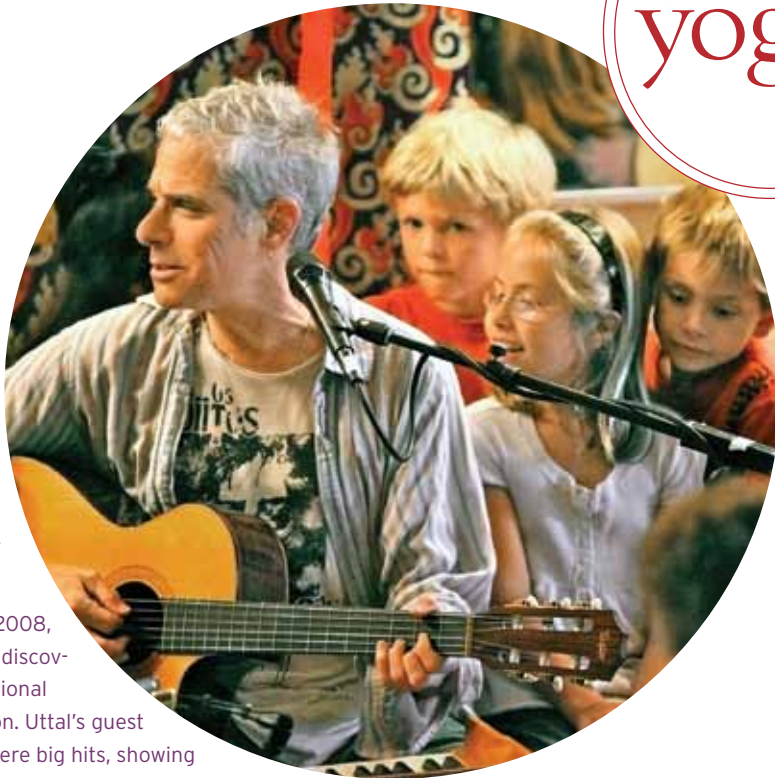


SWEET SING-ALONG

Kids get in on ancient love songs in Jai Uttal's musical celebration of childhood innocence and wonder.



When *kirtan* artist Jai Uttal's son, Ezra Gopal, entered preschool in 2008, the Grammy-nominated musician discovered a new audience for his devotional chants—and new artistic inspiration. Uttal's guest appearances at his son's school were big hits, showing him how much young children appreciate *kirtan*, the yogic practice of chanting God's names. The experience led him to start hosting children's *kirtan* events near his home in Northern California and to create an album especially for children, *Kirtan Kids: The Elephant, the Monkey, and the Little Butter Thief*, released this autumn.

Singing with Ezra and his schoolmates, Uttal was struck by how naturally children take to *kirtan*, approaching it without conditions or cynicism. "He seems to love it from the inside out," Uttal says of Ezra. "The relationship with the gods and the goddesses, it's so part of his being. It's nothing learned. It's nothing absorbed. It's always there."

Though children may be drawn to *kirtan*, many kids can't sit still through a long "grownup" *kirtan* event (or album) with many songs lasting as long as 45 minutes. So Uttal developed a format that works for kids.

He began hosting donation-based events at several yoga studios. The events last about an hour and finish with cookies. Children sit in a circle, with the parents taking a back seat. Uttal tells lots of colorful stories, drawn from the Rama-

yana and other Indian myths, and he leads kid-friendly versions of devotional chants. "I wanted Ezra to have a way to get together with other kids his age who were into *kirtan*," Uttal says of the events. "This gave him his own *sangha* (community)."

Kirtan Kids re-creates the feeling of these events and gives parents a new way to introduce children to *kirtan*. The album features a chorus of children, including six-year-old Ezra, on every song. It offers other surprises: an elephant solo, the sounds of banging pots and pans, and music from about a dozen instruments, including the glockenspiel and a toy piano. The songs are shorter than what you might hear on "grownup" *kirtan* albums, and some of the call-and-response sections are simplified so that the kids will have no trouble singing along. The album includes narrated tales of Gopala, the child form of Krishna; the elephant-headed god Ganesha; and the monkey god Hanuman.

Uttal says he hopes parents and kids will jam with the album during car rides or at home. Chanting *kirtan*, he believes, is a joyful way to introduce children to yoga. "Kids are completely spiritual beings, and part of our job as parents is just to keep reminding them of this fact," he says. "Joyously repeating the holy names with rhythm and melody effortlessly does that. It reminds us, grownups and kids, that our true natures are just droplets of divine love." ANNA DUBROVSKY

