

## **The Musical Traditions of Native America**

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World Music

The indigenous musical traditions of the North American continent are as fascinating and diverse as the many cultures in which they are found. Within the continental United States alone there are over five hundred registered tribes (6. 593) whose life ways and cultures have historically varied greatly depending on environment and access to resources. However, from the desert dwelling Hopi and Zuni to the tribes occupying the rainforest like environment of the Northwest Coast there are certain distinct similarities which span across North America's cultures.

Among the most prominent of these features is the fact that no North American tribe had developed a written language until the mid-nineteenth century but instead have relied on stories, poetry, and song to carry on their traditions, histories, and philosophies (5. xxx). When compared to the European practice of written language, oral traditions have both their advantages and disadvantages. Accuracy is definitely a casualty, as stories will be altered when passed through the generations. However, an oral history holds a more directly personal connection with the people and if a history is fluid perhaps it is more alive.

With a history and culture told at least partially through song, the power and importance of song rises to a new level. "To the Indian, song is the breath of the spirit that consecrates the acts of life," (5. xxx) and the Native understanding of music is one dramatically different from that of Western Europe. Across the continent song, as well as dramatic ceremony and prayer, are very important to the healing ceremonies conducted by Shamans and spiritual leaders such as the Wakan- Tanka (medicine men) of the Dakota people (5. 24). Music, drama, and dance were an inseparable part of military, religious, and social activities (1. 371) and were often required by religious belief for the tribe to prosper. Within the culture of the Great Plains, bands were structured around elaborate societies for men based on religious, military, social, and age groups, each of which had their own ceremonies and songs (5. 31).

During the 18th and early 19th centuries the U.S. government's official policy towards Native Americans was forced assimilation. Children were taken from their families, often with the use of military force, and placed in schools designed to mold them into white American culture while stamping out their own traditional life ways. Native children were not

allowed to speak their own languages nor were they allowed to sing their peoples' songs or play their traditional music. After many years of living in these harsh and often abusive facilities many children would return to their homes ashamed of their own cultures. Some children were not even able to communicate with their parents due to the fact that they had been forced to forget their Native language. This, combined with the dramatic decline in Native population in the past four hundred years, has led to an incredible loss of history and culture.

The twentieth Century saw a steady increase in the populations of Native America as well as a change of perception of the general American public towards Native peoples. It was not too many decades ago that the American Indian was looked at with scorn and was the target of racial prejudice, but starting in the 1960's with the rise of the Native American Civil Rights Movements these perceptions have changed greatly. Along with the movement came the rise of interest in Native cultural crafts and teachings as well as the rise of the Native American music industry.

In the modern era the dominant venue for showcasing Native American music is the powwow. Powwow is a term derived from the Algonquin phrase *pau wau* which refers to spiritual leaders (6. 594). Today the word designates a large festival which brings together Native American craft vendors, musicians, and dancers and can represent tribes from across the continent. The powwow as purely a festival can trace its roots back thousands of years (6. 594) but the modern form of the festival grew in popularity after World War II as a means of honoring Native veterans(3). Today the largest festival in the country is the Gathering of Nations powwow in New Mexico (3). The event takes place over a week during which one can expect to see the best dancers and hear the best flute players and drummers from across the country.

To understand Native American music one must consider its connection to dance. As with many African traditions, music and dance are simply different complementary aspects of the same art. In fact much powwow drum music can come off monotonous and uninteresting to untrained ears without the visual stimulation of dancers.

There are many different types of dance. In some dances the sexes are segregated and in some both men and women dance together. Dancing is almost always representational and can tell a story or relay a battle (3). One example of this is the Sneak Up Dance performed by men in which the dancers drop very low to the ground to represent sneaking up on an enemy (3). Other styles include the Fancy Dance, Traditional Dance, and Women's' Jingle Dance in which bells cover the dancers'

regalia. This dance is designed so that the shaking of the bells adds to the musical ensemble (3).

Traditionally different groups practiced different dancing styles. In the Southwest, group dancing in a circle or oval was most common. On the plains straight line dancing was popular and the high energy level involved in dancing nearly approached frenzy. This is a stark contrast to the dancing styles of the Pueblo people of the Southwest who practiced slow, hypnotic forms of dance (1. 371).

A dance which has historically received high levels of interest and scrutiny as it was the catalyst for a major Native political movement was the Ghost Dance. This was a dance which spread from the Paiutes of Nevada in the 1880's which consisted of both men and women holding hands and singing while shuffling clockwise in a circle. The practice of this dance was meant to bring about a new age in which the Natives' ancestors would rise from the dead to help defeat the white man and win back the lost land. The practice so unnerved the white settlers that the dance was eventually declared illegal by the United States government and the movement was suppressed (6. 596).

Among the modern Creek people the Corn Dance is a tradition with very old roots but which continues today. The dance takes place regularly at the Greenleaf Ceremonial Grounds in Tallahassee Florida and consists of a procession of both men and women which begins as a line and spirals into a circle. This is the style of progression used by most modern powwows as the grand entrance for dancers at the opening of the dancing arenas. For the Corn Dance the procession is lead by a male who serves as both the primary vocalist as well as the drummer using a single hand drum. The drum pattern is a continuous quarter note in 4/4 time and his vocals provide a continuous melody within the tenor range. The procession leader sings alone for approximately twelve measures at which time he is joined by four measures of call and response whooping in a high pitch. This consists of one measure of a singer calling followed by a measure of many singers responding. These two measures are then repeated to complete the phrase and the ensemble then returns to the tenor vocals and drum alone. Underneath all of this is the sound of rattles worn by the women on their legs which shake in time to the beat of their step (2).

Within Native American music rhythm is the most developed characteristic (5. xxxii). The drum is the most common instrument found around the world, and it is easily the most important instrument to Native music, both traditional and contemporary (3). Powwow drumming is a

much defined art created by a group of six to eight performers sitting around a large drum. The players sing vocals and keep time with padded drum sticks while following the group's leader for cues to change vocals or rhythmic patterns.

The modern powwow drum is a large circular drum which likely evolved from the European style marching band drums (6. 594). It gained popularity among the plains tribes whose drums had been small frame drums before relocation (6. 594). These had better accommodated their former nomadic lifestyle and as groups became more sedentary they did not have to worry as much about limiting the size of objects they had to regularly transport. Thus they were able to move on to the larger bass drums.

A drums rhythmic pulse is highly symbolic, representing the human heartbeat, (3) and it most often takes the form of a continuous quarter note in 4/4 time. Though this seems simple in itself, there is much room for variation such as accents on the first and third beats of a measure (2), and occasionally throwing in two measures of a repeated eighth/accented dotted quarter note pattern (2).

One particularly interesting example of an unusual drum pattern is found in the rhythms which accompany the Handgame of the Kiowa tribe. The game itself is a hiding and guessing challenge played by two opposing teams, which is played along with singing and a drum beat. The vocals are rather simple, but the drum part is interesting in that it employs a continuous dotted eighth/sixteenth in quarter time, which at times verges on being swung in a jazz style (2).

If rhythmic pattern is the most developed aspect of Native American music, then it must be said that vocal patterns are the most distinct. There are a number of characteristics which set Native singing apart from Western and other styles. One of the primary components is a prominent rhythmic pulsation of the voice on sustained notes (5. xvi). This is a characteristic which is generally found across the continent, but there are very distinct differences in singing styles from tribe to tribe.

The Indians from the Great Lakes and Plains regions use a very strong vocal style which focuses on a large range rather than smooth melodic movement. This is at least partially attributed to the need to project the voice when one is constantly singing in the open air in areas of heavy wind. Male vocals in this region range from falsetto, tenor and a deep bass sound, and quite often use accents with a harsh staccato attack. Any sustained notes have a prominent vibrato, or fluctuation in the pitch caused by singing with a tight throat (5. xxxiv). One of the goals of this

style of singing is the reproduction of the sounds of nature and animal noises such as the coyote or buffalo call (5. xxxiv)

Contrasting with the vocal styles of the Plains, vocals of the Navajo and Apache are chanted with a low nasal swing, and their dance songs are often lively and lusty (5. xxxix). Then there are the Pueblo people who incorporate strong deep tonations, sung with full lungs. Their ceremony chants tend to be low pitched and solemn. Hopi women's' singing is known for using long drawn out slurring of phrases as well as a vagueness in quality and intonation (5. xxxix).

It must be noted when discussing the singing of Native vocals that there is an important distinction between the use of words in traditional languages and their translations. In the words of one Native: "It takes many words in English to tell what we say in one. But since you have no one word to tell all we mean, then you must speak our one word in your many" (5. xxxi). Translations rarely capture the true meaning and power of traditional words, and in all actuality there are fewer and fewer people in the modern era who remember the old languages and songs.

In modern Native music there are basically three types of vocals: those which use actual words, those which use vocables or pitch inflections with no literal meaning (6. 594), and those which use a combination of the two (3). It is possible that at one time some old songs which use vocables might have had actual Native words, but as they were passed through the oral traditions the meaning of the words were lost (3). In any case, separating vocals from the symbolism of words perhaps has its own beauty as it allows for the human voice to be a more purely melodic instrument.

One of the most common of Native American instruments used today is the flute, which is actually one of the few melodic instruments ever developed in the New World (1. 371). The instrument was originally meant to be played by men as a means of courting women (2), but it has come to be used by both sexes and is one of the most common representations of Native culture. In fact one of the most regular symbols seen of Native culture in modern American society is the image of the flute player Kokopelli, who was the Anasazi god of music and fertility.

The modern flute is a two chambered instrument (4. 1) which is connected by a short air passage. This air passage is covered by a wedge tied to the top of the instrument called a Bird, which also partially covers the top opening and controls pitch quality and intonation (6. 595). The Bird is the most distinct aspect of the Native American flute and helps distinguish it from similar instruments from around the world.

The modern Native flute was likely first used by the Lakota people

whose word for flute is *wiikijo* (4. 1). Traditionally flutes were made of reeds, cedar and redwoods, but in the new era a flute can be made out of any wood available. The different types of woods used create different types of tones, with hard woods creating crisp pitches and soft woods producing a smoother pitch. Most flute players collect different types of flutes for different styles of playing (4. 1).

Traditionally the modes found on flutes varied greatly. Flutes were originally designed around the dimensions of the flute maker's body. The length of the instrument was the length of the maker's elbow to the tip of his longest finger, and hole positions were determined by the length of the maker's handbreadth with holes being placed a finger's width apart (4. 2). Naturally this led to a wide variety of scale patterns. Today one can find flutes more fitted to western ears with pentatonic scales being the most common. One can find diatonic flutes, but in the words of Calos Nakai, one of the most prominent flute players today: "such a hybrid seems to lose the intrinsic magical quality of sound that is common in the hand crafted art." (6. 595)

Music is one of the most prominent elements of a culture and from it can be derived the character and spirit of that culture. The North American continent has produced a countless array of beautiful and fascinating societies whose musical heritage has long represented the deeper side of their spiritual nature, and which has come to show both the sadder side of their history and a hope for the future. For this continent's Indigenous people the rhythmic pulse of tradition has become overlaid with the continuous melodies of progress and it is in this manner that the lives and arts of Native America will continue to grow and flourish into the next millennia.

1. Native American Heritage, Third Edition. Garbino/Sasso  
Waveland Press, Inc. Prospect Heights, Illinois. 1994
2. Songs of Indian Country.  
Footage taken from Songs of Indian Country Conference workshops and  
concerts as well as scenes filmed on location
3. Interview with Dr. Mario Garza, Director: Indigenous Cultures Institute

Sunday November 18, 2007. 12:00 pm

4. How to Play the Native American Flute. Mario Garza. 1997
5. The Indians' Book. Natalie Cutis, recorder/editor.  
Gramercy Books. Avenel, New Jersey. 1987
6. World Music, The Rough Guide, Vol. 2. Broughton, Ellingham  
Rough Guides Ltd. London, UK. 2000