to psychoanalytic thought. Yet in this special instance something unusual exists. A gifted singer and a deeply spiritual person has created an aspect of his identity integral to himself. Remarkable!

The music on the CD is compelling and engaging and spiritual. When I first heard the CD, I said to myself, and then to others, this music is a pathway to God. Krishna Das's voice is a path to God as is the impact of the synergy between his chanting and the work of Baird Hersey and Prana.

Calling something a path to God is a bit of a statement. A touch of hyperbole, a very personal comment. My intention is to communicate a spiritual experience. As if the blend of voices and the impact of throat singing in this context is an invitation to a contemplation of the nature of reality and the significance of the sound of the human voice and the intricacy of musical composition and the raising of the voice.

Voice is breath. Prana means breath. In religious traditions breath is life. In biology breath is life. In creation myths deity breathes life into the inanimate clay that becomes the human being and the informed soul.

Breath invokes the wind. Winds blow all over the world, bringing air from one part of the world to another. Breath, sound, particularly speech communicates ideas, bringing minds into contact with each other. Singing and speech keep us in contact with each other's hearts and minds. Breath also is procreative. In some cultures procreation was thought to take place through the wind, that a woman conceived a child with the wind. Breath not only is life, breath creates life. When a baby is born, we make sure the baby is breathing and breathe into the baby's lungs if necessary. Breath resurrects.

The impact of throat singing creates the impression that not only a human voice is involved but that other instruments are being played. People sometimes think they are listening to flutes or pipes or whistles or something electronic. What they are hearing is the human voice interacting with itself! A gifted throat singer can sing a harmonic line along with the melody line she or he is

singing. Of course throat singing also is interactive with other singers. Several throat singers singing together create melodic and harmonic structure with each other. But a throat singer also creates a melodic and harmonic structure only with the singer's own voice.

As well, the intake of breath is audible and meaningful in listening to the CD. Members of Prana, the throat singing chorus, can be heard inhaling during performance. Therefore the listener becomes aware of the meaning of the intake of breath. Not only does breath create the sound of the music, it creates the communication between performer and performer as they key off each other, and the communication between performer and listener.

For me, what is communicated is wonder, the wonder of what is carried by sound, speech, music – meaning.

I have emphasized the spiritual aspect of this music, for good reason. The music itself is intended as a spiritual activity and communication. Discussing spiritual states in a psychoanalytic forum is not easy to do. Defining a spiritual state is not easy. I will make an attempt: a spiritual state is an awareness of connection and meaningfulness and being part of the great pattern of being.

A spiritual state can be considered a psychological state and an experience that many people seek in many forms. People seek spiritual experience through contemplation, meditation, communion, nature, love, thought, intellectual undertakings, creative activity, play, work, interaction with others. I believe that feeling connected underlies the desire to experience spirituality.

Perhaps music like Gathering in the Light can be used and understood as a means of considering what informs the human heart, mind, and soul. We seek light.

Why is light such a powerful metaphor? Light sustains life.

I hope others will be curious to travel the road that this CD offers.

-Merle Molofsky

Merle Molofsky, psychoanalyst and poet, serves on the boards of IFPE and NAAP and the editorial board of The Psychoanalytic Review. Her articles have appeared in The Psychoanalytic Review and Journal of Religion and Health. Merle Molofsky is a published poet. Her play, "Koolaid," was produced at Lincoln Center.