Photo by Nancy J. Parisi

Kirtan for elders

Jonathan Lambert finds his purpose

BY NANCY J. PARISI

Local musician, entrepreneur, and self-described "deep thinker" Jonathan Lambert has followed a winding path from playing guitar in metal bands to extensively documenting the metal scene to a new, spiritual voice. Several times a week, he brings healing energy to senior facilities by playing a small accordion-piano hybrid type instrument called a harmonium and creating *kirtan*—a Sanskrit word for performative, communal call and response that is both joyful and meditative.

Kirtan is part of some Indian religious traditions, including Hinduism, Sikhism, and certain schools of yoga. "Music healing, with mantras added for peace," is what Lambert calls it. "I was inspired by going to kirtans at Michele Gigante's Shakti yoga studio, where I was photographing classes and performances. She's the prime person who got me started on this path."

Training as an electrician, working in a military-adjacent field, and other more traditional jobs left Lambert feeling off-kilter with his interior self, yearning for more meaningful work. "I had come from the world of distorted guitars, and chaotic, loud instruments," he says. "Now I can, with my work, bring all these seniors together in one room and, with the harmonium and mantras, they feel a sense of peace and connection."

"In my one-hour sessions, everyone sings back, and I ask them to be louder," Lambert continues. "The harmonium is a vessel. I bought it on eBay in 2025, and when it showed up, I had to learn how to play it. I felt comfortable with it, but one of my biggest fears was singing in front of people."

But these days, armed with his harmonium; about fifty palm-sized egg shakers, maracas, tambourines, or other small instruments; and printed sheets of gentle mantras for comfort and peace that explain what the ancient words mean and how they help, Lambert creates programs filled with communal moments where everyone lifts their voices in simple, repetitive chants. For example, Hari Om is "the gentle eraser," good for feelings of overwhelm or resetting one's mood.

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Kirtan *continued*

In a typical session, Lambert gets participants in the mood to make music by playing some Frank Sinatra or Fleetwood Mac, something that signals this is about having a good time. "I'll then talk about my journey, including my relationship with my grandfather, so they can get a feeling of who I am," says Lambert, whose grandfather is housebound. "I explain that I am offering a vibration, and I hope they receive it. My mantras have a lot to do with easing suffering, and if they're cognitively present, I encourage them to sing back to me. I say that it's all right if they are just doing percussion or just singing. I can gauge where we are going."

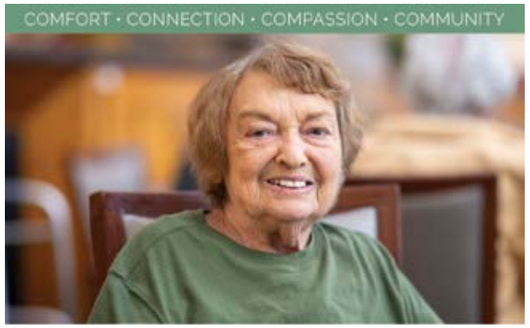
One facility reported that, after one of Lambert's sessions, ten residents in a memory care unit were more restful for a full day. That makes it meaningful work for him.

"I like to ask questions and learn stories about other people; that's what led me to working with the senior community. Listening to stories of elders has been inspiring, and I also found out that there's a serious issue going on with the loneliness epidemic—we're not addressing that properly."

By 2024, Lambert spent three years living out of his van prior to taking that military-adjacent job. "I did the Colorado trip, and then I was in the workforce," he says. "If I was able to give one piece of advice to a twenty-year-old, it is to get in your car and drive as far as you can and just be by yourself for a couple of months. Your perspective on life will change. You will start to see outside of your little bubble. You will get put in situations, but you can get through it. People think travel is so expensive, but if you study minimalism, you can live frugally. And you can do amazing things in this life. I gave up the musician ego and the whole industry side of music. I now focus on the more important parts of music, the healing to connect people. And I always have to make sure that I get the egg shakers back. People pocket those things."

Beyond nursing homes, Lambert also sees house and hospital-bound patients benefit from the healing power of his music and energy work. He now has a business, The Art of Staying Sharp: it's also his website (*theartofstayingsharp.com*), and mission statement of sorts. In addition to kirtan for seniors, Lambert offers end-of-life doula services and, using his photography and filmmaking skills, he creates legacy videos to honor elders by recording their stories. He also designs websites, continues as a freelance photographer and videographer, and collaborates with local musicians. His website has links to two of his metal band documentaries, *Between Exultation and Aggression 1* and *2*.

Lambert grew up in Pendleton; later, his family moved to Newfane. "It's been a love-hate relationship with Newfane, but more on the love side," he says. "I'm far enough from the city that I can enjoy my hobbies, including dirt-biking in cornfields. A lot of my family is nearby—my grandparents, my parents, my aunt—and as I get older, I've learned to appreciate that slow way of life."



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