

Flow—An Interview with Sat Kartar Khalsa

By Debi Winston-Buzil

It's another Monday morning. Outside it's cold, wet and grey, but I'm feeling unusually cheerful. I attribute this feeling of well being to putting Sat Kartar's latest CD *Flow* into the boom box and hitting play.

Perhaps not a household name (yet), you've heard her sing backup with Kirtan luminaries such as Krishna Das and Wahl. Nuanced and mellow, Sat Kartar's latest release *Flow* is a blissed out offering of love. Our conversations have been energetic and fun, with honey-voiced Sat Kartar sharing many aspects of herself including her rich and interesting history.

DWB: *Sat Kartar, please tell us about your journey as a kirtan singer. Was there a particular moment where you moved into the realm of sacred music?*

SK: I grew up doing all kinds of music. I was playing the piano by [age] six, dancing to whatever records I could find, singing hymns in the Episcopal church, obsessed with the Beatles and playing guitar, and later gigging and doing covers

of other artists' songs at rallies and different venues. When I got into yoga in 1971, my most profound experiences came with chanting. I can remember



a retreat when I was chanting in a group, feeling a mixture of cynicism and curiosity. At one point I just vibrated the chant and relaxed, and all of a sudden I had a big AHA—I suddenly felt connected with every living thing on the planet, and experienced all of it as energy and realized my humble little part in it. That was a big turning point for me. Later, in 1973, I experienced classical Gurbani kirtan—singing bhajans, which we call *shabds*, in raga scales, which, when I first sang them, felt like

mantras made out of notes. When I heard my first kirtan teacher do an *alap* (vocal freeform improvisation in a raga scale), I felt like a thousand shimmering diamonds poured down through me and something truly mystical opened within. Yogi Bhajan said once that the power of the musician is in the *alap*.

DWB: *How did you meet Yogi Bhajan? I love finding out how friends know they have found their teacher. How did you know?*

SK: I saw him at the Atlanta Pop Festival and then at a winter solstice sadhana retreat. He was funny, real, simple, straight up, no bull and registered on my intuitive radar as salt-of-the-earth authentic. How did I know he was my teacher? It wasn't an immediate knowing but more of an organic incremental process of realization. Kundalini yoga was opening up my consciousness and changing me even before I met him. My first personal meeting with him was to get a spiritual name. I was awestruck by his presence, which spoke volumes before he spoke. Shyly, I asked him for a spiritual name. "Will you live to it?" he asked me, squinting his eyes and scrutinizing me like he could see straight through me. I had no idea what he meant and gestured as such. Again he asked me but this time his voice was demanding, but clarifying "Will you *live* to it?" he repeated. "Yes," I answered tentatively. "Sat Kartar!" he thundered, as if

making a proclamation. "Now get out!" But what he was actually intimating, in retrospect, was "Now go live your destiny," and I knew it.

His secretary handed me the name's meaning (*Doer of the Truth*), and I walked away feeling in that one experience that he had just tested my strength, but from a deeply loving, supportive, nurturing place like a father who is tough with his kids, demands their best and will relentlessly work to get them to grow. I feel blessed that I got to grow and evolve with him for 33 years.

DWB: *What is your current involvement with kundalini yoga?*

SK: It's my soul food and daily practice, and how I maintain balance, growth, focus and joy in my life. I live in a kundalini/Sikh community in Phoenix, AZ, and teach mainly through the music/chant experiences I facilitate, but I also teach yoga classes and workshops.

DWB: *How has kundalini yoga affected your music? Your life?*

SK: It completely changed both around the time I was 20. I was an aspiring singer-songwriter, heading for LA and the folk-rock music scene there. I tried a yoga class, hoping to dissolve my songwriter's block, and stumbled upon chant/kirtan. Regarding music, I really liked the emphasis in each class on sound and chanting, and there were usually specific chants to do with the yoga sets. I started doing chant music with my first yoga teacher in Atlanta in 1972 and have continued in chant bands and kirtan groups up to this day. With regard to my life, I never expected to happen upon a community of people



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