

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Breathe in, breathe out. Then get crazy.

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Sunday, January 27, 2008



Special to the Chronicle / Kat Wade

If you had spent any time near the Embarcadero this past weekend, you might've noticed a lot of healthy-looking people, mostly women, with rolled-up foam mats jutting out of their bags and backpacks.

The staid downtown Hyatt Regency, host to the Fifth Annual San Francisco Yoga Journal San Francisco Conference, seemed bursting with a very unbusinesslike exuberance, its beige halls, escalators and meeting rooms filled with funky Lululemon stretch pants and Dansko-clog-

wearing yogis and yoginis toting their mats. It was a contrast to the professional types who usually fill these spaces.

More than 2,100 practitioners came to be inspired by yoga's top teachers - some rock stars in their own right - and bask in the glow of shared experience with like-minded souls. The sold-out event was the biggest yet, its popularity thanks, in no small part, to the participation of Michael Franti, front man for San Francisco band Spearhead as well as an activist and dedicated yogi. In addition to being the event's keynote speaker, Franti gave a benefit concert for Youth Aids and his own organization, Power to the Peaceful, and co-taught two workshops that incorporated his music with the ancient practice of yoga.



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"Michael opened things to a new level," conference director Elana Maggal said. "I think he's one of the main reasons this conference was such a huge success. Yoga is bigger than ever and because he's local, he tied it all together."

Yoga has become so popular that the Journal holds three conferences a year, here as well as in Boston and Estes Park, Colo., with more cities on the horizon. Today, 16.5 million people in the United States practice yoga, an increase of more than 30 percent from 2002, according to a recent survey by Yoga Journal, the country's most popular yoga magazine, with more than 1 million readers. MRI, a leading media and

consumer research firm, reports that yoga is now the fastest-growing sport in the country, besting skateboarding, surfing and snowboarding.

Which may explain how the former front man for industrial noise band the Beatnigs and in-your-face protest band Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy could end up at a yoga conference. Many people come to yoga to get fit; others need relief. Franti's introduction to yoga was gradual and came from the latter.

Franti said the stress of touring with Spearhead caused him aches, pains and a feeling of being spiritually disconnected. To help him, former Black Panther Angela Davis turned him on to meditation, which he did until 9/11, when, he said, he felt overwhelmed by the crisis in the world. During this time, a friend who taught yoga invited him to a class. "Since then, I practice every day," he said. "The only tradition I follow is I get on my mat every day."

"It teaches you to just be with it," he said, "to not run away from pain and sadness and to not forget to be joyful. That's been big for me because when I first started music, it was angry, f- the system. It was hard for me to experience joy and be happy and grateful."

Legions of yoga fans, the famous - Sting, Christy Turlington and Gwyneth Paltrow among them - and the many more who are not, have taken to this path as a way to reduce stress and get centered, but more and more do it to cultivate their spirit, find their place in the world and to work toward the big things: world peace and saving the planet.

"People initially come to yoga to get buff and then they go deeper," Maggal said. "Yoga practice takes you to the next level of greening the planet, and then the next level is saving the planet."

That was the buzz at this year's conference, alongside freeing oneself from rigid dogma or structure. And streaming over all of that was the music.

Lily Nagy, 28, from Charlotte, N.C., a conference first-timer, said that many of the teachers had the same message: "Get stronger, be healthy, get more peaceful and use that peace and strength to make a difference in your community." Over and over during the course of the weekend, teachers and students alike talked about taking their practice off the mat and into the world.

Franti is the embodiment of that ethos. With Spearhead, Franti travels to wordly destinations such as the Palestinian territories, Israel, Iraq and Brazil, talking to people and asking them about their lives. "It's sort of a throw back to the '60s," Maggal said. "It's what people were doing during Vietnam."

In the spiritual activism workshop, which Franti co-taught with Jivamukti Yoga founders Sharon Gannon and David Life (Jivamukti is the largest yoga center in the nation), the musician walked his talk, bringing what he offers to people around the world to the gathered students.

In a darkened ballroom, Franti and guitarist J. Bowman sat on the edge of a platform playing a soothing melodic refrain. "They say that there is one thing Americans fear more than death," Franti said, "and that

is public speaking." Then he smiled. "And what do they fear more than public speaking? Singing in front of people." He turned to the audience. "Who here is afraid of singing in front of people?" Many people raised their hands. "Great," he said. "Let's go. You. C'mon up."

One after another people went onstage. He had them hum with their eyes closed first. Then he would gently ask questions: "Why are you afraid of singing in front of people?" "I'm afraid they will think I sing badly." "Great. Now sing that." "Tell your son how much you love him. Sing it." One by one, each person revealed their fears, hopes and desires, and sang about them in front of the gathered crowd. People wept onstage and many in the audience wept as well. Toward the end, someone called out that it was a great display of music therapy.

"As these yogis are evolving more, music is just becoming more a part of what they do," said Maggal. Music permeated this conference more than in years past, she said, to facilitate opening up and contemplation, but also to raise energy and create ecstatic moods while doing yoga.

A workshop called Mandala Namaskar: The Healing Power of Circular Movement Within Yoga was led by Shiva Rea, leading teacher of transformational Vinyasa flow yoga and yoga trance dance worldwide. Rea led students through variations of standard yoga poses that extended and flowed beyond typical postures. Done to music, the practice was akin to dance.

"Turn it up. Crank up the music," she instructed her assistants, and to the students she exhorted, "break out of the box," whether that box was the rectangular yoga mat, rigid, linear movement or another stifling aspect of one's life.

The ecstatic, joyful nature of music carried through Franti's Move and Be Moved: Music and Yoga workshop as well. Franti and his guitarist Bowman got participants up off their mats with their hands up in the air, and soon the almost entirely female group broke into freeform dancing and cheering.

"I really love practicing yoga to music," Franti said. "Not just any music; I really like music that has some kind of inspirational melody, different from just using a pumping beat to get the adrenaline going. It's about taking me into an emotional place."

Franti and Bowman continued playing while well-known Ashtanga teachers Nicki Doane and Eddie Modestini took over and led participants through a series of poses. The music added a layer of inspiration.

"It's such a great combination," Doane said. "Yoga opens you up, music pushes you through."

Doane and Modestini tour with Franti and Spearhead, teaching yoga wherever they go. When they do classes with music, it's always with live musicians, which adds an improvisational quality. "What's juicy about it is we can't plan it, it's unrehearsed," Doane said. "There's a lot of letting go, less structure - you become more playful. Sometimes you have to do that."

Although this workshop and the conference as a whole are largely attended by women, Maggal said that's starting to turn. "Spouses are coming onboard," she said, "and we're looking at ways to bring in more men."

Stephen Cogswell, 36, of San Francisco was at the conference for the second time. He acknowledged the disparity between the number of men and women, and said, "All my single friends, I gotta get them to a yoga class." He continued, "It's awesome, amazing, when this many health-conscious, spiritually-conscious people are in the same place. It really feels high, hopeful."

Maggal said the conferences are doing very well, and the company is doing a new event in Florida this fall and another in New York next year. Celebrities continue to offer their cachet to the events, with Donna Karan scheduled to give the keynote address in Boston and Trudie Styler in Florida.

And yoga itself continues to evolve as well. "We're seeing more experimental yoga like the Acroyogis (who do a combination of acrobatics and yoga). They taught a class for the first time and performed during the Franti concert, which was great," said Maggal.

There is also yoga combined with rock climbing and yoga on the slackline (tightrope). People are trying new, fun approaches and mixing it with other disciplines. To these trends, Maggal added a note of caution: "That's asana (physical practice), but we still have to stay grounded in the sutras (teachings) and realize it's a lifelong spiritual journey."

As for Franti, at the end of it all, he said he had a great time and that "it was very humbling." During the keynote, he said he kept wanting to reach for his guitar so he could sing, but he forced himself to talk. "It was like being in your shakiest yoga pose for 45 minutes."

Margaret Westley, 23, of San Diego was one of the women swaying and dancing in the music and yoga workshop. Westley was hit by a bus in her freshman year of college and lost her left leg. She wears a prosthetic limb, which she removes to do yoga. About the conference, she said, "I feel like I belong."

"We're all here to do some healing, and if you look at the world, it needs healing, too," she said. "As you heal, you become more humane."

Franti echoed that sentiment. "The world needs yoga right now," he said.

## Resources

-- Yoga Journal conferences: [www.yogajournal.com/conferences](http://www.yogajournal.com/conferences)

-- Michael Franti and Spearhead: [www.spearheadvibrations.com](http://www.spearheadvibrations.com)

E-mail Amy Moon at [amoon@sfgate.com](mailto:amoon@sfgate.com).

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/01/27/LVT7UKU6Q.DTL>

This article appeared on page G - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle