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A Bridge between Souls: “One Track Heart: The Story of Krishna Das”



In American history, the 60s were a time marked by music, love and drugs run rampant in a social climate that sought to challenge the established norms. It was a unique time. American culture was dramatically shifting amidst a new era of openness. Many embraced spirituality, namely Eastern philosophy.

Among those spiritual seekers was former rock and roll singer, Jeffrey Kagel. Tired of the feeling that something was missing from his life, Kagel set upon his own spiritual journey. He turned away from the rock and roll lifestyle, sold all of his possessions and moved to the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. There he met Neem Karoli Baba, now better known as Maharajji, a Hindu guru and spiritual teacher who taught Kagel (renamed Krishna Das) the art of meditation, chanting and the kirtan-style of music. Krishna Das was forever changed by the experience.

That awakening to a new understanding of life has since guided Krishna Das through the decades, and served as a fortress of inner strength even as he battled drug addiction. Das is now regarded as the best-known kirtan style singer, who took the unique sounds out of temples and into concert halls. Through his music, Krishna Das built a bridge from the East to the West, by which he imparts the first-hand understanding he received from the Maharajji himself.

More than 20 years later, amidst a different social climate, Jeremy Frindel, a sound editor in the entertainment industry, also set on his own spiritual journey. Like many, Frindel grew weary of the emptiness he felt in life, that need for life to be more than live, work and die. Though he had never meditated and had no prior experience with Eastern philosophy, Frindel enrolled himself in a 10-day meditation retreat. The experience changed his life.



A new believer of the power of meditation, yoga and Eastern thought, Frindel immersed himself in learning more. That led him to meeting Krishna Das and the two formed a friendship. Upon hearing of Das' experience in life, Frindel was inspired to make a documentary of the remarkable transformation of Krishna Das and the wisdom he gained through the years.

What resulted is the new documentary "One Track Heart: The Story of Krishna Das." It is Frindel's first feature film, and includes many of the Western heavyweights of Eastern thought: Ram Dass, Sharon Salzberg and Daniel Goleman, along with many others who encountered the Maharajji and were transformed by his teachings. Picked up for distribution by Zeitgeist Films, One Track Heart made its debut in 2013.

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The strength of the film is that it builds a bridge from the East to the West, shedding a new light on Eastern philosophy. One Track Heart makes ancient truths accessible and tangible, even for those who wouldn't necessarily consider themselves spiritual. As it did for Krishna Das in the 60s and for Frindel in a later decade, the teachings of the Maharajji as portrayed in One Track Heart are certain to inspire more spiritual journeys, and reinforce the metaphysical bridge between the East and the West. In this way, Krishna Das and Jeremy Frindel are innovative thinkers who are not afraid to build bridges between people, their minds, and Eastern and Western philosophy. A well-received gift to the world!

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*“I wanted to be a rock star
Jedi knight poet.”*



A Conversation with Documentary Maker Jeremy Frindel:

As a child, what did you want to become?

I had a hard time deciding between Luke Skywalker and Jim Morrison. Jim Skywalker? I suppose that's not a profession. I wanted to be a rock star Jedi knight poet.

In which town did you grow up?

We moved when I was 12, from a suburb of Chicago to Louisville, Kentucky.

Do you think your background has influenced your current filmmaking style? If so, what specific element in your background is most pervasive in influencing your current film making style?

There was a certain DIY scrappiness I learned growing up in Kentucky. There wasn't a whole lot going on, so most of my friends played music and started bands. There was a strong community of us who would just start bands, write songs and play shows anywhere we could. And there was always this feeling that you could just do it and not need to ask permission, which I think explains my root attitude toward filmmaking as well. I didn't go to film school. I just started working on whatever films I could, doing whatever was needed and trying to learn as much as I could. For this project, I just got a camera, some editing

software and started working. I was basically a one-man crew, I shot everything, did every interview, all the sound and the editing. I think the attitude that this was a reasonable way of going about things came from that time of growing up playing in rock bands, where you just kind of figured out how to do it and hope for the best.

What inspires you in the job of being a filmmaker?

First off, I don't think of filmmaking as a job. Catering was a job. But I know what you're asking. The way it looks to me now, the most noble way to live life is as a conscious evolution towards a broader consciousness, and greater compassion and wisdom. For me, stories are very often the vehicle for realizations in this regard. So, to spend my time immersed in shaping and interpreting stories and myths is very exciting and fulfilling to me.

How did you get the idea for making this documentary about Krishna Das?

After years of ups and downs in the entertainment industry, I was a bit broken down on many levels. On a whim, I signed up for a 10-day silent meditation retreat, never having really practiced meditation before. The experience of staring at my mind for 11 hours a day, investigating my motivations, cravings, desires and basically studying myself at the most subtle level I'd ever investigated, completely flipped me around. Coming out of it, I felt the need to change many things in my life to embody what I had seen and experienced in this retreat. I started studying yoga rather intensely, and this led to meeting Krishna Das. I've never thought about it in quite these terms, but Krishna Das is a sort of the Jim Skywalker I was joking about at the start of the interview.



He lives with this great wisdom and deep connection to the subtle elements of life, and is also an incredibly cool guy and easy to relate to. Sharing his story felt like a great way to share with people the possibility of a more “spiritual” approach to life within the culture we live in. As David Nichtern says in the film, KD’s not imitating an Eastern culture. He’s very true to his life and what he knows, while incorporating this wisdom and discipline from the spiritual sciences of the East.

In which ways has yoga influenced your life?

I feel much more in control of my own happiness. No matter what the circumstances of life, which will always be full of ups and downs, there is a way to remain plugged into the deeper essence of life, to live with a much broader perspective. Meditation, yoga and the wisdom teachings have given me tools to begin retraining my mind away from reactivity and small-minded views, towards a more stable connection to a deeper, subtler appreciation of life.

Do you have a favorite filmmaker yourself?

More favorite films than filmmakers: Harold and Maude; Fitzcarraldo; many of Ingmar Bergman’s films; Koyaanisqatsi; Paris, Texas; Buffalo 66.

Are you ever afraid you will run out of inspiration and creativity in your job?

Not until now! Just kidding. Again, I really don’t consider this a job. But if there wasn’t a story I was inspired to share, I’d find something else to do with my time. Right now I have the opposite problem though. There are too many films I’d like to make, and there is too little time and resources.

What was the most difficult thing in making this documentary?

Telling a story full of devotion and “spirituality” without it being overly sentimental. My goal was to give a taste of the love and sweetness I’d experienced through Krishna Das and through the community of devotees of Neem Karoli Baba.

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I wanted the experience of watching the film to give a drop of that, and hopefully inspire people that there is a way to live in the world with this kind of love. And I wanted to do it in a way that people who knew nothing about Krishna Das, or chanting, or yoga would be able to enjoy and experience the film as well. This was the greatest challenge.

What was the most fun part in making this documentary?

Traveling with Krishna Das, getting to know him and meeting so many of the wonderful people in his life.

Do you expect your way of creating films to change in the future?

I have a couple of ideas for scripted films that I would like to make down the line. It would also be nice to have more of a team to work with. This film was interesting to make basically on my own, and was really the only way we could

afford to do it. It also provided me with an intimacy that I believe really benefited the film. But I look forward to collaborating in the future with cinematographers, producers, etc.

Do you embrace the changes in the film industry regarding social media and technology influences?

I would never have been able to make this film 20 years ago. The technological advances with camera and editing equipment have really opened the art of cinema to a much wider spectrum of artists, which I think is great. That also means there are many more movies vying for people's attention, so it's more challenging to get people to watch your movie. The seeming death of shooting movies on film is a sad result of these technological advances, as I think it is a beautiful medium with a different sense of life and magic than video. But it is very exciting to be working at a time of this kind of rebirth in cinema.

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A Conversation with Innovative Thinker & Musician Krishna Das:

As a child, what did you want to become?

A fireman or maybe a basketball player.

In which town did you grow up?

I was born in Manhattan, but I moved to Long Island around the age of 8-years old, so I grew up there.

Do you think your background has influenced your current music style? If so, what specific element in your background is most pervasive in influencing your current music style?

I came of age in the 60s, a time when music was extremely important. The U.S. was going through big changes then, the culture was changing at that time, spiritual changes, revolutionary things, social and cultural changes. Music was the soundtrack for all those experiences. Music was very important to all of us and it was very important to me.

I always wanted to be a musician. So it was only natural that when I went to India and started to recognize the beginning of what was important in life, that I realized music should be a natural way of expressing that, because music was important to me. At first, the music was coming from the outside and

healing my heart to some degree. But then, as time went on, the heart had to find a deeper kind of healing. Then the music came out of the longing for the heart to heal. It was no longer from the outside to the inside; it was coming from the inside, naturally flowing to the outside. Chanting is not really a musical expression; it is the expression of the heart through music.

What inspires you in the job of being a musician?

What I chant are the divine names of god, or the names of love. In India, these are the names of the deities of the gods. But what does that mean? What are the gods? The gods are an expression of pure love. More than that, that love lives in our own hearts. So everything else that we think we are worshipping outside of ourselves is really inside of us.

In which way do you consider yourself an innovative creator?

People have been chanting for centuries, I'm a newcomer. I'm a Westerner. I grew up with Western music, with chords changes, rock and roll. My emotional responses are tied up in those sounds. During my 3 years in India, I learned to chant and when I returned to the States, it came out of me in a way that was natural to me as a Westerner, not as an Indian. I just sang what was in my heart. More than that, I sang what came from my heart and it saved me, because I was in a bad shape.

Which basic elements of creativity did your family teach you?

My father was very musically oriented. He played the piano. My mother loved music, as well. I definitely grew up in a family that was very liberal and creative in that way.

What was the trigger that made you leave everything behind and travel to the Himalayas?

I realized the longing in my heart could be fulfilled. At that time, there were no yoga centers and all this information wasn't readily available. There were a few books and such, but not a lot of information. I was very much alone in this for many years. After I met Ram Dass, people started to gather around us. Ram Dass also inspired me to go to India.

In which ways has yoga influenced your life?

It's hard to explain to people, but it's kind of like those first feelings of falling in love. Being with Maharajji, was like having that feeling all the time. He is a being who became love, he is love. There's no one in there to turn you off, who can manipulate you or use you or mislead you or change you. You've just fallen in love with love. Then you see that your own stuff closes you down.

On your website you say: "We begin to learn how to override the things that close us down. Chanting is a way of entering into that flow. The theory, of course, is that you

develop the strength to continue to override the ability of that stuff to grab you and bring you down to a more conditioned state." In which way can people who listen to your music collect the same experience? Please explain how you came to the point of nothing holding you back.

But everything was holding me back. That was the point. But the longing to be free of that, the longing to live in the love keeps you moving in the right direction. The longing is what saves your ass. Without the longing, all you do is you live and then you die. That's it. You don't have the energy or the mindset to find something more in life.

The longing forces you to find a way to deal with it. Once you taste that then you know it's possible. You open, then you close, then you open, then you close up again. It's a process. The yogi trained us, invited us into the room where love lives, but we'd drag ourselves out. And he'd invite us in again and the process continued. The important thing is that you find out it is possible. When I chant, I come back into the presence of love. Over time, this changes the quality of your life.

"I'm just a person like everyone else, trying to get through this life alive and do the best I can. It's all driven by the longing to be back in that love again."



You spend less and less time in heavier states of mind. You might get depressed, but instead of it lasting 10 years, it'll last 9 years and 364 days. The question is "how do you live every day and find a way for the stuff to not kill you?" The key to it is embracing some kind of daily practice, even if just 5 minutes. Just sit for 5 minutes and just be there. Don't do anything. Just watch your breath. It's something that grows over time, like a plant—slowly and regularly.

The more you recognize what you want and understand it is possible to have your life starting to change around you. It's not trying to be good or holy, you're just trying to find real happiness and real love. You just naturally stop doing the things that hurt you and instead are naturally drawn to what helps you.

Explain to us how the death of Maharaj-ji for you was not "just the death of a loved one, but the death of love for you."

I used to sing for him in India back in the day. When he died, I lost that faith, that connection I had. But it wasn't until I really knew that if I didn't sing with people, I wasn't going to make it. I had to chant with others. It forced me to feed my heart. It was very much with people. I feel like he is transmitting through me a little bit of the love that he is, that feeling of being at home, at ease, wonderfulness. I'm doing it for

myself, not others. I know people get a lot out of it, and that's wonderful. But if I didn't do it for myself, I don't think people would get anything out of it. It's inextricably bound. Until I started passing some of this through me, I wasn't really experiencing it myself. I was really depressed and strung out on freebase (it's a very pure form of cocaine, 1000 times worse and more addictive than heroin). I only got saved from it by the grace of my Indian family.

Do you have a favorite musician yourself? Could you suggest musicians from your own record label to us?

I love so many different kinds of music. We put out our own CDs on our own sort of record label.

What was/is the most fun part in making your music and following your spiritual path?

Going to India definitely is enjoyable. But what is "fun," and this may sound pretentious, is recognizing that you can deal with anything. That whatever comes, you find a way to deal with it instead of living in fear, losing yourself or being afraid of taking a leap, and things like that. Life becomes more fun when you realize you can open up to it and everything is going to be okay. We're not raised to believe that we can be happy. We're raised to believe that life is hard, do the best you can, then you're dead. But you can be happy and have everything you want, in an inner way, be fully engaged in life and not run from it.

Everyone becomes your family and you recognize everyone hurts and has their suffering. We hurt other people out of our own pain. So you stop feeling like you're a target of other people actions. You realize that no matter what anyone does, you have your own inner space that doesn't have to close you down because someone is nasty to you.



Life becomes very interesting because we don't have to go to these places where we're safe—you're safe everywhere; it's the world, because you have created your own spiritual house.

Real happiness is the happiness of who we are—who we are already, not who people want us to be or who we think we are. It's not dependent on others, but on us finding that place inside. It's totally possible for everyone, because it's inside of you. They call it the soul, buddha, nature, god. It's very simple. It's what we feel when we chant, and you calm down and enter that space.

Tell us about how chanting and yoga helped you transform your life and free you from addiction.

I wish I could explain it, but I didn't want to stop. I was addicted. I went to Canada to visit my Indian father. I walked into the room and his back was toward me, and I just stopped. I felt this thing and started to slowly back out of the room. Then he shouted, "You promise me now that you will give up cocaine...NOW!" He was a great

yogi. I just loved him so much and I knew that he was right, so I said, "okay." He wasn't giving me a choice, he was demanding it. So I just said okay. By his blessing, I never experienced any suffering from stopping, physically or mentally. It was amazing. It was just like instant. My only explanation is that he was a great yogi who had a great revelation, spiritual grace and power. When I said "okay," all of that grace and blessing and strength came to me. If I had said no, I wouldn't be here today.

I think 12-step programs are good and useful, but for me, the yogi was right for having that karma lifted from me. But there is no easy way. I should have been dead 20 times in my life. For whatever reason, the powers just keep saving my ass. I'm not going to argue with it. I think the chanting is very useful for people dealing with addiction if done in the right spirit. Most times, Westerners do it as just another thing to excel at. But it's like planting a seed: it will grow into the things that you really want.

Do you like art? Do you have any preferences for an artist? And/or for creators of artistic or innovative works?

I suggest reading the book *Miracle of Love* by Ram Dass, which is about how Neem Karoli Baba (Maharaj-ji) changed hearts.

My favorite cd is the “Lama’s Chant: Songs of Awakening” on the Sony label. It’s a Tibetan lama and a French composer who arrange string compositions around ancient chants. It’s so deep. You don’t want to drive when you listen to it because you will just float away.

I really like Sharon Salzberg, author and Buddhist meditation teacher. Read her book “*Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*” and “*Faith: Trust Your Own Deepest Experience*.”

If so, why is that? What special quality do you like in their work or personality?

Sharon Salzberg teaches “loving kindness meditation” and has many books that are great, especially “*A Heart as Wide as the*

World.” It’s a practice that is really good for Westerners. It’s really simple, but that is exactly the point. It cleans your heart and allows you to sit more deeply in your heart in a natural way, not a fabricated tense way, but relaxing into yourself. It’s an extraordinary practice.

There are so many wonderful teachers these days, because they’re based on compassion and caring about others as much as yourself. Even when we get involved with spiritual things, we think it’s about me and my experience, what I want for myself. On one hand, it is. But what you find over time is that you became so sensitive and concerned with others that it gets bound up in your happiness. You do not want to become dependent on that, but you just naturally become responsive and you lose the obsessive thinking. This “lovingkindness practice” is beautiful.

Chanting just works. You don’t have to understand why or how—I don’t even understand it. But it does.

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Could we feature your favorite musician, author, artist, designer, architect, etc. in our magazine and/or online?

Yes, Sharon Salzberg.

Do you have any plans for future masterpieces?

I don't have much of a plan. I wish I did, because it would fool myself into thinking I know what happens. I am going to start a new CD in the fall, in New York. But right now, it's just more of the same old chanting. It's what I do.

Do you aspire to collaborate in your creations with an artist or innovative creator from another artistic or innovative discipline?

I did sing with Boris Grebenshchikov. He's like the Russian Bob Dylan. We collaborated a couple of times and we might do that again. His voice is much deeper than mine.

What is your favorite building in the world?

I love walking around New York, with all those old houses and neighborhoods. The Golden Gate Bridge is also beautiful.

What would be your ideal home?

I keep saying I wish someone would knock me out, put me in a little room, give me a little rice each day, and let me be in a little cave. I would be happy that way. Anywhere in the universe would be fine.

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

Just that I'm really very gratified that people get something from the chanting. I'm just a person like everyone else, trying to get through this life alive and do the best I can. It's all driven by the longing to be back in that love again. In one way, it kind of ruins your life because nothing else is enough. The love is forever, it is now, it is here.

“Meditation cleans your heart and allows you to sit more deeply in your heart in a natural way, not a fabricated tense way, but relaxing into yourself. It's an extraordinary practice.”