

JAI UTTAL wails to the world beat of the One Spirit, ripping open his heart in raw yearning for Union, connecting listeners to their own naked yearnings for the Divine. His music expresses the uniquely contemporary merging of a Bhakti yogi in a rock and roll soul, the wild mix of a New York city kid wandering the streets of India with the minstrel Bauls of Bengal. Jai's vocalizing conveys both the evocative transmission of his studies with musical mentor Ali Akbar Khan, as well as the core surrender of prayer drunk in at the feet of his spiritual Guru, Neem Karoli Baba. Jai and his Pagan Love Orchestra have received critical acclaim and international attention with their numerous chart-topping CDs, including *Footprints*, *Monkey*, *Beggars and Saints*, *Shiva Station*, *Nectar*, and their latest, *Mondo Rama*. For Jai Uttal's performance and workshop schedule, go to www.jaiuttal.com.



passion for freedom

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAI UTTAL

WHJ: Do you consider your music to be primarily a personal spiritual practice for you, to keep your heart open, a service to others, or, being in the music business, is it ever merely entertainment and performance?

JAI: First and foremost, it is a spiritual practice for myself, and always has been, before I even became a "professional." It is a devotional and meditative tool for me. It opens and softens my heart, and calms me, and in the devotional aspect, it's a vehicle for all of my emotions, and just my whole life. Music is a healing and saving thing for me. And what I'm doing is so rooted in the Indian devotional practices it has become a conduit to God.

I never really set out to do it as service, but I see that it has become service, and I feel really blessed to be on this side of that. Because I see how it does affect and help other people in a similar way it does for me. I am con-

tinuously amazed by that, because I don't really see myself as anybody all that special, but something about the music really does seem to resonate in a lot of people's hearts, and so in essence it really is service. So sometimes when I'm not feeling particularly inspired, that can give me inspiration, to know what it's giving other people.

And the third thing: there's something really cool about being an entertainer and at the same time having it be your spiritual work, although it's not always so easy. But when things are coming together, that entertainment/invocation kind of space can be just really fabulous, because people want to be entertained, and at the same time they want to commune with the spirit. Sometimes when I'm performing with the band it provides that very full spectrum of totally sacred space along with the more social aspects of a concert.



WHJ: When you're in front of a group, who are you singing to? The audience, God, your inner Self, or all three?

JAI: Well you know it cycles—I'm not that good a yogi that my concentration is always on God, but that's the intention. But of course, sometimes I'm seeing the people, getting distracted, and other times it's not distracted, and becomes a great sharing of energy with the audience.

WHJ: Many people have deep musical wounds around their singing voice. What sort of openings or healings happen for the non-singers who attend your workshops?

JAI: Let me start with myself, because I was always told that I couldn't sing. And I was often discouraged from doing music. I mean music was okay as a hobby, but not as a life. And I was constantly told that I wasn't a singer. So, a lot of healing had to occur in myself to allow myself to open up my mouth and sing. And it's still something I struggle with. I don't feel always confident and comfortable in my singing voice, because it's so naked, and a tremendous amount of self-acceptance has to be present for it to happen in any kind of real way. So I'm always kind of looking at that and working with that, and I think for starters, me being in that space helps other people also go to that space. And we talk about it in the workshops—inhibitions and so forth—but of course I don't teach singing. I lead the group in the devotional practice of chanting, and really encourage people not to worry about aesthetics, what it sounds like, what they sound like. And the practice itself is so strong that it kind of touches most people who come, and frees people up a lot.

WHJ: How much do you use music as a discipline in your life? If you're feeling depressed or out of it, can you still sit down and generate the energy to launch into a full-out devotional song and bring yourself through it?

JAI: Well, I sit and chant everyday, no matter what I'm feeling. But I couldn't necessarily say that everyday I launch into full devotional song. A lot of times it's very mundane in a sense—it's grounding and centering. And I don't necessarily try to change what I'm feeling—unless sometimes if I'm really desperate and despairing. But as far as daily discipline, it's not so different in intention than silent meditation practice, where you're kind of watching where you are and just doing your practice, but in this case I'm singing. Sometimes it's really dull, sometimes it's really passionate, and I don't trip much about it, because I'm absolutely not performing for God. But I do do it

everyday, sometimes for 15 minutes, sometimes for an hour and a half.

WHJ: There is a great longing and yearning for God in your voice sometimes, particularly when you let the words go. Does devotional music inherently reinforce separation somehow, because it is essentially a dualistic practice, and accentuates the distinction between lover and beloved, or devotee and God? Or do you also sing and chant from a place of completion and yearnings fulfilled?

JAI: One of the paradoxes of every devotional spiritual form is that, the longing involves a dualistic kind of stance or heart space, where you are singing and crying for God. But as Rumi says in a lot of his poems, there is a place where the separation and the longing and the union are the same, or they go in and out of each other. It's kind of hard to describe in words, but the longing *is* the fulfillment at the same time. I find when I'm singing sometimes there's real yearning and pathos, and then in the blink of an eye, there's complete Presence. And it's not just longing—in the devotional practices, all the emotions are directed towards God, towards the Divine, and all those emotions go into singing: sometimes it's longing, sometimes it's love, it could be anger, any emotion that a human being has is directed into the singing.

WHJ: Say more about anger—I've never heard anger in your chanting particularly, but tell me about that.

JAI: Start by putting yourself in the place of the Lover, because you were speaking before of the Lover and the Beloved. And put yourself in the place of the Lover who got stood up by his Beloved, or who has been waiting for the call from his Beloved and it never came. Like Radha was waiting until dawn for Krishna to come to her and He didn't come, and although she loves Him as her true Self, she's furious with Him, and she'll sing a song of anger, but it's anger with love in it. And how many times have we, say, sat in meditation and thought, "Okay, I've been saying this prayer for the last twenty years and I still haven't felt anything. God where the hell are you? You don't care about me—what kind of God are you?" And that feeling and energy goes into the song.

WHJ: Do the various Hindu deities you invoke in your music differ from one another in terms of meaning levels and the music they inspire in you? Does a Krishna chant bring forth a whole different vibe than a Ram chant?

JAI: Yes and no and yes. The different names do encapsulate different aspects of God and I do feel that as I sing, but then as I get absorbed in it, it all seems to come from and be in the same place. And then, on a really esoteric



level that I can't really understand or describe, afterwards it does seem different, that a different energy has been evoked.

WHJ: So the chant is over and you find yourself sitting in a slightly different place in consciousness?

JAI: Yes. But I don't know how to speak about it-it's pretty beyond intellect.

WHJ: Well, say you're creating a new album-how do you choose which deities you're going to create songs around?

JAI: I don't-I use the ones that are there, the chants that are in my mind that I've been singing. It's not like I sit down and say "Okay we'll have Shiva, Krishna, Radha and the Goddess..."

WHJ: And top it off with a little Shankara.

JAI: Right. It's funny, the albums seem to have had more Shiva stuff on them, and yet in my own life I'm more Ram and Hanuman oriented, but you know, I just don't think about it. Whatever songs that come out are the ones that come out.

WHJ: Do the words and spiritual context ultimately matter, really? Or couldn't you pour your heart and soul into a good Beatles song and achieve similar results?

JAI: It's funny that you say that, because on the new album I am doing a Beatles song!

WHJ: Which one?

JAI: Tomorrow Never Knows. And there are a couple of more English songs. I think what you're saying is true: there is a place where it's all about the intention and the feeling. And at the same time I really believe in the power of these mantras, and the tradition behind them. So I like to do a lot of different things in my music-some in English, some in Sanskrit, sometimes improvising without

any words, and I do feel like it comes from and leads me to the same place. But also just to say that in performance, when I'm doing something over and over again for years, it's the Sanskrit or Hindi songs that I don't get bored with. After awhile I do get bored with the English songs-I just think the emotional palette is a little wider on the other ones.

WHJ: In the Hasidic tradition, one of the highest forms of prayer is chanting melodies without words-the melodies themselves are said to contain the power.

JAI: Yeah, I'm not so versed with that, but I'm fascinated by it.

WHJ: Well it reminds me of your own music when sometimes you leave the words behind and you're wailing on improvised melodies with your voice and it's just naked expression. The Rebbes said they never "composed" the melodies, but rather brought them down already whole from another realm.

JAI: That's like the Indian ragas. They contain melodic structures, including scales, microtones, phrases and notes that are emphasized and de-emphasized—all these rules make a raga, a melodic form that elicits and creates a spiritualized space, but they're all different. And the original ragas were said to come to the Rishis as visions-kind of the same idea. In later years people wrote ragas, but the system originated from just a handful of original ragas that came as Divine gifts, and the rest were sort of offspring. Now there are many thousands.

WHJ: Do you notice that distinction in your own composing, between you creating a melody from your ego, or just receiving it?

JAI: Yes I do. I pray and wish that it was always from the heavens. It's easier when I'm improvising. When you're trying to write something it becomes harder to let that Divine melody come forth, because you have concepts. I try to let the concepts come after-have the seed of the song come from a Divine place and then kind of house it or clothe it with more of a creative agenda-which I guess is ego.

WHJ: One of my favorite songs of yours is Be With You, and I gather that it's about your relationship with your Guru, Neem Karoli Baba.

JAI: That's a very interesting, multi-leveled song. Ultimately, it's about my relationship with Neem Karoli Baba, for sure. But the seed of the song actually came from a human relationship, when I broke up with a girlfriend. It sat around for awhile in my head, and then my father died, and a bunch of words in there had to do with that, and



yet it all culminated and tied in to my relationship with my Guru. But that also really speaks to the whole Bhakti devotional tradition, that all of the emotions and all of the relationships we have are relationships with God, and we can try to see our lives on all those levels. It's about separation and Oneness, separation and Oneness, feeling distant, feeling close. Even in that song, it starts out with a distance, and then in the singing itself it becomes very filled with Presence and by the time I'm singing "I want to be with you" it's so impassioned that I kind of feel like I am with you.

WHJ: I noticed the phrase "passion for freedom" somewhere in the press materials about you-can you say something about that?

JAI: It's such a high-falutin' phrase-I don't even read that press stuff!

WHJ: I think it's true though. When I read it, I said, "Oh yeah, that's why I like this guy's music-that's what I feel in it."

JAI: I guess when I'm really involved in singing I feel free from all the constraints of personality, and my life, my ego, my situations, and all that stuff, and I just pray to have that feeling pervade my life. Not in terms of being irresponsible or being isolated, but just to not be bound and shackled by my own consciousness. I just want my spirit to be able to be free and fly, my heart to be free and not closed down by uptightness, worry, conditioning. I just want to feel freedom in my life, in my breath, in my being.

