

Nicholas Pell

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Birth of a flute:

A deeper understanding of the Native American Style Flute:

After researching the use of music in the Great Basin, it was evident to me that music, and even the flute [or whistle] is a very important part of culture and historical documentation. Music has changed over time and the different instruments to play their songs have as well. Having spoken with a native Ute/Pueblo Indian, I now understand the importance of music in cultural and spiritual history. It is evident to me that each tribe has deep roots in music and uses it as an important part of cultural and spiritual ceremonies.

According to Nino Reyos, a native Ute and Pueblo Indian, the flute is the 3rd oldest instrument, outdated only by the rattle and drum. It is an important instrument that continues the traditions of the native people. The Native American flute has been handed down from generation to generation. As Reyos stated, "the flute is an instrument that must be played from one's self. Through it native ways are continued and passed on to the younger generation (Reyos)." Since the flute is so versatile in its usage, it can be played almost anywhere. It has also been named the "Native American love flute." It got this name because Native American men play it to attract women. A lot of musical instruments in the Ute tribe are made to simulate the sounds of nature. The flute is said to mimic animal sounds, like the woodpecker, the bugle of an elk, birds, and the wind. The sounds of nature are brought by the creator and they are present in the sound of many Native American style flutes.

Music in the Native American culture along with the ever-present "vocables" (or untranslatable lyrics sung to tribal tunes) that accompany it presents important historical events (Wikipedia). In this manner music can be said to be a way to pass down history. Over the years the stories are added to and altered in some way, but the basic meaning is still preserved. The purpose is to inform the newer

generation of the importance of their way of life and how their ancestors survived the hardships of the times. Music presents itself as an important tool to portray oral historical accounts of the tribal people.

Reyos explained that when someone hears music, "...they are transported to a different mode of thought. [These might include] healing, reminiscing, historical events, and even family. When you hear [music] you become calm and soothed." Flutes are used to heal people.

Music plays a big role in teaching the young people about culture as well. "If the young people don't learn, if they don't pick it up, the culture will die out as will the customs." Reyos explained that for this reason, it's important to expose young people to the flute and other tribal instruments, so that when they're older, they can express those same views to the generations which are yet to come. There are a slew of different practices, events, ceremonies, songs, and prayers that are conveyed through music that must be learned by the young people. Through these practices the elders teach about traditional ways of respecting the land and treating it as a family member. These lessons are taught at an early age that the newer generation may live with and love the earth from which they came. By learning the ways of the ancient civilizations and how they conducted their lives, the newer generations come to have a deeper respect for and understanding of the traditional way of life.

Chief Joseph, of the Wal-lam-wat-kain (Wallowa) band of Nez Perce, once said,

"We were taught to believe that the Great Spirit sees and hears everything, and that he never forgets, that hereafter he will give every man a spirit home according to his deserts; if he has been a good man, he will have a good home; if he has been a bad man, he will have a bad home. This I believe and all my people believe the same."

Flautist Reyos said, "Songs often have a story. I tell stories of buffalo, birds, and other journeys I have gone on in my life. I tell a story before I play my music and, as a result, the people know what the song means. By playing this way, the song is more powerful and meaningful." His style is very

passionate and deep-rooted in the ways of his native Ute and Pueblo Indian ancestors. He enjoys making his flutes and portraying important events of his life through his music.

One interesting fact that I learned from Nino Reyos is that when music is to be played at a funeral, no pre-recorded or contemporary music accompanies the instrument. Because no modern music is added, the song played live is more meaningful and powerful. There is more strength from the flute as opposed to gaining such from more contemporary methods.

“Music from the Great Basin is said to be very simple. It is characterized by short melodies with a range smaller than an octave. [It is accompanied by] moderately-blended monophony, relaxed and open vocals and, most uniquely, paired-phrase structure, in which a melodic phrase, repeated twice, is alternated with one to two additional phrases. A song of this type might be diagrammed like this: AA BB CC AA BB CC, etc. (Wikipedia).” There is much repetition in this music and melodies are kept simple.

One interesting fact is that “The Native American flute is the only flute in the world constructed with two air chambers: the Slow Air Chamber and the bore respectively. The top chamber serves as a secondary resonator, which gives the flute its distinctive sound. The length of the flute would be the distance from the armpit to the wrist, the length of the top air chamber would be determined by the width of one’s fist. The distance from the whistle to the first hole would also be the width of a fist, and the distance between each hole would be the width of a thumb. The distance from the last hole and the [south] end would generally be one fist-width. Traditional American Indian music had no standard pitch reference, such as A440, so flutes were not standardized for pitch. This made it difficult to have multiple flutes playing at a time, but it wasn’t until much later that flutes, such as the ones made now, were tuned in concert keys (such as A or D) (Wikipedia). Now that there is a much more standard way of tuning the flutes, they can be played easily with other instruments. Over the years the shape and style of the flute has changed. The quality of the flute has been improved by eliminating air seepage and cracks in the flute. One tradition that is still kept to this day is that the bird, housed directly on top of

the nest area, is tied on with leather straps or other natural cords. Below are a couple of examples of Native American Style Flutes from years ago until now:



A traditional Yuchi flute.



A more modern style Native American Style Flute

In short, flutes, and music in general, play huge roles in the Native American way of life. The importance of cultural practices and historical events are passed down through music. Music is a calming essence of life, one that uplifts and inspires. From ancient times until now the flute and other instruments have played key roles in teaching the younger generations about culture and respect. Music is more of a sacred tool than just another comfort in the native mind. It is combined with stories to entertain, but also to relate important events in one's life. It is important that the young learn the ways of the ancestors and that they learn the way of the music so that Ute, Pueblo, and other Native American cultures don't die out. Flutes are to be prized and respected. They are yet another wonderful gift that the natives of this country have shared with us. It's up to us to respect their ways and carry on their ancient traditions through beautiful music.

Works Cited:

Reyos, Nino. Personal Interview. 3 April 2010.

Wikipedia. Native American Music. December 2007.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_American_music>