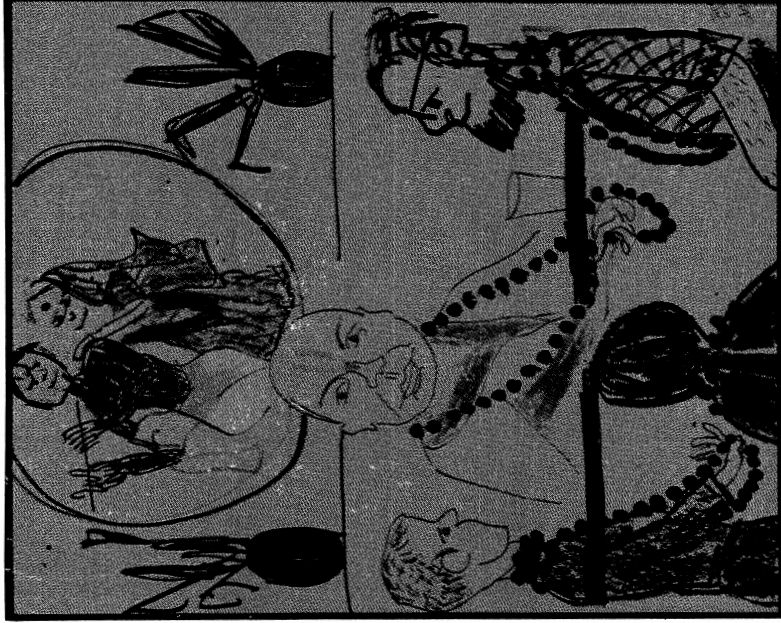


# Beginning at 26 Second Avenue

Satsvarupa dasa Goswami



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*Namah om visnu padaya*

Krsna prasthaya bhutale ~~Prasthaya~~

John, Kate & Santa Swannick

James S. Edwards

*Macgata dea* *form.*

No. 111 D. 111

7

*Bhak-tiveśvara*

Swarna Lakshmi Vengal

to know on their side how they <sup>will</sup> be treated.

## Offering Obeisances to the Spiritual Master

This is a devotional picture of me looking at Śrīla Prabhupāda. I was surprised when I drew it because I saw myself suddenly fifty-five years old—wearing glasses, my lips sunken, wrinkles—sitting in front of Prabhupāda. I was only thirty-seven when he left. He has never seen me in this older body. Therefore, I was surprised when this drawing manifested itself. It made me realize how drawings can create their own life, a new possibility in my relationship with Prabhupāda.

In this painting, Prabhupāda looks like a *mūrti*, his skin golden. He's not looking at me. He seems absorbed in his *kīrtana*. Or perhaps he is looking past me at the assembly of devotees. That's the freedom of artwork, that you can place yourself right in front of your *gurudeva*, intent on getting his mercy, looking up to him with worshipful eyes, trying to penetrate his solemnity, his peace, and become absorbed in it.

I superimposed this drawing over Prabhupāda's *praṇāma-mantras* because that's how I worship Prabhupāda. I have placed this painting first because my love for Prabhupāda is the beginning and essence of my spiritual life. Devotees sometimes ask why I put so much of myself in my writing (and drawing). What can I say? I exist. Prabhupāda told me that the feeling that "I am something" is not wrong. I simply have to understand who I actually am. Then he taught me that I was Kṛṣṇa's eternal servant. Although I exist in a false conception, I exist in a real conception too. Here I have portrayed myself wearing *tilaka*, growing old, still trying to respond to Prabhupāda's drawing me to him. Submission to Prabhupāda is not a manifestation of false ego, but of Prabhupāda's mercy. Therefore, this is not a drawing of my false ego, but of a person about to serve, who first comes before his spiritual master to beg permission and acceptance. Besides that, Prabhupāda liked to see me. He liked to see all his disciples. He didn't think we were ugly because he could see past the body to the soul. He was interested not in our expertise, but in our hearts. I offer this little book as service to him.



## India's Message of Peace and Goodwill

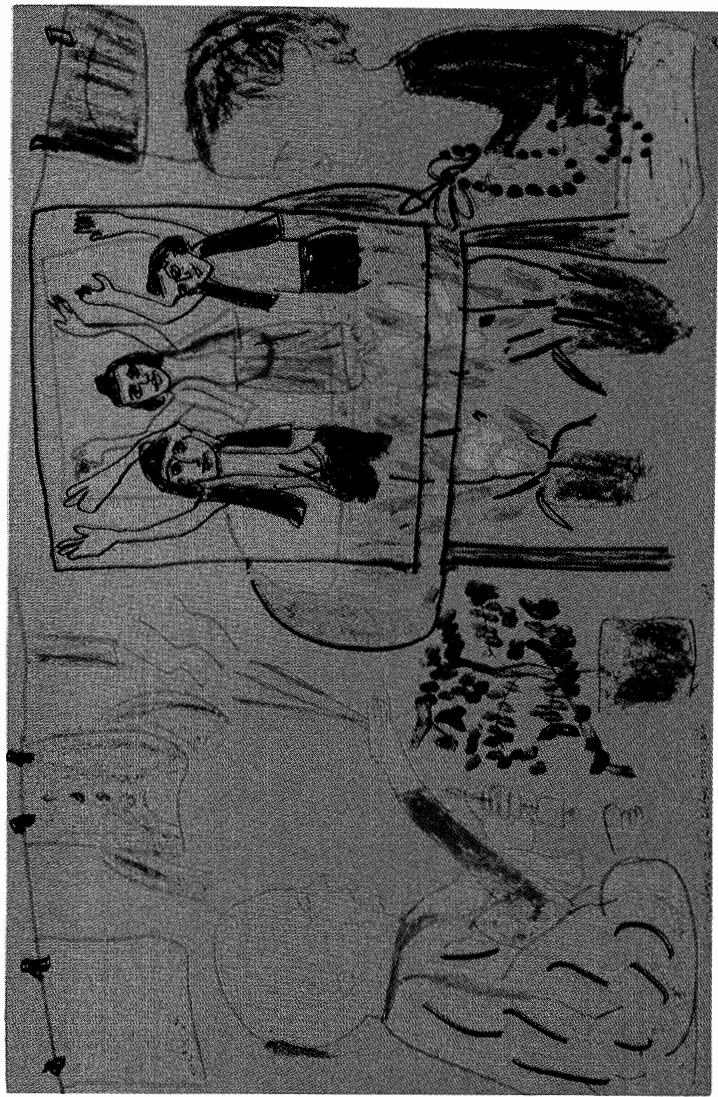
This is my rendition of the cover of a pamphlet Prabhupāda brought with him to America. He intended it as both an advertisement and a preaching tool.

Prabhupāda used his passport photo on the cover. That photo used to frighten me. He didn't seem particularly friendly in the photo, but grave, like no one I knew.

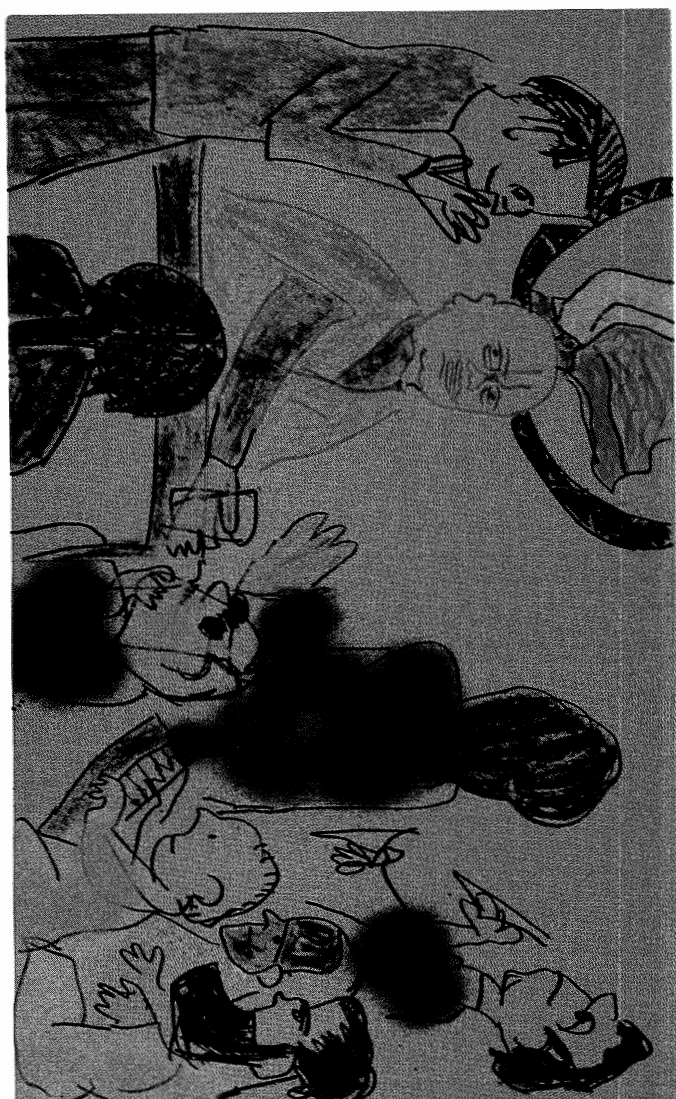
Prabhupāda didn't seem masculine or feminine to me. He had attributes of both somehow. His beauty was not of this world.

In those days, I was still bound by style. Swamiji didn't conform to style, not even to "swami" style. He was from another frame of reference completely. The other swamis we knew had long beards and magnetic smiles. Prabhupāda's gravity was impenetrable. It was clear that he had access to things incomprehensible to us. He could introduce us to Kṛṣṇa's world, to "India's message of peace and goodwill."

My drawing doesn't show all that—it's more like a postage stamp version of the original—but you get the idea.



**Swamiji Performs Bells before Panca-tattva**



## With the Swami in the Temple

The ecstatic chanters with Swamiji come partly from my imagination and partly from typical characters of those times. Hayagrīva has his beard and saffron *dhotī*, and it's likely that the guy with the glasses who is studying Prabhupāda is on drugs. Swamiji surrounded by wild Americans. At least there's a good *kīrtana* going on. The painting is crude because the people were crude. Prabhupāda refined us little by little.

Whenever I draw Swamiji, I'm pleased to remember the simplicity and innocence of those days. Would I like to go back to those days? Perhaps I am holding onto some romantic conception of myself and my relationship with Prabhupāda. I had so many material desires then. I must be in better shape now. But those days were full of freshness of hope and faith.

I wouldn't really want to go back, at least not as I am now. That gives this art-remembrance a right to exist. Although it doesn't exactly bring us back, it evokes the Kṛṣṇa conscious spirit we had in 1966. Kṛṣṇa consciousness in New York City. I was there! Swamiji was there! It happened, by Kṛṣṇa's grace.

Looks like Kīrtanānanda there—solemn, dark face, a happy face. We were each absorbed in our own fantasies. Swamiji told us, "Get up and dance."

I call this painting "With the Swami in the Temple" because that's where I want to be, at least in spirit. The spirit of 26 Second Avenue was summed up by Prabhupāda: "These boys, you will see that they are practically thinking of Kṛṣṇa twenty-four hours a day. We have so many engagements. We have manufactured engagements. Someone is typing, someone is editing, someone is writing, someone is distributing or dispatching, someone is cooking." I don't know whether we really can ever go back, but ultimately, that "going back" means returning to the spiritual world. That is the meaning of 26 Second Avenue.

## Lunch With Swamiji

Eat more. Swamiji looks thin, but he's happy. Pañca-tattva is on that same table. The boys are scruffy. That's realistic. Is that Brahmānanda with the belly? Is that Acyutānanda with the long hair?

Who's the guy with the anchor tattoo? I don't know. I took the liberty to add people. As I drew it, I wondered who would come to lunch. Who would serve the *capātis*? There had to be a few girls there too. That's how it was. Swamiji always sat in the center, the glowing source, our invitation to spiritual life.

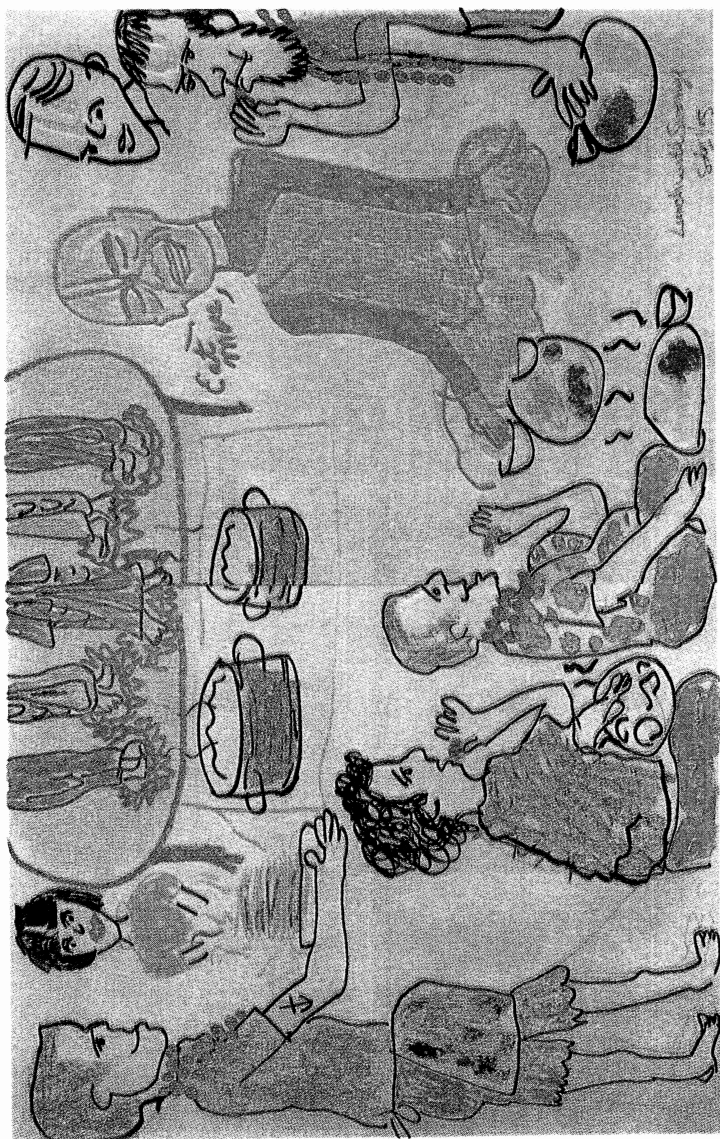
How could I capture the actual aromas steaming from the pots? I could only draw in a few lines to indicate steam. You should know, though, that I couldn't convey the aromas or the happiness of our eating such hot rice, such subtly spiced *sābjīs*. We had never even imagined such foods, such *capātis* from India.

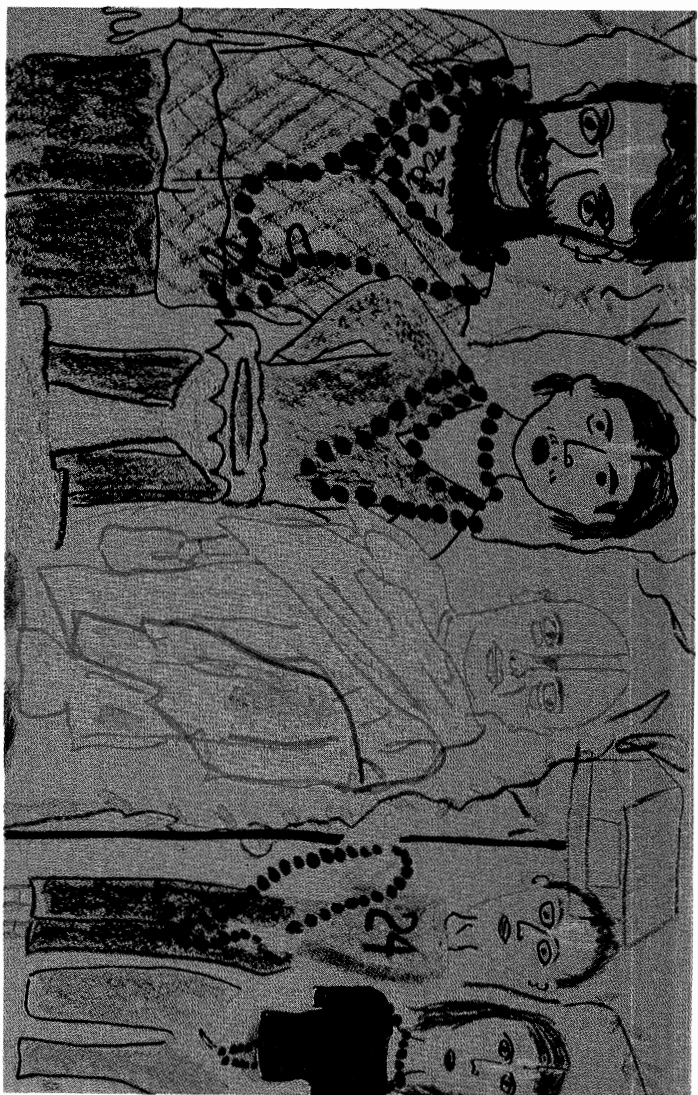
"Eat more," Prabhupāda invited. "Take seconds and thirds."

People are wearing *tilaka* in this picture and some have red beads. We eat with our right hands (and no spoons).

We're still eating *kṛṣṇa-prasādam*. Now, of course, we know we shouldn't eat so much, but those were permissive days. It was better to eat this food than to go out and eat lumps of sin—food not offered to Kṛṣṇa, non-vegetarian food, dirty food, junk food. This was food for the spirit; Prabhupāda had offered it to Lord Caitanya. You can see His golden, glowing, lotus feet in this picture.

Lunch with Swamiji was at one o'clock. He cooked in his small kitchenette. Later, his boys cooked. A dozen or more of us would come. At first, we would sit in his room with him, but after the noon meal attracted more people, we would have lunch downstairs and Swamiji wouldn't come. It was very special in the earliest days to sit in his room with him and have lunch. The room was warmed by the *prasādam* and the heat from the nearby kitchenette, which often showed signs of the recent explosion of hot *chaunk* meeting hot *dāl*. The room was especially warmed by Swamiji and his, "Eat more."





**In the Courtyard**

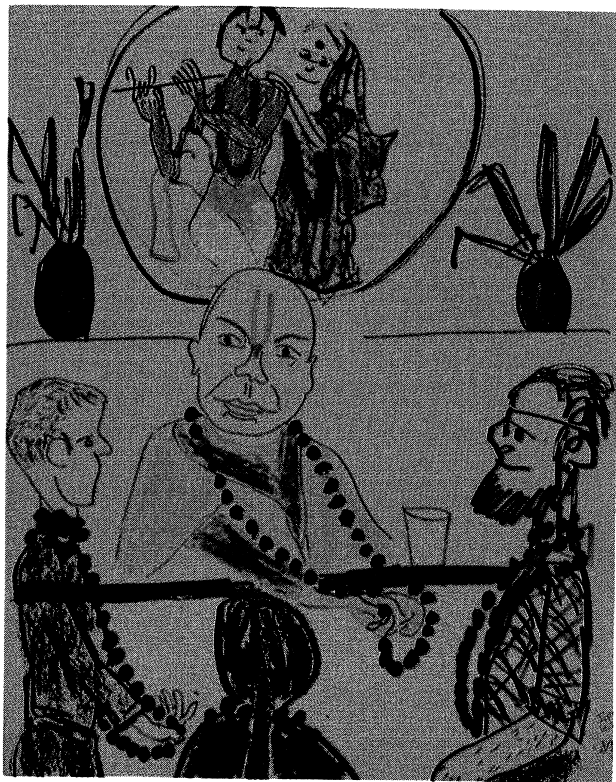
## *Japa Lesson*

Swamiji used to sit with us in the morning and say, “Chant one round.” Then he would give us a *japa* lesson.

We didn’t have beadbags in those days, and when we chanted together, Swamiji took his beads out of his bag and held them in his hands. We hung our beads around our necks as we chanted. We wore them out on the street too. Those red beads became the mark of the Hare Kṛṣṇa chanters.

In his lectures he implored the audience to chant. He promised peace and prosperity, and he assured us it didn’t cost anything. He begged us to chant the holy name because Kṛṣṇa is nondifferent from His name. He told us we could chant anywhere—in the factory, in the subway, in hell. How could we have chanted without Swamiji’s *japa* lessons? He was happy to give them to us. More than anything, he wanted us to chant. This is how he hoped to satisfy his guru and all the *ācāryas*. It had to start with us practicing *sādhana*.

This is what it was like to be with him. This is an off-moment in a sense, and that’s why I wanted to paint it. He wasn’t lecturing. He was simply sitting with us, leaning over his table and allowing us to approach him to learn the art of chanting.





### A View Of Tompkins Square Park

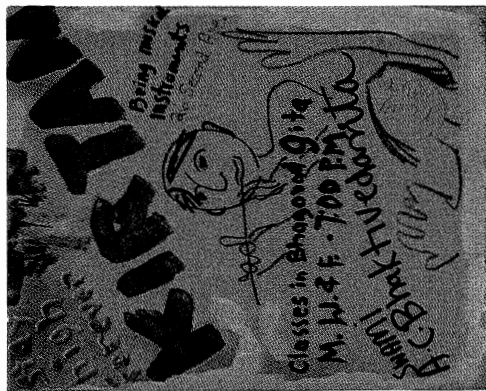
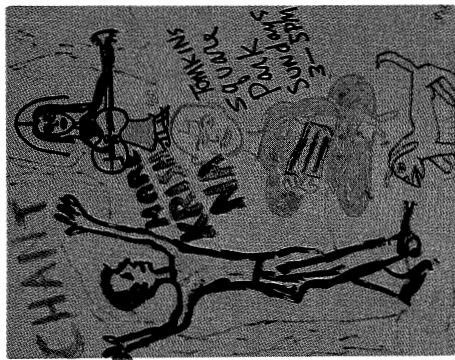
I tried to capture the panorama of the *harināma* in the park in this painting. Swamiji appears three times. It reminds me of how Lord Caitanya simultaneously appeared in seven *kīrtana* groups.

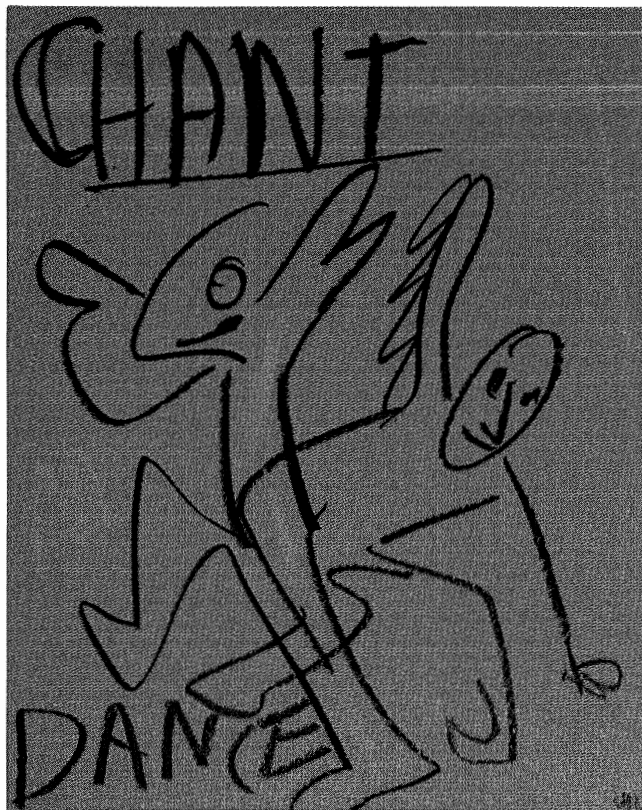
Happy, simple faces. Ecstasy in the park. Black man playing a wooden recorder. Girls in dark glasses. People dancing according to their own style, devotees dancing the Swami step.

Swamiji loved the way young Americans took to chanting. He said, "You Americans are able to capture a good thing." It was our innocence, our willingness to try something new despite the risks. When we applied those tendencies to Kṛṣṇa consciousness, they became valuable. We didn't care that our conservative neighbors looked at us askance. The Swami was a good thing. Why didn't anybody in Straight Square Authority swing with the Swami? We just wanted to play the music.

He accepted us the way we were. I have drawn the colors and forms, the movements of raw youth, the flirting faces, the dancing bodies, most of us standing while Swamiji sat, the vibration of his drum punctuating our movements. He was not lost in the sea of American youth. It's not that he started chanting and later someone else took over and sang rock 'n' roll. It started and ended with him in control, glorifying Kṛṣṇa.

These paintings stand by themselves, childish as they are in their happiness and simplicity. As I painted them, I tried to reach back through my complicated present, my fifty-five year-old mind and body, through everything the institution has been through, everything I have since seen and done and realized and thought, to remember that simple happiness. Those days were not false or sentimental; we were really singing and dancing in the park, and as *The New York Times* reported, finding ecstasy. The green and gold splashes remind me of those long, warm October afternoons. It never rained on us as we distributed our "Stay High Forever" flyers.



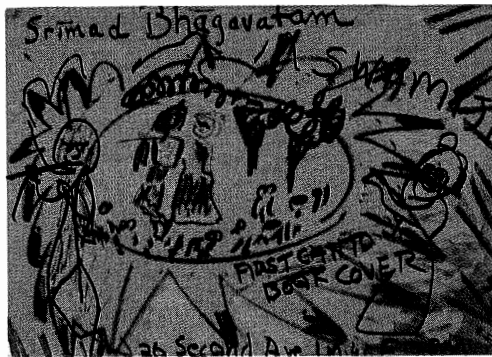


## Chant, Dance

This morning I had fun drawing and painting with colors. I took a magic marker and started scribbling. Out of the lines, as they whirled around in circles and angles, something started to appear that I recognized and I went with that. I like to approach art in the same way I approach my writing. That is, I like to go with what comes. If something scary comes out, then I don't deliberately change it because there's energy in it. I tend to like friendly images, though. Also, if what I'm doing is scattered and doesn't come together, that's not a reason to go for a more legible image.

This morning felt like a mad painting jag. I did a series of 1966 posters to advertise the Love Feast and our storefront to the Lower East Side crowd. The posters came out childish, crude, and bright, but they were fun to do.

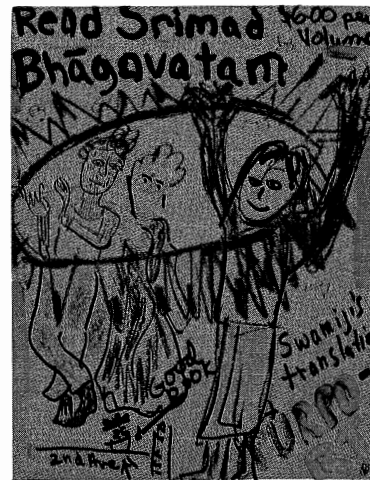
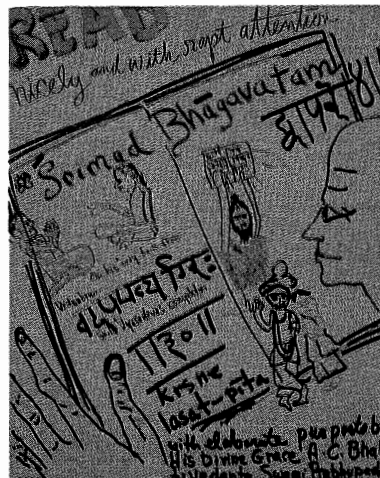
When I went out for my walk later, I imagined devotees going into my room and seeing the posters and being surprised that such a sober teacher is splashing colors. I don't know what they will think, but I'm celebrating something here, celebrating the past, celebrating the moments I have now with Prabhupāda, celebrating simple, happy service. Life is precious. Celebrate Kṛṣṇa.



This is a free-spirited poster. Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and Their devotees is the essence of Goloka Vṛndāvana. Everything is contained in Swamiji's First Canto book cover. There is no existence outside it. It's inconceivable.

Prabhupāda says that to understand the exchanges of transcendental loving service with Kṛṣṇa is possible only when one is actually in touch with the Lord's pleasure potency. Great liberated souls such as Rūpa Gosvāmī and others have tried to give hints of the Lord's transcendental activities in the spiritual world, but these transactions remain inconceivable to us at present.

My rendition is simple, the emotion conveyed simple, and the technique child-like. No harm. I'm looking for a child's simple devotion. Swamiji called us unripe mangos. He presented his esoteric subjects to his kindergarten class simply. These colors, lines, the verve, and the love are to help us remember. (The address is there in case we forget.) They swam in our minds. Kṛṣṇa's form permeates our beings. We live with it more than we often consciously acknowledge. We only hope to see such visions at the time of death and to hear Swamiji's voice intoning the *Bhāgavatam*, worshiping the totality of Kṛṣṇa's form, paraphernalia, pastimes, entourage, and energies. They're all present on the First Canto book cover, which Prabhupāda commissioned an artist to paint even before he came to us in the West.



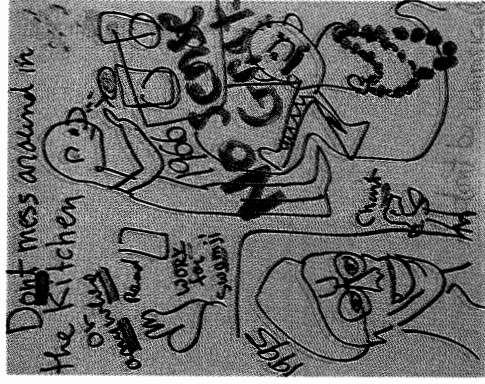
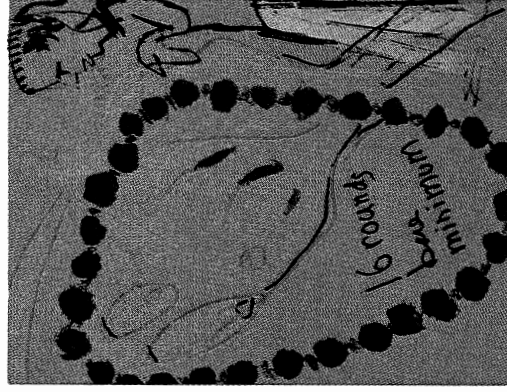
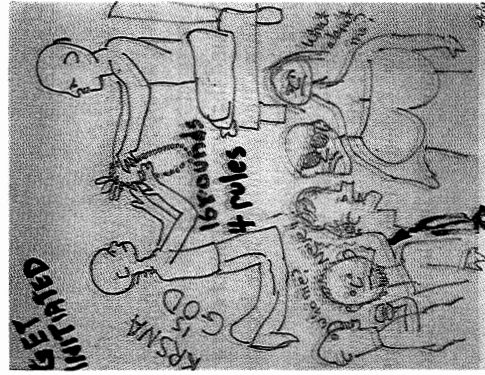


## Attend Swami Bhaktivedanta

I will assert it: this is Swamiji, even though the drawing is crude. As disciples, we tried to bring people to his lectures. That's why I used the imperative case: "Attend." I don't say "Please attend." Don't be left out.

I didn't make posters like this in 1966. I can't make posters like this now because Swami Bhaktivedanta is not lecturing. But I did make it and I don't think it's outdated. Attend. We only have to change the address to wherever we are speaking Swamiji's words. (Nowadays, we don't even have to change the address—26 Second Avenue is still there.)

I've often said that my first impression of Swamiji was that he was like Buddha. In this drawing, the classical lines of his form are similar to any Buddha, any holy man, any ecstatic chanter, yet he is so perfectly himself. That's how spiritual life is, isn't it?



These posters wouldn't make sense to someone if they were stuck in delicatessen widows on the Lower East Side. These are insider posters. I can imagine hanging such posters up in my apartment on 1st Street where the devotees used to hang out. No sense grat. Ravi Shankar and Shakespeare are now in a class with rock 'n' roll. Don't do anything unless it pleases Kṛṣṇa. A reminder.

We all need reminders. When we look up and catch ourselves, we remember Swamiji. Businessmen remind themselves with words like "Think," and, "Time means money." We remind ourselves by asking: "Is this for Kṛṣṇa or for me?"

I put my face in there from 1995 because this point is as true today as it was in 1966. You'll see that I look happy in the 1995 inset. That's because I'm still practicing Kṛṣṇa consciousness by Prabhupāda's grace. I'm happy.



## Radha and Kṛṣṇa

It's not that whatever we did in 1966 is an ideal to which we should all aspire, but it was something. The devotees were closely linked to whatever Swamiji wanted and that was also true, of course, of the artists. Those 1966 paintings have become the foundation of a tradition. They are spiritual.

Most of the original artwork was painted by Jadurāṇī. She wasn't the first artist—there was Haridāsa (Harvey Cohen) and Jagannātha (James Greene), but she was the first to take it up full-time.

Even in the beginning her pictures weren't as crude as these ones I have done. We were introduced to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's forms right from the beginning when we saw James Greene's oval painting of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. I also found a picture of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in a copy of *Nārada-bhakti-sūtra*. Swamiji approved it.

As I have been trying to go back to 26 Second Avenue, I have, for the first time in my life, dared to paint Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in a serious way.

I drew Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and  
was afraid it might be  
blasphemy or like those  
godless impersonal  
versions in Delhi airport  
where Viṣṇu forms have  
no face. "Modern art."

But I want to draw  
the Supreme form  
in affection as a  
tiny son draws his father—  
not so good,  
but with love.

Best if a viewer smiles, knows I  
felt love but couldn't  
execute it for lack of expertise.

Once I had a moment alone with Prabhupāda at the  
Ananda Ashrama. I took out *Nārada-bhakti-sūtra* and  
asked, "Swamiji, is this painting of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa all  
right?" He looked at it and said "Yes." I went out and made a  
dozen copies for the devotees.

Prabhupāda was private. We couldn't understand his  
mind. He was often silent. There were barriers we couldn't  
cross. It created a gap. When I asked him whether this  
painting was all right, he simply said, "Yes." That was all.  
Then he was silent, as he often was.

