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05:20 a.m. January 16, 2004
Ragani's voice inspires local kirtan craze
 By **Molly Snyder Edler**

On a warm summer night, during the height of festival season, almost 200 people file into the North Shore Presbyterian Church (4048 N. Bartlett Ave.) for a unique spiritual experience called kirtan.

From the Sanskrit word for singing, kirtan is a style of chanting that originated in East India and is one of the world's oldest forms of spiritual music.

Traditionally, kirtan is call-and-response devotional chanting with a leader singing a simple Sanskrit mantra and the group repeating it. Ideally, by repeating the words, kirtan participants mentally travel to an experience of pure consciousness.



According to Ragani, who started the East Side Kirtan Ensemble in 1999 and leads the group, Milwaukee has an impressive kirtan appreciation.

"This place we live is not called the heartland by chance. There's something about Midwesterners that really strikes me as warm and sincere in a down-to-earth manner," says the 37-year-old South Bend native. "At the same time, they are visionaries. Look at the number of musicians who started in Milwaukee: Violent Femmes, Talking Heads, BoDeans, among so many others.

"There's lots of shakti (energy) is this land, though it may not be apparent on the surface. Lots of Native American sacred land here. There's something about this area of the country that is good soil for creations."

This first kirtan event was in September 2001, with 40 people in the audience. The second month, there were 61 and today, there are between 180 and 200 people every month and it is still growing. Because of the popularity of the event, it has changed locations twice and probably will move once again in the future.

Ragani, born Julie Ann Hobing, was raised in an Indiana household that valued spirituality, yoga, meditation, homeopathy and vegetarian eating during the late '70s when such a lifestyle was not understood by mainstream America.

"I remember when my grandmother used to 'sneak' ham into our sandwiches because she was afraid that we wouldn't grow up strong," says Ragani, who changed her name to Julie Ragani Buegel in the early '90s. (Buegel is her husband Dale's name and "Ragani" was given to her by her guru, legendary

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SOUND CAPSULES



Barry Brown -- Rich Man Poor Man: 1978-

1980 (Moll Selekta)

This German label has been issuing some great discs full of vintage '70s roots reggae and they're now easily available in the U.S. Some have called Brown the Dylan of reggae -- rather inexplicably -- but the youthful Brown was indisputably one of the best, if underrated, roots singers of his era and this 14-track disc offers a fine overview of his work for producer Blackbeard Sinclair in a great-looking package.

yoga master Swami Rama.)

Ragani met Swami Rama at the age of eight and he began to train her in yoga, meditation and Eastern music. For two decades, he took her under his wing and Ragani spent many summers at his ashram in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

Although he passed away in 1996, Ragani continues to feel his presence and draws from his love and inspiration.

"I have many memories of my time with Swamiji," she says. "He really worked hard to guide me, and I remember very clearly the day that he told me that it was my dharma (life path) to sing, that I had been born to sing."

Last year, Ragani released her first kirtan CD entitled "Best of Both Worlds." Her mesmerizing voice is airy and strong, trained and free.

"I wanted to make a CD that was to be a classic in the field of kirtan, something that would last for years to come, for the next generations, something with richness and layers and all the things that I feel during kirtan."

But to get the full Ragani experience, one must see her in person. Warm and friendly, she creates a comfortableness in the room that eases newcomers and inspires those that arrive a bit skeptical.

"Ragani kirtan's are the most devotional and non-pretentious ones I have attended," says Erin Love, who has attended kirtans in Milwaukee, Chicago and Boulder. "They seem to welcome all, not just the yoga and new-agey crowds ... and Ragani herself seems to blend the spiritual and the earthly seamlessly. She is a trusted guide on your way to discovering how to blend the two in your life."

The room, which is in the basement of the church, is dimly and warmly lit. Ragani and her band face the audience members who are either sitting on blankets or meditation pillows, seated in chairs or standing.

Presently, the East Side Kirtan band includes Mike Kashou (fretless bass, Arabic tabla on occasion), Tim Maher (Djembe, Native American drum, etc.), Holly Haebig (flute, lead harmonies, backup vocals, hand percussion), Dave Blessum (guitar), Jahmes Tony Finlayson (hand percussion, drums), Katie Bliffert (tanpura, hand percussion) and Fred Bliffert (drums).

Maggie Jacobus, David Odland, Mary Ann Morrissey, Rebecca Gray, Jodi Simerl and Brandon Lewis sing backup vocals and Ragani's husband Dale does the sound engineering.

Before a kirtan, which take place the first Friday of every month, Ragani makes certain every detail is in place, including a professional sound system and a large screen that projects the words of the simple chant so audience members can easily respond.

The kirtan begins at 7:30 p.m. and lasts for about two hours. Within that time, three or four chants are sung with a minute or two of silence in between to, in Ragani's words, "soak it all up."

Kirtan audience members are very much a part of the experience. They not only respond to the singers' call, but also clap hands, use shakers, sometimes even dance. Sometimes, the breathing of the participants becomes synchronous, creating a sense of unity, well-being and timelessness.

The cost of kirtan is a \$5 donation, except when special guests lead the group, in which case the suggested donation is \$15. Internationally recognized performers Dave Stringer and Wa have both made guest appearances.

Although kirtan is of a spiritual nature, it appeals to people of all faiths. "That's one part that amazes me about the kirtan experience -- anyone can attend, regardless of their religious beliefs, and still enjoy the kirtan experience. We really open our doors to everyone."

"I dream of changing the world with this kind of music," says Ragani, who has formal degrees in acupuncture and a doctorate in clinical health psychology. "I've often said that I know I'm in charge of the band and of getting things organized, but aside from that, the experiences that people have at the kirtan, the inspirations that they may feel ... are from the universe of awakened sages that guide us all. And I am ever grateful to be a part of this whole experience."

For more information about the East Side Kirtan, go to www.raganiworld.com.



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