

After a lost summer in India, a message of love led Ben Lee back to himself. In the second instalment of our series of memoirs, the musician and songwriter recalls reconnecting with his spiritual side.

Lost and found

In December 2003, I made a trip to the south of India that profoundly affected me. I went to Tamil Nadu to spend time at the peedam – meaning “abode of the Divine” – of Sakthi Narayani Amma, a young Hindu saint. I thought I was going to get away from things and recharge my batteries. Although I felt a certain sense of being guided to take this trip, I had no idea that my life was about to change dramatically and forever.

To give you some context, I was going through a “rough trot”. My father had died a couple of years previously, leaving me with pain and confusion that I didn’t have the proper emotional tools to work through with. My six-year relationship with my first love, the girl I assumed I would marry, had fallen apart. The record label I had been with in the US for seven years had gone bankrupt.

I was left without a sense of what lay ahead of me. I found myself acting out in work and in life, which resulted in me being branded as a “difficult” artist to work with. I would never have admitted it at the time, but my divisive behaviour stemmed from a deep pain I couldn’t wrap my head or heart around. I had been making music professionally since I was 14 years old, and at 24 I found myself without a home – not only domestically, but also in a business and spiritual sense.

I first met Narayani Amma in New York City in August 2003. His visit was being hosted by a renowned oncologist at an Upper West Side apartment, where Amma conducted prayer ceremonies and private interviews. The words uttered by Amma in my interview echoed in my head for the next few months: “There is nothing permanent in this world. The only thing you can rely on is the Divine. The Divine will never turn His back on you; only you can turn your back on Him.”

After my breakup, I threw myself into touring, and as the year wound down I decided to visit Amma’s ashram in India. After all, I was living on a tour bus, so I had to go somewhere over Christmas, and that seemed as good a place as any.

Life at the peedam was an adventure from the first day of my arrival. During the day, I sat and watched Amma perform Hindu pujas (prayers), losing myself in the ancient rituals. For the rest of the time, I engaged in wonderful conversations with spiritual seekers from all over the world. Everyone there had been touched by this holy being in some way. Some people experienced miraculous healings from terminal illnesses; others began to notice their emotional guard coming down. Healings were taking place on many levels and in many ways. All were trying to make sense of their own mysteries. It was an electric atmosphere.

On Narayani Amma’s birthday, January 3, I was asked to perform a song for Amma by an older devotee. He knew I was a musician and told me that I shouldn’t miss this chance to “perform for the Divine”. I wasn’t sure what that meant. After all, I had come to India unsure of my future as a musician, wondering if it was perhaps something I would leave behind for good. But never being one to miss an opportunity, I agreed to perform a song of mine called *Love Won’t Let You Down*. The lyrics are for the world-weary. It is a plea for hope and tenacity in a brutal world. It felt like the right song to sing, and one I could sing from my heart.

Performing that night was an extraordinary experience. Amma smiled at me like a loving and unconditional parent as I lay my heart out in verse. I felt an ease in my voice that was strangely unfamiliar.

The next day I awoke from a deep sleep to a terrible depression. Inexplicably, I felt like my world had fallen apart. I felt heavy, resentful and very angry. It was a depression that lasted for the next two weeks – two of the hardest weeks of my life. In bhakti yoga, the path of devotion, this is called purification – the burning of karma – but to me it just felt agonising. I reached depths of sadness and loss that I hadn’t allowed myself to experience before. Why was I in India? Who was Amma? Who was I and what was I doing with my life? Was this all a load of nonsense? These questions haunted me. It was truly a roller-coaster ride with no harness.

Throughout it all I kept sitting in on Amma’s pujas, trying to focus my mind, trying to feel these feelings – as challenging as they often were. Then, one afternoon, I was called to Amma. As I shared lunch with the young saint, he told me being born as a human, as opposed to any other life form, is a blessing and holds many unique opportunities. He said the purpose of life is to do service to mankind. Then he asked, “So what is Ben’s service going to be?”

To say this question hit a nerve with me would be an understatement. I began to weep as I babbled away. “I don’t know, Amma! I’m not good at feeding poor people. I always seem to give too much or too little. I don’t feel useful. I try, but I don’t seem to be having an effect on people...” Amma’s laugh cut me off. “No, no, no,” he said. “Ben’s service is music.” I felt an enormous wave of relief. It resonated with me as a basic truth of my existence.

Then Amma asked the question I least expected to be asked: “Has Ben ever been top 10?” I laughed at hearing the phrase “top 10” come from his mouth. It seemed so odd. Did they even have pop radio in rural Tamil Nadu?

“No,” I replied, embarrassed. “I’m not that successful.”

“Amma will bless Ben to be top 10, if Ben will put Amma’s message into music.” Now I was intrigued. Could it be that easy? I asked Amma what the message was. “Joy,” he replied. “The joy of life is to give to others. The message is joy.”

I left feeling lighter and calmer. I didn’t know how Amma’s instructions would play out, but I felt a deep sense that things would be OK. I spent the rest of my trip taking part in service projects, visiting orphanages, feeding the poor and writing songs. These songs went on to form my album *Awake Is The New Sleep*, which debuted at No. 7 in the ARIA charts and eventually rose to No. 3. It went top 10 in Spain and the Netherlands and made inroads for me in the US and Europe.

Of course, the lesson of this story is not that spiritual work leads to material success. That was just the entry point for me to understand the power of faith and possibility. I believe it was by recommitting to my music with a sense of generosity and faith that I found a new audience, as well as a new sense of purpose.

I continue to visit Amma to reconnect with that pure sense of selfless service and unconditional love that resides in all our hearts. My path has deepened with new challenges and tests, and I am beginning to realise how little I know about the true nature of reality that lies under the surface of my existence. I’ve learned that life is more about the slow cultivation of an open heart, rather than about quick fixes and glamour. And each time I step onto a stage, I remember Amma’s instruction to me: “The joy of life is to give to others. The message is joy.” ● Ben Lee’s new album, *The Rebirth Of Venus*, is out February 7.



SUMMER MEMOIR

Ben Lee
musician and
songwriter