

Moved by the Spirit

By NAN BIALEK

July 10, 2012



Dan Bishop

Ragani has developed a strong local following for her monthly kirtan sessions. Kirtan is sacred participatory chant music.

The new buzz words for Wisconsin just might be beer, cheese and kirtan. If you're unsure about kirtan, check in with the 300 to 400 people — police officers, rabbis, cafeteria workers, business executives, barbers, even a Lutheran minister — who spend the first Friday evening of the month chanting with Ragani at the Unitarian Universalist Church West in Brookfield.

Kirtan is sacred participatory chant music, Ragani explains, which comes from the yoga tradition and is thousands of years old.

"For me, it's not a religious experience as such, but it is a spiritual one," she says. "It connects to that heart experience that we all have. The sounds that we use, the practice we do, is called Nada Yoga, meaning the sound we chant or say evokes that experience in us, just with those vibrations of sound. The repetition slowly relaxes the mind."

Ragani-led sessions are the largest independent, ongoing kirtan scene in the country. In the more than 10 years she has been scheduling kirtans in Milwaukee, the group has outgrown two venues and, she says, will soon be too large for the Unitarian Church. Chanters who get there early sit on the floor, others in seats, still others in the standing-room-only spots.

"It's just a powerful energy, everybody just jumps right in and they make the song, it's like they own it, it's theirs, the event is theirs," Ragani says, "more so in Milwaukee than any other place I've known."

Although kirtan is firmly rooted in Eastern traditions, Ragani's intent was to make it accessible to Western audiences as well, so she assembled a band that blends cultures. The band includes Fred

Bliffert, Julio Pablon, Tim Maher and Dave Blessum on drums, Holly Haebig-Wake on flute and vocal harmonies, Mike Kashou on fretless bass and Kaita Bliffert on tanpura. Ragani is lead vocalist and plays harmonium.

How did Ragani, born in Detroit and raised in South Bend, Ind., become a kirtan leader? She was just 8 years old when her parents went to a lecture by the yogi Swami Rama in Chicago, and she met him briefly in a bookstore before his presentation.

"All the way home I was thinking, 'I want to study with someone like that. I want to know what it is to live that kind of life,'" she says.

At age 16, she spent a summer studying at his Himalayan Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy in Honesdale, Pa., and returned every summer for 11 years. When she expressed an interest in kirtan, Swami Rama taught her traditional Indian music, stressing the most important aspect of the practice is that participants "need to feel something when they sing, that it moves them."

Swami Rama gave her the name Ragani, which means "to give color or mood to or to be able to shift things," she says.

Ragani also writes music for film and television shows, and her compilation CD "Love Holds Everything" made it to No. 24 on the iTunes chart and was No. 1 on CD Baby for two weeks.

"Sutra," a documentary focusing on Ragani's kirtans and her connection to Swami Rama, who died in 2000, is scheduled for release later this year.

Download a free MP3 of Ragani's "Jaya Ganesha" from a Milwaukee kirtan with Ragani event at www.raganiworld.com/MMagazine.html

This story ran in the June 2012 issue of:

