Heartbeat: The Voices of First Nations Women

RAYNA GREEN AND HOWARD BASS

A woman hums songs to a child. Three old ladies sing as they pick chokecherries or cactus buds, husk corn, or dig camas root. A woman's high-pitched lu-lu-lu-lu rises over the men's voices at the end of an honoring song for returned veterans. "Chorus girls" back up the men's lead song at the drum during a war dance. The pulsating, driving hand-drum beats and magic-making songs women sing at a stick game. The woman whose songs make the Sun Dance circle right. These are the voices of Native women. Like the drum whose heartbeat is that of a woman, these women and their songs are at the heart of Indian Country. But unlike the drum, their songs and voices are rarely heard beyond their communities.

Along with the first of two recordings made available on Smithsonian/Folkways (Heartbeat: Voices of First Nations Women, SF 40415) and a two-week presentation at the 1995 Festival of American Folklife, this essay is part of an effort to present an overview of music by Native women - traditional, new, innovative, and little known. Included are traditional women's songs from tribes in the United States and Canada as well as material usually sung by men and recently taken up by women. We also discuss fresh material, Native women's music that merges traditional music with many styles of popular American music.

Very little women's music is known and appreciated, even by those who value and know Native American music. People may see Native women dancing when public performances take place, whether they are on stage or in a community setting. Still, men's dancing dominates the public arena. Because much of Native women's traditional singing occurs in a private setting associated with family, clan, ceremonial, or work activities, those who are unfamiliar with these traditions rarely see or hear women sing. Thus the common perception is that women have little presence or significance in the performance and preservation of Native musical traditions. A few tribal or regional collections have included women's singing and instrumental music. Recordings by contemporary Indian women musicians like Buffy Sainte-Marie first received favorable attention in the late 1960s. Since then, the ranks of such women have grown to include Sharon Burch, Joanne Shenandoah, Geraldine Barney, and several groups of women singers.

Native men and women, like men and women everywhere, historically had different roles and ways of being in daily life and in music and dance. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the roles and activities of all Native people changed radically as disease, war, land loss, removal, and relocation shifted populations and devastated traditional ways. The U.S. government forced men to farm where once they had hunted and women to sew where once they had farmed. The government and missionaries forbade the performance of Native ceremonies and the wearing of ceremonial clothing. New settlers and hunters wiped out the once-abundant supply of buffalo, salmon, wild rice, and deer. Indians were sent to schools and churches to "civilize" them; in those places they were forbidden to speak their own languages. As for music, dance, and song - so integral to traditional life - much went underground or was altered to be made acceptable to government agents and missionaries. Some was lost forever, but much remained, has resurfaced, and been renewed in the 20th century.
CEREMONIAL AND SOCIAL MUSIC

Ruth Underhill, working with T'ohono O'odham people in the 1940s, tells of asking the women why only the men sang and danced. "Oh," one of the older women responded, "you sing and dance to get power" — the inference being that the women already had power. Although women are thought to have a substantially lesser role than men in the area of spiritual or religious music, there are in fact serious and profound roles for women in the performance of music associated with ceremonial life. In areas that have traditions of female spiritual leadership in healing, for example, women have significant, acknowledged roles in public ceremony. Gender differences in vocal range and resonance and culturally based notions of male and female performance dictated the varying roles of men and women, roles that differ from tribe to tribe.

On first glance at Pueblo ceremonial dance, one would never think that Pueblo women sing at all. Certainly, women rarely sing in public ceremonials on feast days. In dance performance, men and women are equally represented: the world is divided into male and female domains and spirits; even dance steps have male and female parts and lines. Songs make constant reference to Corn Maidens (and Corn Youths), the Green Earth Woman, Mother Earth (and Father Sky), Dawn Maidens (and Dawn Youths), to the role of women in agriculture and new life. Yet women's voices are not heard in these serious ceremonial events, only in less public, more intimate ceremonies mostly associated with women, such as the Basket Dances.

Often the singing connected with the most powerful of women's rites of passage — coming-of-age or puberty ceremonies — is performed by men. In the Apache and Navajo puberty ceremonies, men sing the songs for the ceremonial parts of the events. Among the Mescalero Apache, however, women sing the morning songs after the Crown Dances and join the men in singing for the back-and-forth dances that are part of the all-night ritual asso-
Women members of the Cherokee Baptist Association sing a hymn in Cherokee at an annual gospel sing.

Describing a Sun Dance song, Angelina Wagon, a Wind River Shoshone woman, said, "My mother, she found that song. She was sleeping the first time she heard that song. So she got up and she went to the room where my dad was sleeping, and she sang that song for him, and my dad just caught that song all at once. And nowadays you hear this prayer song all over; even in Idaho [and] Utah, they sing that song" (Vander 1986).

The medicine woman, healer, or dreamer is not always a singer, though she may be the center of the ritual aspects of a healing ceremony. In the Yurok Brush Dance, the medicine woman is joined by men and young girls who sing and dance, the men beginning on the so-called heavy songs, followed by light songs by men and the young girls. These light songs may include verbal interplay, signifying the eligibility of the young girls present for marriage. The use and presentation of the voice by young

Women members of the Cherokee Baptist Association sing a hymn in Cherokee at an annual gospel sing. In Northern California, men would customarily sing the songs for the Flower Dance, the girls' ceremony celebrating the first menstruation. Recently, as this ceremony is being restored, women have begun to sing these songs.

In tribes where women have formidable ceremonial and public roles, they do sing and "make" songs, and their songs may be like those of male spiritual leaders. In the Plains Sun Dance, for example, women always had a special role in the ceremony, and thus in making and singing songs.

Some peoples, like the Northern California Pomo and those on the Halfway River Reserve in Canada, had healers whose healing songs came to them in dreams. Many of these were women. The Kashia Pomo Dream Dances were recovered and restored by a female dreamer. Navajo women can and do become medicine women and have several different specialties within Navajo healing traditions. Those who become medicine women must learn the stories, prayers, and songs that are an essential part of ceremonial healing.
Nancy Richardson sings in a "storysong" associated with the Karuk world renewal tale:

“They once told lizard, they said, don’t make human beings. They won’t get along, but lizard said I’m going to do that.”

Betty Mae Jumper, in a "storysong," has the turtle sing to the wolf he has outsmarted:

“Ya ha, ya ha! I told you I was little, and can’t run fast, but I can outsmart you. Wolf, wolf, your bones will be quivering. The flies will be buzzing around you.”

Women are different from that of men singers; the young women also do not sing with the group, except as soloists. In recent times, however, some Karuk women like Nancy Richardson have begun to sing the heavy songs, using the sobbing, emotion-laden vocal characteristics that once belonged only to men (Keeling 1989).

In the Northwest Coast, women and men alike play major roles in the family and in clan potlatch traditions. They sing songs honoring ancestors, chanting the genealogies, events, and deeds common to the potlatch. Most songs are associated with clan, family, and the animal spirits (Raven, Killer Whale, Wolf, and others) that gave the clan birth. In the modern musical repertoire, family groups from Makah, Spokane, Yakima, and elsewhere sing their own music, mostly in a community setting. Recently, for families in which no sons, nephews, or grandsons are available or interested in the songs usually passed down by male relatives, the men have begun to teach daughters, nieces, and granddaughters to sing them instead.

Yupik musical performance is based in ceremonial dance-drama. Generally, the men sing, using a large, thin, hand drum with a handle, beaten with a thin stick, and the women dance in front of them. When the women sing, they might sing challenge songs or composed songs that commemorate some event or a person's deeds. Women from St. Lawrence Island sing a song, complete with dance and hand motions, to honor the bush pilots who fly into their village, even becoming the plane, swooping down. In other songs, the women become geese, honking, courting, and singing their song, and they sing songs honoring their relatives, a great hunt, or the animals pursued by the hunters.

In the Victory or Scalp Dance common on the Southern Plains, the women relatives of warriors returned from victory would dance

Annie Long Tom, a Clayoquot woman who kept the old religion in spite of the pressure to become Christian, said, “You must not be ashamed to sing your own song.”
with lances in their hands, lances that formerly held scalps. They also would sing and make at the end the characteristic high-pitched ululating noise called a “lu lu” in the Southern Plains. The lu lu signals the somber end of an honoring song or, when made during a song or dance, the excitement of the moment and appreciation of the song or dance. It is a sound associated, oddly enough, both with mourning — it is often heard at funerals or in honoring songs for the dead — and with celebration. In addition, modern songs that honor men and women veterans and earlier songs honoring warriors always featured women in a central role. The War Mothers Societies, revitalized during World War II from older women’s societies, had songs of respect that were paid ceremonially to veterans, some sung by both men and women, others sung specifically by women.

In most tribal groupings, women traditionally sing the sorts of music associated with familiar women’s roles, with life-giving and renewal. Such songs are numerous but, with some exceptions, quite private. Song types include lullabies, food preparing and gathering songs, songs associated with the making of clothing and other objects created by women, songs sung when delivering babies, for childless women to have children, as medicine for female illnesses or conditions such as problematic menstruation, and mourning and burial songs, songs sung at wakes for the dead, animal songs related to medicine, or “story-songs.” Native men and women everywhere also have songs that accompany magic. Women at San Ildefonso sing Bow and Arrow or Comanche Dance songs as honor songs on Mother’s Day. Zuni Olla Maidens sing Rain and Comanche Dance songs for the women dancers, who perform with pottery water jars on their heads. These songs, while part of the social or minor ceremonial repertoire, are about the significance of water and a woman’s role in the giving of life.

Christian music, in the context of ceremonial performance, is widespread among Indian women. As is true to a large extent among many peoples in the United States, the major participants in Christian ritual among Indians are women. Christianity may have given Native women — robbed of their traditional economic and political roles in Native culture by missionization, acculturation, and the “civilization” policies of the U.S. government — one of the few places in which they could maintain a visible role. In almost all Indian churches, Catholic and Protestant, the women sing Christian music, some of it composed by Indian people and distinctly their own, some of it drawn from the standard repertoire of the religious denominations. They sing and compose these hymns and gospel songs, even masses, in their Native lan-

Ojibwa women’s love charm lyric, from Georgia Wettlin-Larsen:

“Truly,
I am arrayed like the roses,
and as beautiful as they.”

Mary Ann Meanus and Verbena Green from the Warm Springs Reservation sing, in an Owl Dance Song,

“How can you leave me, dear,
when I love you so,
in a hunky-dory way?”
A spirit came to a young Sioux woman, Wananikwe, and said:

"Do you see the sky, how it is round?... Go, then, and tell your friends to make a circle on the ground just like the round sky. Call that holy ground. Go there, and with a big drum in the center, sing and dance and pray to me.... You will have one heart" (Hoffman 1891).

languages. Christian Mohawk women on the Canadian border sing wake and burial songs that bear a strong resemblance to 17th-century French Catholic laments, and Salish women in Montana sing both traditional Salish and Catholic songs during the mourning period. Others, like the Tewa Indian Women's Choir at San Juan Pueblo, sing for weddings. Many are involved in language preservation in the tribe, and the church music and work allow them to merge their interests in cultural preservation with their daily caretaking of the church.

Apart from their role in ceremonial and religious performance as well as in music that accompanies the rituals of daily life, women from many different traditions often sing songs for social dance and play. Iroquois women, for example, are now singing eskanye ganishe or New Women's Shuffle Dance songs — Iroquois social dance music that has been sung primarily by men accompanying the women's dance. This dance represents the respect and honor paid in public ceremonials to women, the significance Iroquois give to the role of women. They also sing war songs and stomp dance songs (Pigeon and Duck) usually associated with Southeastern tribes. The women sing, like the men, in a full-throated chorus which emphasizes unity of voice rather than harmonies and different parts.

Women also sing some love songs. Such songs, however, some with much bawdy wordplay, are quite frequently both the province of women and men. On the Southern Plains and in the Northwest, women have always sung the social dance songs known as the "49 songs" or Owl Dance songs. These are sung at the end of a dance, late at night, when courting and flirting ("snagging") go on. In these songs, both men and women sing about love, though more about thwarted or lost love, and their roles in the performance of that music — with the exception of who sits at the drum — are relatively equal. Another example would be in Navajo skip and two-step singing, where both women and men perform in the same styles and genres, accompanying their singing on the drum, and where wordplay and jesting are common features of the singing.

Competition singing, as in Inuit throat singing, was done by both men and women in the Northwest Coast and among Inuit and other Arctic peoples. Women in the Midwestern tribes historically played peach or plum stone games, and there were magic game songs associated with them. As a living tradition, however, gambling songs for the hand, stick, or bone game are everywhere sung by women. Among Northwest Coast and Great Basin peoples, Ute, Salish, Kootenai, and other women sing in hand games as parts of a team, as lead singers, and, occasionally, as part of an all-female team. In Southern
Developed by Zuni women in the 1930s, the Olla Maidens gave women a role in the new business of performing for tourists. Some women sing while the other women dance with pottery on their heads.

California, women singers sing songs called *peon* songs for their gambling games.

**SINGERS, SONG MAKERS, AND INSTRUMENTALISTS**

As vocalists, women have had varying roles in Native music. According to most scholars, the traditional vocal role of women in the Northern and Southern Plains is that of assisting the male singers (Hatton 1986). On the Southern Plains, women in the role well known as “chorus girls” have always sung behind the drum, seconding the leader one octave higher than the men. Chorus girls are usually associated with a particular drum and, in the powwow context, are paid part of the money given to the drum by the powwow committee and by those putting money on the drum for the singing of honoring or “give-away” songs. Referring to the electrifying sound of the nearly 100 women singing behind the drum at Red Earth, an annual powwow in Oklahoma, LaVonna Weller, a longtime dancer and singer, said, “Boy, that really made my fringes snap.”

In the Northern Plains and Woodlands, women's singing roles were presumed to be modest and supportive and were carried out in the context of group singing (Hatton 1986). Women sat behind the male singers at the drum, responsible for performing the correct songs in sequence and for give-aways, the presentation of gifts to others by those honored in song. In the Ojibwa Drum Dance, the women's role was confined to maintaining activities surrounding the dance and to the important, though subsidiary, activity of “helping” the drum by singing the songs with the men. Ojibwas did, however, have a Women’s Dance and developed a smaller women’s drum and repertory of songs for women (Vennum 1982).

According to Plains belief, the Great Spirit is said to have given the first drum to a woman, instructing her to share the drum with women of all Native nations.

Despite this oral tradition linking women to the drum, in the Plains and Great Lakes women generally have not sat at the “big” drum or the medicine drum. There are prohibitions against touching the drum for many. A woman’s coming to the drum is not always accepted equally by men and other women.
"We got a lot of flack at first about sitting at the drum, but gradually we got a lot of people supporting us. Now they ask us to come... We get asked to sing, it's an honor.
So, we have to be humble, down to earth," says Celina Jones of the Crying Woman Singers.

"Northern Lights," theme song of the Crying Woman Singers:

"Listen to the heavens. The spirits are singing. Listen to the songs! The spirits are singing."

"We make all our own songs. The songs just come to you. You have to wait for them," says Celina Jones of the Crying Woman Singers.

One Plains singer was reluctant even to demonstrate a song using a hand drum. "My [male relative], she said, "would kill me if he saw me with this drum."

In recent years, however, particularly in the Northern Plains, changes are underway with respect to the place of women at the drum. Increasingly, women describe being called to the drum, to sit at the drum, to be the drumkeeper in the way that men have talked about it. At the Maliseet Reserve near Fredericton, New Brunswick, Margaret Paul and other women and men have formed a Drum Society.

Increasingly, powwow singing in the Northern Plains has brought the advent of mixed drum groups. Usually these are family groups, with women and girls actually sitting at the drum. Most women and girls sing with the men, generally an octave below. Others sing in the higher-voiced male register. Many of the women singers in these recently formed mixed drum groups are inspired by the need to train young people in cultural preservation. This is one reason we have seen the women increasingly sitting at the drum and singing in major roles in the Plains. More
Sweethearts of Navajoland sing a skip dance song at Lillian Ashley's home in Chinle, Arizona.

From a contemporary Iroquois song sung by the Six Nations Women Singers:

"The earth, our Mother, is crying tears. Earth is shedding tears for the bad things our 'younger brothers' [white people] have been doing to her."

In the words of Joanne Shenandoah, the music is “creative, lively, and rooted in ancient traditions [but] it isn't all drums around a fire. Give us a listen and watch as we peel away your misconceptions."

"Now That the Buffalo's Gone." Her strong lyrics about love and the evocative power of homeland find expression in “Until It's Time for You to Go” and "Piney Wood Hills."

Other women have addressed alcohol abuse, spouse abuse, alienation in the city, and Native political issues such as environmental destruction, the preservation of sacred lands, and threats to Indian sovereignty. Musically the songs may still have a strong tribal base, but they are rearranged for Western instruments, along with traditional instrumentation and lyrics that integrate tribal languages with English or, in Canada, French lyrics.

Women historically have played a small role as instrumentalists in traditional Native music. In recent years, however, young women like Geraldine Barney and Lillian Rainer have taken up the Plains courting flute. Some — Navajo, Apache, Pueblo, and others — compose songs on the Indian flute. Singer Georgia Wettlin-Larsen has even adapted flute songs for the voice, and others have transposed flute music for the piano and synthesizer.

Iroquois, Navajo, and Apache women use the small water drums common in the music of their peoples. Where tribes use hand drums
Ojibwa gospel singer and actress Elin Sands recalls, "I heard all kinds of music at home... [M]y parents were into Eddie Arnold and Jim Reeves, and my sisters were into the Beatles. Then there were the powwows... So I grew up appreciating all kinds of music" (Sound of the Drum 1990). for gambling, stick, bone, or hand games and for social dances, women play them. This practice is common among Inuit and Northwest Coast peoples as well as among peoples in the Great Basin and Plateau areas of the United States. In the rare "Navajo" dance, a clowning piece performed at the Pueblos of San Ildefonso and Santa Clara, a woman dressed in imitation Navajo garb may beat the drum.

Zuni Olla Maidens use the small Pueblo log drum and the frog box, a wooden painted box with bottom side open, scraping its rasp handles with sticks. During the Basket Dance at the New Mexico Pueblos of San Juan and Santa Clara, the women scrape rasp sticks over baskets, creating a percussive role not found anywhere else in Pueblo ceremonials. Women in many places use rattles — the small women’s cow horn of the Iroquois social dance songs or the gourd rattles of the Southwest.

As with men, the movement of objects on women’s dance and ceremonial outfits creates percussive sounds accompanying song. The jingle dress, an increasingly strong presence on the Northern Plains over the past 30 years, is a major percussive instrument, with the sound of hundreds of cones fashioned from Copenhagen snuff-can lids jingling together. The turtle shells (and modern tin-can substitutes for turtle shells) of women shell shakers in Southeastern stomp dances have always set the unifying rhythm for the dance.

In the mid-19th century, Indian women and men took to Western instruments, both to accompany traditional music and to participate in Western, often Christian, music. The piano, the fiddle, the accordion, the tambourine, and especially the guitar have been...
Mescalero Apache women listen to their recording of a back-and-forth dance song, customarily sung before dawn after a young woman’s coming-of-age ceremony.

Adopted and played by Indian women. In Canada, both women and men participate in marching and concert bands at some reservations, and everywhere young Indians play Western instruments in school bands and orchestras. Using keyboards and synthesizers, women add to the old instrumental mix with blues, folk-rock, jazz, and reggae riffs and beats. Others, like the group Ulali, use traditional hand drums and rattles, though with vocal sounds and harmony never before heard in Indian music.

All these ways of singing and music-making once existed among Native women. Much of the old music exists today, joined by newer ways. Native women’s music is vital and dynamic, very much a part of the process through which Native peoples are preserving and revitalizing Native life and culture.

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References and Suggested Readings


Suggested Listening

Traditional

Antiste, Mary, and others (Kootenai). Eighteen Stick Game Songs. Canyon Records CR 8017-C.


Cassadore, Patsy. I Build the Wickiup and Other Apache Songs. Canyon Records CR 6102.


Crying Woman Singers (Cree and Nakota). Dancing Spirits. Sweet Grass Records SGCW 022194.


Klagedoh Maiden Singers (Navajo). Klagedoh Maiden Singers. Indian House IH 1508.

Midge, Nanaba. Traditional Navajo Songs. Canyon Records CR 7146-C.


Songs of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Phoenix: Canyon Records.

Southern Maiden Singers. Navajo Skip Dance and Two-Step Songs. Indian House.


Tewa Indian Women's Choir of San Juan Pueblo. Songs from the Tewa Mass. From Libby Marcus, Box 27, San Juan Pueblo, NM 87340.

Contemporary

Aglukark, Susan (Inuit). Arctic Rose. Aglukark Entertainment, Inc.

____. Dreams for You. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.


Goodhouse, Sissy. The Third Circle: Songs of Lakota Women. Meyer Creative Productions MC 0113C.

Horne, Paula (Sioux). Heart Songs of Black Hills Women. Meyer Creative Productions DU P001D.

La Rue, Lisa (Cherokee). Beloved Tribal Women. SOAR 104.


____. The Best of Buffy Sainte-Marie, Vol. II. Vanguard 33-44.

____. Coincidence and Likely Stories. Chrysalis 21920.

____. It's My Way. Vanguard 73142.

____. Little Wheel & Spin. Vanguard 79211.

____. Performance. Warner Brothers Records, Inc.

____. She Used to Wanna Be a Ballerina. Vanguard 79311.

Ulali (Formerly Pura Fe & Soni). Ladies Choice. Available from the American Indian Community House, 404 LaFayette St., 2nd floor, New York, NY 10003.


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