"Every Word Is a Song, Every Step Is a Dance": Participation, Agency, and the Expression of Communal Bliss in Hare Krishna Festival Kirtan

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“EVERY WORD IS A SONG, EVERY STEP IS A DANCE”:
PARTICIPATION, AGENCY, AND THE EXPRESSION OF COMMUNAL BLISS IN
HARE KRISHNA FESTIVAL KIRTAN

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ABSTRACT

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement, offers a highly accessible approach to Indian spirituality in contemporary American culture. Among the most intriguing facets of Hare Krishna practice are the prevalence of celebration and the use of activities such as singing, dancing, and feasting as expressions of faith. The dominant musical practice of the Hare Krishna movement is kirtan, the call-and-response performance of sacred devotional chants. According to Hare Krishna belief, kirtan can be a vehicle to spiritual realization and communion with the divine. In the context of public celebration, kirtan may also serve as a performance of the bliss promised by Krishna philosophy and an invitation to listeners to take part. This dissertation examines kirtan as a tool in the mediation of social encounters by considering elements of devotion, participation, and agency in musical performances at four festivals: two Rath Yatra parades in New York City and Los Angeles that take the practices of Krishna worship into public spaces; the Festival of the Holy Name in Alachua, Florida, which involves deep immersion in the process of singing kirtan; and the Festival of Colors in Spanish Fork, Utah, during which a large crowd consisting almost entirely of those not affiliated with the Krishna movement nevertheless gathers to participate in a weekend of Krishna-oriented musicking. I posit that the participatory nature of kirtan as performed in a celebratory context serves to negotiate issues of personal and social identity both within the Krishna movement and in encounters with those outside of it. I further argue that kirtan has the potential to create experiences that are perceived as being personally and spiritually meaningful not only to adherents to Krishna consciousness, but to those who ascribe to differing belief systems but nevertheless find elements of common spiritual experience within the kirtan process.
INTRODUCTION

A few years ago I opened the longest, most academic document I had written to date by telling a story about a version of myself, who, a few years previous as a music major at Brigham Young University, had met up with a group of friends to attend the Festival of Colors, or Holi, at the Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork, Utah. Festival of Colors is an exciting annual event in which thousands of Utahns—the vast majority of whom are not affiliated with the Hare Krishna movement at all—dance and sing along with a rock-style kirtan, or musical rendition of sacred chants, all while throwing brilliantly colored paint at each other. The event has since skyrocketed in popularity to become arguably the largest Hindu festival in North America, but my friends and I got in on it when it was first on the rise, and for a group of religiously-inclined students predisposed to embrace the world as a spiritual project, Holi represented not only an excuse to throw paint at strangers without getting arrested, but a realization of deeply-held aspirations about music, faith, acceptance, and the coexistence of mutually respectful communities.

After another encounter with the hauntingly lovely traditional kirtan of the Krishna movement and a trip to India during which I was deeply moved by the spirituality I witnessed on display at the banks of the Ganges River, I chose to write a master’s thesis on Hare Krishna music (Black 2008), using the remarkable Spanish Fork, Utah, temple as a lens into the world of kirtan. It was a powerful experience, filled with interactions and experiences that never quite made it to paper because they ranged far beyond the topic of music in their scope, but were intensely meaningful to me. At the end of it all, I told my paint-spattered story, theorized extensively on what it meant, turned in my thesis, and started looking at new styles of music to research.

But I found that it was hard to consider my work on Hare Krishna music finished. I noticed that when I shared my research with other people, they quite often responded eagerly and asked when I was going to go deeper. Much as I would have loved to believe that there was some sort of personal genius on my part that stimulated those positive responses, the fact was that I had stumbled upon something very powerful and fascinating in the practice of kirtan. At the same time, even as I was sharing all of this with others,
kirtan began to experience an unprecedented rise in public awareness, with punk rock labels signing kirtan artists; festivals springing up dedicated to singing kirtan for 12, 24, 48, even 96 hours at a time; and yoga studios adding the practice to their repertoire of meditation techniques. I began to realize how much more there was to learn about the subject.

So I decided to take it further. Hare Krishna kirtan, particularly as its popularity is just now building momentum, is a phenomenon well beyond the scope of a single dissertation, but for the sake of this project I will focus on kirtan as an element of public celebration and “collective spiritual play,” to borrow a phrase from Stephen J. Stein (see Stein 1992). What I offer here are four snapshots into communities and festivals that represent different facets of kirtan. They will include kirtan in big cities, in small towns, in large and well-established Krishna communities, and in small fledgling ones. They will represent kirtans sung by people who are initiated into Hare Krishna philosophy, and kirtans sung almost entirely by those who are not. In the process I hope to shine a light on a musical process that is both stimulating and personally rewarding to many who take part.

Purpose

*Kirtan*, the call-and-response musical performance of chants regarding the life and names of Krishna, is one of the most prevalent aspects of Hare Krishna worship, from moments of private meditation to outreach efforts in public spaces. Among devotees, kirtan serves to focus the senses and bring the singer into a state of ecstatic communion with the divine. For those who are not devotees but encounter Hare Krishnas in public spaces, and particularly in large-scale celebrations, kirtan serves as an invitation to participate, to throw off skepticism and the consciousness of difference, and to abandon oneself to the moment. I believe that studying kirtan can have powerful implications for understanding positive encounters across social boundaries that might otherwise be contentious—between different religious groups, between so-called Eastern and Western cultures, between the familiar and the “foreign”—as well as exploring the types of experience that might be perceived as personally meaningful to people who identify themselves at different places along those boundaries. The main purpose of this
dissertation is to investigate the phenomenon of kirtan through a study of performances presented in multiple locations across the United States during the annual cycle of Hare Krishna festivals. I argue that in a celebratory context, participatory music can act as a tool of agency in choosing one’s response to certain circumstances and encounters, and I use kirtan as a specific example to illustrate and explore such participatory musicking. Collective music making can become a tool for negotiating complex issues of personal and social identity, both within communities and during encounters across boundaries of social difference. It can also generate experiences that are perceived as being spiritually or personally meaningful, both to those within the movement and those who adhere to different belief systems but are affected by or choose to participate in kirtan.

While the purpose of this dissertation is specific to the performance of kirtan, it extends as well to the promotion of intercultural appreciation and tolerance on broader levels. During the last decade, fears about national and personal security in the United States have fostered a cultural milieu in which ugly undercurrents of xenophobia and religious prejudice run beneath the surface of a public dialogue often characterized by a mostly unspoken fear of the Other. Hare Krishna festivals provide an interesting site for teasing out questions about the awareness of difference, the simultaneous desire for and fear of diversity, and the potential for positive encounters with “Otherness.” Regardless of the national origin of a Hare Krishna individual (as many are born and raised in the United States), an encounter with a Krishna devotee is still an encounter with cultural difference—with someone who has chosen to adopt behaviors, beliefs, and often an appearance that many in mainstream America experience as being distinctly foreign. However, such an encounter in a celebratory context with a group that is generally viewed without fear provides a “safe” location for exploring the place of Eastern-derived elements of culture and religion in Western society. By choosing to participate in a festival event that, by its nature, is essentially designed to foster goodwill and honor a shared ideal of goodness, those who take part in festival kirtan model a positive, inclusive way of encountering and embracing the cultural Other.

The festivals discussed in this dissertation include the Festival of the Holy Name at the New Raman Reti Temple in Alachua, Florida, held in November 2011; the Holi Festival held at the Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork, Utah, in March 2012;
and the Rath Yatra festivals sponsored by the Sri Sri Radha Govinda Mandir Temple in New York City and the New Dwaraka Temple in Los Angeles in June and July 2011, respectively. The locations, temple communities, and festivals chosen were selected because they collectively provide a complex, multifaceted perspective on the types of participation that occur during festival kirtan practice and the diverse demographic of kirtan participants and groups in the United States.

**Background and Significance**

The Hare Krishna movement in the United States originated in 1965, when the Vaishnava guru A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada journeyed from Bengal to New York City and there established the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). A second branch of ISKCON was organized in San Francisco a year later. In terms of spiritual heritage, however, members of ISKCON, today as in the past, trace their lineage not to New York or San Francisco in the 1960s, but rather to the Vedic period of Indian religious and philosophical history that flourished millennia ago, rooting their worship of Krishna in the study of the Bhagavad Gita.

Prabhupada’s 1965 journey was the fulfillment of counsel given him by his own spiritual guru, Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, to take the worship of Krishna to the West. Prabhupada’s discipleship at Bhaktisiddhanta’s feet represented one link in an unbroken chain of discipleship leading back to the fifteenth century saint Caitanya Mahaprabhu, who largely set the tone for Krishna worship as it is practiced in ISKCON. Lord Caitanya, as he is popularly known, was one of a number of charismatic mystic personalities who shaped the bhakti movement in Hinduism—one so charismatic, in fact, that he was considered by many to be an earthly avatar of Krishna himself on the earth.

In a philosophical system that set out, according to the Bhagavad Gita, three fundamental paths to salvation—*karma yoga*, the yoga of right behavior; *jnana yoga*, the yoga of knowledge; and *bhakti yoga*, the yoga of love and personal devotion—the bhakti movement was a popular, largely egalitarian movement stressing personal experience and personal love as the primary vehicles for achieving a meaningful relationship with God. Caitanya was a leader in the branch of Hinduism known as Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which focuses on Krishna (commonly viewed as an avatar of Vishnu, hence Vishnu-ism) as the
ultimate form of one Supreme Deity. According to Gaudiyā Vaishnava doctrine, the literal presence of Krishna is incarnate in the sound vibrations produced by speaking his name. For this reason, a key aspect of Gaudiyā Vaishnava worship is the chanting of sacred mantras that speak some of the many names of Krishna, with the most important being the Maha Mantra:

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna
Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare
Hare Rama, Hare Rama
Rama Rama, Hare Hare

There are a couple of different ways of understanding the names included in the mantra. Krishna refers to the supreme nature of God, Hare to his attributes, and Rama to his personal nature. But Hare is also a name for Radha, Krishna’s divine and eternal lover, whose passion for Krishna represents the depth and intensity of love that the soul should direct toward God. ISKCON temple altars represent Radha Krishna as a unified entity, and placing the name Hare before Krishna in the mantra even suggests a privileging on the feminine aspect of the divine. By chanting the names Hare and Krishna together, every iteration of the mantra suggests that the nature of the deity is love.

Because the Maha Mantra is filled with names for God, the chanting of the mantra is said to bring the devotee into a blissful state of personal communion with God. And because the sound vibrations of Krishna’s name are said to carry his actual presence, the mantra is believed to be capable of cleansing and enlightening the environment and all listeners who hear it spoken. Chanting the mantra loudly and often musically in public spaces where passersby may be affected by it is considered a form of service to the world. Quiet, non-musical chanting for the sake of personal meditation is called japa, but putting the mantra to music and singing it for the pleasure of all around is often referred to as bhajan (a term often used for devotional singing in general in India). Singing the mantra in groups, particularly in a call-and-response fashion accompanied by instruments and dancing, is called kirtan, and can become a powerfully ecstatic participatory experience. The kirtans originally led by Lord Caitanya were said to be overpoweringly ecstatic and held such powerful sway over those who participated that some historians have essentially credited Caitanya with having “sung” Vaishnavism into Bengal (Gelberg 1983:84-85).
Kirtan accompanies many practices involved with Hare Krishna worship and constitutes a dominant element of the soundscape surrounding Krishna temples. Kirtan is prominent in the annual cycle of religious festivals observed by Hare Krishna communities as an accompaniment to ceremonial activities and processions or as one of a variety of celebratory activities available to festival goers. Of the religiously oriented festivals that are held frequently in the Hare Krishna community, some are common to Hinduism in general, such as Diwali, the Festival of Lights; and Holi, the Festival of Colors. Some, such as Janmastanmi (the birthday, or “appearance day” of Krishna) and Gaura Purnima (the appearance day of Lord Caitanya) are specifically connected with the life of Krishna and are specific to Krishna devotees. It is also not unusual for ISKCON temples in the United States to have cultural festivals that are not necessarily planned around a date of religious significance, such as Festival of India, Himalaya Fest, or even Llama Fest.

These festivals point toward the greater significance of music and celebration in the worship of Krishna and the process of spiritual realization. Many deities in the Hindu pantheon are associated with musical instruments and dance forms, but Krishna is one who is especially identified with the performance of music—specifically, music played on the flute, which is his primary signifier in Hindu iconography, and as accompaniment to dancing, in Krishna’s case dancing with his mythical entourage of female cowherds, the gopis. Krishna’s personality within Hindu theology is specifically associated with youth, beauty, music, dance, love, and humor. Devotees have explained to me that these light-hearted aspects of Krishna’s personality constitute a profound revelation about the true nature of the spiritual world, to which all souls should aspire—when the soul passes from the sufferings of the material world, the true nature of the spiritual world is bliss. Although certain Hare Krishna practices (including approximately two hours of japa each day) and aspects of the movement’s lifestyle (vegetarian diet, abstinence from alcohol and drugs, celibacy outside of marriage) require great discipline, many aspects of worship revolve around fundamentally celebratory activities, feasting, singing and dancing among them. The belief is that by filling the senses with beauty and, by extension, with Krishna, the body becomes an instrument toward the bliss that is genuine spiritual enlightenment.
American artistic and literary culture has long harbored a romanticized image of India as a culture of deep mystic spirituality, particularly thanks to transcendentalist writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson who felt a spiritual affinity with Hinduism as they understood it and commonly juxtaposed the spiritual East to the materialistic West. At various times Eastern spiritual practices such as Transcendental Meditation and hatha yoga have become very popular in North America. When Prabhupada landed in the United States, the 1960s counterculture was in full swing. George Harrison had just introduced the sitar to rock music and Ravi Shankar was fast becoming a reluctant superstar (see Shankar 1997). Much of the popular interest in Indian music and Indian spirituality was surely due to the hippie movement’s tendency toward unabashed exoticism, but among those who sampled a little raga here and a little yoga there were some American youth who took to the serious study of Eastern spirituality in hopes of finding an alternative to a social system that they believed had failed them.

After Prabhupada formally organized ISKCON with a public kirtan in Tompkins State Park in New York City, the practice became popular among countercultural youth who enjoyed the blissed-out ecstasy of chanting. The fledgling movement attracted the attention of prominent figures from the counterculture—Prabhupada’s first recording of kirtan was made using a harmonium borrowed from Allen Ginsburg, for example. The Hare Krishna movement required more of its followers than many in the hippie movement were willing to give—rock and roll was fine, but sex and drugs were not. However, ISKCON also provided a sustainable lifestyle to support the ecstatic states of consciousness accessed through chanting. At the same time that the counterculture was collapsing under its own weight, George Harrison was introducing kirtan to mainstream popular music audiences through the Radha Krishna Temple Album and the single “Hare Krishna Mantra,” which performed strongly on pop charts in Europe as well as the United States. The Krishna movement, rather than falling away with other elements of the counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, stabilized and expanded during that period and in subsequent decades.

The establishment of an ISKCON temple in London quickly followed those in New York and San Francisco, and by the early 1970s, ISKCON had established temples
in several European, Central and South American, and African nations as well as the United States and the United Kingdom. Large ISKCON temples were also built in several locations in India, including Vrindavan, the reputed birthplace of Krishna and a major site for pilgrimage. In 1972 the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust began producing Vaishnava literature at a high volume. ISKCON devotees established farm communities and schools, restaurants and lunch distribution programs on college campuses, and a mass media presence with radio stations and websites like KrishnaTube that feature recordings of kirtan. Since Prabhupada’s initial 1965 journey, the Hare Krishna movement has become a global phenomenon, claiming 500 temples worldwide.

It is my intention with this dissertation to bring together the beliefs of Hare Krishna devotees regarding the transformative power of music and celebration, and the meaningful experiences of those who participate regardless of religious persuasion in order to explore the potential of Krishna kirtan to stimulate an inclusive experience of “collective joy” (Ehrenreich 2007). Krishna festivals are fascinating and meaningful events regardless of the political tenor of the times in which they are held, but I believe that this research is particularly timely now, at a point in history when unrest in the Middle East and in Central and South Asia have led many in America to regard foreign cultures with some degree of suspicion. Hare Krishnas still stand outside of the religious and cultural mainstream of the United States, but the movement has been established in American culture for 45 years now, and although there are those who always have and continue to accuse ISKCON of being “a cult,” the Krishna movement is a manifestation of Eastern culture in America that is, by now, generally regarded without fear. The festival experience is designed to foster goodwill among those who participate, and I believe that these Hare Krishna kirtans have the potential to model very positive social interactions that promote both education and empathy among those of different religious and cultural persuasions.

Survey of Literature

While little has been written specifically on the practice of kirtan in North America, there are several rich and significant threads of scholarly inquiry that shed light on the potential for participatory musicking, and Hindu devotional music in particular, to
negotiate identity within the Krishna community and in relation to those outside that community, as well as to generate spiritually meaningful experiences for devotees and non-devotees alike. These threads of inquiry include the discussion and analysis of Hindu philosophies regarding music and ethnographic literature dealing with those musical practices in India that provide a concrete manifestation of these ideas. It is also important to consider the literature on Krishna’s personality and the practices associated with Krishna worship, as well as the history and philosophy of the bhakti movement in India, particularly the teachings and impact of Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Doing so casts light on the ways that certain musical practices are perceived as being spiritually meaningful to Krishna devotees as well as the social negotiations that take place within Indian, Hindu, and specifically Hare Krishna communities through the processes of musical worship. As both music and theology with Indian origins have taken root in the West, some important scholarship has emerged regarding the place of Asian religions in the cultural milieu of the United States, the pluralistic nature of the American religious experience and the struggle over what pluralism should and does mean, particular historical and theological relationships between Hinduism and Christianity, and the history and sociology of the Hare Krishna movement, as well as the popularity of Indian music among American musicians and music enthusiasts. Exploring these topics offers perspective on encounters between adherents to differing belief systems and the question of whether or not experiences generated through the practices of one religious community can be interpreted as spiritually meaningful to members of another. These areas of inquiry will be reviewed in this section.

The practice of Krishna kirtan has its roots in ancient Indian philosophies regarding the cosmological nature of sound and music. In Music and Musical Thought in Early India (1992), Lewis Rowell offers a survey and analysis of Indian treatises on music, philosophy, and spirituality, grounding musical practices in the development of Hindu thought. A key aspect of these treatises is the belief that sound is a primordial, generative force that emanates from sacred, creative powers. Guy Beck proposes sacred sound as the “central mystery” of Hinduism and a crucial property of what is perceived as divine power, conceptualized theologically as the female energy of Hindu deities. In Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound (1993), Beck draws on scriptural texts and
philosophical treatises and discusses Nada Brahman (sound as “breath of God”) in Shakti, Saivite, and Vaishnava traditions. He expands his thesis to include sacred sound in other major world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism, as well as Hinduism, in Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions (2006). In Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India and America (2004), Harold G. Coward connects the doctrine of sacred sound to mantra meditation, including Hindu, Sikh, Sufi, Muslim, and Buddhist practices all emerging from this Indian cultural milieu. The manner in which this association between divine power, vocalized sound, and musical practice has shaped the history of religion in India is dealt with by Shantsheela Sathianathan in Contributions of Saints and Seers to the Music of India (1996), which explores the musical nature of Hinduism, the charismatic spiritual/musical leaders involved with the bhakti movement, and the historical development of devotional music in India.

A number of ethnographic studies of bhajan and kirtan in India have brought out different dimensions of Vaishnava devotional music. Edward C. Dimock’s work in Bengal (Dimock 1966) deals with the use of music to develop a personal relationship with Krishna, given the types of emotions involved in performance and the human relationships that are portrayed as metaphorical for love of God. A study with implications for my research in Los Angeles and New York City is Milton Singer’s essay “Urbanization and Culture Change: Bhakti in the City” (1972), which attributes a shift in popularity from ritual to devotional observances in Madras to the processes of urbanization. Singer finds that Hindu practice does not become more secular, but rather becomes more personal as devotees cope with the demands of city life. He also emphasizes the performance of democratic ideals on the part of those who participate in bhajan and kirtan (Singer 1966). Stephen Slawek also emphasizes the personal nature of bhakti and the egalitarian nature of bhakti musical practice in Benares (Slawek 1998). Other ethnographies on music in Vaishnava devotionalism include Edward O. Henry’s research into devotional singing in the Bhojpuri region of India (Henry 1998; see also Henry 1991 and 2002), Selina Theilemann’s work on dance dramas on the life of Krishna that are performed in Vrindavan (Thielemann 1998), and Anne-Marie Gaston’s Krishna’s Musicians, which focuses on a hereditary line of temple musicians in Rajasthan (Gaston 1997). The social importance of kirtan even outside of the sphere of Hindu
devotionalism has been documented by researchers focusing on kirtan as an element of
Sikh (Mansukhani 1982) and Christian (Duncan 1999) practice, and as a political act
significant to Indian nationalist movements (Schultz 2002, 2008).

Krishna is, of course, deeply entwined in India’s scriptural and literary traditions,
and many beliefs about him are usefully explained and analyzed in Krishna: A
Sourcebook (Bryant 2007), a compilation of writings about Krishna, scholarly analyses of
scriptural and poetic texts, explanations of common worship practices, and descriptions
of different schools of philosophical thought centered around the personality of Krishna.
Edwin Bryant’s use of the phrase “perpetually accessible sonic avatara” or “Krishna in
vibratory form” to describe the Vaishnava conception of the holy names is particularly
apt for our purposes in this dissertation (Ibid., 15-16), as is Neal Delmonico’s description
of the name as “a perpetual descent or an enduring appendage of Krishna in the world” in
his essay in the same book (Delmonico 2007: 551). The scholarly literature surrounding
the personality of Krishna is too vast to cover here, but a couple of volumes that have
been particularly useful in preparing for this research are Alternative Krishnas: Regional
and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity (Beck 2005) and Krishna: Myths, Rites, and
Attitudes (Singer 1966), which effectively describes a number of Vaishnava traditions as
they were practiced in India at roughly the same point in time that Prabhupada brought
them to America.

The historical conditions surrounding the bhakti movement are effectively
explored by the contributors to Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and
Political Action (Lorenzon 1995), who show the impact of bhakti on community identity,
theology, and politics in both Hindu and Sikh communities in North India. Bhakti yoga as
it is understood among American devotees was largely shaped by Caitanya Mahaprahhbu,
and a text that is considered by many (particularly followers of Prabhupada) to be
definitive is Sri Caitanya Mangala: A 16th Century Biography of Sri Caitanya
Mahaprabhu, written by Srila Locana Dasa Thakura, a disciple of one of Caitanya’s close
associates. Scholarship on Caitanya focuses on biography (Narayan 1984, Bon 1973),
which is especially significant given the belief held by many devotees that contemplating
Caitanya’s activities can lead to enlightenment, as well as analysis of Caitanya’s role as
originator of a philosophical school (Chatterjee 1993), and the writings of those who were his associates (Sinha 1976).

Placing the Krishna movement in the United States requires knowledge of American religious history, particularly the history of Asian religions in America. Thomas Tweed and Stephen Prothero’s *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* (1999) is a useful compilation of primary sources that includes accounts of Christian missionaries in Asia, writings by and about Asian immigrants to the United States, the literary work of sympathetic Transcendentalists, firsthand conversion stories, the works of gurus who have traveled to the United States, legal decisions, journalism on popular music, and a wide variety of other documents. Harold Coward, John R. Hinnells, and Raymond Brady Williams provide a useful history of diasporic religious phenomena in their book *The South Asian Religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States* (2000; see also Narayanan 2006), which deals with Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities in all three countries, emphasizing diasporic movements, religious practices as lived in a new environment, issues of public policy, gender, and generation, and the fundamental question of retaining one’s identification with a distant homeland. Lola Williamson offers an important analysis of meditation movements in the United States based on Hindu ideas in *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*. Williamson addresses spiritual and philosophical impulses in an evolving American society that have predisposed many to embrace Hindu-based philosophies and practices as part of contemporary spiritual life.

A number of writers on American religion (including Hutchison 2003 and Lippy 2000) acknowledge that Americans have traditionally boasted diversity, tolerance, and pluralism as national virtues, yet have found truly democratic inclusion of diverse beliefs to be a complex challenge. One particularly notable event in the history of American pluralism was the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions that was held as part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Daniel Ross Chandler treats the event and its aftermath effectively in *Toward Universal Religion: Voices of American and Indian Spirituality* (Chandler 1996), an analysis of writings and speeches by six American and six Indian thinkers influential on East-West religious dialogue, including Raja
Rammohun Roy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Swami Vivekenanda, and Rabindranath Tagore.

The establishment of the Krishna movement in a predominantly Christian country can be usefully informed by a number of works that deal specifically with religious dialogue between Hindus and Christians. Coward again presents two useful volumes, *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (1987; see also Coward 1985), which studies the challenges faced by the many religions in India that occupy the same space, and *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (1989), which examines both the long history of Christians in India and the more recent history of Hindus in the West. Other writers who have specifically tackled the Hindu-Christian dialogue include N.K. Devaraja with *Hinduism and Christianity* (1969) and the contributors to *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Gort et al 1989).

The organization of ISKCON in America was greeted with a burst of scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s, much of it concerned with explaining the practices of this new movement (Daner 1976), placing it in both Vedic and American historical contexts (Bromley and Shinn 1989), and overwhelmingly dealing with the question: who joins the Hare Krishna movement and why? The question of conversion was approached from a variety of angles, including countercultural impulses and specific catalysts of rebellion (Judah 1974), personality type (Poling and Kennedy 1986), and in the case of E. Burke Rochford’s *Hare Krishna in America* (1985), extensive demographic analysis of factors ranging from age and race/ethnicity to parents’ occupations and income, family religious practices, drug use, and any other social movements or groups with which converts to Hare Krishna were once involved. ISKCON as an international presence is treated in Charles R Brooks’s *The Hare Krishnas in India* (1989), which offers a fascinating picture of Western devotees making pilgrimages to Vrindavan, India, and dealing with the local population and their reactions to foreigners participating in their native religious system on (purportedly) native terms.

Two volumes from this initial burst of scholarship on ISKCON offer particularly intriguing, multi-dimensional portraits of the Krishna movement. One is *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (1989), edited by David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn, which thoroughly grounds the movement in Bengali Vaishnavism before analyzing the
movement in America in terms of devotional experience, historical trends in acceptance of and antagonism toward Hinduism in the United States, the formation of ISKCON communities of American devotees in the U.S. and India, and specific challenges to ISKCON from various social movements in North America. Another is *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West* (1983), a set of interviews by Steven J. Gelberg with scholars Harvey Cox, Larry D. Shinn, Thomas J. Hopkins, A.L. Basham, and Shrivatsa Goswami that range through scriptural doctrine and practice, bhakti as an expression of American values, resonances between Vaishnavism and American Christianity, and various other social and historical realities that may have predisposed twentieth century North America to be a fertile ground for an Eastern religious movement.

The initial flurry of scholarship spurred by the urge to explain this new movement has passed, and recent work has instead tended to focus on the movement as it has changed and matured, as well as the alterations that have allowed it to survive and remain relevant in a changing America. *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change* (2007), edited by Graham Dwyer and Richard Cole, focuses on the historical continuity of Vaishnava practices in ISKCON and addresses various social issues that have been raised as the movement has progressed. Some of the contributors are scholars from outside the movement with a long-standing academic interest in it; others are scholars who are also practitioners of the Hare Krishna faith. E. Burke Rochford’s follow-up to *Hare Krishna in America*, the book *Hare Krishna Transformed* (2007), deals with changes that have occurred in ISKCON as the organization has adapted in order to sustain its growth into a second generation, particularly in regard to views on family, women, and children.

Studying kirtan in the United States does not just involve understanding Indian religion in America, but also Indian music in America. In *Indian Music and the West* (1997), Gerry Farrell traces Western views on Indian music from the racial attitudes held by colonialists during the British Raj, through the efforts of Indian music teachers who traveled to the U.S. and Europe hoping to stimulate Western spirituality as well as musical thought, to more contemporary popular culture’s fascination with Indian music in rock and jazz. Peter Lavezzoli similarly traces Western musicians’ fascination with and
study of Indian music through history in *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi*, but structures his book around the careers of influential individuals such as Yehudi Menuhin, John Coltrane, George Harrison, Mickey Hart, Philip Glass, and others whose love of Eastern sounds had a lasting impact on Western musical culture. Much of the activity discussed by both Farrell and Lavezzoli centers around the mid-1960s outpouring of Western interest in Indian culture, and an intriguing volume published by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, *Music East and West*, records the proceedings of a conference in New Delhi in 1966 dealing with similarities and differences between Indian and Western music, psychological studies of the effects of listening to music from a culture that is not one’s own, and contributors’ beliefs about the changes facing traditional music in an age of industrialization.

There is also much to be learned about the crossover between Eastern and Western musics by reading the autobiographies of musical luminaries such as George Harrison (*I Me Mine*, 1980) and Ravi Shankar (*Raga Mala*, 1997; see also Shankar’s 1968 autobiography, *My Music, My Life*). Shankar’s two autobiographies are particularly poignant, as Shankar records his personal fear that venerable Indian music traditions might be sullied by their mixture with the less desirable elements of the 1960s counterculture. Still, Shankar asserts his sincere love for many of the young people he met in America who, he felt, were earnestly seeking a spiritual truth that he believed could be found in the study of raga. It is not only a poignant picture of American youth searching for a deeper reality, but a reminder that the Western desire for Indian music has never been solely about the music, but has almost always included an element of spiritual quest.

Finally, Steven Rosen, a devotee of the Hare Krishna movement, offers a first book to acknowledge and explore the phenomenon of kirtan in America with *The Yoga of Kirtan: Conversations on the Sacred Art of Chanting* (2008), in which Rosen interviews twenty-one kirtan recording artists, effectively documenting the initial rise of kirtan as an art form in the West.
Theoretical Approach

Understanding the multivalent nature of kirtan performances at Krishna festivals and how they negotiate social identity while generating meaningful experience for varied groups of people requires pulling together several different theoretical threads. The first involves simply setting out the stated meanings of music and celebration as taught within the context of Krishna theology. The second expands the picture to include those who, because of their own cultural or religious background, may not approach kirtan with a knowledge of these theological meanings, but who find meaning in kirtan nonetheless. To do this I will draw heavily on the work of Thomas Turino on participatory music as social engagement, which involves elements of agency, flow, and the suspension of ordinary modes of social differentiation (i.e. communitas) to find new modes of interaction dictated by both the participatory experience and the nature of celebration. Teasing out the meanings of the interactions at these celebrations will also require a comparative discussion of religious experience and the use of cultural performance theory to reflect on the values encoded in festival music.

A study of the meaningful experiences generated by kirtan performance first requires a treatment of sound, music, and celebration as they are understood by Hare Krishna devotees, particularly in terms of philosophies that ISKCON inherits from a broader Vedic culture. This involves examining concepts of sacred sound, “the domain,” according to Guy Beck, “that remains mysterious or undefinable despite continuous revelation and interpretation, [and] provides the motivating and unifying power behind” Hinduism (Beck 1998:5). I will also look at Hindu ideas regarding music, which Lewis Rowell identifies “with the creative vital force by which the entire universe is animated” (Rowell 1992:36), and what Krishna devotees believe that music can do. According to one Indian kirtan singer, as quoted by Stephen Slawek, “by uttering good words, the pollution in the air is counteracted,” and “we believe that our kirtan benefits the welfare of the whole world” (Slawek 1998:84). In order to fully appreciate the intended meanings of the festival experience, it is necessary to understand the significance of celebration in a material world that strives toward the bliss of a spiritual realm where “every word is a song, [and] every step is a dance,” according to the Brahma Samhita.
These concepts inform the way that musical practices are perceived as spiritually meaningful for those whose belief system is informed by Hindu philosophy. To understand how these practices then impact social interactions and the negotiation of group identities, I will rely on the notion of music, particularly participatory music, as a form of “heightened social interaction” that performs and honors certain cultural and individual ideals. The model of participatory (as opposed to presentational) music employed is based on that set out by Thomas Turino in *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Turino describes the participatory musical experience as one in which “we are fully focused on an activity that emphasizes our sameness” (Turino 2008:18).

Edward O. Henry, in his work on Bhojpuri devotional music, writes that “group singing and dancing are unique in the repertoire of human behavior in the way they join individuals in social relation through individual, psycho-physiological gratification.” In particular, “the phenomena of rhythm and the mutual coordination of voices are keys to the process of the individual-group relationship” (Henry 1998:116-17). Both the highly rhythmic nature and the call-and-response execution of kirtan lend themselves to this social integration. Kirtan can facilitate what Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has theorized as “optimal experience” or “flow,” which is described as “a state of merged awareness and action” (1971:46; see also Csikszentmihalyi 1998 and Csikszentmihalyi 2008) or “heightened concentration” (Turino 2008:4) that can “result in both a temporary transcendence and a cumulative expansion of the self” (Ibid., 233). Ultimately, according to Turino, “deep identification [of individuals with one another] is felt as total,” even “so intense that we feel, for those best moments, as if our selves had merged” (Ibid., 18-19).

The significance of these kirtan performances to the negotiation of social identity lies not only in their participatory nature, but in the decision to participate itself. Turino notes that activists in the Civil Rights era sometimes used communal singing to choose their responses to situations otherwise beyond their control—specifically to choose positive and compassionate responses to violent encounters. In those situations “the function of the songs and the power of singing” were intended to cause participants to “internalize [certain] thoughts, and then act on them.” Such encounters were “surely a powerful testimony about the power of group singing to strengthen resolve and a particular way of being in the world” (Turino 2008:217).
While the exuberant Hare Krishna festival is a far cry from the troubled circumstances of the Civil Rights activists’ rally, Turino’s point is still instructive regarding the potential of participatory music to act as a tool of agency—as a tool for choosing one’s reactions to one’s circumstances and to encounters with those who might be seen as being Other. In the festival situation, a Krishna devotee’s decision to participate involves a choice to declare her beliefs and to do so in a way that, according to Krishna theology, makes a positive contribution to the environment. The non-devotee’s decision to participate involves a choice both to embrace those who may be perceived as being different, and to do so in a manner that promotes empathy and an experience of perceived unity.

Historically speaking, one of the most socially important characteristics of kirtan, dating back to its origins in the populist bhakti movement, is its fairly democratic nature. Milton Singer identifies “reducing the consciousness of caste, sect, and regional differences and the tensions generated by this consciousness” as a primary function of kirtan, one that is on par with facilitating spiritual realization (Singer 1966:121). Although caste is not an issue in an American setting (at least not explicitly relative to that term), the awareness of religious and cultural difference remains a social fact that can be mediated through the practice of kirtan. Kirtan, like other celebratory activities, stimulates communitas, which Victor Turner famously defined as an unstructured social state in which consciousness of hierarchy, status, and difference are temporarily suspended. According to Turner, these large-scale celebrations are instances of entire communities passing through “the liminal, ‘betwixt-and-between’ state intervening between the ‘safe’ but dull domains of routinized and classified life” (Turner 1982:29; see also Turner 1982 and Picard et. al. 2006).

Turner also writes that “a mystical character is assigned to the sentiment of human kindness in most types of liminality” (Turner 1969:105). This type of open relationship characterized by kindness that celebration generates among participants is key to the festival experience. Barbara Ehrenreich invokes Durkheim’s term “collective effervescence” to describe events in which “techniques of ecstasy” help to generate and express that “love that serves to knit people together in groups” (Ehrenreich 2007:14-16).
In order to reflect on potential reasons why Hindu-based musical practices may be perceived as spiritually meaningful by those who adhere to a non-Hindu-based belief system, my analysis will adopt a comparative approach to understanding the religious faith of festival participants. There are inherent risks to discussing religion in comparative terms, as described by scholar of ISKCON Harvey Cox, who warns against a tendency “to minimize or de-emphasize the doctrinal content of any particular religious phenomenon but look at the purely structural aspects of it” while disregarding “the fact that there are real differences between what Krishna means and what Christ means.” (Gelberg 1983:29). Even so, Cox, who is a Christian, admits that “my interest in [the Krishna movement] probably stems, in part, from the fact that it touches certain aspects of my own spiritual tradition, my own spiritual trajectory” (Ibid., 27), and Thomas J. Hopkins points out that, given the bhakti orientation toward personal experience with a compassionate deity, “the kind of universal accessibility and attractiveness that we see in Vaishnava devotionalism owes much to the fact that it does speak to very basic human needs and it speaks to those needs in terms that are both powerful enough and simple enough that people can connect with it at a variety of different levels” (Ibid., 116).

So while it is important to always honor the distinctiveness of Vaishnava doctrine, the fact remains that these celebrations do involve the participation of people from outside the Hare Krishna community, many of whom are actively involved with other religions. And while some may merely come to enjoy the novelty, there are also those who engage with the festival experience on a spiritual level and find meaningful experience there. A major project of this dissertation is to explore the qualities of spiritual experience that allow people of different belief systems to find and recognize shared meaning. A term which may be useful in this discussion is “holy envy,” which was coined by theologian and Lutheran archbishop Krister Stendahl to describe a person’s ability to admire elements of religious practices other than her own, to desire them as part of her own practice, and to allow them to enrich her own worldview (Landau 2007). “Holy envy” may accurately describe the experience of many who participate in Hare Krishna festival kirtan while remaining firmly grounded in their own religious (or non-religious) philosophies.
Because Hare Krishna festivals involve not only religious signifiers but also a representation of South Asian culture in the United States, one additional theoretical concept that deserves treatment as I tease out the processes of negotiating contrasting social identities is cultural performance theory. As defined by Milton Singer, cultural performances include festivals as well as theatrical and musical productions, rituals, prayers, and weddings, among other events. “Through an analysis and comparison of cultural performances and their constituents—e.g., the media and the themes, the place and occasion of performance, the performers, the audience—it is possible to infer the structure and organization of particular kinds of performances…[and] it is possible to arrive at the more comprehensive and abstract constructs of cultural structure [and] cultural value system” (Singer 1972:65). Singer’s primary research was in India, and he writes that “it seemed to me that my Indian friends—and perhaps all peoples—thought of their culture as encapsulated in these discrete performances, which they could exhibit to visitors and to themselves,” and, significantly for this project, that “these were the kinds of things that an outsider could observe and comprehend within a single direct experience” (Ibid., 71). The last statement, needless to say, deserves considerable nuancing, but the basic idea remains: cultural performances are vehicles through which members of a particular community perform certain truths about themselves, as well as their hoped-for ideals.

It is worth noting that cultural performances display cultural ideals; they allow members of a community to put the best and most beautiful that their culture has to offer on a stage and allow those things to speak for their collective identity. The nature of the festival experience itself may account for the very positive tone of many of my interactions and experiences while conducting this research. If the contacts I made in conjunction with these events were filled with exuberance and a positive regard for the culture being celebrated, it may be an indication that festival organizers have succeeded in their goal of presenting signifiers of treasured values.

The various activities at Hare Krishna festivals display a combination of not only specifically Vaishnava but also more generally Indian signifiers that are performed and perceived by people of Indian descent, by non-Indian Americans who have chosen to adopt selected aspects of Indian culture, and by Americans looking from the outside in at
Indian culture. In the process, participants create and receive images of India and America. Singer specifies four types of dialogue involved with the exchange of cultural images: a dialogue “between image and reality,” “between the Western image of India and the Indians’ self-image,” “between the images one country holds of another and the psychological needs, fears, and hopes projected onto these images,” and “between what society and culture contribute to an image and what an individual brings to it” (Singer 1972:12). The cultural signifiers on display at a Krishna festival may be usefully analyzed in terms of these dialogues to reflect on the beliefs and tensions present in American culture with regards to India today.

In writing this dissertation, I have opted to organize my information in terms of chronology and research location, rather than ordering my findings in terms of theoretical constructs. In unfolding a roughly chronological narrative, I hope to allow underlying themes and theoretical constructs to surface organically within a narrative of interactions and performances. This narrative strategy is reversed in the concluding chapter, in which I will explicitly map out the trajectory of the preceding chapters in relation to an overarching theoretical framework while at the same time linking the various chapters together in terms of the guiding theoretical concerns that integrate them into the work as a whole.

**Methodology**

In deciding how to approach this research, I had two major priorities: first, to learn how festival participants and observers perceive their own experiences; and second, to observe the ways in which those who participate in or encounter these celebrations engage with the festivals in general and the kirtans in particular through actions that demonstrate the negotiation of social self-identification. My research methods largely consisted of interviews, participant observation, and analysis of video footage recorded at several Hare Krishna festivals held at different temples throughout the United States over the course of a year. With the exception of the Alachua temple, where proximity allowed me to visit the temple for multiple festival events as well as to stop in for Sunday worship on occasion, I arrived at each temple during the week preceding the chosen festival and spent time visiting with devotees and, where appropriate, volunteering to assist in
preparing for the event. During this time I conducted interviews with devotees regarding
the history of the temple, interactions between the temple and the community at large, the
various celebrations held at each temple, and their own personal histories within the
Krishna movement. I also interviewed festival participants during the events, asking
about their impressions of the quality of their experiences. I took part in various
celebratory activities and made extensive observations, based both on my own
experiences and on analysis of video footage, regarding the level and quality of
participation on the part of different groups of people, both devotees and non-devotees.

The festivals at which I conducted research were chosen to reflect not only on
different temple locations throughout the United States, but also on contrasts and
commonalities in different types of festivals, different sizes of devotee and non-devotee
communities, and varied levels of involvement required of festival participants.

Alachua, Florida, boasts the largest Hare Krishna farm community of its kind in
the United States, comprising approximately 500 families. The Festival of the Holy
Name, in its second year when I attended on Thanksgiving weekend 2011, is a festival
dedicated specifically to the chanting of kirtan. Although the festival is open to visitors
of any background, the event is grounded in the well-established devotee community and
reflects the devotees’ level of comfort with Indian as well as Vaishnava cultural practices.
My observations of celebratory kirtan at Krishna Janmastanmi and Gaura Purnima also
factor into my discussion of kirtan in the Alachua community.

Los Angeles and New York City both hold very large Rath Yatra processions
each summer, and I attended both of these events in June and July 2011, respectively.
Rath Yatra is a widespread festival that enjoys great popularity in India and among Hindu
communities throughout the world. Los Angeles and New York City both have large and
well-established Hare Krishna communities. Both temples, in keeping with the Rath
Yatra tradition in India, also take large-scale processions through public places—beaches
in California, city streets in New York City—where not only devotees (many of whom
drive across country to attend), but also significant numbers of people who are not
affiliated with ISKCON are invited to join in, sometimes by simply allowing themselves
to be absorbed into the procession.
Spanish Fork, Utah, is a small town that hosts a relatively small Hare Krishna community, but nevertheless attracts significant tourist traffic to a particularly beautiful temple. The Spanish Fork temple’s Festival of Colors, which I attended in March 2012, drew 65,000 participants from surrounding communities, a fair majority of whom were active Christians who made the effort to travel to the temple’s slightly out-of-the-way location. The Festival of Colors, or Holi, has a very long history in India and is one of the most popular Hindu festivals. The custom of throwing colorful paint on participants gives Holi particular significance as an event that promotes empathy by coloring over the visual signifiers of apparent difference and stimulates collective laughter among those who choose to take part.

Khandelwal writes that “all truth is situated” (Khandelwal 2004:15), and quotes Ruth Behar in saying:

To assert that one is a ‘white middle class woman’ or a ‘black gay man’ or a ‘working class Latina’ within one’s study of Shakespeare or Santeria is only interesting if one is able to draw deeper connections between one’s personal experience and the subject under study. That doesn’t require a full-length autobiography, but it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied. (Ibid.,14-15)

My experiences with kirtan are inevitably read through the filter of my own religious background as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (to which I will hereafter refer using both the terms “Latter Day Saint” and the common nickname “Mormon”). This is especially relevant to Chapter Five on the Utah Festival of Colors, as just seven years ago I was among the crowd of eager Brigham Young University students discovering kirtan through that event. Because of my personal background, I am sensitive to elements of Hare Krishna doctrine that are likely to resonate with Latter Day Saints and can easily recognize rhetorical techniques addressed to members of that church. Even at research sites outside of Utah I found that my religious background had a beneficial impact on my interactions with devotees and the manner in which some of our interviews took shape. I considered it important to be upfront about my own religious identity while interacting with devotees—if nothing else, I did not wish to deceive anyone regarding my intentions in visiting their temples. I found that devotees often responded positively, expressing a favorable impression of Mormons (thanks in part
to the reputation of the Utah Festival of Colors) and responding to the willingness implicit in my presence at the temple, given who I am and what I was doing, to engage in positive interfaith dialogue.

Kirtan and Writing about Kirtan

Kirtan in the broad sense is a very diverse phenomenon that exists in a number of different religious traditions in India, including Sikh and Sufi kirtans, but the style of kirtan that has had the biggest impact on the musical practices of ISKCON is Gaudiya Vaishnava kirtan as practiced in Bengal. The Indian origins of kirtan as it is practiced in the United States are most readily felt in the selection of melodies used, the tonality of those melodies, and the instrumentation of what devotees commonly refer to as a "traditional kirtan," although non-traditional kirtans performed in popular music styles sometimes utilize the same melodies common to traditional kirtan but perform them with different instrumentation. The harmonium is the main non-percussion accompanying instrument for a traditional kirtan, and is often played by the kirtaniya, or leader, who directs the musical progress of the performance. I overheard a devotee describe the harmonium to a tour group as a sort of "poor man’s piano,” and as such its presence in kirtan emphasizes the egalitarian influences inherent in bhakti yoga. Other melodic instruments such as the violin or the flute (particularly the Indian bansuri) may also be present in the kirtan. Kirtans usually include several percussion instruments, most often a small pair of hand cymbals (or kartals) and the mridanga. The mridanga is a double-headed clay drum invented by Caitanya Mahaprabhu for the specific purpose of playing kirtan, according to drummer Visvambhar Sheth, who explains that symbolically “the small [treble] side represents Radharani, the big [bass] side represents Krishna—it’s high and low like their voices.”
Photographs 1 & 2: Devotees Playing Harmonium and Mridanga

Sheth also describes the lightweight mridanga as being designed to be carried while dancing, and it would be impossible to accurately describe the performance of kirtan without emphasizing dance, or a generally kinesthetic dimension of self-expression on the part of those who participate. Sometimes devotees distinguish between bhajan, or chant sung sitting down, and kirtan, or chant sung standing up, but for convenience I will use the term kirtan as an umbrella term for any call-and-response performance of sacred chants, especially given that there is considerable overlap between sitting and standing performances—many start out sitting down and end standing up, or include some congregation members who stand up to dance while others remain seated. But especially as kirtan is sung standing up, devotees tend to engage in a variety of culturally conditioned behaviors that I will call “gestures of ecstasy,” or common gestures that convey recognized emotional states, such as raising the arms above the head to convey excitement or opening the hands around the heart to express joyful contemplation. Dance is often a particularly important gesture of ecstasy. In Chapters Three and Five I will discuss physical gestures adopted by non-devotees as they too find ways of responding kinesthetically to the rhythmically driving music of kirtan.

The practice of kirtan goes beyond the rendition of any particular song or songs and can perhaps best be described as a process, a type of musical behavior with certain parameters that forms part of Vaishnava ritual practice. When Christopher Small famously proposed the term “musicking” to refer to music as a verb, not a noun, he described the musical act as a process in which “the more actively we participate, the more each one of us is empowered to act, to create, to display, then the more satisfying
we shall find the performance of the ritual” (Small 1998: 54), and it is an apt description of kirtan. The most important aspect of kirtan is its participatory call-and-response nature, as a kirtaniya spontaneously strings together melodies usually drawn by memory from a stockpile of common kirtan melodies that most musicians simply pick up over years of chanting, which the audience then repeats. Accompanying instrumentalists spontaneously and collectively improvise an accompaniment that is usually characterized by a very compelling rhythmic groove. Thomas Turino, who differentiates between participatory and presentational modes of musical performance—an important distinction that I will discuss in greater depth in Chapters Four and Five—describes participatory musical forms such as kirtan as “a collection of resources refashioned anew in each performance like the form, rules, and practiced moves of a game” (Turino 2008:59). One of Turino’s traits of participatory music is repetition, and kirtan melodies are generally sung in call-and-response several times over. Occasionally a kirtaniya will sing only one or two iterations of a melody, but most melodies are sung anywhere from four to sixteen times, allowing participants to become thoroughly grounded in whatever emotional sensations a melody has to offer before moving on to a new one.

The most common text for this call-and-response singing is the Maha Mantra, although I will analyze performances, particularly in Chapter Five, based on other names for Krishna or other Sanskrit texts. The Maha Mantra, due to the symmetry of its two eight-word phrases

Hare Krishna Hare Krishna/ Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama/ Rama Rama Hare Hare

tends to invite musical renditions with similarly symmetrical structures, whether the two halves of the mantra provide a balanced question-and-answer structure or simply repeat each other. Smaller musical motifs might also build on the mantra’s symmetry at a two or four word level. However the musical phrases of a chanting melody are combined, the Maha Mantra provides a very symmetrical text for musical interpretation.

Although the pool of kirtan melodies is vast, there is one particular melody that is particularly prevalent. I will refer to this melody henceforth as the “common melody.”
This is a melody that was sung often by Srila Prabhupada, and is particularly prominent in newsreel footage from the period when Prabhupada first introduced the Krishna movement to America. A momentous moment in Hare Krishna history occurred with the 1969 release of a single, “Hare Krishna Mahamantra,” as sung by devotees at the London temple and produced with the help of George Harrison by Apple Records. The single represented a significant step into the public consciousness for ISKCON, as it charted in the United States and several European countries, and George Harrison accompanied the group of devotees singing it several times on Britain’s Top of the Pops. The single consisted entirely of iterations of this common melody. I have noticed that this very familiar melody often appears at the emotional climax of a kirtan, and seems to draw an extra burst of enthusiastic energy from devotees whenever it is sung.

If kirtan is a process, rather than the execution of a piece or set of pieces, what gives a kirtan its shape is the direction of the musical energy. Edward O. Henry writes that “intensity is a major theme in the music of India,” and that “In India an important goal in many different music genres, from participatory ‘folk’ music to that of the ‘classical’ full-time specialist, is the generation of intense feeling in its listeners or participants” (Henry 2002:33-34). To this end, kirtan, like many forms of Indian music, tends to start out slowly, then gradually build in speed and intensity until it reaches a climax. Sometimes this process takes only a few minutes; oftentimes it lasts over the course of an hour or more. It is not unusual to hear kirtaniyas alternate melodies or groups of melodies that produce a sensation of intense focus, as characterized by rapid, steady surface rhythms and repeated notes over a narrow melodic range that allow for more rapid iterations of the mantra, as shown here:

Figure 2: Melody with Focused Energy
with expansive melodies that exhibit slower, more varied surface rhythms and a wide melodic range:

Figure 3: Melody with Expansive Energy

The contrasting sensations created by the introduction of different styles of melody tend to draw excited reactions from participants whose energy levels seem to range from ecstatic to very ecstatic to extremely ecstatic. Henry notes that participatory devotional music in India is often geared toward the “use of music as a trigger to special states of consciousness” which, in the case of bhakti movements like Hare Krishna, are attached to “intense devotion to God… highly emotional and intensely personal” (Henry 2002:49-50).

Because kirtans tend to involve dense textures and simultaneous improvisation on the part of a large group of people who have varying degrees of musical training, it is almost impossible to fully transcribe all of the sounds that are involved with performing a kirtan. However, as I examine a handful of representative kirtans (or passages of kirtan) as performed at the various festivals in the coming chapters, there are a few aspects of the music that I will discuss, generally in the context of shaping the energy and emotional tenor of a kirtan. These may include the melodic composition of the kirtan: for example, what melodies are used, how many times they are sung, how they flow into and relate to each other, and how they shape the energy of a kirtan through the manipulation of meditative feeling, focus, and expansiveness. I will also examine rhythmic patterns, cross rhythms, and the use of the various percussion instruments to create and guide musical momentum. Other topics for discussion may include the use of instruments, both rhythmic and melodic, to add counter melodies or to ornament the musical texture; personal inflections and elaborations of the melodies as performed by individual kirtaniyas; modes of participation by members of the congregation and observers; and gestures of ecstasy from those who are participating. While there is no single set of analytical tools that can adequately describe all of the sounds or measure the emotional impact of a kirtan, I will discuss sample performances largely in terms of Turino’s work.
on participatory music, evaluating how the music invites people to take part, and allow Henry’s analysis of musical techniques that create emotional intensity in Indian (or for our purposes, Indian-derived) musics to act as a framework for understanding the way that the kirtan experience is perceived emotionally.

**Chapters Outline**

In her research into the lives of Hindu sannyasinis, Meena Khandelwal writes that good ethnographic research should illustrate “how abstract theological and philosophical ideas are interpreted by individuals and reenacted in everyday situations,” and “the relevance of abstract philosophical concepts for contemporary people” (Khandelwal 2004:12). While I was interviewing Hare Krishnas at the various temples I visited, it was not surprising to me to find that the ins and outs of the particular festivals detailed in each chapter were only a small part of what they had to offer. The practice of kirtan is deeply rooted in the lives of these devotees, and I was impressed by the experiences they were willing to share beyond the specific scope of the four festivals that are the focus of this dissertation. Chapter One is my attempt to honor the deep importance of what these devotees were willing to share with me by exploring patterns in their stories about coming to embrace Krishna consciousness, the personal transformations that kirtan has stimulated in their lives, and the meaning of the practice in their lives.

Chapter Two deals with the ISKCON community in Brooklyn, New York, and the annual Rath Yatra parade on Fifth Avenue. This chapter will explore common temple practices in the Hare Krishna movement and their impact when they are taken into public spaces, the beliefs that devotees hold about the impact of kirtan on its environment, and the use of kirtan as a tool in negotiating public encounters between people from different ethnic and religious communities. In Chapter Three the Rath Yatra parade is transplanted to Los Angeles’ Venice Beach, where the celebration yields insight into kirtan as a performance of the promises that Vaishnava theology makes regarding personal liberation and bliss. This chapter will also introduce the topic of kirtan and musical hybridity, which will be developed further in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four introduces the Alachua ISKCON community, the largest Hare Krishna “farming community” in the United States, which has become simultaneously a
retreat for the first generation of Krishna converts and a hotbed of creative activity on the part of a rising second generation of performing artists. The interactions among devotees in Alachua illuminate the negotiation of social identity along generational lines within the Krishna movement. This chapter also delves into the recent phenomenon of the “kirtan mela,” or the festival solely dedicated to the focused practice of kirtan for a given period of time. Studying performances at the Festival of the Holy Name provides an opportunity to examine some of the artistic elements of kirtan performance, the creation of emotional intensity in Indian-derived musics, and how these things are developed within a participatory framework.

The participatory and the presentational merge in the performances at the Utah Festival of Colors, which takes on the atmosphere of an extraordinarily colorful Krishna rock festival. In Chapter Five I examine kirtan as it is presented in an event primarily geared toward introducing the practice to a group of people who are, for the most part, unfamiliar with it. I will look at musical as well as rhetorical techniques involved with the use of kirtan to mediate cultural encounters and to provide an experience that can be personally meaningful to a wide range of people regardless of what their own belief systems may or may not be.

Over the course of these chapters I will call attention to negotiations of social identity within the Krishna movement and with the larger communities in which they are situated, both during encounters in public spaces and at times when the public actively travels to be with the Hare Krishnas. I will explore the meanings that kirtan holds for Krishna devotees and their techniques for presenting the music in a manner that they hope will make kirtan relevant and meaningful to others, mediating social differences in a celebratory environment of “collective spiritual [and musical] play” (see Stein 1992).
CHAPTER 1
THE MEANING OF KIRTAN:
CONVERSATIONS WITH DEVOTEES

The nature of this dissertation is such that I use four single-day or weekend events
to provide snapshots into four communities and their musical practices. There is much to
be learned by using such events to frame the various ways that kirtan functions in Hare
Krishna celebration, but these snapshots fail to fully convey the ways that the practice of
kirtan is woven into the broader narratives of the lives of those who practice it. This
chapter is my effort to honor the deeper stories that Krishna devotees were willing to
share with me, and the crucial “relevance of [these] abstract philosophical concepts for
contemporary people” (Khandelwal 2004:12). This dissertation presents kirtan as part of
a social negotiation, a practice intended to offer meaningful spiritual or personal
experience to any who hear or choose to participate. But in order to understand the way
that kirtan can become meaningful to people for whom this music is a new experience, I
must first examine what it means to those for whom it is a part of daily life.

In this chapter I look at the experiences of thirteen devotees and one Hare Krishna
enthusiast who had not taken initiation as of the time that we spoke. All but that one non-
initiated enthusiast, who was born and raised in India, and one Englishwoman, are
American-born and raised. All devotees are given Sanskrit names at the time of initiation,
and I will use those names since that is the way that they identified themselves to me.
Ten are converts to ISKCON, nine of them from the first generation of Hare Krishna
converts who came to the movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The other three are second
generation Hare Krishnas born into ISKCON families. All were eager to convey to me a
sense of positive transformation effected in their lives by the study of Vedic philosophy
and the influence of kirtan. A look at their stories about finding and embracing Krishna
consciousness and encountering kirtan for the first time, as well as a survey of some of
their beliefs regarding kirtan, provides insight into the motivations and meaning that Hare
Krishnas ascribe to their music.
Encounters with Krishna: Discovering ISKCON

Some of the devotees who I met in the process of visiting temples and discussing the meanings of Hare Krishna music had a clear memory of hearing their first kirtans. For others, kirtan is something that has simply been so integrally the soundtrack of their lives for so many years that any memory of the first one has long since been lost. However clear their memory of a first kirtan is, however, each convert first had to discover Krishna consciousness, and every story begins with some sort of search: for meaning, for peace, or for a deeper reality.

Those searches were stimulated in different ways. Kurma Rupadasa was among the first generation of ISKCON devotees and now divides his time between India and the United States. He explains that, according to the Bhagavad Gita, there are different categories of souls or stimuli that prompt souls to seek Krishna. One category involves those who are “distressed: one is experiencing difficulties in the material world. One is distressed either financially, or because of illness, or his family situation is painful.” Such a soul seeks out Krishna because he is “seeking relief.” A second category of souls includes “those who are inquisitive about what is the purpose of life, people who have existential concerns. How should I spend my life? What is the purpose of my life? What am I supposed to be doing with my life? Am I supposed to be working eight to five, just paying taxes? Is that all there is?” Finally there are those who seek wisdom for the sake of goodness alone. “There are those who are actually wise people—saintly, wise people who are seeking knowledge,” Kurma explains, “they want to practice it. They are the most mature” of the different types of soul. “They are seeking knowledge about the spiritual world—transcendental knowledge. So they are not interested in material pursuits, they’re not interested in making money or getting some position or having some nice career. But they’re interested in getting out of the material world” and into a spiritual one, “so they want to apply themselves to some process of yoga.” As one who has spent a great deal of time in Hare Krishna temples greeting visitors, Kurma says that “we see in practice [that] it’s very easy to distinguish these types of people when they come in and begin inquiring.”

Kurma places himself in the first category of souls that he described to me, those who find God in their time of distress. Kurma was raised in a Christian family, but he,
like many Krishna converts, did not make an especially strong connection in his youth with the faith of his parents. He describes them as “very good people” who lived a values-based lifestyle, but as he puts it, “religion was like an elective in our family,” and he didn’t meet any “impressive spiritualists” who caught his attention at church. Still, he reflects, “I had from a past life, you would say, an innate faith in God. I felt, ‘There’s someone, there is a controller, there is a lord of the universe, but I don’t know anything about him.’”

For Kurma, the crisis that drove him into Krishna’s (figurative) arms came when he was called up to fight in the Vietnam War—a cataclysmic event in the lives of many Americans that coincided with the rise of the Krishna movement. “When I was in college this Vietnam War was going on, and I was faced with having to go into the army,” Kurma recalls. “I was hoping that I could stay in college until the war was over, because I don’t have a martial spirit. I’m 64 years old, I’ve never been in a fight in my life.” But the war outlasted his work on a photojournalism degree and Kurma was drafted. Much as he hoped the army would use him as a journalist, “it became more and more apparent that I was going to be sent as a footsoldier to Vietnam. I was being trained for that. So that created great distress in my life. It was actually the crisis of my life.” So Kurma began reaching out for God:

I felt very isolated from all these other people in the barracks in the army…and when it became obvious to me that my next step was to go to Vietnam and fight with people I had no quarrel with, it created great distress. And I began praying. I didn’t really know how to pray, because I didn’t have any religious training, but I remember the prayer was something like, ‘My Lord, if you can somehow relieve me from having to go to war then I will’—it was like a business deal—’if you save me from having to go to war then I will learn how to serve you.’ That was basically the essence of my prayer, and it was intense.

At that point Kurma experienced what he called an “inner guidance,” or an “inner voice that told me, ‘You search out this person, you say this, you do this.’” Within a couple of months Kurma was transferred to a desk job that allowed him to fulfill his military duty without perpetrating violence himself, and as he describes it, “That was the beginning of my spiritual life.” Upon being discharged from the army, he felt a responsibility to keep his end of the bargain he had made with God, and so he began to search. Kurma felt little during his initial search into Christianity that moved him greatly,
but he had “an inclination toward yoga” that he credits to a previous life, and so he began reading into the Vedic tradition in India. After investigating Vedic culture, Kurma explained,

I understood the *Bhagavad Gita* was what I had to study. I got several editions of the *Bhagavad Gita* in college bookstores that were academic. They were translated accurately but they weren’t translated by people who practiced [the religion], and so there was a gap. But intuitively I knew that there’s a book in existence that explains every verse of the *Bhagavad Gita* and gives practical guidance, and so I kept searching until I found A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada’s book that explains every verse.

While reading Srila Prabhupada’s translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* and associating with other devotees, Kurma found what he was seeking. “I experienced relief from my distress, and that’s what has kept me on the same path…I was distressed, then I got some knowledge and I put it into practice, I experienced where it does work.”

If Kurma represents those who come to know Krishna in their times of distress, a number of his contemporaries in the generation of ISKCON devotees who joined during Prabhupada’s lifetime may be said to belong to the category of converts who are “truly inquisitive souls.” A common theme running through many of their stories is the college experience and discovering the Krishna movement in the context of a personal quest for enlightening education. Alachua temple president Mukhya Devi Dasi, for example, discovered Hare Krishna when she was a student at the University of Michigan. “I had to take a class on world religions, so I had to visit three religious places,” she remembers, “and I went to the Hare Krishna temple in Detroit as one of them.” For Mukhya as for Kurma, an encounter with Srila Prabhupada’s *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* was powerfully significant: “I immediately said, *this* is actually what I want to study. This resonated with me very strongly, so I actually didn’t go back to school after my year finished and I just joined the temple in Detroit.”

Banabhatta, a drummer deeply involved with musical activities at the temple in Los Angeles, was in his first year of college studying theater “when my theater teacher asked if I’d come back and take on some bigger roles next semester. I told him that, ‘I love you, I love the theater. I have to be honest and tell you, I’m playing the parts of so many different people, and I have no idea who I am.’ So at that time I ended up hitchhiking out to California” on a “journey of self-realization.” There he encountered
devotees who had known his brother, a San Francisco hippie-turned-Krishna devotee. Inspired by their message and teachings, he joined the San Francisco Hare Krishna temple.

Hridayananda dasi Goswami, who is now an initiating guru in ISKCON, quips that he simply “woke up one morning and there I was in a Hare Krishna temple.” He laughs, but turning to his actual history, he explains that he attended UC Berkeley during the 1960s when “there were a lot of people who were asking significant questions like ‘Who am I? What’s the purpose of life?’ and all that. So I was one of the innumerable young people back then who was quote-unquote ‘searching.’” Hridayananda reflects that “my own nature was that I needed not just a mystic experience or a warm fuzzy community, but I needed a very clear, coherent explanation of life, a metaphysical roadmap. Who am I? What is God? What is the nature of the soul? What is this world? I wanted a very clear, cogent explanation before I could just give myself” to a religious movement. He adds, “I had a lot of friends. I didn’t need to join a religious community to have friends.” But as he investigated further, Hridayananda “became convinced that the philosophy of Krishna consciousness was really the best explanation.” That doesn’t mean that he perceived ISKCON as having an exclusive corner on truth. “I experienced the presence of God in many traditions. God was reciprocating with many different people in many different ways.” But Hare Krishna theology “provided the most comprehensive and most detailed explanation of what many other people were also talking about.” Hridayananda “wasn’t just looking for a doctrine to believe in or a religion to belong to,” but he set his own criteria in that “I actually wanted to somehow attain and remain at higher consciousness. And I found that I tried Brand X, but when I finally engaged in Krishna consciousness I found that it gave the most comprehensive explanation.”

For many devotees of that generation, Srila Prabhupada’s teachings provided an important counterpoint to what they found elsewhere in American society. Sukha Dasa, a teacher in the Alachua community, recalls that “as a child I actually thought I did not want to go to heaven because I just thought God was mean. Like, he sends people to hell forever and ever [and] they burn and I just thought, ‘Uh-uh,’” she shakes her head adamantly. “Not understanding heaven, not understanding what went on there, all I knew
[was that God] sat on a throne and there were some angels that look pretty, but [I] couldn’t really totally relate to him.” As Sukha grew older, she found mainstream American culture somewhat depressing. “I remember the last two movies I saw before I became a devotee…one was Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the other one was Bonnie and Clyde. And I finally thought, ‘Why am I torturing myself going to these depressing movies? I come out and I feel worse than when I went in. I’m not going anymore.’” But in contrast to a mainstream culture she found depressing and an image of God thought unrelatable, “Prabhupada gave us this whole picture of what goes on in the spiritual world” that provided for Sukha a real motivation to approach God through Krishna consciousness.

Kirtan was an important element of this college-age searching and transformation for some devotees. Bada Hari, a California native turned fixture in Alachua’s Hare Krishna music scene, was performing as a professional musician in Los Angeles by the age of seventeen, received a composition degree from the University of Southern California, and was in graduate school in Switzerland touring with a composer there when he took an interest in trying out different spiritual paths. “I had kind of an awakening of my spiritual urge. I was doing yoga, I tried Transcendental Meditation,” he recalls, “and when I came back to America I had this idea that I wanted to find a spiritual group…a genuine spiritual path…some way to make spiritual progress.” After being impressed with a Krishna devotee he met in Washington D.C., “I came back to Los Angeles to be with my folks. My dad brought a mantra card back from the airport, so I went to the temple at that point –and moved in.” An interest in kirtan followed soon after, strongly driven by hearing Srila Prabhupada chant, and the course of Bada Hari’s life was set.

The rush of college students who joined the Krishna movement in the decade after Srila Prabhupada’s arrival in the United States are the stuff of ISKCON legend, but the kind of self-searching that often accompanies the college experience continues to be a significant factor in bringing people to Krishna consciousness. Ananda is a young devotee at the New Vrindaban ISKCON farming community in West Virginia. When he discovered Krishna consciousness he was a student for whom, like Bada Hari, musical impulses and experiences were intricately tied to his spiritual pursuits. Ananda was just
out of high school when he was given a Hare Krishna book at a Washington D. C. concert:

I had just graduated. I had my interests, I was into music, I was thinking of going in that direction. But at the same time the push [was] to go to college, and so I was kind of at a crossroads. At the same time I was searching spiritually, and the book came at the right time in my life. I really identified with the teachings of Srila Prabhupada, our founder. I was really impressed with his purity and his knowledge of God.

Ananda identified with Prabhupada’s teachings about vegetarianism, compassion for all beings, and the assertion that “we can feel God’s presence all the time. We don’t have to [go to church] just once a week or once a year. We can actually experience God everywhere.” After reading the book, Ananda wanted to learn to chant. “I learned the Maha Mantra and just whenever I had free time [I’d] go up in the woods and I’d chant and play guitar. I’d put [the mantra] to different tunes.” Once Ananda went to college he found a nearby temple where he had his first real opportunity to learn from Krishna devotees, who he felt were “very kind to me and generous with their time.” A life dedicated to Krishna consciousness followed soon after.

Prateek, an Indian-born man in his thirties now working in the United States, offers a perspective on ISKCON from within Indian culture. Prateek’s obstacle in adopting Krishna consciousness was quite opposite to the challenge faced by American devotees whose Vaishnava beliefs and lifestyle are so radically different from their surrounding culture. According to Prateek, in India “the problem is we take it for granted. The Indians don’t want to go for yoga classes, they want to go for salsa classes.” In the atmosphere where Prateek was raised, ISKCON devotees were seen as eccentric, as unorthodox, and he laughed a few times about what response he might have gotten if he had told his parents that he wanted to go to Vrindavan. But after encountering ISKCON in temples in the United States, and in the Utah temple most especially, he says “I started coming—it’s like seven weeks I am coming here—[it is] so addictive. I just want to be in a place like [this].” He reflects on coming to the temple to access his own Indian culture, saying, “I started doing Hare Krishna thinking that it’s just another place, but then slowly I just drifted away from everything else I believed in.” Like many of the devotees who discovered Hare Krishna in college, Prateek is drawn by the philosophy of Vaishnavism.
“If you cleared this crowd away, the glamour of this festival, even then it’s a very rich place. I mean you come here for [Bhagavad Gita classes] in the evening…it’s like an encyclopedia pouring into your ears.”

Discovering Kirtan and the Transformation of the Self

The spiritual searching that led devotees such as those interviewed above to discover Krishna consciousness inevitably led to a musicultural encounter with kirtan. Not all of those who shared their stories with me can remember the specific instance of their first kirtan—in fact, many cannot—but they do seem to invariably remember the way that it quickly became part of their spiritual lives. Sometimes it is a matter of pinpointing the first trip to a temple. “It was probably that first time in the temple that I visited,” Mukhya muses. “I probably saw devotees in New York when I was growing up.” But as part of her early temple experience, she recalls, “I thought [the kirtan] was so nice…I liked the sound. It was exotic but it was somehow—it was deep also.” Banabhatta admits, “I don’t think I remember the exact first time, forty-five years is a little bit of a blur. I can remember just the general experience…the feelings I had, just like so many people do initially. [It was] very uplifting and a feeling of peace and tranquility, a feeling of being free from cares.”

For other devotees, the first kirtan is a crystal clear memory of a singularly transformative moment. For Kurma Rupadasa, following his release from the army and during the period of time when he searched to find God as fulfillment of his promise, he took to farming in the state of Washington in an attempt to live a pure, self-sufficient existence. He visited a Sunday feast at the ISKCON temple in Seattle, where, he explains,

We assembled in a temple room and had a big kirtan. And it was then I think I [realized] that these people [were] experiencing joy. I didn’t know any of these people. I was a stranger, but the kirtan was intense and the singer was very sincere and the participation was very enthusiastic. I felt myself just getting caught up with it, carried away with it…I just remember feeling transformed by the kirtan, an internal transformation.

The transformative influence of that first kirtan affected Kurma’s entire being. He was married at this point in time, and after a visit that was intended to last a couple of hours lasted nine, his wife called the temple worried about his safety. So Kurma went home.
I remember arriving [home] at maybe ten o’clock, and she was with her sister and her sister’s husband. They looked at me and they said, ‘What’s happened to you? You look different. You look different.’ And I told them, ‘Well, I feel different.’ In other words, it wasn’t just an internal transformation, but it was some kind of external transformation.

The intensity of his own experience has inspired Kurma’s view of festivals such as the Rath Yatra that he is visiting New York City to attend. “I have faith that it can have an effect on other people. So therefore to go on the streets of New York and to do kirtan or to participate in these festivals, I have a realization that somebody’s going to be positively affected.”

For Ananda, who started his own kirtan-like process of singing the mantra after reading about it, “the first time I heard kirtan was actually a recording of George Harrison, ‘My Sweet Lord.’” Harrison’s famous song, released shortly after the break-up of the Beatles, constituted one of his first and most influential efforts to share Krishna consciousness. The lyrics to the song express the searching feeling that many of these devotees felt while beginning their quest toward God consciousness—“My sweet Lord/ I really want to see you/ I really want to be with you”—punctuated by a gospel choir singing “Hallelujahs” that seamlessly merge into the Maha Mantra. According to Ananda,

I’d already been chanting myself, but the actual first time I heard someone chanting was that recording of “My Sweet Lord”…and it brought tears to my eyes. I was really touched…I guess I probably heard that song on the radio when I was a little kid [but] when I’d been chanting, really understanding the philosophy myself, I heard that and it was kind of a moving experience for me.

Ananda’s first encounter with devotees in the temple in Baltimore, then, brought on the powerful sensation “that we’re all part of the same spiritual truth. It’s one of the realizations you get from chanting. I remember standing there in that crowd, and as the chanting was going on I started to feel this bond with the people around me.”

Ananda is one of a number of devotees that I have met over the years who first encountered kirtan through a recording, particularly one of an influential handful released in the late 1960s and early 1970s such as Harrison’s “My Sweet Lord” or the Radha Krishna Temple Album. For Kansas City temple president, kirtan recording artist, and initiating guru Danavir Goswami, it was the soundtrack to the musical Hair that first
introduced him to kirtan. In Danavir’s case, it didn’t make an especially strong impression—it just familiarized a sound that made a much greater impact when he later encountered devotees in person. That encounter turned out to be an experience powerful enough that he can immediately call the date to mind. “That first night I actually spoke to the devotees was June 9, 1970. I joined the chanting that night, singing and dancing, and I never stopped.”

Hridayananda was another devotee who first heard kirtan in the Hair soundtrack while listening to music at a high school friend’s house. Later, when he heard it “from the horse’s mouth, so to speak,” it came from devotees chanting on the street at UC Berkeley and again in Los Angeles when he came home for the summer. “I found the chanting of Hare Krishna profoundly elevated my consciousness, and as far as I could observe I saw that the devotees were actually following strict spiritual principles. It wasn’t just talking a good theological game but then you have a mundane life.” For a young Hridayananda, watching devotees chant kirtan was his first experience with what he calls “activist monasticism,”

Where people are really following serious spiritual disciplines but at the same time are actually active in the world, trying to change and help the world. I don’t think I was really cut out for being a hermit or for being a recluse up on top of a mountain. I wanted to really make a difference in the world at the same time [as] I wanted a serious spiritual practice.

Lakshmina is a New York devotee active in promoting kirtan both among devotees at in-home gatherings and as a practice in yoga studios. He first heard kirtan on the Hair album and joined a friend in comically skipping around their campus singing “Hare Krishna” the next day. For him the Radha Krishna Temple Album was, fittingly, a more serious influence, both before he became seriously involved with kirtan and during his personal transformation. As Lakshmina went through “a transition period from not being aware of my spirituality … [to] where I was starting more or less to come of age in terms of my interest in my spiritual path,” he started experimenting with music as a path to God. “There was this one guy who [played flute] and he would just play D. He said it was a pure note, and we did meditation to that… then when I came across kirtan it was really my niche and that’s where I kind of dove [in] head first.” At that point the Radha Krishna Temple Album played an important role in “giving me a familiarity with melody
of mantras, the Hare Krishna mantra, and other aspects, other instruments.” Ultimately kirtan became not only a means of worship but a lifestyle:

It just so happened the person who really impressed me the most had a bus that was converted into a temple. So he invited me to travel with him and his [routine] was going to places that didn’t have Hare Krishna temples and doing kirtan. So that was my introduction, right from the beginning, we chanted almost daily for hours. We’d go to a campus or we’d go to the Boston Commons and places like that. We’d just sit down and we had the Madras cloths and we had various Indian instruments and I just picked it up.

The belief that Hridayananda described as “monastic activism”—the belief that personal spiritual pursuits can and should impact the larger world—is evident in Lakshmina’s experience:

I’ll tell you, several of the devotees that are here were the result of hearing our kirtan. Actually one of my best friends…we were on the Boston Commons chanting, and he was a music student in Boston, and he came upon us. And he sat down and I handed him one of our [instruments], and he started playing the tamboura. And the result was he became a devotee, and he’s been a devotee since that time, that’s 1974.

Bada Hari, like Lakshmina, had the experience of almost immediately finding kirtan not only a passion but a lifestyle. “My first kirtan would have actually been Mangal Arati—that’s kirtan that takes place at 4:30 in the morning. I wound up spending the night [at the temple], and,” he laughs “I got up a little earlier than I was used to” when the music began. Within days Bada Hari moved into the temple. “I said, ‘I’ll be back,’ and I moved in. The day I moved in they put about thirty of us on the back of a flatbed truck that was covered with a tarp and we drove to San Francisco for Rath Yatra, and we had kirtan the whole way…. that’s where I met Srila Prabhupada the first time in 1975.”

Meeting Srila Prabhupada on this occasion wasn’t the first time that the guru’s music had an impact on Bada Hari. While studying at USC he had been “introduced to that idea of music as a meditation, or music as a connection to transcendence, that music could be a form of yoga.” Some of the ensembles that he performed with experimented with things like singing the syllable Om for periods of time, attempting to “get into this vibration and hear this sound—and I remember it was striking. It had a quality to it that was different, actually amazing.” Bada Hari appreciated music’s power to influence and
express human emotion, but wrestled with the feeling that “for the most part material music is expression of emotions that are based on illusions. I would express it as crying in your beer, so to speak. There’s ‘My baby left me and I feel so blue,’ and other people listen to it and go ‘Yeah.’” But he kept on feeling that “it’s all based on illusions, it’s not really the soul’s real feeling.” While standing in the temple gift shop, then, he heard a recording of Srila Prabhupada singing, and even though he didn’t yet know who Srila Prabhupada was,

I thought, ‘This is different than any other music I’ve ever heard.’ And I was thinking, ‘This is the best musician I’ve ever heard.’ and I’ve thought about that—you know that was just the thought that popped in my head....and I think it was because of this point: he was actually singing from his heart. He was singing real feelings, real emotions, about things that actually exist in reality. It’s not illusory and there’s not a hint of false ego in his music…it’s all just him singing out of pure love to Krishna, and even though I didn’t’ know anything [about him] at that point, it really came across loud and clear.

After that experience Bada Hari found that he couldn’t quite return to the kinds of music that he had played before. Almost immediately he started leading kirtans, and when he moved to a temple in Laguna Beach he began working with Agni Dev, a prominent musician who had Bada Hari learning the songs of venerable Bengali poets like Govinda Das, Narottam Das Thakur, Bhaktivinoda Thakur, and Lochan Das Thakur. He has been deeply involved with kirtan, as well as Indian classical music, ever since.

The Doctrine of Kirtan

In having these conversations with devotees, it becomes clear that some of them feel a real pleasure not only in practicing kirtan, but also in simply talking about it, and in the process they bring out several important dimensions of kirtan as an element of Vaishnava theology. At a fundamental level, kirtan serves the purposes of Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of love and devotion that “yokes” the soul to the divine. Devotees teach that the sound vibrations of God’s name invoke the presence of God himself, and because it fosters direct communion with the divine, kirtan falls into the category of what Ramabhadra Das, temple president at the Brooklyn temple, calls “the different spiritual sciences [that] help one re-establish or reawaken one’s dormant love. Everyone loves God,” but kirtan helps reawaken the “dormant love within the heart.” Devotion is
hardwired into the spirit, and music is a means of cultivating that. Ramabhadra uses the example of watching the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan show when he was young and watching the fans crying with emotion. “The Beatles were great people, don’t get me wrong,” he says. “They’re very nice people and they helped the Hare Krishna movement a great deal. But the point is: it was a mundane [sound] vibration. It was a mundane vibration, but because of the dynamics of the nature of our own souls” even the mundane music drew out hysterical reactions from the fans. “Every living entity, even a tiger, wants to be loved, because that’s inherent. And God’s the supreme lover. That’s all he engages in. He doesn’t have to worry about missile systems and crooked bankers, all sorts of nightmares.” Ramabhadra emphasizes the tremendous power of God and concludes that through kirtan,

We’re given the opportunity to carry out this process in the material realm to qualify—to purify and qualify ourselves to once again, to enter the spiritual realm, to enter an eternal loving relationship which we have with God, but forever. Forever. To never ever leave that eternal association of the supreme personality of Godhead.

According to Ramabhadra, kirtan is the “opportunity” that God gives to human souls, who are “parts and parcels” of God, “to re-establish their position with him” if that should be their choice:

Because built into every person, built into the consciousness and the eternal nature of every living entity, is free will. We all have free will. There cannot be love without free will. If you go into some place with a gun and hold it to someone’s head you cannot make them love you. It has to be spontaneous. It has to come by association and service. By associating and serving you develop an affection, an attachment, and love.

However, this requires the tempering of selfish and other undesirable influences: “Free will has to be utilized. That has to be rechanneled. You have to direct it away from a life of ‘I, me and mine’ personal gain, personal sense gratification, personal temporary so-called happiness.”

And chanting is the means to do so. Ananda’s immediate response to the question of “Why chant kirtan?” is “To purify the heart. We want to understand our identity. We want to understand God.” He quotes a Sanskrit verse by Caitanya Mahaprabhu, “Caito Darponum Marginum,” referring to the consciousness, a mirror, and cleansing:
essentially “the consciousness is compared to a mirror that’s covered with dust at the present moment” but can be cleansed by chanting, which “extinguishes the fire—the blazing forest fire of material existence.” Ramabhadra describes the ideal state of mind for chanting and what chanting should achieve: “a humble state of mind, feeling oneself lower than the straw, more tolerant than a tree, devoid of all sense of false prestige.” It is the state of mind that is the goal of yoga, and Hridayananda elaborates:

Yoga means connect, link. So when you chant or sing or hear the names of God—kirtan—you are immediately in a state of yoga….Prabhupada used to give the example that if you put iron in fire, the iron becomes fire, [it] takes on the quality of fire. So when you put your consciousness in or immerse your consciousness in God by kirtan, you become divinized, or you become spiritualized, or you become Godly.

This process is the ultimate purpose of human life, according to Danavir Goswami: “That’s what it’s all about. Praise the name of the Lord from the time the sun rises to the time the sun sets.” The ultimate goal is that “if we do that we will prepare ourselves for going back to the spiritual world. In the spiritual world they’re having kirtan all the time.” Sukha describes the process as “training up so at the time of death it’s a natural transition,” based on the belief that “whatever state of mind you have when you leave your body, that’s the state you attain.” Devotees believe that if a person is thinking of Krishna at the time of death, he or she will return to Krishna and attain the spiritual world. Ananda describes this as the ultimate homecoming, in contrast to the experience of living in a transitory material world:

If someone is on a long journey they may be having a good time visiting various places on vacation, but everybody likes to come home. It’s a nice feeling to actually come home… but what kind of home is it if you can be kicked out of it at any moment? That’s this material life. Our death is there, and there’s no notice, nobody knows—it may come today, it may come 50 years down the road. But the point is, at any moment you can be kicked out. What kind of a home is that? Home is a place where you can feel secure and happy and comfortable. So you get that feeling by chanting: you’re in the place where you’re supposed to be.

For this reason, Sukha tells me, Srila Prabhupada taught that kirtan is “the safest place in the material world.”

Finding safety in the material world is especially crucial during what is called the Age of Kali, or “the age of quarrel and hypocrisy,” which Ramabhadra sees evident in the
fact that the world has been in a state of warfare for virtually his whole life. Banabhatta points to the pollution of the air, “the ether or the vacuum by which sound vibration travels,” as a reason for using mantra meditation to cleanse it, and Danavir says that material sound vibration “binds one up to the material world and spiritual vibration [through kirtan] liberates one.” According to Ramabhadra, “the whole Hare Krishna movement is based on the congregational chanting of the holy names, and all the temples—they’re basically all an arrangement by God Himself to give the people in this particular age” the opportunity to approach Him.

A Brief History of Kirtan

Since sound is identified with divine creative beings and powers in Hindu cosmology, the use of music as an act of worship has a long history in India dating back to and beyond the Samaveda, whose hymn texts and careful instructions for performance constitute one of the world’s earliest forms of musical notation. In part because of the complexity of the performances demanded by the Vedas, in orthodox Hindu practice priestly mediation was considered necessary in order for an individual to approach God. Musical forms like dhrupad used the complicated resources of raga to express sacred ideas.

Starting around 600 C.E., the bhakti reformation of Hinduism began to sweep India, a “popular pietistic movement in opposition to the ritually oriented orthodoxy” (Slawek 1988:77) that was marked by worship practices that “[rebelled], explicitly or implicitly, against priestly dominance” (Henry 1991:222). Music figured powerfully into the bhakti movement, and several influential groups of poet-musicians are credited with spreading bhakti. For example, the Alvars, whose name translates roughly as “one who has mystical intuitive knowledge of God and who has merged himself in the divine contemplation,” were a group of twelve Vaishnava poet-saints who wandered far and wide attracting disciples through devotional music. These poet-saints wandered from South India and their followers spread throughout the Northern part of the subcontinent until, by the sixteenth century, bhakti devotionalism was a predominant manifestation of Hindu religious feeling in North India (see Gupta 2000 and Johnson 2009).
Stephen Slawek writes that bhakti movements generally “formed around a central figure who was regarded to have experienced some kind of direct contact with the Divine” (Slawek 1998). In the case of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Caitanya Mahaprabhu was revered as an actual avatar of the deity, and his approach to the singing of kirtan set the pattern for devotional music as sung by Hare Krishnas today. This period of history around the time of the life of Caitanya, when kirtan took root as the yuga dharma, or solution to the difficulties of the Age of Kali, is an important source of stories that devotees find personally inspirational. Charles R. Brooks writes that “bhakti movements have always been a force subversive to ideological inequality” (Brooks 1989:25), and devotees are fond of stories that emphasize the inclusive egalitarian nature of bhakti. Banabhatta shares one very popular story, the story of Ramanuja, an important religious figure who preceded Caitanya.

[Ramanuja’s spiritual teacher] told him, “I’m going to give you a secret mantra. This mantra is so powerful that when you chant this mantra, this will give you liberation. But I have to ask you to do one thing for me—you have to promise never to give it to anyone else.” And he promised and got the mantra and he started chanting it. And all of the sudden the guru came to his ashram and Ramanuja was there with a huge crowd of people out there and he was yelling out the mantra, teaching them the mantra. And the guru became very, very angry and he reprimanded his disciple and said, ‘What are you doing? I told you this was a secret mantra, you’re not to give it to anyone else.’ Ramanuja said, ‘If this mantra can actually give one liberation, I’m not greedy just for myself, that it should just be for my benefit, but it should be for everyone’s benefit.’ And so this is the tradition that we’re following, it is not that we only want to benefit ourselves, but the benefit is so great and the happiness is so great that it’s very difficult to keep from wanting to give it to others.

Of course the figure who is most important to ISKCON theology as propagator of kirtan is Caitanya Mahaprabhu, of whom Ramabhadra remarked, “Caitanya Mahaprabhu had the dogs and the tigers in the forest chanting. He’s God.” Visvambhar Sheth and Krishna Kishore, lifelong devotees and performers with the kirtan band Mayapuris, share a story from just after the time of Caitanya, one which they regularly tell during their performances. Kishore begins the story:

[This is] how kirtan was revived 500 years ago. This Maha Mantra that you’re hearing in the festival, it used to be a secret mantra and only the higher caste people had access to this mantra, and the founder of kirtan, Sri Caitanya, he thought, ‘If this mantra is so powerful, why is it kept a secret?’ So before
releasing it to the public, he and some close friends cultivated this mantra and really developed a relationship with it. And then they created this mridanga drum to dance with, dressed beautifully like this with different cloths and colors and flags, and they brought it out to the streets for everyone to have. But there was some opposition.

Visvambhar continues:

The thing is, it wasn’t just the Muslims that were against the kirtan, but it was also the higher caste Brahmanas, they were envious that these people are—because Mahaprabhu was sharing it with anybody. And anybody, whether they were a woman or whether they were of the lower caste or whether—it didn’t really matter whether they were even a Muslim or of another religion, he was just encouraging everyone to chant. So when they complained…the mayor he came and he broke the mridanga and he broke the mridanga and it was a big offense.

Kishore and Visvambhar continue to pass the story back and forth: “They asked Caitanya: ‘this happened, what do we do?’”

“So the next day he gathered everybody—the whole town, all the villages from all the neighboring districts—and they all gathered and they all had this big rally and they”

“—had torches—”

“—and they were doing kirtan. And it was the first time that a harinam sankirtan party went out on the streets, and they just took it to the streets. And there was like thousands and thousands of people and they all marched to the mayor’s place and the Kazi [or mayor] was super scared. And they were just like, ‘No we just want to talk to you.’ He invited Caitanya Mahaprabhu in and all the other people, they had a discussion.”

“So you see a revolution of simply chanting and dancing—non-violent. When they got there they just talked about philosophy, talked about what they agreed on, and continued on and then the Kazi—”

“Then he said that, ‘We’ll never stop the kirtan again.’ And also he showed his chest and on his chest he had these scratch marks. And that night—the night after he broke the drum—he had a dream that Narasingha Dev, the half-man half-lion form came to him and grabbed him by his chest and was like, ‘You’d better never stop the kirtan again, so…. ’”

So in that moment Caitanya Mahaprabhu set up kirtan as a practice to spread the influence of God consciousness in the world. Devotees place great emphasis on not just
speaking the mantra, but also hearing it. Ramabhadra compares the impact of the kirtan to a more benevolent version of the Pied Piper of Hamelin and explains that “if bystanders see it and they hear it, that plants a very pious seed within the heart. This is one of the ways that God reclaims his conditioned souls.” According to Banabhatta, “Kirtan means to chant congregationally and to give it to others because the chanting of the name is so powerful that even living entities that are encaged in the body of an insect or a plant or a tree or a bird like that can get benefit from hearing the name of God being chanted.”

Because they believe that kirtan has global importance and can have a global impact, devotees are careful to note that the seeds of kirtan aren’t just found in Gaudiya Vaishnavism. According to Banabhatta, “In every major scripture the names of God are alluded to, just like the Lord’s Prayer says, ‘O Lord, hallowed be thy name.’ It also says, ‘In the beginning was the word, and the word was God.’ And so that sense of God investing his potency in his name is there within any religion.” Sukha stresses, as many devotees do in our conversations, that “it’s non-sectarian. As a Mormon do you have a name for God? Prabhupada would say, ‘If you have some opposition to chanting Hare Krishna, then chant your name for God.’” Hridayananda adds,

If you study world religions including Buddhism, not to speak of the overtly theistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism—in all these traditions there is a clear notion that God is present in his name. To give a simple example from Judaism, the Old Testament explains that when David conceived and then Solomon ultimately constructed the temple in Jerusalem, that it was built as a temple to the name of God. And it states in the Bible that as God lives in heaven, his name lives in the temple. Or you think of pure land Buddhism….certainly in Christianity, Sufi mysticism—throughout world religions you find the discovery, the awareness, the recognition that God is actually present in his name.

Jahnavi Harrison, who plays violin with the kirtan band As Kindred Spirits, says that “Kirtan of some form is present in almost every culture in the world, because essentially it’s calling out to a divine power in a loving mood, or in a personal way… it’s about building that relationship—and specifically building that relationship with the help and support of others, doing it together. So that experience is probably one of the most universal kinds of experiences that you” can have. Sukha emphasizes the most
important point: “The idea of keeping God’s name close to your heart helps you remember him and increases your love for Him.”

The Meaning of Kirtan

All doctrinal explanations of kirtan aside, the potentially deep personal impact of kirtan can be readily perceived in the reflections of those who so often play it. Banabhatta, who is most deeply involved in Los Angeles kirtan performance as a drummer, explains the name of his instrument, the mridanga, as “the singing drum,” reflecting that as “one actually becomes expert in playing mridanga, one gets the sense that he is actually not playing the drum, but one gets the sense that the drum is actually playing oneself.” This happens because the nature of musical instruments is such that “Everything is the energy of God, and especially things that are directly used to glorify God actually have their counterpart in the spiritual world, so that they actually have a personality.” So based on the state of mind in which he takes up the drum, “Some of the times when I play with that intention, the drum actually begins to start playing me. I get the feeling from the drum, and the beats come from the drum. [I] basically lose external consciousness and it becomes a totally spontaneous kind of experience.”

Allowing the self to be sublimated in the music is also a theme with Bada Hari, whose goal as a kirtan leader is “to be transparent. To be a vehicle that Krishna can shine through.” One nice thing about being a kirtan musician, according to Bada Hari, is that “Kirtan’s always successful. You can’t do kirtan and be a failure.” Although it is possible for a musician to let ego get in the way,

I find that if I can really be in a mood of prayer, really calling out to Krishna so that it’s not just singing some words or making some music, but I’m really calling out to Krishna, “Let me serve you, let me be with you,” really kirtan becomes successful when Krishna manifests himself somehow or other in the kirtan…you feel his presence. Prabhupada said, kirtan means to feel Krishna in your heart. So that’s really a successful kirtan, is when you feel that Krishna is present.

Those who perform kirtan professionally have the opportunity to not only feel kirtan’s impact in their own lives, but to observe the way that it affects others. Jahnavi witnesses this, despite the fact that she, with her band, moves from place to place so quickly. “I’ve met people from almost every faith, people who are practitioners of their
faith but they still they really strongly feel that kirtan’s an important part of their life…there are people who have written us letters saying that their life has been transformed.” One woman in particular approached the band recently and told them that although “she was a severe alcoholic, she would listen to our CD and she’d be able to resist. She said it cured her of alcoholism. So we’ve had a lot of stories.”

Visvambhar and Kishore recount a recent experience that clearly moved them both. “We even went to a psychiatric hospital and did kirtan there,” Visvambhar says, “It was really amazing. They all were touched—the psychiatrist said they never saw so much wonderful emotion in all the [patients]. That was an experience for us where we really saw the power of the sound vibration on anybody, even people that are really down. One of the psychiatrists, she said—she was in tears—”

Kishore chimes in, “What did she say, that people that she hadn’t seen smile in months were smiling.”

Visvambhar continues: “Like they can’t even look at somebody in their eyes, [but] they were dancing” to the kirtan.

Kishore sums up the impact of kirtan upon the personality:
It encourages us to live in a higher conscious reality and be loving and thoughtful of every act that we do. And that’s what kirtan does, it really grounds you to be in the moment—not dwelling on the past, not speculating about the future, but really maximizing on the moment. And if you are around somebody sharing love, not being afraid to express what you’re feeling for this person or what you’re feeling in the moment and to receive love as well—that’s what kirtan is. Even you see it’s call-and-response: it’s always giving and receiving. It helps us to practice that in our everyday lives with our interactions with our family and with our friends and with strangers.

The memories, ideas, and beliefs shared by these devotees indicate the various ways that those who live with kirtan perceive its power and spiritual meaning in their lives. In the following chapter I will explore an event in which devotees take their practice into public spaces, hoping to affect in others the transformation that kirtan has already affected in their own lives and personalities. New York City hosts one of the world’s largest Rath Yatra parades. During the procession the sounds and spiritual influence of kirtan are broadcast in such a way as to bathe the inhabitants and cityscape of Manhattan in the enthusiastic sounds of kirtan. It is a powerful manifestation of what
Hridayananda expressed as “activist monasticism,” his ideal in which spiritual practice turns a soul not only inward but outward as well.
CHAPTER TWO
THE NEW YORK CITY RATH YATRA:
DISRUPTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

New York City has a reputation as one of the most fascinating cities in the world, but sometimes it is a hard place to get around. With its multiple co-existing cultures and subcultures, New York City is a place where contrasting and sometimes clashing signifiers of cultural identity constantly meet, interact, and even alter each other. And on certain days, members of one culture group may take over a street with a parade that puts those signifiers on proud display and asserts the presence and the strength of their community. On one day the Hare Krishnas, joined by a significant portion of the city’s South Asian diasporic population, shut down half of Fifth Avenue to lead chariots carrying the images of their gods through the center of the city. The next day the Puerto Rican parade shuts down what seems like half of Manhattan. These parades, as disruptions of urban space for the sake of cultural performance, provide rich sites for inquiry into the negotiation of social identity that occurs when members of different culture groups encounter each other in the streets.

Along with the proud display of cultural self-identification, there is a poignant personal dimension to the Rath Yatra event in particular. Milton Singer, in his research on Hinduism in urban environments, found that Hindu practice does not, as some would assume, become more secular as it becomes more urbanized, but rather becomes more personal, more devotional in nature, as individuals use their faith as a means of coping with the demands of urban life (Singer 1959:149). In this chapter I will examine the negotiation of South Asian as well as Vaishnava religious identity that takes place when New York’s Hare Krishna community parades their deities through the center of the city; I will also look at the deeply held beliefs of devotees who feel that their action has the potential to transform their city and spread God consciousness in the world.

The Brooklyn Temple Room

Brooklyn’s Sri Sri Radha Govinda Mandir temple is, from the outside, an unimposing building next door to a bingo hall, distinguished from the others on its block only by a low row of tulsi trees set in planters along the side of the building. Inside the
entryway, a large pile of shoes in a hallway lined with photographs of Srila Prabhupada indicates the entrance to a temple room where the vivid color and beauty typical of a Hare Krishna temple are fully apparent.

As in many Hare Krishna centers, the walls of the temple room—a large space approximately the size of a gymnasium—are lined with framed paintings. A circuit of the room reveals incidents from the *Bhagavad Gita* and tales of a young Krishna as detailed in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, portraits of Vishnu displaying his divine attributes, Caitanya Mahaprabhu shown in different stages of his life but always leading an ecstatic kirtan, various saintly characters overcoming beasts and demons with their faith, and above all, images of the androgynous blue beauty of the youthful god Krishna, draped in lavish robes and flowers, playing his flute and accompanied by his beloved Radha. As is customary, a life-size statue of Srila Prabhupada (called a *murti*) watches over all proceedings from a throne lavished with a profusion of flowers, while the eagle god Garuda, mount to Lord Krishna, perches on a pillar near the back of the room. The temple room is an almost dizzying, multifaceted collection of images carrying volumes of encoded information about the heritage, practices, and promises of the Krishna movement. Above it all, the importance of kirtan as a means to access the spiritual realities encoded in these images is shown by the large mural covering the rear balcony, a painting of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu in ecstasy, a crowd of exuberant devotees following him in chanting the names of God.
For all of this elaborate imagery, the visual focal point of the temple room is its altar area. This week, in preparation for Rath Yatra, a five-foot sculpture of Lord Jagannath stands on a table in the front corner: a rough, seemingly unfinished figure cut into wood and painted with bright, exaggerated, features. He is a deity known for the affection lavished upon him by his devotees, but as he stands here Jagannath himself seems to be looking toward the center of the room where the altar is. The altar itself is framed by a gate with beautiful metalwork, and nearly the entire front portion of the room is covered by thick brown curtains that draw together over the altar. Painted screens on either side show roughly life-size portraits of women drawn in Rajasthani style who stand as devotees offering perpetual obeisance to the deities currently hidden behind the curtains. The entire set-up of the front portion of the temple room, as it appears now, seems carefully engineered to draw attention to those heavy brown curtains and to build anticipation toward the moment when they will open.

Photograph 4: Altar Area with Closed Curtains

**Arati and the Sunday Love Feast**

In the early years of ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada instituted the tradition of the Sunday love feast. Hindu worship is often centered in the home and performed on an individual basis, but Prabhupada chose to set aside a special time for congregational Krishna worship on the holy day already observed by most religious Christians in the
West. The Sunday love feast is an opportunity to combine the traditional ritual of arati, a series of offerings made to the deity, with the singing of kirtan, a lecture on the Bhagavad Gita, and a vegetarian feast.

Certain elements of the arati ceremony are the same at every temple. During arati, a devotee “offers” certain symbolic objects to the deities including a ringing bell, a flower, a tray holding several tiny flames, a silver container of water, and a peacock fan. The objects are offered by swinging them several times in a circular motion first toward the altar, then toward the congregation. A devotee will circulate through the congregation carrying the tray of fire so that each person has the opportunity to pass their hands from the sacred flames to their heads. Later someone will walk through the crowd shaking drops of the holy water over the heads of the worshippers. These elements of arati generally stay the same from temple to temple. However, there are elements of the arati which are practiced at some temples and not at others, and certain combinations of ritual are unique to the different temples included in this study.

Regardless of the configuration of the arati ceremony, the accompanying kirtan is always a constant. On a particular Sunday in Brooklyn, a week before the 2011 Rath Yatra, kirtan begins (as it often does) loosely with the handful of people gathered in the temple room by 4:00. This initial kirtan is fairly low key in comparison to the ecstatic fervor that will come with the kirtans performed later in the program. A man in traditional dress sits cross-legged at the harmonium with microphone in place, leading the congregation in singing that is slower and more relaxed in feeling than the usual standing kirtan. A young boy sits beside him playing the mridanga, and one or two other young men play hand cymbals in a short-short-LONG pattern that is characteristic of Hare Krishna music, as shown in Figure 4.

![Figure 4: Clapping and Hand Cymbal Rhythm](image)

This reliable short-short-LONG rhythm is one of the most accessible gateways into the music for those wishing to take part in the kirtan, and a number of the few dozen devotees sitting cross-legged on the floor clap this rhythm gently throughout the singing.
Gradually the music builds in intensity; the devotees stand and begin to orient themselves toward the altar area; anticipation builds.

Among the core practices of Hinduism is the act of *darshan*. Darshan means, literally, “looking,” and at its most basic level, the practice of darshan is exactly that: one comes face to face with divinity, and man and god exchange gazes. It is a moment intended, as so many of the most important practices of Hinduism are, to develop a relationship, even affection, between man and god. Simple as it may seem, this moment of encounter—and the central act of looking—resonates throughout Hinduism. Every Hindu temple has its altar deities, those statues of the gods whose presence has caused so many in the Judeo-Christian tradition to accuse Hindus of idolatry. Hindus reply to such accusations by explaining that they are not literally worshipping the stone or wood statues, but the god that they represent. As the Supreme Being emanates throughout the natural world, he provides in his mercy objects for contemplation, and a pure devotee, I have often been reassured, would look at the altar and see not the carved figures, but the face of God himself. No devotee I have spoken to has ever claimed to have arrived at that state of purity yet.

Hindu temples around the world have different approaches to the moment of darshan and the presentation of the deities. In some temples, the altar deities are nearly always visible. In others, the altar is open for darshan during certain hours of the day—perhaps a couple of hours in the morning, in the middle of the day, and again at evening. Devotees famously line up at certain prominent temples in India and wait in great anticipation sometimes for hours at a time, full days even, to enter the temple, to have the curtains lifted, and to experience a brief, intense moment of darshan before the curtain drops again 20 to 30 seconds later. Building anticipation and focusing the gaze within a certain limited time frame may intensify the feeling generated at the moment of darshan.

Earlier I mentioned the framing of the altar area and the painted Rajasthani women whose perpetual obeisance focuses the eyes toward what have been, until now, closed curtains. As the kirtan builds in intensity the devotees gather in front of these curtains, until at a certain moment they finally open and the deities are revealed. On this day Radha and Krishna wear purple robes lined in gold and detailed with patterns of flowers, leaves, and peacocks. The brilliantly colored backdrop to the altar is covered in
the same vibrant material. The divine pair wears flower garlands in shades of white, lilac, and coral. At their feet, filling out a canopied shrine with golden pillars, rest smaller figures and framed portraits of saints, gurus, and demigods. There is momentarily a hush as devotees gather before the deities with hands raised to “Namaste” position.

At the Brooklyn temple, this initial moment of darshan is accompanied by the famous recording “Govinda,” sung by Yamuna Mataji. The text comes from the scriptural text *Brahma Samhita*, which reads:

Govindam adi-purusam tam aham bhajami  I worship Govinda, the primeval Lord,

Venum kvanantam aravinda-dalayataksam  Who is adept in playing on His flute,
Barhavatamsam asitambuda-sundarangam  With blooming eyes like lotus petals
Kandarpa-koti-kamaniya-visesa-sobham  With head decked with peacock's feather
Angani yasya sakalendriya-vrfti-manti  With the figure of beauty tinged with the hue of blue clouds
Pasyanti panti kalyanti ciram jaganti  And His unique loveliness charming
Ananda-cinmaya-sad-ujjvala-vigrahasya millions of Cupids

This particular recording of the prayer was produced at Apple Records by George Harrison during his collaboration with London devotees on the *Radha Krishna Temple Album*, a recording which, as has already been noted, factors into the conversion stories of many devotees. According to ISKCON tradition, Srila Prabhupada cried upon hearing Harrison’s arrangement of “Govinda” for the first time, and requested that the track be played at all ISKCON temples every morning to greet the deities. This Sunday evening at the Brooklyn temple is the first time that I (in my admittedly limited experience) have heard the song used in the context of a Sunday feast arati. Here the recording plays at the moment of opening the curtains and the devotees gather, some singing along quietly. There is a softness, a gentle longing in the faces of many of the devotees at this moment, and the objective of darshan is achieved. A woman at the front of the room carries out the offerings of the arati as the devotees look on.
Kirtan continues through the end of arati. Two acts of communal worship follow. These are also not universal to the practices of the Sunday feast, but are meaningful within the framework of ISKCON theology. As arati finishes, the curtains close, and the kirtan intensifies, the men in the room make a long line and process toward the statue of Prabhupada at the back of the room. In some ISKCON temples—though by no means all—there is a loose division of the room by gender, men on the left hand side of the room (as seen when looking toward the altar), women on the right. The division may not be strict—families, for example, may continue to sit together, especially young boys sitting with their mothers, but the genders perform certain acts of worship separately, such as this process of giving honor to Prabhupada. The men in the room line up and, without ceasing to sing, proceed to the back of the room where each picks up a handful of rose petals from a tray beside Prabahupada’s throne, then drops them at the feet of the statue. Some touch the feet reverently, some stand with hands folded in prayer for a moment, but all then step aside and prostrate themselves before Prabhupada.
Prostration as a demonstration of humility and devotion before God is a very common gesture in Hare Krishna culture, both practically and thematically. It is traditional in India to greet a person of seniority or higher rank by stooping to touch the person’s feet with the hands; it is likewise traditional for the so honored person, where there is a relationship of affection as with a father, to catch and raise the one touching their feet before they make it all the way to the ground. The first person demonstrates honor and humility by touching the feet; the second demonstrates affection by raising them. This exchange happens frequently in day-to-day interactions, and points toward the larger gestures directed toward deity. The circle of red paint, or tika, often worn on the forehead by adherents to Hinduism is itself a symbol of prostration before God, as it is believed that God has red feet, and the red dot on the forehead symbolizes having placed one’s head at the feet of God. In ISKCON practice, nearly every temple room kirtan ends with prostration on the part of most people in the room. Some devotees (usually men) go so far as to stretch out their full length, arms extended overhead, on the floor. Most keep it to a more subtle movement, dropping to the knees and touching just the forehead to the ground. Many devotees prostrate themselves in the direction of the altar deities with a smooth motion born of habit immediately upon entering a room; some even prostrate before paintings of Krishna. It will become apparent later in the week that even a rainy New York street is no deterrent to the impulse toward prostration.
The women standing to the side and the men waiting in line all sing a continuous round of kirtan throughout this obeisance to Prabhupada. Even the kirtan leader stands in line playing his cymbals and singing right up until it is his turn to make the flower offering and prostrate himself before Prabhupada. Once the men’s line is finished, the women line up and make the same combination of offering and prostration. Throughout this process a man stands beside the Prabhupada statue making some of the same arati offerings toward Prabhupada as were earlier directed toward the altar deities such as waving the tray of fire.

In visiting Hare Krishna temples I have been impressed by not only the enshrinement of Prabhupada in the temple room murti, but also the sense of affection with which devotees regard him, almost as a beneficent spirit whose personality watches over them. I remember devotees telling stories among themselves about an incident when a group of burglars started to break into an ISKCON temple intending to loot the altar, but stopped short when they saw the bald man in the peach-colored robes sitting watching them. He—or at least this representation of him—is treated with respect and consideration for his comfort. I have seen the statue of Prabhupada outfitted with a wool poncho and knit cap in cold weather. As an outsider I have been surprised at times by the level of reverence directed toward Prabhupada, who was, for all of the goodness and wisdom ascribed to him, only human. But within the context of Hinduism, a devotee might be expected to revere a guru as being next to God. In the context of Hindu faith—and by extension, the spiritual progress of an ISKCON devotee—the guru is one who rescues the soul from its enslavement to a world of illusion and leads it toward the spiritual world and toward Krishna, and therefore the guru is revered as being next to Krishna. This is the reason why it is not uncommon to see small-size statues of Prabhupada among the figures that populate a temple altar, sitting at the feet of Krishna. This is the reason, too, why at this temple, framed pictures of modern day gurus are included among those of demigods at the base of the temple altar.

One additional feature of the ceremony characterizes the Brooklyn arati. In Hinduism at large and Vaishnavism in particular, the tulsi plant is associated with Vishnu and regarded as being sacred to him. The tulsi is revered as a representation of the goddess, sometimes personified as a wife of Vishnu. A tulsi plant—a short bush-like
plant with fragrant leaves—is often prominently placed in or near a Hindu temple. In ISKCON temples the tulsi may stand beside the statue of Prabhupada, and the prayer beads that ISKCON devotees use in rosary-like fashion while chanting the names of Krishna are often made of tulsi wood. Offering devotion to a tulsi plant is one of the various acts that ISKCON devotees regard as having an immediate salvific effect. Coming in contact with the tulsi plant is believed to relieve a person of sin, disease, and despair (Mahesh-Das 2011). At the Brooklyn temple during arati, a woman wheels a projector cart holding a potted tulsi plant into the middle of the room. There she makes several of the arati offerings including the fire, the flower, and the ringing bell, this time oriented toward the tulsi. At the conclusion of her offerings, the men line up and, as a group, circumambulate the tulsi plant several times, followed by the women, all singing kirtan continuously.

Photograph 7: Circumambulating the Tulsi Plant

As kirtan draws to a close, most of the congregation assembled by now—a group nearing one hundred people—drops to the floor and bows or prostrates before the now- curtained altar. As is customary, the kirtan leader ends by reciting a series of praises—“all glories to the assembled devotees,” for example, answered by the congregational response of “Jai,” meaning, “praise,” or literally, “victory.” Temple president Ramabhadra Das stands to give announcements before taking a seat in a low chair similar to Prabhupada’s vyasasana, or throne. Once seated, he plays the harmonium and leads the congregation in a rendition of “Jaya Radha Madhava,” a song about Krishna’s lover Radha with a particularly haunting melody that was especially beloved by Prabhupada.
“Jaya Radha Madhava” gives way to the Maha Mantra, and after a brief bhajan Ramabhadra proceeds to speak for roughly an hour on the topic of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu—in particular, the intensity of ecstasy that Caitanya achieved while singing kirtan and observing Rath Yatra. Caitanya is just one example of a revered figure whose legend revolves not such much around miraculous exploits as around a quality of devotion, a fervor expressed in kirtan performance and celebratory expression that qualifies him or her for reverence.

By the time Ramabhadra has finished his lecture, hundreds of people have gathered for the “feast” portion of the Sunday feast, a vegetarian meal served in the downstairs cafeteria. One devotee described Krishna worship to me as “chanting, dancing, feasting.” Like the items presented during arati, a portion of the food prepared in Hare Krishna kitchens is presented to the deities on the temple altar and consecrated with prayer. This food, called prasadam, is then considered holy. It is believed that Krishna has tasted that food—meaning all of the food prepared in the kitchen and included in the prayer, not just the portion placed on the altar—and like the sounds of kirtan and the sights of the altar deities, it is considered to be a form of Krishna, a physical reality with which a person can have sensory contact and thus achieve spiritual purification through direct experience with God. “Krishna should occupy as many of a devotee’s senses as possible,” writes J. Stillson Judah in one of the early texts to explain the expansion of the Krishna movement in the United States (Judah 1974:91). Francine Daner further explains that through the music, the art, and the food present at a Krishna temple “the senses of the individual become dovetailed with the supreme senses of Krishna, and the living being attains the pleasure and happiness that is otherwise impossible to find. (Daner: 34-35)” Hare Krishna temples all over the world not only offer prasadam at Sunday feasts, but also run restaurants, lunches on college campuses, and other programs of food distribution. Many of these kitchens have well deserved reputations for producing especially delicious and healthy food. The distribution of food—usually for low cost, and on Sundays at no cost (although donations are strongly encouraged)—is both an act of service and one more way that the rich sensory experiences provided by Hare Krishnas are their attempt to spread the presence of God in the world.
A History of Hare Krishna in New York

The hallway between the temple room, gift shop, and cafeteria in the Brooklyn temple is full of photographs of Prabhupada in various locations around the city. New York City has a special significance in the history of the Hare Krishna movement (although the Brooklyn temple itself wasn’t established until after Prabhupada’s death), as the city was Prabhupada’s first destination within the United States and the place where ISKCON began. The story of the Hare Krishna movement is intimately tied to locations all around New York City.

Prabhupada’s own guru is a figure of great reverence within the Hare Krishna movement. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur was by no means the first Indian religious teacher to have the ambition of taking Hinduism to the West, the United States in particular. Swami Vivekenanda’s address to the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago was a seminal moment in Hindu-American relations, and the Vedanta Society that he established in New York shortly afterward has been a continuous fixture in America’s religious landscape ever since. Other important figures including Swami Rama Tirtha and Paramahansa Yogananda made important inroads in teaching Hinduism in the West. There were always curious learners—dating back, even before Swami Vivekenanda’s visit, to the heyday of Transcendentalist writers Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson—who took an interest in Eastern spirituality as a path to enlightenment. However, anti-Asian biases resulted in anti-Indian riots in parts of the country early in the twentieth century, as well as restrictive government policies that denied citizenship to South Asians and defined India as part of a “barred Asiatic zone” under the Immigration Act of 1924. These policies forced Indian culture at large—including Indian-derived religious practices—to the extreme margins of American society for several decades (see Coward, Hinnells, and Williams, 2000).

It was during this period of minimal immigration and strained American-Indian relations that Bhaktisiddanta met a devoutly religious young pharmacist named Abhay Charan De and encouraged him to teach Gaudiya Vaishnavism, the worship of Krishna as propagated by Caitanya Mahaprabhu, throughout the world. Ten years later Bhaktisiddanta formally initiated De as a disciple, and in a letter dated 1936
Bhaktisiddhanta again stated that, “I am fully confident that you can explain in English our thoughts and arguments to the people who are not conversant in the language (Bengali and Hindi). I have every hope that you will turn yourself into a very good English preacher” (Krishna.org, 2010). De, now known as Prabhupada, started the magazine *Back to Godhead* in 1944, took a vow of renunciation in 1959, and throughout his spiritual career kept this counsel from his guru close to his heart.

In 1965 the Immigration and Nationality Act dropped the national origin quota system and opened the floodgates for immigration and cultural exchange between the United States and India. This policy change came at roughly the same time that an emerging youth counterculture took an interest in the philosophies of a “spiritual” and “mystical” East. In this same year, Srimati Moroi, owner of the Scindia Steamship Navigation Company and a devout worshipper of Krishna, gifted Srila Prabhupada with steamship passage to America (Coward, Hinnells, and Williams, 2000).

Srila Prabhupada’s journey to the United States is a much recited chapter in ISKCON history. During the crossing, the 70-year-old Prabhupada survived two heart attacks in two days. While passing through this ordeal, he dreamed that he saw Krishna rowing beside the steamship in a smaller boat. Krishna spoke to him, told him not to be afraid, and urged him onward. Prabhupada wrote that his health recovered considerably after this vision.

Prabhupada’s ship docked in Boston in September 1965 before continuing on to New York City. Prabhupada famously recorded his thoughts on the occasion:

My dear Lord Krishna You are so kind upon this useless soul, but I do not know why You have brought me here. Now You can do whatever You like with me But I guess You have some business here, otherwise why would You bring me to this terrible place? How will I make them understand this message of Krishna consciousness? I am very unfortunate, unqualified, and the most fallen. Therefore I am seeking Your benediction so that I can convince them, for I am powerless to do so on my own. Oh spiritual master of all the worlds! I can simply repeat Your message. So if You like, You can make my power of speaking suitable for their understanding. Oh Lord, I am just like a puppet in Your hands. So if You have brought me here to dance, then make me dance, make me dance, oh Lord, make me dance as You like. I have no devotion, nor do I have any knowledge, but I have strong faith in the holy name of Krishna. I have been designated as Bhaktivedanta, and now, if You like, You can fulfill the real purport of Bhaktivedanta. The most unfortunate, insignificant beggar, AC. Bhaktivedanta
A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada landed in New York City on Sept 19, 1965. Upon his arrival he was received by one Hindu doctor and spiritual teacher who had arrived and established a Hindu spiritual presence in the city during the previous decade. Medical doctor Ramamurti S. Mishra, also known as Sri Brahmananda Sarasvati, had immigrated to the United States from Uttar Pradesh in 1955 and established the Yoga Society of New York in 1959. Dr. Mishra housed Prabhupada upon his arrival and invited him to lecture to some of his followers. (Dasa)

Dr. Mishra’s home, located at 72nd Street and West Central Park, is just the first of a string of locations around New York City made sacred to Hare Krishnas by virtue of their guru’s presence. Prabhupada offered lectures on the Bhagavad Gita, feasts of blessed prasadam, and, at every opportunity, a participatory kirtan. As he made contacts among New Yorkers, a young man invited Prabhupada to stay with him at his loft in the Bowery. The first place in New York City that fully belonged to Srila Prabhupada and the fledgling movement that would become ISKCON, however, was a storefront in Manhattan’s East Village that Prabhupada’s new followers leased at 26 2nd Avenue and 1st Street (Ibid., Ramabhadra interview).

As was mentioned earlier, Prabhupada’s journey to the United States coincided with both an upsurge in Indian immigration and an upsurge of Indian cultural influence in America. It also coincided with the rise of the 1960s counterculture whose community of hippies positively devoured a wide variety of rituals, artifacts, and ideas brought from the purportedly more spiritual East. India’s most famous musician of the time, Ravi Shankar, who experienced a rise in fame that coincided roughly with the emergence of Prabhupada’s Krishna movement, expressed an intense aversion to the drug use and indiscriminate sexual behavior that he observed in so many of the young people who attached themselves to him. Yet he continued to perform out of a sincere love that he felt toward those from whom he sensed genuine interest. Similarly, Srila Prabhupada attracted attention among many youth who saw the music brought by this Eastern swami as a perfect supplement to their marijuana and LSD use. However, he continued to offer prasadam, Gita lectures, and the singing of kirtan with the hope of reaching those who
were sincere seekers of spiritual liberation. Before either Prabhupada or Shankar
attracted their most famous student—George Harrison—Prabhupada had the attention of
counterculture luminary Allen Ginsburg, who wrote (as recalled by Ramabhadra), “we
were very fond of going to the early morning session of the swami…because his chanting
was so mesmerizing…”

It was Ginsburg who provided Prabhupada with the harmonium he played when a
group of devotees recorded an album of kirtan that would find its way all over the
country (and into the hands of George Harrison). Prabhupada played Ginsburg’s
harmonium again under a tree in Tompkins Square Park on July 11, 1966, when he and
the small circle of devotees who had gathered around him sang the first open-air kirtan
performed in the West and officially incorporated the International Society for Krishna
Consciousness.

Current Brooklyn temple president Ramabhadra Das was one of those young
people who spent the late 1960s exploring Eastern spirituality as an alternative to the
values of mainstream American culture. He discovered the Bhagavad Gita in 1967,
shortly before starting his senior year of high school. As Ramabhadra describes the
moment, a friend had a copy of the Gita, and

I looked over his shoulder—it was like a poem, there were verses, and each one
had a number, no commentary. I’d later find out it was an introduction. I read one
page which might have been ten or twelve verses. At the end of the twelfth one—
[it was] almost like a typewriter. When you would get to the end of the typewriter,
what would happen? A bell would go off. There’s a little bell that would ring and
you’d go back again. So at the end of that last verse, literally speaking, a bell went
off in my head and I thought, ‘My God, it’s the truest thing I ever read in my life.’
So immediately on the spot my friend was standing there and—I was a reader also.
I had a book, it was the biography of the already retired by the summer of ‘67 Bob
Dylan…So I said to my friend, ‘Hey, I tell you what. I got the biography of Bob
Dylan. I’ll trade you. Let me read that.’ I said, ‘What is that?’ He said,
‘Bhagavad Gita.’ So he gave me that, I gave him the Dylan biography…and I
started from that day.

Over the course of the next six months Ramabhadra read the Bhagavad Gita 150
times, and as he says, with “each reading I was becoming more and more convinced of
the truthful nature of it. And I was applying the instructions without any other
supervision in my life—controlling my mind and thinking of God, doing all of these
things that Krishna states in the Bhagavad Gita.” Like many youth in the 1960s
counterculture, Ramabhadra became preoccupied with the possibility of transforming the world with the consciousness that he was obtaining.

After about six months I was completely convinced that the Bhagavad Gita was a spiritual text that actually was able to—[it] had the power to deliver one back to the eternal realm of God. I was 100% convinced of this, to the degree that I developed a pretty strong desire for a period of time that I wanted to give the Bhagavad Gita to everyone in the world. Here I was, 17 years old, walking on the streets, I had no money except what my mother would give me, and I was thinking: ‘How can I get this to everybody?’ And I thought: mimeograph machine. They didn’t even call them copiers back then, it was a mimeograph machine. ‘I’ve gotta get a mimeograph.’ I was way beyond my thinking. There’s millions of people and a little guy’s going to get a mimeograph machine and give [a copy of the Gita] to everyone in the world. I didn’t know that Prabhupada was already there in New York City, established by Krishna.

In the following months, Ramabhadra’s path converged at various moments and at certain significant places with the emerging community of Krishna devotees. One night he visited a friend who lived above the 2nd Avenue storefront. While walking into the building he, with his friends, passed a man in orange robes with a shaved head who, according to Ramabhadra, “looked a little like Buddha.” Ramabhadra and his friends didn’t recognize the man’s greeting of “Hare Krishna”—“my friend said, ‘what did he say?’ ‘I don’t know, but I think it was like Merry Christmas. It was like a spiritual greeting of some sort.’” Lost for words as to how to respond, the boys flashed peace signs and went on their way. In the following months, and from time to time as Ramabhadra walked around the East Village where he was living, he would pass down 8th Street by St. Mark’s and, as he describes it, “some girl would come up with a sari type thing on and she’d put a mimeographed Back to Godhead magazine in my hand, because they had a mimeograph machine. Prabhupada wound up with the same thing I thought—‘I’ve got to get a mimeograph.’” After an awkward moment, Ramabhadra would hand the girl a quarter and move on. As he puts it, “That was a messenger in Tribeca, a messenger from a printing company.”

Ramabhadra’s first encounter with kirtan—what turned out to be a defining moment for him—followed a concert by Country Joe and the Fish in June of 1968. After the concert Ramabhadra and his friends walked down to Washington Square Park, the
place now used as the culminating location of Rath Yatra. They arrived at around 11:30; the park was crowded with some 400 young people, and as Ramabhadra describes it,

My [friend was] walking in front of me and he got into the crowd [and] fell to pieces. He just fell to the ground hysterical...called out my name, “Dave, Dave, you gotta check out this scene! You’re not going to believe!” So I waded through the crowd and I looked—my eyes just opened. They had a circle of 40 devotees—the first Hare Krishna devotees because this is now June of ’68, these are the original ones from 26 2nd Ave. They’re dancing, they had these little tiny fingertip cymbals... and when I listened, ‘Hare Krishna Hare Krishna’ the chanting really mesmerized me and I stood there for a long time... Finally I said to him, ‘It’s that Bhagavad Gita. It’s the Bhagavad Gita that I’ve been studying all this time. This has something to do with it.’ He said, ‘How do you know?’ I said, ‘Krishna. They’re saying Krishna, Krishna.’ They kept on repeating ‘Krishna, Krishna.’ I said, ‘That’s the person in the Gita. That’s the person that’s speaking the Gita to Arjuna. That’s Krishna.’

And so Ramabhadra discovered Krishna at 26 2nd Avenue, on 8th Avenue in the East Village, and at Washington Square Park. The New York landscape is peppered with other places that are part of the ISKCON story. From the 26 2nd storefront, the ISKCON community had moved to a loft over Jack Dempsey’s pub, then to a Henry Street brownstone in Brooklyn Heights. The movement later relocated to a 13-story building in Manhattan before obtaining the current Brooklyn location in 1981, three years after the death of Prabhupada. Although he was never present at Sri Sri Radha Govinda Mandir, the historical connection between Prabhupada and the city is evident in the temple hallway filled with pictures showing Prabhupada at different New York locations, and in the way that devotees—even recent converts—cite Prabhupada’s time spent here as a major reason for the significance of the Manhattan Rath Yatra.

New Yorkers and New York City

In talking with New York City devotees, it becomes clear that the nature of the ISKCON community is strongly influenced by the nature of the city itself, its status as a cultural center with far-reaching influence, and the type of person who sets out to spread the influence of Krishna consciousness in such a powerful place.

Kurma Rupadasa speaks nostalgically of the early devotees who set out to establish an ISKCON presence in the city:
I feel a great camaraderie with those devotees who have served here in New York City from the time we were in 55th street. Somehow we were very united because New York City is a very powerful place, and there was, of course, a lot of acceptance. People are very broad-minded, so there was a great community that accepted our teachings. And there was great opposition as well. So the push and pull of things when you would go out and try to preach united us. I felt a great camaraderie with the people I grew up with in New York City.

Alexandra Sejo, who has been a devotee for less than a year, feels a similar kinship among those willing to attempt to influence, through the communication of Krishna consciousness, the nature of the city. She emphasizes a theme I have heard a few devotees mention. Many of them clearly adore their city, but they do see its worldliness—the Kali Yuga, according to their theology—at its height, making New York City both especially difficult and especially important as a place to spread their influence. Alexandra reflects,

I think that it takes a certain kind of person to be a Hare Krishna in New York where there’s so much other stuff going on here. [There are] a lot of illusions—finance, the night life, industry—there’s so much [going on] in New York that if you allow it to it could really put out your fire. So I think it takes a certain kind of person to put all of that stuff aside and say, ‘this is where I’m going to put my love and my devotion and my energy.’ Chanting on the subway, or seeing devotees when you’re walking on the street, there’s a nod and…it’s really sweet…the movement is still fairly new. It’s growing and the potential to really take over New York is—it’s huge.

Part of the mystique of New York City is its diversity, its broad range of cultural signifiers crammed into a limited space, its significance as a reminder of the immigrant nature of the United States of America. The Statue of Liberty is among the city’s most important icons, and American school children are raised learning about the plaque at its base that reads, “Give me your tired, your poor…” The reality of that ideal, of course, can be debated endlessly, but even so, much of New York’s identity as a cultural center is tied up in its diverse population. This diversity has an impact both on the cultural flavor of the Krishna community and the way that people respond to it. Lakshmina points out, for example, that New York City’s ISKCON community bears a “strong African American [influence]—they bring a real soulful approach to music. Even in our Krishna society it’s known as the New York kirtan because it has some real grooves.” During the kirtan sung at the Sunday love feast, for example, a little gospel-style tambourine playing
added a distinctive flavor to the otherwise North Indian percussion grooves, as performed by a devotee whose dress looked like a sartorial mix of sari and kaftan.

The diversity of the city also powerfully affects the way that people outside of ISKCON encounter the movement. When I ask Lakshmina what makes the New York Hare Krishna community distinctive, he immediately responds, “Well, the New Yorker is distinctive.” He elaborates:

Every New Yorker is a philosopher. You get in a taxicab and that taxicab [driver]—he’ll have a philosophy for you….New Yorkers see a lot. I think in the New York school systems [there are] 120 languages spoken. So there’s such a cross section of cultures: Indian culture [alongside] Latin American culture and Italian culture and Jewish culture…

There is an element of social negotiation evident in conversations about what the Krishna community offers to New York City. Both Kurma and Lakshmina feel that the ISKCON community does a much appreciated act of service for the city, by performing for New Yorkers what they believe about themselves and bringing a special flavor to the city’s famous cultural mix. According to Kurma, wherever he sees efforts to spread Krishna consciousness,

People I meet are appreciative. In fact even some of them will say, “Hey, why don’t you have a restaurant anymore, can’t you see we’re starving out here?” Things like that. You know, New Yorkers appreciated us when we had a stronger presence. I think you could even say New York misses us because our presence has diminished over the years again. Again, because New Yorkers are open-minded. They’re cosmopolitan and so they don’t have so much prejudice. They’re open because they’re such a cosmopolitan city.

New York City is a place that is in many ways known for performance, and the city famous as a center for theater is also characterized by the performance of cultural identity by different ethnic groups. In recent years the city has tried to cut down on parades on Fifth Avenue, but the fifteen annual Fifth Avenue parades that are sanctioned by the city read like a roll call of ethnic populations in the city including the St. Patrick’s Day parade, the Federation of Hellenic Societies, Puerto Rican Day, Salute to Israel Day, Steuben’s Day (a German celebration), Hispanic Day parade, and the Pulaski Day Parade, a Polish celebration. Festivals like Rath Yatra are a performance not only of a specific culture but of the diverse nature of the city at large, and provide a service for those both inside and outside of the specific communities honored.
I have referred previously to Milton Singer’s cultural performance theory, the idea that music, dance, theater, ritual observances, and other public events can be viewed as “discrete performances which [members of a culture group] can exhibit to outsiders as well as to themselves” to communicate important information about social structure and ideals (Singer 1972:xiii). Singer specifically had Indian culture in mind when he formulated his theory and wrote that “self-conscious nations, like self-conscious individuals, quickly become aware not only of how they look to themselves but of how others look at them, and then the two sets of images may begin to influence each other” (Ibid.). I will discuss Singer’s theory in conjunction with the public festivals and the performing arts later, but there are other ways in which New Yorkers eagerly consume carefully packaged experiences with Indian culture that are viewed as encapsulating important cultural information.

Kirtan and Yoga

One way in which New Yorkers are increasingly embracing the cultural performances of the Indian Other—and one way in which ISKCON devotees are spreading the practice of kirtan—is through chanting in yoga classes. Kirtan is currently drawing increasing attention among yoga practitioners, many of whom were previously inclined to think of yoga as solely a discipline of physical asanas. But now “people whom you'd never expect to hang out singing chants to God have turned this type of traditional Indian hymning into the coolest form of music on the yoga block,” proclaims one article in the prominent magazine Yoga Journal (Sexton and Dubrovsky 2012). The trend toward kirtan in yoga studios is found nationwide, but I was particularly struck by how much it factored into my conversations with devotees in New York.

According to Singer, in cultural performances, in any combination of signifiers there are four different types of dialogue occurring: between image and reality, between the self-image of a culture and the image attached by other cultures, between the images one culture attributes to the other and the psychological hopes and fears attached to them, and between social and individual readings of those images. If yoga in general and kirtan specifically are recognized as signifiers of Indian culture, there is in these practices a complex negotiation among images that Americans have of Indians and images that
Indians have of Indians. There are also images in play that Americans have of themselves, many of whom wish to see themselves as open-minded seekers of truth and enlightenment from other cultures. The trend toward kirtan chanting in yoga studios speaks to Western “psychological hopes,” to use Singer’s phrase, attached to prominent images of Indian culture.

Francine Daner credits part of the appeal of ISKCON in the United States to a tendency on the part of many Americans to view Western culture as “devoid of philosophy and language addressed to the nonintellectual, the irrational, and the mystical” (Daner 1976:2), and to look to Eastern cultures to address that void. This tendency is relevant to North American yoga enthusiasts who often have significant hopes for personal enlightenment and fulfillment attached to the signifier of yoga. As Westerners learn more about yoga as a broad concept that encompasses but is not limited to physical exercise, the distance between perception and reality narrows. They come to understand bhakti as a dimension of yoga, and kirtan enters the picture as something that many Western yoga enthusiasts want.

Lakshmina is among those responsible for making kirtan an increasingly prominent feature of yoga practice in New York City. He says, “When I go to the yoga studio, most people either have heard of kirtan and have some curiosity about it or have participated in a kirtan.” Lakshmina’s visits to yoga studios are both spiritual practice and cultural outreach. He speaks to the classes about Indian music and instruments, about the principles of mantra meditation and bhakti yoga, and he intersperses these mini-lessons with the singing of kirtan, all followed, naturally, by a vegetarian feast. He deliberately keeps the music simple, avoiding the complexities of which Indian music is infinitely capable and being careful to pitch the music in a comfortable range. He also emulates Srila Prabhupada in crafting a kirtan that makes it easy and inviting to participate:

You’ll notice that it starts off slow. Slow and very emotional with a lot of feeling…and as I feel that the audience has the melody and [is] really locked into the groove, then I’ll pick it up a pace, and then another pace. And by the end you have people dancing. It’s really a steamroller effect.

As far as the reception that Lakshmina gets from the participants at his yoga classes,
It’s a real mixture. Quite often people can accommodate at least the concept of meditational music. So I find particularly in this day and age, I find a real openness to the kirtan experience and that’s what I ask people to do, I do ask them to just experience it, no commitments other than, ‘You’re here now and just do it. Open your heart and do it and then take it where it may.’ So I do find a great deal of openness to kirtan. Some people are confused by it or it’s new [to them]. They’ll be quiet, passively attentive, [they’ll just] go into the lotus position. Those rare few who open their heart and jump right in, sometimes they get up and dance. So it really runs the gamut, but I find very few people resisting. I think in all the kirtans we’ve done over this last year we’ve had one person [who responded poorly]—she was 65 [and] I really didn’t think she knew what the kirtan experience was about. Everyone else has been really good.

Alexandra’s new membership in ISKCON is a result of the influence of a yoga teacher like Lakshmina. As she describes the experience,

I practice yoga and one of my instructors, unbeknownst to me actually, he’s a Hare Krishna and I didn’t know. I just found something very intriguing and inspiring about his classes, and he sings kirtan and chants at the beginning of class. So while I was studying I just gained this affection for it. After several years of practicing yoga I decided that I wanted to go to India…from the moment I landed in India—I think it started before I landed in India—I knew there was a calling.

As a yoga enthusiast turned devotee Alexandra clearly recognizes the evolving relationship between image and reality where yoga is concerned: “In India yoga isn’t a bunch of exercises. Yoga is kirtan, yoga is meditation, yoga is studying ancient texts, these sacred writings.” A broader awareness among American practitioners that yoga goes beyond a properly aligned downward dog posture is leading to new expectations that American yoga enthusiasts have regarding the metaphysical culture of India, and an interest in embracing devotional practices such as kirtan.

**The Meaning of Rath Yatra**

One of Prabhupada’s early priorities in establishing ISKCON in America was organizing the first Rath Yatras performed in the West. The first Western Rath Yatra was celebrated in San Francisco in 1967, and in fairly short order Rath Yatras began popping up in major cities all over the United States. Today the Rath Yatra is staged all over North America, and the back cover of the ISKCON magazine *Back to Godhead* carries a schedule of Rath Yatras throughout the United States and Canada from weekend to weekend; if one had the time and resources one could theoretically spend a summer
following Rath Yatra from city to city all over the continent. New York City’s ISKCON community staged their first large Rath Yatra down Fifth Avenue in 1976, but in years before that devotees took a small cart through Central Park to express their exuberance and devotion to Krishna as manifest in the particular form of Lord Jagannath.

Recorded descriptions of Rath Yatra date back at least as far as the Srimad Bhagavatam, although many believe that the festival has a history dating back literally thousands of years. It is an event historically connected with the Jagannath Temple at Puri in the Indian state of Orissa. Jagannath is regarded by Krishna devotees as an incarnation of Krishna, as Kurma Rupadasa explains: “Jaggat means universe, Nat means Lord, so Jaggat Nat means Lord of the Universe. So the Lord of the Universe is one person but he has many forms.” Although he is most popular among Vaishnavas, other branches of Hinduism have claimed Jagannath as well.

Jagannath cuts an idiosyncratic figure within the Hindu pantheon. The imagery of other gods is very often focused on refinement and beauty—the name Krishna means “the all-attractive”—as well as the delicate and exuberant decoration of their clothing, their iconography, and their sacred environments as depicted in the Hindu visual arts. Jagannath on the other hand has a distinctly unrefined look that I have heard described as “tribal” and “unfinished.” He is made of wood, rather than stone, and carved in the most basic of shapes—a cylindrical trunk, arms without hands, and a face in which the features are painted, not carved, in brilliant colors and, again, basic shapes: circular eyes and a wide red curve of a mouth. Interestingly enough, the ornaments added to his face—a tilak and a nose ring—are sometimes more elaborate and intricate than his actual features. When he is worshipped alongside Krishna’s siblings Subhadra and Balaram, these two revered figures take forms similar to Jagannath’s.
There are many stories behind Jagannath’s eccentric appearance, including the explanation that the large eyes and broad smile are a result of the pleasure derived from witnessing Krishna’s pastimes. The most famous story involves a devout king, Indradyuma, who was instructed in a dream to have a particular log from the seashore carved into a deity. Indradyuma retrieved the log in question and advertised for a sculptor to carve the image, but every mortal to attempt the job had his chisels blunted upon first contact with the wood. A divine being in the form of an old man volunteered to carve the deity on condition of being left completely alone for at least three weeks. When the sounds of work ceased after ten days, Indradyuma entered the workshop to find the deity only half-carved and the carver disappeared. The remorseful Indradyuma berated himself for having interrupted the work with the deity only half finished, until a voice from heaven informed him that this, too, was a valid form for the Lord to inhabit (Vedic Knowledge Online).

This story is an example of a divine characteristic that devotees have explained to me as a sign of Krishna’s divine mercy: his willingness to appear in multiple incarnations so that devotees may be attracted to one or another form of the Supreme Lord. As Kurma Rupadasa explains,

Krishna has many forms and so generally the devotee, as he practices Bhakti Yoga…becomes attracted to one particular form. So some people develop this attraction for Lord Jagganath and others for Radha Govinda, but we understand
that if you’re attracted to Lord Jagannath and [someone else is] attracted to Radha Govinda, you’re attracted to the same Lord of the Universe, but in a different form.

This story also illustrates another very significant contrast between Jagannath and the other gods of the Hindu pantheon. Jagannath does not have a biography comparable to Shiva’s ascetic achievements, Rama’s triumph over the demon Ravana, or Krishna’s amorous exploits with the gopis. Where other deities—or, from a Vaishnava perspective—avatars of the deity—have stories that demonstrate their individual abilities and attributes, Jagannath is lacking a personal biography. The stories attached to Jagannath, with few exceptions, revolve around his loving relationships with his devotees. The legends of Jagannath talk about great devotees and perceptive souls who recognized the deity and promoted his worship, but in the various stories Jagannath is defined less by what he has done and more by the way that he is adored. Devotees have told me that Jagannath is perceived as being particularly compassionate and merciful, and this open-hearted nature explains the deep feeling that many devotees have for this particular form of the deity. “All devotees have a special affection for Jagannath,” explains Ananda. “He’s very lovable. He has a big smile, big eyes. He’s very merciful and devotees feel a reciprocation with Jagannath.”

The Rath Yatra parade held in Jagannath’s honor is associated with a journey undertaken by Krishna to visit his loved ones. The Mahabharata specifies the forests of Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh as the location of Krishna’s birth, childhood, and youth, and many of the famous pastimes so venerated among Vaishnavas, particularly those involving the profound love between Krishna and his family, cowherd friends, and consort Radha, are tied to that location. For this reason Vrindavan is a major pilgrimage site described with deep feeling and veneration. Kurma Rupadasa explains that Krishna left Vrindavan at some point to go to Matur and Dwarka and did not return. However, Krishna along with his siblings Balaram and Subhadra visited Kuruchekra near Vrindavan, and when Krishna’s friends and family heard that he was going to be there, they went out to Kuruchekra to meet him. Kurma explains,

There was a great fabulous reunion. So this festival of Rath Yatra symbolizes bringing Krishna to meet…his most loving devotees. So it’s a very joyous occasion...His greatest joy is when he’s reunited with his pure devotees and they
have their loving exchanges. So the purpose of this festival is to help give this ultimate pleasure to Krishna…anybody can participate, anyone can come and knowingly or unknowingly participate in this reunion.

In the weeks leading up to Rath Yatra, the wooden sculptures of Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balaram are given abhisheka, a ceremony in which they are bathed with auspicious liquids by devotees for whom the bathing process is an expression of their personal love and devotion to God. Traditionally, the devotees, because of their great affection, bathe the deities so thoroughly that Jagannath catches a cold. The wooden statues are then put to bed for a week or two and treated with the utmost care and devotion, until Jagannath and his siblings are brought out of their sickbeds and placed on carts or chariots to be paraded through town.

The Spiritual Necessity of Joy

I have long been intrigued by the celebratory nature of Krishna worship, both in the annual cycle of festivals and in the simple fact that singing, dancing, and feasting are considered means to salvation. “Chanting, dancing, and feasting—any opportunity we can find to get together and do these three things, we take it,” says Ananda. “Our process is said to be a joyful process.” When I ask Kurma about what has seemed to me a spiritual necessity for celebration, he explains that at the most straightforward level, Hare Krishnas celebrate “to honor different pastimes of Krishna or the activities of our saints in our life who we feel indebted to because of their contribution, because they’ve enthused us to participate by revealing their experiences…[festivals] are fun events, they are events that are uplifting spiritually, and they’re also very purifying.” At a deeper level, however,

The process of worshipping god is joyfully performed. In other words, we understand god—Krishna. One of his characteristics is that he’s full of bliss, and so as one practices yoga then one should experience happiness. Bliss is of course a spiritual state. If one is practicing bhakti yoga properly then he will experience—if not happiness, at least he will experience peace. Or at least he will experience a cessation of suffering.

These effects should ideally be felt by the individual Krishna devotee while taking part in any ritual or celebration, whether at a temple or in the home. Rath Yatra, however, does not happen in a place where those who wish to participate—generally those who are...
already attached to Krishna or aware of what the Krishna festival has to offer—go to a location to meet with others in the know. In the case of Rath Yatra, the celebratory worship experience is both an inward and an outward experience, as the festival is taken to the public. The parade constitutes a significant disruption of public space, where it might catch people by surprise, introducing an element of the extraordinary to their day. Rath Yatra is not only a celebration for the benefit of those who are already devotees, but also an offering or invitation to those who are not. Kurma explains:

> It’s not actually a process about trying to make more devotees or more followers, but it’s actually about how to diminish the suffering of people in the material world. Because everyone is. Even the richest people who are not engaged in any kind of spiritual activity their lives are—we can understand they are suffering, and so these festivals do a substantial amount to reduce the suffering of the world. And that’s something to celebrate.

According to Kurma, celebration can even be seen as a type of service:

> There’s a saying, if you row someone across the ocean you also get to the other side. If you help someone progress spiritually, you also progress. And in fact, if you help someone else progress spiritually, that’s when you actually experience your own progress. That is when you actually experience happiness. Bhakti Yoga is about giving, not about taking. It’s about giving to others. It’s a practice for love, and love is expressed by giving not by taking. That is the basis of why we celebrate: it should be joyful, and if it’s not joyful—if our spiritual practices are not joyful—it means that we’re doing something wrong.

Ramabhadra also speaks to the dual nature of Rath Yatra as worship and invitation: “That’s our main reason for the Rath Yatra, is to offer or display Krishna consciousness to the massive public that have no information,” he says. “We consider it in that sense, if a person doesn’t have knowledge of how to get the greatest benefit in their life and someone else knows those things—knows this is how you get the greatest benefit, this is how you can do the greatest good for yourself and your neighbors and mankind—then really there’s a responsibility that goes along with that.” Ramabhadra uses an analogy drawn from one of Prabhupada’s books, The Nectar of Instruction, which he summarizes thus:

> If you drop a bag of seeds, say, or rice on the sidewalk and it cracks open [and] a little bit of the rice falls out, a bird will come just take a few grains and fly away. But another person may come and see it and look around and see [that] no one’s looking and stop the car, open the trunk, throw the whole bag in, and take the whole thing away for their own pleasure, their own enjoyment.
Ramabhadra explains the significance of this example:

A person who is narrow minded, or kripa is the Sanskrit term… is basically thinking of their own well-being, their own self-aggrandizement, their own satisfaction, their own pleasure… and then there’s the mahatma. The mahatma’s the broad-minded, the great soul, and the great soul’s mentality is that they come upon a treasure…then they will want to share that with others. ‘I’ve won a hundred billion dollars. Now I want to help others with this money.’

Ramabhadra points out that in the modern world such extremely wealthy people as Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffet have accumulated massive fortunes and then chosen to spend at least part of those fortunes on charitable foundations that provide educational programs, scholarships, research to fight disease, etc. But he classifies this as “a mundane type of benevolence,” adding that “there’s even a higher type of caring and benevolence. It’s one thing to give somebody an injection to keep them from getting sick or alleviate some of the symptoms of their illness, or even to give them a scholarship. They may become a lawyer. At the end I’m giving them information on how to attain the highest love. It’s a little bit of a difference. So if we’re going to be magnanimous, if we’re going to share with others, we have to go out. We can’t just stay secluded or locked behind doors.” Ramabhadra refers to the great spiritual and philosophical leaders in history, such as Jesus Christ and Socrates, who put themselves at great risk to convey a message that they knew could bring enlightenment to those who heard it. “The soul is eternal,” he says, so it’s very, very important that we do public things and this is a public spiritual event.”

Ramabhadra frames the need for public chanting in the Hindu conception of the Kali Yuga as a period of great corruption and spiritual difficulty. According to scripture the prescribed method for salvation in the Kali Yuga is chanting the names of God, and Ramabhadra explains,

It’s a very easy thing to do, it doesn’t cost any money, and when we go out into the street, many people will see it for the first time. And because of the dynamic effect of hearing the holy name of God, if persons have a positive attitude about it, if they think, ‘Oh this is unique, what is this?’—if we have a couple from Europe that are on Fifth Avenue and Nancy says to Fred, her husband, ‘Fred, what is it, it’s so charming—look at this, what are they doing? Where are they from? Is this from India?’…They’ll hear it, ‘Hare Krishna Hare Krishna.’ If they have that
attitude—if they see it and they hear it, that plants a very pious seed within the heart. This is one of the ways that God reclaims his conditioned souls.

Preparing for Rath Yatra

During the week leading up to Rath Yatra, a large poster in the temple room lists those who have made monetary donations, and on Friday an open invitation goes out to members of the community to come help out with some final tasks in anticipation of the next day’s festivities. Much of the preparation for the festival has been going on for some time and is virtually complete by now. The deities will go onto the trucks to be moved downtown in the evening; during the day the temple is filled with devotees working on two jobs that needed to wait until this last day. A large crew of vegetable choppers in the kitchen downstairs prepares the copious amounts of food that will be distributed as part of the festival’s prasadam. And upstairs in the temple room, I join a group of about twenty women and young girls preparing the flower garlands that will adorn the deities and their carts.

There are two major tasks involved with garland-making: beheading the red, white, and pink carnations that are densely packed into buckets all over the room, making large piles of blossoms, and using needles and string to turn those into three or four foot garlands that are gathered in boxes. At some point in the early afternoon the curtains over the temple are opened and a few people make their way to it to gaze on Radha and Krishna. A young man with a video camera enters at the balcony and the group is invited to wave and call out “Hare Krishna” while he films us.

At one point I start stringing flowers beside a young woman named Jahnavi Harrison, and she tells me she is here as part of a performing group, As Kindred Spirits. She was born into the Krishna movement in London, and as of the last three years has been touring with As Kindred Spirits, playing violin as part of a kirtan performing ensemble. The group has toured all over the world—she talks about having just returned from South Africa and Australia. As Kindred Spirits has performed in venues ranging from Krishna festivals to yoga events—a very prominent part of what they do, apparently—and even at a couple of nightclubs in New York and Los Angeles, where they chanted over beats set down by a DJ and apparently drew an enthusiastic reception.
A performance at a “Chant for Change” event in conjunction with the inauguration of President Obama was a highlight of the band’s career. Jahnavi is here this weekend because As Kindred Spirits is performing as part of the post-parade festival tomorrow. When I ask her what makes the New York festival special enough to travel a great distance for it, she lists a few things: the historical connection between this community and Srila Prabhupada, given his founding of the movement here; the fact that the deities worshipped in this temple have been worshipped here since Prabhupada’s time; and the importance of New York City as a cultural center that influences the world. As we talk, we actually both pull out our cameras and interview each other—I for this dissertation, and she for a blog that she writes for a kirtan website, Gauravani.com. Jahnavi is an international touring artist whose group, I will come to find out, is highly respected among ISKCON musicians, but I’m impressed by the humility apparent in serving in the temple room stringing flowers rather than expecting to be treated like a guest artist. Her presence also indicates how carefully the temple community plans the cultural performances that they offer to their city during a festival like Rath Yatra.

Taking the Temple to the Streets

Rath Yatra begins around 11:00 a.m. on Saturday, June 11, 2011. Throughout the week devotees have passed out flyers announcing a gathering place at 46th street, and I confess to feeling slightly lost upon first arriving at 46th and seeing no crowd of devotees. When I spot a Caucasian couple sporting Indian clothing and tilaks, or ritual markings painted on their foreheads, who are staring down 46th as if they are as confused as I am, I know that I have found at least some of the people I am looking for. We start walking Fifth Avenue together and I learn that they have been devotees for more than twenty years, and a trip from Pennsylvania to New York for Rath Yatra is an annual custom.

As soon as we reach 45th, a fairly small side street off of Fifth Avenue, we see three chariots built in a very distinctively Indian design, and know that we are in the right place. Like the paintings and altar areas of ISKCON temples, the Rath Yatra chariots are an explosion of colorful decoration. Each is a wooden cart painted brightly in red and yellow with various animal designs—elephants between the spokes of the tall wheels, swans along the bed of the cart. Each is topped with an arch-shaped canopy distinctive to
Rath Yatra chariots, made of red and blue or red and yellow fabric and, like the carts themselves, painted in gold with a variety of animal shapes—swans, dolphins, a silhouette of Hanuman the monkey god, etc. The many, many yards of garland that we spent the previous afternoon stringing together are draped liberally around the carts. Each is effusively decorated with greenery, ribbons, tulle, fabric lanterns, and an abundance of star-shaped balloons. The passengers themselves—the deities Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balaram—each sit in splendor in the front of their own chariot. In Jagannath’s cart, three smaller statues of the divine trio sit at his feet. The Prabhupada murti from the temple room sits to the side of Subhadra on the second cart. Each deity in the divine trio is accompanied by two or three devotees who fan them with peacock feather fans and otherwise attend to their comfort.

Photograph 9: Rath Yatra Cart

There is still an hour or so before the parade will pull out onto Fifth Avenue, but this stretch of 45th Street is already very crowded, populated almost entirely by people in South Asian clothing or t-shirts emblazoned with Hindu imagery or the Maha Mantra. The area is dominated by the carts and the groups of people gathered around them; non-affiliated pedestrians make their way through the crowd, some gaping in open pleasure at the beauty of the whole spectacle, while others keep their eyes forward and pass without registering any response. Guests emerge from a restaurant across the street and take a moment to watch the show before going on their ways. There are among the gathered
devotees those whose job it is to direct traffic, and occasionally they herd the crowds who are singing and dancing in front of the carts, snapping pictures, or taking darshan to the side of the road so that a car can pass through. The gathered devotees tend to be very cooperative with these efforts.

As the assembled Hare Krishnas prepare to move their carts onto Fifth Avenue, it is instructive to consider the various elements of the Rath Yatra parade in the perspective of temple worship, especially since Rath Yatra represents not only a celebration for Jagganath’s and the devotees’ pleasure, but also an attempt to transform the city through the spirituality of Krishna consciousness. The bhakti yoga tradition to which the Hare Krishna movement belongs is strongly focused on personal experience and emotional attachment to God. Because Krishna theology distinguishes between a material world that is filled with suffering and a spiritual world that is filled with bliss, the worship practices performed at ISKCON temples are heavily concerned with salvation and with actions that are believed to create a personal interaction with the divine and thus have an immediate and dramatic effect on the state of the soul. These fall into a couple of broad categories. Some of the actions performed in the temple serve to attach the senses of the worshipper to Krishna. The sense of sight, for example, connects devotee and deity through darshan, the exchange of gazes between the worshipper and the altar deities. The sense of taste is employed while eating prasadam, the sense of smell is filled with incense, and the sense of hearing is touched by the singing of kirtan, all of which is intended to bring the worshipper into sensory contact with Krishna who cleanses the soul.

A second broad category of worshipful action involves performing some sort of service for the deities, as represented symbolically by the sculpted figures enshrined on the temple altars, often through a series of ritualized offerings such as the arati observed in the temple room or the circumambulation of the tulsi plant. These actions are accepted as service to God and an expression of humility and affection—acts that likewise develop a relationship with the divine that results in salvation.

Taking Rath Yatra to a public space may be considered a particularly significant religious act because as the procession passes through a prominent and heavily populated location, those actions of temple worship that are believed to have direct and immediate impact on the state of the soul are offered to the general public. The Rath Yatra may be
seen as a traveling darshan, for example, taking a temple deity into the street and passing through the center of the city. Among devotees of Krishna great significance is attached to an encounter with Jagannath on the street. For example, there is a belief that a person who sees Jagannath riding on his cart will become a pure devotee. According to Kurma,

It’s explained in the scriptures that if anyone sees the deity Lord Jagannath riding on the cart—let's just say some street bum happens to be walking in the street and he happens to see Lord Jagannath on the cart—it has tremendous spiritual importance for him. It has a very purifying effect. Spiritual progress means that your negative karma is dissipated. In order to progress in spiritual life one has to eradicate good and bad karma, so most of these festivals have that effect on anyone who participates knowingly and unknowingly. And if someone participates unknowingly just by seeing the cart or by seeing the enthusiasm—people dancing and chanting and pulling the cart and they pull on the cart—their spiritual life has begun.

Many of the forms of service to the deity associated with temple worship would be impractical in a processional context, but on the parade route an appointed form of service is pulling the cart ropes attached to each chariot. I have often heard devotees assert that any person who takes hold of the cart ropes during Rath Yatra performs an act of service for Jagannath and thus receives a forgiveness of sins, whether that person be a devotee or a passerby. According to ISKCON guru Romapada Swami, time spent in Puri, the city sacred to Lord Jagannath, will purify the soul of its sinful impulses. The presence of a Rath Yatra parade makes that opportunity available to all in proximity because the presence of Jagannath on his cart causes the space that he inhabits to become, however temporarily, Puri (Nilesh Moghe, HH Romapada Swami, entry posted 2008).

During the hour or so before the deities will begin their procession onto Fifth Avenue, the majority of those gathered in front of the three carts are standing quietly, some with open hands raised to shoulder height, in a familiar gesture that conveys openness, respect, contemplation, and quiet feeling. Many prostrate themselves on the street, dirt and wet notwithstanding. These devotees are crowded in as close to the carts as possible for darshan, and their stillness and quiet contemplation provides a marked counterpoint to the mounting enthusiasm exhibited by those who have chosen to take part in kirtan.
Photograph 10: Darshan before Jagannath’s Cart

Of the devotees taking darshan, a large number are crowded in front of the carts photographing the deities. Cameras will be nearly omnipresent during the day. Halfway down the parade route one of Manhattan’s many open-topped tour buses will pull up alongside the procession and, with a single unified motion, at least two dozen people will dive for their bags and surface with cameras. Given the colorful and vivid nature of the Rath Yatra, the prominence of photographers, both professional and amateur, is hardly surprising. But the reverence observable among the faithful suggests a deeper meaning as they crowd in front of the carts to frame their photographs in such a way as to receive the direct gaze of the deity, preserving the moment of encounter like a sort of technologically mediated darshan.

The use of technology to mediate temple experiences such as darshan and kirtan is by no means new. Early in the development of the Hindi film industry filmgoers began to regard the movie theater as a surrogate temple where, in the common genre of “mythologicals” at least, filmgoers could come face to face with the deities portrayed on film (Dwyer 2006: 19, 29, 58). The inclusion of a musical number that allows audience members to participate vicariously in sung devotions before temple altars and in-home shrines is also a common cinematic phenomenon. In more recent years a YouTube-like website called KrishnaTube has begun offering, among its clips of archival footage,
documentaries, lectures by important gurus, and other Krishna-related material, filmed kirtans and videos simply labeled “darshan” that train the camera on the faces of the altar deities while devotional music plays. The founders of KrishnaTube stress participation in a mission statement proclaiming their intention to “to spread the glories of Krishna and the chanting of His holy names” through technological means to an international community because “insofar as kirtan--mantra-yoga, or the yoga of chanting the Hare Krishna mantra…is concerned, the more people present the better.” Responses to these technologically mediated kirtans and darshan clips echo the rhapsodic responses commonly associated with live temple worship: “my soul is singing” “all hunger and thirst gone,” “super ecstatic,” “gosh, I think I’ll die with this song,” and “I am now seeing several things. I myself have a much higher true identity than I am recognizing.”

So it is not surprising to see cameras snapping photographs of the deities before the parade begins and the same cameras later following the carts down Fifth Avenue in a sort of ambulatory, technologically mediated version of temple room darshan. Kirtans before and during the parade are similarly mediated through amplification systems that fill the space of Fifth Avenue with sound. All things available in the material world are put to the service of Krishna during Rath Yatra, and their presence firmly grounds an ancient tradition in the modern world.

As with so many of the activities associated with Krishna worship, the assembly of devotees in front of the carts before parade time is accompanied by pervasive kirtan. There is a small kirtan group in front of each of the three carts, complete with loudspeakers and microphones for kirtaniya, two or three mridanga players at each cart, and usually a kartal, or hand cymbal player or two. The largest group by far is at the front cart, although the initial kirtan is a very loosely organized performance of the text “Namaste Sarasvati Devi” played at a relaxed tempo. At the second cart a rapid mridanga beat drives a slightly smaller group, many of whom sway with their arms held ecstatically above their heads—the most immediately recognizable gesture of ecstasy in Krishna worship—and engage in a little light, spontaneous dancing. The kirtan group at the third cart utilizes the energy of the very young: a pre-teen boy plays mridanga, while a boy of about the same age holds a microphone for another of his peers who is leading the kirtan. The boys playing and singing the kirtan wear expressions seriousness and
responsibility on their faces; between them and the cart two very young boys play enthusiastically, jumping around and swinging each other in what could be kirtan-dancing or a private game. All three kirtans are amplified to spread their purifying influence as far as possible, and walking between the carts offers a blend of overlapping sounds from the three different kirtans.

Photograph 11: Kirtan before the Parade

These kirtans performed standing in place in front of the carts before the parade begins have much the same purpose and the same type of gradually building energy as the kirtans performed in front of an altar in a temple room. These are kirtans performed as an act of service to the deities in the carts for their pleasure, and they take the listener/singer through a certain type of emotional experience intended to bond the soul to Lord Jagannath not only through the recitation of the name but also through the emotion, energy, and ideally, the ecstasy generated by the kirtan experience. I’ll take the kirtan performed in front of the first cart—Lord Jagannath’s cart—during the build-up to the start of the parade as an example.

When I arrive, one kirtan has just drawn to a close, and there is the briefest lull in the music. A lead kirtaniya takes a microphone and sings a single phrase from a familiar chant, “Nama Om Vishnu Padaya,” then pauses for several seconds before continuing, “Srimate Bhaktivedanta svamin iti namine.” Many devotees are still performing
prostrations before the deity at this point, but the strength of the vocal response increases as devotees rise from their prostrations and join in the singing. Partway into the first phrase, the first instrument becomes apparent, as a single mridanga adds a straight, unadorned beat. During this time, a devotee walks through what is currently a very loose crowd, using a flower blossom dipped in yellow paint to apply symbolic markings to the faces of members of the crowd, including the men who are there to direct traffic. During the second response, more hand cymbals join in, the mridangas take to more sophisticated beats, and the kirtan is under way. As the kirtaniya shifts into singing the Maha Mantra and the crowd becomes more engaged with the kirtan, several devotees in orange traffic vests herd the crowd to the side of the road and a couple of NYPD motorcycles pass through, honking their horns and riding lazy S-curves to clear the way for a tow truck towing a blue SUV through the crowd. There are those crowded to the side of the road who are earnestly trying to keep up their darshan/kirtan groove, continuing a few improvised dance steps while being sure to clear room for the tow truck to pass. As the truck passes, the kirtaniya shifts into the common melody most often associated with the kirtans of Srila Prabhupada (see Figure 5):

![Figure 5: Maha Mantra to Common Melody](image)

A shift into this melody usually raises a highly enthusiastic response from devotees, and as soon as this melody is sung, almost automatically a few devotees’ arms shoot into the air. However, some still have to keep an eye on the passing truck and motorcycles and almost seem confused as to where to orient their ecstatically raised arms—toward the passing police or toward the deities. As the police pass, the crowd opens out again and devotes their energy to the music.

I will use the climax of this kirtan to illustrate common musical techniques for building energy when the crowd is standing in place, as they do in a temple room or in front of a parked cart. Later I will contrast this to a moving kirtan when the parade pulls out onto Fifth Avenue. Because each kirtaniya improvises his or her combination of
kirtan melodies, and all instrumental accompaniment as well as audience response is spontaneous, every kirtan is different, and this is just one example of a group of musicians working together to build musical energy. Kirtaniyas often sing the basic melodies differently and many use different inflections, appoggiaturas, and expressive deviations during every repetition of the melody, so for the sake of simplicity I have transcribed the melodies as clearly recognized and sung by the congregation during the “response” phases of the kirtan call-and-response. Rehearsal letters note both the different melodies and the number of times that the kirtaniya and congregation sing a call-and-response iteration of each melody.

The initial melody for this final portion of the kirtan, transcribed in Figure 6 as melody A, is performed as the kirtaniya is driving the music toward its climax.

![Figure 6: Melody A](image)

This melody has a moderately wide range as kirtan melodies go, and is characterized by a rising and falling, slightly disjunct motion with phrases split off from each other by rests, allowing for a delivery that separates and emphasizes each line of the mantra but does not necessarily establish a sense of forward drive and motion. At this point the melody is delivered in a moderately relaxed tempo, ca. 104 beats per minute. However, as often happens with a slower melody sung while building energy, a slow tempo is still matched by extensive gestures of ecstasy among the congregation, expressed individually rather than as a group. For example, a group of young men in traditional dress display incredibly broad grins while alternately throwing their arms in the air, clapping along with the music, and exchanging enthusiastic, almost painful-looking high fives. Several other devotees choose gestures like opening their hands while gazing upward, or raising the arms while taking a deliberate side-to-side dance step.
Photographs 12 & 13: Gestures of Ecstasy during Kirtan

During the initial “call” of the melody, two mridanga players, a couple of hand cymbal players, and a man with a small hand-held gong and a wooden stick create a polyrhythmic combination of rhythms. The mridanga rhythms are, again, not an exact science, but the most common rhythm at this point is the one illustrated in Figure 7:

![Figure 7: Basic Mridanga Pattern](image)

This type of rhythm provides forward momentum into either the next call or the next response. The hand cymbals and gong tend to focus on the distinctive short-short-LONG pattern that is the single most common rhythmic pattern associated with kirtan, although like the mridangas, the cymbal and gong players may add a little rhythmic flourish at the end of a melodic iteration to give the music a little forward push. During this melody, whose relaxed tempo allows for easier, more organic demonstrations of ecstasy, both mridanga players drum through the kirtaniya’s “call,” but drop out for the “response” to raise their arms above their heads and dance a relaxed side-to-side step with expressions of beatific bliss on their faces. Throughout this first melody, congregation members not only sing throughout the responses, but they keep up a level of
participation throughout the kirtaniya’s call by clapping enthusiastically, some with the characteristic short-short-LONG rhythm played by the cymbals and gong, but most with a steady clap matching the long beats of the hand cymbal rhythm.

After four iterations of call-and-response on melody A, the kirtaniya moves on, as shown in Figure 9:

Figure 9: Melody B
In contrast to melody A, melody B is narrower and more conjunct in range and, at least initially, steadier in surface rhythm—all traits that provide a sense of forward motion in comparison to melody A. The B melody is also marked by a distinct jump in tempo from 104 to 126 BPM. The tempo change is greeted by shouts of “Haribol!” in the crowd and by an immediate leap—literally—into action by many of our male devotees, who begin jumping up and down in rhythm with the music. Many of their gestures of ecstasy correspond to the “response” portions of the call-and-response, the physical participation matching the musical.

Melody B is followed by a brief return to melody A, twice through the call-and-response, performed at the newer, faster tempo, which means that the more wide ranging, conjunct melody performed at the faster tempo represents its own upshift in energy.

Following this return to melody A, the kirtaniya launches into a significantly narrower, more conjunct melody with a faster, steadier surface rhythm (Figure 10):

Figure 10: Melody C
This shift to a tighter, more focused melody is accompanied by a more intense bounce among the jumping devotees. The hand cymbals shift from their characteristic short-short-long to a steady stream of eighth notes, giving the music even more forward
propulsion. Two times through the call-and-response on melody C are followed by two
iterations of a modified form of melody C, which retains the same rhythmic pattern but
flattens the melodic contour further to an almost static repetition of a central pitch that
shifts up a whole step from the central pitch of melody C (Figure 11):

Figure 11: Melody C

After two repetitions, the melody shifts up another whole step (Figure 12):

Figure 12: Melody C2

An unmarked but steady increase in tempo moves from 138 beats per minute at the
beginning of melody C to 152 BPM on melody C2. While some devotees maintain a
steady bounce that matches the main beat, others take to slower but more ambitious
vertical jumps. Others seem to tire out and stop jumping altogether.

Finally, after two repetitions each through C, C1, and C2, the kirtaniya breaks into
the common melody. Once again, the appearance of this melody seems to evoke, for
many devotees, a sense of coming home and is often greeted by a particularly joyous
release of emotion. A first iteration of the maha mantra maintains the tempo already set,
and even speeds up to 160 BPM, but even so, as soon as there is a transition into this
commonly beloved melody, many of them immediately relax into a side-to-side sway
with arms opened broadly toward the sky. At the second iteration of the mantra, the
kirtaniya makes a very sudden break from the previously established fast tempo to an
abruptly slower tempo, 126 BPM. This break to a slower tempo brings a sudden spike in
intensity among the devotees, who match it with a slow but ambitiously high vertical
jump, some devotees reaching up as if to grasp the air, some pointing their index fingers
to the sky in the gesture commonly recognized in sports when a baseball player or
football player points to the sky—indicating thanks to God—upon hitting a home run or
scoring a touchdown. This is one gesture of ecstasy that seems to come as much from
contemporary popular culture as from the Hindu devotional tradition. As often happens
at the end of a kirtan, iterations of the Maha Mantra sung to the common melody are followed by singing the traditional greeting “Haribol” to the same melody, during which many devotees relax their dancing but put extra energy into their sung responses. Two rounds of singing “Jaya Prabhupada,” literally “victory to Prabhupada” again stimulate many devotees to a very rhythmic jump accenting each syllable. After two rounds of singing praises to Prabhupada, the drummers close the kirtan and the congregation cheers. Within a minute, another kirtaniya takes up a new song.

**Onto Fifth Avenue**

While this kirtan, along with those performed in front of the other two carts, serves to build enthusiasm among devotees currently focused inward toward the deities, some in the crowd begin unfurling long, thick ropes from either side of the front end of each cart. Groups of people line up along the ropes, anticipating the moment when this mounting energy will be turned outward toward the city. As kirtan continues, the devotees finally begin to pull the carts forward and out onto Fifth Avenue.

Fifth Avenue between 45th Street and Washington Square Park has been shut down on the Northbound side of the street, and as the dense throng of festival participants crowds between and around the ropes, there is an initial crush between those who are dancing along with the kirtan and those who simply walk the parade but end up packed into the space in front of the cart. A tight line of NYPD motorcycles contains the crowd.

At the initial moment of moving out into the city, the press is such that I, cameras in both hands trying to take in the experience, find myself wedged in between enthusiastic Hare Krishnas and police motorcycles in a chaotic and somewhat frightening moment. I remember a friend from the Alachua Hare Krishna community, Krishna Kripa Das, telling me about attending the major Rath Yatra in Puri, the homeland of Jagganath, and being so overwhelmed in the face of the massive, energetic crowd guiding these very large carts that he thought, momentarily, that he was going to die—I think of the experiences that led the British to coin the term “juggernaut.” It was, for him, a moment of clarity, a moment of awe in the face of the vast sublime that included a sudden awareness of his own fragility—and it seems that that moment of being overwhelmed, of
feeling both awe and the sudden realization of mortality, is part of the experience of Rath Yatra. It adds a powerful quality to the notion of darshan.

Once the parade is on the street, it opens out a little bit, although the crowds are still very dense in some places. A handful of rather frazzled devotees with megaphones rush about trying to herd the crowd into a manageable space, praises to Krishna and traditional Indian politeness interspersed with their attempts to give directions: “Haribol; please use the sidewalk. Hare Krishna; please go to the front of the cart.” The NYPD on their motorcycles are impassive; they do not appear to participate in the festivities in any way other than through their presence, yet they also make no attempt to interfere, more to escort and to guard the celebratory ritual passing through the city. Lakshmina interprets the support of the police department as evidence of positive regard that the city has for their Krishna community. “You can see it in the police department,” he says. “New York cops are infamous, if you’ve been following Occupy Wall Street. [But] everyone gets caught up in the spirit of it…to this day I go into the streets of New York we do kirtan there people are drawn, they dance with us…” And while it is at some level impossible to identify definitively who is not a devotee among the crowds on the street, I do occasionally see people pulling the ropes, if only for a few minutes, or grooving with the music, who do not appear to be affiliated with the movement and step in and out of the parade. A stream of yellow taxis is still honking its way down the right hand side of Fifth Avenue, and across the street spectators stop to point, to gawk at the parade, and to pull out cameras.

Photograph 14: Festival Goers and NYPD on Fifth Avenue
**Kirtan En Route**

The kirtans sung on Fifth Avenue are, like the darshan offered by carrying Jagannath into the street, a disruption of the public space that, according to Vaishnava belief, may bring the bypasser into sensory contact with Krishna himself. I have discussed the belief that the sound vibrations created by singing the names of Krishna in kirtan have a purifying, salvific effect because of the notion that the names of God carry his literal presence. As I proposed in Chapter One, the powerful changes to the self that ISKCON converts ascribe to hearing their first kirtans are important evidence of the transformative power that devotees ascribe to the presence of “Krishna in vibratory form” (Bryant 2007:15-16). The chanting of kirtan is thus believed to have a purifying effect not only on those who chant, but also on those who listen. Neal Delmonico summarizes, “chanting to oneself, in one’s mind or in a whisper, is beneficial for oneself, but chanting loudly is beneficial for oneself and for all those who hear. Loud chanting is thus said to be a hundred times more beneficial than silent chanting” (Delmonico 2007:552). I have spoken with devotees who were motivated by this principle to go outside in freezing weather and sing the holy names to a wounded animal, believing that should the animal die, the chanting heard before its death might help it to be born as a higher order of being in its next lifetime.

Devotees’ faith in the transformative power of kirtan extends from the bodies of active listeners to the physical environments touched by the sacred sound vibrations of Krishna’s name. In his important work on devotional singing in India, Stephen Slawek refers to “sound's mystical potency to promote auspiciousness” as singers “imbue the environment with divine vibrations.” Slawek quotes one of his informant’s in asserting that “a kirtan is like a laboratory through which we spread the verbal form of Brahman,” the divine energy believed to emanate from God and animate the universe. According to Slawek’s informant, “By uttering good words, the pollution in the air is counteracted. So the farther are broadcast our kirtan, the better. We believe that our kirtan benefits the welfare of the whole world” (Slawek 1998:84).

For this reason there is powerful significance to not only taking the Rath Yatra into the streets where it can be heard by many, but taking it through a central location—
Manhattan’s famed Fifth Avenue—in a city that is among the world’s most important cultural centers. Krishna devotees might hope to have a purifying impact on this famous location in such a prominent city through their kirtan, and thus have their influence radiate outward in the various ways that New York City influences the world. I believe that it is significant that, like darshan, kirtan has a form of technological mediation—along with the central core group of kirtaniya, instrumentalists, and dancers in front of every cart, one or two devotees with each group carry loudspeakers over their shoulders, thus bathing their environment with the purifying sounds of kirtan.

In the pre-parade kirtan, as devotees were both bathing their deity with the devotion of beautiful music and warming themselves up for a tremendous outpouring of devotional energy into the streets of Manhattan, the music offered a slow build in energy to a very clear climax. During the actual parade, however, there is a slightly different feeling to the release of musical energy through a very long, continuous performance. The walking kirtan has to guide the congregation through the steady forward motion of a roughly two hour procession. The kirtaniya and drummers must set the pace for participants who are dancing through a significant portion of the city, as well as for those who are pulling the cart ropes or simply walking the parade route. Their musical challenge is to both generate an experience of ecstatic enthusiasm and maintain a steady energy and walking pace throughout the parade. There are subtle differences in the way kirtan is performed and energy is built and maintained for a walking kirtan. The music must maintain a sense of emotional urgency while simultaneously providing the kind of continuity and pacing that allows the parade participants to keep their energy levels high throughout a long walk.

I will use as an example a segment from the kirtan performed in front of cart two, Subhadra’s cart, about twenty minutes into the parade as the chariot passes the New York Public Library. Over the course of about nine minutes, the kirtaniya uses variants of only two melodies, performed at a very steady pace that hovers around 116 beats per minute, only rising to 126 BPM at its fastest point.

This segment of the music starts by bouncing back and forth between two melodies that I will call variants of each other, as they share a rhythmic profile and final
phrase. First the kirtaniya leads the congregation through five call-and-response cycles on melody A, transcribed in Figure 13:

![Figure 13: Melody A](image1)

Five times through melody A give way to three call-and-response cycles through a variant marked in Figure 14 as A₁:

![Figure 14: Melody A₁](image2)

Melody A₁ varies melody A by starting in a higher register, offering continuity from one melody to another while still adding a sense of emotional urgency. Although neither tempo nor surface rhythms get faster, the relatively wide range of the melodies still provides for heightened emotion.

When the kirtaniya does switch melodies, he uses a melody with a familiar rhythmic pattern—the same rhythmic pattern that was performed at increasingly high-pitched registers as a method of amping up energy during the pre-parade kirtan. A rhythmic profile of steady eighth notes only altered by 16th notes at the beginning of a phrase (and an occasional shift into quarter notes where singers substitute “Ram” for “Rama”) is very common in kirtan performance, and often accompanies a melodic profile that is either static or oscillates in thirds. It is very frequently accompanied by a significant upshift in tempo and serves to focus and intensify the energy.

However, this time the tempo only shifts minimally, and the missing tempo shift is quite noticeable to someone experienced with kirtan. In addition, the rhythmic profile is attached to a melody with a wide range and descending contour (Figure 15):
This allows for a sense of focused emotional energy without actually increasing the tempo. In this segment of kirtan, not only have fewer melodies been used, but they have been repeated more times, and in this case the kirtaniya takes melody B through 10 call-and-response cycles before returning to A1 three times, then B again where this particular segment ends.

Shortly afterward, the group preceding the third cart, Balarama’s cart, pulls to a temporary halt of their forward motion, and in a moment that perfectly illustrates the intent behind the claim to benefit the environment through kirtan, a circle of devotees intensifies their leaping and the gestures of their ecstasy and orients themselves toward the Empire State Building in a moment of specially focused and directed kirtan, bathing an iconic place in the music they believe can raise it to a higher spiritual plane.

So far I have simply referred to the kinesthetic dimension of the kirtan experience as “gestures of ecstasy,” without discussing specifically the role of dance in Krishna worship. A famous line from the Bhagavata Purana that I have been fond of quoting states, “every word is a song, every step is a dance” in the spiritual world. The mythology surrounding Krishna’s life place great emphasis on his skills as a dancer—in one story he even divides himself into hundreds of versions of himself so that he can dance with each gopi and they can all feel the bliss of dancing with Krishna as individuals. Dance accordingly plays an important role in the way that a walking kirtan like Rath Yatra is performed and presented to the public.

While there are notable exceptions to every generalization about kirtan practice, it is easy to recognize in the Rath Yatra, as in kirtan at large, certain styles of dancing that tend to fall along loosely gendered lines. Male devotees, for example, tend to show a very vigorous energy that is often focused inward toward the kirtaniya and kirtan group. There is by no means an absence of female kirtaniyas in ISKCON—a fact that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Four. Still, male kirtaniyas often dominate arati ceremonies and important ritual functions, and they are accompanied by mridanga
performers who are usually male (again, with notable exceptions). Kirtaniya and instrumentalists are often ringed by circles of men who pack themselves in closely and direct their energy either inward, sometimes utilizing gestures that emphasize personal connection like clasping hands on shoulders or running ring-around-the-rosy type circles around each other, or upward and outward, jumping up and down rapidly during passages with a fast surface rhythm or in explosive vertical leaps when the music opens out into more expansive melodies. At times a good kirtan can seem like a spiritually consecrated mosh pit.

Among women, though, the impulse is generally to gather into loosely packed groups and engage in spontaneous but semi-coordinated and artful dancing. During Rath Yatra, as well as in other walking kirtans that I have observed, the dancing women precede the kirtan group and provide a vanguard to the procession responsible for both inviting observers into the kirtan and adding a certain aesthetic. Where the men may be seen as providing the kirtan with its intensity, the women provide it with its beauty. At a certain point well into the parade, for example, some ways past Madison Square Park where a devotee might be expected to get tired, the kirtan group keeps their energy up. The present melody is pitched relatively high in the kirtaniya’s tenor range—often a sign of emotion—and delivered with a very precise, almost clipped enunciation as seen in Figure 16.
Figure 16: Kirtan Melody

The enunciation of the melody is matched by the gestures of three rows of young women, about twenty in all, dressed in saris and most sporting the long hair that emphasizes the feminine aesthetic often found in the dress of female devotees. These women all engage in a simple but graceful and semi-coordinated dance. For each pair of names sung as part of the mantra—“Hare Krishna” or “Rama Rama,” for example—the women execute three or four grapevine steps capped with a graceful hop that matches a hard mridanga hit, first to the right and then to the left. Individual dancers may add a spin to the hop, or wave their arms in graceful motions that provide a sense of circularity to the step. The wave of dancers performing similar but individually expressive movements gives a sense of floating grace to the whole proceedings.

Photograph 16: Dancers Forming Vanguard to the Parade

Festival of India

I’ve described the fifteen annual Fifth Avenue parades as cultural performances that carry important information about the ethnically diverse city of New York, as well as the cultural identities of significant segments of the population. The Fifth Avenue parade is a recognized way for a subgroup within the city to assert the strength of its identity.
Rath Yatra adds the Indian community to the list of those having a parade that performs aspects of their heritage in the center of the city every year. The presence of a highly visible South Asian community in New York City is in some ways a relatively recent phenomenon. Even after the relaxation of immigration laws in the 1960s allowed for increased migration from India and the number of practicing Hindus in the city increased, the burgeoning community did not always have an easily recognized public presence. The broad umbrella of Hinduism includes a wide range of beliefs and practices, many of which are inclined toward private worship at in-home shrines. It has only been in the last 30 years that Hindu temples such as the Ganesh temple in Queens, for example, have become prominent centers for Hindu practice in New York City (Fairbanks 2008).

ISKCON has, since its inception, provided a more public face to Hindu-based religion in New York City. Devotees dance on streets; they hand out literature; in recent years ISKCON publicity has touted the success of harinam, or public chanting, in Times Square, with some writers even giving the influence of the chanted names partial credit for reduced crime rates in Manhattan (Krishna.org, 2002). The devotees offering this prominent face to Vaishnava devotionalism are without question an ethnically diverse group—devotees frequently stress to me that this is an International Society for Krishna Consciousness. But in recent years many young Indian Hindus have taken to ISKCON and the annual Rath Yatra provides as a particularly vibrant display of their culture. According to one website oriented toward the Indian diaspora, the Rath Yatra provides an opportunity for many Indian families, even those who are not necessarily affiliated with ISCKON, to demonstrate their cultural pride and the size and strength of their community. For some Hindu parents, the Rath Yatra is considered an important opportunity to teach their children to respect their traditional culture (Rediff.com, 2007). It is notable that a very large segment of the parade is made up of young families, particularly mothers and fathers pushing strollers down the parade route.

While the dancers, kirtan groups, and loosely organized quasi-mosh pits that surround them certainly provide the most vibrant and exciting element of Rath Yatra, they by no means comprise the totality—or even, arguably, the majority—of the crowd walking the parade route. Some walk the sidewalks handing out fliers, copies of the Bhagavad Gita, and other literature to bystanders. Ananda, for example, took a bus from
New Vrindavan in West Virginia to be at this Rath Yatra, and he works his way down Fifth Avenue with a backpack full of Bhagavad Gitas to pass out as he goes. However, a large number of the people preceding the carts down the street simply walk along with the parade, lending their presence to the spectacle. Those who do so are, again, a racially and ethnically mixed crowd, but approximately half if not more are South Asian in descent. Even among those who are not, the vast majority of people walking the Rath Yatra wear some item of clothing that acts as a visual marker of either Indian culture or Vaishnava faith. A marked majority of those taking part, regardless of ethnicity, wear Indian clothing. Some items of clothing like a sari or kurta simply signify Indian origin; other items, such as the dhoti or a set of peach-colored robes, are explicitly associated with religious practices. For those not otherwise dressed in Indian clothing, a t-shirt emblazoned with the Maha Mantra, a photograph of Prabhupada, the face of Jagannath, the Om symbol, or some similar design still signifies a Hindu-based identity, and in many cases such t-shirts accompany traditional dress. Even where specific items of clothing do not indicate religious or cultural affiliation, many on the parade route wear a bead bag around the neck or *tilak* markings painted on the forehead or arms that act as signifiers of distinction, and mark those who have come out to Fifth Avenue specifically to celebrate the Rath Yatra.

When the parade arrives at Washington Square Park, the carts turn onto the street that runs in front and a thick crowd of devotees jumps up and down while singing an intense kirtan before the deities being lowered from their chariots. Most of the parade participants, however, proceed into the park for the appropriately named Festival of India. Two of the dialogues Singer assigns to cultural performances deal with image vs. reality and self-image vs. perceived image from an outside culture. Through the arch and past its inviting sculptures of important American historical figures, Washington Square Park is set up with booths under brightly colored red, yellow, green, and blue striped tents. Many of these booths are devoted to communicating information about ISKCON, elements of Eastern religion such as reincarnation, and Hinduism at large. It is an opportunity to dispel misconceptions and attempt to communicate what Hare Krishnas want the world to know about themselves and what some of their accomplishments are.
One of the tents on the eastern side of the park, for example, houses a display of posters about the life and achievements of Srila Prabhupada. Lined up along the perpendicular walkway are a tent covering a similar display on “The Science of Reincarnation” and an adjacent “Questions and Answers” tent set up with folding chairs. Several devotees, one with a microphone, converse among themselves about manifestations of the divine energy. Signs above other tents proclaim offerings including a “Museum of Vedic Culture” and “Books on Yoga and Meditation,” as well as cold drinks, smoothies, and watermelon.

The tents and displays are all part of the Festival of India, which travels around North America during the summers on a 48-foot trailer from Rath Yatra to Rath Yatra (festivalofindia.org). I stop to chat briefly with the three men working the Mantra Yoga booth, all three Indian men in kurta and dhotis with tilaks painted on their foreheads. I ask them about their interactions with people who come through the park and they explain that their main purpose is to communicate the reasons and benefits of chanting the Maha Mantra—“naturally people are attracted to it, they would like to experience it,” one of the men says, “and if they really like it they will purchase the beads.” Another of the men volunteers the fact that last year in Washington D.C. they sold 100 sets of prayer beads to interested people at the park. When I ask about their interactions with people of other faiths, one remarks that the “real spirituality” of Krishna consciousness is something “they get attracted to even though they have something [else]. Like I was talking to a Chinese Muslim and he was saying, ‘of all the religions, I feel personally this is more appealing.’” When I ask him what attracts people to come to the booth with their
questions he smiles and asks, “Do you really want to know?” When I respond affirmatively, he continues: “It’s about our previous life activities, [our fruitful] activities. So depending on what you did in a previous life that gives you a chance to meet Krishna or Krishna’s devotees. If you’re very young it means you’ve done a lot and that’s why you’re coming.”

On the sidewalk that forms the outside boundary of the park, the largest crowd of people by far is lined up in front of the prasadam tents. A set of posters explaining spiritual principles of vegetarianism is set up beside that line. Closer to the center of the park, a long but cheerfully patient line precedes the “Delicious Snacks” tent. It is raining, which may explain why most people in the park are those whose manner of dress marks them as either devotees or members of the Indian community who have come out for the day’s festival. Benches and curb space are filled with Indian families eating plates of prasadam. After a few minutes I realize that one very notable characteristic of the crowd is a striking sense of decorum. I notice cheerful smiles and a remarkable amount of patience in the demeanor of those who are waiting in very long food lines. It is a very peaceful atmosphere, as large crowds in big cities go. They are quietly well-behaved, but they are also very friendly. More people spontaneously talk to me and say hello in this place this afternoon than at any other time and place during my stay in New York City—other than those selling something in Times Square.

At one point, for example, a young man who I had noticed dancing especially ecstatically both during the parade greets me with a friendly “Haribol! Hare Krishna, how are you?” His name is Bakshi and he is from Bombay originally but currently lives in Baltimore; two friends from different parts of India also stop to chat. When I ask why he would come all the way to New York for Rath Yatra, Bakshi jokes that money is what brings people from one place to another, but then adds more seriously, “The name of Lord is the most valuable thing in this earth. We are lucky being a human we can get that.” After he encourages me to come to New Vrindavan for an upcoming 24-hour kirtan, I express a desire to go to India again, and Bakshi replies, “the Almighty will fulfill our wish—he is our father, we are his sons. So he will fulfill your wish.”

Colorful, slightly eccentric life-size sculptures are scattered around the park, accompanied by signs that explain principles of Vaishnava spirituality. A figure of a man
playing an oboe to a pot full of snakes, for example, taps into one almost painfully exotic image that many Westerners attach to India, but the sculpture utilizes that imagery for the sake of spiritual analogy, as a sign titled “The Snake Charmer” exhorts: “the senses are compared to venomous serpents. The yogi, or the devotee, must be very strong to control the serpents, like a snake charmer...”

Photograph 18: The Snake Charmer

Very quickly after the parade arrives at Washington Square Park, Jahnavi’s group, As Kindred Spirits, paired with the Mayapuris (who I will meet later in Alachua), are set up on the stage performing kirtan with traditional instruments while seated, bhajan-style. A crowd of a hundred or so is gathered in front of the stage, many singing the responses to the kirtan, while a fair number of audience members stand up and dance ecstatically. It is fitting that the banner over the stage announces “Festival of India,” because throughout the day the tent hosts performances that aptly demonstrate India’s culture: kathak and bharatanatyam troupes displaying India’s classical dance traditions, dramas that illustrate key principles of Vaishnava theology, and kirtan on traditional instruments. These performances offer a display of classical Indian culture for the enlightenment of outsiders as well as the pleasure of insiders; they are also inclusive, as signifiers of Indian culture go. Indian Muslims, Sikhs, and South Asians of other religious (or non-religious) affiliations may lay equal claim to the pleasures of Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and even the moralistic folk tales that are the subject matter of the short plays.
A pair of actors performs, for example, the fable of the boatman and the scholar, in which an arrogant academic finds that his theoretical knowledge cannot save him if he does not have the practical knowledge to swim across the river. The mini-play is filled with humorous moments and accompanied by a recorded soundtrack filled with mixed musical signifiers, such as a fragment of Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” that promptly segues into the Maha Mantra common melody as performed on traditional instruments. The incongruous combination of signs draws a combination of laughs and cheers from the crowd.

Some of these performances will be repeated the following day at the Brooklyn temple in the context of a secondary celebration that mixes dramas and classical dances with rousing, large-scale kirtans and the standard Sunday arati as devotees relax and celebrate with other devotees. On this day, however, the Festival of India acts both as a source of pleasure for members of the Indian community, a display of their talents, and a demonstration of the artistic beauty of their culture.

The combination of Rath Yatra parade and Festival of India at its end provides a host of vivid sounds and images through which both Hare Krishna devotees and members of New York City’s Indian community can present their culture to the public at large and assert its strength and beauty. To dedicated Hare Krishna believers, Rath Yatra is an attempt to transform their city in light of their beliefs about the impact of encountering Krishna through sound and imagery. In the next chapter I will examine Rath Yatra and its accompanying Festival of India in a different context, California’s Venice Beach. In
that chapter I will delve more deeply into ways that outsiders respond to an encounter with kirtan and with Rath Yatra as a public invitation to personal liberation.
CHAPTER 3
THE LOS ANGELES RATH YATRA:
PERFORMING LIBERATION

While the Rath Yatra has gained in popularity in many North American cities, there is a general consensus among Hare Krishnas that the two festivals worth making a cross-country trip are the Manhattan parade discussed in Chapter Two and the Los Angeles Rath Yatra on Venice Beach, the latter of which serves as the focus of this chapter. The festive and eclectic atmosphere of Venice Beach gives the event a special flavor; when I asked devotees what makes this Rath Yatra special among all such parades now held in North America, there was often a pause and a brief look taking in the beach environment, as if they were thinking, “You have to ask?” As public spaces go, Venice Beach is a place where people often go to relax and to play, so it was easy to feel that in Los Angeles the Rath Yatra was a celebration passing through another celebration.

In Chapter One I presented ideas and memories offered by a number of Hare Krishnas who described the moments when they encountered kirtan in terms of personal transformation, describing “a feeling of being free from cares” (Banabhatta), one that “profoundly elevated my consciousness” (Hridayananda Goswami), one that yielded “real feelings, real emotions, about things that actually exist in reality [as opposed to] illusion” (Bada Hari), leading one devotee to proclaim, “I started singing and dancing and I never stopped” (Danavir Goswami), and another to recall that after the experience, loved ones would say “you look different,” to which he would respond, “Well, I feel different.” A Rath Yatra, as a public performance of worshipful actions often reserved for the Krishna temple, will always involve a social negotiation as members of a religious minority disrupt a public space to display their culture. During the parade at Venice Beach I was struck by the nature of the Rath Yatra as an offering, that devotees were taking an experience that they found personally meaningful and transformative and offering members of the public an opportunity to try it out and see if it was as meaningful and transformative for them. Los Angeles devotees have told me that Srila Prabhupada gave them a special charge to share the message of Krishna consciousness with the public, and in this chapter I will consider ways in which the city’s local ISKCON community
addresses their message to the public and invites them to engage with it through musical participation.

New Dwaraka

The New Dwaraka temple in Los Angeles is more of a complex than a single building. A sign announcing the presence of the “Hare Krishna Community; Founder Acharya His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada” is visible from Venice Boulevard. Upon turning off of the main road the first several hundred yards of Watseka Avenue are lined on both sides with ISKCON-associated buildings. To the right is the temple itself, a large building with classical columns on the façade that currently displays banners emblazoned with images of Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balaram. Adjacent to the temple is a restaurant and bookshop, and next door is a house converted into a Bhakti Center. On the other side of Watseka Avenue the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, ISKCON’s publishing company, borders Venice Boulevard, and a large banner displaying the Maha Mantra hangs over the archway framing one of three entrances into the apartment complex across the street. Devotees sporting shaved heads and traditional Indian garb wander the block, many congregating to chat at lunch tables set up outside of the restaurant. There is no question of having found ISKCON territory.

Photograph 20: Los Angeles Temple Facade
The temple room in Brooklyn appeared to be a gymnasium converted into a strikingly beautiful worship space, and New Dwaraka is a converted Baptist church. Inside the temple room is stunningly beautiful. It is not a large room, but it is filled with exquisite dark woodwork set against white walls and a brown-and-tan marble floor. The altar area at the front of the room is set back into the wall and divided into three sections each framed, again, with intricately-carved woodwork. Inside the altar area, the resplendent Radha and Krishna are at the center, with other demigods on either side; their individual sections of the altar are topped with domes carved in the style of a Rajasthani temple.

As in Brooklyn, two characters watch over the proceedings: Srila Prabhupada, here in a decorated throne with a red canopy placed to the right of the altar area (Krishna’s-eye view), and the eagle-god Garuda, who dominates the balcony at the back of the room. As at the Brooklyn temple, the walls are lined with theologically significant paintings. My favorite shows Srila Prabhupada playing the hand cymbals and looking meditative as he visualizes Radha and Krishna in their glory, the deities revealed to him, I imagine, through the process of musical chanting. The only part of the temple that rivals the gorgeous altar area in beauty is a ceiling hung with crystal chandeliers and painted with large murals showing scenes from the life of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu. Perhaps there is something symbolic in placing the image of Krishna’s last avatar singing in a position
where the person looking toward heaven sees that—a representation of sacred music as mediator with heaven.

Photograph 22: Temple Room Ceiling

**Sunday in Los Angeles**

I arrive for the Sunday Love Feast in Los Angeles partway through the arati ceremony and kirtan. The relatively smaller space of the Los Angeles temple is more densely packed than its Brooklyn counterpart, but on this Sunday afternoon the atmosphere of the opening kirtan is, for lack of a better term, ecstatically relaxed. The music proceeds at a moderately lively pace and while the majority of devotees simply stand and sway from side to side as the music progresses, a handful of individuals scattered throughout the crowd jump up and down with arms raised, half-twirl with ecstasy, or bounce from side to side with outstretched arms in an easygoing but blissful dance. At the center of the room, three or four male devotees dance in a loose circle as though playing a Krishna-inspired game of ring-around-the-rosy. Two priests in white robes stand with their backs turned to the congregation while making the arati offerings in front of the leftmost sections of the altar area. They occasionally turn to the audience with their offerings, while one of the devotees circulates the congregation offering the holy water and sacred flames to his fellow worshippers.
As the arati draws to a close, one devotee stands to make announcements while the members of the congregation shuffle around pulling mats from a pile in the corner of the room and settling into cross-legged positions on the floor. The room is fairly crowded by now, and I am standing in the back. As the temple president makes his announcements, he asks if anyone is there for the first time. Another young woman and I raise our hands, and we are officially welcomed with a new copy of *Bhagavad Gita: As It Is* and a bookmark indicating times for various events at the temple.

Tonight’s lecture is by a man named Arcita, and as he is introduced the devotee making announcements expresses great enthusiasm about Arcita’s knowledge and what a treat it is for us to get to hear from him. Arcita has set up a laptop and projector and some young devotees set up a screen. In Brooklyn Ramabhadra’s Sunday lecture previewed the upcoming festival by choosing a Rath Yatra-related topic, and Arcita similarly chooses to speak on topic. He tells Jagannath’s origin story, specifically the legend of King Indradyuma hiring a divine being to carve a sacred piece of wood, and as he does so Arcita uses his laptop to project images of dioramas which tell the famous story. He continues to talk about great devotees and to recount lore surrounding Puri. Much is made of Jagannath’s eccentric appearance and lovable personality.

At one point, Arcita refers to one of the men in the congregation—one he describes as a “great devotee” and who seems to be known and well-loved by the group at large. The man is invited to stand and share a story that has apparently been told in this setting many times before but is worth telling again. The devotee in question is one of the early devotees who joined the movement under Srila Prabhupada during the Vietnam War era. Like Kurma Rupadasa, whose story I related in chapter 1, this storyteller felt an intense aversion to violence as the Vietnam War unfolded, an aversion fueled, shortly after his conversion, by his new understanding of principles like *ahimsa*, or non-violence. Like Kurma he struggled to reconcile the demands of country and conscience when drafted. Ultimately he went to the draft building wearing a small figurine of Jagannath hanging around his neck, and to each person who questioned him about this strange, eccentric-looking necklace he answered, “This is the Lord of the Universe and he will protect me.” A simple and compelling statement of faith to those in the temple room, but perhaps a little strange to someone who is uninformed. The
storyteller and the entire congregation clearly derive great pleasure from each phase of the story as he proceeds through the various offices in the draft building, repeatedly being asked about the necklace and repeatedly saying, “This is the Lord of the Universe and He will protect me.” Each time he is answered by a very puzzled look from the office workers who obviously find him strange—right up until the part of the story when the draft office releases him from military duty “by reason of mental defect.” Everyone laughs heartily at the story. It illustrates faith in the power of Jagganath and the fact that the Lord of the Universe did release him from military duty; to an audience of sympathetic devotees, it also illustrates a willingness to stand out and be distinctive, unusual, even viewed as somewhat strange, in the name of loving God.

Srila Prabhupada and the Communal Self-Identity of ISKCON Los Angeles

After Srila Prabhupada founded ISKCON in New York City in 1965, he set out for the West Coast, specifically San Francisco, the center of the 1960s American counterculture. There he found a large population of young people eager to embrace the ecstatic pursuit of individual bliss through singing and dancing to kirtan. Websites such as YouTube and the Vaishnava spin-off KrishnaTube feature an abundance of archival footage of blissed-out hippies in San Francisco linking hands and dancing circles around an almost severe-looking Srila Prabhupada. Los Angeles was in fact the third temple established by Prabhupada, and while New Dwaraka may not have been the first West coast foothold of the Krishna movement—San Francisco also boasts the first Rath Yatra in the Western hemisphere—when Srila Prabhupada did organize ISKCON in Los Angeles, he set it up to be a light to the world. Hridayananda explains: “Prabhupada at one time lived here and he developed it as a headquarters—as a leading center.” Although the official international headquarters have since been moved to Mayapur, India, Los Angeles still acts as a headquarters for ISKCON in North America.

I notice, during afternoons that I spend at the temple complex, that I am meeting a number of devotees with significant international experience who have gravitated toward Los Angeles. I also notice in my conversations with them a special sense of reverence toward Srila Prabhupada and a feeling that the temple’s history with Prabhupada makes this ISKCON community special. Nam Kirtan, a longtime Los Angeles temple resident
who acts as a sort of guide to the temple complex and community, muses that, “why a lot of people do what they do is simply to try to please their spiritual master…even though he’s not on this planet, to act in such a way that will please him.” He elaborates on the reason for the tremendous reverence toward Prabhupada: “it’s a big part of our [spiritual] process. We say that one has to go through a spiritual leader or spiritual teacher in order to understand that one is actually pleased by God.” And Prabhupada’s project to make Los Angeles a major center is still strongly felt here. There’s a notable sense of heritage in the temple complex, and the call to spread Krishna consciousness from this center is considered very carefully. As Nam says, “He gave very specific instructions of what he wanted in that regard.”

When I ask Nam how he would characterize the Los Angeles temple community in general, he replies,

These are a group of devotees who are very serious and very sincere in trying to please the order of their spiritual master and—well basically just trying to give people some solace and some happiness or, as you could say, a drink of water in the mirage of this desert material world… people would come to the temple just so frustrated and so burned out from the material world and engaging in so many types of activities that they felt that just for that moment—that hour or two hours or whatever amount of time they spent at the temple—that they actually found a place where they could feel safe and very happy and satisfied.

The Temple Complex

The powerful sense of history and the care with which devotees consider their responsibility to communicate the message of Krishna consciousness is evident just from a stroll around the block observing the set-up of the Los Angeles temple complex. Adjacent to the temple itself is Govinda’s Natural Food Buffet—Hare Krishna restaurants tend to be named Govinda’s something-or-other, Govinda being a name for Krishna that is particularly associated with his pastoral character as a cowherd. Govinda’s offers a rotating vegetarian menu, always posted online, that seems carefully considered to appeal to as many tastes as possible. The menu includes the classic ISKCON quasi-Indian combination of dahl lentil curries, subji vegetable curries, rice, and halavah, a popular dessert made from cream of wheat. It also includes entrees like lasagna and enchiladas, a salad bar, pastas, pizzas, soups, and cookies. It’s a very successful venture. Nam
estimates that the restaurant attracts between five hundred and six hundred customers every day. Many of them also patronize the store located up a short set of stairs from the restaurant. The temple gift shop sells an extensive array of Indian clothing as well as Krishna consciousness-related books and various items such as figures of the deities, hand cymbals, and incense.

Earlier I mentioned the outdoor seating area filled with tables and umbrellas in front of the restaurant. The temple and restaurant in general are set some ways back from the street, and the courtyard in front acts as a major meeting place for members of the community. The diversity of devotees present on any given day is impressive, and some are willing to share stories about their sojourns at a variety of foreign ISKCON temples. As the week before Rath Yatra progresses, the courtyard becomes a center of more and more activity; one afternoon a man sets up a microphone and harmonium near the outside corner of the temple and sings bhajan for all in the neighborhood to hear.

Between the temple and Govinda’s is a narrow courtyard lined with the same set of posters that was on display at the New York Festival of India chronicling the life of Prabhupada and his achievements. At the end of this courtyard is the entrance to the Bhagavad Gita Museum. The Gita museum is a multimedia presentation requested by Srila Prabhupada as a vehicle for disseminating the message of Krishna consciousness. It hosts a number of large clay dioramas featuring nearly-life-size figures, viewed while walking along a darkened path, that tell the story of the Bhagavad Gita, from Krishna and Arjuna overlooking the battlefield at Kurukshetra, to vivid illustrations of the principles taught in the Bhagavad Gita, and an ultimate depiction of the spiritual world. These dioramas are accompanied by recorded narration and spotlights that point out the key elements of the pictures. My favorite of the dioramas accompanies the moment in the story when Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna in his transcendental form, and numerous representations of Krishna appear, from a multi-headed, many-armed form to the vast figure of Vishnu sleeping with the universe on the lotus that extends from his body, surrounded by a host of devotees and important figures from the Hindu pantheon. Nam estimates that perhaps five or six visitors come to the Bhagavad Gita museum on weekdays, compared to the twenty or thirty guests who find their way there in conjunction with a venture to the Sunday Love Feast.
The restaurant, shop, and museum are all oriented toward making Krishna consciousness appealing and accessible, as well as serving the temple community. A smaller, less public manifestation of the community’s devotion to their history with Prabhupada is tucked away behind the restaurant. At one point Nam, finding me with my father (who drove out from Kansas City for the festival) in Govinda’s outdoor seating, asks if we’d like to see Prabhupada’s garden. He leads us down the driveway beside Govinda’s to a little fenced-off area. Inside is a very lush and peaceful, albeit small, square of profusely green garden, with a stone walkway circulating the space, a couple of benches, a clay fountain in the center of a tiny pond, and a picture of Prabhupada—a pile of flowers offered before it—sitting under a small overhang.

Nam explains that this was a place to which Prabhupada liked to retire for meditation during his stays in Los Angeles. “He actually spent more time in the Los Angeles temple than…any other place in North America,” Nam says. “He spent probably the most time in India and then outside of India would be Los Angeles.” Nam invites us to spend as long as we like in the garden, and my father and I take some time to rest, read from the Bhagavad Gita that I was given during Sunday’s feast, and drink in the stillness. If the temple complex itself seems like an island of peaceful consciousness in the midst of a heavily commercial district of Los Angeles, Prabhupada’s garden is doubly so—it is quiet, it is green, and it stands as one more carefully maintained link to the man whose character is so important to the self-identification of the people who frequent this temple.

Next door to the restaurant and gift shop is a house with a lawn where I see young children playing and a sign out front announcing the “Bhakti House.” The Bhakti House hosts a variety of different programs weekly such as small Bhagavad Gita study classes. Across the street is the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, where the works of Srila Prabhupada and other scriptural texts are printed. Publishing is a crucial operation in a movement that places so much emphasis on scriptural scholarship and in which the devotees are known for distributing books in public places as much as the public singing of kirtan. Nam even attributes the amount of time that Prabhupada spent in Los Angeles to the presence of the publishing house: it was “very important to him because it was his
translations from Sanskrit to English so the English-speaking world could understand the philosophical teachings of Bhagavad Gita [and the] Srimad Bhagavatam.”

Across the street from the temple is an apartment complex; three arches lead into courtyards between its several buildings and a large banner proclaiming the Maha Mantra hangs over the entryway to the courtyard closest to the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. The apartment complex is apparently heavily populated by Hare Krishna devotees who prefer to live near the temple. Nam estimates that of the 500-600 devotees who live in the Los Angeles area and attend the temple regularly, 200-300 of them live in that complex. As he explains, “we have a diverse mix of people because it’s an international society, so people [come] from all different parts of the world…especially within Los Angeles. Because Los Angeles itself is very heavily Latino populated, there’s a lot of Latino devotees there. But I met devotees from Croatia and Russia and all different parts of Europe and India”

The whole complex is evidence of a broad and multi-dimensional offering to the community. As Nam describes it,

We have a wide gambit of all kinds of things. There’s music, there’s food, there’s clothing, there’s philosophy. In general we’re just trying to [appeal] to people’s inclinations. Some people are very intellectual so they’ll be more into the philosophy. More people [are] into the music…it doesn’t really matter what you’re into or what you’re doing, it’s that whatever you do, just try to use it in God’s service. So if one is just into working on cars, well that’s great too—help build a cart for Rath Yatra. We just try to attract what propensity they have, to help them spiritualize that so they can become God conscious.

As we continue chatting about the temple complex, the restaurant, and the Sunday Love Feast I bring up the appeal of Eastern philosophy and Nam smiles “We get a lot of people [for that] but it’s interesting, we get a lot of people who just come for the feast.” We laugh. “The thing with us is, we’re okay with that too. You come to whatever you want to come to. We try to provide the full spectrum of what attracts a person to understand God a little better. Now,” he hurries to add, “we definitely try to emphasize you’ll get a lot more out of it if you come to more than just the feast. But if that’s where you’re at then that’s where you’re at”
**Singing, Study, and Worship in the Temple Room**

In Los Angeles I was able to observe kirtan, darshan, arati, and Bhagavad Gita class as part of day-to-day practice. My visits to the temple were yet one more opportunity to find out just how integral music is to Hare Krishna worship. “The first program is at 4:30 in the morning,” Nam explains. “From 4:30 to 5:30 you have your program. And then from 5:30 to basically 7:00 [in the evening] you have mantra meditation [where you] chant the names of God. And then from 7:00 to 8:15 you have another kirtan. And then you have class. Just within that [time frame] 4:30 to practically 8:15 is just, like, *all kirtan.*”

My own experience verifies that this is the case. One afternoon, for example, I wander into the temple room in the late afternoon and find that although the altar area is closed, a small knot of devotees is gathered in the center of the temple room, sitting on mats and singing kirtan. When I ask one of the women circulating the room if it is okay for me to film the music as well as the arati that will be happening soon, I am struck by her response—rather than nodding a mere assent, she whispers, “we would be honored.” Initially an American woman in traditional dress acts as kirtaniya, playing the harmonium and singing into a low microphone on a stand, using very familiar kirtan melodies and rocking back and forth with the emotional intensity of her performance; she is accompanied by several young men playing mridangas and hand cymbals. At various times people wander into the room, pulling mats over from piles beneath benches that are built around marble pillars at the back, and sitting around the kirtan group, some pulling out hand cymbals to play, some clapping softly and singing, and some crowding in close to the kirtan group but really only sitting to listen with expressions of quiet contemplation.

After ten minutes or so the woman draws kirtan to a close, and very quickly there is shuffling, shifting around as those in the circle take new places, pass around new instruments, and a young Indian man in jeans and a t-shirt takes the spot in front of the harmonium and microphone stand. He launches into a very beautiful kirtan utilizing a combination of melodies that grow into each other organically and a vocal style that is highly ornamented, idiosyncratic, and emotionally expressive. In chatting with him later I find out that he was born to a family of professional musicians in India, and although he leads many kirtans in different circumstances that demand different musical approaches,
he likes to take advantage of smaller moments like this one to really open up his heart
and express himself using the musical materials he has brought from his homeland.

At some point more people begin to fill the room and two priests open the altar
area for an evening arati. In discussing practices at the Brooklyn temple, I mentioned
that there were elements of the arati that are practiced at some temples but not
everywhere, which give every temple a slightly unique flavor. One fairly common but
not universal element of arati is a moment when devotees line up and approach the altar.
There the priest places a silver crown imprinted with feet representing the feet of God
over each person’s head momentarily before moving on. Much like receiving the red dot
or tika, receiving the crown with the Lord’s feet on top of the head is symbolic of bowing
before or subjecting oneself before the will of God.

In Los Angeles, as each devotee steps to the side after being crowned, he or she is
handed a cookie. Sharing consecrated foods is an important element of worship, and I
immediately recognize the cookie distribution as a sort of prasadam. But it seems, after
observing a handful of aratis over the course of the week, that it is also a way of
emphasizing the good-natured, generous dimension of devotion. In the back of the
temple or outside the doors at various times, devotees who I have never met approach and
offer things that they have made and brought to share, like paper cups full of rice pudding,
small sweets, and short flower garlands. Nam explains that “a big part of the practice of
Krishna consciousness is giving things to people, usually in the form of food and flowers
because these are actually all the things we offer to God. And in the process, once it’s
offered to God, it becomes spiritualized so we call it prasad. So we try to give prasad to
everyone because even when somebody partakes in that very simple small thing they
make spiritual advancement.” At the same time, such small gifts are part of an effort “to
ultimately understand that we’re all parts and parcels of God. God is our father so we’re
all ultimately related in the spiritual sense, and so this is what we do for our brothers or
sisters…in [the] spiritual sense ultimately everyone’s related, so we want to make
everyone feel welcome, let everyone feel special.”

Hare Krishna devotees place great emphasis on studying spiritual texts, especially
the Bhagavad Gita, as part of living a consecrated life. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna
enumerates three different types of yoga: karma yoga, or the yoga of right behavior;
jnana yoga, or the yoga of wisdom; and bhakti yoga, the yoga of love and devotion. Although ISKCON devotees place the greatest emphasis on bhakti yoga, the other yogas are still evident in their practices: karma yoga through living regulative principles such as vegetarianism, and jnana yoga through the diligent study of scripture. Bhagavad Gita classes are thus an important element of any Hare Krishna community, and on one evening I visit a class taught by Arcita, who also taught the lesson at the Sunday feast. The way that Arcita leads the class is similar to practices I have seen elsewhere, a method of teaching that both emphasizes the veneration given to the words of scripture themselves as they are believed to be spoken by deity, and the musical nature of those words, given the fact that the name “Bhagavad Gita” literally means, “song of God.”

There are only a few people in the temple room for Gita class on this particular night, which is amenable to a particular way of teaching Gita verses. In Bhagavad Gita: As It Is, each verse is presented in its original Sanskrit, followed by a list of translations for individual vocabulary words, then an English translation of the verse, followed by anywhere from a sentence or two to several pages of purport, or commentary by Srila Prabhupada. This class, like most, focuses on a single verse. It is sung to a simple melody commonly used in such lessons, transcribed in Figure 17.

![Figure 17: Bhagavad Gita Recitation Melody](image)

Arcita starts by singing the chosen verse to this melody, after which the small class sings the verse. A few of the devotees, as they choose, take turns singing the verse. The class then goes through the word by word translations as a non-musical but nevertheless call-and-response recitation: Arcita would read, to use Bhagavad Gita 2:13 as an example, “dehinah, of the embodied” and the class would repeat “dehinah, of the embodied,” then “asmin, in this” answered by “asmin, in this”, and so on through the verse. After going over the vocabulary, Arcita reads the English translation, and continues to quote from and expound on the purport for a half hour or so. This teaching method is notable for both the veneration of the holy word, to the point of giving great care to a verbal performance of what looked to me, upon first glance, like nothing more than a glossary. It is also an indication of just how integrally music factors into worship in practices based on Vedic culture.
I have noted the deeply-felt historical connection to Srila Prabhupada, and I noticed among people with whom I spoke at the temple a deep reverence for the traditions of Vaishnava worship as well as for the venerable traditions of kirtan singing. One devotee requests that I not record our conversation but nevertheless spends a significant amount of time talking through the Hare Krishna musical tradition with me, emphasizing the basis of ISKCON’s standard “traditional” kirtan style in Bengali padavali kirtan, and talking through rhythmic patterns, dance traditions, scriptural origins, and historical patterns of worship. I walk away from a single conversation with a tremendous amount of information on Indian devotional music. I also walk away with a sense of how deeply the personality of Srila Prabhupada is imprinted on the practice of kirtan—how many of the regularly performed songs are those which Prabhupada particularly loved, or how much his preferences shaped the assumed ways that kirtan is sung and performed today. According to Nam, Srila Prabhupada encouraged expert musicianship, but taught that “it goes beyond just being a good musician [but] has to do with having the actual right conscience within the heart—really praising God.” He explains that some of their kirtaniyas are “not necessarily professionally trained or even very good musicians, but they may be very sincere in what they do and that’s really the main emphasis.” At the same time, “the secondary [priority] is actually being a good musician… because who’s going to listen if you’re not really good at what you do, and we want people to hear the names of God. But more important is the sincerity of the heart in calling out for God.”

Chanting in the Streets

Srila Prabhupada’s personality has clearly shaped much of what goes on among devotees in the temple complex, but his ultimate intention was for the Los Angeles Hare Krishna community to be a light to the world. While the temple complex offers an array of services to those who come to visit, the negotiation of ISKCON’s identity and place within the cultural milieu of Los Angeles is largely played out in what happens when devotees leave the temple and take their practices into the city.

Los Angeles, like New York, is a city in which Hare Krishna devotees feel a strong imperative to influence their surroundings through kirtan and, by extension,
through Krishna consciousness. Since the world at large looks to these cities for cultural influence, Krishna devotees place a high priority on influencing them. Like New York, Los Angeles is a city closely identified with performance and with the theatrical, although in the case of Los Angeles, it is the cinematic world and the personalities of Hollywood cinema rather than the live theater of Broadway that dominates the city’s public imaginary, at least for tourists. This fact enters into the proselytizing efforts of Hare Krishna devotees. Bhanabatta, who was introduced in Chapter One, describes going out to play kirtans near the Hollywood Walk of Fame and reflects that “people are going to Hollywood…hoping to get to see one of their stars…so they have this feeling of expectation when they go up there and where we chant out there on the sidewalk, it’s right where all of the Hollywood stars are. There [are] many people who take on the costumes of different characters and get their photos taken with [tourists]. And so we chant right there and…we get big crowds [who] come up and watch us. I think a certain percentage of those people actually think this is orchestrated, that we’re all part of the whole Hollywood experience, and it becomes really exciting for them.”

As it turns out, the practice of taking kirtan into the streets, known as harinam, is one of the most important elements of Hare Krishna devotionalism. Every week groups of devotees will invite anyone who’s interested to go out and chant. Just as New York devotees to make use of iconic locales and tourist magnets like Fifth Avenue and Times Square, Los Angeles devotees use the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the Santa Monica Boardwalk, and Venice Beach.

The harinam has great historical significance for ISKCON. According to Nam, “in the beginning days of the Hare Krishna movement when we didn’t really have anything, the one thing that we did do a lot of was called the harinam…in those days in the ‘60s and ‘70s you would find times when people go out and do harinam for ten, twelve, thirteen hours a day without stop.” Bhanabhatta was among those early devotees, and he links the practice to the intentions of Srila Prabhupada:

Our movement is very much a preaching movement. Our spiritual master came from India at a very advanced age to bring the message of yoga and of chanting God’s name in kirtan to the West. And so he instilled that same kind of spirit in us…from the very early days when I joined the movement, we would go out every day on kirtan and spend six or eight hours out on the street playing drums or playing [hand cymbals].
It is hard to overestimate the importance of harinam in making the Krishna movement a recognizable part of the American landscape. As Nam puts it, “we actually founded our movement on kirtan.”

In describing the harinam experience, both Nam and Banabhatta frame their memories in terms of positive responses; neither recalls any very serious hostility encountered while performing the harinam around Los Angeles. Instead, they describe a variety of reactions, from those who are baffled to those who find it funny to those who are genuinely excited. In particular, children tend to respond strongly to the harinam. Banabhatta describes children standing entranced or dancing along for a half hour at a time; Nam remembers children swinging back and forth on their parents’ arms and insisting on staying long after the parents want to be on their way. Banabhatta describes tourists from other parts of the world who are entranced, genuinely moved by the joy that singing devotees project:

We get people from Saudi Arabia and [such places] on vacation. They get really struck with what we’re doing; they’ll stand there and watch it for half an hour [and] be really impressed by how much devotion is in it. We get really into it when we chant, it becomes a very joyous thing because to simply chant some song continually, to feel very joyful for hours and hours on end is a pretty rare situation. It is a deeply moving spiritual experience we experience every time we go out.

Nam elaborates:

The kirtan itself is actually invoking the names of God...one of the reasons why we invoke the names of God is because we’re parts and parcels of God. This is how we come in contact with God. No matter what religion someone is from, what philosophy they practice, ultimately people may not know why intellectually, but there’s something that strikes them about the kirtan or the harinam. It actually brings them joy to the heart.

The Venice Beach Harinam

On the day before Rath Yatra I have the opportunity to accompany a walking kirtan performed a group of devotees on Venice Beach. Given the relaxed pace and atmosphere of this walking kirtan in comparison to the larger Rath Yatra, this harinam provides an opportunity to observe in detail some of the ways that Hare Krishna kirtan interacts with the distinctive Venice Beach milieu.
On Saturday, July 30 at 2:30, a chartered bus pulls up in front of the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, and over the course of about twenty minutes, about two dozen gather on the bus, some carrying mridangas and other percussion instruments, most dressed in clothing marked for distinction as being related to ISKCON. Those on the bus are clearly familiar and friendly with each other, and socialize happily. My father and I take our seats on the bus, and although we are clearly not part of the Krishna community, nobody acts as if our presence is at all out of place, and a handful of people talk to us in a very friendly fashion. On the way over a dignified looking Indian gentleman in his 50s talks to me about my project, and tells me that he comes from a religious family in India. He clearly misses some of the styles of public celebration and music in India, but seems to also enjoy the Los Angeles community and culture and the way that people embrace it. He, like others that I talk to, says that Los Angelenos “love” the kirtan, and identifies the driving rhythms as the irresistible element that draws people in. The same man later introduces me to a documentary filmmaker who has recently returned from India, who freely offers insight and contact information for music collectors. Interestingly enough, I’ve noticed that devotees sometimes open up to me more, rather than less, when I tell them about my own religious background. When I tell the filmmaker that I’m a Mormon he responds enthusiastically, “Oh, Mormons love [Krishna consciousness]! To Mormons, this is pure sweetness!”

The devotees gathered on the bus are equipped with mridanga drums, hand cymbals, and other instruments, and as soon as the bus pulls out onto Venice Boulevard and starts moving toward the beach, the instruments come out and kirtan begins. The busload of devotees sings happily all the way through the ride. At one point the group runs through the series of praises that generally end a kirtan, calling out names of important gurus punctuated with cries of “Jai,” meaning “Victory!” When they include in their round of praises, “Bus driver, Jai!” and acknowledge him, I think of two things. First, that whichever bus driver, of the various employees hired by the bus company, draws the assignment to drive the Hare Krishnas, has to have a special love for his job at that moment. And second, that singing kirtan appears to be a matter of personal pleasure that can go beyond either the custom of playing music for ritual purposes or the charge to
take Krishna consciousness to the public. There is no arati on the bus, and only three non-devotees to hear the music, but the devotees sing regardless.

Upon arrival at Venice Beach the kirtan that started on the bus spills out onto the street and works its way up to the boardwalk. The harinam includes about thirty or forty people, most of whom are clapping, dancing, and singing responses. In addition to the kirtaniya, four or five drummers pound out a propulsive groove that is supplemented by the clang of metallic percussion—several sets of hand cymbals, a small hand-held gong, and an instrument constructed of two strips of wood lined with tambourine bells—while a flute player adds a layer of jaunty ornamentation.

A vanguard of about ten dancing women ranging in age from young girls to elderly women, all dressed in either colorful saris or sweeping Bohemian skirts, bursts into the open area in front of the ocean front walk with arms raised, working their way from side to side with a three-step grapevine punctuated by an enthusiastic jump. Almost immediately upon entering the beach area the dancers are attracting beachgoers to their side. As soon as the dancers emerge from the festival set-up area they are joined by a teenage girl in a ruffled skirt with bellydance-style coin scarf, shiny purple tights and pink leg warmers, who throws herself full-force into the dance.

Photograph 23: Dancing Vanguard

When the procession reaches an open space in front of the Venice Sidewalk Market, a short discussion among the drummers yields the decision to pause and the largely male group of instrumentalists circles up towards each other, while that portion of the group who are mostly walking and clapping falls into place flanking the circle of instrumentalists. One man stands behind the instrumentalists holding up a loudspeaker,
while another walks through saying “let’s get the dancers up front, let’s get the dancers up front.” Almost immediately a circle of bystanders, many with cameras, gathers to watch the show. (A similar circle forms adjacent to those watching the Hare Krishnas, this one watching a group of young men performing hip-hop dances.) A few devotees circulate through the crowd handing out pamphlets and flyers for tomorrow’s festival. After several minutes the group, following the dancers’ lead, breaks up the circle and moves forward into the narrower confines of the Oceanfront Walk. As they move forward the women are not the only ones dancing; some of the young men, including the drummers, run loose figure eights around each other as they move. A dozen or so devotees, mostly middle-aged to older men, simply walk behind the instrumentalists clapping vigorously. The harinam procession will repeat this process several times during the afternoon, forming circles in slightly more open spaces for a few moments of specially focused performance, then moving on to pass through the boardwalk.

Photograph 24: Dancing on the Boardwalk

**Venice Beach and the Carnivalesque**

Venice Beach ranks among Los Angeles’ most popular tourist destinations and sites for social gathering and public celebration; it is also a place that seems devoted to the celebration of the weird, the wild, and the uninhibitedly individualistic. When I asked devotees to explain what makes this Rath Yatra of all Rath Yatras distinctive, I was amused by the number of times that they would simply wave an arm to take in the whole surroundings and stammer something along the lines of, “it’s just—all of *this.*” The area has a certain reputation, capitalized upon by a Venice Beach travel website which
announces right on its home page, “Compared to other beach towns, Venice is one of the most culturally diverse and eccentric communities by the sea. Residents are accepting of everyone’s individual lifestyle choices and forms of expression and seem to follow a ‘Do What You Want, Just Don’t Invade My Space’ mantra.” Other sites promoting the area proclaim that “Venice, California continues to be known worldwide as a counter-culture enclave” (Venice Beach Walking Tours, 2012)—a trait that makes Venice a fitting venue for the efforts of Hare Krishnas who have historically appealed to a countercultural impulse among American youth by offering, according to J. Stillson Judah, a “continuation of [their] accepted countercultural values now arranged in a more meaningful context” (Stillson 1984:11). In all, the ambience of Venice Beach is strikingly carnivalesque, and the Hare Krishna harinam plays into this.

One side of the Oceanfront Walk is lined with permanent stores, the other with tents and booths. The harinam passes t-shirt and sunglasses shops, fruit stands, pizza and Italian ice vendors, tattoo and piercing parlors, freak shows, sidewalk cafes, arts and handicap booths, and head shops. Vendors offer henna tattoos, Bob Marley merchandise, handmade jewelry, caricatures, Day of the Dead skulls, and even paintings and statues of the various members of the Hindu pantheon. The shopping area is oriented toward displaying an availability—even abundance—of pleasure, fashion, and a certain eclectic lifestyle.

The Hare Krishnas are not by any means the only performers on the beach, and this is part of what helps them fit in to this atmosphere of the carnivalesque. At various times they will pass—and their rhythms will mingle with—a drumline with dancers and a group performing on congas. One street musician on the boardwalk, a middle-aged man with an amplified guitar, incorporates “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” into his performance as the group goes by.

The crowd that the walking kirtan navigates is characterized by a high percentage of people in very individualistic fashions, some who carry signs meant to draw attention to themselves—the man with the sign soliciting donations for his penis reduction surgery, for example, is particularly inclined to groove along with the Hare Krishnas movement as the harinam passes by. A few people have actually come to the beach in costume. Given
the intent for kirtan to diminish demonic influences in the world, my favorite is the man in the devil costume who rather brusquely hurries through the kirtan.

Photograph 25: In Costume on Venice Beach

I also enjoy the man wearing a pot (as in the vessel for flowers) decorated with pot (as in marijuana leaves) on his head who claps and walks along grooving with the kirtan for a few moments. Marijuana leaf imagery, the number “420,” and clinics advertising medical marijuana licenses are visually prominent throughout the scene—an interesting juxtaposition to the dancing and singing of devotees who eschew all intoxicants yet participate in a form of devotional music that Edward O. Henry describes as the “primary religious activity” of Hinduism specifically because the music can act as “a trigger to special states of consciousness” (Henry 2002:50). The entire Venice Beach scene projects some distinct ideals: uninhibited individualism, spontaneity and personal freedom, and the pursuit of pleasure.

**Gestures of Invitation, Modes of Engagement**

In this carnivalesque mix of spontaneous self-expression and the pursuit of freedom and enjoyment, the Hare Krishnas offer their own take on achieving happiness and liberation. Earlier chapters have referred to actions such as dancing, jumping, and raising the arms in the air on the part of kirtan participants as “gestures of ecstasy; “gestures of invitation” is a useful term to add when discussing a harinam. The very
ecstatic nature of the kirtan and the animated expressions worn by most of the participants indicate a state of mind that may be desirable to many people on the beach. Some devotees pass out pamphlets or engage onlookers in conversation—one girl even hands me a flyer twice, before realizing that I’ve been with the group the whole time. But these are invitations to learn more later, while the drummers and dancers have the task of inviting people to actually become involved in the moment. And as at that initial moment of entering the boardwalk, the dancers act as a sort of vanguard. Some gestures of invitation are recognizable as many devotees dance with arms opened in sweeping circular motions that look, at times, as if they are gesturing people into the kirtan. Some gestures of invitation are fairly direct. At one point a dancer wraps her arm around the waist of a woman who has stepped into the circle and leads her in the side-to-side grapevine; that woman stays and dances with the harinam for some time. Although most of the dancers are women, a couple of young men stand halfway between the dancers and instrumentalists, rhythmically clapping with the kind of wide gestures and exaggerated facial expressions that I recognize from having been a supporting performer at drumming performances and being given the task to clap until the audience joins in.

The driving rhythm of kirtan itself can act as an element of invitation. The Indian gentleman with whom I spoke on the bus told me emphatically that what draws beachgoers to participate in kirtan is its rhythm—the complex groove created by the layered improvisations of several drummers and percussionists playing together. If devotional music has the potential to act as a “trigger to special states of consciousness” (Henry 2002:50) it may have something to do with the connection between musical rhythm, the perception of time, and states of consciousness that may be perceived as spiritual, as John Blacking suggests in his landmark book How Musical is Man? According to Blacking, “a world of virtual time” facilitates experiences in which “people become keenly aware of the true nature of their being,” and experience “freedom from the restrictions of actual time and complete absorption in the ‘Timeless Now of the Divine Spirit.’” Through musical participation “we often experience greater intensity of living when our normal time values are upset…the virtual time of music may help to generate such experiences” (Blacking 1973:52). Blacking continues, “There is excitement in rhythm and in the progression of organized sound…the motion of music
alone seems to awaken in our bodies all kinds of responses” (Blacking 1973:52). A few beachgoers offer instinctive bows and raise their hands to Namaste as the harinam goes by, but many more exhibit bodily responses to a rhythmic groove, to a “virtual time” that they cannot seem to ignore.

I will use the phrase “modes of engagement” to describe different levels of interaction among beachgoers who encounter the visually and aurally attention-grabbing phenomenon of kirtan. At least four distinct levels of engagement among participants can be identified. First there are those who simply choose not to engage at all. Many people on the beach are entirely impassive; some simply pass through the kirtan while giving little to no acknowledgement that they have seen or heard it at all. At a second level, many beachgoers respond to the kirtan but are essentially passive observers: they form circles to watch, they pull out cameras, they accept offered literature, they flash thumbs up and peace signs and other gestures, but for the most part they make no effort to actually participate.

A third level of engagement involves those who allow the passing kirtan to temporarily alter what they are already doing. The man on the soap box with the sign regarding his penis surgery, for example, temporarily lowers his arms and crouches down to do the twist in time with the drums as the harinam passes by. A person who is overtly “performing” on the beach (some exaggerated personal characteristic if not a specific character) could be said to “break character” by grooving along briefly with the Hare Krishnas. It is possible to read such gestures from non-performing beach goers as similarly breaking character with the socially acceptable “normal” behavior of a person walking from point A to point B. Many people on the beach temporarily “break character” in whatever they are doing to briefly respond to the kirtan using a couple of distinct gestures. First there is the temporary groove: some kind of short rhythmic dance gesture, be that a shoulder shimmy, a crouching twist, or a side to side wave that lasts roughly as long as it takes for the Hare Krishnas to pass by. Second is the rhythmic walk-through: many passersby, while walking past or through the kirtan, temporarily break into some sort of rhythmic dance step for the duration of the time that they are passing through, before walking normally out the other side. Some other characters on the beach, such as the singer/songwriter who incorporated the Hare Krishna maha mantra into his
song, might fit into this category. It would be impossible to attach a number or percentage to how many people on the boardwalk take to any given one of these modes of participation, but it is safe to say that a substantial portion of the day’s beach population finds the driving mridanga groove impossible to ignore, and allows the kirtan to temporarily alter their behavior.

A fourth level of engagement involves those who actually step into the realm of the kirtan to participate, however temporarily. There are fewer of them, but a fair number of beachgoers do embrace the opportunity to become part of the dance, if only for a short time. The girl in the bright outfit who joined the dancers when they initially emerged on the beach is an example of someone who immediately takes the presence of the harinam as an excuse to dance in public with abandon. Moments later a man in a wheelchair raises his arms and throws his entire upper body into dancing and singing along for as long as the kirtan is near him. Some of the pauses in forward motion lead to the formation of circles where the dancers move back and forth in a tightening and expanding formation, and inevitably a few passing shoppers end up in these circles. A few women, in particular, join the dancers and remain with the group for an extended period of time while moving down the boardwalk. Some shoppers join in the dancing while making humorous faces to their camera-wielding friends that indicate self-consciousness and perhaps a bit of mocking humor—and yet they choose to take part.

It is always interesting to observe the beachgoers who cannot seem to stay away from the harinam. For example, a thirty-something woman wielding a shopping bag in one hand and the Rath Yatra flyer she’s just been handed in the other, spends a few minutes in the circle of women as they dance in and out of a center point. Several times she moves out from the group and looks like this time she’s going to keep walking and go on her way, but then she turns and goes back to the circle again. This goes on for several minutes. One young man in sagging jeans and a trilby hat stands in the middle of the circle with his arms thrown out, then walks away. Within moments he is back, making angular gestures and mock-ballerina turns and calling out “Hare Hare” in a nasal voice, but when he walks away he is not gone for long. Over the course of several minutes he leaves and comes back at least five times, virtually running back to the circle at some moments. A little while later a man sporting tattoos and a pseudo-Harley Davidson t-
shirt similarly comes back and forth to the circle of drummers and singers several times. By the third time he returns to the group he is inserting himself tightly into the circle of men, engaging in back-and-forth exchanges of matched gestures with devotees, raising his hands to Namaste, and bowing instinctively to the drummers.

![Photograph 26: Dancing with the Harinam](image)

No one on the beach seems either particularly surprised or particularly bothered by the presence of the harinam, but a fair number of people seem to actively enjoy themselves. Nam remarks, “It’s another addition to the mirage of different things that are going on [at Venice Beach]. It’s like a circus of all kinds of activities. So I think [the harinam] just adds on to it, just makes it more festive, adds more of a spiritual element to it.” For most beachgoers the harinam will be fairly unusual, and it provides an opportunity to explore the liberating power of dance. Meena Khandelwal describes the essentially emotional nature of bhakti yoga as being characterized by “an intensely personal attitude toward devotion…[in] its spirit, which should be playful, random, and expressive” (Khandelwal 2004:75-76). The behavior of the Hare Krishnas, dancing and engaging in the uninhibited gestures of ecstasy associated with kirtan, is certainly outside the sphere of normative public behavior. There is something transgressive in their unrestrained expression of bliss, and taking the kirtan into public is unquestionably an invitation for others to participate. In the context of everyday American society, what the Hare Krishnas do is unquestionably different, and it is spontaneous, freeing, and very pleasurable to those who choose to take part.
Rath Yatra

This harinam the day before Rath Yatra simply serves as the last act of a blitz of publicity that precedes the big festival. A few months in advance, flyers start going out all over Los Angeles and devotees pass out information and promote the festival to customers at the restaurant. The mention of Rath Yatra, which has been running in Los Angeles since 1977, recalls fond memories for some restaurant goers—Nam laughs about people who remember back into the 70s and early 80s when devotees used to take an elephant down the street as part of the parade and subsequently offer elephant rides on the beach. Even though it has been decades since civic ordinances shut down the elephant rides, people apparently still come to the restaurant asking, “Are you going to have the elephant? Are you going to have the elephant?” It’s not surprising to hear from devotees who anticipate the festival eagerly, but even among non-devotee and essentially non-religious Los Angelenos, according to Nam “a lot of people actually wait all year long for that festival.”

As for devotees, “Generally speaking everyone I know usually comes for New York and Los Angeles,” Nam says. According to Lakshmina, “I’ve really had quite a bit of exposure to both the New York and Los Angeles and the Rath Yatras are what makes LA LA and what makes New York New York.” He describes the two parades in terms of “the whole California experience as opposed to the New York experience…LA is along the beach, everybody’s hair is blowing in the ocean breeze, and there’s lots of sunshine…and you’ve got your LA characters there set up on the side of the boardwalk. And you just have this whole California experience….as opposed to the urban environment [and] the grandeur of Fifth Avenue.” In some ways Rath Yatras in New York City and in Los Angeles are very similar: the basic set-up of the carts and kirtan groups is the same, and both parades take the festival and accompanying temple practices through a particularly influential spot in an influential city. Both celebrations are marked by the overwhelming enthusiasm of the devotees who take part, and both celebrations end in a prominent public location where a festival offering displays, booths, and cultural performances continues throughout the day. However, the two parades have a slightly different flavor, and the contrast between Rath Yatras has much to do with the characters of the two cities involved.
The Parade through Santa Monica

The Los Angeles Rath Yatra processes from the Santa Monica Civic Center through town to the beach, then passes down the Oceanfront Walk on Venice Beach. At one point the parade used to go down the Santa Monica Boardwalk; later it passed from the Santa Monica boardwalk all the way down to Venice Beach, but eventually the route changed to pass through the city. It was a decision that apparently disappointed some who were accustomed to the kinds of reactions they got on the crowded beaches, but according to Nam, “we found it was actually even better because we got to reach more people. More people got to see it and experience it, and a lot of people appreciated it and loved it.” Certainly passing through the city opens up the possibility of reaching local residents who may not get to take the day off at the beach, but who live, work, and shop in the city proper.

Large groups are gathered in front of the three carts at the civic center on Sunday morning, July 31, 2011. The Rath Yatra carts here are similar to those used in the New York parade, particularly in the brightly colored arch-shaped canopies that cover the cart beds and the deities inside; these canopies are a distinctive visual marker of Rath Yatra parades as they are performed all over the world. However, the carts used in Los Angeles are wider and so elaborately decorated on both top and bottom levels that the carts almost look like little two-story buildings driving down the street. A number of devotees ride on the carts; their job is to attend to the comfort of the deities, attending to the ritual offerings that are made to the altar deities at certain times of day. Apparently, according to Nam, who rode beside the Prabhupada sculpture on the lower level of Subhadra’s cart, they are also “just protecting the cart from people trying to get on.”
Many of the decorations are similar to those on the carts I saw in New York: there are plants, flower garlands, and balloons. The image of Jagannath and his divine siblings is replicated everywhere; on the sides of the cart, for example, cut-out images of the deities in either cardboard or plywood fill up the space of the lower level; the back of the cart between the arched canopy and the bed is draped with tapestries printed with Jagannath’s face; and in addition to all of this, a small face of Jagannath hangs from the back of the cart much the way that a car might display fuzzy dice in the rear window.

Approximately the first hour of the two-hour parade passes through the streets between the civic center and Venice Beach before turning onto the Oceanfront Walk and passing through the well-populated shopping area. Although the set-up of the parade, the elements of temple worship modified for a processional setting, the diverse group of participants engaging in common gestures of ecstasy, and the music are similar to the Manhattan event, there are some things that give the procession through Santa Monica a different feeling than the Fifth Avenue parade. For example, Manhattan was distinguished by a sense of containment—of ecstatic gestures filling up and pushing against the walls of a limited space. Santa Monica is less densely packed and the buildings are both shorter and more loosely spaced from each other, diffusing the sense of Rath Yatra as an intensified river of color and sound rushing through the canyon-like spaces between skyscrapers. The streets of Santa Monica are decidedly uncrowded, and
here the Hare Krishnas have the whole street in which to spread out, rather than being
contained to a single side of the street as on Fifth Avenue.

The socially-enforced structures of containment are also different in Los Angeles.
Where the New York parade was escorted from beginning to end by a tight wedge of
New York Police Department motorcycles, the Los Angeles police department presence
exists but it is minimal. A couple of police cars and motorcycles mark the beginning of
the parade, and a handful of policemen who appear relatively relaxed are stationed with
cruisers at points where the parade turns corners, marking out the route. Several
policemen either walk or ride bicycles behind the third cart, and twenty yards or so
behind that, in an almost comical contrast to the impassive and impressive NYPD, a lone
three-wheeled police cart holds the rear guard.

At the same time, there are other sources of social containment that exist as part
of the Los Angeles Rath Yatra, which, as far as I was able to determine, were either not
present or not as obvious in Manhattan. Sunday morning on the streets of Santa Monica
there are Christian protesters preceding the parade by some distance. They walk up near
the police escort, some forty or fifty yards in front of the main body of Hare Krishna
devotees, carrying signs printed with slogans ranging from basic statements of Christian
doctrine like “Jesus Said I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” to more confrontational
messages like “God Hates Sin” and “Trust Jesus or End in Hell!” This particular
encounter, involving people willing to come out in deliberate confrontation with signs to
state their opposition, is the most potentially contentious of the negotiations of social
identity present in this particular cultural performance. Although the hostility may
become more overt later, during the early phases of the parade the protesters’ behavior is
fairly muted; they are carrying their signs but calling out no slogans, and as far as I am
able to determine they do not actually turn around and engage with the Hare Krishnas
during the parade. They simply precede the parade with their written warnings, and some
of the Krishna devotees are prepared for them, in their own very easy-going way. One
devotee carries a sign declaring, through words and pictures, “Unconditional free food for
the Bible crew,” while another carries a sign giving both the scriptural reference and the
text to Luke 6:29-31, “turn the other cheek.” Hare Krishnas are not, as a group,
unfamiliar with the Bible and they often quote the New Testament in particular to support
their positions; in this case a Krishna devotee takes the opportunity to turn Christian scripture against Christian protesters. Those carrying these signs are a distinct minority, however; for the most part the Krishna devotees participate in their own parade without any noticeable reaction to the opposition preceding them.

Photographs 28 & 29: Christian Protesters and Devotees Carrying Signs in Response

This said, I spend more time focused on the devotees than the protesters, and apparently other observers are more struck by the Christian opposition. A blogger writing for the travel website Westlandtraveler.com inserts a short paragraph into an otherwise glowing advertisement for the parade that mentions the Christian protesters with the line, “They have been a part of the parade for as long as I can remember.” Of the thirty-one images in the photo gallery that accompanies that post, five feature the protesters (Westland Traveler). A blog maintained on the website for the band St. John and the Revelations includes this post:

I snuck through a minor clash of religions on the Venice boardwalk yesterday while the Krishna Festival of Chariots paraded their colourful floats past very upset Christian zealots. I wasn’t sure if the Krishna devotees were performing third-trimester abortions on the floats as tourists took pictures, but whatever was going on sure made the Bible-thumpers upset. Maybe they were just trying to convince Krishna to reprise his role in Avatar 2. (sjatr.com)

The first hour’s parade through Santa Monica is not only distinct in mood, character, and spatial arrangement from the New York parade, but it is also very distinct from the second hour of the parade, when the Rath Yatra will turn onto the crowded Oceanfront Walk. At that point, the parade will become a very publicly-oriented event; at this point, however, with plenty of space and very little restriction, the parade takes on
a very playful character. There are a few people out on the street watching Rath Yatra go by—the patrons at a handful of outdoor cafes watch with interest, and at any given moment a dozen or so people will be standing on a stretch of sidewalk watching the parade, many with cameras. But this is hardly the crowded event, the performance for a densely packed public space, which the parade down the boardwalk will become. For this hour, at least, it is easier to imagine the Rath Yatra as an event purely for the pleasure of the people taking part in it. If devotees offer Ratha Yatra to the boardwalk crowd hoping others will find it personally and spiritually meaningful, during this hour it is easy to observe how meaningful the experience is to them. Their pleasure is visibly apparent in the mannerisms with which they perform their worship, both in the playful gestures of ecstasy apparent as part of the procession, and in the distinct musical characters that emerge from the kirtan groups assembled in front of each of the three carts.

**Three Kirtans**

The spontaneous flexibility of the kirtan process is reflected in the fact that the group in front of each of the three carts does seem to have a different musical personality; the kirtan in front of Jagannath’s cart, for example, is very melodic, characterized by a varied progression of chanting melodies which still manages to create a sense of organic continuity; Subhadra’s cart is propelled forward by a powerful rhythmic groove; and the kirtan in front of Balaram’s cart is marked by the idiosyncratic and expressive style of the kirtaniya.

The group walking in front of Jagannath’s cart, as in New York City, is a distinctly multi-racial group with a strong South Asian contingent, if not quite as strong as in Manhattan. Again, the majority wear some distinguishing item of clothing marking them as devotees of the movement—dhotis in white, peach, or saffron; an item of Indian clothing such as a kurta or a sari; a Krishna consciousness-themed t-shirt; or a chadars scarf marked with Om symbols and Sanskrit writing. Many of the people in the parade simply adopt a Bohemian aesthetic characterized by loose, flowing, brightly-colored clothing such as a long skirt or linen pants. A hundred or more people precede the first cart as it starts out, and for the first several minutes the main activity, aside from the work of the kirtaniya and the drummers and hand cymbal players who accompany him, is
walking, pulling the cart ropes, pushing the cart, and otherwise getting the parade out onto the street. This does not mean that enthusiastic gestures of ecstasy are not evident among the rope pullers and cart pushers—a number are waving in rhythm while singing the kirtan responses loudly, or raising their one free arm.

However, several minutes into the procession the parade stalls its forward motion. At this point, the kirtaniya at the first cart exhorts the crowd, between one response and the next call, “let’s get some fancy footwork going on here,” at which point a dozen young men, most in dhotis with tilaks, form a tight oval with arms passed over each others shoulders and start a back-and-forth step-step-step-hop motion. Very quickly a group of women—this time more varied in age, from teenagers to the nearly elderly—gathers to start their own variation on the step-step-step-hop with more circular motion and more graceful jumping and turning worked into the movement. When the cart starts moving again, a handful of men almost rush in to take hold of the cart ropes and begin pulling Lord Jagannath on his way.

The kirtan in front of the first cart is marked by its melodic character, in particular the skillfully intertwined melodies that change often, maintaining both musical interest and a sense of continuity through the careful use of related or variant melodies. This interweaving of similar and variant parts gives the kirtan a sense of dynamism and momentum in spite of the fact that the tempo remains fairly constant—there is a very gradual increase from approximately 112 beats per minute to 126 BPM, but for the most part it is fairly constant. Over the course of about 15 minutes, the kirtaniya covers eight different melodies, in contrast to many that essentially cover three or four melodies in the same amount of time. For the most part, the melodies are only sung three or four times, some even once. However, the skillful interweaving of related melodic ideas gives the kirtan a sense of continually evolving organic growth.

For the first few minutes of the kirtan, the leader blends two contrasting melodies, transcribed as A and B (with related melody C) in Figure 18:
Figure 18: Melodies A, B, and C
Melody A starts with a (mostly) steady stream of eighth notes and a narrow pitch range, which is not surprising in a situation that requires continuity and forward motion through space. Melody B is a marked contrast, then, utilizing varied and asymmetrical rhythms, a wider range, and a raised register—often a sign of intensity in Indian music and a very effective way of upping the emotional ante when making a transition between melodies without necessarily altering the tempo. After two call-and-response iterations of the contrasting melodies, C then returns to the basic pitches and narrow contours of A, but continues to use the rhythmic patterns of B.

The next several minutes of the kirtan then focus on transformations of melody D, shown in Figure 19:

Figure 19: Melody D
Melody D covers an octave range and is marked by a slower surface rhythm, consisting mostly of quarter notes. However, a melody with slower surface rhythm may not be experienced as being slow so much as being expansive when paired with a wider range and a starting pitch in a higher register. After firmly establishing melody D in four iterations, melody E raises the register and with it, the intensity of the musical expression in the first phrase, but maintains continuity by transforming melody D’s first phrase into
the second phrase of melody E. Melody F then speeds up the recitation of the mantra through melody D by speeding up and flattening out the surface rhythm into steady eighth notes that double the notes of melody D, giving a sense of playfulness and rapidity while getting through the complete mantra in the time and amount of music that it previously took to get halfway through it (Figure 20).

The next six or seven minutes are then devoted to exploring the common melody. Oftentimes arrival at the common melody marks the final climax of a kirtan, but here it is a passage within a larger kirtan. The kirtaniya sings six iterations of the common melody (labeled G here)—the most given to any one melody during this portion of the singing—before singing two melodies that maintain the easily recognizable rhythm of the common melody, while offering different melodic profiles that are nevertheless layered in with returns to the common melody. Melody H maintains the common rhythm and pitch profile until a leap of a fifth gives it excitement and pizzazz, and for a single round through the mantra, melody I raises the kirtan to its highest pitch profile so far—again, a sign of intensity—before returning to the beloved common melody one last time. Figure 21 shows melodies H and I as they are layered in with returns to the common melody.
Meanwhile, behind Jagganath’s cart is a fairly open thirty yards or so where a handful of people wander in the space between the back of one cart and the gathering of devotees in front of another. The crowd in front of Subhadra’s cart is somewhat smaller, and like the group in front of the first cart, multi-ethnic, most dressed in a fashion expressing self-identification with Krishna consciousness, although knit caps, dread locks, and other fashion signifiers of a more eclectic contemporary identity accompany the dhotis and Sanskrit-printed scarves.

By far the most compelling feature of the kirtan that precedes Subhadra’s cart is its rhythm section. While all three carts are well-equipped with drummers, the kirtaniya in front of Subhadra’s cart—who is himself playing a mridanga while another devotee holds a microphone to his face—is surrounded by a tight, inwardly focused group of ten to twelve drummers, all playing mridangas with the exception of one young man playing what looks like a dumbek, as well as two or three hand cymbal players and a man with a small hand-held hanging gong.

Figure 21: Melodies G, H, and I
Their intensely rhythmic approach to kirtan seems to inspire a handful of free-spirited young men in the center of the crowd who take to sporadic dancing with broad, swinging, even loping motions executed with a sense of expansiveness quite distinct from the intense, focused vertical jumping that often accompanies a standing kirtan. At times various of the younger instrumentalists in particular, a group including drummers, a wooden flute player, and a man with a small harmonium hung around his neck, start to run loose circles, figure eights, and other spatial patterns around each other, making a special dance of the instrumentalists.

The congregation in front of Balaram’s chariot is smaller still than that at the second cart. These devotees distinguish themselves visually in that a number of them—twenty or so—carry triangular red, yellow, and blue flags mounted on roughly five foot lengths of PVC pipe. The pleasure of the dancing devotees is apparent in the style of open dancing apparent among many of the devotees—either an easy skipping motion or an open-armed step-hop.
The singing in front of Balaram’s cart also has its own distinct flavor. Perhaps as a reflection of the individualized pleasure felt by the dancing congregation, this kirtaniya brings a very personal flair to the various kirtan melodies. He sings, of course, from a pool of stock tunes, and the congregation clearly recognizes the intended melodies and responds to them, but the kirtaniya takes advantage of the crowd’s familiarity and adds some distinct sounds. Over the course of about ten or fifteen minutes walking past the three carts I hear the common melody emerging from the melodic fabric of the kirtans in front of all three carts, but the singing by the kirtaniya at the third cart is the most idiosyncratic. The melody rendered by the congregation as shown in Figure 22:

Figure 22: Common Melody as Sung in Front of Balaram’s Cart

is actually “called” by the kirtaniya as shown in Figure 23:

Figure 23: Kirtaniya Rendition of the Common Melody
The idiosyncratic rendering of the common melody at Balaram’s cart reflects the room for spontaneity and individual expression within the framework of kirtan.

**For the Devotees’ Pleasure**

As the parade passes through Santa Monica, there are a handful of people at any given time on either side of the road—perhaps a dozen or so gathered at an intersection, with several more leaned against a wall or seated at an outdoor café, but the audience to the parade at this point is not large. The devotees meanwhile are spread out over the whole road and there is no necessity yet of navigating and sharing space with the Venice boardwalk crowds. Nam spoke to the opportunity to reach more people by passing through Santa Monica, and with this route the parade takes in those who are out and about in their own city engaging in everyday activities and errands rather than spending a morning at the beach. But at this point of the parade, before there is a necessity of navigating, sharing space with, and even integrating boardwalk crowds, the Rath Yatra appears to be an event primarily oriented toward the pleasure of the devotees taking part.

One indication of the devotees’ pleasure is the occasional flash of humor on display. I’ve mentioned the extensive mythology surrounding Krishna the cowherd, which has led to stereotypes associating Indian culture with cows. I don’t know with certainty if it is meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but it brings a smile to my face to see each of the Rath Yatra carts adorned with a dozen or so cartoon-like cow balloons, a little bit of self-referential humor from the group of devotees who so thoroughly enjoyed a “great devotee’s” story about worrying the folks at the draft office. In Los Angeles, as in Manhattan, a handful of devotees walk the parade route with megaphones attempting to direct traffic in a non-intrusive way. In Manhattan I was struck by the deferent use of culturally appropriate politenesses such as “Haribol, please use the sidewalk. Hare Krishna, please go to the front of the cart.” Here, the directive to maintain forward motion before getting flattened by the cart is phrased, “Keep moving—otherwise we’re going to turn into pizzas!” The humor can be read as a marker of not only fun, but also self-awareness and the expression of individual tastes and quirks. In one of my favorite encounters of the day, a devotee in kurta, dhoti, and baseball cap walks past manipulating a Kermit the Frog puppet dressed in peach-colored priest’s robes, green felt hand raised
in ecstasy, who cries out, “All glories to Prabhupada!” Krishna Kermit even gives me a very knowing nod as we pass.

Photograph 32: Muppet Devotion

The devotees’ tendency toward unbridled expression of personal pleasure can also be recognized in terms of spatial orientation during the parade. The Los Angeles parade isn’t exactly lacking in forward momentum—at one point the man with the megaphone trots alongside a particularly enthusiastic group of cart pullers calling out, “We’re walking, not running! We’re walking, not running!” Even so, there is still a level at which the gestures of ecstasy during this part of the parade are very free form and multidirectional. Where the New York parade felt both contained and driven forward, the Los Angeles parade, at least at this juncture, seems to spill outward from its center, and devotees take advantage of the open space to express themselves.

For example, I notice at a number of points on the parade route small groups of dancers forming tight circular knots to dance around each other. At one moment it’s a trio of middle-aged South Asian men who appear to be friends, all dressed semi-formally in Indian clothing, skipping in a circle with arms raised. A couple of moments later and a few yards away, it is a quartet of men who have improvised a well-coordinated sidestep in a counter-clockwise circle, every fourth beat accented by a lean into the circle and a rolling hand motion that gestures inward on count one and outward on count three. It is notable that sometimes these knots of dancers join seemingly unlike groups of people: this quartet appears to be South Asian, East Asian, and Native American; they appear to
range in age from early 20’s to mid-50’s; two are in white dhotis, one is in dress slacks and a plaid shirt, and one sports a black tank top, jeans, and beaded jewelry.

Darshan is an important element of the Los Angeles Rath Yatra, not only while standing in front of the carts before the parade starts moving, but also while the procession is in motion. I am struck by the number of times parade participants turn their orientation entirely backward to gaze on the deities during the parade. Sometimes it is a matter of the parade having slowed or come to a temporary halt, but in other cases, while the parade moves forward, devotees turn and orient themselves toward the cart anyway, temporarily walking, dancing, or even running the parade route backward. At moments when the parade is at a halt it seems natural for the devotees turn inward, and for many of them the moment of darshan comes at a moment of calmed energy. At other times, as the parade continues moving, it appears to be an entirely spontaneous gesture that nevertheless involves a number of devotees as many, but not all, participants instinctively turn around and orient themselves toward the cart, moving toward the deities.

Onto the Boardwalk

After approximately an hour passing through Santa Monica, the parade turns onto the Oceanfront Walk on Venice Beach. Not surprisingly, the Rath Yatra takes on a different character when it turns onto the more crowded Oceanfront Walk—and when it enters the carnivalesque milieu of Venice Beach. I described the previous day’s harinam as a performance that passed through the milieu of the Oceanfront Walk; the Rath Yatra, by contrast, seems to encompass it by virtue of its sheer size. This time shoppers and beachgoers have to navigate their way through the kirtan, rather than the other way around.

The reactions of many on the beach, however, lend credence to Banabhatta’s and Nam’s statements that visitors seem to see the Hare Krishnas as part of the Venice experience, another element of this theater of the carnivalesque. Almost immediately as the parade turns onto Oceanfront Walk, a teenager sitting against the wall launches into enthusiastic air guitar to the rhythm of the kirtan. While the accumulating onlookers during the parade through the city had their share of cameras out, here there’s an almost continuous line-up of tourists with cameras and broad grins; as we pass I overhear
comments like, “No way—it’s the Hare Krishnas!” At one point the parade passes a hotel and semi-clad people sporting bedhead and boxers stand at the windows taking pictures. Diners eating at an outdoor café stand on chairs and wave their arms as if at a rock concert. Others step out into the kirtan with their small children, showing their little ones how to dance to a good mridanga beat. In a particularly telling moment, two men wrap arms around each other and pose for a woman who takes their picture with Subhadra’s cart in the background, a variation on the classic tourist photograph posed in front of a famous attraction, although this time the attraction is a moving cart and a group of dancing people.

Although sometimes the procession does move fluidly through the boardwalk, there comes a point when the walk becomes more crowded, the forward motion starts to slow, and the crowd becomes very dense. Finally the parade grinds to a near halt, and as it does so, the music begins to resemble a standing kirtan in a temple room, where the music builds to a peak of intensity. During this latter part of the parade, at least in front of Subhadra’s cart, the microphone gets passed to more kirtaniyas for shorter periods of time. One kirtaniya begins by deploying a slow kirtan melody which features long held notes, a very slow surface rhythm, and even, in its first iteration, a lack of forward motion from the drummers, transcribed in Figure 24 as Melody A:

![Figure 24: Melody A](image)

Figure 24: Melody A

The gestures of ecstasy on the part of the answering devotees likewise mimic the performance of this melody I that have seen in temple rooms: devotees raise their arms when they enter with their vocal responses; the drummers make a definitive entrance on the second iteration of the melody, and dancers begin jumping in imitation of the drummers’ rhythm (Figure 25):
The kirtaniya tightens the music into something with more forward drive by introducing a melody with a narrower range and more motion in the surface rhythm (Figure 26):

![Figure 26: Melody B](image)

Then she raises the intensity with a similar melody just slightly higher in register, transcribed as melody C (Figure 27):

![Figure 27: Melody C](image)

The energy of both the music and in the dancers’ gestures of ecstasy ramps up considerably with a return to the A melody, but this time the usually very slow melody is sung several times at a markedly faster tempo (from 88 BPM to 130 BPM) and then altered to change the long notes usually held over five beats to a mere dotted quarter note, as follows (Figure 28):
After a shift back to melody C, this time at 144 BPM, a final break into the common melody draws expansive gestures of ecstasy from the devotees. This kirtaniya draws to a quick close, and almost immediately another kirtaniya takes over, accompanied this time by some very complicated cross-rhythms by the drummers and an effort by the dancers to turn those cross-rhythms into vertical motion. As this is going on, I spot people who appear to be fascinated passersby pressing their way closer into the center of the tightening circle of singers.

Photograph 33: Gestures of Ecstasy on Venice Beach

The kirtan described above is relatively short, lasting about fifteen minutes, but it does offer the type of kirtan that builds in energy to an ecstatic climax, for the pleasure of the crowds on Venice Beach. Nam points out that, with all of the Festival of Chariots performances around the world, at least part of the reason for the iconic status of the Los Angeles parade is the fact that “you already have hundreds of thousands of people that are passing through there every day….so many people get to experience that and witness that,” and “this is why we do these festivals…for people that have never had an experience with what we’re doing.” Devotees acknowledge that most people who pass through the kirtan know next to nothing about what it’s really about, but “it’s a festive
mood, everyone’s having a good time. People who don’t know a thing [regarding] what it’s about or understand it [still find that it] looks like fun in…. [because] we’re throwing flowers and dancing and singing. So even people who don’t have a clue that it’s about a spiritual thing…can enjoy it because it’s a good time.”

Banabhatta refers to texts on the life of Lord Caitanya that describe the ecstasies of his devotees in kirtan: “the experience from chanting [for] one who is actually doing it himself is almost like diving deep within an ocean of nectar…one loses sometimes his external awareness of where he even is.” Specifically, the kirtan singers “would have tears flowing out of their eyes out of intense ecstasy, and they would experience quivering in their body and laughing uncontrollably.” Banabhatta’s key point in relation to Rath Yatra is this:

Even people who were outside hearing it would experience…these types of symptoms. It’s explained that even though they weren’t diving the ocean of ecstasy, they were floating on top of it….Especially when we pull the beautiful carts down the street and all the devotees are dancing and chanting, it’s such a colorful and beautiful performance and celebration on so many different levels. So when people are walking down the street with their babies and their friends, it’s such an out of place thing and such a joyous celebration that you can see people spontaneously get caught up in the euphoria and the blissfulness of it. And you can see that on their expressions.

As the Rath Yatra passes through the Oceanfront Walk it is indeed like a Juggernaut—a very loud, exuberant juggernaut—passing through. Its presence is impossible to ignore, and it provides an interesting juxtaposition to the other activities on the beach. I mentioned the pursuit of pleasure as an element of the carnivalesque nature of Venice Beach, and indeed every few storefronts is one emblazoned with a marijuana leaf or the number “420”. There is a certain irony in the pervasive smell of pot that wafts through the festival from time to time. As I’ve explained earlier, ISKCON devotees do not drink alcohol or caffeine, smoke tobacco or marijuana or anything else, they adopt a vegetarian diet and they do not engage in extra-marital sex. But the performance of public kirtan is an opportunity for devotees to perform the fundamental principles of ISKCON theology and perform the bliss that they promise to those who forego other forms of pleasure for Krishna consciousness. The dancing Hare Krishnas are adding to the carnivalesque atmosphere of Venice Beach by offering one more way to explore the
exhilaration of uninhibited self-expression, but they are also presenting themselves as a
distinct juxtaposition to some of its activities. In one particularly poetic moment, I find
myself sandwiched between a group of ecstatic devotees singing praises to God and the
entry to a surf shop blaring AC/DC’s “Highway to Hell” out of its loudspeakers.
Banabhatta expresses their motivation: “we follow many regulative principles that for
outside people are pretty strict, but the process [of worship] itself is so joyful [that] it
becomes very easy for us to give these [things] up because by nature we’re spiritual
beings and these physical bodies are only coverings for our soul. The more we realize our
spiritual nature and act according to that in all of our activities, the more we feel joyful.”

The Festival on the Beach

Finally the Rath Yatra arrives at the site where the festival will continue through
the rest of the day, and the trio of carts as well as the singing congregation turns just off
of the Oceanfront Walk in front of the Venice Beach Street Market. The parade is
greeted by the line-up of Christian protesters who earlier preceded the carts through the
streets. There seems to be a small culture war in progress that takes the form of dueling
signs: from one side, “Repent and Believe”, “No Person is Righteous Rom 3:10 Holy
Bible”, “The Shed Blood of Jesus Christ—Man’s Only Salvation”; beside those signs,
“Eff the Haterz” and “God Hates Signs”. Again, “Jesus Saves from Hell”, “Satan
loves…false religion”; and then again on a hand-drawn cardboard sign, “Surrender to the
Pope-No!” Somewhat ironically, one sign announces the fires of hell waiting for
“drunkards, fornicators, atheists, abortionists, adulterers,” etc.—all things that Hare
Krishnas oppose as intensely as Christians. A few feet away, a homemade sign points to
this one announcing, “I’m with Stupid.” The faces of those holding the signs appear to
me more tired and drawn than anything, and a woman under a “Repent and Believe” sign
listlessly holds out literature to people who don’t take it.

The sign-holders draw no reaction from the devotees singing and dancing in front
of the cart, clapping and shouting enthusiastic calls of “Jai!” or simply “Hey!” in
response to the kirtaniya’s rapid fire enunciation of such lines as “LA Rath Yatra Ki!”
and “Glories to the assembled devotees!” As the kirtaniya draws the music to a close, a
man on the megaphone announces, “Lord Jagannath is coming down from the cart. It is
requested that we chant until he comes down.” So the kirtaniya promptly starts another
tune—an indication of the nature of kirtan as service activity performed for the pleasure
of the deities.

At the end of the LA parade route, as in New York, a large festival area is set up
with displays and booths, including many of the same ones that were in New York, and
two stages for performances. The booths are all covered in the same brilliant yellow, red,
blue and green stripes that adorned the tents at the earlier festival, with the “walls” of
booths set off from each other by brightly colored material printed with quilting star
designs. The three deities are set beside each other in one of the carts and attended to by
devotees fanning them with yak tail brushes and making offerings. Throughout the day,
devotees and visitors will take darshan or receive the silver crown from a priest sitting on
the bottom level of the cart. Beside the chariot, the main stage for the day’s
performances faces a large grassy seating area. A banner across its top reads “Festival of
Chariots,” and its backdrop is a sepia-toned painting of a Indian landscape, complete with
domed temple.

As in New York, many of the performances will feature very traditional Indian
devotional music and Indian classical dance. Certainly the rituals actually performed in
the Los Angeles temple show a real interest among LA devotees in classical Indian music.
But upon arriving at Venice Beach, many of the performances also take on an element of
the carnivalesque—there are even magic tricks on the main stage at one point. Some of
the performances deliberately emphasize hybridity by rendering of Krishna conscious
music in a fashion combines elements of devotion with popular styles of music that reach
out to many beachgoers. In fact, the whole event—especially on a secondary stage set up
nearer to the other parts of the beach—takes on the character of a Krishna rock festival.

In Manhattan, the rainy weather of the day, if nothing else, limited the number of
people passing through Washington Square Park for the post-parade festival, and
although many people lined up for prasadam, the size of the stage and the number of tents
and activities indicated a moderate expectation for public attendance. On Venice Beach,
however, the post-parade celebration is a key feature of the event, because this is the
place where thousands of casual beach-goers will “discover” the Festival of Chariots, and
potentially through it, Krishna consciousness. Nam acknowledges, “a lot of people who
are very secular, [they] don’t have a lot of interest in spiritual topics or religion or what have you. [They] just love the festival because they’re just having a great time.” And while the festival is certainly set up to assist in spiritual discovery, “we don’t expect everyone to surrender themselves to god or become a theist. But if they can appreciate it, that’s nice, and a lot of people do.”

The beach festival then casts a very broad net in terms of what it offers to the crowd. Walkways to the side and behind the main stage area are lined with booths offering various types of food (pizza, watermelon, shaved ice, vegetarian curd steaks, fresh coconuts) and information about Hare Krishna dietary principles (“Vegetarianism: The Higher Taste”, “Hare Krishna Food for Life: Serving the World”). Various displays offer an array of information geared toward an eclectic contemporary audience: “Srila Prabhupada: the Acharya”, for example, or an extensive Bhagavad Gita set-up that includes major topics like “Seeing God in Nature” “The Personal Form of God,” “The Law of Karma,” “Yoga and Meditation,” “Monotheism,” “Equality of All Living Beings,” etc. There are booths for book and DVD distribution, question and answer sessions with devotees, and activities such as children’s craft tables and an Atma Yoga booth where a devotee with a microphone directs twenty or so people on yoga mats through various poses.

Photograph 34: Yoga at the Beach Festival

Just over a grassy hillside where beachgoers relax and a man sings bhajans while playing his harmonium, are large tents housing an extensive display on “the Science of
Reincarnation,” distribution of the free feast, and a second stage. While it’s impossible to calculate the number of people who make their way through the festival area, Nam estimates that the free feast tent distributes five to six thousand plates of food. The festival area is heavily populated with a wide array of beachgoers, approximately half of whom are dressed in a manner marked for Hare Krishna identity. But many of the people on the beach display a broad range of fashions that indicate diverse social choices and philosophies.

**Hybridity: Krishna Rock, Krishna Reggaeton**

Both stages at the beach feature an eclectic set of performers, all oriented toward the promotion of Indian culture and Krishna consciousness, but they take a variety of approaches. For many people, a fascination with a foreign culture viewed as “exotic” is the biggest draw to a festival like this, and performances by a couple of different Bharatanatyam groups demonstrate the vivid, intricate aesthetic and the sophistication of Indian classical culture. Some of the groups simply perform traditional kirtan with Indian instruments, though the responses are sung by other members of the performing group on stage, and only rarely by the audience. These performances tend to dominate the main stage, although there are at times guitars and rock sounds emanating from that stage.

Personally I am most fascinated by some of the performances on the admittedly less populated secondary stage—a stage set just slightly apart from the main stage and its adjacent complex of booths, but situated right between the main festival and the rest of the beach. This stage displays the Maha Mantra on a banner above it, and the backdrop features the massive faces of Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balaram, offering both kirtan and darshan to anyone who might walk by. The setting for the secondary stage isn’t quite as comfortable; the stage faces a cement area set up with plastic lawn chairs rather than a grassy area like that in front of the main stage. But it is also nearer the water and surrounded by open spaces that allow people to converge from different parts of the beach and respond to the music in their own fashion. On this stage I am impressed by the musical hybridity on display, as Krishna conscious performers meld the message and the spiritual content of kirtan with popular music styles meant to appeal to different
demographics. I am also impressed by the fact that participation by audience members factors significantly into the performances here.

Hare Krishnas frequently remind me that the name Krishna means “the all-attractive,” and I have heard several devotees express the opinion that although there is something beautiful and pure about the musical style that connects the kirtan experience back to Bengal and the homeland of Krishna consciousness, it is also a worthy project to blend kirtan with diverse musical styles that serve to “attract” more people, whose ears are tuned to different styles, to Krishna consciousness. I have even heard kirtan fans reflect on music that isn’t overtly Krishna-conscious as being, in its way, kirtan. Hridayananda, who travels extensively throughout the world as an initiating guru, has heard a wide variety of musical hybrids—he mentions “samba kirtan” in Brazil in particular—but talks of his deep love of Western classical music as a “neo-Baroque” keyboardist himself, confessing, “I like to do kirtan myself. I find to be honest—true confession—I find that I actually enjoy kirtan more when I do it [with] more Western keyboard accompaniment.” When he speaks of the great figures of the Western musical world he says,

They did kirtan. Western culture is full of kirtan. If you look at the great figures like Bach, Handel, Mozart, and of course others—Vivaldi was a Jesuit priest—they wrote a tremendous amount of sacred music. Handel’s Messiah…was done very consciously and very specifically to glorify God. So yeah, kirtan is universal. In the Vaishnava tradition that we practice and promote there is really a unique amount and quality of knowledge about God, and you know the saying “ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” So when you do kirtan with a very powerful understanding of who you’re glorifying I think it makes it all the more powerful. Kirtan is very much a part of sacred culture all over the world.

Performers on the secondary stage tap into different combinations of sounds and recognizable pop styles that make the chanting of the holy names and the expression of a Krishna conscious message seem both attractive and relevant to different groups of people. In all, the secondary stage has the feeling of a Krishna rock festival.

At a few points in the afternoon, for example, we hear hybrids of Indian and rock music with emphasis on different instruments. Early in the day the Breath of Life Tribe is represented by lead singer, violinist and guitarist Deepak Ramapriyan, a second guitarist, and later in the set, a young man with a drum who comes out of the audience to
play. This initial set features an acoustic folk-rock sound with a very melodic character. Lyrics are composed entirely of names for God, although rather than sticking to the Maha Mantra, Deepak includes other common names for Krishna like “Govinda” and “Vasudeva.” This early in the day, only a handful of spectators occupy the seats, although attendance will pick up over the course of the day. At some point, an elderly man wearing only sneakers, boxer shorts, a fanny pack, and a canvas bucket hat stands in front of the stage and dances with free, rather disorganized movements.

Later in the afternoon, Deepak and some of the same musicians will bring a larger audience for a performance by Deepak’s rock outfit, B.O.L.T. In this performance the singing of the holy names paired with the electric instruments makes for a long, hypnotic jam. B.O.L.T. is not the only rock outfit on the stage, nor is theirs the only approach to Krishna rock. We also hear from Nirantara and friends, a slightly older quartet of singer, electric guitars, and drum set who play with a 1970s classic rock sound. A key difference between B.O.L.T. and Nirantara is that this group, rather than using the music as a vehicle to chant the names of God, writes songs about Krishna consciousness, including lyrics about chanting (“Every time I call out Krishna’s name…unchain my heart/ he set me free”).

Lokah Pavana uses both approaches—singing about chanting and actually chanting the names themselves—during a Reggaeton set, though his approach is skewed toward the former. Before starting a number Lokah leads the audience (a good seventy to eighty people by now) in a call and response recitation of the lines of the Maha Mantra. He does this multiple times during his set. On one song, Lokah raps the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra to a recorded Reggaeton beat (given an interesting hybrid flavor by a young devotee drumming on dumbek) interspersed with verses that he sings alternately in English, Spanish, and Sanskrit in order to both honor the cultural roots of ISKCON and demonstrate its relevance to a wide audience. The rapped mantra itself is rhythmically compelling, and the verses proclaim the pleasurable effects of that mantra: “Hare Krishna/ dancing in the street/ enjoyment of your life… Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare/ don’t stop don’t stop/ enjoy it everybody…” The song places the pleasures of chanting Hare Krishna in the context of a Venice Beach culture which glorifies the ideal of unfettered personal freedom with language like: “without
limitation, “because we are eternal,” “we don’t have discrimination,” “no fear,” etc. Lokah and the other performers who back him up have clearly identified Krishna consciousness as something that is spiritually meaningful to them and they use popular music styles to address their message to audiences that might consider a Reggaeton-inflected mantra personally meaningful to them.

Some among the beachgoers who wander into the performance area very clearly utilize the music as a vehicle of their own enjoyment. The space in front of the stage proves an inviting place for playful self-expression. During a song in which Lokah raps “Nitai Gauranga Jai Jagannath” (more names and praises for Krishna), two young men on skateboards roll into that space in front of the stage and begin circling each other, then dancing the Macarena to Lokah’s hybrid Indian folk/Reggaeton beat from atop their skateboards. An elderly man in t-shirt and shorts sporting a big white beard and a Santa Claus hat walks up and begins dancing; one of the skateboarders briefly starts dirty dancing up behind beach Santa Claus, a fact to which Santa appears oblivious. Santa walks away fairly quickly, but at least three young men take to the front of the stage for serious demonstrations of their hip-hop dancing skills, with some emphasis on pop-locking.

Photograph 35: Spectators Dance to Lokah’s Krishna Reggaeton

Lokah’s set is notable for successfully inviting participation from audience members, both devotees who have come out for the festival and other beachgoers who have stumbled upon it. Early in his set five people—two young men, two young women,
and a little boy—set up yoga mats in front of the stage; apparently the group had been out practicing yoga on the beach and Lokah invited them to come participate in his performance. I have already remarked upon the connection between kirtan and yoga and the fact that devotees often use hatha yoga, which has gained so much popularity in recent years, as a window into bhakti yoga. Lokah introduces his five guests by talking about yoga as both bhakti and asana, and inviting them to give a demonstration during his song “Yoga—Yo’ Gonna Like It.” The audience laughs as he announces his title and he plays up the humor of the pun by opening the song with a knock knock joke: “Who’s there? Yoga. Yoga who? Yo’ gonna like it.” The quintet of yogis then proceeds to run through various asanas and combinations; balance poses seem to get the most emphasis, especially for a little boy who is especially fond of crow pose. Meanwhile Lokah raps lyrics like “Yoga—yo’ gonna like it/ it’ll stretch your mind/ yoga—yo’ gonna like it / open up your heart…this is the connection/ light it up light it up…” During the performance Lokah reminds us of the link between his song and the yoga demonstration, calling the audience to clap in rhythm with the words “give it up for the yogis.” He also includes the lyric “bhakti jnana karma raja,” listing important types of yoga other than the widely known hatha yoga as a reminder that there are dimensions to the practice other than the series of stretches that receive so much attention as a form of exercise.

Later Lokah helps Lila Padma introduce the crowd to “Bhakti Dance,” a free form style of dance performed to devotional music. At this point, with their encouragement, a group of two dozen or so spectators come to the front of the stage to dance—a group that includes several people in devotee garb but also includes those dressed like granolas, Goths, punks, and belly dancers—as well as another dozen or so people standing behind and beside the seating area dancing from where they are. Lokah calls out a few directions and leads the group in some basic steps, lunging forward to the ground and then raising the hands high overhead. The group begins combining a light step-hop with clapping as the drummer who accompanied the earlier numbers begins playing a light beat pattern. Onstage Lila invites a man in kurta, dhoti, chadars and baseball cap to the microphone. This man, accompanied by the drummer and another devotee playing a two-stringed Indian folk instrument, begins to sing the Maha Mantra to a simple melody. The trio onstage continue to perform the mantra with a light texture and relaxed tempo.
throughout the next ten minutes. During this time Lila and Lokah lead the dancers through an accessible, easy-to-follow combination of steps, hops, jumps, claps, and turns combined with heart-opening gestures like circling the arms outward and overhead. Only one or two of those dancing show any sign of self-consciousness; for the most part the other dancers—again, including a very diverse group of beachgoers—are grinning broadly, extending their arms to their maximum range of motion, and even in one case, casually assuming various hand mudras associated with meditation, indicating an anticipation of the type of cultural complex this dance belongs to. Several minutes into the dance, a devotee hands Lokah a mridanga and he leads the group skipping in an easy circle around the stage area.

Photograph 36: Bhakti Dance

It is clear, during this performance as well as others throughout the afternoon, that many people have come to Venice Beach prepared, possibly even hopeful of engaging in expressive activities free of inhibition, and the Hare Krishnas provide for that. During the Bhakti Dance there are moments when audience members literally run to the center of the dance to be a part of it. Behind the seating area, a man dressed all in white with streaming gray hair turns toward the ocean and uses the drummer’s rhythm as a basis for a dance that alternates between moments when he throws his arms wide as if to embrace the sea, and moments when he appears to be praying to it. There does seem to be a certain phenomenon of the aging Caucasian male in strange clothing who comes to the beach to dance in front of the stages, from beach Santa Claus to the man in boxers and
bucket hat who haunts the front of the stage nearly all day, to one who joins the scene during Nirantara’s performance and dances throughout the B.O.L.T. set sporting a sparkling gold lame shirt, a purple hat with a large flower, and what looks like a piece of decorative molding broken off of a staircase somewhere and hung on a string around his neck like a breastplate.

Photograph 37: Dancing on the Beach

From the dancing old men to those who appear to have come to the beach in costume, it is not surprising to me that people who perhaps come to Venice to work out some sort of internal energy and, as they say, let their freak flag fly, find a venue at the Rath Yatra and a vehicle for unbridled self-expression and the exploration of internal impulses in kirtan and other Krishna-conscious music. It is an impulse commonly credited to Americans with an individualistic countercultural bent—“misfit consciousness is a very American state of mind,” proclaims a writer on counterculture fixtures the Grateful Dead (Brightman, 1998). But it is also not out of place in Vaishnava devotionalism. Stephen Slawek quotes an Indian kirtan singer explaining that “as long as we are doing kirtan…we will not think in favor or against anybody, not about anyone's qualities or defects, we will just concentrate and think that we are singing kirtan” (Slawek 1998:84). The free-spirited dancing by beach-goers may be occasionally irreverent, but it is not inappropriate to the intentions of the devotees who put on this festival. As many of them have reminded me so often, the invitation to participate in Krishna consciousness in some manner, be that food, philosophy, or erratic and uninhibited dance, is very open-
ended. Devotees are eager to meet people where they are and offer Krishna consciousness as a proposed answer to their individual needs. Hridayananda says:

The soul just naturally dances, it sings. We are not ultimately or originally impersonal...we are eternally persons. The experience that we have now of ourselves, “I am a unique individual person”—that’s eternal. We are eternally unique persons and it is our nature to rejoice to sing to dance...It’s the very nature of the soul.

I often hear devotees express their belief that the invitation to bliss through Krishna consciousness is not an attempt to impose an unnatural thing, but rather an attempt to awaken what is already within the self. According to Banabhatta, “we are by nature full of spiritual happiness in relationship with God. That’s a very joyful thing that carries with us [through] whatever we’re doing.” Danavir Goswami says that “everybody’s actually a devotee of Krishna. Some have forgotten that, so they just need a reminder. It’s not something that’s external or foreign. Every soul is already related.” The Rath Yatra festival may be a once yearly event, but there is significance to taking it down Venice Beach, a place that seems to exist in a perpetual state of the carnivalesque, even if visitors stop in to experience that celebratory atmosphere on an occasional basis. It reflects an important idea that Banabhatta shares when I ask him about the spiritual necessity of celebration: “Everything that we do is a celebration, because [our] whole life is a celebration [when] we realize the real purpose behind it.”
CHAPTER 4
IMMERSION IN THE HOLY NAMES
IN ALACHUA, FLORIDA

The New Raman Reti temple in Alachua, Florida, provides an experience entirely different from those found at Radha Govinda Mandir in New York City and New Dwaraka in Los Angeles. Radha Govinda Mandir and New Dwaraka are temple communities whose challenge is to create a space, a reputation, and an influence for the Hare Krishna movement within the urban landscapes of major national and international cultural centers. This is certainly not the case for New Raman Reti—it is a rare thing in any context other than cataloguing Hare Krishna temples to hear Alachua, Florida, mentioned in the same sentence with New York City and Los Angeles. Certainly Florida has its large urban and cultural centers, and if Los Angeles devotees thrived in the carnivalesque atmosphere of Venice Beach, Florida offers America’s other permanently running carnival a mere two hours down the freeway in Orlando, an urban landscape so carnivalesque as to be flat-out comical in some places. In comparison to Orlando, Tampa, and Miami (all of which also have Krishna temples), Alachua seems remote, isolated, out of the way. Yet in spite of its remote location—or in some ways because of it—Alachua offers the Hare Krishna movement one of its most influential cultural centers. In Alachua ISKCON devotees have been able to create for themselves a space apart where certain elements of Hare Krishna culture—including kirtan and the performing arts—have flourished and matured.

While temples like the ones I have discussed in previous chapters occupy spaces integrated into their urban landscapes—you could easily stumble onto Radha Govinda Mandir while looking for the bingo hall next door—a visit to New Raman Reti requires a journey out into the rural farmlands surrounding the small town of Alachua. After passing various fenced-off farmlands for about two and a half miles on State Road 235, the arrival at ISKCON property becomes apparent by virtue of the Indian-styled stonework topping the fenceposts surrounding the temple. Also, it is easy to hear that you are approaching the temple if the radio is on, as within a certain range the radio will be suddenly filled with the distinctive sounds of kirtan.
New Raman Reti is what is known within ISKCON as a farming community, of which there are several in North America. Upon arriving at the temple complex, the agricultural basis of the community is made abundantly clear by the presence of a sturdy wooden pen in the middle of the lawn that houses a very large bull (or two) dressed in elaborate garlands and beautiful cloths during festivals.

Various signs posted around the bull pen and in other places on the property advertise “Save the Cow,” an organization that solicits donations to care for a herd of cattle owned by the community. A visit to the website savethecow.org offers pictures and bios (including ancestry and personality) of the individual animals, as well as “Mootube Videos,” an “In Moomoriam” page dedicated to those who have “gone on to greener pastures,” and “Moo of the Month Bovine Biographies.” While I have spent relatively little time studying or discussing Save the Cow with the devotees, its existence indicates the service-oriented approach that devotees at this temple take in fulfilling the desires of Krishna—in this case the imperative that all living beings, including animals, be treated respectfully as individual spirit souls. (It also demonstrates the devotees’ self-aware humor.) Save the Cow gives special emphasis to cattle as they were beloved by Krishna the young cowherd, but I have observed this attitude towards other living beings even in some surprising moments—during a conversation with temple president Mukhya Devi Dasi, for example, an insect ran across the floor, and rather than making any attempt to squash it (as I would have done), she smiled and actually called out “Hare Krishna Hare

Photograph 38: Cattle Dressed for Celebration
Krishna,” a small act of service that becomes natural in light of the belief that briefly hearing the mantra might raise the unfortunate creature to a higher birth in its next life.

Because of the proximity of Alachua to my current place of residence in Tallahassee, I have been able to visit New Raman Reti more frequently over a longer period of time than the previous temples I have written about, and for that reason I have developed more familiarity with some of the devotees there, both those whom I have met, interviewed, and greeted again upon repeated visits, and those who I have simply learned to recognize from watching them sing kirtan. Devotees at New Raman Reti have been very helpful—my husband and I have rarely eaten prasadam alone, as community members waiting in the prasadam line have usually engaged us in conversations that lasted through dinner. Here, as in the other places I have visited, the temple room itself and the rituals performed there provide a telling introduction to traits of the community and key elements of the doctrine and practice of Krishna consciousness. In Alachua, however, interactions with certain devotees provided opportunities to see what happens behind the temple altar and the forms of service that take place as part of devotional bhakti yoga. In this chapter I will look at the concept of devotional service, the offerings of two generations of Hare Krishna devotees, and the way that this unique environment has shaped the development of artistry in kirtan performance there.

**Behind the Temple Room**

The New Raman Reti temple occupies one corner of a grassy expanse that also includes a pavilion with a stage for performances, a tiny gift shop, a firepit surrounded with benches where rituals are performed, and picnic benches for prasadam. Farther out are farmlands and other buildings that house, among other things, a school for the ISKCON community’s children. As at other Krishna temples, devotees have made every effort to make the sacred space a place of beauty. The rural setting provides lush greenery which is already quite lovely, and the lawn in front of the temple features an attractive three-tiered fountain surrounded by benches.
The temple itself is a modest single-story building with a red tile roof, but the attention to beauty is evident in the carving of the pillars that border the several meters of porch space that ring the building and provide an important space for devotees and visitors to mingle and socialize. Inside the temple room is uncluttered, an expanse of black and white checkerboard marble often lit primarily by the natural daylight that comes in from the three double doors on either side. The space itself offers a sense of clean simplicity as well as a beauty which is enhanced by the natural world surrounding it.

To refer to simple, clean, natural beauty, however, does not mean that the temple room is lacking in the ornate, elaborate style of decoration so typical of Vaishnava and more generally of Indian artwork and architecture. As in other temples, the walls are ringed with beautiful paintings, Srila Prabhupada watches over things from a decorated throne at the back of the room, and the altar, in particular, is a beauty to behold. Like the one in Los Angeles, the New Raman Reti altar is a stage-like area set back from the wall that fills up nearly the entire front wall of the room and is divided into three segments filled with different deities and a profusion of decorations including flowers, fruits, and small figures of cows.
I get an added perspective on the devotional service associated with the altar, the arati, and the treatment of the altar deities when I arrive early on the afternoon of Govardhana Puja (which I will discuss later) and meet one of the local devotees who has expressed a willingness to be interviewed. She is generous enough to allow me to accompany her to the big kitchen behind the temple with camera running. Raga Swan has been a devotee since 1985; she was already an aspiring musician and a playwright before encountering Krishna consciousness in a manner thematically resonant with much of our conversation this afternoon. As she describes it, “I did a little service for—I didn’t even know this lady was...she was in plain clothes, she wasn’t in devotee attire. I helped her down the subway stairs and she repaid me with a book...I flipped through the pages so fast I just couldn’t put it down.” Raga was born to musical parents and pursuing a musical career at the time of this encounter, but she was first enchanted with the philosophy of Krishna consciousness, particularly the emphasis on vegetarianism. Shortly afterward her background in music became a vehicle for her newly discovered faith. Twenty-seven years later when we meet in Alachua she shares her new CD full of Vaishnava-themed songs, and when I pull out the camera to interview Raga I expect to spend most of our time talking about the CD. However, because I have caught her on the way to the kitchen where she is kind enough to allow me to tag along, I end up seeing a dimension of the everyday devotional service of bhakti yoga that takes place almost entirely behind the scenes.
The kitchen behind the temple is large and roomy, painted in the same color of peach as the robes that many devotees wear, meticulously clean, and decorated with four framed pictures on the back wall, including one of Prabhupada. Raga introduces me to her husband, and while three other men are hard at work preparing the feast that the rest of us will pounce upon later, Raga and her husband have their own task. Three shining silver trays sit on the counter nearest the door, and as the various dishes for the upcoming feast are finished, they place samples of each in thali-style bowls, one on each of the three trays. These are the trays that will be offered to the deities by the priest, or pujari, serving at the altar tonight—it is a rotating task, and Raga’s husband is among those who sometimes perform it. Once the food is blessed and ritually offered, it will become prasadam, purified by Krishna’s touch, and like the name recited in kirtan, a purifying agent for the soul. Each tray contains a glass of smoothie, steaming bowls of rice, dahl, pakoras, vegetable subji, rice pudding, and my personal favorite, Gauranga potatoes. Raga retrieves from behind the temple room a silver jar filled with leaves of the tulsi plant and places a leaf or two on each dish on each tray. “Krishna always wants tulsi on his food. On every preparation we put at least one tulsi leaf,” Raga explains. Her husband starts to explain the mythology behind the gesture: “Tulsi was a great personality….one of Krishna’s greatest devotees,” and Raga continues, “Yes, Tulsi is a personality in the spiritual world….Krishna wants his [food] with a tulsi leaf to give honor to her. You may notice there’s a lot of female personalities in the spiritual world and I think that’s really important to know.”

As the three trays are loaded with a complete sampling of the night’s feast, Raga and her husband carry them from the kitchen across a walkway to the back door of the temple. Behind the temple room is an extensive array of supplies and preparations for the different kinds of service that devotees offer to the altar deities both as symbols of humility and as gestures that establish the kinds of divine relationships that lead to salvation. I remember a brahmacari at the Utah temple telling me, several years ago, “when you clean the temple it’s like you’re cleaning your heart,” and the sentiment applies to all of these kinds of service. Upon entering the temple we pass through a corridor in which an entire wall is covered in pegboard draped with several dozen different colors and varieties of bead and pearl necklaces, all intended for dressing the
deities and decorating the altar. To the side is a smaller kitchen area used to cook items exclusively for the deities. A narrow counter runs parallel to the altar beside a wall hung with strings of various colors and combinations of beads. Raga introduces me to a shy-looking older gentleman who is stacking folded piles of very ornate, tiny clothing and gathering combinations of beads on a tray—“this is for tomorrow morning,” he indicates, when devotees will gather early to bathe and dress the altar deities in the elaborate clothing they will wear for the day.

Photograph 41: Preparations for Dressing the Altar Deities

“Every morning they have at least ten or twelve pujaris and they’re all attending to the Lord,” Raga explains. “They’re bathing the lords, they’re dressing them, they have different devotees to bathe and different devotees to dress. This gentleman here was fixing a crown for the Supreme Lord tomorrow. This goes on 24/7.” She adds, “Most of it won’t be visible because it’s behind the curtain and a lot of devotees don’t even see it. But we know it’s going on.” This quick walk through the sacristy is evidence of both the many different processes that are involved with ritual worship and the way that even relatively small gestures are perceived as having the power to impact the state of the soul—when they are directed toward the altar deities or the operation of the temple. “A lot of people,” Raga says, “are almost imagining themselves to be serving God. But then if there isn’t—not an icon, but for lack of a better term, an icon—if there isn’t somewhere to focus that service on, exactly what service are you doing?” As we walk between the temple and the kitchen, I open and hold the doors for Raga whose hands are full. “See, Krishna’s known to be tricky,” she says, “tricking you into some devotional service. You’ll get credit for that. He can see it all.”
Just beside the doorway the priests will use to enter the altar area when they go to perform their offerings, is a little space containing a bookshelf packed with various supplies, a sink and counter, and another shelf filled with the golden implements used to make arati offerings. There is also, on the counter beside the door, a 5x7” framed photograph of a man in priests’ robes. “Let me show you something,” Raga says (after we spend a few minutes chatting about George Harrison and how devotees view his service to Krishna), and picks up a similar framed photograph from the other side of the sink. “This is a picture of our guru, and as you can tell he’s in Russia,” she says. “Each person” who does service on the altar “will put the picture of their guru right next to them as they’re doing their worship.” She explains that “you take the guru with you because the guru is actually the one who makes possible the connection with Krishna. We can’t serve Krishna directly no matter how so-called advanced we think we are. We can’t really do that.” So instead, even in the person’s absence, the image of the guru acts as an intermediary.

Raga points to one of the shelves on the bookshelf behind us which is loaded with about a dozen similar framed pictures, representing the gurus of all of the devotees who perform service on the altar. “Our particular guru was very well regarded,” she says, “Well, all of them are. We have personal relationships with many of them.” She pulls a couple of pictures off of the shelf to show me: of one she says, “He went to the Amazon and we read his work a lot—he does Diaries of –whats it called again?” “Diaries of a Traveling Preacher,” her husband replies, and “he does a big, huge, huge festival over in Bosnia and Poland and it usually attracts thousands and thousands.” She pulls down another picture: he “recently met the president of the United States, he met Barack Obama.” “All of these personalities are disciples of the founder acharya Prabhupada,” Raga’s husband tells me, and by serving them there is a sense of continuing to serve Prabhupada. Raga places the continuing service to a guru, even a departed guru, in the context of worship around the world: “it is something that’s been known in some other cultures…some African cultures used to have the name Olatunje, certain things like ‘Father has come back to us.’ Sometimes they have altars—not as elaborate as our altars, but they sometimes have altars or they sometimes [give] service to a departed relative.
after they’ve left.” The opportunity to give service is perceived as a gift: “that’s why [Prabhupada’s] mercy is still going on,” she says. “It’s amazing.”

Devotional Service

Outside in the temple room, evidence of devotional service is present not only in the rituals that take place at the altar, but in the way that the room is decorated. There are fewer paintings on the walls here than I saw in other temples, but they are much larger, and they are unified by theme—the pastimes of the young Krishna—as well as by style. That is because a single artist, Pushkar, is responsible for these paintings, and I hear on a number of occasions in different conversations around the temple reference to his talents. Raga tells me that some of his paintings were done under the direction of Srila Prabhupada himself. On other occasions I have had the opportunity to talk with Pushkar’s wife Sukha, and our conversations make it very clear that, reputation for talent or not, her husband’s paintings are yet one more act of humble service.

Photograph 42: Paintings in the Temple Room

“There’s something for everybody to do,” she says, “there’s different ways that everybody serves, like my husband [who] does the paintings in the temple rooms.” On the day that we talk Sukha tells me that Pushkar is at home, working frantically on a painting for the festival next week. As service to Krishna, the artist’s work has special significance and there is always more to add—“Not that [the paintings are] ever done. If
you ask him if the painting’s done, he’ll be like, ‘No! There’s so much more to do! It’s never finished!’”

In talking with Sukha, it is clear that there is creativity in her home, between her husband the painter and a daughter who performs with the community’s highly respected Bharatanatyam troupe. The presence of Krishna that devotees seek to bring into their lives seems to express itself naturally through an impulse to service that is often artistic in nature. “I think it just evokes spontaneous creativity,” Sukha says of the practices of Krishna consciousness, including the meditation of kirtan. “You naturally want to do something.” She brings up the performing arts: “Krishna was at the center of everything [in Vedic culture] so all drama revolved around Krishna and his pastimes. All music revolved around Krishna and his pastimes. All art revolved around Krishna and his pastimes. Everything was meant to elevate peoples’ consciousness, not degrade it.” But even at a more subtle level, small acts that bring beauty into the world are seen as devotional service to the deity known as the all-attractive or the most beautiful. Sukha describes a recent event in which groups of devotees used different colors of rice flour to paint intricate and beautiful mandalas on the ground—“even though they knew they were going to be erased shortly, it’s just an act of love.”

Photograph 43: Chalk Drawing at Temple Entrances during Janmasthanmi
She describes the paintings, the music performed, and some of the carefully crafted food donations brought to the event and muses, “we’re all servants.” Sukha lists a few types of human relationships that involve service—even, “you’re serving your professor by doing this project.” But with all of these forms of worship, “the highest service is service to God. And when you do that you’re inspired in your service to everybody else. But if you just serve everybody else and you don’t serve God, you don’t get that same kind of inspiration because God gives the intelligence. He gives us the intelligence to know how to act, what to do.”

Sukha expresses a belief that I have heard from a number of people around the temple—that with so many types of devotional service possible, it is easy for each person to find the service that allows her to follow her bliss. Mukhya, for example, says, “Everyone gets engaged in Krishna’s service according to what it is they like to do, or are good at. So I like to cook so I did cooking. I did a lot of things over the years, but cooking has always been something I like to do.” She pauses. “And managing.” When I ask about her service as temple president, she says that she was asked to step into this role, “but I’ve always liked to organize things and manage things, even as a kid.” Raga says, “You know what’s so sweet about it is that you’re supposed to do what you actually [want to do]…God gives gifts, talents as they call it in the Bible, and [he gives us those things] to be returned to him in service.”

Her own life is an example of that fact. Raga was born to a musical family and was with a band performing rock and roll covers when she met the woman in the New York subway whose gift of a book changed her life. She had been offered a recording contract but was wrestling with the question of what that style of music might do to her consciousness. Although kirtan did not appeal immediately to her, she very quickly started rewriting popular song lyrics to reflect her newfound philosophy. Flash forward a couple of decades, and although she hasn’t necessarily taken to performing the mantra, Raga’s music is focused on using global popular styles as a framework for promoting the ideals of Krishna consciousness.

Reflecting on the natural affinity that different people have toward different types of service, Raga reflects:
That’s supposed to be honored in a certain way. Of course the most advanced thing is where you’re not even concerned which of the services you want to [do], just to please the Lord, whatever will please him most…I’ve been there sometimes but it’s better to be honest about where you are…you will carry these desires. These desires will stay with you, lifetime after lifetime sometimes. And they’ll haunt you completely. For example—you’re interested in music. What time did that start for you?

Later on, when I admit that I will have to miss an upcoming event due to my teaching schedule, her immediate response is, “That’s good that you’re keeping up with your dharma, [when you need] to teach.”

Sukha says of the impulse to devotional service: “these kinds of activities, they do bring joy, and they bring auspiciousness.” She uses a recent trip to Hawaii, where she observed offerings to the volcano goddess Pele and priestly ceremonies in the home of King Kamehameha the Great as evidence that the impulse toward these types of actions is innate to being human. “This kind of sacrifice pleases god and it makes everything beautiful. Because really sacrifice is required of a human being you know what I mean one way or the other either voluntarily or involuntarily we’re all engaged in some kind of sacrifice but when you do it out of love it’s much better than having to do it for any other reason”

Such sacrifices and services don’t need to be great acts, but Krishna devotees see them, when done with a devotional attitude, as crucial steps back toward a higher state of being in this life or the next. Toward the end of my conversation with Sukha, for example, a young man approaches and starts taking away our prasadam dishes. Sukha thanks him heartily, then turns to me and, nodding toward him affectionately, says, “He’s trying to go home, to go back to Godhead [so he’s] doing all the service, taking the express route.” The young man replies, “I told Maha Nanda I don’t even want that. I just—next time I don’t want to waste 23 years figuring out how to get back to this spot.” Sukha responds by offering him a cupcake.

During most of this conversation with Sukha, one of her friends listens in on the interview, and at one point he breaks in with this thought:

There’s this continuous competition in the spiritual realm where Krishna lives between Krishna and his devotees. Each is trying to please the other more, and they’re constantly trying to defeat each other by making the other one happy. So Krishna is not just accepting of [them], he loves his devotees as well. He likes to
see them happy. That’s what his happiness is, is seeing his devotees happy, so he makes all kinds of arrangements. Like there’s one incident related in one of our scriptures where somehow this person is able to travel to different places throughout the universe, and finally he makes it to the spiritual kingdom. And he sees God there—he sees Krishna, and Krishna’s first [impulse] is they embrace, and then Krishna says to him, “You know I make certain rules for the material world so that people go through all their steps before they’re pure and they really want to be here with me. But I so much missed you that I broke all the rules to make you get here faster.” But it’s not just him. He wants all of us to come, he wants us all so bad.

The Alachua Community

While there are several Hare Krishna farming communities in the United States such as New Talavan in Mississippi and New Vrindaban in West Virginia, New Raman Reti is the largest such community in North America. Before the establishment of the Alachua community, there was an ISKCON center in Gainesville associated with the University of Florida, and to this day the two communities are closely connected. The popular U of F lunch program adds significantly to the visibility of the Krishna community in the area, and U of F events such as football games and Homecoming parades provide popular venues for harinam. In the late 1970s a decision was made to purchase a farm—as Mukhya expresses it, “a lot of devotees my age who became Hare Krishna devotees in the early ‘70s had lived in cities all over the world and practiced Krishna Consciousness and spread Krishna Consciousness. And so later as the years went on we were looking for a more peaceful place to settle down.”

The land was purchased in 1977, and Mukhya, who refers to her encounters with and initiation under Srila Prabhupada as “the great fortune of my life,” says that Prabhupada “left in ’77, and he had come to Gainesville of course much earlier than that. And then they actually signed the papers to purchase this property on the day that he left his body, so we consider that auspicious and special—that he gave his blessing in a sense.”

The community thrived. According to Mukhya, “over the years devotees who were living in other places came here to continue to practice Krishna Consciousness in a more rural setting” because it was a matter of “getting out of the cities and finding a more peaceful way to live. A lot of people wanted to get back to the land so to speak, maybe
grow some of their own food, or experiment with raising farm animals. We could do that here, and it was just a more peaceful setting.” And so the community became and continues to be a very appealing location for established devotees. “More and more people settle here because we have nice programs for Krishna Conscious life and people like to be with other people of the same thinking.”

As a visitor to the New Raman Reti temple I’ve found that one very appealing aspect of the personality of the community is the number of longtime devotees who have settled here. Many have powerful stories about having met Srila Prabhupada. During conversations over prasadam devotees who have known each other for decades will pass each other at the tables and pause to reminisce about shared experiences from the early days of the movement when “we did crazy things,” as two old friends say, laughing, before shrugging and smiling, “We’re still crazy now.” At times during my research I have wondered if fondness for the early era of Krishna conscious music has something to do with the fact that the community at large seems to have a great sense of collective affection for George Harrison. The first time I visited the Alachua temple several years ago I overheard two elderly gentlemen talking intently over prasadam about whether or not George was a good devotee. Last year a guest lecturer spoke to the community about Harrison’s contributions to ISKCON, and to this day I find that his name and accomplishments come up frequently in casual conversations as well as formal interviews with members of the community.

Mukhya estimates that about 500 Hare Krishna families live in the area immediately surrounding Alachua, totaling approximately 1000 people, with another 3000 or so who don’t necessarily attend regularly but come in periodically from places all over North Florida. Some of the festivals draw devotees from around the state, particularly Indian families who are able to find at the Alachua temple certain rituals and observances that they grew up with in India, but miss in America.

Mukhya revels in Alachua’s combination of a naturally beautiful landscape, a friendly small town atmosphere, and the availability of a larger city with Gainesville nearby. “I love Alachua,” she says, “I think it’s a friendly place. Over the years the native Alachuans have really grown to embrace the community in the sense that we’re
part of their community” and as time has gone on the locals have developed a rapport with their ISKCON neighbors:

We’re interacting all the time with people in Alachua—we buy land, we buy groceries, we go to the post office we do all of the things that anyone does who lives in a town so in that way they get to know us and it’s a nice way to get to know someone because they see that we’re not so terribly different. And actually there are people from some of the local churches who come to see what our spiritual beliefs are and how it is that we have such a large group coming.

The New Raman Reti community has their ways of reaching out to the community: they attend interfaith meetings, they distribute lunches at nearby Santa Fe College (in addition to the food distribution done by the Gainesville group), and local press come in to do releases on the major events. According to Mukhya they always try to keep an eye out for newcomers who are unfamiliar with ISKCON, particularly at Sunday Feasts, so that they can gear lectures toward introducing and welcoming the newcomers.

ISKCON: the Next Generation

It is not surprising, given Alachua devotees’ respect for the importance of following ones’ natural affinity towards certain types of service, that New Raman Reti has become a particularly fertile ground for the development of those affinities among those inclined toward the performing arts. As longtime devotees have gathered in Alachua as a refuge, and as families have brought their children to be educated, New Raman Reti has become an important place for the development of special talents in the arts, including kirtan—and some of these young talents are now playing an important role in moving kirtan into the mainstream. One of these highly respected young musicians, Visvambhar Sheth, explains that “it’s such a big community and it’s very diverse, and a lot of really expert kirtan people have come through here and lived here for a while. And there’s people who have lived in India and been all over the place. So there’s so much talent in terms of musicianship…there’s professional dancers here, drama, architecture, kind of everything.”

And with so many experts in various fields coming through Alachua, there is a great opportunity to educate the rising generation. The onsite Bhaktivedanta Academy,
for example, currently schools fifty students in pre-K through 6\textsuperscript{th} grade programs focused on a combination of academic and spiritual activities. The school will expand to include 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} grade in 2013. According to Mukhya, because of the school “more people with children have come. They continue to come because right now our school is very developed and [of a] very excellent quality, and so we get a lot of young families with kids.” In addition, Alachua acts as a home base for a youth bus tour that travels across the United States every summer performing temples and acting as a sort of training ground for actors and musicians.

And so the local community provides a place for the rising generation to hear, absorb, and learn to play kirtans. I have often heard first generation devotees in Alachua refer with awe to the younger generation in their community and their accomplishments as performing artists. It is impressive to hear, in a fairly casual conversation, Sukha and her friend excitedly rattling off names of the Krishna conscious bands that in which their friends’ children perform:

“Do you know about the Mayapuris? I saw National Geographic taking a picture of them this afternoon….and they’re not alone, there’s another group called the Kindred Spirits…and you know the two girls I’m thinking of, it’s Auri Dev’s daughters and they do—”

“It’s sort of a rock and roll…even a little different than that but it’s the closest I can describe it.”

“They call their band something like King Ram.”

“The Adventures of King Ram.”

“It’s got a real Krishna conscious basis to it.” Sukha continues to enthuse, “So there’s many different groups of young people who are taking kirtan out to the people, and kirtan’s becoming so popular now. Even within the three years that you’ve been doing this dissertation, it’s grown leaps and bounds.”

The Bhakti Dance Seva Ensemble provides one example of the educational environment at New Raman Reti producing an artistically skilled second generation of ISKCON devotees. The Bhakti Kalalayam Dance Academy offers classes in Bharatanatyam classical dance, and the top dancers perform with Bhakti Dance Seva, a troupe that performs internationally. They featured prominently in the display of Indian
arts in conjunction with the Manhattan Rath Yatra, for example. Sukha’s daughter dances with the ensemble, having studied for fifteen years, and she recalls:

They got their way paid to Poland where they’re doing a traveling festival for—they’ve been gone six weeks, they’re in their last two weeks now. They had a Woodstock in Poland, a replica of the Woodstock, but they had 600,000 people there, and someone called me up and said, ’Ah Sukha Das put this on you can see her on the webcam.’ When I talked to her on the phone…it was like 3:00 in the morning there so when I called her I expected her to say, ‘oh I’m so tired.’ She said, ‘it’s the most fun I’ve ever had in my whole life, I wish it never would have ended.’ [She’s] just absorbed in the chanting and performing [and] it just gives birth to more—that’s the beauty of devotional service.

Sukha feels that the dancers are recognized for their skill certainly, but also for standing out as distinct, in a positive way, from other young people: “There’s a purity of the performers. The girls get a lot of compliments on how beautiful they are and how wonderful they are and how they’re different.” We had chatted earlier about my experiences performing with a BYU orchestra that sometimes elicited strong reactions from audiences, and Sukha draws a connection: “I think a lot of it is just the character, that not everyone does this. I’m sure it’s the same with Mormons, you have your principles.”

The group that inspires the most excited chatter from Alachua devotees when they hear about my research is the Mayapuris, a trio of young men and a female bharatanatyam dancer. As soon as I put faces to the name I realize that I have seen various members of the Mayapuris performing on many occasions. In fact, when I first meet the band’s frontman Visvambhar our first nearly simultaneous exchange is, “I have seen you everywhere.” The Mayapuris have close connections with As Kindred Spirits, the band to which Jahnavi Harrison, who I met in New York City, belongs. Both groups perform a musically flexible but essentially traditional kirtan style at a wide range of international events, and they have an extensive touring schedule. In one conversation Visvambhar rattles off an exhausting list of performances: “We were just in Australia for a month, and we did a variety of things—yoga studios, auditoriums, temples, 12-hour kirtans, 24-hour kirtans…” After a brief stop in Alachua they were getting ready to perform at Miami’s international Art Basel festival, advertised on the festival website as “the most prestigious art show in the Americas.” As part of Art Basel, “they’ll have yoga
going on and we’ll be playing morning and evening. They’re expecting hundreds of people to be coming.” After Art Basel the group was off to South Africa for a youth festival.

“We’re fortunate that there’s a high demand for kirtan,” Visvambhar says, acknowledging that kirtan is currently experiencing an unprecedented rise in popularity, both in live festival situations and increasingly in the recording industry. Vaishnava musicians like Krishna Das and Jai Uttal have been performing kirtan as part of their work on the world music scene for years, but kirtan received a special boost of recognition three years ago when Equal Vision Records, a hardcore and punk label, established the sub-label Mantralogy specifically to promote “kirtan and a variety of other sacred and meaningful musics for both the flourishing underground conscious music scene and an increasingly swelling mainstream audience” (Gauravani). Hardcore, punk, and kirtan might seem like strange bedfellows, but Equal Vision founder Ray Cappo found that some of the same impulses that drove the 1980’s Straight Edge punk movement, in which he was active, resonated with his later experiences as a Hare Krishna convert. For that reason, establishing Mantralogy under Equal Vision Records ultimately seemed a return to the core values of his label (Equal Vision, Gauravani).

Recordings of kirtan have always been prominent in the aural landscape of the Krishna temple. Hare Krishna restaurants, gift shops, and other ISKCON locations tend to broadcast a steady stream of kirtan through their premises, most of which consists of recordings made during live worship or at festivals. In the live kirtan recordings that are so prevalent as part of the ISKCON soundscape, the listener may not be personally participating in the music, but a great deal of musical energy is derived from the fact that so many singers are participating in a united wall of sound. Studio-recorded kirtans such as the albums recently released by bands like the Mayapuris and As Kindred Spirits may still retain call-and-response between groups of performers, but in recordings their emphasis shifts from the exhilarating energy of participation to the artistic quality of the melodies, rhythms, and arrangements themselves. Performers in this up-and-coming generation of kirtan singers perform in a variety of situations. In order to succeed they must navigate the requirements of participatory music during more traditional kirtans, of
presentational music during stage shows, and of studio recording with its added emphasis on music as art object (see Turino 2008:91).

In addition, they must also present kirtan in a manner likely to attract new music fans, and the Mayapuris offer a telegenic, youthful face to the emerging kirtan movement. Milton Singer’s statement regarding cultural performances that mediate “between the images one country holds of another and the psychological needs, fears, and hopes projected onto these images” comes to mind (Singer 1972:12). Westerners often like their Eastern spirituality both loaded with ancient wisdom and capable of revitalizing their modern lives. The imagery prevalent in promotional materials, photo shoots, the band’s website Mayapuris.com, and their music video “Mridanga” blends traditional texts, instruments, and attire with rapid-fire drumming, dancing, and a large number of shots in which performers are seen either spinning or airborne. World music luminary Jai Uttal proclaimed the Mayapuris the “young tigers of kirtan,” a statement that has been frequently quoted in press materials both to promote kirtan to a newly interested public and as a sort of passing of the torch between generations of kirtan artists (Mayapuris).

Two of the members of the band, Visvambhar and Kishore, sit down to talk with me about their musical careers, and while Kishore, who was born to a Colombian family in Mississippi, and Visvambhar, who moved around extensively when he was young, represent a variety of places of origin, three important locations stand out in their stories. One is Alachua, where they spent a significant portion of their youth and which they credit on their website as “a small village-esque town known to some as the capital of the underground grassroots-kirtan movement in the West” (Mayapuris.com). The other two are the Indian cities of Vrindavan and Mayapur, the locations of Krishna’s birthplace and the origin of Caitanya-style kirtan in India, respectively, where they studied in gurukulas, or guru-centered residential schools. In these nurturing devotional environments, Visvambhar says, “both of us have been playing the drum since we could not even reach it.” Performing became a way of life, as Visvambhar details:

Either together or individually we’ve basically been touring for over 10 years. Kish would travel with his brother Bali who’s part of the Mayapuris, and they would travel on the bus tour every summer and hit all the Rath Yatras as young boys and do kirtan everywhere. And we actually started Mayapuris 10 years ago doing drum presentations. We’d do this presentation where there’s mantras for
the drum, and we’d play it and dance with the drum, and that’s how Mayapuris got started.

Because ISKCON devotees see their movement as force with the power to change the world for the better, and because kirtan is believed to cleanse the world, the prospect of widespread public interest in kirtan is very exciting to many devotees. I have discussed the popularity of kirtan in yoga studios in conjunction with the New York community, and the Mayapuris have likewise spent their share of time in yoga studios. Vishambhar, having grown up performing deity-centered worship before temple altars, confesses that “the first time we went out to a yoga studio I was like, ‘Where’s the Krishna in here?’ [we laugh]. But it was good for me because then I had to just really focus on the name [of Krishna in the mantra] as the deity.” He continues to reflect on the reasons for the spread of kirtan through contemporary yoga classes:

The yoga brings a state of balance, [of being] centered, and then once you’re there it’s like, ‘Okay, I want to feel something. And the kirtan does stir that right away, it’s the fastest way to reach the heart, the inner sanctum of the heart. And that’s why it’s prescribed for this age, and people who are practicing yoga—they’re already somewhat open, and so it’s a great venue. We owe that to a lot of kirtan artists who are out in the yoga world who cultivated that for the last ten, fifteen years.

Groups like the Mayapuris spend much of their time leading kirtans in temple and festival settings with ISKCON devotees who naturally participate and participate enthusiastically, and indeed much of my recognition of the various members of the Mayapuris comes from seeing them not on stages but in temple rooms in different places both leading kirtans and taking part in kirtans led by others. The need to be participating in the music in some way appears to be deeply ingrained; after sitting in on my interview with Bada Hari one Sunday, Visvambhar excuses himself, saying “I have to go get my kirtan on,” and heading back to a nearly empty temple room to play hand cymbals for another kirtaniya. He says, “Kirtan is something that people relate to, it’s participatory—you sit there, you’re a part of it and even if you don’t sing….you [can] just be in it and the practice is so powerful.”
The Uses of Kirtan: Celebrating in Alachua

The Hare Krishnas are a group that spends a great deal of time celebrating. Kurma Rupadasa pointed out during our conversation in Brooklyn that between the appearance days and disappearance days of various saints, gurus, and forms of the deity and a rich body of lore regarding divine pastimes of Krishna that deserve commemoration, there is a lot of celebrating to do. As a consequence the event calendars at New Raman Reti tend to be fairly full. Certainly some festivals are larger than others or addressed to different audiences. Mukha explains that “we do try to put press releases out for the big ones like Janmastanmi. and we often get papers to come out and report on it.” For smaller festivals like Govardhana Puja, “we really invite our extended congregation. There [are] a lot of Indian families in Florida who would like to come here and observe these festivals because this is what they grew up observing in India, so we try to contact them.” From the perspective of a temple president tasked with managing a large number of events with high attendance,

Our biggest goal is always to please Krishna with whatever we’re doing, including putting on a festival, and to keep that focus throughout the festival. In other words, everything we do is for Krishna’s pleasure. So if we’re organizing a big festival like Janmastanmi or Govardhana Puja then [our priority is] how are we glorifying Krishna the most, and then also enabling the people who come to participate to do so as well?

After an event, she says, “I think if everybody has a good time, if everybody says, ‘That was a great festival, I had such a nice time, the food was good, the music was good, I felt happy and satisfied,’ that’s a good festival.”

My current proximity to Alachua has provided the rich opportunity to observe a handful of celebrations both traditional and modern in a well-established devotee community. For the sake of this dissertation, I will give primary emphasis to a discussion of the Festival of the Holy Name. First, however, I will provide portraits of two other celebrations, Krishna Janmastanmi and Govardhana Puja, which together demonstrate different ways that music and the performing arts are used to bring beauty, pleasure, and the performance and embodiment of theology to a religiously significant event.
**Krishna Janmastanmi**

Krishna Janmastanmi is celebrated annually in the late summer to early fall—in this case, on August 21st, 2011. It is one of the most important festivals in ISKCON as it commemorates the appearance, according to Vaishnava belief, of Lord Krishna approximately 5000 years ago. “One of the reasons Krishna comes is to destroy the negative elements, destroy the demons, and another reason he comes is to give pleasure to his devotees,” Sukha explains. “So really Janmastanmi is largely a celebration of Krishna’s pastimes [and] the ways that Krishna interacts with his devotees.” As such, Janmastanmi is the biggest festival held annually at New Raman Reti. “It’s not just like, ‘Oh it’s my mother’s birthday, let’s plan a big party and invite a bunch of people,’” Sukha continues. “It’s like, ‘Hey, it’s God’s birthday.’” Janmastanmi is notable for its emphasis on Krishna’s life story and on his relationships with family, friends, lovers, etc. Thomas Hopkins credits the intense devotional feeling of the performance arts in bhakti yoga to the fact that “it [is] their own relationship to God that they express, conveyed in terms of human feelings—love, friendship, despair, and joy” (quoted in Henry 2002:49). In fact, Vaishnava theology uses the dynamics involved in different types of human relationships to describe different ways of relating to God: as disciple, servant, parent or sibling, friend, and lover (see Dimock 1966:49). Over the course of the festival devotees will act out certain roles in the life of Krishna, imagining themselves as characters of Vaishnava mythology, or simply emphasizing Krishna’s interactions with his loved ones through the arts, all behaviors intended to “elicit a form of participation in the life of God” (Gelberg 1983: 27-28).

Starting early in the afternoon of Janmastanmi the temple room is the site of a continuous string of loosely populated bhajans led by a string of kirtaniyas. They are accompanied by a handful of mridanga and hand cymbal players, some of whom simply shuffle the instruments around in the very brief pauses between kirtans, one passing a drum off to another while taking the spot in front of the microphone and harmonium to lead. During this time various people come in to take darshan—some parents leading their children in to perform prostrations in front of the altar, some devotees with cameras. At some point during the afternoon a pujari enters and begins the arati offerings. A few young men stand up and start to dance in loose circles around each other.
The bhajans/kirtans performed in the temple rooms during festival afternoons often accompany an arati with a special ritual dimension such as the bathing of deities. On this afternoon, for the festival commemorating the birth of Krishna, devotees line up and approach a hanging cradle which holds a baby Krishna doll, which they rock briefly. Watching individual devotees approach their brief moment rocking the baby Krishna can be moving. A young mother shows her two young children how to rock the cradle. A couple of the older women move their hands to their foreheads or the crowns of their heads after touching the cradle, as if taking the divine influence into the parts of themselves where the divine spirit might enter. One older man drops to his knees. Many people place gifts of cash in the cradle.

Photograph 44: Rocking Baby Krishna

Because Vaishnava theology frames human relationships as symbolic of a soul’s affection toward God, devotees are invited to identify with those personalities who interacted with Krishna in particular ways. In the Mahabharata, for example, Arjuna exemplifies the affection of a friend as directed toward Krishna. Radha is worshipped on temple altars everywhere because her fierce passion for her lover exemplifies the highest level of attachment to Krishna. According to the mythology that surrounds Krishna, the human woman Yasoda was given the privilege of being Krishna’s mother in the flesh because, in her intense pious devotion to the Lord she had prayed that the Lord’s incarnation might be born to her so that she could shower him with service. This is one temple where there are recognized men’s women’s sides of the temple room when devotees are all assembled for lectures, aratis, and kirtans. During ritual processes at
other Alachua festivals I have seen a table for bathing the deities, for example, set up in the center of the room, and two lines of devotees waiting to bathe them that start on either side of the room. However, the act of devotional service represented by rocking Krishna’s cradle is one that would be specially associated with Mother Yasoda, and so it seems significant that for this offering there is only a single line for devotees of both genders to temporarily step into her role, and it is on the women’s side.

One thing that strikes me about the stream of rotating kirtaniyas that take over the harmonium and microphone throughout the afternoon is the fact that I am hearing many women’s voices. While women leading kirtan is by no means unusual, the fact remains that the majority of kirtaniyas at all of the ISKCON temples I have visited, as well as the majority of the percussionists who accompany them, are men. There are musically-inclined female devotees who are not bothered by this—Raga, whose CD includes a few songs that specifically address women’s rights, actually surprised me by saying that she doesn’t always like to lead kirtan because she feels shy. She described as her favorite a temple where the women actually sat in a separate balcony because “I felt that this meant that [fewer] men would be looking at me [while leading kirtan]. Because you want to be admired, but to a point.” Still, there is often a noticeable gender disparity in kirtan leadership.

When I ask Mukhya about the prevalence of male kirtaniyas she acknowledges, “that’s true…traditionally the kirtans have been led by men,” and she offers a practical reason for that: during crowded kirtans, such as the Sunday feasts, “you need a very strong voice that really lasts a long time and that is typically a male voice who is suited for that.” However “the bhajans when we’re sitting quietly are often men or women.” She adds that “at this temple, because we’re such a family oriented community, the women also lead kirtan,” adding that the morning kirtans during the week are quite often led by women. During this particular afternoon, in which a long series of kirtaniyas follow one after the other, approximately half of the kirtans are led by women, half by men. The two that appear to me to draw the most enthusiastic participation are both led by young women. One, the only one of the afternoon kirtaniyas dressed down in a t-shirt and jeans, lets the harmonium drop out at times to clap some complicated rhythms and draws a great deal of enthusiastic clapping to match her. Another woman’s kirtan is
accompanied by several young men who stand up to dance exuberantly in the open space of the sparsely populated temple room.

Though there is a clear division between the men’s and women’s sides of the room, this does not equate with there being a strict segregation—women participating in the kirtan group, for example, sit on the men’s side of the room, although the fact that the kirtan group is traditionally placed there and women pass to the other side of the room to lead may be indicative of certain assumptions about kirtan leadership and gender. Still, there seems to be no disapproval for those passing through each others’ sides of the room, and I would be surprised to see it at a temple with a female president. When I ask Mukhya about being a female temple president she observes wryly, “It has been more unusual over the years, although Prabhupada said right from the beginning, men or women can do this. But then the men never seemed to think that was something they were willing to do.” But ideally, “we look for people who are suited for the service” and “I think it’s much more acceptable” now.

While kirtan before Krishna’s cradle carries on in the temple room, the outside pavilion houses a combination of performances that combine traditional art forms, contemporary staging of scriptural stories, and the embodiment of Vaishnava mythology among members of the community here. During a costume contest, a number of children in elaborate outfits trot across the stage impersonating various characters from Vaishnava mythology. The contest to impersonate mythological personalities, as well as the iconography and theology surrounding them, leads to some telling interactions between the emcee and the contestants. He is able to cover for stage shyness, in one case, by announcing, “Draupadi was very chaste so her shyness today” is fitting. A few moments later a tiny girl in sari, head scarf, and flowers makes her way onto stage, announces herself as Radharani, then stands frozen in front of the audience. They respond with audible admiration when the emcee asks, “How does Radharani hold her hands?” and she raises one trembling hand into an open-palmed gesture of benevolence. The nature of Hindu cosmology then allows the emcee to cover what might have been an awkward moment when an equally adorable girl comes onto the stage dressed as the same character: “Wow, so many expansions of Radharani!” While the children in the costume contest might be too young to participate in some of the other performing arts displays
that invoke the names of Krishna or mimic his pastimes, this event still gives them the opportunity to temporarily embody the forms of the divine.

After the costume contest a theatrical performing troupe takes the stage. They perform “The Three Lives of Bharata,” a drama based on a cautionary reincarnation tale about a soul who becomes a great king, but whose obsession with a pet animal causes him to be reincarnated as a deer in his next life. As the play progresses, Bharata gradually works his way back to enlightened human form. The troupe performed this play across the country in conjunction with the bus tour this summer. As the actors are tasked with depicting such abstract ideas as the creation of the world and the evolution of life forms, not to mention a story in which a man turns into a deer, their performance is marked by the use of humor to make the story current—the evolution of living beings, for example, as a narrator announces “three different gradations of aquatic species,” is accompanied by actors wiggling around the stage, arms waving, making fish faces. The play also demonstrates impressive costuming for a production that otherwise has to be essentially set-less for traveling shows. The costume in which the actor recognizable as Bharata enters the stage manipulating the moving parts of a large deer is particularly impressive. After the play, the display of young Krishna-conscious talent continues with performances by bharatanatyam and kuchipudi dancers.

The most involved of the activities associated with Janmastanmi is the construction of a miniature village of Vrindavan, the reputed birthplace of Krishna, on the lawn behind the temple. Although the real Vrindavan is a relatively small village, it is densely packed with temples, and ISKCON devotees put great priority on traveling there. Vrindavan is particularly associated with the sacred pastimes of Krishna, which are commemorated wherever he is worshipped in lila plays, lila meaning pastimes. Stories told as an effort to venerate the sacred pastimes concern Krishna’s birth, his childhood pranks as a naughty butter thief, the patience of Mother Yasoda, and his mischievous exploits with the gopi cowherd girls. The Vrindavan village, as created by the Alachua community’s youth, illustrates some important pastimes. One story from Krishna’s childhood, for example, tells of the many-headed river serpent Kaliya who captures the child Krishna in his coils, to the great panic of Yasoda and all of the gopis. However, the young Krishna ultimately defeats the serpent by dancing on top of its many
heads. In the Vrindavan village replica, the story is recreated by seven papier-mâché serpent heads extending out of the ground, some a good three to four feet tall. An elaborately dressed plywood cutout of young Krishna smiles and dances on the heads, pulling the serpent’s long tail, while another cutout shows the head and shoulders of a praying gopi.

Photograph 45: Krishna Dancing on the Serpent’s Heads

Sukha describes the details involved with creating the serpents and says, “we’re talking [about] people taking months and months really to do this, and once it’s over starting to plan what they’re going to do for the next year. So it’s a meditation. It’s an absorption” in the pastimes of Krishna, “which is really the purpose of the whole thing, is to wrap your mind around love of god.” In another spot, beside a sign indicating “Chir Ghat,” a location in Vrindavan, a figure of Krishna watches from one of the Alachua property’s trees. The heads and shoulders of several bathing gopis protrude from the lawn, understood to be the Yamuna River, the storied gopis pleading with the mischievous young god to return their clothes. It is fitting to place emphasis on the experiences of the gopis, as they represent the kind of fierce love that a human should have for God. Edward Dimock writes that love “is a saving grace which fixes the mind on God…the gopis long for Krishna, and are deeply in love with him; man by his nature longs for union with God” (Dimock 1966:62). According to Milton Singer, “the story of Krishna and the gopis is taken as a parable of the individual’s spiritual odyssey. (Singer 1966: 136)”
Most of the space in the miniature village, however, is dedicated to replicating twelve of the famous temples in Vrindavan, and for a few hours in the evening, the village is open for devotees to visit. With the exception of one built into a permanent pavilion, the temple replicas consist of a tent booth with a large, painted cardboard façade that mimics the appearance of the temple in Vrindavan. Inside each tent is a table with a set of altar deities, most the smaller sort that stand roughly a foot high. Beside each booth, a stand offers information on the temples depicted, including stories about the particular expansions of the deities worshipped, legends about how particular deity statues were found and information on the historical figures, many from the 16th and 17th centuries, who installed them in those temples. Every information sheet ends with the line, “Srila Prabhuapda brought Vrindavan to the whole world,” followed by a picture of altar deities from a temple outside of Vrindavan such as London, Brooklyn, or Atlanta. The miniature temples are decorated in different ways, ranging from the fairly simple—like Sri Sri Radha Syamasundara, where Radha and Krishna stand under a golden arch on an elegant black and gold tablecloth surrounded by not much more than a couple of candle-holders—to the very elaborate—for example, Sri Sri Radha Madan Mohan, where deities are housed in an intricately carved wooden stage and the table before them is arrayed with items including flower garlands and piles of flower petals, small framed photographs, conch shells, golden ritual offering implements, statues of Nrsimha the lion god, etc. Regardless of how they are decorated, all of the booths are very beautiful, and the visiting devotees treat them as miniature temples: they approach and take darshan, many of them prostrating themselves at each station, while young women stationed at each temple hand out sweets as prasadam, sometimes telling stories or talking of Krishna consciousness.
At the far side of the village, a small kirtan group sits in a tent beside the deities of Jagannath and his siblings. Their music is carried by loudspeaker over the whole miniature village, as is fitting for any Krishna conscious event. This kirtan is in traditional style with harmonium and mridanga, which is fitting for a celebration so heavily invested in conveying tradition. Near the exit of the Vrindavan village is Krishna’s birthday card: a wall-size posterboard painted with an image of toddler Krishna playing in the broken crocks of butter that figure into many of the stories of his childhood exploits. Markers are provided and even a stepladder for devotees to write on Krishna’s birthday card, and an array of different greetings cover it. Many of them—perhaps a majority—consist of a basic “Happy Birthday, Krishna” and a signed name. Children have drawn hearts, lotus flowers, and Krishna’s face in different places. The messages range from the sort of thing you’d imagine writing to a co-worker or acquaintance (“I hope you enjoy your birthday with Srimati Radharani and all of your devotees”), to the theological (“Thank you for coming to deliver us fallen conditioned souls”), to the personally moving, (“Thank you my dear Lord Sri Krishna for allowing me to see you today”), to the slightly humorous (“Happy Birthday Krnna, eat lotsss of butter 😄”). Krishna’s birthday card shows a real dedication to the idea of a personal God—as Sukha says, “hey, everybody, this is God’s birthday—and the notion of celebration as a way of participating in the life of that God. The various activities of Janmastanmi are oriented
toward replicating events and places in Krishna’s life so that devotees can feel personally involved with him, and kirtan, the musical act regarded as aural communion, provides a continuous soundtrack to those processes.

Govardhana Puja

Govardhana Puja is held annually in the late autumn. It is smaller than a festival like Janmastanmi, but it is likewise an event marked by the use of distinctly pleasurable activities as forms of worship. Kirtan plays a key role in spiritualizing each activity as well as injecting it with enthusiasm and joy.

Govardhana Puja commemorates an incident in the life of Krishna, and is named for Govardhan Hill, a location in Vrindavan. According to legend, Krishna saw the people of his village striving to make adequate sacrifices to appease the rain and thunder god Indra. Krishna taught the importance of living with right karma, rather than trying to get through life by appeasing the elements, and acting according to his advice, the people of the village neglected to perform the sacrifice. A furious Indra responded by sending a deluge upon the village. In the key act commemorated by the festival, Krishna lifted Govardhan Hill and balanced it on his little finger, and the people of Vrindavan took shelter underneath. The people were preserved, Krishna’s greatness was demonstrated, and Indra’s power was broken, or at least sublimated to the supreme power of Krishna.

During Govardhana Puja, the major activity of the day flows organically from a temple room kirtan and arati. When I arrive kirtan and arati are already under way and

Photograph 47: Krishna’s birthday card
continue building strength in the temple room over the course of a half hour. At this point there is a lead singer playing mridanga, two other drummers, and a couple of hand cymbalists. The singer only covers a couple of songs over the course of the kirtan, but this is a performance with a strong sense of play: the conga line that starts circling the front half of the men’s side then slips into a loose game of ring-around-the-rosy is evidence of that. The temple room accumulates a larger and larger group of people as the music continues.

Finally a man calls out a set of instructions and the congregation neatly turns and files out of the temple room, setting out into the lawn between the temple room and the pavilion.

Photograph 48: Govardhana Puja Procession

The procession is led by a kirtaniya now singing into a megaphone and a kirtan group that has expanded to include a propulsive five-man drum line, a few pairs of hand cymbals and, somewhere along the way, an accordion. The group walks straight to a large shade tree and the “Save the Cow” pen. A devotee holds a rope connected to two large cattle yoked together and dressed in colorful flower crowns. They seem remarkably unfazed when the procession of 80 or so devotees, all singing enthusiastic kirtan, circles around them, some reaching out and touching the animals in affectionate gestures. Ultimately the group circumambulates the cattle and the tree three times, while one of the women rings a bell and waves incense toward the animals. A couple of kirtaniyas will pass the megaphone between them over the next 45 minutes, but the melodies used will remain fairly constant. In fact a single melody, varied somewhat in the kirtaniyas’ interpretative approaches but recognized as fairly constant by the congregation, will
occupy the majority of the ritual. Even so, the continuously repetitive nature of the music will not affect the enthusiasm with which the crowd approaches their task. The dancing of the devotees becomes increasingly animated as they move toward their next destination: Govardhan Hill.

Photograph 49: Govardhan Hill Replica Made of Sweets

Under a tent on the lawn just outside of the temple room, devotees have created a mountain—a detailed replica of Govardhan Hill made almost entirely of sweets. At the head of the table stand figures of Krishna and Balaram. Both the mountain that runs down the center of the table and the landscape that surrounds it are made out of a base layer of halavah and dyed green coconut vegetation. The center mountain is also covered with sugar cookies in the shapes of flowers and elephants. Sweets covered in green coconut stand on toothpicks all over the landscape to represent trees, and sugar cube houses topped with chocolate roofs represent buildings. The landscape is extensively populated by plastic toy animals, with an obvious emphasis on cows. Little signs indicate specific locations: Asivora-Base of Hill, Asivora-Sandy Path, Radha Govinda Mandir, Bhaktivedanta Asrama, etc.

The kirtan group halts their forward motion briefly before approaching the hill, and the energy that had been devoted to moving forward now seems to be transferred upwards, as many of the devotees take to a series of excited vertical leaps. A larger group of singers has gathered now, as well as a significant number who are simply standing around the hill watching. After several minutes, the procession of singing devotees begins to circumambulate the hill, and although I ultimately lose count of the
circumambulations, they circle Govardhan at least 14 times over the course of a half hour. During this time a pair of pujaris stands near the corner of the table; one holds a tray full of items, and the other makes arati offerings such as the bell, the incense, the fire, and the handkerchief toward Govardhan Hill. This is the second time within a few minutes that pujaris have made the ritual offerings I’ve seen so often presented before deities to ordinarily mundane things: two cattle and a hill. But a couple of thoughts come to mind as I reflect on it. First, that the celebratory process, in a faith-based setting, aims to make all things sacred. Or further, that these things are touched by Krishna, and association with Krishna is believed to make all things sacred. Hence the common recitation “all glories to the assembled devotees,” cried out during prostration at the conclusion of a lengthy kirtan. The intention of kirtan is, through association with the names of Krishna, to make everyone there sacred.

My second impression is of the utilization of pleasurable activities for worship by tying them into the life of the deity, turning that pleasure into an act with potential to bind the soul emotionally to Krishna. At a certain point, several devotees step into the roped-in area surrounding Govardhan Hill and begin scooping up handfuls of candy mountain to distribute to the gathered crowd. The mountain is unmistakably delicious, but it is also sacred, and a couple of devotees manifest an awareness of taking the sacred mountain into themselves by raising their handful of halavah and coconut briefly to the forehead before eating. Understandably, much of the singing congregation disperses to take part in eating Govardhan—within ten minutes, the mountain is virtually gone—but a dedicated group of fifteen or so instrumentalists and singers continues their orbit around the hill. I confess that I find myself watching the kirtan group while I, myself, am eating at the table, and hoping that someone saves a pan of green coconut halavah for them later. But even as the mountain disappears, the kirtan singers hardly seem deprived. At a certain point, after 15 or so circumambulations of the hill, the kirtan players turn and head back into the temple room, the music as continuous on the way in as it was on the way out, where they circle up toward each other and continue to play, obviously energized, obviously deriving great pleasure from the process of singing, playing, and dancing. They show no sign of wanting to stop.
**Festival of the Holy Name**

The New Raman Reti community provides an excellent opportunity to see a range of traditional Vaishnava festivals; it also provides a festival of a sort that is part of a recent trend: the 24-hour (or 12, or 48, 72, even 96-hour) kirtan, or “kirtan mela.” Where every other festival discussed in this dissertation uses kirtan as a primary element of a celebration essentially dedicated to other things, the Festival of the Holy Name allows kirtan itself to become the object of celebration, separating the singing out from the other practices of the temple for long and intensive periods of immersion in calling on “Krishna in vibratory form” (Bryant 2007:15-16).

Krishna Balaram Mandir is a temple in Vrindavan which was built by ISKCON in 1975 and has since served as a major center for the society. Srila Prabhupada desired to see a perpetual kirtan performed there, and for a period between 1975 and 1978 a 24-hour-a-day kirtan ran at various times, albeit not always continuously. In 1986 Aindra Prabhu, one of Srila Prabhupada’s disciples, reinstated a continuously running kirtan thanks to kirtaniyas who work in shifts, all on a volunteer basis (24-hourkirtan.com). Particularly as young up-and-coming kirtaniyas have the opportunity to play in the 24-hour kirtan, this immersion in kirtan has become a much sought-after training experience; inspired by the perpetual kirtan at Krishna Balaram Mandir, festivals oriented toward a certain number of hours of singing kirtan have sprung up all over the world.

The farming community in New Vrindaban, West Virginia, for example, hosts one of the more famous kirtan melas. New Vrindaban’s 24-hour kirtan is held annually from 11:00 a.m. Saturday to 11:00 a.m. Sunday on the third weekend in June, and the 2012 event is the sixth year for that particular festival. Press materials emphasize the continuous nature of the event, claiming that the best hours are often for those troupers who make it through the early hours of the morning (New Vrindaban). In recent years the trend has become an international phenomenon, and there seems to be a drive to expand the scope of such festivals in time as well as in space. In November 2011, Nova Gokula in Brazil announced Latin America’s biggest kirtan with a 48-hour event (Sri Krishna Murti Das 2011). Estonia’s Sri Harinam Mandir announced the first major kirtana mela, or kirtan festival, in the Baltic states running for three days of 12-hour kirtans in March 2012 (Eistre 2012). By the time these took place, a new record for
Kirtan festivals outside of Vrindavan had been set by Germany’s branch of ISKCON with a four-day, 12 hour-per-day festival in the town of Hoher Hain (Smullen, “Germany,” 2011). Press for the event emphasized the conception of this period of history as the Kali Yuga, and kirtan as the prescribed method for attaining liberation during the Kali Yuga; with that in mind, the organizers’ goal was to “spread auspiciousness all over the planet. Our ‘Kirtana Mela’ is informed with the desire to not only bless ISKCON Germany but to benefit many devotees all over the world and ultimately the planet Earth.” Press materials also encouraged attendees to pace themselves, recommending 6-8 hours of kirtan per day and emphasizing the need for proper rest, water, and prasadam (Ibid). This year’s event is even larger, promising nearly seven days of kirtan (kirtana-mela.com).

Some kirtan melas are held to bring auspiciousness to an occasion, such as the Chant for Change event that Jahnavi mentioned in conjunction with President Obama’s inauguration festivities. These festivals are sometimes held to celebrate the installation of new deities in new temples, and recently some such kirtan melas have been associated with special benefits, such as VerMantra, held at Vermont College of Fine Arts to raise money for continued disaster relief associated with last year’s Hurricane Irene (Patoine 2011). Others have been associated with commemoration, such as a 24-hour kirtan held in Washington D.C. in 2010 on the anniversary of 9/11. “The world is on fire, and we need the peace formula of God’s Holy Name,” press materials announced (Smullen 2010).

A significant dimension to the kirtan mela is its role in negotiating generational identity within the Hare Krishna movement. Articles promoting the various events often speak of the 24-hour (or similarly marked-out) kirtan as a manifestation of enthusiasm from the emerging second generation of ISKCON musicians. An article on the Brazilian 48-hour festival refers to the trend for kirtan as “a revolution in the Vaishnava youth” (Sri Krishna Murti Das 2011). One article on the New Vrindavan festival has to overcorrect for the phenomenon:

Although the festival was not advertised as a “youth event,” the majority of those who took part in the kirtan were part of ISKCON’s second generation. Festival organizers, while encouraged by the youth presence, felt that more needed to be done to communicate that the festival was meant for everyone – regardless of age, gender, or background. “Devotees need to understand that this isn’t an exclusive ‘kuli [devotee youth] thing’ or whatever,” said New York kirtan leader Ananta.
Govinda Dasa. “It was never meant to be that. This is for everyone who wants to experience kirtan” (Chander 2008).

Another article on the same event, from a different year, states: “Gurukulis, or second generation devotees, will also make up a major part of the spiritual talent….One could go so far as saying that New Vrindaban’s 24 Hour Kirtan is a festival driven by the second generation.” The article then quotes Gaura Vani, a musician who has acted as something of a mentor to rising kirtan artists including As Kindred Spirits and the Mayapuris, with a telling statement:

“Gurukulis have a reputation for loving kirtan because we’ve been listening well to our parents!” laughs Gaura Vani. “As we were growing up, they always talked about how the ultimate expression of a devotional heart is chanting the holy names, and how the purpose of all of our teachings and principles is to create an atmosphere where we can chant constantly. So with all of our faults, the one thing the younger generation has got right is our love for chanting” (Smullen 2009).

In Los Angeles Banabhatta and Nam both, in characterizing the history of their movement, emphasized the great devotion shown by converts in the 1960s and 1970s taking to the streets for full days of harinam. As I have talked with devotees and listened in on their conversations I have noticed a tendency to pay special tribute to the efforts of these early devotees and emphasize the long hours involved. For members of the younger generation who have grown up learning to reverence the older generation for that sacrifice, the kirtan mela takes the place of the exhaustive offering of time, and allows the second generation to demonstrate their own devotion by creating their own way of spreading the singing of kirtan in the world.

New Raman Reti’s Festival of the Holy Name is held over two 12-hour days in November. According to press materials, “We decided on Thanksgiving weekend every year, because the festival is all about the community coming together and celebrating our gratitude for the Holy Name and for each other’s association” (Smullen, “Hearts Transformed,” 2011). As festivals go, the setup is simple, but inviting. A large tent is erected, similar to the one that housed Jagannath and his siblings at Janmastanmi and those at the Festival of India. It is adorned in star quilt designs in bright colors and hung with fabric lanterns and other colorful and beautiful decorations. A large banner bearing the Maha Mantra in silver letters hangs at the front of the tent; tables at the front also hold the deity pair Nitai-Gauranga, who represent Krishna and Balaram. In the evening the
large deities of Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balaram are brought in and placed on a picnic table, much to the enthusiasm of the singing devotees. The crowd in the tent fluctuates in size, as prasadam is also available on the temple grounds and a separate area is set up with a screen to show Krishna-related cartoons to young children, but the congregation numbers somewhere between 150 and 200 or more at any given time.

The spatial set-up of this kirtan mela is also a sort of social negotiation, as young devotees work out what they believe about the relative prestige kirtan participants should have. There is no stage at this performance. Rather, the congregation is oriented in a loose half-circle, with several microphones set up in the front of the semi-circle and a harmonium that rotates among participants. A sign outside the tents gives a schedule of kirtan leaders, an hour allotted to each. Once again, press materials provide insight into the intentions of the festival organizers, who state their goal of achieving “a mood of humility, simplicity, and working together as purely as possible with Krishna in the center” (Ibid.). With that in mind, organizers make a few specific decisions about how the social relationships embedded in the performance setup should be organized:

They also aim to avoid the kind of “celebrity worship” that can be a byproduct of major kirtan events, by dispensing with stages and having all attendees sit in a circle around deities of Gaura Nitai rather than facing the kirtan leaders. After receiving feedback on last year’s promotional flyer, they also opted not to promote any specific “headliner” kirtaniyas this year, instead focusing on everyone as equal servants coming together to chant the Holy Name (Ibid.).

Photograph 50: Singing at the Festival of the Holy Name
A look at the faces in the kirtan tent indicates the deep pleasure that many devotees derive from their intensely focused musical participation, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the exhausting nature of the long-running, deeply immersive event. Visvambhar refers to the Festival of the Holy Name as “one of the sweetest kirtan festivals that is going on,” and cites the fact that such events act as a reunion of sorts for the professional musicians who have become friends over the years: “We all get together wherever we can and do kirtan—the same kind of crew—and play with each other. Some are touring internationally, and then we all meet up a couple of times a year and share kirtan with each other.” My interview with Visvambhar and Kishore takes place outside of the Festival of the Holy Name late in the afternoon of the second day, and their exhaustion is clear, as well as their enjoyment. “This is what happens,” Kish volunteers at one moment, holding up a hand bruised and bloodied from drumming in three hour shifts. It’s been that way since the final kirtan the previous night—“that’s why it started sounding slow,” he laughs. Much as these two make a career of explaining kirtan to the general public, their eloquence starts to unravel humorously during our conversation. At least three times, as they express ideas that are obviously very clearly formed in their heads, they still find themselves repeating words and saying, “Did I make that word up?” The third time this happens, Kish laughs, “I thought I was making up a word!” “We’re both making up words,” Vish replies, and Kish adopts a pseudo-advertiser voice, “from the Mayapuris….” They are clearly exhausted but enjoying themselves, and other than a few minutes here and there such as our interview or a few moments for yoga stretches outside the tent, they are almost always inside in the middle of the kirtan.

Techniques of Musical Ecstasy

There seems to be a key group of musicians who inhabit the front area of the tent, take part in each other’s kirtans, and pass around their instruments. Having spoken with a number of musicians, I have found that it is very difficult to get a specific answer in response to questions about the process of putting together a kirtan. Although Bada Hari does say knowingly to Visvambhar, “I think you’d agree that there’s an art to putting together a kirtan,” he describes his process as one of letting go and giving in to the spirit
of Krishna. “I remember having led a kirtan,” he recalls and narrates: “It becomes really ecstatic and then people kind of think, ‘Okay do it again.’ [laughter] But I didn’t do that one, I was just sitting there singing. But if anything wonderful happens it’s certainly by the grace of the Lord.” According to Bada Hari, the process transcends individual musical talents anyway.

The kind of amazing thing about kirtan is, it’s not really within our power. We can’t [say] ‘Okay, we’re going to have a fired up kirtan.’ Sometimes devotees will say like that, ‘Let’s get fired up’ and I’d be like, ‘It doesn’t really work like that.’ We try to nicely try to call out to Krishna and if he by his grace appears in the kirtan, believe me—it will be fired up. But it’s not due to the mode of passion or our getting really amped up. It happens by his grace.

When I ask Visvambhar and Kishore, who make a career out of putting kirtan on stage, to take me through the process of leading one, Visvambhar just laughs, “Oh man, I never know what’s going on.” He does add, “It’s just different every time, but it’s a practice that—you have the tunes, you have your… former training and practice of the tunes and the rhythms. So when we have the right combination of people together [and] everyone drumming and singing” it comes together, but “it really depends on the energy.”

As for what feels like a successful kirtan, Bada Hari says,

Kirtan’s always successful. You can’t do kirtan and be a failure…you can be in different kind of consciousness when you’re doing kirtan, you can be in more of a mode of trying to impress people. But I find that if I can really be in a mood of prayer really calling out to Krishna so that it’s not just singing some words or making some music, but I’m really calling out to Krishna: ‘let me serve you, let me be with you,’ really kirtan becomes successful when Krishna manifests himself somehow or other in the kirtan.

Kishore and Visvambhar reflect on what they were told by mentors within the kirtan movement. From Gaura Vani (according to Kishore): “There’s three types of musicians. The first one is one that’s just really enthusiastic to learn something and to the ears it’s not really pleasing. And the second one is, they’re getting better but they’re just focused on what they’re playing on their instrument. The third is stepping back and seeing the whole picture and being a sensitive musician so we just—we try to strive for that so it’s pleasing to the ear.” From Aindra Prabhu (according to Visvambhar): “Krishna has very sensitive ears, so when you’re playing your instrument you want to play so it’s pleasing to him, so that it doesn’t upset him.” At a practical level, “with this crowd of devotees
here [in Alachua] we can chant any tune and take it anywhere and go any rhythm and somehow or other they’ll follow along.”

A festival dedicated to kirtan at New Raman Reti, a community known for its musicians, produces kirtans of a stunning beauty; even those led by guest kirtaniyas from outside of Alachua find backing musicians and a congregation up to following the leader wherever he or she decides to go. We will take, as an example, a kirtan led by Jahnavi Harrison of As Kindred Spirits. I will use two models for analysis of the musical elements of her kirtan. One is Thomas Turino’s work on participatory music as set out in *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Turino sets out a few musical traits that tend to promote maximum participation among those present, including kinetic as well as sonic interaction between those taking part, a balance between accessibility and challenge, an open form that can be adapted to the situation, repetition, intensive variation, and a constancy of groove (see Turino 2008:36-50). These are all traits that tend to be innately programmed into the process of kirtan itself, where, as Turino says, the “quality of performance is…judged on the level of participation achieved” (Ibid. 29), but it is worth mentioning them again as certain moments during Jahnavi’s kirtan bring those musical elements into special focus.

In kirtans such as those at the Festival of the Holy Name where the artistic quality of the music is very high, it is also instructive to consider a few special traits associated with the build and release of emotional energy. Edward O. Henry, in his article “The Rationalization of Intensity in Indian Music,” analyzes the emotional quality of Indian music. He writes about a tendency to favor music that starts out in a fairly relaxed, meditative state and gradually increases in intensity until it hits a climax—hence the increasing speed and complexity of the alap and gat in a raga performance, or the Bollywood musical number that climaxes when organized choreography goes out the window and the dancers simply go into a free form frenzy. Kirtan is a musical process that—with a few exceptions such as a Rath Yatra that must maintain a continuous pace and energy level—follows this evolution from the slow and meditative to the fast and intense. Henry lists nine musical traits associated with increasing intensity in Indian music, and it is useful to consider these in the context of the performances at a kirtan mela: the progression from free rhythm to a fast beat, increased tempo, increased volume,
increased rhythmic density, melodic ascent, a held high note, what Henry terms an “arousing lyric,” a wide melodic range, and cross rhythm.

**Jahnavi’s Kirtan**

Jahnavi leads one of my favorite kirtans at the Festival of the Holy Name during the late afternoon on the second day of the festival, Saturday, November 26, 2011. Jahnavi, like the other performers leading kirtans at the festival, has an hour to work with, and it is fascinating to watch the music evolve in shape and character over the course of that hour, especially given that most of the time is spent working with variants of two particular melodies, transcribed as A and B in Figures 29 and 30 respectively:

![Figure 29: Melody A](image)

![Figure 30: Melody B](image)

The first melody contains characteristics that have the potential to be exploited to emotionally intense effect, particularly the rising line to the held C# that opens melody A and exhibits the wide range, ascending melodic line, and held high note that Henry identifies with musical intensification. As the kirtan progresses, groups of men amp up the intensity of melody A by singing the second phrase (on “Krishna Krishna Hare Hare or Rama Rama Hare Hare”) up an octave. Both of these melodies are performed in such a manner as to invite participation. The need for participatory music to balance challenge with accessibility, for example, is met by a melody A that can be fairly easily sung straight, although there is, as Turino would say, an “ever expanding ceiling” for challenge,
namely for accomplished musicians to sing with virtuosity by adding various mordents, sometimes several in a row, to notes throughout the melody. Most of the solo “calls” use at least the mordents shown in the transcription above (if not more), while the “responses” exhibit intensive variation of the original melody as some members of the congregation take up the challenge of the ornamentation, while others sing the melody straight.

Jahnavi exemplifies the festival founders’ desire that the festival not become focused on “celebrity worship” of individual kirtaniyas—as well as encouraging participation in a manner that keeps the musicians on their toes—through some modified call-and-response and soloing patterns that Turino would refer to as a combination of “simultaneous and sequential participation” (Turino 2008:47). Although Jahnavi does the most singing and certainly shapes the kirtan in terms of the melodies used and how many times they are sung, she actually passes the microphone around during the various “calls,” allowing different singers to lead different iterations of the melodies. Gaura Vani (mentor to As Kindred Spirits), Vrinda Devi (backup vocalist and bharata natyam dancer to the Mayapuris), Visvambhar, and two men whose names I do not know but who I have seen singing in the temple room, all take turns with the microphone. This opens up the door for a variety of vocal styles and interpretations, from those who take each melody fairly straight (Vrinda Devi), to those whose nearly every note is heavily ornamented (Visvambhar). During one round through melody A, the microphone moves back and forth four times between Gaura Vani, Visvambhar, and Vrinda during a single “call.”

Photograph 51: Jahnavi and Friends Pass the Microphone

Henry describes a basic pattern found in many genres of Indian music in which performers start out slowly, meditatively exploring their melodic materials, before
gradually become faster and more rhythmic until they reach a climax; the basic *alap/gat* structure of Hindustani raga is perhaps the most well-known example of this. Early in the kirtan, as Jahnavi and the singers explore the musical possibilities of the two melodies at slower tempos (roughly 80 BPM for melody A, 96 BPM for melody B), the overall effect notable in audience response is one of emotionally charged, almost hypnotic absorption in the music and in the names being sung. This is a sitting bhajan, and many of those in the congregation sway from side to side, eyes closed but faces oriented upward, mouths open very wide as they sing very loudly. After an initial nine or ten times through each melody at a slower tempo, Jahnavi returns to A, then B, then A again for seven iterations each. Once the musicians have thoroughly explored the expressive capacities of melodies A and B, the music becomes more markedly rhythmic and the tempos begin to flow, gradually increasing to 132 BPM. During this time the audience members clap energetically, many with large gestures, and a corps of a dozen or so women ranging from teenagers to senior citizens gather at the left side of the tent (facing Jagannath) to dance enthusiastically.

The congregation’s impressively enthusiastic participation is further enhanced by the fact that, at various points in this kirtan, Jahnavi and the other kirtaniyas gesture toward the audience to do some modified call-and-response patterns. For example, sometimes all of the women in the congregation sing the call and all the men the response, or vice versa. Sometimes they exchange lines or phrases of the mantra. Sometimes during the soloist’s “call,” the men sing the second phrase up an octave, then the entire congregation sings the response. Sometimes they simply add a response verse or two. These processes seem to be viewed as a game and they draw enthusiastic gestures—for example, when passing verses between the men and women, some of the singers will raise their arms at the end of their part in a throwing gesture as if they are literally passing the music across the room. Some of the men fling their arms upward in an enthusiastic “V” whenever they add a “Krishna Krishna Hare Hare” or “Rama Rama Hare Hare,” sung at the top of their register, at the end of the soloist’s call.

Henry describes increasing rhythmic density as a trait of emotional intensity in Indian-derived music. After spending roughly twenty-five minutes exploring melodies A and B and moving into an easy, flowing rhythm, Jahnavi begins ramping up the energy
with short, simple melodies that streamline the surface rhythm into a steady run of eighth notes and simplify melodic motion to a basic run down and up (or up and down) the scale. In the process she moves the tempo ahead to an energetic 152 BPM. These melodies are transcribed as C and D in Figure 31.

![Figure 31: Melodies C and D](image)

Meanwhile the dancers at the back of the tent are increasing in number and working hard to keep up with the tempo, most engaging in a basic forward-and-back step-hop that is common to most of their movement, but not performed as a unified body the way that women’s dancing during kirtans sometimes is. While the movements are similar, their execution is somewhat individualized.

![Photograph 52: Dancing to Jahnavi’s Kirtan](image)

One of the most impressive things that Jahnavi achieves with this kirtan is a sense of continuity and development by using variants of her key melodies to generate interest. After ramping up intensity and speed through melodies C and D, Jahnavi makes a marked break in tempo, reining it in to about 126 BPM. Here she introduces a variant on melody B, transcribed as E in Figure 30, that will be important to the development of the rest of the kirtan. In this variant she repeats the first phrase of her melody—a phrase that
desperately wants to resolve. But she withholds the resolution three times, finally ending with an abrupt and percussive “Rama Rama Hare Hare!”

Figure 32: Melody E

Jahnavi follows up again with melody F, which streamlines the rhythm into a steady flow of eighth notes on that same repeated first phrase of E, accelerating not only the surface rhythm but the rate at which the mantra is repeated, singing in two phrases what previously took four. Again, an increase in rhythmic density intensifies musical energy. The tempo accelerates markedly, first to 168 BPM, then on to a frenzied pace well past the 200 BPM. At this point Jahnavi is spitting out mantras at a rapid rate, and between Jahnavi and the congregation they sing twenty rounds of the mantra in about a minute and twenty seconds—not much longer than it took to sing a single call-and-response round at the beginning of the kirtan. The melody and the vocalization become so focused that when Jahnavi suddenly breaks the frenzied rush of eighth notes with a long slow run up the opening notes of melody A again, giving each note of the ascending scale extra time and emphasis, it has a dramatically expansive effect and draws even greater emotional intensity in the gestures of ecstasy expressed by the congregation.

However, this is the point in the kirtan dedicated, for the most part, to the big accelerando, so after a few times through A again, Jahnavi returns to melody F. She then does an interesting thing: she introduces melody F₁, a variation on F that turns that same incomplete-sounding initial phrase into the whole melody. She lengthens the initial notes of the phrase into heavily accented quarter notes on a repeated G#, and she does not change chords in her harmonium accompaniment, creating the sensation of a very long pedal point. This pedal point effect continues through melody G, which simply oscillates up and down the scale between G# and C# on quarter notes—overhead claps from many devotees emphasize the somewhat pounding sensation of those quarter notes—while
again, holding the same continuous chord, building tension and anticipation. Melodies F, F₁, and G are transcribed in Figure 33:

Figure 33: Melodies F, F₁ and G

The building tension and anticipation is finally released when Jahnavi introduces a new melody (Figure 34):

Figure 34: Melody H

After that grinding pedal point and the pounding quarter notes, the angular dotted rhythms and (relatively) high range of this new melody, executed at a tempo nearing 200 BPM, create the impression of a spontaneous outburst and a sensation of great freedom.

Kirtans vary in the manner in which they end, and sometimes kirtaniyas, having progressed from a meditative to an almost frenzied energy, bring the experience full circle by returning to meditative contemplation. After fourteen times through melody H, Jahnavi suddenly breaks the tempo and takes it back to a very slow, fluid return first to melody B, sung three times, then melody A, again passing the microphone between her friends. In an hour Jahnavi ranges from the deeply meditative to the ecstatically intense and back again. By skillfully manipulating contrasting melodies with different traits of musical intensity as found in Indian music, as well as playing with patterns of
participation, Jahnavi crafts an experience that is emotional and involving for those who take part.

Jahnavi’s is only one of a series of kirtans sung over the course of the Festival of the Holy Name that demonstrate a flair for the energetic and emotionally intense in kirtan. There are other kirtaniyas worthy of mention who introduce innovative approaches to melody, but her work will suffice as an example here. The quality of musical performance at Alachua reflects on the community as both a haven for first generation devotees and a hotbed of creativity for the second generation. In Chapter Five I will consider the work of these second generation devotees from the well-established Alachua community (among others) as guest artists tasked with addressing their musical practices to an unaffiliated crowd at the largest festival included in this dissertation, the Utah Festival of Colors.
CHAPTER 5:  
COLOR AND COMMUNITAS:  
THE UTAH FESTIVAL OF COLORS

Shortly after the Utah Festival of Colors in March of 2012, an image began circulating Facebook showing a large crowd of young people covered in multi-colored paint. The caption reads: “Largest Hindu festival in Western Hemisphere: 10,000 Mormons. 25 Hindus.” The numbers are inaccurate and the comment thread that accompanies the picture is a typically impenetrable tangle of commenters accusing other commenters of not understanding the intention of the photograph (Hindus could complain of appropriation; more often other Christian groups accused the Mormons of blasphemy). But nevertheless the picture garnered 2,561 “likes,” and I can say on an anecdotal level that the several friends—all supporters of the event, and all Latter Day Saint—who referred the picture to me all seemed to love it. Moreover, the popularity of the image, as well as its content, illuminates a few salient points about the Utah Holi or Festival of Colors. I don’t know exactly where to find definitive numbers on the size of Hindu-related events in the Western Hemisphere, but it isn’t difficult to imagine the Utah Holi as the largest: the event drew 65,000 people in 2012 to a relatively small property in rural Utah over the course of two days. Certainly it is the largest of the events I will discuss within the confines of this study. It is also sponsored by what is by far the smallest ISKCON community I have considered. And while the other communities and festivals that I have dealt with have exhibited an element of outreach, with music and celebration mediating encounters between different groups, the character of the Festival of Colors is virtually defined by the fact that it is a celebration hosted by one religious group for a crowd almost entirely composed of people who don’t belong to it.

My friends who talked about this photograph responded with amusement and a tinge of pride. Their unscientifically gathered but nevertheless considerable responses, along with the fact that more than 2,500 people saw fit to “like” this photograph, might indicate that there is something slightly aspirational about the way that 65,000 Utah residents take to a festival that represents a belief system to which they don’t belong. Holi is most famous for the custom of participants throwing colorful paint on each other, and the festival has since its inception in India provided an opportunity for people to
erase the symbols of social difference and embrace each other in an (at least temporarily) tolerant atmosphere. Undoubtedly large numbers of Utah residents flock to Spanish Fork for little more than the novelty of being able to run around throwing paint at strangers and get away with it. But some members of Utah’s prominent Latter Day Saint population, possibly feeling the sting of negative stereotyping about their faith, are eager not only to learn about others but also to demonstrate being open and willing to embrace what they have to offer.

On a personal note, concluding this dissertation with a visit to the Utah Festival of Colors feels in many ways like coming full circle; it was, after all, the Spanish Fork Holi that first piqued my interest in kirtan and convinced me that it was a phenomenon well worth studying. At various times in the last few years I have had the opportunity to spend time at the temple, to get to know members of the community as friends, and to attend a variety of events with a researcher’s eye. However, this is the first time, since the initial experience convinced me to study kirtan, that I have been able to return to the Festival of Colors and turn the camera, the recorder, and the analytical tools of an ethnomusicologist on the event. At any given moment during the festivities, some element of my surroundings would promise fascinating insight into the various processes of social encounter and mediation taking place on such a broad scale. But at certain times I found it necessary, on a human level, to simply put away the camera, put away the notes, pull out the colors, and become a giddy festival-goer with a heart full of good will, a handful of paint, and a crowded hillside full of targets.

The Lotus Temple

In the preceding chapters I introduced temples by describing their physical facilities, and while all have been characterized by careful attention to beauty—Krishna is, after all, the “most beautiful”—the Sri Sri Radha Krishna temple in Spanish Fork, Utah, is unquestionably a knockout. One pleasant quirk of the Utah landscape is the presence of beautiful white temples built by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on hillsides where they appear to rise from and command their respective landscapes. At least four are visible from the road in less than an hour’s drive up I-15 toward Salt Lake City—even before reaching the iconic Salt Lake Temple that has
become visual shorthand for the state of Utah itself. Extend the ride just a few minutes southward, and the Hare Krishna temple in Spanish Fork provides an intriguing bookend to this line-up of temples. Like these other temples, the Lotus temple (as it is often called) is also visible from the freeway; it is beautiful, impressive in scale, and it stands in distinct contrast to its surroundings. But it also exhibits an unexpected dimension to Utah religiosity.

The easiest way to reach the temple itself is by driving along the Main Street that passes through Spanish Fork until it leaves the small town and heads into residential neighborhoods and farmlands that roll outward. Initially the temple itself is obscured by the hillsides that line the road, until all at once it appears on the right: two stories of glorious domed Rajasthani architecture. According to devotees who lead temple tours it is the largest free-standing example of Rajasthani architecture in the Western United States.

Photograph 53: Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple

Turning onto the property, the temple stands at the top of a large grassy hillside with three pavilions at its base, one of which acts as a stage for large festivals such as the upcoming Holi. Two large red banners bearing the Maha Mantra flank that stage as well as one at the back.

At the top of the hill, a koi pond to the side of the temple building houses a large school of fish; it is fed by a small waterfall running down the rocks of a slight hillside; on top of those rocks sits a statue of Shiva, conventionally recognized Hindu god of
destruction and according to Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a demigod and dedicated disciple of Krishna. Temple president Caru Das explained to me that while most deities are kept inside to be cared for and sheltered from the elements, Shiva is a character associated with great austerities, so he sits outside in a meditative pose and watches over the pond. The position on the hill is such that Shiva’s waterfall appears to be set in the Rocky Mountain landscape that frames Utah Valley; the whole scene is remarkable in its beauty.

Photograph 54: Shiva by the Waterfall

The nature of the activities performed at the temple is apparent from a walk through the spaces around the temple building. Sri Sri Radha Krishna hosts many festivals other than the famous Holi, and many of the smaller ones are held in this space just East of the temple, where a small stage is set up for performances, as well as an enclosed pavilion for storage and other auxiliary functions. The temple grounds also act as an animal park, with signs outside the various enclosures describing not only the origins and characteristics of the animals, but also some of the spiritual beliefs regarding them. Several exotic birds live in two large aviaries. Thirteen peacocks wander the temple grounds at will. One fenced off enclosure houses a trio of Zebu cattle, while another much bigger space houses a large herd of llamas.
Photographs 55 & 56: Small Stage and Llama Farm

The llama farm in particular, which was purchased to raise funds for the temple in the mid-1980’s, has come to be associated—almost synonymous—with the local public image of the Spanish Fork Hare Krishna community. During the summer months, when nearly every town and city in the larger Utah Valley area has its local festival, temple devotees walk llamas through parades where they might be somewhat leery of performing kirtan, but the llamas draw inevitable cheers. Next to Holi, perhaps the most popular of the yearly festivals held at the Lotus Temple (a nickname for Sri Sri Radha Krishna) is the idiosyncratic LlamaFest, which features llama races, llama obstacle courses with Mormon missionaries sometimes acting as llama guides, a baby llama beauty pageant, and Andean musical performances. The temple website proclaims, “Other festivals have booths, exhibits, and some food. Above that, any festival that has good, live entertainment will definitely be successful: if over and above that, you have llamas…then you have really got something that nobody else can offer” (UtahKrishnas.org)

I’ll never forget hearing temple president Caru Das announce Llama Fest during the Sunday Feast some years ago by recounting the Krishna temple’s decision to hold a completely secular festival as a way of showing wary Spanish Fork residents that the Hare Krishnas could go for a whole day without proselytizing. But people kept on following the devotees around asking questions about Krishna and about the temple—“excuse me, we’re trying to hold a llama festival here,” Caru recounted with tongue planted thoroughly in cheek—so they started introducing Q&A sessions and kirtan singing during the Llama Fest although, as he deadpanned, the original intent was to
refrain in order to show the local community “that we’re normal people just like everyone else—because that’s what normal people do, is hold llama festivals.”

As for the building itself, two large golden elephants flank the stairway that leads up to the balcony and second floor of the temple, which houses the main temple room and altar. A walk around the balcony affords a chance to admire not only the beauty of the building itself—at each of the four corners is a domed turret supported by pillars and delicately scalloped arches—but the Lotus Temple’s natural setting: to one side is the rugged Wasatch Range of mountains that marks the westernmost edge of the Rockies; an expanse of open farmlands rolls out to the other side. The four turrets frame particularly stunning vantage points for jaw-dropping views of Wasatch Front sunsets.

An acute awareness of and attention to beauty is also apparent inside the temple room. The temple exterior and interior were both designed by Caru’s gifted wife Vaibhavi Devi, who worked as an artist in London before joining the Krishna movement in the early 1970s. I’ve found Vai reluctant to boast about her own work as an artist, but when I asked her about the spiritual necessity of beauty so evident on the temple grounds, she replied:

The original variegated beauty in all things—trees and plants and people—was all there in the spiritual world: spiritual forms, spiritual activities, spiritual relationships. But when it becomes reflected in matter then it’s insubstantial, temporary, you stick your hand in it [and] it’s going to wash away. Our mistake is looking at the reflection. If we look at the original then we see it’s substantial, spiritual substance. So why not present the glory of God? Because it’s everywhere (Black 2008:23-24).

From bottom to top, the elements of the room are not only rife with beauty, but with symbolism, as both Vai and Caru explained to me several years ago when I first set out to study the Hare Krishnas with the Utah temple as text. At the center of the room, for example, there is a large stone lotus design inlaid into the marble floor. According to Vai, poised as it is in the center of a world of material illusions, Sri Sri Radha Krishna “is called a lotus temple. The lotus flower grows in the water but it never gets wet. So the temple is a spiritual place, it’s not [part of] the material world. Everything becomes spiritualized.” The walls of the temple are, as in the other locations I’ve visited, filled with paintings of Krishna’s life, although possibly my favorite artwork in this particular room is a wooden carving depicting Radha and Krishna in an embrace that beautifully
captures the emotional intimacy that, according to Vaishnava belief, should define a person’s relationship with God. The dome at the temple room’s center is ringed at its base with paintings of Radha and Krishna while white marble peacocks circle the sky-blue interior of the dome itself. The peacocks in the dome, like the peacocks outside, symbolize, as Caru has explained in various conversations and lectures, the evidence of God’s hand in the world: God loves beauty, and the purpose of the peacock’s feathers is simply that—to be beautiful.

The altar in the Lotus Temple is a large fixture of dark, intricately carved wood which houses three distinct sets of deities. Radha and Krishna of course occupy the central space, dressed in elaborately colorful clothing that matches the other deities on the altar as well as the fabric backdrops to the altar area. The quartet of Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman stand to Krishna’s left (Krishna’s-eye view), with Nitai Gauranga on the right. Golden implements for offerings sit at the deities’ feet.
To the side of the altar sits a Prabhupada murti on a wide wooden throne with intricately carved latticework at his back, the throne itself being set on a raised platform where a speaker or a small kirtan group might sit to address or sing to a congregation.

Downstairs is a cafeteria for prasadam and a gift shop that offers clothing, books, festival t-shirts, and in deference to the special character of this temple, toy llamas. The downstairs room also holds displays not unlike those found under the tents at the Festival of India, explaining different elements of Vedic culture and especially vegetarianism. While some of these posters look roughly similar to those seen at the Festival of India, some bear the distinctive mark of a temple community whose members spend a great deal of time explaining themselves to those of another faith; some of the posters display quotes from prominent figures in Latter Day Saint history that condemn cruelty to animals and suggest vegetarianism as a higher law. The downstairs area is a place for discussion, for visitors to bring their questions, and it becomes apparent after spending even a short time at the temple that devotees here are well-accustomed to answering questions and disseminating information as a form of devotional service.

**History of the Temple**

Utah’s Hare Krishna community has been built largely from the ground up by its founding couple, Caru Das and Vaibhavi Devi. Caru and Vaibhavi joined the Hare Krishna movement in 1970 while traveling the world in search of higher consciousness. Although they had fleeting encounters with devotees and kirtan in Calcutta and in Bali, the first encounter that really stuck was with devotees in Australia in 1970. The pair took initiation and spent several years working on publicity activities with the temple and with Srila Prabhupada. Caru served as temple president in Australia and in San Francisco, as well as working with the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust and early versions of the Festival of India, before purchasing a radio station in Utah and ultimately, in 1982, the property in Spanish Fork where he and Vaibhavi built a small ashram. Within the first few years of operation, the tiny temple community bought its first llamas and began bringing in revenue by renting the animals to hiking groups. Caru and Vaibhavi’s fledgling community bought a larger tract of land in 1992, and 1996 saw groundbreaking for the current temple (Utah.com).
This is where the story of the Spanish Fork Hare Krishna temple takes an interesting turn. In their efforts to get the temple built, the Krishna community found an ally in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, aka the LDS or Mormon church. While the population of the state of Utah generally has a large Mormon population, the LDS influence is even stronger in the Utah Valley area south of Salt Lake City. The presence of Brigham Young University roughly twelve miles up the freeway from Sri Sri Radha Krishna only strengthens the Mormon influence in this region and helps to bolster the popular perception that Mormonism is the default religion in the area. When I have told this story to non-Mormon non-Utahns I have noticed an instinct to expect rivalry between the two groups, and it is certainly possible to point to incidents of contention involving individuals. But a local Mormon congregation donated a crucial $25,000 to the temple building fund. Then Mormon volunteers and youth groups took part in building the temple itself. Caru has said of the local Mormon community,

They’ve been very generous, they’ve shown a lot of magnanimity. I’m just kind of in awe of the way they’ve extended their hospitality and their friendship and their support to us. Its really exemplary…I suppose that to some degree the LDS helps everybody, but if its true that they help us out more than others—I don’t know if that’s true, I suspect it may be (Black 2008:69).

To this day, Mormon youth groups have continued to participate in new installations and maintenance of the temple. Recently Caru remarked on the continuing relationship between the Mormon and Krishna communities,

We respect each other. I’m glad that we’re in a rarefied moral environment which is compatible with our own standards. It creates a better soil for interaction and dialogue, and I’ve heard a lot of good things from people at BYU who think that we’re fulfilling a need in Utah County, providing services that they’re lucky to have.

Popular tours attended by BYU religion students are one such service. Festivals such as Holi that provide safe but celebratory events for the community are another.

When I was last in a position to attend Sunday feasts on a regular basis, there were a handful of devotees who lived at the temple itself, and some stalwart families outside of the temple came every Sunday, as well as Indian families from the Salt Lake City area who came to visit sporadically. Every week approximately 70 or 80 people attended the Sunday feast, 10-15 of whom generally appeared to be newcomers dropping
in to see what the temple is like. Sometimes I had the opportunity to talk to these visitors over prasadam and found that most who I talked to were Mormon, all were enthusiastic, and they had some powerful things to say about the need to reach out and learn about other groups. That was my experience a few years ago; a few conversations this year indicated that the size of the Sunday congregations hasn’t changed much.

A significant milestone occurred in the summer of 2011, as the group purchased a second Hare Krishna center in an accessible location in Salt Lake City at a renovated Adventist elementary school. By doing so the community created a second congregation that holds feasts on Saturday nights, and although the numbers attending events at the new center are modest, the presence of a second location for staging events and festivals provides an opportune venue for expansion. Two weeks after the major Holi discussed in this chapter, the Salt Lake City center held its first Holi festival, and although it was apparently smaller in scale, Caru called it an “unqualified success,” the relief in his voice audible as he talked compared the experience to the logistical headaches involved with fitting such a vast crowd into as small of a town as Spanish Fork.

Outreach in All of Its Forms

The Utah ISKCON community’s placement in such a heavily Latter Day Saint area has radically shaped the character of the temple, and in particular, the temple’s outreach efforts. Non-sectarian as they may be, ISKCON is famously oriented toward proselytizing. Krishna devotees are dedicated to the effort to revitalize the consciousness of the world, and activities such as harinam and book distribution are hallmarks of ISKCON activity. Given the temple’s unusual surroundings, both physical and social, the Utah Krishna community takes a different approach to proselytizing in an effort to avoid causing distress to a public that tends to be passionately attached to their own dominant religion. Utah devotees rarely perform harinam in public spaces, for example, nor do they do much in the way of book distribution. However, Caru and Vaibhavi have created the temple itself to be a significant attraction with many cultural offerings to the community, so that rather than going out to the public, the public comes to them. According to Caru, “We want people to come to us…that was the whole idea of building
Utah’s Hare Krishna temple takes a broad approach to outreach—although invitation might be the more apt term. According to Caru, “we help a lot of people take baby steps toward Krishna consciousness. Other temples might be more focused on a few people taking giant steps but we’ve never thought that that would be doable here. And so our strategy has always been to get a thousand, ten thousand people to take their baby steps.” Although Caru wryly notes that this means sometimes running short of the help that they need to put on their major events, the sheer number of activities and attractions that Utah’s devotees offer to attract the mountain to Mohammed are impressive. Caru once noted that, given the belief that some spiritual activities come to fruition in future lives, “there are other temples making more devotees in this life. We’re making more devotees in the next life” (Ibid.).

The longest running proselytizing activity at Sri Sri Radha Krishna is the radio station KHQN, the first 24-hour Krishna-oriented radio station. As Caru explained, “Prabhupada always talked about broadcasting the glories of Krishna, so we just took him literally.” The temple radio station provides a means for proselyting literally without ceasing in spite of the need to occasionally sleep or eat (Ibid.).

After establishing the radio station, the temple’s llama farm became the next project, and while llama rentals to hiking and other groups are a significant source of revenue for the temple, they also act as another draw for visitors to come to the temple. Tours of the animal farm are aimed toward children, and subsequent tours of the temple itself have become increasingly popular. Devotees at the temple are prepared to offer guidance to visitors who stop in, drawn by the unusual and beautiful structure visible from the freeway. Tour groups come through the temple from time to time for various reasons; Mormon missionaries, for example, have been known to stop in on their day off, or groups from senior citizens’ homes.

In particular, students in Brigham Young University’s World Religions classes often come to the temple as part of their class assignments. Devotees who have led those tours have mentioned finding the BYU students very game for the most part—very willing to take the tika and to sing along with the kirtan, for example. Still, devotees are
careful to never push a nervous first-timer past their comfort zone in terms of participation—although one devotee admitted that he got a kick out of teasing the students after they received their *tika* by saying “Okay, you’re all Hindus now,” and watching their momentarily startled faces). Dr. Alonzo Gaskill, one of the BYU religion professors responsible for sending students to the temple, said

> I don’t think I’ve had a single student mention anything negative about the experience, but there’s been tons of raving about how fun it is…In general most people come out of it saying wow, I didn’t realize I had some of the prejudices. They realize how much truth there is in other religions. It just really causes people to stop and say, A) that was really cool, B) that was really eye-opening, C) these kids seem to have a really spiritual experience there…and how naïve am I to imply that…they can’t be having a connection with God? (Ibid.)

In addition to offering the temple itself as a tourist attraction for the curious, the Spanish Fork community offers services for those interested in spiritual pursuits at different levels. The Sunday love feast, of course, is always open to the public. But in addition the temple offers yoga classes on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights and on Saturday mornings. The classes are listed as “integrated yoga”: only a portion of the class is actually devoted to hatha yoga, and classes include kirtan and japa chanting as well as segments labeled “bhakti” and “jnana” yoga.

Given the massive scope of Holi alone, it is clear that festivals have been the most effective means of inviting people to the Lotus temple. “We have a lot of events for the public,” Caru says, “Probably more so than most temples because we don’t have a constituency in Utah to speak of, and so we get support from the public, and give support to the public.” Even setting aside the phenomenon that is the Festival of Colors, the other seven festivals held annually at the temple draw large numbers of people to the temple to participate at different levels. The most important traditional Hindu festivals are celebrated, such as Diwali the Festival of Lights, Shiva Ratri, and, naturally, Krishna Janmastanmi. Festival of India offers a pageant of the Ramayana, performances of classical Indian dance and music, and a burning of the demon Ravana. And then there is the LlamaFest—an utterly idiosyncratic event, unofficial and unaffiliated with Krishna theology. Devotees laugh about having to explain repeatedly that llamas aren’t actually part of their religion, although I do remember hearing Caru describe them as innately
mystical creatures. The LlamaFest is always very successful, drawing several thousand people every year.

The Llama Fest was my first Krishna temple event, in fact, even before Festival of Colors—I remember seeing announcements in the newspaper and deciding that a llama beauty pageant was impossible to miss. The self-aware humor evident in Caru’s story about how “normal” people hold llama festivals is certainly a significant factor in bringing people to such events, just as idle curiosity or the need to get a grade on an assignment may draw visitors to the tours. But as Caru explained, many people who show up for the humor and the fun end up becoming curious, even hooked on aspects of the theology. I remember being in the temple room during a Q&A session at Llama Fest one year and observing, for example, a girl who periodically drew her legs up into a lotus position and her hands into basic mudras, particularly when the priest leading the discussion demonstrated kirtan. She wasn’t a devotee—or at least I had never seen her in my then-regular Sunday attendance—but she knew the lotus position and the mudras, and assuming them was evidently instinctive to her when she recognized a certain type of feeling in the room.

Photograph 60: Mormon Missionaries Leading Llamas through the Obstacle Course

Aside from the events that draw people to the physical temple, the Sri Sri Radha Krishna temple maintains a significant online presence. The temple website UtahKrishnas.org, for example, not only provides thorough and well-organized information about various activities and events and on the temple itself, but very extensive information about Krishna consciousness. It is not unusual for an ISKCON
temple website to have sections offering basic information on Vaishnavism, but this website is particularly thorough in its twenty pages of information on the nature of Krishna himself; on Vedic scriptures, the teachings of gurus, and altar deities as routes to reach Him; and on the various types of devotional service that bring one into personal relationship with Him. A multi-author BYU-based blog called “New Media and Great Works” reviewed UtahKrishnas.org in the essay “A Guide to Promoting a Religion in Mormon-Dominated Utah.” The essay, written by a Latter Day Saint, analyzes the careful use of language chosen to emphasize common ground and describe spiritual realities in terms that resonate with Mormons: “This allows the reader to connect to the description of God on an emotional level, which helps to provide a stronger connection to the overall site and religion,” writes author Josie Juarez. She continues to analyze parts of the website before concluding with the somewhat amusing advice, based on the website’s quotation of work by BYU students, “You can validate everything about yourself if you just remember to ‘Use a Mormon’” (Juarez 2010).

The website is only one internet resource among several that the Lotus temple offers. A blog gives information on events and compiles posts from other news and internet sources about the temple, and the temple’s Twitter feed announces events as well as providing links to relevant pictures and articles and announcing media appearances by Caru. Sri Sri Radha Krishna has Facebook and MySpace pages, and very effectively for “broadcasting the glories of Krishna,” as Caru said, a YouTube channel with 26 playlists including talks given at Sunday feasts, festival footage, videos on science, reincarnation, and ecology, travel videos, kirtans, non-kirtan music about Krishna consciousness, videos to set the mood for chanting japa, Sanskrit chanting for ritual purposes, videos on various aspects of Krishna conscious lifestyle including vegetarianism, information on Prabhupada, etc. An iTunes channel offers 146 lectures from Sunday feasts going back to 2009.

**Krishnas, Christians, and Holy Envy**

The relationship between the Hare Krishna and Mormon communities in Utah Valley is complex, fascinating, and impossible to reduce to a handful of generalities. Some facts are very telling: the donations of money and manpower from the Mormon
church, the volunteers that still work the festivals and renovation projects, and the tours full of BYU students all point to an impulse on the part of the Mormon community at large to build bridges with their religious neighbors. However, it would be naïve to assume that that statement represents all Utah Valley Mormons. A few years ago when I had the opportunity to discuss personal history with several of the Utah devotees it seemed that nearly every Hare Krishna convert from Utah had their story about a Mormon family member or relative who responded very negatively when they converted. It became clear that for these devotees, the painful experiences with the people closest to them colored their impressions of ISKCON’s relationship with the Mormon community.

At the same time, listening to their stories about visitors to the temple made it clear that this contention was more individual than systemic. I remember listening in on devotees telling stories, for example, about hosting a group of seventy BYU students on a recent tour. They laughed heartily about two young men standing at the back of the room while everyone else was participating—the ones who came in suits and ties and stood stock still with arms folded, scowling intensely as if thinking, “I had to come but my dad told me not to like it.” Then, after thoroughly laughing about the attitude of those two young men, the devotees telling the story paused to reflect—but that does mean that there were sixty-eight people dancing, singing, and thoroughly embracing what they were being offered.

There can be a certain cognitive dissonance for Latter Day Saints in interacting with those of different religions, and I heard devotees at the Krishna temple mention this as having a significant impact on the tours. On one hand, there is some exclusivity in the church’s self-concept, as Mormons believe that there are important principles in their theology that simply aren’t found elsewhere, and this drives the LDS emphasis on missionary work. At the same time, Mormons teach a Christian theology that doesn’t require non-Christians to make a stop in either hell or purgatory, so as interfaith dialogues go, Mormons pride themselves on being able to skip over some of the hellfire and damnation. LDS leaders often encourage their flock to seek out and honor the truth within all religions, and individuals within the Mormon church, according to their own life experiences and inclinations, take to that advice with more or less enthusiasm.
For Latter Day Saints inclined toward studying in the teachings of other religions, the Hare Krishnas offer much of interest. I remember hearing Caru relate with amused surprise that Mormons so often toured the temple, listened to him outline Krishna doctrine, and then said, “That’s what we believe.” Obviously, Caru reasoned, that is not true. There are some obvious differences, aside from the biographies and iconographies of Christ and Krishna. Perhaps most fundamentally, Vaishnavas and Christians, while both nursing healthy belief systems regarding right and wrong behavior, differ in their concepts of sin, redemption, and how corruption to the soul is cleansed. Where the majority of Christian groups believe in a concept of sin and redemption through the atonement of Jesus Christ, Vaishavas believe in a law of karma wherein wrong behavior and corrupt spiritual states are expunged through a series of lifetimes of—if lived correctly—increasing purity.

However, as a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints thoroughly versed in Mormon history and doctrine, I can honestly say that I have rarely if ever been to a Krishna temple lecture without hearing something that I found meaningfully applicable to my spiritual life as a Latter Day Saint. Both Mormons and Hare Krishnas believe in a personal God with whom the individual can develop a personal, even affectionate relationship. These relationships are deepened through scripture study, right action and discipline, devotional service to God and God’s children, and practices of either japa (for Hare Krishnas) or continual prayer (for Mormons) that are designed to keep God at the forefront of the mind and in the affections of the heart. Many of the lectures that I have heard at Hare Krishna temples that deal with these methods of reaching the divine would, with a few alterations of terminology, be entirely at home in a Mormon Sunday School. At the same time, some doctrinal details wherein other Christian groups might be at odds with Vaishnava belief aren’t so hard for Latter Day Saints to accept, like the belief that God is a corporeal being whose influence radiating in the universe is nevertheless limitless, the belief that the God traditionally referred to as a “he” has a female partner—even the fact that both groups consider themselves thoroughly monotheistic, while outsiders sometimes brand Mormons, who reject the traditional trinity, and Krishnas, who acknowledge demigods and multiple avatars of Krishna, as something else.
Mormons that I know tend to appreciate what Hare Krishnas teach about developing a personal relationship with God, particularly when local Utah devotees use language that feels familiar. I have often heard devotees say, “I am an eternal spirit soul and a servant of God,” and it resonates with members of a church whose most popular children’s song is called “I Am a Child of God.” Scholar Harvey Cox, a Christian who, like me, has studied Hare Krishna, confesses that part of his interest in Krishna consciousness stems from “the fact that it touches certain aspects of my own spiritual tradition, my own spiritual trajectory,” particularly in teaching about a “personal God who becomes incarnate in a particular figure revealing what God is about and eliciting a form of participation in the life of God” (Gelberg 1983: 27-28).

Gaskill uses Krister Stendahl’s poignant term “holy envy” to describe the experience which many of his students have at the Hare Krishna temple, and that many people have when encountering the faith of others:

Holy envy is the idea that you see something in another religion that your religion doesn’t have, and you’re struck by it, and the principle makes you feel closer to God, so that you envy it and wish it was part of your religion. Christopher Stendahl, who was a Harvard theologian, used to be the Lutheran archbishop in Stockholm. He coined that phrase regarding Mormon temple worship. He has “holy envy” toward it. I don’t have it in my religion, but it makes me feel closer to God, and I wish I did. And so I think the things that you really find [students] writing more meaningfully about are the things they have holy envy for. Like a lot of students say, “I wish we danced.” Or got up spontaneously and sang. Or had—whatever the case is. A buffet afterwards.

Interestingly enough, my conversation with Gaskill was not the first time I heard a Mormon religious education professional use the term “Holy Envy” specifically while talking about Mormons encountering Hare Krishnas. I have heard holy envy described not only as a feeling that devoted believers might have toward others, but as one that they should have, as a predisposition toward holy envy might indicate a real hunger for spiritual ideas and a respect for those from whom they come. According to Thomas Hopkins, “The kind of universal accessibility and attractiveness that we see in Vaishnava devotionalism owes much to the fact that it does speak to very basic human needs and it speaks to those needs in terms that are both powerful enough and simple enough that people can connect with it at a variety of different levels” (Gelberg 1983:116). A person’s ability to connect with devotionalism at different levels, and her predisposition
toward holy envy, might be influenced by certain commonalities in the types of experience that she is inclined to regard as spiritual.

**Commonalities of Religious Experience**

On a number of occasions I have heard Utah Mormons who are fond of their Hare Krishna neighbors express a sense of kinship based on a shared marginalized status in American society. The cultural mythology of the United States idealizes tolerance, inclusion, and pluralism starting with the founding myth of the Pilgrims sailing to the New World in search of religious freedom. Even so, historians can readily point to occurrences such as the treatment of early Mormons who were driven out of the United States by mob violence as immediate evidence that reality often fails to live up to the tolerant ideal. Mormons tend to have a sharp cultural memory of that period of their history, and it is not unusual to hear members of the local community say that after what their church suffered at the hands of intolerant neighbors, it would be wrong to turn that treatment on another group. While there are unquestionably non-Mormon residents of Utah who can point to those Latter Day Saints whose behavior has caused them to feel socially excluded, the ideal of promoting kinship between one often misunderstood group and another is gaining traction in the local community.

Mormons and Hare Krishnas, in spite of (and possibly because of) their positions at the margins of American religious culture, share certain qualities and inclinations with a number of other religious movements that likewise occupy a space outside of the mainstream; such groups include Hasidic Jews, Quakers, Mennonites, and holiness churches. Being outside of the mainstream may not be regarded as a bad thing; it may even add to a sense of “otherworldliness” or separation from a corruption that adherents fear in contemporary society. Many Utah Latter Day Saints appreciate the fact that Hare Krishnas offer another voice preaching abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, and extramarital sex. One Utah devotee told of a tour in which Caru explained the regulative principles of ISKCON and a Mormon mother responded emphatically, “All kids should hear that. All kids should hear that” (Black 2008:72).

The slightly otherworldly—or other-*this*-worldly—character of these religious organizations is sometimes accompanied by a tendency toward Utopianism or
revitalization. The cultural mythology of the United States as “New World” has strong hints of Utopianism, and North America has hosted many Utopian societies starting with the founding of New Haven, Connecticut in 1638. America’s Utopian history includes groups religious (the Ephrata Cloister, the Shakers, Harmony, and the Peace Mission among others), socialist (New Harmony, Kaweah, etc.), transcendentalist (Brook Farm), theosophical (Point Loma, Halcyon), and countercultural (Hog Farm, the Diggers). Some, like the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness, were driven by a belief that the Americas were a “promised land” consecrated to the millennial reign of Christ. Some were dedicated to social causes such as preparing slaves for freedom through education (Nashoba) or fostering equality and environmental sustainability (Twin Oaks). Others, like the Fourierist communes and Oneida, were experiments in developing an economy based in pleasurable activity (see Yale University Library 2006). All sought in some manner to turn an ideal about how life should be into a meaningful reality experienced communally. Some non-mainstream religious organizations that are not now associated with Utopianism, including the Mormons, went through periods of living in organized communities, and an instinct toward communalism is still played out in the set-up of the Hare Krishna ashram. Where attempts to create actual independent Utopian communities have fallen by the wayside, some of these movements still take on the project of cultural revitalization, an attempt to remake “existing institutional forms” and work toward “the construction of more satisfying forms” in their place (Daner 1976:2).

While studying Mormonism and Hare Krishna in the context of other belief systems such as Hasidism, holiness, and Quakerism I have been struck by a common approach to faith that I’ll call “experiential spirituality,” to again borrow a term from Stephen Stein (see Stein 1992). I believe that it is instructive when examining negotiations of religious identity to observe common elements of spiritual experience, even where there are significant differences on points of doctrine. Harvey Cox and Stephen Gelberg value the ability to identify “various theological or psychological types [common] within the various traditions; the pan-theist, the monotheist, the monist, the pietist,” but they do so somewhat cautiously, rightly observing that it is important not “to minimize or de-emphasize the doctrinal content of any particular religious phenomenon” (Gelberg 1983:29-30). Even so, according to Kenneth Valpey, “a measure of creativity is
called for to bring into meaningful juxtaposition a complex set of religious ideas, images, practices, and institutions” (Valpey 2006:4). For the sake of this study I will identify “experiential spirituality” in terms of a constellation of beliefs in a personal God, light within or personal revelation, and ecstatic or emotional experience.

Many of these just-outside-of-the-mainstream groups place paramount importance on cultivating devotion to a God with attributes, individuality, and possibly a personal history. Most importantly, this God has an infinite capacity for compassion that is to be experienced at a personal level, rather than attempting to bring that level of devotion to bear on a being who is conceived of as a more abstract energy. Harvey Cox beautifully captures what many Latter Day Saints find resonant about Hare Krishna with his description of Vaishnava devotionalism as “the idea of a personal God who becomes incarnate in a particular figure revealing what God is about and eliciting a form of participation in the life of God” (Gelberg 1983:27). Thomas Hopkins adds, “That whole orientation toward a personal deity of compassion and concern, and of love, who is not just some kind of absolute, impersonal reality in the Vedantic or Advaitic sense, but a Personal Being of infinite compassion, one who is concerned for those suffering in the world, appeals to something very deep within the human spirit” (Ibid. 116).

Devotion to a personal God may extend to a belief that human beings can experience a divine bestowal of some truth or heavenly intervention in response to their efforts as individual seekers. The Shakers referred to this as “gift”; Quakers use the term “light” to describe the heritage of the divine within the individual and teach that “if [believers] wait silently upon God there will be times when God will speak to them in the heart” (Hoare 2000). Latter Day Saints teach about “personal revelation,” the belief that every person has the right to—and even the responsibility to seek out—a personal manifestation of spiritual truths and direction regarding life decisions. While dramatic manifestations are rare, believers are encouraged to discover a personal relationship with God and learn to recognize an individualized manner of experiencing spiritual guidance. I have sensed a commonality between the way that Mormons describe personal revelation and the types of experiences that Krishna devotees characterize as evidence of the direct communion with deity that they seek through the process of chanting the holy names. I have often found, while talking about spiritual experiences over prasadam, that Hare
Krishna devotees use very similar—sometimes almost identical—language to that which I am accustomed to hearing at Mormon testimony meetings.

As an extension of this emphasis on personal light, gift, or revelation, experiential spirituality values the contributions of the individual to the community. Silent Meetings among the Quakers involve gathered Friends sitting in quietness until someone in the congregation is moved upon to speak by the Holy Spirit (Ibid.). Mormons have no paid clergy, but rather hear weekly talks and lessons given by lay members of the congregation and hold monthly open-microphone testimony meetings, thus ensuring that any member of the congregation with the desire to do so has the opportunity to make her voice heard. This is also very resonant with the egalitarian nature of bhakti yoga.

Hare Krishnas take a distinctly ecstatic approach to worship and great value is placed on the emotion and energy derived from experiencing that personal connection to a personal God. There is a commonality between bhakti devotionalism and the Hasidic belief that the qualifications for “devekut,” or personal communion and attachment to God, are humility, joy (simhah), and enthusiasm (hitlavakut). The heart mediates between the heel (man’s animal self) and the head (man’s divine self), and the emotional power of music is an important part of this (see Belcove-Shalin 1995). I am also reminded of the overflowing joyous nature of kirtan when observing the extraordinary ecstatic nature of gospel singing in holiness churches.

Mormons do not generally engage in some of the outward displays of ecstasy that might be expected at, for example, a holiness church—they tend to frequently quote the Biblical passage about the Spirit of the Lord not being in a whirlwind or a tempest but in a still, small, voice (1 Kings 19:11-12). They do, however, teach that “the song of the righteous is a prayer unto [God]” (Doctrine & Covenants 25:12), and some Mormons subscribe to that belief very earnestly. For example, I remember a trend in Utah Valley some years ago when large groups of BYU and high school students began gathering at somewhat random public locations—a tunnel on BYU campus, at the beginning—and singing hymns for hours at a time. The original “tunnel singing” grew so large that it had to break off into satellite tunnel singings, even if the location wasn’t an actual tunnel. In retrospect, I can recognize in the tunnel singing trend intentions and qualities of experience that are common with kirtan.
Spiritual enthusiasm among Latter Day Saints is generally expressed less in overtly ecstatic behavior than in a very deep emotionalism. The culture of Mormonism tends to encourage the expression of personal spiritual experiences in deeply emotional terms—Mormons often joke about their predilection for crying while speaking in public. To members of a religion that teaches that “happiness is the object and design of our existence” (Smith 1976:255), ecstatic devotionalism is not difficult to understand or appreciate.

In writing about the Festival of Colors, it may be possible to overstate the idea that one religious group is speaking to another, given that the population of Utah is not (as some people assume) all Mormon, and it would be impossible to quantify exactly how much of the crowd at any given time is Latter Day Saint. However, given the festival’s placement in a state and in a region of that state where the Mormon population is so influential, one may reasonably expect that many if not a majority of the people there are, if not actively LDS themselves, influenced by Latter Day Saint friends and neighbors. The commonalities of religious experience shared by Mormons and Hare Krishnas offer a significant subtext to the way that festival organizers and performers frame the event.

Over the course of the weekend at Holi, as both Caru and various musical artists address the crowd, they tend to emphasize what I like to call the “event-ness” of the festival. There are hints of revitalization in the way that they both frame the festival as utterly unique and proclaim a potential for Holi to influence the world for better. Periodic pleas for good behavior draw cheers from the crowd as they capitalize on a group pride in otherworldliness, in rising above expected rock festival behavior. Monologues from the stage invite people to identify both as individuals and as a crowd, framing the attributes of individual personalities as manifestations of the divine while encouraging festival goers to literally embrace each other in communal love. In many ways the performers demonstrate and invite the audience to blissful, emotional experience. I will discuss specific examples of this language of revitalization and experiential spirituality later, but first I will examine the history of the event itself and its influence on the local community.
Festival of Colors

Holi, or the Festival of Colors, is among the oldest and most prevalent of Hindu festivals. It is celebrated in the springtime as an affirmation of life emerging from the bleakness of winter. The name of the festival is derived from the fireproof demoness Holika who, according to legend, attempted to kill the virtuous child Prahlad by carrying him into a fire. However, because of Prahlad’s devotion to God, Holika was incinerated while the child escaped unscathed. This story was told from the stage many times over the course of Holi weekend, and according to Caru, burning an effigy of the demoness in the spring is a way of affirming the right order of the universe with good ascendant over evil.

The most vivid and recognizable aspect of Holi is the tradition of participants throwing paint at each other. The use of actual liquid paints which could contain lead or other harmful chemicals has long been a concern to health officials, and so many places, including Utah, have adopted the use of dyed powders. Given the origins of Holi in a Hindu belief system traditionally associated with strict stratification and regulation of social activities, the chaotic misbehavior of showering people with paint acts as a release valve for social tensions, and to many the colored paint acts as an equalizer. In some parts of India, the festival is associated with an inversion of social conventions and a release from what would ordinarily be considered correct behavior; in certain villages, for example, the women of the village line up to beat the men as part of Holi (Gupta 1991:40-41). If part of the revolutionary nature of the bhakti movement in Hinduism, and the practice of kirtan in particular, was the promise of relaxed social delineations, Holi was one such practice already sanctioned in a more widespread manner in the Hindu world—if only once a year.

It is fitting then, that the celebration that has become emblematic of social groups in Utah embracing each other’s differences is a version of Holi. According to Caru, the first Holi held in Spanish Fork in the 1980s consisted of “maybe five Indians, three BYU students, and six devotees.” In retrospect Caru poked fun at the careful, almost nervous approach that the initial Holi group took to the celebration:

We used to just very demurely with people’s permission smear a few colors on their face. And one day a yogi who’s a dear friend walked in the room. He caught me tentatively standing before a BYU student with a plate full of colors
asking if I could smear a little of it on his cheek. And the yogi just grabbed a huge handful and plastered the guy. There was this dead silence—I was like, “What’s going to happen now?” And the BYU student started laughing and laughing, and I was laughing, the yogi was laughing, then the colors started flying and that was the first and last year we ever had it indoors.

From there the size and the reach of the festival increased. By the time I attended my first Festival of Colors in 2005 the event was publicized on BYU campus and a healthy crowd of at least a thousand were there. A rock band made up of Krishna priest Jai Krishna Das and a handful of Mormon friends sang rock-style kirtan from the mini-stage at the side of the temple, and the entire event took place on the relatively small space between the temple building itself and the llama farm. Jai recalls pulling together the musical aspect of the festival:

This temple is spread so thin, in terms of man power and everything, and I don’t know how we pulled it off, I really don’t. So we need a rock band and someone just comes and says, ‘Oh I play blues,’ and we don’t even practice. We just say, ‘Here’s the music,’ and before we know it it’s just like, [gasp of astonishment] ‘We just pulled it off again, there are 3000 people jumping and screaming at the top of their lungs having the time of their lives, and we didn’t even practice’ (Black 2008:86).

Since then the event has exploded. Caru estimated that 3,000 people attended the 2008 festival; 10,000 attended in 2009; 25,000 in 2010; 50,000 in 2011 over the course of the first festival to become a two-day event, and ultimately 65,000 in 2012.

The growth of Festival of Colors as a community event of great significance is apparent from the fact that, during the week running up to it, various local news sources rush out their own “how-to” guides for enjoying Holi. BYU’s student newspaper The Daily Universe recommends wearing sunglasses and bandanas over the nose and mouth, using shrink wrap and plastic bags to protect cameras, and swathing car interiors with old sheets to protect upholstery (Lake 2012). The Utah Valley University UVU Review compiles a pros and cons list with the quip, if “you’re debating whether or not to go this year, perhaps this list can help. Or throw you into a deeper pool of ambivalence. Just don’t say the V left a stone unturned. We’re just here to help.” The pros and cons list includes such items as “New Facebook profile pics” vs. “Your profile pic will look pretty much the same as 200 of your other friends”; “Great excuse to get close to that special
someone. Or that special stranger” vs. “Body contact with potentially sweaty, chalk-covered strangers”; and “Llamas” vs. “Spit” (Bailey and Goldsberry 2012).

As the festival has grown and become virtually impossible to ignore, some of the hostilities that certain members of the Mormon majority hold toward the Krishna temple rise to the surface, as well as conflicts within the Mormon community regarding the appropriateness of participating in a non-Christian event. “We have our critics,” Caru says. “There’s a puritanical attitude that some people have…that if it’s too much fun something’s got to be done about it…it’s good that people are God conscious…so that’s a great atmosphere but at the same time you get a lot of this bigotry.” Critics charge that the traffic on Holi weekend is too congested, and that the center of the crowd during a color throwing might be a dangerous place for a young child or a person with asthma. An article in the local newspaper even quotes a woman convinced that the bags of color are actually bags of illegal drugs that people are throwing into the air to get the crowd high. (I confess to thinking about the cost of a single paint-packet-sized baggie of cocaine or heroin and wondering just how much money she assumes that a temple makes off of the sale of prasadam).

Interestingly enough, when online press coverage of the event brings up the controversy, the ensuing dialogue in comment threads sometimes skews toward the defensive. When a blog attached to the Daily Universe simply states that “some people argue that this is sacrilegious of Mormons to attend an event like this,” the first posted response replies, “My own faith is strengthened when I see the joy and celebration from all of God's children,” and every single subsequent comment speaks positively of the event (Farnsworth 2012). The online version of an article in the local Daily Herald draws more heated commentary by focusing heavily on traffic congestion and critic’s worries about health hazards. The long comment thread attached to this article is filled with festival goers vociferously defending the festival. “Use your brain instead of being foolish, blaming other people for your own foolishness, and expecting everyone else to do no more with their lives than you do,” writes one poster, advising asthmatics and parents of young children to simply stay away from the more crowded parts of the temple property. “Sometimes it's downright embarrassing to live in Utah County…Does that kind of small-mindedness really represent the best of what we are?” (Lesue-Smithey
When I ask Caru how he would characterize the support of the local community in comparison to the hostility he immediately replies, almost before I have the question out, “95% to 5%. [We receive] overwhelming support. But the 5% is quite vocal and nasty, I’ll tell you that.”

Nasty five percent aside, Caru offers two possible explanations for the skyrocketing popularity of the festival among those who do come. One is the use of rock music styles to accompany the kirtan sung throughout the festival, although Caru notes that “we’re actually probably leaving rock music behind to a significant degree because young people—they like techno, they like trance, they like hip-hop, they like reggae…we’re trying to tailor the festival to the times and the circumstances.” His other explanation is the use of an organized countdown and throwing of colors on cue, rather than simply running around tossing paint willy-nilly. Guests at the Utah Holi do plenty of that too, but the anticipation that builds around the organized countdown, when a sudden eruption of color engulfs the temple grounds, is one of the biggest draws to the festival. “Those two things are our own unique innovation,” Caru says, “neither of which they do in India nor in any other temple, although they’ve contacted me from South Africa and from Brazil and from New Vrindavan and also from Australia. They want to do it like we’ve been doing it.”

The countdown and unified color throwing are also the element of the festival that have arguably done the most for raising the profile of the event outside of Utah Valley. It would be hard for a photographer to find a more purely photogenic event than the countdown and throwing in front of the already gorgeous temple. Throughout the weekend photographers and videographers, equipment swathed in plastic wrap, figure prominently into the festivities. Camera persons from one production company body surf through the crowd with cameras attached to poles to take footage from some unique angles. Another production company sets up a zip line from the top of the hill to the stage, and the audience cheers wildly and almost affectionately for the cameraman when he goes up and down the hill on the zip line. The videos produced by those crews will go on to accumulate 2,032,733 views and 143,602 views, respectively, on YouTube within the next four months. During the festivities Caru announces that last year’s event made the front page of YouTube and merited MSNBC’s picture of the week. The year before
that a photographer won a prestigious Associated Press award for her work at Holi. An important element of the festival continues to be its ever-expanding media footprint.

All of this said about the famous visual imagery of Holi, when I ask Caru about the Hare Krishna community’s motivation in staging an event on this scale, he brings it right back to the aural dimension, and specifically kirtan:

Superficially it’s [about] the colors and the poking of fun at oneself and the opportunity to take ourselves a little less seriously, kind of erase the barriers that we put up between each other on the basis of gender and ethnicity, economic status…but for us it’s the music. It’s the kirtan. That’s what drives us. The colors is a gimmick to get people to come, but we don’t think painting colors on oneself has a really significant bearing on one’s eternal spirituality. But to hear the names of God melodiously and repetitively chanted for hours at a time, and to participate in the chant—we feel that that’s the highest dharma, or the highest thing that one can do in the present age.

A few years ago, when festival attendance was just below 10,000, Caru was asked to explain the temple activities to a group of ISKCON temple presidents and at that point—even before the explosion to 65,000 in attendance—he had this to say:

Look at these videos on YouTube and I think you’ll agree with me on certain points: that this is the biggest kirtan in North America, maybe the history of North America, especially last year attendance was through the roof. And I said, it’s the biggest kirtan, and I said, these are not devotees. LA Rath Yatra, New York, they’re all devotees chanting with maybe a few people in the street just joining, but these people are not devotees. Most of them have never been to the temple before, nor have they ever chanted the Hare Krishna mantra before today. And yet this is the biggest in terms of number and if you look at them you’ll see that its as enthusiastic, they’re chanting as enthusiastically as any comparable group of devotees (Black 2008:86).

Preparing for Holi

On Friday afternoon the day before the festival I spend several hours at the Lotus temple attempting to lend a hand, and chatting with various people over our tasks offers an interesting snapshot into the types of people who fall into the Lotus Temple orbit. When I first arrive Vai sets me to work preparing boxes for collecting money from the sale of color packets. Within moments I am joined by Mike, a quiet but good-natured Salt Lake City native in his late 40’s or early 50’s who is not a devotee and has never actually attended a festival here before, but he has come into the temple’s sphere of influence via yoga classes. As we tape and mark boxes, we talk over a wide range of
subjects having to do with jobs, family, even our religion—after we’ve been working for awhile Mike almost hesitantly asks if I’m LDS, tells me that he was baptized a Mormon a few years ago, and opens up about his questions regarding his newfound faith. One thing he is adamant about is his gratitude for the intensely positive impact that the temple yoga classes have had on his health, his lifestyle, his sense of self—gratitude such that even when there are no yoga classes, he comes to the temple to work.

Vai next refers me to a group of volunteers in the pavilion, and I catch up with four BYU students as they are huffing and puffing their way through a series of narrow gates around the llama farm with a large Parking sign set in a heavy and slightly unwieldy wooden frame. I find out that they are all classmates at BYU. Their participation in helping to set up the festival fulfills an assignment for a humanities class which requires volunteering at an internationally-oriented public event. None of them have attended Festival of Colors before, but apparently as soon as one of the girls told her friends about seeing Holi during the year and a half she lived with her family in India, they all responded positively and chose this festival for their volunteer efforts. They don’t know what to expect from an American Holi, but are planning a weekend around it.

Twenty-somethings Alan and Crystal join us in moving display screens with information on topics such as the Bible and vegetarianism. Alan and Crystal and I work on getting the pavilion set up by gathering boxes and t-shirts and cutting open boxes of color packets. Earlier this year Alan advertised on Craigslist for someone to ride across country from New England to California by the end of the month; Crystal responded to his ad, and their cross-country drive ended up stopping here, taking off for a few days, then coming back. Crystal showed up at the temple a year ago, apparently knowing little about it, and has since bounced back and forth between a handful of different Hare Krishna temples. She does not specify if she has taken initiation as a devotee, but she seems to identify as a devotee and Alan sees her as such. I ask Alan, when we first start working together, if he is a devotee and he says no, he might think about it, but he’s not sure about the lifestyle. Even so he’s excited about having new experiences and seems comfortable at the Krishna temple.

When we’re finished in the pavilion Vai directs me to the kitchen to fill large containers with large amounts of channa (chickpea curry) and kichri (lentils and rice with
vegetables) that will feed the weekend’s sizable crowds. Two teenage girls join me in the kitchen, both born into devotee families and raised within the movement. The girls’ families have traveled to Spanish Fork from Southern Utah and San Diego especially for the festival. The one from Southern Utah in particular expresses a sense of geographical distance from other devotees, but the Utah temple and Holi in particular offer an opportunity to gather with others who share her beliefs. They, with the others that I meet, indicate a variety of motivations that draw people in and expand the local influence of Sri Sri Radha Krishna.

**Festival Weekend**

Saturday morning I join my sister and two of her friends for the festival, one of whom timed a trip from California specifically to coincide with Holi. Spanish Fork is crowded, to say the least. Throughout the weekend school buses act as shuttles between large parking areas in other parts of the city and the temple itself. Owners of some fields in close proximity advertise parking on their property for $5.00, and hundreds of cars end up packed into those fields. Saturday morning the road leading out to the temple is lined with cars on both sides, and my sister and I simply park a good half or two-thirds of a mile down the road and join the groups of people walking to the temple.

Admission to the festival costs $2 a person, and volunteers at the gate check bags for unauthorized colors. Because there are significant health and safety concerns regarding the throwing of unauthorized paint—especially should lead-based paints or actual colored chalk get involved—only colors bought from the temple are allowed on the property. Some of the bags are assembled here, but most are shipped from India from suppliers who use non-toxic dyes and corn starch. Around the temple grounds a handful of vendors sell items, particularly Indian food, and the temple offers large quantities of prasadam as well as drinks for sale.

Immediately upon joining the crowd entering the temple property, one of the unofficial customs that has become part of festival lore is apparent: the tradition of wearing white clothes, or at least a white t-shirt, so as to better display the colors. The predominant whiteness of the clothing on the stream of people making their way onto the temple property is visually striking. The 65,000 don’t show up all at once, so there is a
continual stream of people both entering and exiting the grounds throughout both days, and it is comical to watch the two streams passing each other—those entering the festival in their pristine white shirts, and those exiting who have become walking paint monsters.

Photograph 61: White Entering, Multicolored Leaving

And indeed the pristine whiteness of the t-shirts worn by the majority of those who enter the temple grounds lasts for about a minute or two past the gate. Although the official color throwings are scheduled for every two hours, once the event has started the bags of brilliantly colored paint powder are open and any moving body is free game. Having last been at the festival when the colors really were saved for a single climactic throwing, I am initially annoyed that people are disturbing the pristine t-shirt and jeans that I was somehow expecting to save for the sanctioned countdown and that first dramatic baptism in paint. However, the many young children scampering around the grounds, gingerly tossing tiny handfuls of powder are utterly endearing, and the sensation of a landing handful of paint starts to actually feel good. The powders are very fine and they feel slightly cool landing on the skin; they are also very lightly perfumed and they smell clean and vaguely floral. That said, the paint eventually layers on thickly, and the sensation of being grimy can become wearing.

As Caru said, though, the real objective of Holi is to expose the vast crowd to kirtan, and aside from the color throwing the main activity of the day is a series of performances by musicians representing a variety of musical approaches to chanting the holy names.
These groups include TK and Nam Rock, a classic rock outfit; Larisa Stow and Shakti Tribe who perform a hard rocking style of kirtan; the Mayapuris, who provide the most traditional kirtans of the festival; the Kirtaniyas, who generally perform traditional kirtans like the Mayapuris but bring dubstep and electro house to this particular event; Jai Krishna and Ananda Groove; and the headlining artist, world music legend Jai Uttal, who brings a reggae band. Audience members crowd the hillside dancing and singing along to the music, all while liberally emptying bags of color on each other. Every two hours the lead singer of whichever group is on stage gives a countdown to the unified throwing, at which point the temple itself momentarily vanishes in a cloud of colors that is multicolored when it first goes up, but settles into a haze of pink.
In the fairly uncrowded area to the side of the stage two life-size demon effigies dressed in long black wigs and women’s clothing stand waiting on a pile of kindling, one for each day of the festival. Up until time for the bonfire the effigies are wrapped in plastic wrap and marked with signs requesting “Do Not Burn the Demon.”

Photograph 64 & 65: Holika Effigy and Detail

There are all too few opportunities in life to use a sign like that. Come mid afternoon the band on stage prepares to do a countdown, and a portion of the audience circles up around the day’s Holika effigy. Some temple volunteers douse the straw at Holika’s feet with gasoline while others work on keeping the eager crowd at a safe distance. The audience takes up the countdown, and as the colors go up in front of the temple, Holika also goes up in flames. A chant of “Burn the witch!” goes up among those gathered at the bonfire.

Photograph 66: Holika in Flames
The area around the temple itself accumulates a layer of very thick pink dust, festival-goers leave colored handprints on the wall that I imagine will be a cleaning nightmare for the devotees, but look very beautiful for the time being. On the balcony, young people including affectionate young couples take advantage of their colorful brilliance to stage glamour shots. Volunteers man leaf-blowers in front of the entrances to both floors of the temple and blow excess colors off of people who wish to go inside.

Throughout a weekend of crowded chaos outside, the temple room provides an air-conditioned, peaceful respite. A handful of young devotees in Indian clothing perch on the platform in front of Srila Prabhupada’s throne singing kirtan, while a few dozen festival goers dance freely in a markedly blissed-out, free-form fashion. Ring-and-the-rosy circles and conga lines emerge frequently. The altar area is open for contemplation of the deities, and at one point a line forms in front of the altar, where a priest offers the silver crown and the tīka.

Last year the temple started offering a second day of Holi to diffuse the concentration of people on the temple grounds at any one time. Sunday’s festival is shorter and feels more relaxed, but the crowd is only slightly smaller. One noticeable difference between the two days is in the configuration of performers—on Sunday the divisions between performance groups dissolve, as the performers merge into a single group during parts of the day, all of them playing back-up on each other’s sets.
Who Comes to Holi?

As for the demographic of the festival, there are a few generalizations that can be made. A majority of the crowd is clearly young and white. At the same time, it is not at all surprising to see conservatively dressed, middle-aged Indian couples and families, particularly on the upper deck of the temple, who may be there for similar reasons to those that draw Florida’s Indian families to Alachua seeking the religious and cultural observances that they grew up with in their homeland. Given the demographics of Utah Valley, the traditional association of Holi with BYU students, and the vocal support of many in the LDS church for the events at Sri Sri Radha Krishna, it is safe to assume that a majority of the people in the crowd are Latter Day Saint, but trying to draw a frame around the crowd based on religious affiliation can be problematic.

Aside from religious orientation, an important observation about the crowd regards the age of festival goers. Festival of Colors has long been predominantly associated with college students, hence the reputation of the event as BYU’s unofficial spring break. To a certain extent Caru emphasizes the generational aspect of the festival, as least as it is celebrated in Utah, when addressing the event to the crowd. When Caru introduces the Mayapuris on Saturday afternoon, for example, he announces, “They’re your age. They have your level of energy, they don’t need the pumped up electronics. And you don’t need it either, right? This is going to be a youthful, powerful, natural, traditional sound.” At another point in the afternoon he does a roll call from the stage of students from the different colleges and universities in the area, even starting in on the local high schools. The predominance of young people at the festival is evident just from a brief look around the crowd.

That said, a visual scan of the crowd also shows a lot of people in their 30’s or older, clearly excited to get their colorful groove on in the audience. My sister and her 40-something friends consider the festival an adventure they are eager to have. At one point I spot a quite elderly woman sitting in a wheelchair at the top of the hill. She hasn’t been assaulted with color to quite the degree of most of the other festival goers, but there are splashes of color in her white hair, and I notice a group of young college-aged kids
asking if they can take pictures with her and expressing their admiration for her willingness to come to Holi.

The most obvious sign of a spreading age demographic, however, is the prevalence of children and young families at the festival. In the main crowd assembled by the stage a number of parents let their kids ride on their shoulders to get a better view, while on other parts of the temple grounds kids run around with their handfuls of paint while their parents instruct them in the art of nailing a stranger with color. Some children have even come in costume—an 8 or 9-year-old girl in color-smeared fairy wings brings a touch of whimsy to the proceedings. Caru noted that this year

We had a record amount of children with grandparents, more of a family atmosphere. It was effervescent, there was a lot of excitement in the atmosphere….I think there was a sense of taking care of the children, watching out for the children, being as good a model under the circumstances as one can for the children.

This sense of the festival as a gift to the rising generation leaked into Caru’s announcements from the stage during the festival as he told the audience, “Welcome the kids wherever you see them. Welcome the kids. This is the next generation of Holi kids.”

Photograph 68: Learning to Throw Colors

**Color, Communitas, and “Collective Joy”**

It is easy to recognize in the chaotic, celebratory atmosphere of thousands of people singing and throwing paint at each other the unstructured, undifferentiated state of
social interaction that Victor Turner dubbed “communitas” (Turner 1969:96). In Turner’s formulation communitas is a temporary release from an everyday social organization characterized by structure, hierarchy, or at very least an awareness of social difference. Bhakti yoga and the music associated with bhakti yoga have long been credited by religious scholars with dissolving social boundaries, particularly those that have historically existed along caste lines in India, although scholars do warn against attaching too much significance to egalitarian conditions that prevail during kirtan performances, when all too often the social distinctions re-emerge when the music dies down (see Singer 1966). The modern United States does not have at present a system of social structure that compares to the caste system, but it is still instructive to consider in the context of an event like Utah’s Holi the potential for kirtan and the celebration in during which it is performed to “[reduce] the consciousness of caste, sect, and regional differences” (Singer 1966:121) and the tensions that sometimes accompany that consciousness.

Turner makes a statement that has always intrigued me. “A mystical character is assigned to the sentiment of human kindness in most types of liminality” (Turner 1969:105), he writes, linking a crucial triad of concepts: liminality, kindness, and mystical experience, or the quest for transcendence. Turner identifies communitas as being closely related to the experience of liminality, a transitional or “betwixt and between” state of being that exists just outside of everyday life and accepted social boundaries. He further identifies the festival experience as a period during which an entire community collectively passes through “the liminal, ‘betwixt-and-between’ state intervening between the ‘safe’ but dull domains of routinized and classified life” (Turner 1982:29; see also Turner 1982 and Picard et. al. 2006). Turner characterizes this liminal state in terms of relaxing concerns with appearance and status and embracing humility, comradeship, and a willingness to laugh (Turner 1969:95).

The Holi colors are an important embrace of the liminal state, as they erase the visible signs of social distinction and every person becomes, temporarily, a walking rainbow. The tradition of wearing white clothing to Holi indicates a willingness to enter the festival with a somewhat blank appearance—an action that, whether consciously done or not, symbolizes a willingness to shed a certain level of ego before entering the festival.
grounds and adopt a kind of blank-slate sameness. Even the fact that the location of the Utah temple requires many festival goers to travel to a somewhat out-of-the-way space, on the outskirts of one of the smaller towns in Utah Valley, wearing (often) white clothing on the way into town and colors on the way out, requires a choice to enter a liminal space before assuming a liminal personality. Many Utahns pride themselves on their willingness to embrace this liminality and all that it represents, as evidenced by the inevitable rash of Facebook profile pictures proudly displaying festival paint that are so prevalent that the UVU newspaper, in the article referenced above, teased that “your profile pic will look pretty much the same as 200 of your other friends” (Bailey and Goldsberry 2012).

The Holi colors, whose throwing often takes on the nature of a game, are important to the humorous nature of liminality. Laughter can be an element of mystical experience; Turner identifies certain liminal personalities as “holy fools” (Turner 1969:109-10) and Thomas Csordas writes that laughter can be “objectified as sacred if [its] spontaneous occurrence is thematized as out of the ordinary, the ‘otherness,’ which, according to Eliade is the formal criterion of the sacred” (Csordas 2002:70).” Laughter can also be an element of kindness; Turner identifies among the Ndembu the phenomenon of “white laughter” which “represents fellowship and good company” (Turner 1969:104), and the phenomenon carries into other cultural settings.

I have quoted the statement by an Indian kirtaniya to Stephen Slawek that during kirtan musicians suspend judgment: “As long as we are doing kirtan…we will not think in favor or against anybody, not about anyone's qualities or defects, we will just concentrate and think that we are singing kirtan” (Slawek 1998:84). When kirtan is performed on a large scale to a hillside full of people its ideal purpose is to promote human kindness on a large scale. Barbara Ehrenreich describes the festival experience as one in which celebratory activities may stimulate a “love that serves to knit people together in groups larger than two” (Ehrenreich 2007). Thomas Turino speaks of events involving participatory music making as being “fully focused on an activity that emphasizes our sameness—of time sense, of musical sensibility, of musical habits and knowledge, of patterns of thought and action, of spirit, of common goals,” until “deep identification [with each other] is felt as total” and “we feel, for those best moments, as if
our selves had merged” (Turino 2008:18-19). This evocative description can be aptly applied to what I have observed in the experiences of kirtan participants at Hare Krishna festivals such as Holi.

Returning again to Turner’s statement that “a mystical character is assigned to the sentiment of human kindness in most types of liminality,” he continues to assert that “in most cultures this stage of transition is brought closely in touch with beliefs in the protective and punitive powers of divine…beings or powers” (ibid. 105). The origin story of Holi is one in which divine powers protect the devotionally-inclined Prahlad and punish cruelty and aggression as represented by the demon Holika. As Caru announces to the audience, burning the demon is a way of re-ordering good and evil in the world and it is significant that festival goers participate vicariously in this punishment of cruelty and aggression. In spite of what doctrinal differences may exist among the belief systems represented by festival participants, the goal is to celebrate of a shared ideal of goodness in which the embrace of others is a means of approaching the divine.

Radical philosopher Hakim Bey describes social states and happenings with similar qualities to Turner’s communitas as Temporary Autonomous Zones, a sort of collective experience of singular intensity, exhilaration, freedom, and creative potential. Bey describes festivals as a type of “peak experience” that “cannot happen every day—otherwise they would not be ‘nonordinary.’ But such moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life. The shaman returns—you can’t stay up on the roof forever—but things have changed, shifts and integrations have occurred—a difference is made” (Bey). Those who will address the audience from the stage during Holi will express a belief that the event has the potential to be transformative both for the people there and for the world at large. Caru expressed the thought that while colors draw people to the festival, the music is what makes a lasting impact; even for those who may not perceive special meaning in the singing of the holy names, there is still room for the emotional qualities of the kirtan to have an impact. John Blacking asserts that “problems in human societies begin when people learn less about love, because love is the basis of our existence as human beings…the hard task is to love, and music is a skill that prepares man for this most difficult task” (Blacking 1973:103).
Framing the Event: Caru Addresses to the Crowd

The various people who take the stage during Holi all seem to feel a strong responsibility to frame the messages of Krishna consciousness in a manner that may be meaningful to those of differing belief systems. The musical performers clearly sense that responsibility, and I will consider the strategies that they use shortly. But the person tasked with weaving the whole festival together with a unified message is Caru, who has the job of occupying and building excitement in the audience between performing groups while they set up and run checks with the sound engineer. At moments it can be almost funny; as Caru introduces the Mayapuris, for example, he praises their abilities and builds up to the energetic announcement, “this is the first time we’ve had them at the Festival of Colors, this is the first time they’ve been in Utah…let’s give a Utah welcome to the Mayapuris!” The audience cheers wildly. “Okay, it’s going to be another minute or so…” Sometimes Caru has five, even ten minutes to kill, but he takes to his responsibilities as emcee with enthusiasm, and having spent 30 years or so explaining how Krishna consciousness can apply to the lives of non-devotee Utahns, he has quite a bit to say. He is also the performers’ biggest supporter—at one point I walk around behind the stage during a Kirtaniyas dubstep performance and see Caru backstage with a couple of college-age festivalgoers dancing his heart out. At the end of another set, as Caru makes his way onstage to encourage the audience response to a Jai Uttal performance, Jai takes the microphone and calls out, “Can we get a ‘We love you Caru?’”, to which the audience screams, “We love you, Caru!”

In retrospect Caru tells me that his intent in emceeing the festival is to keep the message “quite universal…I read comments on YouTube and people said, ‘I didn’t feel like I was in a religious event. I just felt like I was at an event where we have tools just to become a better person’…we try to speak in a way that is relevant [and] transformational.” With those two goals of being relevant and transformational, Caru’s statements tend to do a few things. They express and encourage a broad spirituality that can be seen as creating a shared theology, framing principles important to Hare Krishnas in a manner to which Mormons can relate. His comments tend to emphasize the “event-ness” of the day, in particular encouraging the people there to identify as a group—even
the basic run-downs of rules, requests to be good, etc. are, in their way, encouragement for the crowd to identify as a group.

Caru spends a great deal of time, for example, talking about variety as a principle of spiritual life—a topic which is clearly fitting for a festival in which people are covered with an array of brilliant colors. I remember conversations with Vai in which she referred to the beauty of the spiritual world in terms of the “variegatedness” of things. Embracing variety is also a fitting request for an event that by its nature relies on an audience being willing to embrace the contributions of a different religious group.

Saturday morning as TK exits the stage and the Mayapuris make their way on, Caru has this to say:

Did you know that God loves variety? I think that most of the problems and the friction in the world today come from people wanting everybody to be just like them. They want them to look like them, they want them to be of the same ethnic background as them, they want to have them to believe the same thing as them, and that’s why people come into conflict, because you’re not like me. We don’t have a problem with people not being like us do we? [The crowd yells, “No!”] No, not only do we not have a problem with it, we love variety! [The crowd cheers.] When you celebrate variety you serve God, because He also loves variety.

Caru continues to talk about the millions of unique snowflakes in a cubic foot of snow or the 65,000 different species of beetles as evidence of God’s love for variety. He then turns to affirming the individuality of the people at the festival as a divine gift:

Each and every one of you is created one of a kind, unique, never to be copied [the audience cheers wildly] because God—not only does he like variety, but he doesn’t cut corners. He doesn’t make carbon copies. He crafted each and every one of you uniquely like a beautiful gem [the crowd cheers], a beautiful jewel [cheers]. We waste too many minutes and hours and days our lives wishing we were like somebody else… let’s be all we can be and not waste time trying to be someone that God didn’t create us to be!

This speech draws wild cheers, fist pumping, ululations from the crowd. Caru returns to this theme throughout the two days, and at some points he takes his discussion of individual variety as a God-given gift further into language tailored to an audience packed with Mormon spectators:

[God] has a great plan for your life. No matter what may have happened…no matter what mistakes you have made, no matter what wrongs may have been done to you, nothing that has happened in the past can keep you from the great future that God has in plan for you.
One of the most prevalent doctrinal terms used in Mormon theology is “plan of salvation,” a phrase associated with the Latter Day Saint explanation of God’s purposes in placing humanity on earth. The plan of salvation is one of the most prevalent topics of Mormon speeches and Sunday School classes, and one of the first concepts that LDS missionaries explain when they proselytize. The plan of salvation is a broad cosmological idea, but it is also spoken of quite frequently on a very personal level, as Mormons teach that God has a very individualized plan for each of His children within that broader framework. The idea of discovering and following God’s personal plan for each individual occupies many of the speeches and classes associated with Mormon worship. It fits into a theology that encourages individualism, from the notion of personal revelation that I discussed earlier to the fact that members of the church spend a lot of time in front of pulpits and, in lieu of relying on a professional clergy, tend to fulfill a variety of teaching and leadership callings throughout their lives.

So the use of words like “God’s plan for you” in the context of a Hare Krishna addressing a largely Latter Day Saint crowd is a powerful appeal to consider this experience within the context of their own spiritual lives. But it can also be read as a subtle message that “I know you, or I have bothered to find out about you because your beliefs are significant to me too.” I find it interesting that when Caru quotes from the Bhagavad Gita, he chooses a passage in which the Lord admonishes Arjuna to teach Krishna consciousness to others. “Declare boldly Arjuna my devotee… declare it boldly,” he quotes, in language not unfamiliar to Latter Day Saints encouraged to discuss their religion with their friends and acquaintances. The message that Arjuna is to declare boldly is that the God-conscious person, “he or she will never perish. They’ll always triumph. They’ll always experience blessings and favor.” I am immediately struck by the similarity of the passage that Caru chooses to the language of numerous verses of Christian scripture—the famous John 3:16, for example: “whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The language, although it comes from the Bhagavad Gita, is not foreign to an LDS crowd. Later in the day Caru again ties the idea that God makes plans for His individual children to Hindu-based spiritual practices:

I pray for you that today is the beginning of the rest of your life. It doesn’t matter what our background is, doesn’t matter what our past is…none of that keeps us
from the amazing future that God has planned for us as long as we recognize and
develop and work according to the talents and abilities that he gave us. That’s
yoga—yoga means simply yoking and it starts, yoga starts when you engage your
senses in the service of He who is the lord of all senses.

Throughout the two days of Holi, Caru tends to emphasize the “event-ness” of the
festival, or suggest a broad significance of this event. A number of Caru’s comments
acknowledge the media footprint of the festival. He mentions last year’s festival being
featured on YouTube and MSNBC’s picture of the week. “I think I’m looking at a bunch
of winners here, I think you’re worth at least MSNBC’s picture of the week,” he
announces, then adds, “some of the most well-known photographers in the world are here
today.” Later on, “There’s going to be thousands and thousands of pictures on Google
Plus and Flickr.” He almost teases the audience, playing to their excitement at being at
such an unusual and potentially auspicious event: “You know what? This kind of makes
me nervous, because you guys are having a good time right?” Wild cheering. “You’re
going to come back next year, right?” More wild cheering. “And you’re going to bring a
few friends who haven’t been before right?” Even more wild cheering. “With all of these
videos and photos probably the rest of the world is going to come, so we have to figure
out what to do with everybody.” And the audience overflows with enthusiasm.

Many of Caru’s comments from the stage are a matter of practical information
such as reminding festival-goers of where to find the Lost and Found tent. But even
those announcements take on the character of the celebration by, for example, segueing
into a story he read on YouTube last year from a festival goer who wrote that he “came to
the festival with five of his friends and the crowd was so big, within the first five minutes
he got separated from his friends. He never saw them again for the rest of the afternoon,
but he said it wasn’t a problem because ‘I had 20,000 new friends.’”

Caru often appeals to the crowd to identify as a group. Interestingly enough,
many of Caru’s more practical comments draw lots of cheers and a sense of crowd
cohesion. When building up to color throwings, for example, Caru appeals strongly to
the audience to avoid “grandstanding,” as he said it, and to wait until the end of the
countdown to throw the colors so as not to ruin the stunning explosion of color. In doing
so, he appeals heavily to group pride: “Let’s show that in Utah we’re not so much
grandstanders but we work in unison, we work together.” Then later, as Visvambhar
prepares for a countdown, “When Vish says ‘Zero’ or ‘Krishna’ everybody go up together, is that alright? Because we are better together!”

Often Caru’s appeals simply amount to a plea to be good, or at least to be smart about avoiding potentially dangerous situations: no moshing, for example. Although “we love body surfers,” please pass the body surfers up the hill rather than down so they don’t end up falling over the shoulders of an unprepared person. Don’t toss the body-surfers. And then there is the request that Caru is clearly amused that he has to make: “We would like it if the body surfers could keep their shoes. Is it possible to leave the shoes on the body surfers?”

Interestingly enough, these appeals for the crowd to behave responsibly tend to draw a lot of enthusiasm from the audience. Caru even has the crowd cheering for the “nice” security guards at the front of the stage, inviting people to hug them and let them know that they’re wanted back next year. Every year the temple community makes a very strong plea that nobody come to the festival intoxicated or high. This is not only because Hare Krishnas, like Mormons, oppose the use of mind-altering drugs on a religious basis, but because, as Caru told me later, he worries that a person on drugs, whose “cells are starving for oxygen,” will have a hard time breathing during those moments when the air is clogged with cornstarch. On Saturday afternoon, just before lighting the bonfire that will burn the demon, Caru announces to the crowd, “If you’re inebriated, if you smoked something or drank something before you came here, get out of the crowd right now. We don’t want to be responsible for your negligence, for your bad choices…if you’re not clean and sober, just go to the side right now and save us all a lot of trouble. Is that understood?”

And the audience cheers, some quite intently, for a statement that would likely be greeted with incredulity in another context. For many festival goers, there is a pride in showing that good, clean fun doesn’t have to water down the “fun” part just because it is “good” and “clean.” In a predominantly Mormon crowd, many of the young people will have grown up being told to wear the label of a “peculiar people” to refer to their chaste and sober lifestyles as a badge of honor. When I chat briefly with Visvambhar backstage and he tells me excitedly that this event is unlike anything he’s ever seen before, and brings up the phrase “good clean fun” as being taken to a new level in the event.
Visvambhar himself draws heavy cheers from the crowd during a set when he exhorts, “Let’s enjoy this time and let’s keep the cops out there to guard the gate, because we don’t need them to come in here.” The festival is, by its nature, already in its way providing an outlet for certain impulses toward what could be considered transgressive behavior—running around throwing paint on complete strangers is certainly outside of the norm of social acceptability. So while the festival is providing an outlet for certain types of social transgression, festival goers actually seem to respond positively and with pride to being well-behaved, and most importantly, non-contentious, otherwise.

In fact, early Saturday evening, in the last hour of the festival, Caru begins walking through the crowd with garbage bags, and large numbers of people in the crowd almost eagerly flock to him, picking up the thousands upon thousands of empty paint bags off of the hill. An unofficial in-joke in Mormon culture regards Mormons cleaning up after themselves—there’s a cultural assumption that sticking around to put away tables and chairs at the end of the night is part of any church activity, and there’s an etiquette to stacking chairs against the wall at the end of a meeting. As soon as Caru shows up in the corner of the crowd with his armloads of trash bags and a large crowd contingent drops to their knees to pick up the trash, my sister leans in laughing heartily, “Mormons always put away their chairs,” and I guess they always put away their paint bags too.

But beyond asking people to identify as a coherent group in terms of good behavior, Caru finds ways of encouraging a sense of temporary collectivity bonded by goodwill, the emergence of communitas from chaos. While it’s not surprising to see a few people with “Free Hugs” signs (a couple of kids even carry a sardonic “Free Gropes” sign), Caru takes it to a broader level by periodically, when onstage set-up is taking a while, calling hug time. In doing so Caru draws on his themes of variety and individuality, encouraging people to embrace each other’s differences:

We’re going to take a little break now where you’re going to go hug 10 people that you’ve never met before and tell them, ‘I love you. [Wild cheering] I love you. [More wild cheering] You are unique. You are one of a kind. You are a God-created jewel.’ Don’t stop until you’ve hugged at least 20 strangers—white, black, yellow, tall, thin, short, fat—I love you.

And again later in the day:
Are you guys feeling rich today inside? [The audience screams.] Rich, maybe even overflowing? [The audience screams harder.] So share that right now: hug twenty strangers….Everybody’s spirit soul, part and parcel of the Supreme. Don’t stop till you’ve hugged twenty strangers.

At another point he has this to say:

You know, whenever you get a crowd this big in a stadium or in an arena it usually has to do with competition, doesn’t it? One team vs. another team. Rivalry. Factionalism. We’re here not in competition. We’re here not to celebrate competition and rivalry, but we’re here to celebrate harmony. Here at the Holi festival there’s no visiting team, there’s only the whole team.

Caru uses the word “transformational” to describe the message he intends to send, and there is in all that is said an implicit hope that the temporary communitas engendered by sending these tens of thousands of people through a brightly colored liminal state, will have the potential for at least some transformational impact outside the temple grounds and after the event is over. At one point Caru calls out the absolute otherness of an experience like this in comparison to the grinding of the “nine-to-five” world, and proclaims, “they see us acting like this and they get a hope for the future. This gives them a hope for a bright amazing future.” Then in the statement I quoted earlier he refers to the children who are so prominent in the festival audience this year, turning them into a symbol of hope: “Welcome the kids wherever you see them. Welcome the kids. This is the next generation of Holi kids.”

Musical Hybridity, or Kirtan for Newcomers

There’s a moment in the Mayapuri’s Saturday set that encapsulates a few key points about the musical performances at the Festival of Colors. The Mayapuris’ website makes a point of their members’ backgrounds with other forms of popular music—Visvambhar having played in hardcore punk bands, Kishore playing reggae, and Bali performing hip hop. Even so, the Mayapuris take the stage with traditional instruments and provide the major bastion of traditional kirtan at this particular event. At one moment in their set, however, Bali—usually the most reserved of the trio, at least by my observation—takes the microphone for a brief drumset-accompanied hip hop interlude, jumping energetically around the stage and rapping about Krishna consciousness. “When I say hip, you say hop!” he yells, leading a call-and-response with the audience on “hip,”
“hop,” “hip,” “hop,” and continuing a series of verbal call-and-responses: “when I say Krishna, you say rock…when I say Hari, you say bol…when I say spirit, you say soul: spirit” “soul” “spirit” “soul.” Meanwhile, Kishore and Visvambhar, traditional Indian folk drum and flute in hands, jump up and down with their arms raised in imitation of a hip-hop DJ.

All told, it is a somewhat incongruous combination of signifiers. However, there are a few things happening during that short musical moment that are instructive in the consideration of all of the musical performances at the festival. First of all, there is a hybridity of musical styles—a translation of Hare Krishna musical culture, from instruments to texts to specific melodies, into the musical languages of contemporary popular culture, the languages that many people in the audience speak, so to say. While the combination of signifiers, such as the hip hop-style gestures executed with one hand while the other hand holds a bansuri, may seem initially incongruous, they make for a rather rich cultural hybrid in the end.

Secondly, there is the use of the musical performances to first, communicate what Krishna consciousness is and what the words mean, and second, find ways of doing so in a manner that people of different cultural backgrounds can find meaningful. Take the progression of word combinations that Bali deploys in his call-and-response, for example. “When I say hip, you say hop,” he begins, invoking the popular culture that many of the festival goers inhabit and appreciate. “When I say Krishna, you say rock” brings the theology and the popular culture together, proposing the two concepts as compatible—then shifting the meaning subtly to praise and affirmation when a second time through the call and response becomes “Krishna rocks.” With “Hari/Bol” he teaches the crowd appropriate terminology. And finally, with “when I say spirit, you say soul,” Bali both communicates a fundamental Vaishnava belief about human nature, and does so in a manner that is easy for a spiritually-inclined but non-Vaishnava person to appreciate.

Thirdly, there is the use of call-and-response—just one of the techniques which the various performers use to draw out audience participation, sometimes through verbal and sung responses and sometimes through the use of gestures to create a kinetic sense of unified action. And lastly, there is the combination of participatory and performative modes of musicking. Thus far I have discussed the singing of kirtan as a largely
participatory act, but a festival like this one puts musicians on stage to offer their refined skills to a listening audience, and the different bands take some creative approaches to honoring the participatory nature of kirtan while still acting as guest performers.

TK and Nam Rock, who open the festival Saturday morning and play again early Sunday afternoon, perform in a classic rock style; it is not surprising, after listening to a few songs, to learn that frontman TK got his start playing in rock bands during the 1970s before joining the Krishna movement. TK primarily takes the approach of singing about Krishna consciousness more than performing actual kirtan. His lyrics attempt to communicate how Krishna consciousness might apply to a person’s life with lyrics that reference Vaishnavism in more or less specific terms from song to song. At the same time, TK inserts rounds of the Maha Mantra in between some of his verses, and always invites the audience to join in.

In one of his songs, for example, TK—dressed in white dhoti and kurta, although the other members of his band are all in jeans and t-shirts—sings, “It’s my nature to rock and roll/ just cause I do/ don’t mean I ain’t got soul/ it’s my nature/ it’s my nature/ I do it for Krishna/ ‘cause he’s the ultimate goal.” The music that accompanies these lyrics sounds definitively retro—the keyboard parts, in particular, could have been lifted from Jerry Lee Lewis. Halfway through the song he calls out, “Everybody sing now,” and begins intoning the lines of the mantra. At this point many of the people in the crowd—particularly those at the bottom of the hill close to the stage—are dancing in an uninhibited, groovy fashion, many with broad smiles on their faces. Looking around, many of them are singing or at least mouthing the words along with TK although, just as the dancing happens in a very loose, individualized fashion at this point, there doesn’t seem to be an audible, unified effort at singing the mantra on the part of the crowd.

In others of his songs TK communicates a spiritual message in language that—with the exception of the rounds of mantra tossed in here and there—translates easily from one belief system to another. “If,” for example, uses a sound that bears the imprint of Eric Clapton or Neil Young as a setting for passages from the famous Rudyard Kipling poem “If”—a poem that I have heard quoted fairly often in an LDS context. Another song, “Supreme Abode,” attaches hypnotic, ringing guitar chords to lyrics in which a wandering character in search of himself reflects, “There’s no peace of mind that I can
find/ no matter how hard that I try...we’ve got to make our way/ to the place where we
belong/ that’s the Lord’s Supreme abode/ it’s our eternal home.” TK’s classic, 70s-style
rock tends to feel nostalgic and familiar even to a generation of music fans who weren’t
alive in the 1970s. The groovy, individualistic dance style adopted by so many
spectators in the audience indicates that they find the retro music pleasurable. The broad,
easy smiles on so many of their faces as they sing the Maha Mantra suggest that the
familiarity of the classic rock sound promotes a sort of comfort with the process of
mantra singing that is otherwise new to many in the crowd.

TK is joined in taking a rock-based approach to Krishna conscious music by
Larisa Stow and Shakti Tribe. Stow has an intense, gravelly voice fitting to hard rock,
and Shakti Tribe plays with a heavy guitar-based sound. However, Larisa also plays a
harmonium throughout her performance, and a layer of bansuri-style flute adds an exotic
and almost delicate layer to their sound. Shakti Tribe hews closer to mantra-based music,
actually singing invocations to the divine, which she explains to the crowd in
philosophical meditations that I will discuss in more detail later. One song that she
performs on both days, for example, is based almost entirely on the word “Amba,”
referring to divine love, and as she exhorts the crowd to “call upon” Amba, the single
word spins out into an entire song.

All of this said, Caru noticed a stronger audience response at this year’s festival to
reggae-based music than to rock. Jai Uttal, a fixture on the world music scene since 1990,
brings a reggae band. He isn’t the only performer to invoke reggae on the stage: both the
Kirtaniyas and the Mayapuris merge reggae rhythms and even quotes from Bob Marley
into their performances, much to the delight of the audience. The affection that college
students hold for Bob Marley is so prevalent as to be something of an inside joke in
contemporary popular culture. Reggae acts as a unifying musical thread at a number of
moments in the festival; it also acts as a rallying cry to a sort of universal spirituality that
I will discuss shortly.

Even so, the traditional Indian roots of kirtan are not at all absent from the
performances on stage, and performers do at times take the opportunity to introduce
elements of Indian culture that members of the audience clearly find exotic and exciting.
When the Mayapuris first take the stage Saturday afternoon carrying harmonium,
mridanga, and hand cymbals, Visvambhar and Kishore sporting colorful head wraps and Bali wearing the distinctive Hare Krishna ponytail, their back-up singer dressed in a sari, they project an image that is contemporary yet clearly references the Indian origins of their music. This image is enhanced by Visvambhar’s narration over Bali’s rolling, thunderous drumming, introducing their instrument: “Our tribal drum from Mayapur, India, made of clay from the sacred Ganges river. Feel it in your heart!” Visvambhar then launches into a series of rapid rhythmic konnakol vocalizations of the sort that imitate tabla drumming, to which the audience immediately responds by leaping up and down, pumping their fists in the air. While an electronically-generated drone plays in the background, Visvambhar asks the audience to raise their hands in the air and chant “Om” with him, and nearly every person on the hillside opens their arms to the side and raises them into yoga’s Mountain Pose while chanting “Om” three times.

Photograph 69: A Brief Moment of Yoga

Visvambhar follows with a rendition of the text “Nama Om Vishnu Padaya” that utilizes a very classically-inclined melody and vocal style. Audience members respond by waving their arms from side to side in a unified gesture that extends all the way up the hillside to the temple. When Bali comes back in with a steady beat, his classical training shines through with rhythms reminiscent of the drumming in classical raga performances, and the audience leaps into the air, jumping up and down with as much energy as they expend dancing to any other musical style performed all weekend.

The Mayapuris tend to actively verbalize an intention toward hybridity, making statements during their sets like “we’re going to give it to you together now, East and West combined!” At the same time they also provide the weekend’s most traditional
kirtans, referring the crowd to the Maha Mantra on the posters at either side of the stage, and at one point actively teaching the crowd to sing specific musical phrases—derived, incidentally, from the same melody that Jahnavi Harrison used as her dominant tune in the kirtan I analyzed in Chapter Four. The band asks the crowd to sing these melodic phrases back to them several times before launching into a full-fledged traditional kirtan that would sound appropriate in a temple or a kirtan mela, with the difference that they break the mantra into shorter sections to exchange back and forth with an audience not as accustomed to chanting the Maha Mantra as a whole.

I mention the fairly traditional kirtans performed by the Mayapuris as a point of contrast. The other crew of young up-and-coming kirtan performers featured at the festival—a group who Visvambhar proudly proclaims from the stage to be “some of our best friends”—are the Kirtaniyas. They are a band who, as their online presence attests, has built a career on traditional kirtan. However, for this particular festival, the Kirtaniyas, fronted by the charismatic Vijay, take advantage of the abilities of another of their members, Nitai, who acts as DJ and provides electronic backing for the Sanskrit texts and names of Krishna. The band’s look gives an immediate sense of visual hybridity: while Vijay, Saraswati, and Rasika sport an Eastern-inspired aesthetic featuring colorful scarves and some items of Indian clothing, Nitai, the DJ, wears a Mohawk, long French braid, and zebra-print shorts. When they take the stage Vijay announces to the crowd, “We thought we’d bring you some kirtan, some chanting of the names of the Lord. And some dub step. That’s it, you heard right. Dub step.” Given my own extensive familiarity with traditional kirtan, I can hear clearly in their performances the sound of a traditional kirtan, recognizable in melodic character and particularly in Vijay’s vocal styling. But Nitai provides a dense layer of electronic noise that transforms the kirtan into something the audience identifies with a currently popular musical trend. The audience rewards the effort with intense enthusiasm. (Audience interest in electronic dance music is evidenced by the presence on Saturday of two young men wearing paint-spattered Deadmau5 heads like those worn by popular Electro-house DJ Joel Zimmerman; when I spot them, festival goers are lining up to request pictures.)
At one point Vijay asks the crowd if they would like to hear dubstep or electro house, and someone in the crowd yells, “Skrillex!” to which Vijay responds, as if expecting (and rolling with) the comparison to the famous DJ, “Ah ha ha ha—yes! Yes.”

The Kirtaniyas’ performances bring out an interesting phenomenon in the festival’s musical performances: a tension between acoustic and electronic sounds that can be expanded to a binary of the traditional and the modern. On Sunday morning, for example, the Mayapuris and the Kirtaniyas share a set, and although for all practical purposes it is a half hour Mayapuris set with back-up by the Kirtaniyas and a half-hour Kirtaniyas set with Mayapuris back-up, their manner of introducing the hour’s music makes for an intriguing play of that electronic/acoustic musical tension. As the groups take the stage, Nitai provides a dense background of electronic sounds—wobble-basses, crescendos of distortion, etc.—while Visvambhar warms up the crowd with comments like “You are all...full of color, full of life, full of energy,” and “do you feel that in your heart?” As the electronic noise increases in volume and density, Kishore takes the microphone, and, pointing dramatically into the audience, calls out, “Utah, are you ready to move? Are you ready to move? Are you ready to move?” Then, following a hand gesture from Kishore, Nitai draws the electronic noise down to a cutoff. There is a dramatic pause. Kishore launches into a rapid mridanga groove, and the audience promptly starts to jump up and down, waving their hands in the air or clapping overhead in time. Visvambhar calls out “East versus West!” as he comes in with a small pair of
hand cymbals, and the audience dances enthusiastically to a minute or so of rapid-fire acoustic, Indian folk percussion. An accelerando draws the audience to a near frenzy of tension. Nitai comes out from behind the keyboard and jumps up and down, waving his arm wildly. When Visvambhar launches into a series of percussive konnakol vocalizations the crowd cheers loudly and dances harder. A minute or so of vocalizations and another accelerando build to an abrupt tempo break, at which point the drumset enters with a rock-style beat. The crowd responds in much the way devotees do when the tempo breaks in a temple room kirtan, with increased intensity expressed by high vertical jumps. However, the rock beat also draws more rock-appropriate responses, as Visvambhar pulls out his ponytail, unleashes his hair, and he and Rasika of the Kirtaniyas proceed to headbang their way around the stage.

After this introduction, the Mayapuris lead a reggae-inflected but fairly traditional kirtan which I will discuss later; halfway through that kirtan Nitai adds a few buzzy but fairly quiet electronic basslines to the overall texture, but the music remains primarily acoustic. When the Kirtaniyas step into the center stage, Nitai keeps up the reggae theme with some quiet, almost hypnotic chords played in a reggae rhythm, while Sarasvati and Rasika, exchange ethereal vocal lines on “Oh Govinda Haribol Haribol Haribol.” After setting that otherworldly mood, Nitai’s electronic sounds come to the forefront with loud, buzzing waves of sound which the crowd rides with enthusiasm. For a time, the electronic sounds dominate the musical texture, with the voices singing the holy names simply adding another layer to the dense waves of sound. Kishore is playing the mridanga, but to a certain extent the Mayapuris’ backing contribution is visual as much as sonic, participating in call-and-response passages but mostly building energy by dancing on stage. Finally Vijay introduces the full Maha Mantra, sung repeatedly on a static note while the electronic sounds buzz toward their climax. Then, after the electronic music reaches its climax, Nitai’s electronics gurgle downward, and the acoustic, traditional elements of the kirtan—the violin, the hand cymbals, and the mridanga—rise from the texture as Visvambhar and Vijay exchange melismatic treatments of the phrase “Hare Krishna,” all of their classical Indian vocal training on full display. It’s a stunning interweaving of acoustic and electronic sounds, demonstrating
the importance of the deep tradition of kirtan, regardless of what modern innovations are added to it.

**Presenting Krishna Consciousness**

Aside from choosing musical styles at once familiar and exciting to their audiences, performers at the Festival of Colors have the task of presenting and explaining Hare Krishna terminology and doctrinal material, encouraging the audience to self-identify with the core concepts and intentions of God-consciousness, and inviting the audience to actually participate in kirtan, with all of the spiritual and emotional benefits that devotees ascribe to the practice.

A rather important piece of information for the uninitiated at Holi, is, for example, the question of who is this person that they are setting on fire. Caru explains the name of the festival Holi after Holika and the reason for the bonfire, framing the burning of the demon as a triumph of good against evil, a reordering and reaffirmation of the right order of the universe. As part of this alignment of good and evil powers, the audience is encouraged to identify with the story’s hero Prahlad. TK and Nam Rock find an entertaining way of presenting and expanding on the Prahlad story during their Sunday morning set with “Prayers to Lord Nrsimhadev.” The song focuses on the conflict between the pious Prahlad and his father, who sent Holika after his son in the first place, and the ultimate intervention of the lion-god Nrsimhadev on Prahlad’s behalf. During his set TK looks back and calls Visvambhar, who is hanging out behind the stage with Kishore, Nitai, and some of the other musicians, to come play the part of Prahlad. Visvambhar runs up to the stage, grabs a handy mridanga, and finds an open microphone. As the band vamps behind them, TK calls out, “My dear son Prahlad.” “Yes, Father,” Visvambhar replies, and the people on stage giggle a little bit. TK asks Vish/Prahlad what he learned at school today, to which he replies, “I learned that to serve the pure people who are connected to the divine is the ultimate way to reach liberation and happiness.” “That’s not what they teach at Harvard!” TK says in consternation, to some laughs from the audience. Then with dramatic intensity he cries, “Prahlad for your insubordination… I… will… **kill** you!” With a dramatic gesture TK launches into a guitar solo, and the audience cheers—behind the stage, the men who have been carrying
boxes of food for the performers put down their load and start jumping up and down wildly, arms waving in the air.

At the conclusion of his guitar solo, TK, in his most menacing voice, enumerates all of the ways he (King Hiranyakashipu) has tried to “cure” Prahlad of his piousness: “Prahlad, after throwing you off of cliffs, having you stampeded by wild elephants, throwing you into a pit of oil that is burning hot, still somehow or another you do not die—which is very disturbing to me!” When Prahlad, in Vish’s most innocent voice, explains that his energy comes from the divine lord, TK’s king roars, “There is no Lord other than myself! Where is this power you’re talking about?” “This power is everywhere…” “I am the all powerful!” TK shouts, and much as he is playing the bad guy in this story, he is hamming up his part so thoroughly that the audience cheers for everything he says. Even so, the dramatic humor gets the story across.

Another long guitar solo stands in for the part of the story where the lion-god Nrsimhadev dispatches the evil king. As the band plays, Kishore and Nitai make their way onto the stage and give the audience a couple of minutes of their best lion impersonations, Nitai crouching and roaring at the audience before Kishore comes up behind him, slings Nitai down on his lap, and roars away at the crowd with tearing gestures.

When the music calms to a vamp, TK explains, “And so as you have just witnessed, the evil King Hiranyakashipu was killed by the half-man half-lion incarnation of God, Lord Nrsimhadev.” He then leads a call and response with the audience shouting “Lord Nrsimhadev Ki Jai,—an impressive feat considering that Nrsimhadev doesn’t have the easiest name in the Hindu pantheon to pronounce. “Now we’re going to do a little prayer,” he explains and begins singing the common chant “Namaste Narasimhaya” with call-and-response from the other performers on stage. The familiar chanting melody gets considerable energy from the harmonies and beats of the rock backing. Interestingly enough, after several minutes TK segues, after a fierce lion growl or two, into one of the very few renditions of the (slightly modified) common melody that I have heard at this festival. Although most of the audience has no reason to react to this particular melody, the performers on stage clearly step up their energy and sing their responses with notable emotion, a little pleasurable addition to the performance for those in the know.
Given that a high percentage of the music performed at the festival is some sort of modified kirtan, performers take opportunities while addressing the audience between numbers to explain the meaning of the terminology they are using and ask the audience to join in singing along with them. For example, the easiest text for the crowd to sing is the all-purpose greeting and expression of praise and joy “Haribol.” Throughout the day performers lead call-and-response with the audience on shouts of “Haribol,” and explain the meaning of the word during their sets. Saturday morning, while opening the festival, TK explains it thus:

This is the buzz word for the Hare Krishnas. Haribol. Hari is a name for Krishna and bol, like bowl of cereal. Bol actually means to sing or praise or chant so Haribol basically means, “Praise God.” So let me hear you say it: Haribol! [the crowd responds: Haribol!] Throughout the day there’s going to be a lot of bands playing, a lot of fantastic players coming in from all over the world, and if you want to inspire them you just start this chant: Ha-ri-bol, Ha-ri-bol, Ha-ri-bol...

The next day Kishore uses this explanation, after leading an audience call-and-response shout on the two parts of the world, Hari, and Bol:

Bol means to praise, to sing from your heart…to sing the praise of Hari. So what does Hari mean? Hari is a name of the divine which means, “one who steals, one who takes away.” Steals what? Your wallet? Your cell phone? Your car? Maybe if those things are stopping you from loving Him and the people around you. But more importantly, what he steals is your heart. He takes away your worries…

This particular explanation of “haribol” is part of the shared set between the Mayapuris and the Kirtaniyas early Sunday afternoon, and it leads into one of the festival’s really enjoyable audience participation moments. At this point the Mayapuris, with their acoustic, traditional instruments hung around their necks, are leading the music. As Kishore explains the name of Hari, as well as leading some call-and-response shouts of the names with the audience, Visvambhar starts playing a slow reggae-style keyboard lick on his harmonium. Kishore explains about Hari: “He takes away your worries, and like Bob Marley said, he said it best—how did he say it, Vish?” Visvambhar steps up to the microphone and begins singing the famous chorus to Bob Marley’s unfailingly cheerful “Three Little Birds”: “Don’t worry about a thing/ ‘cause every little thing/ is gonna be alright…Come on, you all know the words!” he shouts as he finishes the line, “Sing it, sing it with your heart, everybody!” Kishore holds his microphone invitingly
out to the audience and waves an inclusive gesture. The request to participate really isn’t necessary. Almost as soon as the Marley song is recognizable, the audience is waving their arms and singing loudly. Bob Marley’s music, with its themes of overcoming struggle and oppression, has become a sort of pop cultural shorthand for inclusive spirituality and erasing of social boundaries in a sense of goodwill and faith in humanity—note the prominent use of “One Love” and “Redemption Song” in projects like the musical collective Singing for Change. At this moment it is quite effective when performers from one religious group address an audience largely from another by singing the songs of a musician from a third, speaking in the universal language of Bob Marley. The audience loves it—after several times through a singalong of the chorus to “Three Little Birds,” Visvambhar launches into a rather melismatic interpretation of the verse, substituting words to center the song in the present event: “Rise up this morning in Spanish Fork, Utah, [the crowd cheers wildly]/ smile with the rising sun/ the Kirtaniyas and the Mayapuris are on my doorstep/ singing sweet songs/ of melodies pure and true/ singing, this is my message to you.” At this point, instead of returning to the chorus of “Three Little Birds,” Vish introduces a new melody on “Oh Haribol,” reggae rhythm intact, while Kishore uses his microphone to “throw” the call-and-response back and forth with the audience. He also starts a rocking, side-to-side dance to emphasize the easy, reggae-like nature of the underlying rhythm, and after a few times through the melody, Vish connects the kirtan thematically to Marley’s lyrics: “When we chant Hare Krishna, we feel all our worries going away. But let’s fill that space with something positive. Let’s fill it with bliss with happiness.”

Not only are the performers tasked with explaining what Krishna consciousness is and what all of the terms mean, but they’re also tasked with making it relevant. Their challenge is to walk the line between appealing to a fascination with things that are new and exciting, while at the same time making their message familiar enough that audience members might sense that these ideas apply to them. The use of Bob Marley by the Mayapuris or the appreciation of electronic dance music expressed by the Kirtaniyas both communicate, to a certain degree, the idea that “we’re like you.” Vijay’s announcement that “we need to let God know that Utah’s having a par-tay,” as well as some of the humor from stage, appeal to a pop culture awareness. For example, Visvambhar, while
working on sound balances before starting a set, asks the sound engineer for more violin, more of the bass side of the mridanga, and more cowbell, which draws laughter from the crowd. The audience then follows him in shouting “More cowbell!” a few times, referencing a *Saturday Night Live* sketch that is more than a decade old, but which the audience appreciates nonetheless.

Larisa Stow, during her sets fronting Shakti Tribe, seems especially concerned with inviting the audience members to self-identify with spiritual principles applicable to Krishna devotees and Christians alike. When she first takes the stage on Saturday afternoon, she cries out, “Hello beautiful people of Utah!” Beauty is a common theme with Larisa, as at various times she addresses the crowd as “Beautiful people. Gorgeous, colorful, beautiful people,” and tells them, “You look like absolutely, positively the most gorgeous group of beings who are just speaking freedom and self-expression and love.”

Along with beauty, Larisa’s themes are love and freedom, and during her first set she offers this to the audience:

Do you know what freedom feels like? You do, right now! You get a little bit more free when you turn to the person right next to you and you look in their eyes and you see the divine—you see love, you see yourself. You get a little bit more free when you step outside your comfort zone and you say yes to those that move your soul…you get a little bit more free when you look at the world with everything that’s in it, with all of its faults and all of its limitations, and you can still see the absolute, divine, sacred beauty in everything. You get a little bit more free when you know with every cell of your body that you make a difference for better or for worse, and you choose better.

Among her statements about what the audience members *are* she refers to “the bright light that you are,” she asserts that “You are the powerful change agents right now of love”, and she asks “Do you get how powerful you are?” and later, “Do you know that you are love incarnate?” Pausing to speak to the crowd in the midst of another song, she proclaims, “The truth is that every single one of us is a secret genius, but it takes love, it takes intention, and the time is now.” Larisa explains the process of calling on the holy names as transformative, much the way that Steven Slawek’s informant describes kirtan as “affecting the welfare of the whole world”:

We’re going to call on *amba*. Amba means love, unconditional love, and as we call upon that we can feel it amplifying from here all the way out to every corner of this planet. We’re making a huge wave today.
In the middle of the song the music vamps and Larisa makes a significant statement to the audience: “The veil is getting thinner, isn’t it? People, you can feel [this] big time now, you can feel the love, feel the grace. It’s right here. Nowhere else. Right here where you are.” She smiles beatifically and gestures out toward different people in the audience. “Where you are. Where you are. Where you are.” I don’t know how much Larisa may or may not know about Latter Day Saint theology, but her word choice is particularly effective for addressing a largely Mormon audience. LDS theology refers to a veil between spiritual and temporal worlds, and church members sometimes refer to certain ideas and life experiences that are spiritually resonant as being familiar because the human soul has been in the presence of God before and instinctively knows what it is like. It is very common to hear Mormons describe a particularly spiritual experience, one in which they feel a connection to the divine not unlike what Krishna devotees say they experience through chanting the holy names, as one in which “the veil is very thin.” Whether consciously or not, by using those words Larisa invites those members of her audience who are Latter Day Saint to understand kirtan through the language they may well have grown up using to describe their spiritual experiences, and it is a powerful moment.

Inviting participation

Once the performers have conveyed some critical ideas about Krishna consciousness, their goal is to get the names of deity in the mouths of festival goers through verbal and musical call-and-response. At times performers encourage engagement with the kirtan and unity within the crowd by inviting not only musical but kinesthetic participation. Caru’s admission that the colors are a gimmick to get people chanting kirtan is apparent in the stage banter as the Mayapuris build up to a color throwing. “We’re going to have a throwing in five minutes,” Visvambhar announces, “But only if you all sing loudly! [Are] you going to sing with me?” The audience roars, but Visvambhar still teases, “No, no, no, there’s not going to be a throwing at 3:00. Forget it.” As the audience roars louder, “You guys want a throwing at 3:00? Okay, we’re all in this together, right?” He explains that after counting from ten to one they’ll
all shout “Krishna”: “When we throw our colors in the air we’ll do it at ‘Krishna’ because Krishna—God—will bring peace to all people. That’s why we’re doing this, that’s why we’re here.”

Over the course of the festival the performers offer the crowd various explanations for what kirtan is and can be in terms that can easily appeal to people of faith regardless of what faith that is. Visvambhar says it this way: “We want all of you to please sing with us. What we’re doing, this style of music, is called kirtan. Kirtan means, basically, praise. Praise the Lord, and we’re all here to do that, we’re all here to be together in praise.” As Kishore explains it: “So we’re about to do some kirtan. Now just because we’re on stage doesn’t mean this is a performance. Kirtan means that we’re in this together, so your clapping, your singing, your dancing is just as important as my drumming, as his singing, as the whole band up here. So [that] you can partake in this beautiful practice, we’re going to teach you the words.”

And indeed, throughout the festival some of the most enthusiastic participation that the performers draw from the audience comes as they teach the crowd various Sanskrit words and names for deity. Often this takes the form of a basic verbal call-and-response as the performers shout Sanskrit terms that the audience shouts back. The large crowds seem to get a kick out of yelling “Krishna” and “Jai Radhe” and “Shiva Shiva” and any number of words that the singers teach them.

Many in the audience are also open to singing the chants along with the performers. Not every invitation to sing along brings out a unified response; it is sometimes easy to look around the crowd and see people singing as opposed to hearing them. It is understandable that visitors who have simply never had the experience of spending time at a religious center other than their own might have the utmost respect for what they see and still feel uncertain about how much they personally want to participate. That said, the performers are frequently able to draw an enthusiastic response to requests to sing the holy names.

And there are few people in the crowd assembled in front of the stage who are unwilling to participate via dance. Sometimes the audience comes up with spontaneous but unified gestures—like the side-to-side wave that accompanied Visvambhar’s classically-inflected “Nama Om Vishnu Padaya,” for example. One assumption that I’ve
taken as a given through this research process is that the rhythmically compelling music of kirtan *demands* movement, hence the discussion of “gestures of ecstasy” among participants who raise their arms above the head to indicate joy or open the hands and frame the heart to indicate contemplation. However, these are gestures that are culturally learned, and it is fascinating in a situation like the Utah Holi to watch the spontaneous eruption of gestures of ecstasy among the uninitiated. Certainly jumping up and down and pumping the hands in the air are gestures that would not be out of place among devotees in a Hare Krishna temple room. But in the absence of some other learned gestures, one that seems to come naturally to this crowd is the conga line. At moments of great enthusiasm people start spontaneously forming chains and following each other around the hillside. Although no single conga line lasts for much more than forty-five seconds or a minute, a particularly exciting song may stimulate three or four separate conga lines, some of them quite long, before its end. There are other spontaneous gestures of ecstasy. One of the most stunning moments of the entire festival comes as a hillside full of people raise their arms as high as possible and wave their fingers while Jai Uttal sings a melismatic and meditative treatment of “Haribol.”

Throughout the festival, the performers find different ways of inviting specific modes of kinesthetic participation as a means of unifying and focusing audience energy. The yoga-like opening to the Mayapuris’ Saturday morning set, when Visvambhar asked those in the crowd to raise their arms above their heads and chant “Om,” is one example. It isn’t the only time that the Mayapuris use movement to invite the audience deeper into the music. If Visvambhar acts as frontman to the Mayapuris, Kishore acts in some ways like the hype man, the one whose job it is to raise, guide, and shape the audience’s energy levels. At nearly every moment of the Mayapuris’ sets, Kishore is leaping, spinning, or jumping on stage, playing the cymbals with broad exaggerated gestures, leading the audience in a side-to-side arm swing during passages with forward momentum, or demonstrating a rocking dance step during the more reggae-inflected moments.
At one point, Visvambhar and Kishore together draw some of the loudest audience singing of the entire festival on a call-and-response imitation of what is actually a fairly complex, melismatic treatment of “Haribol” by first leading the audience in a snake-like motion of the arms that provides a kinesthetic approximation of the melodic contour they want the audience to sing.

Other performers also invite kinesthetic modes of participation. TK, for example, teaches the audience the meaning of the word “Jai” as victory, then has the audience do the wave from the bottom of the hill to the top, yelling “Jai!” in response to his call of “Festival of Colors Ki!” Vijay also leads call-and-response using “Ki” and “Jai” as cues, and he calls out at moments that he wants to see hands in the air, or feet stomping. At one point, taking off of Caru’s call for “free hugs”, Vijay caps off a call-and-response recitation of the Maha Mantra by commanding, “Give the person next to you a high five right now!” His demand brings forth a great deal of giggling as well as the requested hand-slapping.

Many of the kirtans sung during Festival of Colors are actually based on names for Krishna other than those found in the Maha Mantra, and they offer some variety in texts and the rhythmic patterns molded to those texts. One of the most musically effective pieces by the Kirtaniyas is a dubstep take on the names “Nitai Gauranga.” The repetitive iterations of the names are hypnotic in effect and Vijay adds some melismatic passages set against Nitai’s very heavy electronic dubstep sounds. Vijay encourages audience response with the explanation that Nitai Gauranga (another of Krishna’s
names/avatars) is “the embodiment of divine love. And do you know what his favorite thing to do was? Dance! Dance!” He hardly needs to ask. Twice during the six minute number Vijay asks the crowd to “get down…everybody down on the ground…get ready…wait for it.” Nearly everybody in the crowd responds to his request and crouches to the ground through a good 45 seconds of crescendo and the thickening texture of Nitai’s electronic wall of sounds. The anticipation is amplified by Vijay’s instruction to “wait for it…wait for it,” until at Vijay’s cue the crowd leaps in the air as one, jumping up and down as many festival goers—particularly on the second time through this exercise—throw handfuls of paint in the air.

Photographs 73 & 74: The Audience Waits for It…Then Leaps

Exploring a kinesthetic dimension of the kirtan experience is an effective way of expanding the potential impact of participatory singing in a crowd of the uninitiated. For any who might feel uncomfortable participating in actually singing the kirtan, whether out of unfamiliarity with the words, self-consciousness about singing in public, or an uncertainty about how much one can participate in another group’s religious activities while remaining true to one’s own, the physical gestures provide a way to still be involved and to express the emotions that are part of being in the middle of a large-scale public festival. For those who are singing the kirtan, involving the body can deepen the sensation of having achieved a spiritually meaningful experience. Thomas Csordas, in his work on spirituality and embodiment, writes that “the most immediate and concrete means of convincing people of the reality of divine power is to involve their bodies,” and that spiritual experience with a physical dimension “invokes a powerful sense of totality, encompassing the whole person” (Csordas 2002:30). The kinesthetic experience of participation is also important to helping festival goers experience the breakdown of social barriers encouraged in other ways by giving hugs to strangers, as Caru encourages,
or even giving a high five as Vijay requests. Shared physical experiences can cause people to feel related to each other, as A.R. Radcliffe-Brown asserts in *The Andaman Islanders* with the statement that music and dance are “a means of uniting individuals into a harmonious whole and at the same time making them actually and intensely experience their relation to that unity of which they are members” (Henry 1998:117-118).

**Participatory Kirtan and Presentational Performance**

Earlier I quoted Kishore’s assertion to the audience that “just because we’re on stage doesn’t mean this is a performance…your clapping, your singing, your dancing is just as important as my drumming, as his singing, as the whole band up here.” However, the presence of performers on stage with microphones indicates something more presentational in nature, and during the event the musicians balance the participatory spirit of kirtan with the musical demands of being a guest performer. The musical traits that make participatory music effective can diminish the impact of a presentational performance and vice versa (see Turino 2008:54). When musicians are tasked with fitting a participatory musical form like kirtan to the presentational frame of a stage, they are challenged to find ways of balancing the demands of both approaches to music. I will use two performances—one traditional, one not—to examine how elements of the participatory meld with the presentational, as well as looking at the audience’s sometimes surprising means of finding their way into the music.

**“Jai Sri Krishna”**

The Mayapuris open their Saturday set and their participation in Holi with a classically inflected and thoroughly presentational performance of “Nama Om Vishnu Padaya,” and it has a hypnotic effect on the audience. With their dynamic follow-up, “Jai Sri Krishna,” the band invites the audience into their music, but they do so in a way that alternates group participation during moments of ramped-up energy with moments that showcase their own musical skills.

“Jai Sri Krishna” is a song that appears on the band’s album *Mridanga*. As the studio-recorded version appears on the album, the song is upbeat but ultimately very controlled in its balanced exchanges between soloists and chorus. As it is performed live
with performers tossing calls and responses back and forth to a wildly dancing audience, the song is utterly explosive. While the performers’ commitment to the song is largely responsible for this intensity, some credit must be given to the arrangement of the kirtan in a manner that tweaks the participatory formulae that make a temple kirtan effective. In the stage show, the Mayapuris blend elements of both participatory and presentational modes of musicking for maximum intensity.

Visvambhar introduces “Jai Sri Krishna” by announcing, “This next song is going to take us out of Utah, out of Spanish Fork, out of this earth, out of America. We’re going to another dimension right now. In this dimension there’s variety, there’s color, and every person shares love with one another. Everything surrounds the divine couple Jai Shri Krishna.” Vish then teaches the audience members the words with a verbal call and response on three different parts of the primary text: “Jai Shri Krishna,” “Bolo,” and “Jai Radhe.” Once the audience knows the text, the performers start an instrumental introduction with cymbal, drum roll, and harmonium vamp (Figure 35):

![Figure 35: Harmonium Vamp](image)

The percussion crescendos and repetitive vamp serve to build a sensation of anticipation that feels very intense, even if the tempo is not terribly fast—a deceptively easy 92 beats per minute. Despite the relaxed tempo, musical intensity is already very high. Kishore in particular is explosive in his energy—he takes the stage in a colorful head wrap which stays on for exactly as long as it takes to establish a beat, at which point he suddenly leaps into the air and starts headbanging so fiercely that the wrap flies from his head in an explosion of hair. The audience follows suit, jumping up and down with a fairly unified motion.

The band then begins to lead the audience through call-and-response on the text that Visvambhar has taught them. The crowd participates readily in the music, but unlike the kirtans I have discussed thus far which prioritize participation through open forms and copious repetition, here the call-and-response occurs within a tightly controlled structure of balanced phrases and melodic variety. Turino characterizes the presentational mode of performance as one in which the musical piece is a “set item”
with “scripted forms” and a balance of repetition and contrast, as opposed to a participatory “collection of resources refashioned anew in each performance” (Turino 2008:59). Here the Mayapuris sing four times each—two calls, two responses—through two sets of balanced melodic phrases, transcribed as AB and CD in figures 36 and 37 respectively:

![Figure 36: Melodies AB](image1)

![Figure 37: Melodies CD](image2)

After the responsorial treatment of every two melodic phrases, either Visvambhar or Bali adds a melismatic, soloistic passage on “Jai Radhe Radhe” (Figures 38 and 39):

![Figure 38: Melodies AB with Melisma](image3)

![Figure 39: Melodies CD with Melisma](image4)

In presentational styles of music, demonstrations of a performer’s skill and virtuosity contribute to the audience enthusiasm. In participatory styles, interaction and exchange between those taking part generates enthusiasm. Bali’s melisma, his demonstration of skill, is followed by a exchange between performers and audience of the tightened,
rhythmically accented phrase “Jai Jai Shri Radhe” on a pair of melodic ideas labeled E and F in Figure 40:

![Figure 40: Melodies E and F](image)

The band leads four sets of call-and-response through each of these melodies, and move into double time, drawing frenzy onstage and in the audience. Bali launches into an exciting drum solo before Visvambhar introduces melody G, which, although slower in surface rhythm, has a wider range and thus feels more expansive, one of the traits of intensity that Henry noted in Indian music. The audience responds with more intense jumping, much the way that congregations in temple kirtans often greet a break in tempo with renewed attention to their gestures of ecstasy.

![Figure 41: Melody G](image)

Visvambhar turns the microphone back to the audience for more call and response on E and F. The single biggest ramp in intensity follows a soloistic gesture in which Visvambhar sings a series of slowly ascending notes—Kishore’s energy is wild, as he crouches down and spins around rapidly, and the audience matches his energy, if not the actual gesture. After another four times through G, the band lands on an abrupt end to the song. Where participatory kirtans often capitalize on feathered beginnings and endings to the music (Ibid.), “Jai Shri Krishna” builds to a definitive and almost abrupt end. And it is effective—the crowd cheers wildly.

**“Govinda Govinda Gopala”**

On Sunday morning Jai Uttal offers a kirtan on two of Krishna’s other names, “Govinda Govinda Gopala,” which is memorable not only for its negotiation of participatory and presentational musical elements but also for the audience’s spontaneous but unified way of taking part.
“Govinda Govinda Gopala” is a reggae tune, a genre which is not only popular but appears to be experienced as spiritual in nature by many in the audience. Jai Uttal himself plays electric guitar and he is accompanied by another electric guitar, a bass, and a drummer on drumset. Indian instruments such as the bansuri flute are included in the instrumentation as well. For this performance members of the Mayapuris and the Kirtaniyas join him on stage, with violinist Saraswati playing a particularly important role. The instrumental introduction to the melody establishes what will be a pervasive bass line throughout the piece (Figure 42):

Figure 42: Bass Line to “Govinda Govinda Gopala”

After bass and keyboards set the groove at a relaxed 92 BPM, Jai Uttal enters. He introduces two melodic fragments on “Govinda Govinda Gopala,” each of which is performed in call-and-response fashion, retaining the participatory signature of kirtan. However, the call-and-response at this point happens entirely between the performers on stage, with Rasika of the Kirtaniyas providing the dominant voice. The effect of her responses to Jai’s calls is not unlike the sound of the I-Threes singing with Bob Marley and the Wailers. Although the call-and-response maintains the participatory signature of kirtan, the melodic phrases are put together in a closed form that sounds distinctly presentational. The melodic ideas repeated through call-and-response are put together like the phrases of a song, rather than simply spinning out repetitively as they would in a participatory temple room kirtan. They are organized in an AABBA₁ pattern, as follows:

Figure 43: Opening Passage of “Govinda Govinda Gopala”
For the first several minutes of the song, the band layers the above pattern with instrumental solos heavily grounded in the bass line transcribed above. In between a couple of these patterns, however, Jai introduces a new melody—more of a fragment, really—that condenses the text into a shorter melodic segment and thus gives the music a greater sense of forward motion, as shown in Figure 44:

Figure 44: Melody C

In fact, several minutes in, melody C seems to take over the song and move it into more participatory territory, with 15 repetitions of the call-and-response pattern that now include the audience. Several iterations in, the band launches into a dramatic acceleration from 92 BPM to 112 BPM, and the audience responds accordingly to the building energy of the tightly-compacted iterations of C. After firmly grounding the kirtan, and the audiences’ participation, in melody C, Jai Uttal opens up with an expansive, almost plaintive new melody D shown in Figure 45:

Figure 45: Melody D

For much of the rest of the piece, Jai layers sets of iterations of C and D with instrumental solos in a manner that seems to be entirely improvised.

About ten minutes into the performance something very fascinating (and, as Caru will tell us later, very unusual) happens. At this point the texture of the music—which includes at least three kinds of percussion, violin, electric guitars, bass, etc.—has been becoming increasingly dense. In Turino’s formulation, musical texture—either a clear texture, as exemplified by the first several song-like minutes of this piece, or a dense texture like that increasingly generated during these repetitions of C and D—is a trait that sometimes distinguishes between presentational and participatory performance modes (Ibid.). Where the melodically balanced A and B phrases appear to belong to the people on stage, melodies C and D are more repetitive, and during this latter section of the
performance Jai invites the audience to start taking part. During a set of repetitions of melody D, Jai begins adding a long and heavily distorted electric guitar chord to the beginning of each melodic iteration. As he does so, some members of the audience, perhaps matching tone colors with literal colors in a moment of brief synaesthesia, start to throw a handful of paint to mark each chord. After this carries on for a minute or two, a chicken-and-egg moment of audience-performer interaction occurs. I do not know if Jai Uttal is responding to what he sees in the audience or if the crowd is responding instinctually to this highly significant text, but Jai breaks into the Maha Mantra on a modified version of melody D at the same moment that a spontaneous yet unified color throwing, accompanied by loud cheers, envelops the entire crowd. Unlike all of the previous color throwings, there is no countdown and no cue, but the action is virtually simultaneous anyway. This throwing is also longer than the others, lasting a good two minutes, and it is noticeably joyful: the celebratory nature of the Maha Mantra for Krishna devotees is mirrored in the markedly celebratory gestures of ecstasy from this uninitiated crowd. The gestures of color throwing take on an aesthetic dimension for many people in the audience as they turn the action of flinging paint into something of a dance gesture.

Photographs 75&76: Jai Uttal and the Spontaneous Color Throwing He Inspires
The markedly celebratory mood continues as, for another 7-8 minutes, Jai Uttal alternates the Maha Mantra on D₄, “Govinda Govinda Gopala” on melody C, and instrumental passages that continue to be more and more heavily distorted. During this time the dancing in the audience is markedly celebratory; one group of people in front of the stage spontaneously wrap their arms around each other and dance as a tightly bound circle. It
also includes some of the most individualistic and expressive dancing from many of the people that I have observed throughout the entire festival.

Finally Jai signals an abrupt tempo break to a nearly un-metered 80 beats per minute. All instruments but the percussion drop out, and the audience members mirror Jai in raising their arms high in the air, singing the mantra loudly, and punctuating the words with rhythmic hand gestures, before the instruments come in for a long, 15-second final chord. The audience screams wildly. When Caru takes the stage, he announces that they have never seen something like the spontaneous, unified color throwing—it is an expression of crowd sensitivity to the music onstage, and also an expression of the unity that the whole festival is intended to cultivate.

Responses from Festival Guests

In reflecting on the experience created by the combination of color, philosophy, fellowship, and music, it would be impossible to try to divine all of the motivations driving those who come to the festival—or, after all of the efforts by Caru and the musical performers to address their beliefs to the crowd, what the guests take away with them. Still, it is instructive to hear from a few. Curiosity seems to be a driving factor in getting first-time guests to the festival in the first place. “We just saw, a couple of years ago, people walking around after the festival shopping and wanted to find out what it was,” says one woman sitting in the uncrowded space behind the stage cradling a newborn. “My friends come every year, both days” says a father sitting with his young family. Two teenage girls finish each other’s sentences: “[We] heard about it so we decided that we’d just show up,” “try it out.” When I ask them to describe their experiences I hear responses like “high energy, everyone seems to be having a good time,” “amazing, amazing fun,” “the music’s really cool,” and “I’m definitely going to come back next year.”

Monica is sitting with her husband and a group of seven children—only some of whom belong to her, others are friends. She speculates (even as her young son pipes up, “I just came here to hear the rock music!”) that a driving factor in bringing people to the festival is self-expression: “I think a lot of people are coming because this is a place they can freely express” themselves, and she laughs, “That’s not very common—we’re in
Utah County.” As for her own motivations in coming to Holi, she says, “For me it’s more of a fascination” because “I’m studying behavioral science. I’m studying psychology” and “I watch people come in, and when they’re first coming in they’re all white [in their dress] and they’re all kind of clique-ish. But as they start to get colors and everybody looks the same, you see those cliques kind of deplete, and everyone gets unified.”

When I ask about the spiritual dimension of the festival, Shantell, the young woman with the newborn, says “I wouldn’t say I came to have a spiritual experience,” but “I think it’s more of a draw to see what other people’s religions are like.” However, given the things being said from the stage by both the performers during their sets and Caru as he emcees the event, a sense of spirituality applicable across belief systems sinks in with some members of the audience. “They keep on talking about happiness and love and peace and that speaks to me,” says one girl. A couple finishes each other’s sentences:

“The last time [Caru] was up there talking really spoke to me, when he was talking about love and yoga and the collective and—”

“We’re all God’s [children].”

“Yep, absolutely.”

I hear a similar response from Nina, a woman in her forties who is here with her children and some extended family. She tells me, “There’s good everywhere. Everyone has good [in them], so peace and goodness are everywhere.” It turns out that Nina’s husband is actually on stage playing the drums with TK, and that they are longtime friends of the Krishna temple: “My husband and I used to come 25 years ago, before we were even married, and we just watched it develop over the years…We were BYU students when we first started to come here and that was 23 years ago.” She adds, “We’ve been bringing our friends to Festival of India since [the temple] was built. [We’ve] got to get them hooked on the food…. We laugh. “We love it here,” Nina says, and her paint-spattered teenage daughter opens her eyes wide and nods vigorously, “we love it.” Nina continues, “We come even when it’s not a festival. We love the food, we love the purity, we just love to come out here because it’s really peaceful.” Nina is among the camp of BYU-connected Utah Valley residents who feel that the Krishna temple provides an important service to the community. “My husband grew up in LA and I grew up in
Mexico and in St Louis. So we grew up around a lot of different ethnic groups, and that’s one of the things we want our kids to experience. It’s hard when you live here, so this is a good way to teach them that there’s other people, there are other beliefs, to be more accepting.”

Inside the temple room, where an ecstatic group of paint-covered festival goers dance their very idiosyncratic dances to the traditional temple-room kirtan, I meet Prateek, a native of India who has moved to the United States to work. Prateek is excited, virtually rapturous, to see American youth embracing Holi. “This is my culture,” he says repeatedly, waving an arm to the predominantly white group of dancers, “I am so happy!” Although he describes Holi celebrations as being much bigger in India, having millions of people involved, he considers the Utah event remarkable: “[If you] go to India we don’t have very organized Holi. You can see [this is] the biggest organized Holi in the whole world.” Prateek makes it very clear that in his family as he was growing up ISKCON was seen as a cult, and in words reminiscent of Monica’s assessment of people flocking to the Krishna temple in search of liberating self-expression, he describes his early impressions of ISKCON devotees as a “group of rebels,” “cool people,” “people who don’t listen to anybody, they just do what they want to do,” “people who don’t follow what other people follow. It’s very unconventional” because “what they care [about],” aside from any other social conventions, is the relationship between the individual and Krishna. Looking around the room at what he sees here, Prateek mentions the youth element of the festival as part of its success, saying “when people are young, you [are] more open to things. As you grow old, you go with all the things that you [already] have. So maybe these guys are more open, enough to accept something from another culture than their parents, and that’s why you are seeing so many young people….they still want to be here to know what’s going on, and then maybe some of them understand” a bigger picture regarding the diversity of ideas and peoples in the world.

On Sunday I run into Mike, my companion in box-taping from the other day, and I find myself reflecting on the festival’s message of open-armed acceptance as Mike and I, who have admittedly met only briefly, greet each other with enthusiastic hugs. Mike, a relatively new Latter Day Saint eager to learn what the Krishna temple has to add to his
beliefs, has latched onto something that Caru said earlier about the things we’ll get asked about when we leave this world, and how the love we’ve had and shared with others is the most significant thing to take with us (an idea I have often heard expressed in an LDS context). He reflects on leaving the festival, entering the immediate traffic and congestion and the problems of the world outside, and he hopes that a little bit of the communal love that is cultivated here will spread in our interactions with others. Mike thinks back to experiences earlier in his life when he was not as compassionate as he might have been, and he hopes to learn greater compassion. I walk away from our conversation and reflect that the intentions of the organizers and musicians of Holi are geared toward moments just like this.

As the Festival Closes: On A Personal Note

For the last two days I have been given over to the demands of research, choosing where to be based on the need to film and record performances, scanning the crowd for interview subjects, and fussing over the ragged sheets of Saran Wrap that are crisscrossed around my camera in a continuously evolving attempt to cover anything and everything that could possibly be damaged by flying paint. By the end of Sunday afternoon, however, I have decided that the last color throwing of the day is mine. No camera, no research imperative. I’m slightly chagrined to realize that in the last minutes of the festival I still have three bags of color left—it’s as if I haven’t been here at all. I open one of the bags and make my way down to the center of the crowd, leaving a trail of orange on the people to my right and my left to mark the way down. By now all of the talk of love and generosity has soaked into me to the point that I am grinning broadly at every person I splatter with orange, as if it is some sort of gift. At the center of the crowd I open my last two bags—green in the right hand, the dark purple that I have saved to the last because it is my favorite color in the left. I wait—we all wait—through that last countdown, probably given by Jai Uttal although at this point I’m not keeping track, and on “one” we all unleash the color cloud. I jump up and down, waving both arms in the air until my bags of paint are empty, cheering loudly even though it means inhaling the wall of paint that momentarily obscures everything—even the people around me—from view. Yesterday Monica said that she believes people come here to feel free, and it rings
true—regardless of all other stress and obligation, for that singular moment flinging color and good will at strangers, I feel absolutely, utterly free.
CONCLUSIONS:
THE POTENTIAL OF COLLECTIVE MUSICAL PLAY

This dissertation is about the “collective spiritual [and musical] play” of kirtan, a musical process whose essence is largely defined by two important characteristics: devotion and participation. Kirtan is commonly deployed in ritual settings, where it is intended as an emotional experience through which a soul reaches toward the divine, and in celebratory settings, where it is one means by which festival-goers perform the treasured ideals of Vaishnava culture. I have always been fascinated by the participatory nature of kirtan, first of all because it is very democratic, and secondly because it requires an act of agency. However subtly the choice is made or individual involvement is demonstrated, there is an act of agency involved with choosing to participate in a kirtan, a fact that is given special relevance in terms of Thomas Turino’s statements about musical engagement as a choice to “internalize [certain] thoughts, and then act on them” and about “the power of group singing to strengthen resolve and a particular way of being in the world” (Turino 2008:217). The thoughts that may be internalized by participating in kirtan depend largely on what the kirtan represents to the particular person singing, whether that is divine communion or an extension of social regard. But whatever the perceived meaning of kirtan is, the process of collective musicking represents a certain type of interpersonal interaction that has the potential to mediate social encounters and even create bonds among groups of people. Christopher Small, in theorizing “musicking” as a verb or process, writes that “a musical performance, while it lasts, brings into existence relationships that model in metaphoric form those which [participants] would like to see in the wider society of their everyday lives” (Small 1998:46).

In approaching this dissertation, I explored the notion of collective musicking in a celebratory context as a tool of agency capable of mediating social encounters by organizing my ideas into four interrelated premises:
1. Participatory music making in a celebratory context can become a vehicle for negotiating complex issues of social identity within the Hare Krishna community.

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2. The same process of music making can likewise act as a vehicle for negotiating social identity in encounters with those outside of that community.

3. Collective musicking in festival situations can provide experiences that are perceived as being spiritually meaningful for Hare Krishnas.

4. This is likewise the case for individuals who are not of the Vaishnava faith, but who nevertheless perceive kirtan as being personally meaningful in the context of their own beliefs.

In prioritizing ethnographic narrative and privileging the voices of those whose words, ideas, and music were the lifeblood of that narrative in the preceding chapters, I have for the most part embedded the theoretical trajectory of this work within its “story.” Here, in the concluding chapter, I reverse course by reconsidering the ethnographic portraits contained in the dissertation in relation to the theoretical scaffolding upon which their presentation has been organized.

**Negotiating Identity within the Hare Krishna Community**

The performance of kirtan is a remarkably pervasive activity in Hare Krishna worship, and with all of the meanings that devotees ascribe to singing kirtan, it is instructive to consider how the practice articulates issues of identity within the ISKCON community. It becomes very clear from listening to the stories shared by devotees in Chapter One that a quality of devotion to Krishna is of paramount importance to being part of ISKCON, and participating in kirtan is a means of expressing that devotion. Converts to Krishna consciousness tend to tell their stories as narratives of transformation, including transformations that were specifically stimulated by the kirtan experience. In recent years as a second generation of Krishna devotees, those raised in the movement by Prabhupada’s first converts, has come of age, kirtan has become a vehicle for negotiating generational identity. While members of this second generation might not have some of the dramatic stories of transformation associated with the conversion experience, they still communicate their dedication to Vaishnava devotionalism and its influence in shaping their personal identities through an expressed love of kirtan. Hare Krishnas tend to revere the efforts of the first generation of converts to sing Vaishnava spirituality into America through very long public harinams, and much is made of those stories, such that
Nam told me, “We actually founded our movement on kirtan.” The second generation responds to the precedent set by their parents’ generation in a couple of ways: with the kirtan mela, which demonstrates their own endurance and dedication to the process of kirtan as singers engage in it for a set number of hours at a time; and with the expansion of kirtan in the recording industry, as they take the “monastic activist” aspect of harinam (to borrow Hridayananda’s phrase) to a technologically mediated form of distribution.

Kirtan provides a productive site for teasing out the relationship between tradition and modernity in Hare Krishna identity. Hare Krishnas greatly revere Vedic culture and ancient wisdom; conversations with devotees frequently refer to history, both the life of Krishna located in mythic time, and the life of Caitanya Mahaprabhu in the fifteenth century. In fact, for American-born Hare Krishnas, poised between a Western culture where their worship of a god identified with the Indian pantheon makes them a religious minority, and an Indian culture where their Western origins set them apart, according to Francine Daner “the ISKCON movement gains legitimacy and prestige through its claims to roots in India, its body of Indian tradition, Vedic literature,” etc. (Daner 1976:30)” At the same time, this ancient wisdom is also meant to transform and revitalize the modern world. Framing Vaishnava devotional activities in a contemporary context can function, according to Milton Singer, to “explain how traditional mythological and legendary stories, rites, and ceremonies can serve contemporary moral and social purposes by providing support for social equality, national and regional identity, or community development” (Singer 1966: 202).

This tension between the ancient and modern is played out when the performance of traditional rituals and temple practices such as kirtan and darshan are mediated by technological means such as cameras, the internet, and the loudspeakers with which Rath Yatra participants bathe their urban environment in the purportedly revitalizing sounds of kirtan. Through technologically mediated devotional activities, devices of the modern world are put to the service of ancient wisdom. The tension between the traditional and the modern also plays out in hybrid musical forms of kirtan that combine traditional and popular music sounds. In some cases technologically generated sounds are blended with traditional musical techniques and put to the service of traditional practices. The shared performance by the Mayapuris and the Kirtaniyas at the Utah Holi is a particularly
fascinating example of this integration of the traditional and the modern, as electronic
dubstep sounds blend with the acoustic sounds of mridanga drumming and konnakol
vocalization to accompany singing whose vocal style displays strong classical Indian
influence.

Even within a non-Vaishnava belief system, kirtan can play a role in negotiating
religious identity within a community. Through the festival of Holi, for example,
members of Utah’s Latter Day Saint community engage in a dialogue about the proper
observance of their own religion in relation to other faiths. There are those within the
LDS community who feel that devotion to their own faith requires eschewing the
activities of other religions, and they make their stance known by vocally opposing the
Festival of Colors. There are also those who proclaim a belief that devotion to their own
religion should not mean being unwilling to interact positively with other religious
groups because such behavior is un-Christian and narrow minded—two traits from which
they wish to distance both themselves and their religion. And then there are many who
hold the attitude that believing that their religion comes from an all-encompassing God
specifically means that they should embrace the good ideals and practices of other faiths
because, to quote a phrase which I hear very frequently in conversation, “truth is truth
wherever you find it.” While these debates regarding the appropriateness of celebrating
with the Hare Krishnas (and singing kirtan in the process) take place in various media
outlets in the weeks leading up to the festival, thousands of Utah Mormons take a
position by simply showing up and chanting.

**Negotiating Identity in Encounters with Others**

The Utah Holi, in which thousands of people not belonging to the Vaishnava faith
actively travel to a Hare Krishna temple to hear and sing kirtan, is arguably the most
vivid example of collective musicking in a celebratory context as a vehicle for
negotiating encounters between differing groups of people. The history of the Hare
Krishna temple in Spanish Fork is already characterized by an exchange of services
between the ISKCON and Mormon communities. In the specific instance of the Utah
Holi, there is a real deliberation both to the manner in which organizers and performers
address themselves to their non-Vaishnava audience and to the act of agency on the part
of those non-Hare Krishna festival goers who choose to participate. It is one thing for a person unaffiliated with ISKCON to see a Rath Yatra parade while out shopping, to be favorably impressed by the music and the spectacle, and to allow herself to be temporarily absorbed in a few moments of blissful grooving. It is entirely another thing for a person to cover the inside of the car with sheets and towels, wrap cameras and cell phones in plastic, dress in white clothing, and drive to a location where she is likely to have to either park and walk some distance or catch a shuttle before participating in the kirtan. There is deliberation in such a decision, and while many do it simply because the festival sounds like fun, there are also those who express an active desire to be the kind of person who embraces contributions to the world of faith from those who are different. Participation involves a decision about advocating a certain ideal. Turino writes, “Art is not really an ‘imitation of life’; it would be more accurate to say that artistic processes crystallize the very essence of a good life by dramatically emphasizing the interplay of future possibilities with experiences and things we already know from the past—all within a specially framed and engrossing present.” (Turino 2006:18)

Other festivals demonstrate different aspects of the social negotiation that takes place in the performance of celebratory kirtan. In New York the Rath Yatra parade not only performs the ideals of the Hare Krishna community, but it also demonstrates the size, strength, and vitality of the Indian diasporic community in New York City by filling Fifth Avenue with color and music and Washington Square Park with classical performances. These festivals are pleasurable for members of the ISKCON and South Asian communities, but they are also an offering to the larger community. Such cultural performances, according to Milton Singer, “become symbols of national identity” that “take on a life of their own, quite different from their life as regional and local traditions” due to “a fluidity and a self-consciousness that reflects constantly changing moods and aspirations, and changing conceptions of national identity” (Singer 1959:ix) The initial Rath Yatra parade invites New Yorkers to discover how Vaishnavas celebrate, and in the process encodes cultural information in a vivid array of colorful signifiers ranging from the appearance of the gods to the colorful clothing of the participants to the compelling music of kirtan. The Festival of India proudly displays the classical beauty of dances like kathak and bharatanatyam; it also offers an array of booths offering information on
Indian culture and religion. Singer writes, “Perhaps the relations between different nations will never be completely free of the dialogue of image and self-image. Yet, as each nation becomes aware of how it looks to others and to itself, and of how it looks upon others, and comes to recognize the distortion, bias, and incompleteness in these different views, the chances for misunderstanding are lessened, and the opportunities for mutual understanding increased” (Singer 1972:12).

Parades like the Rath Yatra present a significant disruption of the public space. The devotees’ intention, given what they believe about kirtan’s potential to invoke divine influence, is for that disruption to constitute a positive transformation. Even from the perspective of outsiders who don’t subscribe to a belief in kirtan as a gateway to divine intervention, the disruption of space may be viewed as a transformation which, given the combination of colorful carts, compelling music, graceful dancing, and the sheer joy on the faces of the devotees, may be perceived as filling the space with a measure of beauty. Victor Turner describes the festival situation as one in which a large group of people collectively experience “the liminal, ‘betwixt-and-between’ state intervening between the ‘safe’ but dull domains of routinized and classified life” (Turner 1982:29). Rath Yatra is by no means the only event that engulfs the location of Fifth Avenue in this exceptional state of being, but it is nevertheless significant as an intrusion of the extraordinary into the urban landscape. A similar disruption and potential transformation takes place in Los Angeles with the Venice Beach Rath Yatra.

Cultural performances like the Rath Yatra, Holi, and other festivals also perform something that many people in contemporary American society tend to want: cultural diversity. New York City’s famous ethnic diversity is an important aspect of its identity as a cultural center, and if the various parades that pass down Fifth Avenue put the city’s diversity on display, Rath Yatra indicates the participation of the Hare Krishnas as well as the Indian diaspora in the cultural fabric of New York. The valuing of diversity as it is demonstrated by a Krishna festival is also at issue in Los Angeles, where the reputation of Venice Beach—in fact, part of the marketing that promoters use to draw people to visit—is the promise of “one of the most culturally diverse and eccentric communities by the sea” (venicebeach.travel.com). That there are distinct modes of engagement readable in beachgoers’ responses to the kirtan indicates that there are multiple levels at which
people are willing to engage with such a cultural performance when they encounter it. In Utah some of the festival goers with whom I spoke expressed a specific desire for more diverse cultural influence in their communities—for the sake of education, for the sake of life experience, for the sake of open-mindedness—something which the Krishna festival offers. Singer describes Vaishnava devotional performances as events that express an ideal of social equality—and diversity can be regarded as part of that ideal—even before that equality is fully achieved in the workings of the society. The disconnect between reality and ideal may be considered wrong or even sinful, and the performance is “a kind of acting out in dramatic form and bodily gestures of an ideal, for the purpose of evoking in men’s minds the sentiments and attitudes that may eventually bring their behavior closer to the ideal” (Singer 1966: 127). John Blacking attributes the “source of cultural creativity” to the “consciousness that springs from social cooperation and loving interaction” (Blacking 1973:115), and cultural performances reflect, Singer writes, “the fact that a civilization is a process of becoming, as well as a state of being” (Singer 1959: ix).

That not everyone shares this desire for cultural diversification is evident in the presence of protesters at the Los Angeles parade or letters to the editor published in Utah newspapers from people convinced that dancing Hare Krishnas must be throwing drugs into the air (to take an example, admittedly an extreme one). The protesters at the Los Angeles Rath Yatra are the most notable example of a non-Krishna group actually participating in the festival, but participating in a manner that registers their opinion that the Hare Krishna offering is not welcome. Not all of the signs carried by protestors are specifically hostile in their actual texts—some simply state affirmations of Christian faith such as “Jesus Christ is Lord.” But the fact that those texts are painted on signs clearly intended for protest and situated to precede a non-Christian celebration through a city indicates an attempt to iron out this expression of religious diversity. A few Hare Krishnas respond to those protestors with their own signs by quoting Christian scriptural admonishments to “turn the other cheek” or offering the protesters free food as a sign of peaceful intentions. But most simply go on their way allowing the blissful nature of their singing and dancing to offer its own counterpoint to the harsh tone present in some of the signs.
In Los Angeles the public kirtan acts as a demonstration to those unaffiliated with Krishna consciousness of everything that the philosophy promises: personal transformation, liberation, bliss. The regulative principles of ISKCON including vegetarianism and abstinence from mind-altering substances might be considered harsh by some members of the general public, but by singing and dancing ecstatically in a harinam or in the larger Rath Yatra parade devotees hope to demonstrate that the sacrifice can be worthwhile. Performers make use of musical hybridization, both on Venice Beach and in Utah’s Holi, as a means of communicating the relevance of their message to a range of people interested in different popular music styles such as rock, reggae, reggaeton, and dubstep. Using these styles of music as vehicles for the holy names makes them potentially memorable and interesting to a wide range of listeners. It also communicates a mutual interest in the musical styles of popular culture—even a sense that “we are like you.”

Kirtan performers tend to invite their audiences to musical participation both through singing and through physical gestures like dance that offer a kinesthetic mode of engagement with the kirtan. By doing so performers not only encourage their audience to feel the pleasure of kirtan, but they also promote an experience of empathy and perceived unity. Edward O. Henry writes that “group singing and dancing are unique in the repertoire of human behavior in the way they join individuals in social relation through individual, psycho-physiological gratification,” specifying that “the phenomena of rhythm and the mutual coordination of voices are keys to the process of the individual-group relationship” (Henry 1998:116-17). He refers to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s assertion that “the effect of rhythm…affords an experience of a constraint or force of a peculiar kind acting upon the individual and inducing in him when he yields to it a pleasure of self-surrender. The peculiarity of the force in question is that it seems to act upon the individual both from without…and also from within” (Ibid. 117). Kirtan, particularly in its traditional form, is a genre of music characterized by compelling grooves created by the interlocking patterns laid down by groups of improvising drummers. This rhythmic groove may be particularly effective in what Radcliffe-Brown describes as “uniting individuals into a harmonious whole and at the same time making them actually and intensely experience their relation to that unity of which they are
members.” (Henry 1998:117-18) According to Blacking, such an experience may “involve people in a powerful shared experience and thereby make them more aware of themselves and of their responsibilities toward each other” (Blacking 1973:48), and he elaborates that “in such a moment, you would be sharing the most important thing about music, that which is in the human body and which is universal to all men…I do not say that we can experience exactly the same thoughts associated with bodily experience; but to feel with the body is probably as close as anyone can ever get to resonating with another person” (Ibid. 111). Along with the sympathetic bond and sense of perceived unity comes an implied message from kirtan performers to those who hear and take part: “this music and philosophy are meaningful and relevant to me; they may be meaningful and relevant to you too.”

**Spiritually Meaningful Experience for Believers in Krishna**

In order to tease out the meanings of kirtan as collective play it is important to understand how the kirtan experience is perceived: whether or not it is perceived by those who participate as being effective in its stated goal to bring the singer into contact with the divine, for example. Even if a participant does not connect with the experience on that particular level, it is instructive to consider whether the kirtan is perceived as having other personal meanings or effects which the singer considers to be worthwhile. One logical start point for inquiry into the perceived meaning of kirtan is to consider what kirtan means to those for whom it is an everyday practice and an integral aspect of their personal spirituality. Kenneth Valpey warns against researchers allowing themselves to become too distanced from the doctrines embraced by those whom they study and facing “one serious danger [which is] potential loss of touch with the real concerns of those being studied, people for whom it is important to be situated in or be related with some sort of truth which is of an extraordinary, ultimate nature” (Valpey 2006:5). Tommy Poling and J. Frank Kenney, in their study of personality types inclined toward ISKCON conversion, specifically identify among Hare Krishnas a “religious tendency to seek self-identity in a relationship with some Sacred, Transcendent, Ultimate principle” (Poling and Kenney: 1986:2).
According to Larry Shinn, in the context of Vedic cosmology “Sounds have spiritual significance. They can function not merely as metaphors, but as direct links with the sacred realm” (Gelberg 1983:84). Guy Beck recognizes in devotional music sounds that “represent and express the close and delicate bonds between the divine word and ritual action that serves to keep hope and faith alive, and to animate and sustain the religious consciousness of millions of devout followers.” (Beck 2006:21) He quotes Edmund Gurney with a statement that beautifully captures what devotional music might mean not only to Vaishnavas, but to others encountering it:

The link between sound and the supernatural is profound and widespread… Possibly sound—like the Gods a powerful unseen presence—is an unacknowledged model for our concept of the otherworldly…if we are believers, then we can believe that the Spirit is moving us in our ritual music. Ritual sound makes the transcendent immanent. It is at the same time ours, our own sounds pressing in around us and running through us like a vital current of belief, molding us into a living interior that is proof against the unbelieving emptiness that lies around (Ibid. 23).

Vaishnava doctrine frames kirtan in particular as part of “an elaborate theology wherein Krishna’s names are seen as perpetually accessible sonic avatar” (Bryant 2007:15), and through communion with the divine names “the senses of the individual become dovetailed with the supreme senses of Krsna, and the living being attains the pleasure and happiness that is otherwise impossible to find” (Daner 1976:34-35). In Chapter One I related ideas shared by a number of Hare Krishnas who describe their experiences of discovering kirtan and integrating the process into their lives. In creating personal narratives that include kirtan, devotees tend to recognize kirtan as an agent of personal transformation, a tool of bliss, and a means of forging connections between themselves and their God. A close relationship between faithful intention, personal emotion, and a celebratory, playful approach to worship derives from kirtan’s placement within the bhakti movement. According to Meena Khandelwal, “Bhakti implies taking an informal attitude toward ritual and an intensely personal attitude toward devotion. More important than the form of worship is its spirit, which should be playful, random, and expressive” (Khandelwal 2004:76).

Understanding what kirtan means to those who practice it sheds light on their intentions in performing kirtan in festival settings. In Alachua kirtan is performed as an
element of ritual celebrations such as Janmastanmi and Govardhana Puja. But kirtan itself becomes an object of celebration in the kirtan mela, represented in this dissertation by the Festival of the Holy Name. Devotees taking part in a kirtan mela recognize in it a communally experienced transcendent experience worthy of deep immersion for long periods of time. It becomes apparent that Hare Krishnas value kirtan as a means of attaining not only transcendence but also immediate bliss when observing their responses to the experience as expressed through culturally-recognized gestures of ecstasy and the use of musical techniques that build intensity of emotion. The pleasure of the singing devotee, especially as she is willing to engage in kirtan for exhaustive periods of time, brings to mind Mihalyi Czikszentmihalyi’s formulation of “optimal experience” or “flow” as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi 2008). According to Czikszentmihalyi “Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated,” and “people who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy” (Ibid). Preparing for or cultivating a state of mind open to bliss as well as divine communion is one of the stated purposes of kirtan as well as japa meditation on the holy names.

Understanding what kirtan means to those who practice it is also important to understanding what it is that devotees are actually trying to accomplish when they offer it to the public. Caru says that at the Utah Holi the throwing of colors is really just a gimmick to get people on the property listening to and participating in kirtan. Caru’s hope is that by hearing the holy names, festival goers will experience the transcendent benefits of communing with the holy names and possibly become devotees in future lives. A major reason for taking the Rath Yatra through important locations in prominent cities is to potentially extend to others the benefits that devotees perceive in their own kirtan practice. Devotees tend to frame kirtan as an experience of transformation, so they take temple practices including kirtan into public spaces in hopes of allowing the public to feel the transformative effect of the holy names. They describe kirtan as a tool of bliss, so by taking the kirtan to public spaces—including spaces often visited by tourists in search of
pleasure, enlightenment, excitement, and liberation— they perform their bliss in the hope that others will perceive kirtan as being pleasurable and liberating too.

**Spiritually Meaningful Experience for the Uninitiated**

When devotees perform the ecstasy that they promise is available through Krishna consciousness by chanting in public, they earnestly hope that their audience will feel the sensations of bliss and transformation that they have felt. Regardless of whether newcomers to the practice perceive the kirtan in quite the same way that devotees do—which they may not, if they do not have the same theological information with which to frame the experience—there is still a question of whether listeners perceive the kirtan as having some spiritual or personal meaning compatible with their own beliefs that might inspire some participatory response.

While it isn’t always possible to know exactly how passersby experience and perceive the kirtan during, for example, a public harinam like the one on Venice Beach, it is possible to gauge certain types of response. Many appear to find the kirtan interesting or amusing enough to generate some sort of simple reaction. Some evidently find the music appealing enough to dance along briefly, allowing the kirtan to temporarily alter the behavior in which they are already engaged. And others repeatedly leave and then come back, possibly indicating that there is something in the kirtan experience that they want. The spontaneous responses from those who offer bows and Namaste gestures indicate an instinctual response to the spiritual aspect of the experience. At the Utah festival the actions associated with becoming physically involved in an experience framed as sacred are even more marked. I discussed kinesthetic as well as musical participation in a kirtan as an element of perceived social unity; it is also an element of perceived spirituality. According to Thomas Csordas, “the most immediate and concrete means of persuading people of the reality of divine power is to involve their bodies. Symbolically a microcosm, and physiologically the limit of human experience, the body recruited to the cause of symbolic [experience] invokes a powerful sense of totality, encompassing the whole person” (Csordas 2002: 30). Many of the gestures of participation associated with Rath Yatra and also with Holi have an element of humor to them, but according to Csordas, even the act of “laughing…can also be objectified as
sacred if [its] spontaneous occurrence is thematized as out of the ordinary, the ‘otherness,’ which, according to Eliade is the formal criterion of the sacred” (Ibid. 70). 

Contemporary interest in yoga in American culture may indicate fascination among at least some contemporary Americans with Eastern spiritual systems. Singer’s cultural performance theory refers to the “conversation” that “takes place between the images one country holds of another and the psychological needs, fears, and hopes projected onto these images. An image may sometimes reflect more about the psychology of its holder than about any reality to which it purportedly refers” (Singer 1972). Daner identifies among Americans interested in Eastern philosophy a feeling “that the prevailing scientific world view has left society devoid of philosophy and language addressed to the nonintellectual, the irrational, and the mystical.” This notion has subsequently led to an interest in both Hinduism and Buddhism “for their explorations of mysticism precisely because they are antithetical to that conventional science held in such high esteem by the parent generation” (Daner 1976:4). J. Stillson Judah has identified in contemporary American fascination with Hinduism “the continuation of…accepted countercultural values now arranged in a more meaningful context” (Judah 1974:11). Yoga has long been a vehicle used by many Americans interested in Eastern thought to approach experiences they perceive as being spiritual, and with greater public acceptance of kirtan as yoga has come a recognition that, as Singer writes, “The devotional bhakti movements in Hinduism…are not governed by uncontrolled and irrational emotions. The path of devotion is also a discipline, a yoga, subject to well-understood rules and based on a “rational” philosophy. (Singer 1966:128)” Public interest in kirtan as expressed in the classes taught by Lakshmina and attended by Alexandra in New York points to an increasing public recognition of chanting as a form of yoga. The types of imagery utilized by young performers like the Mayapuris, who display a combination of traditional signifiers and vibrant energy, exemplify an attempt by contemporary kirtan artists to capitalize on this awareness by addressing the hopes and desires of an informed public regarding kirtan.

In festival situations, the way that listeners perceive the kirtan experience may be tied up in the concept of Holy Envy introduced in Chapter Five. An understanding of certain commonalities in religious experience helps to theorize how newcomers might
perceive kirtan as being meaningful within the context of their own personal beliefs about what spirituality is and should be. Harvey Cox writes that

We have to get away from the idea that in the inter-religious dialogue…you’ll have all the Hindus on this side of the table, and all the Christians on another side, and all the Jews over there and all the Muslims over there. If you actually study the history and the composition of any of these movements, you will probably find elements within one tradition that are more similar to certain elements within another tradition than they are to other elements within their own tradition” (Gelberg 1983:28).

While there may be doctrinal differences in the belief systems adhered to by the various participants in a public kirtan, certain types of experience may come together in a constellation of beliefs I termed “experiential spirituality” that include a personal relationship with a personal God, the valuation of individual experiences and contributions, the simultaneous valuation of an almost Utopian communal revitalizing spirit, a willingness to embrace the fact of being just outside of the mainstream as “otherworldly,” and ecstatic or emotional self-expression. Performers and organizers of the Utah Festival of Colors ask festival goers to self-identify with principles that adherents to both Hare Krishna and the local dominant religion can recognize as ideals of goodness. Where common spiritual impulses are recognized and appreciated, a festival goer may then experience Holy Envy, the ability to be emotionally moved by the ideas or practices of another religion. According to Thomas Hopkins, “it’s intriguing when you look at the twentieth century A.D. and see which movements have successfully moved into the West,” that they are traditions that “historically have been to a very large extent culture-free, in the sense that they have not depended upon a particular cultural setting to make them work”(Ibid. 115). He refers to the personal aspect of both God and humanity recognized in experiential spirituality: “Its that kind of personal quality, it seems to me, that appeals to human beings across all cultural lines…it speaks to those needs in terms that are both powerful enough and simple enough that people can connect with it at a variety of different levels. (Ibid. 116)”

Hopkins ascribes the draw of Hare Krishna devotional practices to the “powerful combination” of “a universal spiritual appeal [that] has tended to be inherently egalitarian” (Ibid.). As kirtan is situated in celebratory contexts of collective play, its perceived spirituality is tied up in the experience of communitas, an experience of which
Victor Turner said, “A mystical character is assigned to the sentiment of human kindness in most types of liminality,” one which is “brought closely in touch with beliefs in the protective and punitive powers of divine…beings or powers” (Turner 1969:105). Participants in the festival kirtan are invited to believe in the goodness of a divine being who is himself invested in the goodness of human love, and to express that belief in the types of festival interaction through which, according to Barbara Ehrenreich, festival goers are bound in a “love that serves to knit people together in groups larger than two” (Ehrenreich 2008). Those who take part in the kirtan are invited to believe that their experience of love for the divine and for each other has the power to revitalize their world. Hakim Bey writes of the impact that artistic experiences with new ideas might have on those who come across them in sometimes surprising circumstances, and he could hardly better express what festival organizers, kirtan leaders, and devotees might hope for in behalf of those who choose to share in their music: “Later they [the participants] will come to realize that for a few moments they believed in something extraordinary, and will perhaps be driven as a result to seek out some more intense mode of existence” (Bey).

The “intense mode of existence” experienced through the singing of kirtan is in increasingly high demand. Kirtan melas, recordings by second-generation ISKCON devotees, yoga classes that include chanting, and large-scale festivals like Holi are presently contributing to a significant rise in public awareness of kirtan. I expect that in coming years as kirtaniyas develop their art and as more Americans outside of the Krishna movement discover the practice of kirtan singing and apply it to their own pursuits, that kirtan will play an increasingly prominent role in a cultural dialogue regarding spirituality, self-discovery, and social interaction between those inside and outside of America’s cultural mainstream.
APPENDIX:

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 5/18/2011

To: Sara Brown
Address: 2020 Continental Ave. #203 Tallahassee, FL 32304
Dept.: MUSIC SCHOOL

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
"Every Word is a Song, Every Step is a Dance": Participation, Agency, and the Expression of Collective Bliss in Hare Krishna Festival Kirtan

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and one member of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 5/11/2012 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is FWA00000168/IRB number IRB00000446.
Hare Krishna Festival Music—Consent for Research Participation

You are invited to participate in an interview for a doctoral dissertation project titled “Every Word is a Song, Every Step is a Dance’ Participation, Agency, and the Expression of Collective Bliss in Hare Krishna Festival Kirtan.” Information obtained from this interview will be used in my research into the musical traditions of the Hare Krishnas and their impact on the larger communities of which they are a part. This interview will be filmed for future analysis.

This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes, although you are welcome to cut the interview short at any time. Questions may cover your experiences with the Hare Krishna movement and with the practice of kirtan, the local ISKCON community and their interactions with the larger community, the nature of the festival and the people who participate, and your impressions and experiences participating in this festival in the past.

There are no particular risks to participating in this study. Possible benefits may include the opportunity to share beliefs and the promotion of greater understanding regarding the Hare Krishna community. Records of this study will be kept private and confidential. You will be identified by name only to the extent that you choose. Audio and video recordings will be stored securely and only the primary researcher and advisor will have access to them.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may answer as many or as few questions as you like, and you can withdraw at any time.

Some footage from this study may be used in future presentations about Hare Krishna festival music. You may choose whether or not you wish to have your name and/or image used in such a presentation.

The researcher for this project is Sara Brown, a doctoral student in musicology at Florida State University, e-mail address sb06k@fsu.edu. The faculty advisor is Michael Bakan at mbakan@fsu.edu. Feel free to contact either of us with any questions which you may have. You may also contact the Florida State University Human Subjects Committee at:

2010 Levy Avenue
Suite 276-C
Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742
Ph: (850) 644-7900

You will be given a copy of this information for your records.

Hare Krishna Festival Music—Consent for Research Participation

You are invited to participate in a brief interview for a doctoral dissertation project titled “Every Word is a Song, Every Step is a Dance’ Participation, Agency, and the Expression of Collective Bliss in Hare Krishna Festival Kirtan.” Information obtained from this interview will be used in my research into the musical traditions of the Hare Krishnas and their impact on the larger communities of which they are a part. This interview will be filmed for future analysis.

This interview will take approximately 5-10 minutes, although you are welcome to cut the interview short at any time. Questions may cover your experiences with the Hare Krishna community, your reasons for participating in this festival, and your impressions of your experience here today.

There are no particular risks to participating in this study. Possible benefits may include the opportunity to share beliefs and the promotion of greater understanding regarding the Hare Krishna community. Records of this study will be kept private and confidential. You will be identified by name only to the extent that you choose. Audio and video recordings will be stored securely and only the primary researcher and advisor will have access to them.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may answer as many or as few questions as you like, and you can withdraw at any time.

Some footage from this study may be used in future presentations about Hare Krishna festival music. You may choose whether or not you wish to have your name and/or image used in such a presentation.

The researcher for this project is Sara Brown, a doctoral student in musicology at Florida State University, e-mail address: slb06k@fsu.edu. The faculty advisor is Michael Bakan at mbakan@fsu.edu. Feel free to contact either of us with any questions which you may have. You may also contact the Florida State University Human Subjects Committee at:

2010 Levy Avenue
Suite 276-C
Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742
Ph: (850) 644-7900

You will be given a copy of this information for your records.

FSU Human Subjects Committee Approved 5/13/11. Void after 5/11/12 HSC# 2011.6388
Office of the Vice President For Research  
Human Subjects Committee  
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742  
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392  

RE-APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 4/30/2012

To: Sara Brown

Address: 2020 Continental Ave. #203 Tallahassee, FL 32304
Dept.: MUSIC SCHOOL

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Re-approval of Use of Human subjects in Research
"Every Word is a Song, Every Step is a Dance": Participation, Agency, and the Expression of Collective Bliss in Hare Krishna Festival Kirtan

Your request to continue the research project listed above involving human subjects has been approved by the Human Subjects Committee. If your project has not been completed by 4/29/2013, you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the committee.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your renewal request, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this re-approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting of research subjects. You are reminded that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report in writing, any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor are reminded of their responsibility for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in their department. They are advised to review the protocols as often as necessary to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

Cc: Michael Bakan, Advisor
HSC No. 2012.8237
In the process of conducting this research, I received approval from the Human Subjects Committee at the Florida State University to alter the protocol regarding informed consent to admit interviews in which consent was obtained during a filmed dialogue as an alternative to the use of paper consent forms. A transcript for such a dialogue follows:

“I am conducting research for a doctoral dissertation on the purpose and meaning of kirtan in Hare Krishna celebration [include additional explanation of the project as desired]. Would you be willing to participate in an interview regarding your experiences with the Hare Krishna movement and with the practice of kirtan, as well as your experiences and impressions of the festival today? This interview should take approximately 30-45 minutes [for devotees] or 5-10 minutes [for non-devotees], although you are welcome to cut the interview short at any time.

“There are no particular risks to participating in this study, although possible benefits may include the opportunity to share beliefs and the promotion of greater understanding regarding the Hare Krishna community. Your participation is voluntary and I will identify you in my research only to the extent that you wish. First of all, may I have your permission to use this interview in writing my dissertation? Second, may I use your name in writing about the content of this interview? Last--and this is very optional--may I use this interview in any future presentations of the footage that I collect as part of my research?”
Date: 4/24/2012

To: Sara Brown

Address: 2020 Continental Ave. #203 Tallahassee, FL 32304
Dept.: MUSIC SCHOOL

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research (Approval for Change in Protocol)
Project entitled: "Every Word is a Song, Every Step is a Dance": Participation, Agency, and the Expression of Collective Bliss in Hare Krishna Festival Kirtan

The form that you submitted to this office in regard to the requested change/amendment to your research protocol for the above-referenced project has been reviewed and approved.

If the project has not been completed by 5/11/2012, you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is FWA0000168/IRB number IRB00000446.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sara Black Brown earned Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees in Violin Performance and Pedagogy from Brigham Young University in 2003 and 2006 respectively. She received her Master’s in Music in Musicology at Florida State University in 2008 with thesis research into the performance of Hare Krishna chant. She began doctoral coursework at Florida State University in 2009 and taught courses there in American Roots Music, Modern Popular Music, and World Music Cultures over the course of three years. Brown currently resides in Tallahassee, Florida, where she teaches courses in Music History, Music Appreciation, and Popular Music at Tallahassee Community College.