

A Conversation with Krishna Das
by Frank Goodman (1/2006, Puremusic.com)

Surely many of our readers remember (or have heard of) the famous spiritual/counterculture literary classic, *Be Here Now*, by Ram Dass (formerly known as Dr. Richard Alpert). Published in 1971 by Three Rivers Press, it turned people all over the world on to a world of Indian mystics and meditation, chanting, bhakti and other yogas, and many other things. Ram Dass has remained a very important spiritual figure and a mentor to people of all ages, all over the globe. His work with the issues of death and conscious dying alone has had a significant effect on what's come to be known as the Hospice movement.

Be Here Now told the story of how Ram Dass (or, Richard Alpert, actually) met his guru, Neem Karoli Baba. When Ram Dass came back to the States in the early '70s, he began talking about his experiences and possibilities for human consciousness wherever he went, but first at his father's house in New Hampshire. One of the first pilgrims to follow his footsteps back to the guru was a fellow named Jeff Kagel, later called Krishna Das.

Fast forwarding to the present, Krishna Das has been back in the States for a couple of decades, and in recent years has been leading groups here and abroad in kirtan singing, or chanting. This is a spiritual movement on the one hand, and a musical one on the other. Many great musicians have aligned themselves with Krishna Das, live and in the studio. His personal charisma and presence is very powerful, both stimulating and centering. I was enlivened by his company in a NYC coffee shop rendezvous a couple of months back, and finally got around to interviewing him for Puremusic.

Like the unpredictable rise and rejuvenation of the many forms of yoga in recent years (it's *everywhere* now), there is a growing number of people flocking to the kirtan scene. I happened to brush up against it myself because my brother Billy, an accomplished singer songwriter and slide guitarist extraordinaire (www.billygoodman.com) who resides in Germany, told me on the phone that he'd been doing a number of gigs with Krishna Das. So I checked out some records and found the music and the community fascinating, and was very lucky to meet KD while we were all in New York.

We predict that when you check out the clips on the Listen page, that a surprising number of readers may find an unexplainable connection to the music, and go check out a live kirtan session for themselves. On most all the clips he is playing harmonium and accompanied by the exemplary Ty Burhoe on tabla, perhaps the finest student of the great Zakir Hussain. We also encourage you to visit the website of our friend KD (www.krishnadas.com) to find out more about this compelling spiritual person and rare singer of sacred music. There you can also find out how to book him to come sing at your Yoga Center or spiritual gathering. When you consider all the terrible and crazy things going on in this world of ours, activity like this seems like a mighty good thing, and we recommend it highly.

I caught up with Krishna Das in Hawaii, he was doing a retreat with Ram Dass.

[The interview begins with a small technical glitch called leaving it on "Pause" when it actually seems to be engaged. KD was looking for sugar for his tea when I called first, so I put it on Pause and called back, and... Anyhow, we talked first about how he originally came to know about and search out Ram Dass. He said that he was staying in NY state, with some friends who were mountain climbers and spiritual seekers, though he was not necessarily disposed that way himself. Ram Dass was staying at his father's house, just back from his first trip to India, where he'd met his guru, Neem Karoli Baba, also referred to as Maharaj-ji. KD's friends got wind of the fact that this character was welcoming visitors to his father's beautiful place, where he was talking about his experience and his wondrous teacher, and they set out to join the growing throng. KD was busy in his pursuit of Country Blues.]

Krishna Das: I was very racist in those days.

Puremusic: Ah.

KD: I liked Mississippi Blues.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, yeah, "I was a blues racist."

KD: Yeah, I only liked the blues. And I wasn't really interested in white yogis. So they went without me. But when they came back, I got such a hit off of them when they stepped out of the car, then I packed my bags and left immediately. And that just changed everything.

PM: So you left for where, for that same house or--

KD: Yeah, back up to New Hampshire, where they had just come from.

PM: And did you go solo or with some of them?

KD: No, I just went by myself.

PM: And how were you received by Ram Dass? Was he open to the idea of a stranger or friends of friends just showing up?

KD: Oh, sure. He was there for that. He was just there to hang with anybody who wanted to hang.

PM: So it was a remarkable time, no doubt, to run into this man who came to be a teacher to so many of us. Was he a very different guy than you know him to be today?

KD: Yes, and no. That's a complex question, but I'll try to--it's only complex because I probably don't understand it.

[laughter]

PM: Well, also because we all have changed so much over that many years, but--

KD: Yeah, we do change, but our essential nature stays the same. Who we really are, we already are. And so the way I look at it is that he's more himself now than he was then.

PM: Ah.

KD: He's more just naturally who he really is. There's less personality around--although that personality was very youthful, it gathered a lot of people and turned on a lot of people. I think he's happier now, as a person, anyway.

PM: And being a happier person, you say there's less personality about him?

KD: Yeah. I think for all of us, we're happier when our personality stuff--our emotional stuff--doesn't hurt us and bring us down.

PM: Right.

KD: So I think, like I said, there's a lot less of that around now, so he's in a much happier, deeper state most of the time.

PM: And as I hear you speak, I'm reminded to tell myself, Frank, try to speak less and let KD talk, okay? [laughs]

KD: Oh, no, no. You shouldn't do that, because I could go on about nothing forever.

PM: [laughs]

KD: And you won't have an article.

PM: So then what followed was you pursued the guru, for lack of a better word.

KD: Yeah, I mean, I just wanted to hang out with him. Let me see what happened. Yeah, I quit school again, for the third time.

PM: Where?

KD: At that point I was at New Paltz, State University of New York.

PM: Okay.

KD: I had been at Stonybrook. But at that point, I transferred up to New Paltz, because there was an Asian Studies Institute opening up, and I thought, "This is great, this'll be just what I want." But actually, it was one of the most disappointing situations of my life. It was so horribly intellectual and dry, boring.

PM: Understood.

KD: I couldn't stand it. So I was in really great despair because I thought this would save me, this Asian Study Institute. I could study Indian philosophy, and I'd learn everything, but it was just the opposite. It was so horrible.

Then I met Ram Dass right after that, and I was really ready for that. I quit school again, and we all went traveling, me and him and a number of other people. We went out to the Llama Foundation in New Mexico, which is this commune up on the top of a mountain. We spent the whole winter up there just reading holy books out loud, and sitting, and singing.

PM: Unbelievable.

KD: Yeah, it was a really beautiful time, in spite of the fact that we were so messed up.

PM: Yeah.

[laughter]

KD: It was a good... And then he went off, and I went off to California. And then in the spring I went back out to his place, and I spent the whole summer out there at his father's place. That was the summer that people really started to gather there. There would be hundreds and hundreds of people on the weekends.

PM: Holy jeez! And what did his dad think of that?

KD: Oh, his father was really cool with it. He loved it. He really had a good time with it.

PM: That's fantastic.

KD: Yeah. And I was kind of working for his father, mowing the lawn and --it was kind of a mansion he had, with a three-hole golf course, or something like that.

PM: [laughs]

KD: I used to mow the golf course with the tractor, and all that. I had a little cabin out in the back there. It was great.

PM: Now, were you playing any music at this particular time?

KD: I was playing guitar. I was playing, like I say, blues. I was really into country blues. That's what I was mostly into at that time, like your beloved brother. [<http://www.billygoodman.com>]

PM: Indeed.

KD: But I didn't play slide. I played more like Mississippi John Hurt stuff.

PM: Yeah, sure. That's how we grew up playing, absolutely.

KD: Yeah, yeah. And I can't wait to get him back here for a tour sometime. That'll be fantastic.

PM: While we're mentioning Billy, let's say that it's very unusual how you and I came to meet at all--

KD: Yeah.

PM: --and that my brother ended up playing some gigs with you. How did that come to pass?

KD: And it's unusual for a slide guitar player to be playing chanting gigs, too.

PM: Right.

KD: Well, Billy's friend Bub--Jim-- is my good buddy of mine for 30 years as well, but in a whole different cultural context.

PM: [laughs]

KD: So they all came together when we went over to Germany. And Bub was with me there. Billy said to Bub, "Well, maybe I can do some gigs with KD. I've heard his music and I like it," or something like that. So I thought, wow, how cool. [laughs]

PM: Wow. And Bub, he's a magnificent soul as well.

KD: Bub is great, yeah.

PM: And I think Billy has profited greatly from the time spent gigging with you guys.

KD: Well, I feel we profited as well. He has a great passion to his playing, and his dedication to the music is really wonderful.

PM: Now, to return to our incredible story, after that time with Ram Dass, then you went to India, correct?

KD: Yes. It was about a year and a half after I met Ram Dass that I went to India. And I went specifically to find Maharaj-ji, the old man, Neem Karoli Baba.

PM: Right. And in what region was he living? What town?

KD: He lived mostly in north India. And in the fall, which is when I went, he used to go up in the mountains a lot. So I went up there and found him there.

PM: And what kind of a place was he living in? Was it palatial? Was it residential?

KD: Oh, no, it was a very small humble temple, a very simple temple. In those days there was very little flair, and it was very simply done, nestled in a little valley with the river between--oh, it's a beautiful spot.

PM: Now by that time, how many westerners had he been approached by, or come in that kind of contact with?

KD: By the time I got to him, I think he'd probably met three.

PM: Wow.

KD: Yeah. There was Baghavan Das, who had been there before, of course. He's the one who'd brought Ram Dass to **Maharaj-ji**.

PM: Right.

KD: And then there were another couple of westerners who might have met **Maharaj-ji** over the years. But basically, I was the beginning--me and two other guys--we were the beginning of this next wave of the few hundred people who might have met him over the next three years.

PM: Who was with you at the time that may have been part of that wave? Do you recall?

KD: Well, there were two guys. One was Danny Goldman, who wrote the book *Emotional Intelligence*.

PM: Ah-ha.

KD: He's a very well-known psychologist writer now. And the other guy was Jim Litton--he's a photographer out of Long Island, a good friend. Ranesh Ra Das and Jugga Nas Das, if you want the Indian names.

PM: Yeah, and I'll attempt the spelling.

KD: That's okay.

PM: So are those guys still friends?

KD: Oh, sure, yeah. We're all very closely connected even though we may not see each other that often. We share a tremendous connection.

PM: Would you tell the story, please, of how Baghavan Das came to bring Ram Dass to Neem Karoli Baba? What do we know about that?

KD: Essentially, Baghavan Das had been in India for a long time, and his visa had expired. And he wanted to stay in India, so he knew that **Maharaj-ji** could get him a visa because **Maharaj-ji** knew all these politicians. If **Maharaj-ji** wanted to, he could get him an extension on his visa. And so he was up in Nepal. Ram Dass met him up in Nepal. Richard Albert met him up in Nepal. Baghavan Dass decided to go down to find **Maharaj-ji**, and Ram Dass had borrowed a Land Rover--

PM: [laughs]

KD: --from a friend of his. And so, because Ram Dass had the Land Rover, Baghavan Das decided to take him with him.

PM: [laughs]

KD: For no other reason, really.

PM: That's great.

KD: And because of that, that's how Ram Dass got to **Maharaj-ji**.

PM: The Rover. Ah, that's pretty funny. Is Baghavan Das still a friend?

KD: We know each other, sure, we're still friends. He's around.

PM: And he's a label mate, right? He's on Karuna Records as well?

KD: He did one CD for Karuna. I'm not even on Karuna anymore.

PM: No. You do your own label now, or--

KD: I don't know what I'm going to do, Frank. I don't know. I'm trying to figure out the best way to go.

PM: Right. You're like other indie artist friends of mine in that respect. You started your own label, and now wonder if this is the way to go, or do you farm it out to somebody and let them handle the publicity and all the headaches.

KD: I just don't know.

PM: Yeah, because it's too much rigmarole, really.

KD: Yeah.

PM: Now, you tell me, please, if this is an acceptable or an appropriate topic, especially based on where you are at the moment. I gather that following the years at the foot of the guru, he bade you go back to the U. S. to work there--

KD: Uh-huh.

PM: --and there was some confusion as to what your work would be, or how you would serve him there, what would that be. My understanding is that following his passing from this life, a dark night of the soul period followed for you.

KD: Very much, yeah. Well, he sent me very specifically to deal with my shit.

PM: Ah.

KD: He didn't send me back to sing with people--at least he didn't say that. I mean, he didn't give us orders like that--at least he never told me to do that, verbally. But his original instruction to me was, "Go back to America, you have attachment there. You have work to do there. You have shit to deal with."

PM: Indeed.

KD: So that's why he was sending me back. Because I had been in India a long time, and I was really avoiding a lot of my problems, and trying to kind of override my desires and all that stuff. And the price I was paying for that was I was very tense and very tightly wound, and I wasn't really flowing and allowing things to flow. It wasn't going to get better. So I had to come back and kind of work through stuff, you know, a hands-on--

PM: Right. And what form did those lessons take?

KD: The dark night of the frickin' soul, that's what it took, yeah. I really fell away, in my own mind, from grace, because I--not that one ever really does, but I felt that I had blown my only chance by not going back to see him before he died. And the only thing that had ever really worked for me and made me happy was to be sitting around with him in this incredible humorous, sweet, intimate, funny, deep, loving space.

PM: Right.

KD: And I lost that completely when he died. Really, my whole life since then has been a big arc, trying to get back to that kind of way of living. That's the only way to explain it. I feel like my life is like a grindstone, and it just grinds away my stuff, my bullshit. And it grinds just enough away that you don't believe in death, you know?

PM: Right. Now, the dark night of the soul that you walked into wasn't start a family, get a job--life's general travails...

KD: Well, actually, it developed into that. My girlfriend got pregnant--but that was later on. That was in '79. Now we're talking '73, '74.

PM: Right.

KD: Outwardly, it might not have looked that bad, but inwardly I had died inside. And I was really suffering. I was really unhappy and really lost.

PM: So what did you begin to do?

KD: Well, are you talking about drugs?

PM: Or just with life, wherever it led. I don't know at what point they popped up.

KD: Yeah, that was later. Because at first, I never really had a job, so I used to go around friends' places and crash. And I'd paint somebody's house here, somebody gave me a car. I mean, it was a very wandering kind of life, you know.

PM: Right. In the New York area, or out West?

KD: In New York, California, and New Mexico, mostly, I think. At one point I went down to stay at a friend's place in Topanga. And he had a little trailer. And I was going to become a rock star.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, why not?

KD: Why not! But it wasn't the time for that. And actually, at that point, that's when my girlfriend showed up, my former girlfriend. And then we got back together. And then she got pregnant, and then I had all this responsibility. All of a sudden life got real, so to speak, in a big way.

PM: Right.

KD: And I had to support her, and our daughter and her daughter by a previous marriage. It was pretty intense. I really couldn't deal with it very well. I wasn't made for it.

PM: Yeah, I've never done that, and likewise, I don't believe myself to be made for it. So I empathize.

KD: Yeah.

PM: And so did you split, then, or--

KD: Well, no. Did I split? No. We stayed together for about 10 years. But during the course of some of that I got into freebasing coke, and I got strung out on coke for about a year.

PM: Yeah, it's a devil.

KD: Absolutely the devil, it really got me. And I was just going down. And then this Indian man came from India who's like my father, my Indian father. And he came and he looked at me--he didn't know anything, he just took one look at me and said, "Promise me now you'll stop cocaine, right now. Promise!" He was looking right in my eyes and he wasn't going to let me go. This guy was a great yogi. And he was quite extraordinary. He just looked at me, and he made me vow at that moment to stop. And I really believe that he also gave me the power to do it, because from that moment on until this moment, cocaine and shit looks exactly the same--actually, shit looks a little better.

PM: And so have you seen this Indian father many times since--

KD: Oh, I was very close. He died in '97. But for all those years, I used to go to India and travel around with him and his wife. And we were like a very strange group to see, these two little Indian people and this big white monkey walking around.

PM: [laughs]

KD: I was really like their son. And he was my best friend in the world. I told him everything. I could tell him everything, and he'd never judge me. And he always helped me--he'd always find the bottom line, and help me find a way out of the problems I was in. It was incredible to be with him.

PM: And was he older, or a contemporary?

KD: He was older. He was probably about twenty years older than me, maybe a little more.

PM: And what was his name?

KD: K.C. Tewari. And his wife, Mrs. Tewari, I called her "Ma." They saved my life. They look me in. They loved me and they took care of me. They gave me all the love that I needed to just get through, because it was really a hard time.

PM: Well, thanks for all those details of the story. I'm grateful for all that.

Now let's move on to your work of present day. I want everybody to know about Kirtan.
[Chanting.]

KD: Okay.

PM: When did that begin in your life as something that you would, say, lead?

KD: Well, first of all, Ram Dass had been chanting a little bit when he came back from India. And I enjoyed it very much. But it wasn't until I got to India and actually experienced the way it's done there—the intensity, the madness, the totality of the way people get into it there--that I intuitively felt that, wow, this is for me. I can't get enough of this. And so when I got there and

saw what was going on, then I just wanted to get further into that. But even so, it wasn't about becoming a Kirtan leader. That wasn't in my high school guidance counselor's book of careers.

PM: [laughs]

KD: No, this was something I needed to do to save my own ass. This was a way of connecting. This was intense, this was great. And I really didn't know much about it. I just started doing it anywhere somebody was singing, I tried to go and sing. And for me it was like a lifeline, it was like oxygen, it was like an oxygen tank. And I got more and more and more into it. You see, we actually didn't spend a lot of time with **Maharaj-ji**. He'd see us for a little while, and then he'd send us to the back of the temple. So I figured if we started to sing to him we could bribe into spending more time with us.

PM: Right.

KD: And it worked. [laughs]

PM: Oh, it did.

KD: Oh, yeah. He loved it. He loved when we sang. So then he used to call us to sing when the Indian people were there, and he would look at the Indian people and say, "You miserable people, all you want is jobs and healing and blessings. And when these people come they don't want anything except God, look at them they're just--they're all here just to sing. They gave up everything. They left America," you know, all that bullshit.

PM: Right. [laughs]

KD: But the fact was, what was happening was that we were recognizing that through the chanting we were beginning to connect in a deeper way, to move inside of ourselves. Even though we thought we were chanting to him, we would have these experiences ourselves, inside. And even though for me it all blew up after he died, it was twenty-one years later, after he died, that I was standing in my room. And I knew--all of a sudden I saw and understood and knew completely--that if I didn't start singing with people who didn't know me from the old days...

PM: Right.

KD: I knew that I had to do this with people who didn't know the first thing about it, and I had to do it in that way.

PM: Wow, that's a long time, twenty-one years after--

KD: It was a long time, Frank.

PM: Wow.

KD: The fact that I'm still alive is a frickin' miracle, period.

PM: Right. And it's amazing that that much longer later that you still had that epiphany to say--

KD: Yeah.

PM: --to say, "Oh, this is what I have to do now."

KD: Yeah.

PM: Do you remember where you were when that epiphany took place?

KD: Yeah. I was standing in my living room in my apartment in New York City. Right in the middle of the room.

PM: What a breath of fresh air that must have been.

KD: It was scary.

[laughter]

KD: It was scary because I had been hiding, doing a lot of heavy shit, a lot of dark stuff, a lot of--let me say it another way. Let's just say that I was really lost, and I wasn't getting found very fast. All of a sudden I saw that if, in fact, I wanted to be found, this was the way to do it. I was going to have to find myself. And the only way to clean out these dark places in my heart was to chant with people. I just knew that intuitively in one second. And then I forced myself to go down to this Yoga center and asked them if I could lead some chanting.

PM: Now, where was that one? Is it the one on Fifth that you still gig at today?

KD: It's the one on Lafayette Street.

PM: Lafayette, around where?

KD: Downtown. Lafayette and Fourth Street, roughly.

PM: Right. Lafayette and Fourth, okay. Yeah, because we rent a loft on Wooster, between Spring and Broome. So next time I'm there--

KD: Oh, cool.

PM: --I'm going to take a walk and see if that Yoga center is still there.

KD: They're actually going to be moving soon. They're moving up to Union Square. But they're there, I know, as of now.

PM: And so you began. You went there, and you pitched them the idea of, "Hey, here's who I am. I'd like to do this thing."

KD: Yeah, and they said, "Okay. Well, on Mondays we have this little group of people where we do readings from holy books and answer questions and stuff." This is Sharon and David, the people who ran the place. "So why don't you come on a Monday and sing a little bit?"

PM: Right.

KD: So the next Monday I sang for about twenty minutes. Then they did their thing. And that went on for a couple of months. And then I showed up one day and they were gone. They went to India. And they were gone for a couple of months. So I would show up on Monday and sing for two hours.

PM: Ah.

KD: And then one day I came back, and they were there.

PM: [laughs]

KD: So I started singing, and I didn't stop. [laughs] I sang for two hours. And they kind of looked at each other and said, "Well, that's cool."

PM: Pretty cool, yeah.

KD: And they let me sing. And from then on, Mondays was mine.

PM: Huh. And people started to gather.

KD: People started to gather, yeah. I mean, at first it was like six people. And until the first CD came out, it was never more than twenty, twenty-five people.

PM: And the very first one was called?

KD: *One Track Heart*. And people don't get that title. They don't even smile when they hear that.

PM: Oh, they don't get the joke.

KD: They don't get the joke.

PM: That's strange.

KD: So *One Track Heart* was the first one. But even so, you see, I still didn't have anything--it wasn't a career. I just wanted people to know that I chanted, and so they would invite me to come out and sing with them, because that's what I needed to do. And that's exactly what happened. There are only two places I've ever invited myself. One was Jivamukti, and the other was

Yogaworks, in L.A., because I was coming out to northern California. And I thought, well, maybe I should try to sing in L.A. So I asked a friend of mine to call the people there, and they said yeah. So aside from those two places, every place else I've gone I've been invited.

PM: Unbelievable.

KD: It's amazing. That's all around the world, invited.

PM: That's unbelievable.

KD: It really is unbelievable. And I'm so gratified and grateful and happy that people want to sing with me. That's why I travel, to do that.

PM: And since we haven't so far, would you, in your own words, give a definition of what Kirtan is, for the readers.

KD: Okay. Kirtan is chanting, and it's very specifically chanting what they call the names of God. Okay, and so we might want to try to find a different way of saying that so people don't hit the delete button right away.

PM: [laughs]

KD: In India, everything has a divine aspect. Underneath what we see is divinity. And the idea is to try to see through this haze or this mist, and to see the beauty and the love that lives inside. So what they call the divine name is the name of a signpost to that place inside of us. It's more than a signpost, it's a window. And it's even more than a window. It's ultimately our own names, the names of all that love that lives within us, who we really are when we're finished giving ourselves a hard time.

PM: [laughs]

KD: I mean, we're not making this up, we're just cleaning house. We're cleaning the lens, we're cleaning the mirror so we can see ourselves. If the mirror is full of dust, it doesn't reflect, you can't see yourself. So this mirror of the heart is covered over by our stuff. So chanting is the repetition of these names over and over. And they have the ability to help clean the heart.

PM: For people interested in hearing Kirtan singing, what CD would we point them to, above all?

KD: I would say *Pilgrim Heart* would be the best place to start.

PM: Okay. And that rhymes.

[laughter]

KD: Yeah, hey, I'm a poet, and I know it, hope I don't blow it.

PM: [laughs] And how about people interested in finding out more about your journey. Would you point them to *Pilgrim of the Heart* CD? Is it those kind of stories?

KD: That would be good, sure, yeah. On *Sounds True*.

PM: Okay.

KD: Or they can check out my website. There's some information on the website, interviews and stuff. And I'd love to put a link up to this when you're done.

PM: And we'd enjoy that, too. Now, on this last record that I've really enjoyed, *All One*, it was very interesting to see Walter Becker [from Steely Dan] as the bassist and co-producer. Have you known each other a long time?

KD: We've known each other awhile. I'd say--oh, God, let's see, Triloka Records started in '88. I think I've known Walter probably since 1990.

PM: And so is he a chanting soul? Is that the nature of the friendship?

KD: No, actually, we invited him to mix some jazz records for us when Triloka was still doing jazz, early on. I mean, we started out as a jazz record company.

PM: Interesting.

KD: When Triloka started out, I wanted to give these old guys a chance to record again in their ripe years. I felt that a lot of these guys were dying off, the old guys. And wouldn't it be great if we could give them an opportunity to share some of what they had now.

PM: Wow.

KD: However, we kind of went broke really fast that way, because of course, nobody buys jazz.

PM: Yeah.

KD: But we asked Walter to come in. And we knew him through Roger Nichols, the great engineer. [Famous for his work with Steely Dan.]

PM: Yeah. And how did you know Roger Nichols?

KD: My partner in the record company was running a studio called Soundworks West, in Hollywood, which was the old Motown studios, Motown West.

PM: Right.

KD: And Roger was the head engineer there, so they got to know each other. And then through that, we met Walter. And I actually pissed in a urinal right next to Bruce one day.

PM: [laughs]

KD: So you know, great things happen.

[laughter]

PM: Ah, just that close. How about on *Breath of the Heart*, how did you hook up with Rick Rubin? [A legendary producer, most recently lauded for his outstanding records with Johnny Cash and Neil Diamond.]

KD: Rick started coming out to kirtan. He loves chanting. He came out, and then he got in touch with Mitchell at Karuna and asked for my CDs. So Mitchell, I think, went over and brought them over there, and they started talking. And he started coming out to chant when I was there. And of course, I knew who he was, so I went over and said hey.

PM: Yeah.

KD: So we went out to dinner. That first night we met, we went out to dinner. And we were talking about all kinds of music and having a great time. Then at one point I said to Rick, "I got to start thinking about a new CD." And I said to him, "What I want to do now is I want to do some chanting over tracks, like Moby's stuff, like chant over loops and great tracks."

PM: Right.

KD: And he said, "No, you got to do it live."

PM: [laughs]

KD: And I said to him, "I just did it live," because *Live on Earth* had just come out. And he said, "It doesn't sound live." [laughs]

PM: Wow.

KD: And I went, "Oh, okay." And then the conversation went on to other things. That was it. Next day I get a message on my phone. "Hi, it's Rick. I got some ideas about the project." He said he really thought we should do this and that. So I called him back. I said, "Rick, you said 'we'?"

PM: [laughs]

KD: He said, "Yeah, I want to produce." "Oh. Oh yeah, sure, okay."

[laughter]

PM: What kind of a cat is he? How old is he and--

KD: He's quite a cat. He's really something. He's one of a kind. I think he's about fifty. Maybe late forties.

PM: And what kind of a guy? A soft-spoken guy? An aggressive guy?

KD: He's a very aware guy. He's very, very on top of stuff. He's got an incredible mental presence. And he's really plugged into music. He lives for music, breathes music. And he's functioning, obviously, in a very rare atmosphere. See, he has the ability to hear what you want to sound like. And then, to help you make that sound better, and then to know how to get the people to hear it the way you want them to hear it. There's three things there, and he's just so incredible that way.

PM: Wow. Where did he come from?

KD: He's a Queens guy. When he started Def Jam he was living in Queens, at his parents' house.

PM: Amazing. [laughs]

KD: Yeah.

PM: Now, on the *All One* CD, I really dig that African section. How did that come about, and whose idea was that?

KD: [laughs] Well, first of all, I've spent some time in South Africa. And for years I'd listened to nothing else but township music.

PM: I see.

KD: I just was so taken by it.

PM: What years were you hanging out there?

KD: I'm not exactly sure, to tell you the truth. But it was the year that Mandela got out of jail. Right after *Graceland* was done. [1986] And in fact, we worked at the same studio with the same engineer that had helped with *Graceland*. And I recorded a couple of jazz records with Rene McLean, Jackie McLean's son.

PM: Wow.

KD: He was living there in South Africa, and married a South African woman. And we did a record for him there. We became friends, because I met him when we had recorded Jackie in L.A. He said, "Well, come to South Africa," and I just laughed. But then, in fact, we got to be

very friendly. And once on the way back from India, I stopped in South Africa. And we did this recording. And I met Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba, and all the--

PM: The biggies.

KD: --and their bands, and all these incredible musicians.

PM: Wow.

KD: It was unbelievable. I always loved their music, and I felt very close to it. And then on the day of the recording, the day the recording was to start, I took a couple of CDs with me in the car. And I almost never listen to the music in the car--I don't know, it's just a quiet space for me. And I put in this CD, and it happened to be the *Indestructible Beat of Soweto*. And there was this one track that had such a groove. And I just started singing Hare Krishna over it. And I thought, "Frickin' Ay, I got to do this!"

PM: [laughs]

KD: And that's exactly how it happened.

PM: Incredible.

KD: Just at the very moment the recording started, I found that track by chance, and I knew I had to do it.

PM: And the players got there with no problem at all.

KD: Absolutely. I mean, these guys were incredible.

PM: Yeah, some hot players.

KD: Everyone was overqualified to play with me. They are really great musicians. Everybody there was fantastic, right on it.

PM: Wow. Now, aside from your guru, are there other living or recently deceased spiritual teachers from whom you learned in this life?

KD: Oh, yeah, many. I've been blessed to have met many great yogis and holy people over the years, yeah. It's just continually shot me up again with faith that it's all really true, and we really can find a way to live in this world in a good way. I've met incredible souls over the years and seen amazing things, it's a blessing.

PM: Are you connected with the Ramana Maharishi tradition, and the people from his lineage?

KD: Inside I'm very close with Ramana Maharishi. I've been to Arunchala, his place. And I read his books, stories about him. And I feel very close to him.

PM: One of the most amazing guys that ever lived.

KD: Absolutely. And you don't get the whole picture from most of the books because the people who wrote the books were the intellectuals, and he had a whole full-blown thing going on there, in every way. And even though he taught this one practice mainly, you know, "who am I"--

PM: Right.

KD: --he had a whole devotional scene going on as well. And it was an amazing scene. And the stories about him are so great. You have to find--there's a book called--a three-volume series called *The Power of the Presence* by David Goldman. And it's these longer stories about the devotees with their lives with Ramana. And it's mind-blowing to see him, the human aspects of him, and how he interacted with people. It's extraordinary.

PM: Well, thanks for that. I'm going to hunt that down.

KD: Yeah, it's around.

PM: I often ask a question like this of our interview subjects, and I think the answer in your case might be unique: What do you see up ahead, and what would you like to see happen?

KD: If I had my way, I would want everybody in the whole world to have what they want and what they needed, because why shouldn't they, you know? And the real sad and difficult thing is that people want happiness, they want this feeling, they want to be a certain way, and they reach out for things that they think are going to give it to them, but they don't get it. And so their own actions create suffering for themselves, rather than the happiness that they want. And it's so hard to see that.

It's really just a question of bad aim, that we all have such bad aim. We reach out for things, and then they morph right before our eyes and change into suffering. We reach out for things that we hope are going to give us this feeling, whether it's love or whether it's relationships, or even drugs, you know, we reach out for it because we want that feeling. But in fact, we're reaching for stuff that winds up causing us more and more suffering. So it would be great if we could just rewrite that script.

PM: Yeah. And the good news is that we can. [laughs] I'm so happy to have met you, and I'm very grateful for your time today.

KD: It's my pleasure.

PM: And I look forward to our next live opportunity together.