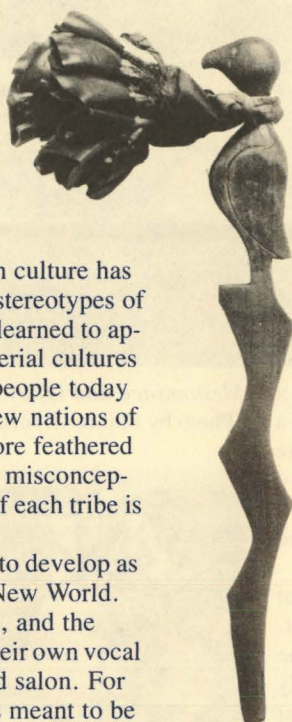


American Indian Music: Stereotypes and Misconceptions

Thomas Vennum Jr.



Chippewa rattle of deer hooves with bird effigy handle.

Increased interest in Native American culture has caused non-Indians to correct many stereotypes of American Indians; non-Indians have learned to appreciate distinctions between the material cultures and beliefs of different tribes. Most people today recognize, for instance, that only a few nations of Native Americans lived in tipis or wore feathered war bonnets. Nevertheless, a general misconception persists that the musical culture of each tribe is the same.

Stereotypes of Indian music began to develop as soon as white settlers arrived in the New World. Most Native American music is sung, and the newcomers naturally compared it to their own vocal traditions of church, concert hall, and salon. For most Europeans, religious music was meant to be dignified, song melodies “pretty,” and a singer’s voice “beautiful”—meaning rich in vibrato and controlled in volume. It is little wonder, then, that they would find an Indian sacred song—typically rendered at full volume and interspersed with shouts and animal cries—to violate all rules of proper musical performance. Indian music was consequently distasteful to them and just one more indication of the “barbaric nature” of its performers. The following opinion, expressed by Henry Schoolcraft in his *Narrative Journal of Travels from Detroit . . .* (1821), is typical of early comments on Native American music:

There is something animating in the Indian chorus, and at the same time it has an air of melancholy, but certainly nothing can be more monotonous, or further from our ideas of music. . . . It is perhaps all we could expect from untutored savages, but there is nothing about it which has ever struck me as either interesting or amusing . . . and it is a severe tax upon one’s patience to sit and be compelled, in order to keep their good opinion, to appear pleased with it.

Not until the end of the 19th century did a few musicians begin to recognize some beauty in Native American song.

Thomas Vennum Jr. is staff ethnomusicologist in the Folklife Program at the Smithsonian Institution and specializes in Native American music.

But even these few were intent upon “improving” the music by adapting it to European styles. In 1903 Frederick Burton, for example, arranged Ojibwa melodies that he collected into 4-part harmonic settings for chorus and orchestral accompaniment, to be performed as incidental music for the play *Hiawatha*.

Recently there has been richer appreciation of American Indian music for its own merits. Still, common misconceptions about Indian musical practices continue. For instance, although Native Americans use numerous musical instruments, the general impression is that there is but one: the tom-tom.

The word itself is not derived from a native North American language, as many assume, but is probably of Hindustani origin. It has been used by English speakers worldwide to describe drums of any “uncivilized” people which produce a monotonous sound. The stereotypical tom-tom is usually a child’s toy with two rubber heads laced together. While drums resembling these are used by some tribes, a great number of other drums exist. They vary from tribe to tribe and even within a single tribe, depending upon their use. The Ojibwa, for example, use a single-headed water drum for religious ceremonies, a large double-headed dance drum for social occasions, a variety of small hand drums for doctoring, and a large tambourine-like drum for the moccasin game.

Nor is the drum the only instrument that provides rhythmic background for Indian songs and dances. Most people know little about the many rattles fashioned from gourds, deer hooves, or turtle shells—or the special percussion instruments, such as the rasp, a notched stick scraped rhythmically by the Utes in a spring dance to imitate the sound of the bear. (During the Festival, an exhibit of Native American musical instruments is displayed in the Hall of Musical Instruments, National Museum of History and Technology. Other examples are in the Native Peoples of the Americas exhibition, National Museum of Natural History.)

Another almost universal misconception is that the standard Native American drum accompaniment for song and dance consists of a pattern of four beats of equal duration, with the first heavily accented: BOOM–boom–boom–boom, BOOM–boom–boom–boom, etc. This pattern has been so



Menominee and Ojibwa Indians together in a Chief Dance.
(Photo by Frances Densmore, 1928)

thoroughly exploited by the media that it has become a cliché. The mere introduction of it in the musical score of a Western film signals that an Indian ambush is imminent. The pattern has also been used to impart an "Indian" flavor to radio and television commercials. The rhythm appears in children's piano pieces wherever the word "Indian" is found in the title.

While this particular rhythmic pattern is not totally absent from Native American music, it is one of the least typical. Even where it can be found—in the accompaniment for the San Juan Pueblo Buffalo Dance, for example, it occurs only momentarily as part of an elaborate chain of different rhythmic patterns. Native Americans even joke about this stereotypical beat: it is said that the pattern was used by Indians as a sort of "drum talk" to signal the arrival of the white man, the drum warning, "WHITE-man-com-ing, WHITE-man-com-ing."

The intention of the Native American presentation in this year's Festival of American Folklife is to try to correct the stereotypical image that most Americans have of Amerindian music. Singers representing five different tribal groups—Pueblo, Navaho, Tolowa, Iroquois, and Sioux—will demonstrate the differences between their musical styles in live performances of songs. By observing the differences between such stylistic elements of the music as song forms, melodic range and direction, vocal techniques, and drum patterns, the visitor to the Festival should be convinced of the enormously rich variety in Native American music.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Nettl, Bruno, *Folk Music in the United States: an Introduction*. 3rd rev. ed., Wayne State University Press, 1976. Chapter IV, "Indian Music of the United States," pp. 46–63. (A good general introduction)

Nettl, Bruno, *North American Indian Musical Styles*. Memoirs of the American Folklore Society, Vol. 45. (Fairly technical).

Catalogs of American Indian recorded music may be obtained from: Canyon Records, 4143 N. 16th St., Phoenix, Ariz. 85016; Indian House Records, Box 472, Taos, N.M., 87571; and the Recorded Sound Section, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 20540.



Native American musical styles from several tribal groups can be heard in the Baird Auditorium, National Museum of Natural History, during the Festival. Above, Loren Bommelyn, a participant from Arcata, Calif., sings traditional Tolowa songs.
(Photo by Paul Framer)