

# The Changing Soundscape in Indian Country

*Thomas Vennum, Jr.*

## Music and Change

By its very nature, music is never totally static; over time, even the most conservative of musical traditions have been susceptible to change, however slight. In “never to be altered” traditions, such as European classical music, which depends upon scores precisely notated by their composers, each performer applies personal nuances of technique and interpretation. Thus no two performances, say, of a Beethoven piano sonata, will ever be exactly identical, even by the same player.

Change in music — like that in other kinds of cultural performance — is a response to changes that may occur in many areas of society, ranging from the migration of peoples, to the acceptance of a particular religion, to shifts in critical notions of “authenticity,” to the stylistic innovations of some creative genius. Music might change from within its tradition, if the musicians have deliberately altered their performance practices, invented new musical instruments, or purposely affected the style of their music in some other way. Change might come from outside the tradition through contact with another culture, when foreign musical genres are imposed on a people (Christian hymns), or when certain traits of the foreign idiom (vocal styles) or whole genres (fiddle dance music) are adopted willingly. The folk and tribal musics of the world — in practice more conservative than popular musics — seem mostly affected by external change. Classical traditions, on the other hand, tend to exhibit internal changes. Sometimes the change

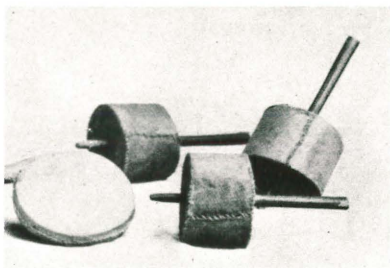
may represent a return to earlier practices to recover the original intention of the music. In the pursuit of more “authentic” performances, for example, the musical instruments of Europe’s past have recently been reconstructed according to our historical knowledge of their former properties — their exact shapes, sizes and materials of manufacture. Museum specimens of Baroque harpsichords are today carefully measured and copied so that performers can replicate the sounds of that period rather than relying on 19th century pianos to produce them, as was customary until recently.

When change occurs in tribal music, the combination of new and old musical traits results in hybrid styles of music. When Indian peoples were (sometimes forcibly) taught to sing Christian hymns, missionaries translated the texts into the Native tongue. They allowed the hymns to be sung in unison (that is, without harmonies) to facilitate learning. In so doing they created a hybrid form — albeit one that was linguistically unchallenging and musically acceptable to Native ears accustomed to unison singing of Indian melodies. Of primary importance to the missionaries were the musical and religious meanings expressed in tunes and texts — European in origin and foreign to Indian cultures.

These new, Native hymns became a powerful tool in attempts to convert Indians to Christianity. They were particularly well received by southeastern tribes forcibly removed to Indian Territory in the 1830s. In a state of extreme culture shock, many of them abandoned traditional life-

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Above: This set of three hide rattles of the Ojibway medicine lodge were used by medicine men and medicine women to accompany songs in initiation and curing ceremonies of the Grand Medicine Lodge. They were collected ca. 1907 on the Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. Photo courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

Right: An Ojibway medicine man performs funeral songs for the deceased enroute to interment in northern Minnesota. Formerly his rattle would have been made of birchbark or hide; here a baking powder can has been adapted for the purpose. Photo by Charles Brill



ways and belief systems, taking up the new religion and its music to address a spiritual crisis. Once in Indian repertoires, however, some translated European texts were set to traditional Native melodies or even new tunes created for them by Indian composers using Indian tonal systems. In performing these hymns, Indian people continued to use their own vocal style. Their characteristically flat, nasal delivery with its glissandi and, to European ears, "imperfect" intonation contrasted markedly with the European *bel canto* ideal of singing, with its vocal vibrato and clear attack of musical pitches. This hybrid tradition of Christian hymn singing in Indian languages continues today, especially among the Choctaw, Cherokee, Comanche and Kiowa, some performed without instrumental accompaniment in unison or in two- three- or four-part harmonies.

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### The Post-Columbian Period

European exploration and colonization of the Western Hemisphere set into motion changes that affected every aspect of Indian culture including music. Indian exposure to European music, especially that of the church, was early. In the wake of Cortés's conquest of Mexico in 1519, the Spanish made immediate efforts to Christianize the Native peoples, building countless small churches and cathedrals, importing musical instruments from Spain to accompany the Mass, and training Indians to sing. As early as 1530 a small organ from Seville was installed in the Cathedral of Mexico City to accompany Indian choirs. Efforts to train Indians to play a variety of European instruments for church services apparently became so excessive that in 1561 Phillip II complained in a *cedula* (royal decree) about the mounting costs of supporting the musicians. He cited the large number of players of trumpets, clarions, *chimirias* (oboe-like reed instruments), flutes, sackbuts and other instruments and requested a reduction in the number of Indians being paid for such services. As the Spanish moved northward into present-day New Mexico, similar practices are recorded. At Hawikuh





Muscogee Creek Stomp Dancers compete in a powwow in Oklahoma. The woman on the right wears the traditional turtle shell rattles bunched around the ankle, the woman on the left the more recent variety of ankle rattle made from milk cans. This modern adaptation is preferred by some dancers because the rattles are lighter weight and produce a louder sound. Milk can rattles are usually excluded from ceremonial Stomp Dances. *Photo courtesy Muscogee (Creek) Nation*

(Zuni), the pueblo used as Coronado's first headquarters, in the 1630s a Franciscan was giving intensive instruction to Indians in organ, bassoon, cornett, Gregorian chant and counterpoint.

Indians quickly became proficient in making a wide range of instruments. At first they began making flutes but went on to construct *vihuelas* (guitars), lutes and even pipe organs, under Spanish supervision. It soon became unnecessary to import instruments from Spain. In summing up the 16th century musical activities of Indians in New Spain, Frey Juan de Torquemada wrote in his *Monarquía Indiana* (Seville 1615): "The other instruments which serve for solace or delight on secular occasions are all made here by the Indians, who also play them: rebecs, guitars, trebles, viols, harps, monochords."

The English and French were equally active in their New World colonies in exposing Indian peoples to their musical traditions. Thomas Heriot in *A briefe and true report of the new found land* (London 1588) wrote of the local Indian chief on Roanoke Island, that he "would be glad many times to be with vs at praier, and many times call vpon vs both in his owne towne, as also in others whither he sometimes accompanied vs, to pray

and sing in Psalmes." By 1648 John Eliot was translating metrical psalms into the language of "the praying Indians" at Natick in Massachusetts. Hymnals in the Native tongues continued to be published throughout the 19th century, particularly by the American and the Presbyterian Boards of Foreign Missions. An Iroquoian hymnal *Gaa Nah shoh* (1860) was created for use by the Seneca at Cattaraugus Reservation, while a Siouan hymnal *Dakota Odowan* (1879) went through several printings. Asher Wright and his wife, who collated the Iroquoian hymns, induced the Indians to sing them to the accompaniment of a melodeon, which had been donated by a Sunday school in Massachusetts. At the Indians' insistence (according to the Wrights), they set the melodeon up in the middle of the longhouse — the traditional Iroquoian religious structure — "where by the grateful young people, who loved it as a human being, it was gorgeously decorated with hemlock boughs and a profusion of red berries." Some Christianized Indians went on to become hymnal collators themselves. Thomas Commuck, a Narragansett, published a Methodist hymnal in 1845 containing tunes claimed to be Native in origin and variously attributed to famous chiefs (Pontiac, Tecumseh) or such





Oglala Dakota dancers and musicians pause during a Grass Dance. Indians first encountered marching band drums in the military bands on frontier outposts. *Photo courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution*

tribes as the Flathead, Osage, Algonquin and others. In the publication the melodies were set to harmonic accompaniment by Thomas Hastings.

As would be expected, European secular music was also brought to the new colonies, and Indians had ample opportunity to hear it. Marin Mersenne in his *Harmonie universelle* . . . (Paris 1636) could state that Indians were already singing the songs of French fur traders living among them. In 1655 Claude Dablon (b. 1619) traveled from Quebec to Iroquois country and brought with him several musical instruments he had mastered as a youth. Although it is not recorded which instrument he played for them, the Indians are reported to have crowded the missionaries' bark hut to hear Dablon "make the wood talk." The trader John Adair, living 40 years among the southeastern tribes in the late 18th century, was accustomed to singing such Irish tunes as *Sheela na guria* to his Indian friends. Song schools sprung up throughout New England for itinerant singing masters to teach not only colonists but also Indians to read music and sing in harmony. In the 1760s, Eleazar Wheelock at his Indian Charity School in what is now Connecticut taught his Delaware pupils to perform in three-part harmony. These schools quickly made fluent sight-singers of the Indians, having introduced them to the totally foreign concepts of musical notation and polyphony, which contrasted with the oral tradition of uni-

son singing they were accustomed to.

Not all exposure to European music took place in the New World, however. Indians were brought back to France to perform in Parisian court entertainments such as *Ballet de la Reine* (1609), which included pastoral American scenes. Apparently a sensation was caused when a naked Tupinambá Indian was introduced on stage in the score of *Ballet de l'Amour de ce Temps* (1620), and the famous composer Lully incorporated Indian actors into several ballets performed before Louis XIV.

### Adaptation and Adoption

Through long and constant exposure to European culture, Indian people not only absorbed foreign vocal repertoires, but sometimes altered their musical instruments as well. One of the hallmarks of Native music in the Western Hemisphere is the almost universal accompaniment of unison singing to percussion provided by the singers or dancers. Of all percussion, rattles and drums have always been the most commonly used. Contact with European cultures affected both types of percussion, but in different ways, as Indian people adapted material items from the foreign culture. In the case of rattles, the greatest change was in the nature of the vessel and the loose material inside that struck the container to produce the sound. An example of this kind of change occurred sometime early in the 20th century in the western Great Lakes area. Formerly,





Red Lake and Ontario Ojibway singers perform with a marching band bass drum in the back of a pick-up truck in a July 4th parade (1969). The boxes of soft drinks have been donated by local merchants as part of this reenactment of the traditional Ojibway Begging Dance. Photo by Charles Brill

the rattle used in religious ceremonies of the Ojibway (Chippewa) medicine lodge was made of bark or hide formed into a cylindrical vessel, filled with pebbles and sewn shut with spruce roots before a wooden handle was inserted. Once Euro-American canned goods became available to Indians, however, it eventually became commonplace to substitute metal containers, usually a baking powder can, for natural materials. Instead of pebbles, buckshot might be used to produce the sound. The shape of the rattle remained the same, but the materials used in its manufacture and the resultant sound changed — apparently not enough to be rejected aesthetically. (The Winnebago, Ojibway neighbors to the south, continue to use traditional gourd rattles in their medicine lodge and jokingly assert that the Ojibway have abandoned tradition and are now using beer cans for rattles!)

Rattles accompany the Stomp Dance, common among southeastern tribes. Traditional Stomp Dance music is cast in a call-and-response pattern: the leader of a line of dancers sings a brief melodic phrase, and the dancers repeat it exactly or answer it with a similar phrase. Although the leader carries a rattle in his hand, most of the percussion in the Stomp Dance is produced by vessel rattles made of turtle shells tied in bunches around the calves of the dancers. Their stomp-like dance steps produce the rattling sound from pebbles inside the turtle carapaces. In this century, however, many Stomp

dancers have begun to substitute milk cans for the turtle shells; they are easier to come by and simpler to make rattles from, and many feel that the sound is even enhanced in volume and quality.

Pre-contact drums were usually made from logs hollowed by charring and scraping, with animal skins stretched over their openings for drumheads. To be sure, this type of drum continues to be made — the large, two-headed cottonwood drums of Pueblo peoples, for instance. But when the Grass Dance with its ritually prescribed large drum spread to northern Plains Indians in the late 1800s, they found it expedient simply to substitute the commercially available marching band drum, long familiar to them from military bands on frontier outposts. To perform Indian music using this drum, they merely turned it on its side so that the singers could surround it. Today such drums with their plastic heads are commonplace, and Indian singing groups usually decorate them by painting Indian designs or motifs of the name of the group on the exposed head. But, in yet another change, a rejection of the marching band drum and a return to building drums the traditional way appears to be part of a general musical revitalization in Indian Country.

### Adoption and Juxtaposition

One European folk instrumental tradition adopted by Indian people throughout North America was fiddle music. The Indians learned fiddle-playing and step-dancing from French fur





**Fiddle and guitar players entertain in an Ojibway berry-picking camp in northern Minnesota, September 1937. Photo by Russell Lee, courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress**

traders throughout the Great Lakes region beginning in the 1600s. Later, settlers from Ireland and Scotland, who did trapping in the 1700s and lumberjacking in the 1800s, brought their fiddle repertoires as far west as the Athabaskan interior of Alaska, where Indian people maintain them today. Inter-marriage between Europeans and Indians accelerated the acceptance of European instrumental and dance traditions.

The Saturday night square dance began to challenge Indian as well as Christian religious ideals. Traditional Ojibway medicine lodge ceremonies, customarily lasting several days, found their attendance dwindling as people took time off to attend local square dances. A Catholic missionary to the Menominee was reported to have chopped to pieces a fiddle belonging to one of his parishioners, telling him that he would never play "the devil's instrument" another Saturday night.

Many Indians developed their fiddle talents while working in lumberjack camps. Others were self-taught, spending spare moments in the woods practicing. In all-Indian logging camps, square-dance callers would perform in the Native tongue, and the repertoire of fiddle tunes often included Indian compositions whose titles were derived from names of Indian settlements or activities. Fiddlers at the west end of Lake Huron, for example, played "Manitoulin Island Waltz," named after an island reservation in that lake; Algonquian speakers on the St. Mary's River had a tune "Whitefish on the Rapids," referring to the great fishery between Lake Superior and Lake Huron, which for centuries provid-

ed an important subsistence staple for Indians living nearby.

Most Indian fiddles were of European manufacture, but some were homemade from cigar boxes and fishline, and others were modified in some way to make them "Indian." In his film "Medicine Fiddle" (1991) Michael Loukinen interviewed a number of western Great Lakes performers, who provided some of the rich lore surrounding their fiddle traditions. One man told of his deceased father who converted a store-bought \$15 fiddle to Indian use; to make it louder he put porcupine quills inside the fiddle's body and attached a deerbone to its neck. Having applied his "Indian medicine" to the instrument, he allowed no one to touch it. Some Indians interviewed on film told stories about chance encounters with horned people playing fiddles in the woods or abandoned cabins. Because drawings of horns on human heads in Great Lakes pictography traditionally signified spiritual power, the horned performers may be understood as spirits, although in this instance there may also be the concept of the fiddle as the "devil's instrument."

A number of distinct Indian fiddle traditions began with this culture contact. Thus we find Indian fiddling contests today among the Cherokee of Oklahoma and among interior Athabaskans of Alaska, a *métis* ("mixed") French-Ojibway-Cree style on the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, and a slightly different Red River style further north in Manitoba among the Saulteaux, where fiddlers jig with their feet while playing. There are also fiddlers among the Houma of Louisiana and the Apache of Arizona, which is the only tribe also to have an indigenous one-string fiddle of its own, totally unrelated to the European variety and used for playing traditional Apache music.

Another tradition of Euro-American culture that was adopted by Indian people was the symphonic (mostly brass) band. This was a late 19th century emulation of Anglo culture: as small towns had athletic teams and marching bands to perform on July 4th in parades or under pavilions, so did many reservations. Just as baseball supplanted lacrosse in many Indian communities, so the marching band grew in importance at the expense of Native musical events. Many learned to play trumpets, trombones and clarinets by attending primarily Anglo schools; others, in all-Indian boarding schools, had band performance imposed upon them as part of their programmed acculturation to deprive them of





Above: The Onondaga Castle Cornet Band, founded in 1862, was typical of Indian groups adopting the instruments and repertoires of the late 19th century concert band. Their costumes reflect pan-Indianisms, combining Iroquois with modified Plains elements, such as the stereotyped war bonnet. Photo by Fred R. Colcott, courtesy Onondaga County Parks Office of Museums & Historical Sites



Left: Ojibway from l'Anse, Michigan, receive musical instruction on band instruments from WPA music teacher Herbert Welsh. Photo courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

their Indian musical heritage, just as they were forbidden to speak their Native tongue or dress in tribal attire. Further erosion of traditional Indian music on some reservations was aided by the government's free band instruction as part of the WPA program in the 1930s.

In Mexico and Central America the various *banda* (band) traditions were adopted by Indian communities from the dominant *mestizo* culture. Their repertoire continues to include *marchas*, *pasodobles* and other compositions arranged and

scored by late 19th century composers — the Spanish equivalents of John Phillip Sousa. Many of the performers were musically illiterate and had to learn the music by ear. Most of them lacked music teachers, so their techniques of playing and the tones they achieve from self-developed performance styles on clarinets, trumpets and trombones do not produce the polished, in-tune, dynamically controlled sounds we are accustomed to. These features of Anglo performance style are absent, and certain Indian



aesthetic qualities of banda music might offend us, but they please their audiences. Banda schools have in fact become cultural institutions in Indian communities, such as in Oaxaca, where rural Zapotec Indian children sometimes live in banda communities away from their families. The town banda has become part of Indian cultural identity for these people — one which distinguishes one Indian community from another. Furthermore, the Zapotec banda has social prestige within the community and functions much like an artisans' guild. In the *tequio* system of social organization, members of the banda are exempt from such communal responsibilities as roadbuilding, to which all others in the town owe their services. The banda members' performance at all secular fiestas and religious feasts and processions is considered their paramount duty to society.

While band traditions have been transmitted mostly through oral tradition in Indian communities, the mass information media of the dominant society have played a key role in introducing Indians to the latest in Euro-American musical forms. Rapid changes in 20th century technology have had a dramatic effect on music in Indian Country. Through exposure, first to radio, then the phonograph and television, Indian people have been bombarded with the musical culture of the dominant society for decades. Rather than passive consumers of American popular music, they have adopted many of the styles and musical instruments commonly found in Euro-American society. In some instances they have adapted them to their own musical traditions; in others, they have accepted them along with the associated musical genres. Thus throughout Indian Country today one finds older traditions of non-Indian origin functioning as contemporary popular music as well as the latest forms of Anglo popular music used by Indian people for a variety of purposes.

Take, for instance, a prevalent style of dance music called *waila*, performed in southern Arizona by its creators, the Tohono O'odham (formerly known as Papago). Waila is also called "Chicken Scratch" by some — comparing the way dancers kick back their feet on the hard, dry, dusty ground to the way a chicken searches for food. The music is clearly derived from Mexican and Anglo neighbors of the O'odham; parts of the tradition had already formed a syncretized style by the mid-19th century. German and Czech settlers along the Texan Rio Grande brought European button accordions with them

in the 19th century to play the polka traditions of the Old World. The accordions as well as the polka repertoires and styles were in turn taken up by Mexican performers, and a new music called *norteño* emerged. Scholars believe this music reached the O'odham by about 1850, when it began to be performed by an ensemble of fiddles and guitars (introduced by missionaries) with a rhythmic accompaniment of snare and bass drums, each played by a different individual. Eventually this ensemble changed its character and sound: the contemporary button accordion was adopted, and saxophones, whose playing techniques were learned in high school bands, replaced the fiddles in the 1950s and 1960s. Today's waila rhythm section includes an electric guitar, bass and traps (a set of drums and cymbals played by one man). Folklorist James S. Griffith comments on the irony of this phenomenon: "Thus the two great institutional attempts at changing Tohono O'odham culture — the Spanish mission system and the Indian schools — are reflected in, of all things, the organization of O'odham popular dance bands!"<sup>1</sup>

"Chicken Scratch" bands typically perform a set of tunes in succession, moving from a waila (a fast tempo polka), to a two-step *chotiz*, to a *cumbia*, a Caribbean borrowing. Occasionally they include a waltz or a mazurka. Like most Indian music the tradition is an oral one, not learned or read from score. Some of the tunes are quite old, while others have been taken from commercial recordings of Mexican *norteño* groups. Some popular American melodies, such as "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" have been incorporated into the repertoire.

Waila music has by no means replaced older O'odham music. Like musics of many American Indians, the traditional O'odham repertoire consists principally of unison songs accompanied by percussion — either rattles, or a notched rasp using an inverted basket drum as resonator. Such traditional instruments are used in the semi-sacred *chelkona*, or "skipping and scraping" dance, performed to induce rainfall in their desert homeland by lines of male and female dancers with special costumes and body paint in cloud and lightning designs. Also traditional is the *keihina*, a round dance which, though somewhat social in nature, is still thought to bring rain, as the dancers stamp vigorously on the ground to encourage rainclouds to appear.

<sup>1</sup>James S. Griffith, *Southern Arizona Folk Arts* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), p. 72.





Yaqui *Pascola* dancers wearing cocoon rattles around their calves perform to the music of a folk harp and folk fiddle. *Photo by James S. Griffith*



In the Deer Dance of the Yaqui, music is supplied by a *tampelo* — the player of a small flute and a hand-drum (on the far right) — and three singers seated on the ground using water drums and rasps. *Photo by James S. Griffith*



While this religious repertoire remains intact, waila bands perform Saturday night social music, thus functioning as a popular music tradition for most O'odham.

While the O'odham and most other Native peoples of North America carefully separate their traditional sacred music from evolved, European-influenced secular forms such as waila, there are isolated examples where the two have been juxtaposed. This has occurred in the *Pascola*/Deer Dance complex, a traditional religious practice of Yaqui Indians still in Sonora, Mexico, and of those in southern Arizona, who fled persecution by the Mexican government in the late 19th century. The history of the Yaqui helps explain the evolution of the *Pascola*/Deer Dance celebration. During the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the early 17th century, an expedition against the Yaqui in 1610 was defeated by the tenacious Indians. Possibly as a strategy against further military action by the Spaniards, the Yaqui requested that missionaries be sent to live among them. Two Jesuits settled in their territory in 1617, and gradually a type of ceremonialism developed that syncretized Indian and Christian elements, such as is evident in the *Pascola*/Deer Dance complex.

The ritual is performed at fiestas to honor God and certain saints. It consists of successive performances by two musical ensembles — the first reflecting European musical traditions, the other exclusively Native ones. The transition between them, however, is not marked, as one flows into the other. The performance begins to the accompaniment of a folk harp and folk fiddle, both modeled after classical European counterparts and offering clear evidence that the Indians began to copy Spanish Renaissance string instruments shortly after the Cortés invasion. The players are seated on chairs, and the style of their music is decidedly European, although Indian interpretation of European tonalities and counterpoint are evident, and performance techniques are more folk than classical. Dancers for both the *Pascola* and Deer Dances wear cocoon rattles strung around their calves — clearly an indigenous musical instrument. *Pascola* dancers wear masks positioned to one side of the head rather than over the face.

Once the *Pascola* part of the ritual has concluded, the completely Native musical ensemble begins. A *tampelo* begins to beat a small hand drum with a stick while simultaneously playing a three-hole flagelot. The other musicians are three males seated on the ground — an Indian

tradition — playing a water drum and using rasps with scrapers and resonators. They perform songs with poetic texts in an archaic form of the Yaqui language unintelligible to most Yaqui today. Meanwhile, the dancer removes a sistrum rattle (Native) that had been tucked in his belt during the *Pascola* section of performance and relocates the mask to cover his face. A Deer dancer, wearing a deer's head atop his own, begins his dance and completes the flow from music of Spanish origin to a probably older Native tradition.

### The Changing Soundscape

Waila, brass bands, *Pascola* music and that of other Indian string ensembles are examples of external traditions syncretized in the past by Indian peoples with their own styles of performance. But today on Indian reservations and in urban Indian communities one also encounters groups playing country and western music, rhythm and blues, and even forms of jazz fusion.

During the period of American social unrest in the late 1960s, the figure of the “protest singer” with an acoustic guitar emerged, not only in Anglo society but in Indian Country as well. Paralleling Anglo counterparts, Indian protest singers created songs depicting a wide range of social injustices visited upon Indian peoples. Performers such as the Dakota singer, Floyd Westerman and the Cree, Buffy St. Marie, began to compose, perform publicly and eventually record an Indian repertoire not unlike that of Pete Seeger or Peter, Paul and Mary. But the issues they articulated resonated principally with Indian audiences, since it was they who were injured by the dominant society's despoilment of the environment, governmental interference in Indian affairs, poverty on the reservation and its attendant social ills like alcoholism and suicide, as well as past injuries inflicted on Indian people. Westerman's album “Custer Died for Your Sins” in the early 1970s — its title a double-barbed missionary and military irony — became a best seller among Indians overnight. The sarcasm characteristic of in-group Indian humor is also reflected in the names contemporary Indian ensembles choose for themselves. Expropriating Anglo stereotypes, an Onondaga blues band from upstate New York calls itself “White Boy and the Wagon Burners” (the keyboardist is non-Indian), and a rock group from Phoenix with members of several tribes — Navajo, Ojibway, Menominee, Hopi and Blackfoot — is named “Wild Band of Indians.”





Mohican composer Brent Michael Davids performs on one of several crystal flutes he invented. Among his compositions are pieces for synthesizer and for jazz/fusion ensembles, and a dance score, "Moon of the Falling Leaves," recently performed by New York City's Joffrey Ballet. *Photo courtesy Brent Michael Davids*

The tradition of protest song continues in Indian Country and is reflected in the repertoires of many performers at this year's Festival. While the message is much the same as in the 1960s, its vehicle has changed: the lyrics of satirical songs performed on electric instruments in blues ensembles comment on political power ("Everyone is white at the White House"), or on constant harassment of Indians from law enforcement officials ("Please Mr. Officer, let me explain, I got to get to a powwow tonight"), or the arbitrary mapping of Indian lands by government planners that results in social upheaval ("Someone drew a line"). The Bureau of Indian Affairs is an especially favorite target of Indian protest singers, who perceive its Native bureaucrats as entrenched, self-serving and worthy of the appellation "the true Washington Redskins."

The program of American Indian music at this year's Festival represents as broad a range as possible of *non*-traditional musics being performed today on reservations and in urban Indian communities. The curators felt it appropriate in the year of the Quincentenary to demonstrate some of the musical repercussions in Indian Country of the initial Columbian "encounter." Many of our performers come from very conservative Indian backgrounds; some are even religious practitioners, maintaining and providing the music required for ancient ceremonies. But some chose to go beyond the traditional music they were brought up with, to adopt other styles, to take up non-Indian musical instruments, to

create songs with English texts in a contemporary idiom and to perform before non-Indian as well as Indian audiences. This musical direction is a relatively recent development, which probably began with the protest singers of the 1960s.

Some performers at the Festival have chosen their musical direction as a means of "getting the Indian message across." This incentive is well expressed by the Oneida singer, Joanne Shenandoah, in a recent statement entitled "1991: The Year of the Native American," as she describes how she became a protest singer and active composer:

As a Native person brought up surrounded by non-Indians I ached to find a way to communicate my history to my American friends; perhaps . . . a popular film, or a top 40 song about Indians which would give us the basis for discussing a different reality than the one they had come to believe was paramount in the world . . . For a society extraordinarily dependent upon the media for its perceptions and beliefs . . . it is necessary to remove the stereotypes which have for so long kept [Indian people] down. Presently, there are many Indian performers on the road and in the studio. They are filming, dancing and recording, ever hopeful their work will finally be taken seriously; that they will be given the chance to show the world we are





The blues/rock band, "White Boy and the Wagon Burners," from the Onondaga Reservation near Syracuse, New York, performs at an informal open-air concert. Photo by Richard Puchyr

more than images from times past. . . . Their music is creative, lively, and rooted in their ancient traditions. It isn't all drums around a fire. Give us a listen and watch as we peel away your misconceptions. (Promotional flyer 1991)

Others present the music they were brought up with. Although European origins may be discernible in what they do or play, it is *Indian* music, played by and for Indian people. Thus waila functions as a popular idiom for the O'odham on a Saturday night in Arizona, as does country and western, or blues in bars or nightclubs on or near reservations in other parts of North America, or marimba or brass bands in small town festivals throughout Mexico and Central America. Because music is never static, traditions continue to evolve, and we can certainly expect further changes in the soundscape of Indian Country.

#### *Suggested Listening*

Because of the many recordings available, readers should consult catalogues from Canyon Records and Indian House Records, where evolved forms of Indian music are usually listed as "contemporary."

Canyon Records  
4143 N. 16th St.  
Suite 1  
Phoenix, AZ 85016

Indian House Records  
P.O. Box 472  
Taos, NM 87571

#### *Suggested Viewing*

"Medicine Fiddle," 1991. 81 minutes, color video. Producer/director Michael Loukinen. Up North Films, 331 TFA, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI 49855