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Ragani offers spirituality, sweetness with "Ancient Spirit"



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Anyone who has attended a kirtan in Milwaukee is already aware of Ragani's talents. On the first Friday of each month, her rich voice and all-encompassing personality attract hundreds of people to the basement of the North Shore Presbyterian Church, 4048 N. Bartlett Ave.

Now, she enlightens and charms fans with her recently released second CD, "Ancient Spirit, Kirtan Café Vol. II." The collection features six yoga chants or kirtan songs -- a style of chanting that originated in East India and is one of the world's oldest forms of spiritual music.

By **Molly Snyder**  
 Senior Writer
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"Ancient Spirit" features six chants, ranging from four minutes to almost 18 minutes. The tracks start out quiet, slowly rise to a crescendo and eventually return to the opening calmness. Throughout the "journey," most listeners feel uplifted and refreshed, thanks to the joyful rhythms and Ragani's incredibly soothing yet powerful voice.

Ragani plays harmonium, keyboards and percussion, enriching the already mesmerizing sound. A host of other musicians add a mix of traditional instruments like tabla and sitar as well as typical western instruments including flute, guitar and electric bass. The combination of old and new instruments serves as a metaphor for Ragani's music in general: a fantastic blend of the ancient and contemporary, able to soothe and inspire at the same time.

Worth noting is the fact kirtan is reclaiming "Krishna culture" from the mainstream's misperception that chanting is practiced solely by robed hippies in airports. In the kirtan setting, Krishna mantras are practiced by people from all religions -- as well as atheists and agnostics -- as a way to relax, or, for some people, to connect with a higher consciousness.

Ragani's first record, "Best of Both Worlds," was released in May 2003. Since then, she has

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achieved tremendous success in the world of kirtan and is regarded today as one of the nation's leading kirtan chanters.

Born Julie Ann Hobing, Ragani 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.

Ragani met Swami Rama at the age of eight. 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 draw from his love and inspiration. Hence, "Ancient Spirit" is a tribute to Rama.

Tags: ragani, kirtan, sitar, tabla, india

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