

## CHANT ENCHANTRESS: AN EVENING WITH SNATAM KAUR

Concert, chantfest, musical group meditation, a yoga class in melody . . . how best to describe a live performance by Snatam Kaur and her band? It's all of these things and more. Seated center stage, Snatam is an angelic presence, dressed in traditional Sikh attire, bejeweled dress, white turban and veil. She's a diminutive woman, barely five feet tall, but possessed of a voice that could wrest tears from a stone gargoyle — crystalline and radiant, redolent of the simple yet powerful truth of the heart. That voice has made her one of the top selling artists in the field of world sacred music. Amid the swelling ranks of devotional divas and mantra mamas, Snatam stands tall.

The music she performs is mostly of her own composing. Her divinely melodic songs are based on traditional Sikh mantras. But to these Snatam adds her own lyrics in English — simple, heartfelt verses that express the personal meanings these sacred syllables hold for her and help the audience forge their own emotional connection. Onstage, Snatam is ably supported by three musicians/backing vocalists. Devotional music stalwart GuruGanesha Khalsa handles the guitar with effortless grace, slipping easily between chordal rhythms and mellifluous leads. Indian prodigy Manish Vyas anchors the beat on tablas, his long, slender fingers laying down solid yet supple rhythmic patterns with a well-placed, occasional flash of virtuosic mastery. Multi-instrumentalist Ram Dass provides warm, hypnotic synth textures and also doubles on clarinet, weaving serpentine melodic lines that evoke the ancient mysterious origins of this reed instrument.

Snatam mainly accompanies herself on harmonium (Indian pump organ), but also plays violin and guitar. The harmonium and tablas ground the sound in Punjabi Sikh musical tradition, but the music also has a decidedly Western flavor. Snatam grew up in an American Sikh family, and her music reflects the totality of her background. One can even detect a slight country lilt as her voice soars into the upper reaches of her impressive range. GuruGanesha, for his part, is a self-confessed Deadhead, which may account for his near clairvoyant ability to goad and guide the group's inspired jamming on the music's open-ended structures. What's most remarkable about the ensemble is its fluid sense of interplay. These are players deeply attuned to one another and the energy of their audience.

Which is essential in the style of music that Snatam performs. Most of the songs are done in call-and-response kirtan mode. Snatam sings a line. The audience sings it back. This back-and-forth exchange builds an energetic momentum that palpably fills the room. These musicians all know how to ride that momentum from here to eternity.

For some, group singing ordinarily counts as cruel and unusual punishment. But when we sing with Snatam, we all sound good. The band's easygoing, informal manner breaks down inhibitions or boundaries. There are plenty of jokes and laughs. Snatam might lead the group in a round of pranayama (yogic breathing) or get everyone on their feet for a stretching exercise that soon becomes a sacred dance. By the end of the night, we're all grinning like fools. Divine fools, that is. For we've been let in on a great cosmic secret: devotional music is fun.

With a back catalog of 9 beautiful albums, Snatam's performances draw from an extensive repertoire. Her most recent disc, *Snatam Kaur Live in Concert*, captures much of the onstage magic. It'll keep you enfolded in bliss 'till the next time Snatam and her Celebrate Peace Tour hit your town.

Oh yes, that's the big karmic bonus here. All this music and joy happen nightly in the name of peace. In select cities Snatam holds workshops in prisons, schools in impoverished communities and other places in need of little spiritual uplift.

This is a woman who walks it like she talks it . . . or sings it. Snatam Kaur brings out a bit of the divine peacemaker in all of us.

- - Alan di Perna, writer for Yoga Journal, Rolling Stone, Guitar World