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Interview by Paul Vnuk Jr.

Kirtan with Ragani

Her music may be exotic,
but her advice to recording musicians is down to earth



Kirtan is a participatory call and response form of East Indian devotional folk music. It is sung primarily in Sanskrit, and while this sounds exotic, esoteric and rare, it is proving to be quite popular in the Western world. Kirtan is often found assimilated into Jazz, New Age, World and even Pop music; Madonna's 2002 "Ray of Light" and Cher's performance of "Gayatri Mantra" on her farewell tour are two prime examples.

Midwestern-based performer and Kirtan leader/singer Ragani (pronounced: RAH-gah-nee) is a prime exponent of Kirtan; her Kirtan Café albums are a hybrid fusion of traditional East Indian instruments, electric bass and guitars. This blend brings the traditional form gently into a modern pop realm without sacrificing its integrity.

The quality of the recordings is lush and full, yet spacious and defined. Assuming they were recorded in a professional studio, I was stunned to find out that it was all tracked by Ragani herself, layer by layer in a combination of retreat centers as well as in her living room, with a modest hand-picked arsenal of gear (see sidebar) centered around a Digi 001 Pro Tools LE system.

Like many of us, Ragani is self-taught, learning much of her art by doing, yet she often seeks out other engineers and producers for advice. After learning and leading Kirtan for 20 plus years and with a seasoned band in place, Ragani felt the urge to record and release her music.

The following people and their support were key in starting and guiding Ragani on her path: Her unofficial mentor David Vartanian, engineer for The Violent Femmes, Live, Daryl Stuermer, Tingstad & Rumbel and others; Wesley Van Linda, founder of Narada Records; and Ragani's husband, a musician himself with an understanding of computers.

I sat with Ragani in her living room/studio to learn more about her journey.

I guess the biggest question is how you made the choice to do the recording yourself, vs. going the traditional studio route?

It actually started with my husband who knew Wesley Van Linda and suggested I talk to him about doing the CD, so I did and he sat me down with his production guys and for three hours they took me through the recording process, step by step. I knew nothing about what tracking was or anything—I just knew I had the musicians who were good. So they suggested that I work with a good studio and Wesley gave me some names, and one of them was David Vartanian.

I brought David three CDs and said, "I want to make songs that sound like this," and he was very positive and said, "You can do this, get Pro Tools and do it yourself. You will be much happier." And that's how it started. For final mixing I still take my projects to David in his larger studio.

What was the learning curve like?

Well, initially I just had this "freeze", and Pro Tools actually sat here for 3 months in the box until my husband, who was much more into computers at the time, plugged it in and recorded a little song with a couple of tracks. Then he showed me how to make a track and it was history from there...

What were some of the early lessons you learned along the way?

I learned to trust my ears and move the mic around to get the sounds I wanted.



The first time I recorded one of our musicians he was like, "You want the mics right here," so he placed them and I figured he knew what he was doing, even though I was a little irked because I just wanted to hear what it sounded like at first, but I didn't say anything. Anyway, somehow part of the track got erased, and later when we came back to do it again in the same place, with his same setup, it sounded like a totally different player.

So I went to David and asked him how I would know I was recording properly, and he said, "Listen to it. If you don't like the sound of it now, don't wait to bring it to me to fix it later." That advice was like gold to me.

In other words, "Don't fix it in the mix". Any other growing pains?

I learned about mistaking a good live-performance musician for someone who could do well in a studio. The second thing I've learned is to know what you want, trust your gut, and then be very clear with musicians when they come in.

So it's more personal than technical?

Other than the steep learning curve of Pro Tools, or learning to have the bass player change his strings before he records with you, it's really more about the interpersonal stuff, like learning how to work more gracefully with

people if they are having a bad day in the studio and how to get them out of it, tell jokes, take breaks, what ever it takes. That was a big thing for me to learn.

You bring up a good point, because when you go the DIY route, you are not only the composer, but the engineer, the producer and even the psychiatrist.

I'm glad I got my degree in psychology years ago, because it helps. The first time around, I just figured you get good musicians in and they will give you something great. Then when I had my first really good musician in there who was steamed because he couldn't lay down a track and he kept getting interrupted and he had too much caffeine... I didn't know what to do with him.

When we recorded the second album, everyone was much more productive because I learned to see the start of a problem and nip it in the bud early. At first I thought the musicians had changed a lot, but then I realized it was my approach to working with them that had changed.

So how do you compose new Kirtan music?

Some of the songs are traditional and have a part A and part B which goes back and forth, and if you do that long enough most westerners will get kind of bored. So I will write a C and a D part and even an E and an F to go along with it so it will shift and have more variety.

For the first few years I recorded everything the musicians did live, and since they did things differently for each gig, I would make notes, "great bass part here, great

flute part here". Then when we would get in the studio I would lay out the song, have them play through it on their own, and record it 2 or 3 times. Then I would go back and have them add a few licks and specific parts from the live recordings to add ear candy to the song.

Next, I start with the drums and then the bass, guitar, and so on and edit together all of the takes into one really nice single track. Then I add my final vocals on top of everything.

So you construct your finished songs from multiple performances?

In some ways, yes, the musicians develop their main parts at our live Kirtan events, and we bring that into the studio. Maybe this is highly produced, but it turns a song into something that I would want to listen to again and again, as opposed to a live performance recording, which often does not feel as it did when you were actually there at a Kirtan event.

How do you get your CDs' full and lush atmospheric sound?

With a few different things, but it starts during the recording. For instance, unlike many Kirtan albums these days—where a singer will record their voice multiple times with different effects and two or three back up singers—I want to use a full chorus and hear that sea of voices like you would at a live event.

Before we add any reverb in mixdown, I want to hear that lushness in mic placement and in the quality of the singers and the tones of the instruments, which are all acoustic. It's got to be there before the actual mix. We also build some of it through panning and mixing. [Interviewer's note: Visually inspecting one of her mixes in Pro-Tools, I could tell Ragani is quite adept at envelopes, cuts and automated DAW mixing. —PV]

David may add a touch of reverb, but not so much that you would hear it echoing. When I get there he usually tells me, "Raags, you have already mixed the album!", but I really need his ear for the final touches like reverb and other little fixes.

So you still see value in a professional studio for final mixing and tweaking?

Absolutely. We also take it to a mastering studio for a third ear, because even though I think it may be done when I leave David's studio there is always something more to tweak a little in mastering. [Interviewer's note: Ragani uses Trevor Sadler for mastering, whom we interviewed in our December 2007 issue].

Thank you so much, Ragani! Do you have any final advice for our readers?

I have always felt you should find someone who knows how to do what you want to do, someone who can do it better or professionally, and learn from them. Also it is important to work with top-notch musicians, because the musicians can take what you have written and make it better than you imagined. ☺

For more about Ragani and Kirtan, and to hear her CDs, check out www.raganiworld.com. Plus, as a firm believer in networking, Ragani can be found hanging out in the online TAXI forums.

Ragani's Recording Gear List

- Lead Vocals: RØDE NT2 (single)
 - Chorus Vocals: RØDE NT2 (pair—main mics near chorus); Shure SM81 (pair—for room ambience)
 - Drums (djembe, Indian Tabla, Arabic Tabla): AKG C1000 (drum head); Sennheiser e602 (drum bottom end)
 - Bass: mostly direct to board—Ragani did some takes with a mic to the amp, but didn't recall exactly which mic was used for that track.
 - Resonator and acoustic guitars: Neumann KM 184 MT (pair)
 - Flute, Tambourine, Bells, Tanpura, Hand Percussion: AKG C1000
 - Shakers: AKG C1000 or Shure SM81 (main mic)—and a second Shure SM81 for room ambience on some tracks.
 - Sitar: AKG C1000
 - Pro Tools LE & Digi 001 hardware interface
- Ragani mixes on the floor and, as you see in the pictures, her mixing desk is a cardboard box!—PV