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CD RELEASES

Singing Prayers of Praise

Texas talent makes Houston Hindus proud

Kalyani Giri, Houston, Texas

When friends Chandrakantha Courtney, Kalpalatha Guntupalli and Swaroop Rani get together, their conversation skims the usual subjects: children, work and life in general. Yet, sometime last year while playfully humming a tune together, something special happened. Two of the three--then the third--got inspired. Guntupalli, an eminent doctor with a passion for music, and Rani--also a physician--proposed the idea of a musical collaborative effort to Courtney, Houston's prima donna of song. The result? A CD of the sacrosanct Sri Lalitha Sahasranamam Sthotram, enchantingly recited in the Raga Saraswati by Courtney and Guntupalli. Accompanying them on the Saraswati veena is Vimla Ahobila-Vajjula.

The CD begins traditionally with the Ganesh Sthuti, paying obeisance to the remover of obstacles, Lord Ganesha. The meditative Dhyana Slokas follow, calling on the listener to summon a mental image of Sri Lalitha. The Lalitha Sahasranamam is renowned for its exquisite use of descriptive words and imagery. Presented as a conversation between Lord Hayagreeva and Sri Agasthya Maharishi, it celebrates the beauty of the Goddess Devi, describing Her abodes and the many ways She is worshiped.

It is the belief of Hindus that the Lalitha Sahasranamam, if chanted with devotion, purifies and elevates the soul. While there have been many artistes over the years who have recorded this shloka, the Courtney/Guntupalli rendition is engaging because it is an amalgam of training, sophistication and devotion. The recording

especially showcases Courtney's vocal versatility and talent by allowing her to explore beyond her formal training in Hindustani classical music. She and husband, musicologist/percussionist David Courtney, perform and teach throughout the US. They have also organized music workshops internationally.

For Houston Hindus, the 41-minute CD, which was recorded and edited by David Courtney, does the community proud. Producers of the CD are Rani and Guntupalli. Four hundred of the CDs have been donated to distinguished non-profit organizations, such as The AAPI Charitable Foundation, Pratham, Tobacco literacy programs and Ekal Vidyalaya. Proceeds from those sales will benefit the education of children in India. The CD sells for \$10 and is available exclusively at: http://www.chandrakantha.com/products_and_services/lalitha.html

Dancing for The Gods

Honoring the Devadasi

Devadasis are the hereditary temple dancers of South India. Now, a new educational CD-ROM, entitled Remembering Devadasis, pays them long overdue respect. Highly trained in their craft and exemplary in their devotion, these performers never dance to entertain. Their art is, as they describe it themselves, "ritual attendance to the Gods." Hence, each devadasi continually strives to merge her humanness in Divinity that she might become a "Goddess walking on Earth." She never marries, for her husband is the God of the temple in which she performs. It is for Him that she dances.

The South Indian temple, its presiding Deity and the devadasis that dance within its precincts are all tied together. This CD-ROM tries to give some sense of this interrelationship. It centers around a 50-minute video sequence of temple dancing, performed by a highly accomplished devadasi, which runs on screen along with a slide presentation that shows and explains how the dance relates to the festivals and ceremonies of the temple. There is also a shorter interactive part of the CD which allows the viewer to acquire--according to his choice--definitions of terms, descriptions of temple ceremonies and map routes of festival processions.

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