

Excerpt from Śrīla Prabhupāda-līlāmṛta by Satsvarūpa dāsa Gosvāmī
Volume 2: Planting the Seed: New York City 1965-1966, "Beyond the Lower East Side."

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Alan Kallman was a record producer. He had read the article in *The East Village Other* about the swami from India and the *mantra* he had brought with him. When he had read the Hare Kṛṣṇa *mantra* on the front page, he had become attracted. The article gave the idea that one could get a tremendous high or ecstasy from chanting. The Swami's Second Avenue address was given in the article, so one night in November, Alan and his wife visited the storefront.

Alan: There were about thirty pairs of shoes in the back of the room-people in the front and shoes in the back. We took off our shoes and sat down. Everyone was seated and very quiet. Front and center was a chair, and everyone was staring at this chair. Even then we felt a certain energy in the room. No one was saying anything, and everyone was staring at the chair. The next thing was our first sight of the Swami. He came in and sat down on the chair, and there was a tremendous surge of energy. The Swami began chanting, and it was a very beautiful sound. Swamiji had this little drum he was hitting-very penetrating and exciting. One of the devotees was holding up a sign with the chant written on it so everyone could follow. Then the devotees got up and danced in a circle, a special dance with steps to it. The Swami was looking around the room, and he seemed to smile as he looked at you, as if to encourage you to join.

The next day, Alan phoned Prabhupāda to propose that he make a record of the chanting. But it was Brahmānanda who answered the phone, and he gave Alan an appointment with the Swami that evening. So again Alan and his wife went down to the East Village, which to them was the neighborhood where things were happening. If you wanted to have some excitement, you went down to the East Village.

When they entered the Swami's room, he was seated at his typewriter, working. As soon as Alan mentioned his idea about making a record, Prabhupāda was interested. "Yes," he said, "we *must* record. If it will help us distribute the chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa, then it is our duty." They scheduled the recording for two weeks later, in December, at the Adelphi Recording Studio near Times Square. Alan's wife was impressed by how enthusiastically the Swami had gotten to the point of making the record: "He had so much energy and ambition in his plans."

It was the night before the recording date. A boy walked into the storefront for the evening *kīrtana* carrying a large, two-headed Indian drum. This was not unusual, as guests often brought drums, flutes, and other instruments, yet this time Swamiji seemed particularly interested. The boy sat down and was preparing to play when Prabhupāda motioned for the boy to bring him the drum. The boy didn't move-he

wanted to play it himself-but Brahmānanda went over and said, "Swamiji wants to play the drum," so the boy gave in.

Brahmānanda: Swamiji began to play, and his hands were just dancing on the drum. Everyone was stunned that Swamiji knew how to do this. All we had seen was the bongo drum, so I thought it was the proper Indian drum. But when this two-headed drum came out of nowhere and Swamiji started playing it like a master musician, it created an ecstasy a hundred times more than the bongo drum had.

After the kīrtana, Prabhupāda asked the boy if he could borrow the drum for the recording session the next night. The boy at first was reluctant, but the devotees promised to return his drum the next day, so he agreed and said he would bring the drum the next evening. When he left the storefront that night with his drum under his arm, the devotees thought they would never see the boy or his drum again, but the next day, a few hours before Swamiji was to leave for the studio, the boy returned with his drum.

It was a cold December night. The Swami, dressed in his usual saffron dhotī, a tweed overcoat, and a pair of gray shoes (which had long since replaced his original white, pointy rubber ones), got into Rūpānuga's VW van with about fifteen of his followers and their instruments and started for the recording studio.

Brahmānanda: We didn't start recording right away, because there was a group ahead of us. So we went out for a walk in Times Square. We were just standing there with Swamiji, seeing all the flashing lights and all the sense gratification, when a woman came up to Swamiji and said, "Oh, hello. Where do you come from?" in a very loud, matronly way. And Swamiji said, "I am a monk from India." And she said, "Oh, that's wonderful. Glad to meet you." And then she shook Swamiji's hand and left.

At the studio, everyone accepted the devotees as a regular music group. One of the rock musicians asked them what the name of their group was, and Hayagrīva laughed and replied, "The Hare Kṛṣṇa Chanters." Of course most of the devotees weren't actually musicians, and yet the instruments they brought with them—a tamboura, a large harmonium (loaned by Allen Ginsberg), and rhythm instruments—were ones they had played during kīrtanas for months. So as they entered the studio they felt confident that they could produce their own sound. They just followed their Swami. He knew how to play, and they knew how to follow him. They weren't just another music group. It was music, but it was also chanting, meditation, worship.

Prabhupāda sat on a mat in the center of the studio, while the engineers arranged the microphones and assigned each devotee a place to sit according to his particular instrument. They asked for only two pairs of *karatālas* and they approved of the pairs of rhythm sticks, but they wanted several devotees clapping their hands. Rūpānuga's usual instrument was a pair of brass Indian bells with the tongues

removed, and when the engineer saw them, he came over and said, "Let me hear that." Rūpānuga played them, and they passed. Since Ravindra Svarūpa would be playing the drone on the harmonium, he sat apart with his own microphone, and Kīrtanānanda also had a microphone for the tamboura.

When the engineers were satisfied, they cued the devotees, and Swamiji began chanting and playing his drum. The cymbals and sticks and clapping hands joined him, and the chanting went on steadily for about ten minutes, until an engineer came out of the glass studio and stopped them: Brahmānanda was clapping too loudly, creating an imbalance. The engineer went back into his studio, put on his headphones, balanced everyone, and cued them for a second take. This time it was better.

The first sound was the tamboura, with its plucked, reverberating twang. An instant later Swamiji began beating the drum and singing, *Vande 'ham śrī-guroḥ...* Then the whole ensemble put out to sea-the tamboura, the harmonium, the clackers, the cymbals, Rūpānuga's bells, Swamiji's solo singing-pushing off from their moorings, out into a fair weather sea of chanting... *lalitā-śrī-viśkhānitāmś ca...*

Swamiji's voice in the studio was very sweet. His boys were feeling love, not just making a record. There was a feeling of success and union, a crowning evening to all their months together.

... *Śrī-kṛṣṇa-caitanya, prabhu-nityānanda...*

After a few minutes of singing prayers alone, Swamiji paused briefly while the instruments continued pulsing, and then began the *mantra*: Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare. It was pure Bhaktivedanta Swami-expert, just like his cooking in the kitchen, like his lectures. The engineers liked what they heard-it would be a good take if nothing went wrong. The instruments were all right, the drum, the singing. The harmony was rough. But this was a special record-a happening. The Hare Kṛṣṇa Chanters were doing their thing, and they were doing it all right. Alan Kallman was excited. Here was an authentic sound. Maybe it would sell.

After a few rounds of the *mantra*, the devotees began to feel relaxed, as though they were back in the temple, and they were able to forget about making mistakes on the record. They just chanted, and the beat steadied into a slightly faster pace. The word *hare* would come sometimes with a little shout in it, but there were no emotional theatrics in the chorus, just the straight response to the Swami's melody. Ten minutes went by. The chanting went faster, louder and faster-Swamiji doing more fancy things on the drum, until suddenly... everything stopped, with the droning note of the harmonium lingering.

Alan came out of the studio: "It was great, Swami. Great. Would you like to just go right ahead and read the address now? Or are you too tired?" With polite

concern, pale, befreckled Alan Kallman peered through his thick glasses at the Swami. Swamiji appeared tired, but he replied, "No, I am not tired." Then the devotees sat back in the studio to watch and listen as Prabhupāda read his prepared statement.

"As explained on the cover of the record album..." The sympathetic devotees thought that Swamiji, despite his accent, sounded perfectly clear, reading from his script like an elocutionist. "...this transcendental vibration by chanting of Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare is the sublime method for reviving our Kṛṣṇa consciousness." The language was philosophic, and the kind of people who usually walked out of the temple as soon as the *kīrtanas* ended, before the Swami could even speak a word, would also not appreciate this speech on their record album. "As living spiritual souls," Swamiji preached, "we are all originally Kṛṣṇa conscious entities. But due to our association with matter from time immemorial, our consciousness is now polluted by material atmosphere." The devotees listened submissively to the words of their spiritual master, while at the same time trying to comprehend the effect this would have on the audience. Certainly some people would turn it off at the very mention of a spiritual nature. Swamiji continued reading, explaining that the chanting would deliver one from the sensual, the mental, and the intellectual planes and bring one to the spiritual realm.

"We have seen it practically," he continued. "Even a child can take part in the chanting, or even a dog can take part in it... The chanting should be heard, however, from the lips of a pure devotee of the Lord." And he continued reading on to the end. "...No other means, therefore, of spiritual realization is as effective in this age as chanting the *mahā-mantra*: Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare/ Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma, Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare."

Alan again came rushing out of the studio. It was fine, he said. He explained that they had recorded a little echo into the speech, to make it special for the listener. "Now," he pushed back his glasses with his finger. "We've got about ten minutes left on the side with the speech. Would you like to chant again? Or is it too late, Swamiji?" Prabhupāda smiled. No, it was not too late. He would chant the prayers to his spiritual master.

While his disciples lounged around the studio, watching their spiritual master and the technical activity of the engineers behind the glass, Prabhupāda began singing. Again the harmonium's drone began, then the tamboura and drum, but with a much smaller rhythm group than before. He sang through, without any retakes, and then ended the song (and the evening) with a *fortissimo* drumming as the hand-pumped organ notes faded.

Again, Alan came out and thanked the Swami for being so patient and such a good studio musician. Prabhupāda was still sitting. "Now we are tired," he admitted.

Suddenly, over the studio sound system came a playback of the Hare Kṛṣṇa chanting, complete with echo. When Prabhupāda heard the successful recording of his

chanting, he became happy and stood and began dancing, swaying back and forth, dipping slightly from the waist, his arms upraised in the style of Lord Caitanya, dancing in ecstasy. The scheduled performance was over, but now Swamiji was making the best performance of the evening from his spontaneous feelings. As he danced, his half-asleep disciples became startled and also rose to their feet and joined him, dancing in the same style. And in the recording booth behind the glass, the engineers also raised their hands and began dancing and chanting.

"Now you have made your best record," Swamiji told Mr. Kallman as he left the studio for the freezing Manhattan evening. Swamiji got into the front seat of the Volkswagen bus while "The Hare Kṛṣṇa Chanters" climbed into the back with their instruments, and Rūpānuga drove them back home, back to the Lower East Side.