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• THE BLACK STARS • MIA DYSON • THE DREAMING • NC JAZZ FESTIVAL • SHOW PONIES • MERCHANT OF VENICE •

Giving Peace a Chant



I RECENTLY REMARKED my aversion to chanting. In particular, chanting while wearing crocs. So when Nyck Jeanes and Rachel Zinman asked me to listen to their CD of devotional chants, Subway Bhaktis, as preparation for an interview, I was a little nervous. What if I suddenly became enlightened and gave up my job on the spot? What if I hated it? Thankfully neither happened, and I'm pleased to say that Subway Bhaktis is well grounded in the mechanics of good music but also offers purpose for those more spiritually inclined.

I played in on my drive back from Ballina and was so in the moment I nearly drove off the road into our local version of subway – you know, not the one that serves trains, the one that serves sandwiches.

Boasting 15 years together, Nyck and Rachel are the ultimate Mind/Body couple. Rachel in demand all over the world as a Yoga instructor and Nyck a broadcaster, publisher and provocateur. So why a CD? Petula Clarke warned Don't Sleep in the Subway, so should we be chanting in it?

For Rachel, putting melody to chant was just a way to try and remember her spiritual instruction.

'When I was living in New York my yoga teacher gave me different chants for health and well being – and to remember them I used to make up little tunes. I used to work in Manhattan and make them up on the subway on the way home

– I'd sing it all the way

home – I'd get home and say to Nyck here's a tune I've been singing and Nyck would put music together.'

It wasn't long before the chants found music and the songs found homes. According to Nyck 'We recorded 'Om Shanti Peace' with Kamal Engels our producer and he entered it in the Dolphin Awards and it won the best devotional music for 2003. When we were in New York doing Kirtan, which is devotional singing, in bigger groups we'd do some of the chants with a harmonium and people would sing along with us.'

'Most of the chants are traditional or variations on chants because this kind of stuff is varied. This is not classical Indian music, this is bhakti, which means devotion – so it's a form of yoga, and a celebration of the divine. We have taken it and made it our own – they are semi-pop and semi-bal-lad.'

As the two speak it's obvious it's been a great chance for them both to join in on a shared project, where each has something particular and complementary to offer. The accompanying images for the CD launch are passionate and exposed and I wondered if making an album like Sita Ram re-ignited the passion in a long term relationship.

There's a giggle and a 'Yes it did' from Rachel and from Nyck, 'It's more of a journey of our spiritual connection. A strong part of our relationship is that and the bond and friendship...we've always sung together.'

I do remember when Nyck and Rachel first met, hearing them sing together in the early throes of romance, at a cafe table somewhere in

Belongil over a decade ago. They were the poster pair for passion.

So it's no surprise to see the theme continued, the title

echoed in the masculine/feminine dichotomy of the album's production.

Rachel: 'Sita and Ram are the great lovers – and the elements of the divine – the Shiva/Shakti – that's why we did it like that ...It's really deep to write music together, and to be in the studio together. It's taken us about a year.'

The CD is a newly crafted delicate composition that reflects the careful planning and thought put in by the third party in the creative relationship, Producer Kamal Engels.

'He does all the programming, bass, keyboard... we went to him with raw tunes and he said, we can make something fabulous with that!'

For Rachel, creating the CD has actualised the deeper purpose of her yoga practise. 'For me that's what yoga is about, it's about the feeling you get in your heart – a lot of people when they chant will cry, and they say, I don't know

and then into more eastern modes in to the celebration of the feminine and then into the masculine principle and then the two coming together which is Sita Ram and then coming together in a more orgasmic peace, and then receding into the subway – the true masculine and feminine.'

So, why the subway? What meaning does an underground travel system give to something as ancient as chanting?

Nyck: 'Those subway sounds you hear on the CD are real New York subway sounds...'

Rachel: 'My teacher actually gave me the talk once that when you y it's easier to meditate but when you're in the subway you're really grounded because you are under the earth – it grounds you inbetween – so it's a great place to chant..'

'...it's been a journey for us and it's more like who we are – tongue in cheek – not new age people.'

why I feel so emotional – the chants are very hypnotic, it can be part of heart opening and can take you into a trance.

'You can get into these ecstatic trance-like states just by chanting – it doesn't matter what you chant as long as you repeat it over and over again. The theory is that you need to give the mind something to do and it's repetitive activity and if it's sound, the mind really likes it, so instead of giving it lots, you give it one thing to concentrate on, it doesn't really matter what...But in sanskrit, certain sounds have certain vibrations.'

Sita Ram is a journey in itself.

The first chant is about removing obstacles and as you go through it opens to the possibility of enlightenment, opening the heart

Nyck: 'It's very much about us, because we are not airy fairy people and the sound of the subway and Nyck and Rachel reminds you that we are just ordinary people living in New York doing these spiritual things, it's been a journey for us and it's more like who we are – tongue in cheek – not new age people.'

THE CD is to be launched at the Byron Community Centre this Friday where the venue will be transformed to a subway in situ. Beautiful cover artwork and photos are by Roger Cosgrave. Also performing on the night will be Murray Burns, Parissa from Hottentots, Liz Lord, Asakti, Kamal and percussionists James and Avishai. 7.30pm, tix are \$20 and are available now at the Community Centre.

