REVIVAL AND COMMUNITY: THE HISTORY AND PRACTICES OF A NATIVE AMERICAN FLUTE CIRCLE

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by
Mary Jane Jones
August, 2010
Thesis written by

Mary Jane Jones

B.M., Youngstown State University, 1978
M.S. in Ed., Youngstown State University, 1981
Ph.D., Kent State University, 1991
M.A., Kent State University, 2010

Approved by

______________________________, Advisor
Terry E. Miller

______________________________, Director, School of Music
Denise A. Seachrist

______________________________, Dean, College of the Arts
John R. Crawford
Much knowledge about the Native American flute was lost following the suppression of Native American musical traditions by the United States government around the turn of the twentieth century. A renewal of interest in the instrument occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century, but few knew how to play the flute stylistically. As flute enthusiasts began meeting to learn and play together, flute circles emerged throughout North America and around the world. This thesis examines one such circle in Northeast Ohio and offers insight into the views and motivations of its members of Native descent. The practices of the flute circle and the relationships that formed among its members are investigated, as well as the reasons why these people have chosen to connect with their roots by means of playing the flute. In order to identify factors contributing to the resurgence of the flute’s popularity, this study attempts to determine whether flutists believe that they are continuing the flute’s traditions or creating a new musical style derived from past Native American flute practices.

This paper also discusses broader trends in Native American music such as the flute circle phenomenon, Pan-Indianism, and integration with New Age music, World music, and other genres.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE NORTHEAST OHIO FLUTE CIRCLE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE NEOFC</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. MAGIC, PAN-INDIANISM, AND AUTHENTICITY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Terry Miller, and members of my committee, Dr. Ralph Lorenz and Dr. Richard Devore, for their assistance and encouragement. I also extend my gratitude to the members of the Northeast Ohio Flute Circle. This paper could not have been written without their cooperation and support.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a classically trained flutist with a curiosity about world flutes, I was interested to learn that a Native American flute convention was being held in my community during the summer of 2001. An evening concert was scheduled featuring nationally known performers, and I made plans to attend. I arrived early and browsed the vendor booths while I awaited the start of the concert, and saw many varieties of Native American flutes. Some had plain wood finishes, while others were ornately carved or painted. The sizes and musical ranges of the flutes varied as well. I had never played a Native American flute before, and did not come to the concert with an expectation of doing so, but many of the flute vendors encouraged me to try out their instruments. It was entertaining to compare the sound and response of various instruments that I played, but I had no intention of buying one. Then I played a dark poplar flute with cream-colored streaks, and felt as though the instrument had been made especially for me. I left that night with my first Native American flute, and also with a pamphlet advertising monthly meetings that were held in my area for the purpose of providing instruction, encouragement, and fellowship for those with an interest in flute playing. I attended the next scheduled meeting of this fledgling organization and met others from the area who shared an interest in the Native American flute. So began my involvement with the Northeast Ohio Flute Circle, a relationship that would last throughout the five-year life of the organization.
This thesis, an examination of the flute circle in general, also focuses on a core group of its members with Native American ancestry in order to understand what motivated these people to form and maintain the flute circle and to participate in Native American culture and music. It is reasonable to assume that these members took up the flute because it provided a link to their cultural origins, yet the flute of today is a very different instrument, both in form and function, from the flute that may have been played by their ancestors. Depending upon the tribe to which their ancestors belonged, their forefathers may not have played the flute at all. Did these flute players delude themselves about the authenticity of their pastime? How did they respond if and when they came to the realization that their ancestors did not play flute in the same manner that they do, if at all? I will examine the degree to which these participants valued authenticity in musical and cultural practices, the qualities of the flute that held such an attraction for these people, and the significance of music as a connection to one's ethnic cultural origins in order to better understand the Native American flute community in general and this group in particular.

My initial involvement with this flute circle did not result from a desire to research the group but to learn about the instrument itself. Like many other new flute owners, I was looking for information about proper playing technique and stylistic elements. The newly formed flute group in my area promised to provide me with the information I was seeking, along with a venue where I could play and learn from listening to others. Researching the group was never a consideration during my affiliation with it, and I was considered by the other members to be an insider, even though I was one of the few non-Native Americans who persisted in attending meetings
and group functions. It was only after the group disbanded that I considered writing about it, and contacted several of the former members to learn more about their opinions and motives regarding the flute. Consequently, the perspective of this study is both participant-observer and interview-based.

Since the participants never had a sense of being studied or observed at meetings, my involvement in the group enabled me to become familiar with the personal characteristics and interpersonal dynamics of the members. The regulars were quite open and forthcoming about their thoughts and viewpoints in a way they might not have been if they had felt they were being studied by an outsider. This situation presented the unique opportunity to see what motivated these people’s Native American flute involvement, and to hear their views about connecting to their roots through music. Even after members became aware that I was writing a paper on the flute circle, their openness continued because of the level of trust and friendship that had been established.

Since the flute had become obsolete in many tribes and few Native Americans had much knowledge about the instrument and its traditions, learning to build flutes and play them presented a challenge. Groups like the Northeast Ohio Flute Circle began springing up across the country in the 1990s to provide aspiring flute players with educational information and support.

Although such organizations now exist throughout North America and several other areas of the world, little research has been done on them. A search of library book and periodical databases shows hundreds of books and articles about the history of the Native American flute, methods of construction, playing techniques, notable flute performers, and stories or legends pertaining to the flute. There are also many songbooks
and self-help books for novices who are learning to play the instrument. However, there do not appear to be any books or scholarly articles that focus solely on the study of specific flute circles or the flute circle phenomenon in general. *Voice of the Wind*, the official periodical of the International Native American Flute Association, frequently runs short, informal articles on topics such as establishing a flute circle and playing together in small or large groups. These types of articles can also be found on some flute circle websites. For example, the website of the Cascadia Flute Circle in Oregon has articles on playing duets, improvising, techniques for adding variety to one’s playing, songwriting, using poetry and prose as a basis for improvisation, the value of participating in a flute circle, and the use of the flute as a conduit of healing.¹

Today’s Native American flute has no tribal affiliation, but reflects musical traditions from a variety of flute-playing tribes throughout North America. The practice of combining many tribal traditions into a single tradition carried out by Native Americans from diverse tribal backgrounds is called Pan-Indianism.

Since the first European colonies were established in North America, Native American culture has been profoundly affected by the values, traditions, laws, and ideologies of the white colonists. Native American tribes inhabiting the eastern United States were the first to make contact with the settlers from across the Atlantic and consequently have experienced the impact of colonization for a longer period of time than their western counterparts. Reports from the colonial era indicate that mixed-race individuals were common by the end of the seventeenth century.² Not only did some

Native peoples become assimilated into white society, but as colonization expanded, Native tribes were often uprooted from their ancestral territories both voluntarily and by forced removal. From the 1790s through the 1850s, many bands of Native Americans moved west to avoid the encroachment of white settlements. Thousands of others were forced west by the U.S. Army during President Andrew Jackson’s administration. Writes Philip J. Deloria:

As the [nineteenth] century opened, President Thomas Jefferson assumed that the Indian people could and would assimilate into American society, and he created policies designed to make assimilation a reality. Some groups, most notably the Cherokee and other members of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, did appropriate certain American characteristics, most notably, American-styled political structures, literacy, and legal knowledge. In Andrew Jackson’s America, however, many people believed that Indians were destined to die off—to vanish in the face of a superior race. Jackson’s own rhetoric was more characteristically separatist: Indian people could best progress if they were removed from their lands and kept segregated from whites. In a series of treaties, negotiators acquired the lands of eastern Indian people, forcing them to relocate to Indian Territory on the west side of the Mississippi.  

Few native tribes were left intact in the eastern United States. Many were split into groups that had left their homelands at different times and ended up settling in different geographic areas as a result. Naturally, such upheaval, along with intermarriage and integration into the white way of life, weakened the cultural traditions of the eastern tribes. These traditions were dealt an additional blow when the Bureau of Indian Affairs banned all performances of Native American music and religious celebrations from the 1880s until well into the twentieth century. The government’s policies during that time were designed to suppress Native American traditional cultural expression in order to better assimilate Native Americans into white culture. Peaceful

---

3 Philip J. Deloria, Playing Indian (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1998), 103-104.
ceremonies such as the Sun Dance of the Plains and the Potlatch of the Pacific Northwest were viewed as offensive because they served to maintain a strong connection to tribal traditions of the past and impeded the adoption of white customs. Other ceremonies, such as the Ghost Dance, came about as an attempt to resist white encroachment. They were prohibited because they encouraged hostility toward the government.

In 1883, the Indian Affairs Commission established a Court of Indian Offenses. Foremost among the banned “offenses” was the Sun Dance, but also outlawed were the “scalp-dance,” the “war-dance,” and “all other so-called feasts assimilating thereto.” Those found guilty of committing these acts could have their rations withheld for up to fifteen days or be sentenced to prison for thirty days.²

The Sun Dance existed in a variety of forms among many Plains tribes, but the primary purpose of the ceremony was to invoke supernatural power.³ According to Fred W. Voget:

> The rationale for the Sun Dances of the several tribes varied. It included the themes of seasonal renewal, growth and replenishment, and the acquisition of mystical power. While these themes received differential emphases in the individual tribal ceremonies, the acquisition of mystic powers and the mobilization of power for war commonly were intermingled with private intentions and public concerns...Among the Crows the Sun Dance was the primary instrument for mobilizing mystical power to effect personal revenge against the enemy.⁷

When a Sun Dance was held, entire tribes would come together from each village’s separate winter quarters. They would camp in a large circle for a week and

---


perform a number of rituals that were considered necessary accompaniments of the dance.\textsuperscript{8} 

The potlatch was a means of establishing and maintaining status among the Native peoples of the Pacific Northwest. These tribes had a rigid rank system that was based on heredity, but the individual was required to claim the position to which he was entitled by hosting a ceremony during which gifts were given to the guests. Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin explain the rationale for the potlatch as follows:

The guest group, by witnessing the claims made, validated and sanctioned the status displayed and claimed. This was vital; the claims had to be publicly witnessed to be valid. At the same time, there was reciprocity to the ceremony. The guests were confirmed in their own status by the order in which they received their gifts, by the amount presented to them and often by the seating arrangements.\textsuperscript{9}

One potlatch might establish a person’s status, but periodic gift-giving ceremonies were necessary in order to maintain it.\textsuperscript{10} As trading with white settlers increased, the tribes of the Pacific Northwest became wealthier. This enabled individuals to have more frequent and more elaborate potlatches, with more invited guests and gifts of greater value.\textsuperscript{11} Although an anti-potlatch law was enacted in Canada, the ceremony was never specifically named in any United States legislation. However, participation was considered an offense and U.S. Indian agents and missionaries did their best to put an end to it.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{9} Dennis Cole and Ira Chaikin, An Iron Hand upon the People (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990), 5.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 175.
The Ghost Dance movement was started by a Paiute named Wovoka (Jack Wilson). In 1889, he had a vision in which he was instructed by God to tell the people to stop quarreling, to love one another, and to accommodate whites. To bring about peace, the people should dance the traditional Paiute Round Dance, holding hands and moving in a circle while praying and chanting for four consecutive nights. This would turn their despair to joy and enable them to be reunited with dead loved ones. During the dancing, exhaustion caused many to enter trances during which they believed they saw their ancestors. In 1890, two Oglala holy men, Short Bull and Kicking Bear, introduced the Ghost Dance to the Lakota, but they equated the attaining of peace with the eradication of the white man by God. Short Bull and Kicking Bear told the Lakota people that a messiah would appear to deliver them from the starvation and disease they were experiencing on the reservation, restoring them to their old way of life. The people took up Ghost Dancing in earnest, praying for the speedy appearance of the messiah. As the movement gained adherents, people began leaving their homes, pulling their children out of school, and congregating by the thousands at campgrounds where Ghost Dances were held. Initially, Indian agents attempted to put a stop to the movement because they saw it as causing people to neglect farms and schools, and interfering with attempts to

14 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Rani Henrik Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 2008), 105.
“civilize” the Lakota. The Ghost Dancers refused to comply with government orders to cease their ceremonies. Eventually, large throngs of rebellious Ghost Dancers would cause Indian agents to fear an uprising, and the Army was brought in to contain any violence that might erupt. Tensions escalated on both sides, and the situation culminated in the massacre of over one hundred Lakota at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890.19

The manner in which Indian agents responded to these three ceremonies played a significant part in the government’s decision to prohibit these and other rituals involving Native musical practices. It is easy to understand how large numbers of seemingly fanatical Ghost Dancers might alarm local agents and white farmers who feared an uprising, but why had the agents attempted to stop the movement almost from its inception? Also, why had the government attempted to eradicate the Sun Dance and the potlatch, which did not in any way threaten government control of the Native Americans or the safety of white settlers?

Arguments against these ceremonies typically fell into one or more of the following three categories: health, morality, and economics.20 Indian agents and missionaries observed that epidemics often broke out following a major ceremonial event, and attributed it to the fact that large numbers of people were camping in close quarters under unsanitary conditions for an extended period of time. In the case of the potlatch, Indian agents also claimed that families often went without proper nourishment and supplies prior to the event so that money could be used to buy ceremonial gifts.21

19 Andersson, The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890, 91-96.
20 Cole and Chaikin, An Iron Hand upon the People, 18.
21 Ibid., 18-19.
Morality was a concern in cases when Native traditions conflicted with Christian principles. The practice of tethering principal dancers to a pole by piercing the skin or hanging heavy objects from incisions was a common element of the Sun Dance for many tribes. Sometimes, fingers were sacrificed. These types of rituals seemed shocking and barbaric to white settlers.

The main argument against these traditions, however, was based on economics and the desire to assimilate Native Americans into white society. Events that lasted for extended periods of time took the people’s focus away from practices such as farming and education that the government was attempting to instill in Native Americans. A major part of fishing season was lost, land was not cultivated, and children failed to attend school due to spring potlatching. Instead of earnings being used for social betterment, they were hoarded and used to purchase potlatch gifts. At the height of the Ghost Dance’s popularity, agent J. George Wright attempted to put an end to it by arresting its leaders and withholding rations from those who participated in it. He stated that it must be stopped because it was “interfering with schools and causing a total neglect of stock.” He also believed that it caused participants to become “completely exhausted physically, morally, and intellectually,” and made them “reckless and defiant.”

Regarding the Ghost Dance, Joe Starita states:

Where the Indian now saw relief from misery and despair, their caretakers saw something else: a regression, an ominous backsliding from a decade of civilizing influence. By the fall of 1890, while the Lakota viewed it as a harbinger of a

---

24 Andersson, The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890, 105.
hopeful future, the government saw the Ghost Dance as a return to the barbarous past.\(^{25}\)

These customs interfered with the attainment of the government’s goal to “civilize” the Native American by assimilation. In addition to bans on musical and religious practices, Native children were sent to boarding schools to remove them from the cultural influences of their tribes.\(^{26}\) It is apparent that the ultimate agenda was to end conflict with Native peoples by pulling them into the American melting pot. The loss of their ethnic identity and customs was insignificant and perhaps even desirable.

As a result of this policy, those Native Americans who grew up during the first part of the twentieth century did not have the opportunity to learn many of their tribal ceremonies, and consequently many musical traditions stopped being passed on to younger generations during that period of history.\(^{27}\) States Bryan Burton:

> The only legal performances of Native American music for nearly an entire generation were for theatrical purposes (Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show,” for example) and for tourist groups near reservations such as performances at the Grand Canyon or for the Santa Fe Railroad’s special travel concessions.\(^{28}\)

It was not until the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 that indigenous Americans were guaranteed the right to believe, express, and exercise their traditional religions through access to sacred sites, possession and use of sacred objects,


and the practice of traditional ceremonies and rites. By that time, many songs and musical traditions had been lost.

For those Native Americans who left the traditional way of life and joined mainstream American society, there was another factor that contributed to the decline of Native musical practices. White Americans of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a negative and stereotyped view of Native Americans, and, as a result, many Native Americans chose to ignore their heritage and forget the old ways. Hazel W. Hertzberg relates the following widely held stereotypes about Native Americans:

Indians were variously—and vaguely—thought of as noble savages, romantic redmen, drunken degenerates, oil-rich primitives, pathetic victims of the white man’s greed, “the vanishing Americans,” bloodthirsty savages, at once strong, silent, war-whooping, enduring, and nonexistent. An Indian spoke in a deep guttural and said “How,” “Heap Big,” “Ugh,” added “um” to most of his words, and never used the definite article. Sometimes Indians stood with arms impassively folded. In greeting, an Indian raised his arm in solemn salute. Indians also appeared on horseback on a promontory silhouetted against the sky before swooping down on a wagon train. Indians smoked peacepipes, referred to money as “wampum,” and wore magnificent feather war bonnets. Indian women were “squaws”—hard-working and oppressed drudges who did the heavy labor while the men danced around the campfire. All the “squaws” wore a beaded band across their foreheads and sported braids. Indian warriors delighted in taking scalps but were otherwise lazy. However, a few Indians went to an eastern college called Carlisle where their main activity was playing on winning football teams. Most Indian men were chiefs and women princesses. Everyone knew that Indians worshipped “the Great Spirit” and went to a place called “the Happy Hunting Ground” when they died.

Concealment of Native ancestry occurred not so much from a sense of shame but from a desire to avoid ignorant stereotypical comments from whites. All of these


elements worked together to destroy many of the cultural traditions of tribes throughout
North America.

During the 1960s, the attitude toward ethnicity in general and Native American
ancestry in particular began to change in the United States. Native American culture was
embraced by adherents of the “hippie” counter-culture probably because Indians were
seen as living in harmony with nature and having been defrauded by the United States
government. Since hippies aspired to the former and identified with the latter, the
glorification of the Indian’s perceived tragic and heroic history inspired headbands, long
hair, fringe, feathers, and beads. Although this image of the Indian now appears racist,\(^{32}\) at the time it placed Native culture and traditions in a positive light and helped make
being Indian something of which to be proud. This time period also saw the emergence
of other demonstrations of ethnic pride, such as the “black is beautiful” slogan, the
establishment of Kwanzaa, and the efforts to preserve traditions among Americans of
such ethnic backgrounds as Polish, Irish, and Italian.\(^{33}\)

This social climate produced an awakening of interest by Americans of Native
descent in the musical and dance traditions of their ancestors. Unfortunately, many tribal
traditions, and indeed whole tribal languages, had been long forgotten by this time.\(^{34}\)
This was especially true for Eastern Woodlands peoples. Says Burton:

The search for “authenticity” in Native American music has been hampered by
several factors: (1) the total elimination of numerous tribal cultures; (2) concerted
efforts by missionaries and early settlers to “civilize” Indians and eliminate

---


\(^{34}\) Ibid., 224.
“paganistic” dances and songs’ (3) distrust of white scholars by Native Americans (even today, there is what might be called a “BS factor” in evaluating information given to non-native Americans regarding ceremonial aspects of music); (4) the inordinately long delay in recognizing the value of the Native American culture. In short, many Native American music and dance traditions have been irretrievably lost.\textsuperscript{35}

How then can people whose ancestors participated in these lost traditions hope to reconnect with their roots? In some cases, Native Americans have adopted songs, dances and customs from other tribes. According to C. A. Weslager, when people have lost their own tribal distinctiveness, substituting other Native American cultural traditions enables the participants to keep alive an Indian consciousness and identity.\textsuperscript{36} In other cases, they may take elements of Native American culture and implement them in accordance with their own modern ideas or conjecture about their ancestors' views.

The concept of Pan-Indianism, or cultural practices reflecting general Indian ancestry without regard to specific tribal origins, is a major factor influencing Native American music today. It provides a basis for those with lost traditions to participate in activities that are uniquely Native American. In addition, it has united people from many tribal backgrounds in an effort to dispel the stereotypes regarding American Indians.\textsuperscript{37} Also, Pan-Indianism may have served to preserve a Native American cultural identity. States Hertzberg:

Only a few decades ago most students of Indian affairs, together with many Indians, assumed that the Indian would eventually disappear as a distinct element in the American population. The assumption was shared by both those who regretted and those who welcomed its inevitability. This view has changed dramatically: it is now widely assumed that Indians will continue indefinitely as subgroups of the American people. If this latterday analysis is correct—and the

\textsuperscript{35} Burton, \textit{Moving Within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance}, 6.

\textsuperscript{36} Weslager, \textit{The Nanticoke Indians}, 20.

\textsuperscript{37} Hertzberg, \textit{The Search for an American Indian Identity}, 319.
evidence supporting it is formidable—Pan-Indianism seems likely not only to continue but to increase in importance.\textsuperscript{38}

The Native American flute, once prevalent throughout the United States, is the subject of a revival that began in the twentieth century. A fipple flute that is typically made of cane or wood, the Native American flute was once prevalent throughout the United States. As Coronado explored what is now the southern Plains and southwestern United States, chroniclers of the expedition recorded that they heard beautiful flute music being played by the residents of those areas. Lewis and Clark also noted that many of the Native peoples they met “played airs upon their whistles and flageolets.”\textsuperscript{39} Played exclusively by men, some tribes used the flute strictly as a courting instrument, and some incorporated it into healing, rain, or fertility rituals.\textsuperscript{40} Playing styles and methods of flute construction differed from one tribe to the next.

During the period when Native American music and ceremonies were prohibited, the flute largely fell into disuse. Rarely, if ever, did Native Americans who were born in the mid-twentieth century hear the flute being played and, therefore, they grew up knowing little about it. This stimulated the curiosity of individuals from this generation, both Native and white, to study written accounts of flute playing, to listen to early recordings, and to interview tribal elders who may have played the flute or heard it played.\textsuperscript{41} Since many of the distinctive tribal flute traditions were lost, what emerged was an amalgamation of flute construction techniques and playing styles from various

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 319-320.

\textsuperscript{39} Bryan Burton, \textit{Voices of the Wind} (Danbury, CT: World Music Press, 1998), 4-5.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{41} Conlon, “The Native American Flute: Convergence and Collaboration as Exemplified by R. Carlos Nakai,” 64-65.
regions of North America. Although the typical modern Native American flute most closely resembles the traditional Plains-style flute, the instrument is used to play a wide variety of music reflecting many different musical styles, including traditional tribal songs, improvisations, and even contemporary pop and jazz. Lost tribal flute traditions have given way to new Pan-Indian flute practices.

To understand modern Native American music, it is necessary to study Pan-Indian musical groups and the viewpoints and attitudes of those who participate in such activities on a regular basis. Since modern Native American flute practices are an example of Pan-Indianism, the study of flutists and flute groups can increase understanding regarding the future direction of flute playing, the establishment of flute traditions, and trends affecting Pan-Indian music in general.

---

CHAPTER II

THE NORTHEAST OHIO FLUTE CIRCLE: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The establishment of Native American flute circles is a fairly recent phenomenon. As the popularity of Native American flutes has grown and increasing numbers of people have purchased flutes without knowing how to play them, groups that are able to provide support and impart knowledge about the technical, spiritual, and traditional aspects of flute playing have become essential. In response to this need, the International Native American Flute Association was formed to foster the advancement, appreciation, preservation, and understanding of the Native American flute, as well as other world flute traditions.\(^1\) INAFA sponsors annual flute conventions and maintains archives of books and recordings, a directory of flute instructors, and a listing of flute circles from around the world. The website of INAFA offers the following rationale for the establishment of local flute circles:

Every beginning flute player travels the same path—being consumed with an eagerness to learn how to play, and being overwhelmed with the frustration of searching for someone or something to help in the learning process. The availability of learning sources has been improving in the last five years, but there is still the agony of "how can I find someone to teach me what I want to learn?"

That need is very appropriately filled by Flute Circles which are materializing in several states across the country. Although each Flute Circle is unique in the manner in which it is organized, there are a few characteristics that most have in common. A Flute Circle provides a venue in which people who are interested in the Native American flute can gather and share their talents and experiences with one another. It is a gathering in which people can help one another musically, spiritually, and educationally. Meeting schedules for the Flute Circles vary.

Flute Circle gatherings provide a sense of connection that results in everyone growing musically, from the beginner to the recording artist. People feel a

---

spiritual bond created by the music of the flute. It is much like the camaraderie that develops at a flute workshop. In a Flute Circle, a type of flute family develops. Often times, one learns more through the people connection than through reading books or listening to tapes and CDs. Ultimately, the greatest teacher is still the flute itself, but when one is in a rut or when one’s playing is stuck on a plateau, nothing gives an individual a greater boost than to spend time with other flute players.²

The Oregon Flute Circle, based in Eugene, Oregon, is recognized as the first official flute circle in the United States. In August of 1993, Sherrie Kuhl attended a one-week workshop at a ranch outside of Helena, Montana. The workshop was entitled, “Renaissance of the Native American Flute,” and was led by flutist R. Carlos Nakai. Kuhl found it very beneficial and rewarding to learn the flute by watching and listening to other players at the workshop, and was unhappy about having to wait until the following summer before she could again participate in a flute group. During the workshop, Nakai had proposed the concept of the flute circle in one of his presentations, and Kuhl returned to Oregon with the intent of starting one in Eugene. She contacted three other flute players: Jeff Calavan, owner of the Oregon Flute Store, Calavan’s brother, Ted Calavan, and Elizabeth White. White was the only member of the group with any Native blood, and none had much knowledge about playing the flute. They began meeting on a regular basis to study and practice the techniques that Kuhl had learned at the workshop. Word spread about the flute circle, and within three years, the group had seventy-five members from eighteen states and two foreign countries. Eventually, members outside of the Eugene, Oregon area began establishing flute circles in their own geographic areas.³ The Oregon Flute Circle’s creed is “To listen to the wind

³ Sherrie Kuhl, e-mail message to author, April 2, 2010.
and hear its voice, to harmonize with the sounds of nature--we come together to learn, to share, to create, not as men and women, but as Children of the Earth--a family of flute people.”

These organizations are identified as “circles” rather than clubs, associations, or societies, since the symbol of the circle holds tremendous importance in Native American culture. This is rather typical of Native American-based musical groups. Says Burton:

In all Native American cultures, the image of the circle may be found again and again. It is found in the dances, the art, the shape of the lodgings. The circle, however, is more than an artistic or architectural device: the circle is the basis of all Native American beliefs. Everything is connected to everything else with all people, nature, and the Creator being part of the universal circle. Wherever one goes, and whoever one becomes, one remains part of all existence and must seek to maintain that balance in nature which the Navajo call “Hozho”—Beauty. When one walks in Beauty, one is in harmony with the universe and is moving within the Circle.

The Northeast Ohio Flute Circle (hereafter referred to as the NEOFC or simply the flute circle), was founded in April, 2001 by two professional musicians of Cherokee descent. One of the founders and president of the group, Carla Holtz, is a classically trained flutist who holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music performance. The other, Michael Searching Bear Smallridge, had been a percussionist before becoming a Native American flutist and flute maker. The two observed that there was a growing interest in the Native American flute in Northeastern Ohio among people who had little or no experience with wind instruments. People who had very little musical experience were purchasing flutes from local flute makers and at Native American flute conventions. Believing that a local gathering to share music, information, instruction, and fellowship

---


5 Bryan Burton, Moving Within the Circle: Contemporary Native American Music and Dance (Danbury, CT: World Music Press, 1993), 17.
would help to make the Native American flute more accessible and rewarding to play for both skilled flutists and those who lacked musical experience, the two musicians established the NEOFC.

The flute circle’s mission statement outlined its purpose as follows:

Our mission is to provide a forum for the exchange of information on Native American flutes including related music, resources, history, performers, and playing techniques. We endeavor to provide this information in regular fellowship that promotes performing, education, and the exchange of ideas in a nurturing, positive atmosphere.  

A convention of the International Native American Flute Association was held at Kent State University in June of 2001. The event featured a wide array of workshops that addressed flute-related cultural traditions, performance techniques, and flute construction. Each evening of the convention concluded with concerts by nationally known Native American flutists. The concert audiences were not limited to registered convention participants but also included many people from the Kent area as well. This event awakened an interest in the flute among many people in the Kent area, who then purchased flutes from convention vendors. Carla Holtz, who was one of the convention organizers, distributed flyers about the newly-established NEOFC, and some of the Northeastern Ohio residents who had recently purchased flutes began attending the flute circle meetings. The earliest meetings of the group consisted of a core group of four people, but during 2005 and 2006, it was common for twenty to thirty people to be in attendance. People from as far away as Pennsylvania, southwestern Ohio, and Michigan frequented NEOFC meetings. There were no dues collected and no official membership

---

6 Carla Holtz, e-mail message to author, January 16, 2009.
roster existed per se, but any repeat attendees were acknowledged as members of the group.

The flute circle met one Saturday evening per month. Most often the president hosted the event, but members sometimes took turns offering their homes for meetings. The vast majority of meetings were held in Portage County. During warm weather, meetings were often held outdoors around a fire. Typically, the gatherings opened with a business report by the president. Included in the report was information about what transpired at the last meeting, upcoming events and/or performances involving NEOFC members, and general Native American flute news. In addition, the president sometimes presented educational information based on her research of Native American flute traditions. Participants were then encouraged to raise questions or issues for discussion. Often members who made or purchased new flutes would use this time to show their instruments to the group. This would often give rise to discussions about the effects of different woods on tone quality, the merits of flutes built in particular keys, the aesthetic effects of finishes and carvings, comparisons with flutes by different flute makers, and specialized flute types such as whistles and drones. A “jam session” followed the discussion. There was a sense within the group that “jamming” was the real reason why they had come to the meeting, and usually all but the shyest of novices joined in enthusiastically.

A wide variety of activities occurred during these playing sessions. Sometimes one person would play a solo, but most of the time he or she would be accompanied by guitar, hand drums, and shakers. Often a basket of small percussion instruments would be passed around, and attendees would be encouraged to take an instrument and join in
the creation of a rhythmic background to accompany the flutist. It was also common for two flutists to play together. Usually, duets were either performed on two flutes built in the same key or flutes pitched a third, fourth, or fifth apart. The pairing of duet partners was largely determined by the keys of the flutes that each person brought with them. It was common to hear such questions as, “I have a D and a B flat. Does anyone have anything that goes with one of those?” In time, frequent attendees became familiar with the keys of the flutes owned by others in the group and could invite someone to play with them without having to make inquiries about the keys of the person’s flutes. Duets often took the form of call-and-response or melody with ostinato. Usually, the two players would have a brief discussion to plan what they were going to do. Regardless of the ability level of the performers, the listeners were very attentive and encouraging.

Most of this playing was improvisational, which is consistent with traditional Native American flute custom. Tribal tales of the flute’s origin and purpose usually include statements indicating that the player’s music was derived from nature or from his innermost emotions. The format of these improvisational pieces was inconsistent with traditional flute improvisation, since there is no evidence that duets, call-and-response playing, or melodies with ostinato were ever prevalent among Native American flute players of the past. However, flute circle members maintained a link to traditional flute playing by utilizing time-honored ornamentation in order to imitate the style heard in Native vocal performances and early flute recordings.

Occasionally vocal songs would be played on flutes. One member of the group wrote an arrangement of a traditional Cherokee melody for three flutes. This

---

arrangement was rehearsed at a flute circle meeting and was later performed publicly. On another occasion, a guest taught the group to sing a Cherokee lullaby. Some of the members then figured out how to play it on flutes. Some formally trained musicians in the group also occasionally shared music books containing traditional Native American songs. At times, the hosts had access to electronic amplifying equipment, and members of the group enjoyed playing into microphones and producing effects such as “canyon echoes.”

The flute circle maintained a website and also appeared on a list of flute circles on the INAFA website. As a result, the group was frequently contacted to provide performances for the public. During the course of its existence, flute circle members played and/or gave educational presentations at powwows, ethnic festivals, a New Year’s Eve First Night celebration, summer community concerts, and exhibits of Native American art. Whenever the flute circle as a group provided music for public events, any remuneration that was received always went into the NEOFC treasury. Members agreed that they should not receive payment for performances that were done on behalf of the group. A few members eventually began playing as soloists at such events, taking their own bookings apart from the flute circle.

The organization held two special events during its existence. In the summer of 2004, the group held a three-day outdoor get-together that was billed as “Flute-R-Rama.” One member who lived in a rural area and owned several acres of land offered his property for the event. Some flutists and their families pitched tents, built a bonfire, roasted hot dogs and marshmallows, and camped out on Friday and Saturday nights. Reportedly, there was much flute playing around the fire before bedtime. During the day
on Saturday, members and their families who elected to sleep at home joined the campers for a day of Native American-inspired entertainment. There were stations where people could make crafts such as gourd rattles to play with flutes and bead wraps to decorate their flutes. There was also an archery range. A woman of Cherokee ancestry taught beading, and several other activities were conducted by a member who as a Boy Scout leader was well-acquainted with American Indian-style crafts. A number of flute circle members donated Native American jewelry and other objects for a silent auction that was used to cover the weekend’s expenses. There was a large pot-luck dinner following the afternoon’s activities, and the host, a truck driver, offered a flat-bed trailer for use as a stage. He set up microphones and amplification equipment, and flute players took turns performing on the trailer. Saturday night also ended with a bonfire and more flute playing before people headed home or retired to their tents. The campers packed up and left on Sunday.

The second major event occurred in November of 2005. The NEOFC sponsored a performance and educational presentation by Mark Holland, a renowned flutist and recording artist. The event was again held at the same rural home, and was more like a flute circle meeting than a concert. Holland performed his own material, but also gave circle members a chance to improvise with him and talk about playing techniques.

During the months following the Mark Holland visit, attendance at meetings began to decline. This was largely due to the fact that a small group of members began creating interpersonal conflicts. Some left as a means of resolving the conflict, and others who were not directly involved in the quarrel stopped participating because they disliked the atmosphere it created within the group. When the president became pregnant
and realized that she would have to reduce her time commitments, she made the decision to disband the NEOFC. Although she hoped that the members would still wish to meet and play their flutes together, she believed that the NEOFC was too closely associated with her. She expected that she would still be contacted for information about meetings and public performances even after she had stepped down as president, and thought that the disbanding of the group was necessary in order to provide herself with the time she would need as a new mother. Perhaps if the group had not been in a weakened state at the time, a new president would have emerged who could have assumed leadership and protected the former president from intrusions into her personal life. Since no one volunteered to fill that role, the NEOFC was disbanded in the fall of 2006.
CHAPTER III

NATIVE AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE NEOFC

NEOFC attendees can easily be divided into two categories. One group consisted of people who had no Native American ancestry. This group could be further divided into two subgroups: people who enjoyed playing the flute for fun and relaxation, and people whose flute playing was the outgrowth of an interest in or an affinity for all things Native American. These non-Native participants saw NEOFC meetings as a way of learning about the flute and improving their playing. Typically, members in this category attended sporadically or attended regularly for a period of time and then fell away. Once they had enough knowledge about playing techniques, many felt that they had gotten what they had come for and were now equipped to play the instrument for their own edification.

The second group consisted of individuals who had some Native American blood. The motives of this group seem quite different from those of the former group. Members who fit into this category founded the NEOFC and kept it running during its five-year existence. A core group of these individuals attended nearly every meeting and developed close friendships among themselves that continued even after the demise of the flute circle. Although becoming more proficient on the instrument was an important reason to attend meetings for these people, they had a deeper commitment to the flute circle and to the flute itself. While few of these individuals would be recognized on the street as Native Americans, they identified themselves as such. For them, attendance at NEOFC meetings was not just about playing the flute; it was an opportunity to meet and
bond with others of similar background and participate in a musical practice rooted in their cultural heritage.

All but one of these individuals came from Eastern Woodlands tribes, with Cherokee being the most common tribe of origin. Their parents and grandparents had grown up during the early twentieth century when those with Native ancestry were often looked down upon by white society. Most of these flute circle members had learned stories and traditions of their heritage from parents and grandparents, but were taught to conceal their ethnicity when they were outside the home. One man of Cree descent recalled his mother repeatedly telling him throughout his childhood that he should never tell anyone that he was an Indian. Since Eastern Woodlands peoples have been interacting with others of European descent for four hundred years, most of them have a fair amount of Caucasian blood and are not easily identifiable as Native Americans. This fact enabled the families of the flute circle members to assimilate into the mainstream white culture of the United States, but this assimilation seemed to leave these Native Americans with a desire to participate in some activities reflective of their Native heritage as well. For some, their heritage may have been manifested through hairstyle and dress, study of tribal folklore, powwow attendance, use of a Native name in place of or in addition to their legal surnames, study of herbs and other Native methods of healing, or the making of Native-style crafts. For all of them, music was a means of connecting to the spiritual and ceremonial elements of their ancestral pasts, and the flute was the tool with which they made this connection.

It must be noted that a few other Native Americans visited the flute circle but did not elect to become regular attendees. Although they were interested in music, several of
these people were deeply involved in other Native American-related activities that took precedence over the flute circle. One admitted she was not interested in attending the flute circle on a continuing basis because she found it “not spiritual enough.” Those who follow traditional Native American religious beliefs acknowledge the existence of spirits that inhabit the natural world and are closely interconnected with the activities of humans. Sam Gill explains Native spirituality as follows:

Native American spirituality builds upon its ancient roots in the American soil and a spiritual way of life that reveres the land as a mother, often formalized as Mother Earth, and respects as kin all plants and animals, indeed, all of nature.¹

For those who hold this view, music is considered to be a part of the natural world and is therefore connected to the spiritual world. One flute circle attendee explained that rhythm is the heartbeat of Mother Earth, and demonstrated her belief that music and nature are spiritually interconnected when she found significance in the fact that a hawk flew overhead at the conclusion of an outdoor performance. This particular individual had been raised in a Native American community and had learned these beliefs as a child, but others had gone to seminars with medicine men in order to learn traditional Native spiritual beliefs. The fact that the majority of flute circle attendees did not express these beliefs with regard to music apparently left some spiritually minded visitors dissatisfied.

The lack of overt Native American spirituality was intentional on the part of the circle’s founders, because they did not want the group to promote any particular religious beliefs or practices. The founders’ professed philosophy was that flute playing is a personal matter. If one intends to use flute playing as a New Age meditation method, a means of communing with the natural world, or a means of relaxing and shifting focus

from the stress of the day’s events prior to Christian prayer and Bible study, the flute circle should equip the participant for that purpose. The spiritual element of flute playing belonged with the individual, not with the group.

The founders of the flute circle were committed Christians. Although one of them believed it is possible to reconcile Christian and Native religious beliefs without conflict, other Christian members of the group felt discomfort about religious practices that acknowledged spirits and pantheistic beliefs. Although it was readily accepted that flute playing is a spiritual act, leaving the individual to define that spirituality was considered the best way to ensure that all would feel comfortable and welcome at meetings. If those who found the group lacking in spirituality would have continued to attend but would have pressed for changes within the flute circle, it probably would have caused the group to fracture. The followers of Native religion and the Christians were uncomfortable enough with each other’s beliefs that endorsing one over the other would likely have caused the minority members to leave the group. If there had been an equal number of members in each group, a split in the circle may have been inevitable. Acknowledging traditional spiritual beliefs but not incorporating them into flute circle meetings was seen as a compromise by the founders.

Clearly, there were other people of Native American descent who were deeply involved in Indian culture and religion and found this aspect of NEOFC meetings unsatisfying. These visitors typically dressed in Native American style and talked about other activities they engaged in, such as beading, drumming, and sweat lodges. By contrast, the Native Americans with a strong commitment to the group exhibited a greater commitment to the flute than to other Native American activities. Despite the fact that
some participants appeared to be more deeply immersed in Native culture than others, there was never any hint of conflict between those who chose to express their heritage in an overt manner and those who did not. Statements about one’s tribal background were accepted without question, even though the person’s physical features may have appeared European. While some attendees wore unusual garb, this fact was never acknowledged, other than the occasional inquiry about who did their beading or the significance of symbols found on their jewelry or clothing.

The extent to which flute circle attendees of Native descent identified as Native Americans and the manner in which they defined their Indianness seemed to have an impact on NEOFC participation. All were similar in that they grew up in states in or near the Great Lakes region (including Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Michigan, Illinois, and New York). With one exception, all traced their heritage to Eastern Woodlands tribes, and, although they had varying degrees of tribal association, all incorporated Pan-Indianism into their lifestyles. One had lived on a reservation, but she had been adopted at the age of two by a couple of European descent and had no recollection of her Indian family or their way of life.

What elements may have contributed to the formation of a Native American identity among these NEOFC members? Several scholars have developed theories regarding the development of identity among Native Americans, and an examination of these ideas may shed some light on the differences in commitment to the flute circle on the part of its Native American attendees.

According to Vine Deloria, Jr., Native American thinking differs from Western European thinking in that Europeans view the human experience as linear, whereas
Native Americans view it in spatial terms. In European thought, time is of critical importance. The present is the result of the past, and time is ultimately related to the destiny of humankind. In contrast, Native Americans have traditionally viewed all aspects of life as related to a geographic place. Their experiences with their surroundings over thousands of years of living on their ancestral lands governed their religious beliefs and their ways of life. The clash between linear and spatial thinking has been at the root of much of the conflict between Native Americans and white Americans.\(^2\) The European-derived belief that land could be possessed by people was at odds with the Native view that land could be occupied but not owned, since Mother Earth is a spiritual entity that is the source of all life. Since Native peoples were unwilling to sell their lands to white settlers in accordance with the European model, the government implemented forced Indian relocation programs and proposed treaties designed to acquire tribal lands. When faced with the loss of homelands that defined their tribal identities and their way of life, many Native Americans chose to raid homesteads or conduct full-scale uprisings to protect their territories.

This place-oriented identity is reflected by Wahpetunwan Dakota writer and scholar, Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, who states that she prefers to use the term “Indigenous” over “American Indian,” “Indian,” and “Native American” because of “the implicit notion of coming from the land and being of the land. This is not only an accurate description of our people’s origins, it is also a political declaration about our claims to the land.”\(^3\)

---

Nicholas C. Peroff and Danial R. Wildcat believe that the degree to which a Native American holds to a spatial orientation has a major impact upon that person’s identity as an Indian. They state:

American Indian identities can be placed on a continuum. At one end lies a spatially defined Indian identity fundamentally shaped and literally “grounded” in specific, geographically identifiable places. At the other end lies an aspatial Indian identity that is essentially disconnected from a geographically identifiable place and formed in the dominant American society.4

Tribal living plays a key role in the transfer of cultural, spiritual, and philosophical elements of what it means to be Native American. Without this immersion in the ethnic culture, one is left to define oneself through information acquired outside the culture.

According to Peroff and Wildcat:

Far more than spatial Indianness, aspatial Indian identity is shaped by metaphor generated at a higher level of organizational complexity in the labyrinth of interacting systems and subsystems that is contemporary American society… With a few exceptions, an aspatial Indian identity is a characteristic of people with, at best, an attenuated, indirect, or even a fictitious and invented knowledge of tribal histories and cultures… A crucial point here is that an aspatial Indian identity is a creation of the diverse body of metaphor generated by formal institutions responsible for education and socialization within the dominant society and sold to individuals through the mass media. For the most part, an aspatial Indian identity is not shaped by social interaction with or between spatially defined Indians… Spatially defined Indian tribal identity in its most expressive totality cannot be taught; rather, it emerges from the experience of real life activities and events, some everyday in character and some extraordinary.5

By definition, then, all of the people of Native American descent who visited or continuously participated in NEOFC meetings had aspatial Indian identities. It is possible that those who participated more widely in a variety of Native American traditions may have had more contact with spatial thinkers and spatially oriented

5 Ibid., 355.
experiences, which may have accounted for some of the dissatisfaction with the NEOFC’s stand on spirituality. However, Peroff and Wildcat caution about attempting to assess the degree of any individual’s spatial thinking:

The distinction between spatial and aspatial Indianness is not rigid or unyielding. Indian identity is not something that is simply declared and maintained, fast and fixed. Spatial and aspatial Indian identities are grounded in metaphors shaped by differing human experiences within distinctive environments, and any attempt to precisely determine, on a person-to-person basis, if one person’s Indianness is more or less spatial than that of another person will and must fail. There is no clear dividing line between Indian identities and the defining features of Indianness shift and change with time.6

While the degree of spatial thinking may be related to the degree of satisfaction with the NEOFC, it is impossible to determine that with certainty. Another model of Native American identity proposed by Liebler may also shed some light on the differences in commitment to the group on the part of people with Native American ancestry.

Liebler identified three perspectives that may aid in understanding the concept of Native American identity. People exhibiting the first perspective, symbolic ethnic identity, have an awareness of their ethnicity, but it has very little relevance to their daily lives. The second perspective, situational identity, fluctuates according to the time and place, and varies according to the needs of the individual. Both of these perspectives are culturally based. The third perspective, pan-Indian identity, is rooted in race.7 Those with a pan-Indian identity view themselves as racially different from other Americans of European, Asian, or African ancestry and may consequently feel it is impossible for them

6 Ibid., 358.
to assimilate fully. It follows that such individuals would embrace their heritage to a
greater degree than others with a culturally based identity, and would seek to immerse
themselves in activities with others of a similar identity for support. Using these
perspectives to look at the identities of NEOFC members of Native descent, it appears
that the flute circle appealed most strongly to those with a situational identity. The
people of Native descent who attended the NEOFC meetings most consistently appeared
to be mainstream Americans in physical appearance and daily lifestyle, but identified
themselves as Native Americans and participated in hobbies and activities related to their
heritage. The people who found the group lacking from a spiritual and/or cultural
standpoint probably best reflected the pan-Indian identity, since they tended to favor
Native American activities, beliefs, and dress as opposed to those of most non-Native
Americans. Their choice to immerse themselves in Native culture and present an
outward appearance as Indians may stem from an acknowledgement of racial difference.
Dressing and living “white” may seem deceptive and unauthentic to people who do not
consider themselves to be Caucasian.

Those who were most deeply immersed in Native culture may have had less of an
interest in the flute as a result of the fact that flute playing is a modern revival. If one is
doing a traditional dance, singing traditional songs, or participating in tribal ceremonies
or customs, there is awareness that these activities were performed by his or her ancestors
in much the same way. A connection with the ancient past exists under those
circumstances that cannot be present as a result of flute playing, due to the fact that
today’s flute and the customs surrounding it are very different from ancient flute
traditions.
Regardless of religious background, members of the flute circle readily accepted the idea of flute playing being spiritual in nature. Tribes that played the flute typically had legends that served to explain its origins. The Kiowa and the Omaha tell stories of a poor lost boy who is given a flute and a song by a spirit or a mysterious voice.\(^1\) Comanche folklore includes the story of a brave who lies down under a cedar tree and hears a beautiful sound. It turns out to be the wind blowing through a hollow broken branch.\(^2\) A Lakota version of this story states that an actual melody was played by the wind because a woodpecker had drilled holes in the branch. The brave fasts and prays for guidance because he wants to learn to make a branch sing. The woodpecker appears to him in a vision, turns into a man, and shows the young brave how to make a flute.\(^3\) These types of stories were familiar to the flute circle, although their retelling was often punctuated with humor and obvious skepticism.

While the members may have been unconvinced regarding the flute’s supposed supernatural origins, there was still a reverence for the instrument itself. Its construction involves a high degree of precision and craftsmanship, yet it is simple enough that even the musically unschooled can play it. Whereas a variety of tunings exist, the modern instrument is typically built to play a minor pentatonic scale. Flutes can normally play

---


\(^2\) Ibid.

five notes plus the upper tonic, and many can play notes up to three semitones above that. Additional notes are playable by using cross fingerings (opening a hole between two closed holes). This pentatonic tuning enables the player to improvise pleasing melodies with a minimum of theoretical knowledge.

Flutes are commonly built with either five or six finger holes. Five-hole flutes are typically associated with Plains tribes and six-hole flutes with Southwestern tribes, but the number of holes on a modern flute is more often the result of the flute maker’s personal preference rather than his tribal affiliation. The six-hole flute requires the player to use three fingers of each hand. On the five-hole flute, only two fingers are used on the top hand. Although the number of holes does not affect the timbre of the flute, it does affect the pitches that it can produce. If the player covers all of the holes, the instrument’s lowest (tonic) pitch is produced. When the finger covering the bottom hole of a five-hole flute is lifted, the resulting pitch is a whole step higher. This pitch cannot be played on a six-hole flute. Uncovering the bottom hole on a six-hole flute produces instead a pitch three semitones above the tonic. Another difference exists at the top range of the flute. Five-hole flutes cannot produce a half step above the upper tonic, but that pitch can be played on some six-hole flutes. Figure 1 shows all of the notes that are possible on five-hole and six-hole flutes by using either basic fingerings or cross-fingerings. It must be noted that the ability to produce some or all of the notes above the upper tonic varies from flute to flute. This example is based on R. Carlos Nakai’s TABlature Finger Charts, which were devised to enable Native American flute music to be notated in one key but to be playable by people with flutes built in any key. This system requires that players relate fingerings to written notes as though all flutes were
built in the key of F#. \(^4\)

![Diagram of Five-Hole Native American Flute]

![Diagram of Six-Hole Native American Flute]

Figure 1. Notes Playable on Contemporary Five-Hole and Six-Hole Flutes

Among flute circle members, those with prior woodwind experience tended to prefer six-hole flutes. No doubt this was due to the fingering similarities between six-hole flutes and other woodwinds. Others who had never played woodwind instruments preferred five-hole flutes, expressing the opinion that they were less complicated.

Two instrument makers belonged to the flute circle and usually brought several of their flutes to the meetings. As others tried them out, it was apparent that each flute had its own unique voice. Members often remarked with some amazement that flutes made from the same type of wood and crafted by the same flute maker could sound and respond so differently. Historically, individuals made flutes for themselves and used the measurements of their own forearms, hands, and fingers to determine the instrument’s length and the placing of the finger holes. This created a wide diversity in tuning and tone quality even among flutes produced in the same village. \(^5\) Many flute makers today standardize tuning by using precise measurements in an attempt to create instruments that


match pitch among their own models. Pitch variations can be caused by such factors as exact length, inner bore size, and width and spacing of finger holes, however, since flutes are not crafted on assembly lines. These variations often produce the following result, according to Burton:

This also means that there are numerous notes on the Native American flute beyond the confines of the Western theory of “equal temperament” which may sound “out of tune” to the listener accustomed to Western art and popular music. Such variations in pitch are characteristic of the instrument and serve only to add to the unique beauty of the Native American flute.

Due to the fact that Native American flutes are increasingly being played with Western instruments, some flute makers are attempting to match the flute’s fundamental to standard Western tuning. This has led some to fear that the Native American flute will go the way of the transverse flute and evolve far from its origins as flute makers attempt to achieve tonal perfection. Despite this trend to standardize tuning, each flute remains highly individual in its sound and response. Native Americans speak of the flute having its own “spirit.” It is easy to see how a flute’s uniqueness could have caused it to be likened to the individuality of a living thing.

Not only was the construction of the flute considered by Native Americans to be spiritually derived, but music itself was believed to have magical powers. Says Bierhorst:

The idea that music has supernatural power is shared by Indians throughout North America. Music is used to cure disease, to bring rain, to win a lover, to defeat an enemy, to create a zone of protection around one’s self. If you can sing, you have

---

7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 51.
the ability to influence the world around you. This idea is still held by older Indians, but many younger ones just sing for pleasure today.\textsuperscript{10}

Although flute circle participants may have been skeptical of Native American stories about flute melodies being given by animals, spirits, and the wind,\textsuperscript{11} there was an acceptance within the group that the flute had a special “something.” It was not unusual for novice flute players to try their hand at improvisation and then express amazement at the beautiful melody they played. One NEOFC member said that after she finishes playing, she feels soothed and relaxed. It is as if she was meant to play those exact notes at that exact time. Another member stated that in explaining why the flute is so easy for people to learn to play, a fellow Cherokee flute maker said, “You don’t play the flute. The flute plays you."

One member told of hearing the flute for the first time when he was in his mid-twenties. Following a powwow, a group of people congregated in the campground area, and an elderly Iroquois man began to play the flute. The younger man continued to hear the sound of the flute in his mind long after the impromptu concert had ended, and he said that he knew the flute was his destiny. Indeed, today flute making and performing is his livelihood.

Although some participants said they chose to play the flute rather than engage in other Native American activities simply because they had prior experience as instrumental musicians, many Native Americans and non-Native Americans alike admitted that they were flute players because they derived some sort of personal spiritual satisfaction from it. It was not uncommon to hear a member or visitor state that flute

\textsuperscript{10} John Bierhorst, \textit{A Cry From the Earth} (Santa Fe, NM: Ancient City Press, 1975), 3.
\textsuperscript{11} Payne, \textit{The Native American Plains Flute}, 15.
playing had sustained them through periods of mourning, illness, or the breakup of their marriages.

The flute circle members also acknowledged a relationship between the flute and the natural world, as evidenced by their preference for meeting out-of-doors as weather permitted and by taking “flute hikes” in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. Lakotas shed light on this relationship by explaining how the flute brings humans and nature together. They say that the flute maker removes the heart of the wood as he hollows it out, but the player puts the heart back in as he plays it.12

It is this association between the flute and the spiritual and natural worlds that has made it popular among followers of the New Age movement. Sound therapist and researcher, Steven Halpern, Ph.D., claims that music can reduce stress, enhance immune function, balance brain-wave activity, reduce muscle tension, increase endorphin levels, and trigger feelings of inner peace.13 However, not all music is effective for these purposes. Halpern states that most Western art music is based upon the concepts of tension and resolution, which causes an anticipatory response in the listener. Therefore, he recommends that people who are seeking healing and relaxation should listen to “free-flowing soundscapes that invite you to be in the ‘hear’ and now rather than waiting for the other musical shoe to drop.”14 In an effort to provide such music to the public, Halpern founded the Inner Peace Music label and released an album entitled, “Spectrum Suite” in 1975.15 This album and similar recordings that followed soon became popular

---

14 Ibid.
15 Maria Armoudian, “Beyond Mainstream Marketing,” *Billboard*, (April 1, 1995), 64.
both with adherents of New Age philosophy and others who found that musical style enjoyable. This genre has become recognized as New Age music. Native American flute improvisation has figured into the New Age music scene, causing many non-Native people to listen to and/or play the flute for the purpose of relaxation or healing. The late New Age musician and composer, Kay Gardner, developed a theory regarding the manner in which music can bring about healing. According to Stephen A. Marini:

Gardner’s theory rested on the claim that music and the body are part of a larger physical universe which is governed by laws of vibration. Whether represented macrocosmically by Plains Indians as “the medicine wheel” or microcosmically in Hindu kundalini yoga as the doctrine of the chakras, sound is understood in most religious traditions as possessing unique power to link the sacred and the human.16

Gardner believed that musical overtones affect different aspects of the body. Much of her music combines melody with a drone because she believed that by sustaining a drone, the resulting overtones will make their presence felt within the listener.17 Calling melody “the heart and soul of music,” she believed it, too, plays a crucial part in facilitating healing. In an interview with Marini, Gardner explained her view of how Western music lost its healing power:

When we moved away from the primacy of the melody after 1600, when the bass line determined what the melody would be, that’s when we moved away from the healing element of music. Melody does something that harmony does not do. I really believe that it touches us very deeply, to the depths of the soul. It’s a heart thing, and we lost that in compositional music.18

It may be interesting to note that in recent years, many flute makers have begun making drone flutes. These instruments are twice the width of the typical flute, and have two

---

16 Stephen A. Marini, Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2003), 177.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
separate hollow chambers that converge at the mouthpiece. One side is left completely enclosed, and the other side has the typical finger holes. When the player blows through the flute, the enclosed side produces a drone while the opposite side is used to play a melody. This innovation may have come about as a result of this New Age concept of drone and melody creating healing vibrations, but to the members of the NEOFC, drone flutes were interesting because of the sound they produced. Both of the flute makers in the group made drones, and several of the members owned one.

While some of the non-Native flute circle attendees may have taken up the flute as a result of New Age claims regarding musical healing powers, the Native Americans in the group never advocated flute playing as a means of healing. Although most participants readily admitted that they derived spiritual satisfaction from playing it, they tended to view this as a very personal matter that was unique to them. They did not advocate flute playing and music as a means of solving everyone’s physical and emotional problems. However, if they had been given a technical explanation of the way musical vibrations interact with the body and mind according to such New Age musicians as Halpern and Gardner, it is likely that they would have been receptive to the information. Most had had some meaningful spiritual experience involving the flute and would probably have been interested in hearing an explanation as to why such experiences occurred. Although they probably would not have been interested in hearing about chakras and auras, they would have been likely to view the New Age musical perspective as an affirmation of their ancestors’ belief that music, nature, and mankind are all interconnected.
In the past, different tribes had different purposes for the flute. In many Native cultures, men used flutes to court prospective wives, but others used it in healing or fertility ceremonies and some played solely for personal enjoyment. In tribes where flutes were played, it was considered a man’s instrument and was not to be played by women. Some tribes did not play flutes at all. One study of flute distribution in the Americas lacked documentation for the existence of any flutes east of a line drawn from the Chicago area to Charleston, South Carolina. Since flute playing today has spread world-wide (in fact, one flute circle member of Native descent first became interested in the flute after hearing it played by an Australian), and women flute players are common, it is evident that flute playing in the twenty-first century is different than it was in the past. There are two likely reasons for this disparity.

First, little documentation exists about flute traditions, and Frances Densmore, who documented the music of the Seminole during the 1930s, had trouble finding anyone who remembered hearing it played. Tim R. Crawford and Kathleen Joyce-Grendahl state:

The lack of discussion of the flute in ethnomusicological and anthropological research either suggests that the instrument was never ubiquitous or possibly that the use of the instrument in many tribal cultures had undergone a substantial decline, which is certainly within the realm of possibility given the trauma of the many uprootings and changes being forced upon these cultures through the reservation system and its forced relocations.
While tribal upheavals may have dealt blows to flute playing, the problem was compounded by government suppression of Native American musical and ceremonial practices from the end of the nineteenth century through the early twentieth century. A number of flute enthusiasts concerned with preserving the traditional songs, flute construction, and playing styles began traveling the country during the 1950s and 1960s to interview tribal elders, collect songs, and visit museums housing archived flute recordings. These people, including Doc Tate Nevaquaya, Richard Payne, Kevin Locke, and Sonny Nevaquaya, began playing the flute and educating others about it in order to preserve traditional flute songs and playing style. Essentially, they have taken what is known about the instrument and, although they have done their best to remain true to its origins, have in fact reinvented the flute in a world very different from that of their ancestors. Hazel Hertzberg defines “ethnological feedback” as a situation where those with lost traditions consult the work of anthropologists to learn about their own cultures. This information is then incorporated into current cultural practices. The re-emergence of the Native American flute in the twentieth century is a good example of this phenomenon.

Another reason why today’s flute traditions have evolved away from those of past eras is the impact of Pan-Indianism upon music in general. Pan-Indianism first began as tribes banded together through activities such as the Ghost Dance in response to white

25 Ibid., 64-65.
encroachment, but as more Native Americans of mixed ancestry and multi-cultural experience emerged, they felt the need to establish an Indian identity beyond the tribe and within but distinct from the American social order. Some traditions have been borrowed from other tribes to replace those that were lost or forgotten during times of social upheaval. Burton cites an example of a courting song that exists among Native Americans as distant as the Lakota of South Dakota and the Nanticoke of Delaware. The song likely originated among the Lakota, but was learned by the Nanticoke from performers in Wild West shows during the early twentieth century.

The powwow has been the main vehicle for the establishment of Pan-Indianism in music. At powwows, people of many tribal affiliations join together in their traditional regalia to dance. The music consists of drumming and singing, and the songs originate from any number of tribal backgrounds. Anyone is welcome to join the dancing, even though the dance being done may not be reflective of that person’s tribal customs. The flute has no formal place in the main powwow activities, but flute workshops are often offered throughout the day and flutes may be available for purchase from vendor booths. Powwow music and dance blurs tribal boundaries, and has helped to create acceptance of Pan-Indianism in music by Native peoples throughout North America. The idea of blending musical elements from other tribes has spread throughout the Native American community, and can be found in Native popular music as well.

27 Ibid., 299.
28 Ibid., 300.
The synthesis of historical information regarding the flute has produced a modern flute tradition that belongs to no specific tribe, making it a prime example of Pan-Indianism. Says James H. Howard:

The borrowers of Pan-Indian forms are usually sublimely unaware of the specific tribal origins of the forms being borrowed. Instead they view their borrowing merely as the assumption or resumption of something “Indian” as opposed to something “White.” No matter that their own particular ancestors may have been totally unacquainted with the culture from which the Pan-Indian War dance, the Gourd dance, or Peyote religion derives. These forms are “Indian” and they, the borrowers, are “Indian” as well, or wish to be considered as such, and therefore adopt the form enthusiastically.  

With regard to the Native American flute, the trend today among professional performers and commercial recordings is not only Pan-Indian, but in many cases incorporates non-Indian instrumentation and musical styles. The recording career of flutist R. Carlos Nakai is a good example of this. Nakai, of Navajo/Ute ancestry, is considered by many to be the foremost Native American flute player of the late twentieth century. He is widely recognized for his musical accomplishments by Native Americans and non-Native Americans alike, and received the first Gold Record ever issued for an album of Native American music when his *Canyon Trilogy* sold 500,000 copies.  

Nakai was born in Arizona in 1946 and graduated from Northern Arizona University after majoring in music and education. In his youth, he played classical and jazz trumpet, but an automobile accident left him with damage to his facial muscles that ended his trumpet career. In 1972, Nakai received a Native American flute as a gift and soon began using the flute to express himself musically. Since the Navajo did not have a

---


history of playing the flute, Nakai studied and appropriated the flute styles and techniques of the Plains tribes.  

Nakai has done numerous traditional-style recordings based on tribal vocal traditions and bird calls, but he has also done recordings with jazz (transverse) flute, guitar, synthesizer, trap set, saxophone, and a classical chamber orchestra, as well as Japanese koto, shakuhachi, and shamisen. Says Nakai of his departure from the pure flute traditions of the past:

What I do is primarily not related to a predisposition to reiterate and romanticize what we were at one time but to look toward the future and to do things from my perspective, based on the influences that surround me… So as a cultural person, and one fairly well involved in the philosophies of the Utes, Navajos and the Zunis, it’s ‘never look back’ but always look toward tomorrow and see what the possibilities could be. I operate primarily from there.

On the pseudo performing things that allude to how we were before the cultural change came in the 1750s, and hearken back to almost a Disney-esque, Bambi kind of cultural perspective of what we used to be, I can’t do that. I don't live there now, I will never live there and I will never tread in the past…

Because there were very few people doing any of this when I started, I thought there had to be a way of bringing people to an awareness that we have to get out there and start doing new things. To pick up the pieces of what we had been doing in the old days and continue on down the road. I've had the support of many traditional elders in the contemporary culture who said 'Yeah, that's what we were supposed to be doing but unfortunately we've all given up.' I thought, 'Well, the only way to get people who've given up to start moving is to confront them with things.' I will continue to do that.

This trend to go beyond the traditional by incorporating other instruments and ethnic styles was reflected during flute circle meetings when flutes were accompanied by guitar and occasionally by African rhythm instruments. The diversity of instruments is even greater when the performances of members who play professionally are examined.

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 66-70.
One member has performed and made recordings with a Christian bluegrass group that includes acoustic guitar and mandolin, and another has done concerts and recordings with Irish bodhran, Aboriginal Australian didjeridoo, electric bass, Appalachian dulcimer, and Slovakian fujara.

While the flute circle participants expressed the desire to learn traditional Native American flute techniques such as pitch-bending, trills, tremolos, and “barking” (quick releases at the ends of phrases punctuated by a raised pitch), most of them did not believe that their music was traditional and “authentic” nor did they feel that it should be. As one member explained, the instrument itself has been so altered from the original method of tuning that it would be impossible to play true traditional flute music no matter how hard one tried. Strict adherence to authenticity would also prevent women from playing, which at least half the flute circle would have found objectionable. The group readily accepted the idea that although traditional Native American song styles and flute techniques can and should be incorporated into modern flute repertoire, Native American flute tradition is actually a twentieth-century innovation that draws on practices of the past.

While the members agreed that they wanted to see the basic elements of traditional flute playing preserved, they also had no objection to using the flute in contemporary musical styles with non-Native instruments. This view was expressed quite eloquently by one member who stated, “You can’t let tradition die, but that can’t be all there is. The world is a blend, so music should be a reflection of that.” Another member stated that adherence to tradition is important in so far that he wants his listeners to feel what he felt when he first heard the flute. “I want people to feel that magic,
because it is magical,” he said. “It is the only instrument that melds music and emotions. I can express any emotion through playing the flute.”

One Native American member presented a dissenting view with regard to authenticity. Since Native Americans traditionally improvised “from their hearts,” she reasoned that if she, as a Native American, improvises from her heart, it is authentic Native American music. A non-Native who improvised from his or her heart could not make that claim in her opinion. Most members of the group disagreed with her view, and some took issue with classifying flute players as authentic based on their degree of Native blood. This particular member also believed that it was important for merchants to differentiate between Native American music (performed by Native Americans) and Native American-style music (played by musicians of other ethnic backgrounds) when displaying CDs for sale.

While this viewpoint may seem specious on the surface, it appears to be analogous to a similar and widely held view among music consumers generally that rock is more “authentic” than pop music. Rock performances are thought to reflect the artist’s or composer’s innermost emotions or reflect and respond emotionally to a social milieu. Pop, on the other hand, is considered to be commodified music performed by artists whose looks and personalities sell recordings.35 Says Nicholas Cook:

Expressed a bit crudely (but then it is a bit crude), the thinking goes like this. Rock musicians perform live, create their own music, and forge their own identities; in short they control their own destinies. Pop musicians, by contrast, are the puppets of the music business, cynically or naively pandering to popular tastes, and performing music composed by others; they lack authenticity, and as such they come at the bottom of the hierarchy of musicianship.36

Just as the pop musician is considered by some to give inauthentic performances because he or she is not expressing true emotion regarding his or her social situation, so some may argue that a non-Native flute player cannot truly express emotions reflective of Native American lifestyle and world view. Therefore, flute music that is recorded by non-Native performers for sale is an inauthentic form of Native music for the sake of profit, much like the pop singer may imitate aspects of rock music in an effort to sell albums.

While some might choose to dispute this point, most members of the flute circle were more concerned with expressing themselves through the flute and were not inclined to concern themselves with the ethnic origins of flute recording artists to any great extent. Since non-Native members of the group frequently verbalized the fact that the flute provided them with an emotional catharsis and were able to demonstrate feeling through their playing, most members of the group discounted the idea that emotions associated with flute playing differed as a result of one’s ethnicity. Statements that created divisions between Native and non-Native typically evoked comments among flute circle members that it was possible to be “an Indian in your heart.” The willingness with which these particular people accepted non-Natives into the fold was probably due to the fact that most of them had a large degree of European blood themselves and had grown up in mainstream white culture. Some indicated that their ancestry had been questioned as a result of the fact that they did not fit the physical stereotype of what a Native American should look like. They had the choice of identifying themselves as white or Native, and they had chosen Native. Being placed in the position of defending that choice probably
made them more sympathetic to other seemingly “white” people who chose to
appropriate elements of Native culture.

It is understandable that some Native Americans may be sensitive about the
adoption of Native dress or customs by non-Natives. After all, as evidenced by the
Native attire of Boston Tea Party participants, whites have used the image of the Indian
for their own purposes since colonial times. Some might see interest and/or emulation on
the part of non-Natives as a compliment and welcome the opportunity to share
knowledge about their culture with interested people from other backgrounds. Others,
however, might see it as having the potential to damage the image of Native Americans
and show disrespect for their culture. If a person presenting himself as a Native
American musician misrepresents the culture because, after growing up with some other
world view, he does not fully understand it, misunderstandings and misconceptions will
result.

Deborah Root presents the idea that appropriating Native culture may not reflect
sensitivity to Native Americans at all, but may actually stem from an attitude of
superiority. Writes Root:

Part of the problem lies in how the display of affiliation enables white people to
insist on being the center of attention. The proclaiming of our alliance in a
visible, emphatic manner has a performative quality that demands instant
recognition and approval. It manifests a certain impatience; rather than
demonstrating our affiliation over time with actions, some of us want immediate
recognition of our good intentions…There is a very fine line between appreciation
and appropriation, respect and self-aggrandizement, a line that is always shifting
and impossible to decide in advance.

Appropriation always goes hand in hand with colonialism and the display of
authority. Wanna-bes have rendered the old colonial “We want it, so we’ll take
it” mentality into something rather more complex in that appropriation can seem
to be a mark of “sensitivity” to another culture. What has caused this turn? Or is it
a turn at all or simply a reiteration of the colonial moment utilizing a different
grammar? Many white people seem “genuinely” to feel “sensitive” to Native issues (which I suppose is a start), but they may be unwilling to take their sensitivity further by relinquishing authority, which begins by putting everything into question, including our right to do as we please.

One comment I hear a lot is that white people think everything is for sale. If we refuse to interrogate the extent to which politics, like style, can become a commodity to be advertised by the gesture of display, then we reinforce the notion that how we present ourselves is more important than what we do. Thinking of identity or tradition or jewelry as a commodity that can be bought and sold makes it too easy to forget that if we are going to ask for something from another community, we have to be willing to give something back.37

While cultural appropriation may be motivated by a desire for personal attention and a stereotypical view of Native culture on the part of some non-Natives, an exclusionary or elitist attitude on the part of Native Americans can only result in divisiveness and enmity between the two groups. There is indeed, as Root says, a fine line between what is respectful and acceptable, and what is not. Certainly, there is no easy resolution to this problem, but sweeping generalizations that fail to promote understanding and awareness between Native Americans and other Americans will only serve to continue this controversy.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It may seem somewhat presumptuous to make generalizations about the future of the Native American flute based on the attitudes and practices of a small group of mixed-blood people from the Great Lakes region; however, this flute circle was typical of the many flute circles that continue to exist throughout North America and the world. The website of the International Native American Flute Association lists contact information for 115 flute circles throughout the United States, five in Canada, and one each in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Peru.\(^1\) It would be impossible to determine how many others may exist around the world that lack affiliation with INAFA or that meet informally as an unofficial organization. In each of these circles, people are learning playing techniques, becoming acquainted with various types of flutes made by a variety of flute makers, developing their own playing styles, and listening to recordings of Native American flutists. With today’s technology and communications, people everywhere are able to hear the same performances and acquire the same information. As a result, flute circles, regardless of location, are probably more alike than they are different. Technology appears to be developing a modern Pan-Indian flute tradition, of necessity driven by the disruption of tribal flute traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *The Invention of Tradition*, editors Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger compiled a series of articles about practices from around the world that are thought to be very old traditions but were in fact “invented” fairly recently. Some of

these recently established practices have emerged spontaneously and have become entrenched in the culture due to their popular appeal. Others have been intentionally invented. Today’s Native American flute practices fit Hobsbawm’s definition of an invented tradition:

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of “invented” traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.2

The values being instilled by the flute tradition are apparent to anyone who reads the testimonials of flute players on the INAFA website. With few exceptions, the instrument is presented as the cure for stress and anxiety, a conduit of healing, and a connection to the natural world.3 To the Native American flute players of the past who used the instrument to win a wife, the idea of using the flute for stress reduction might seem somewhat strange. In fact, today’s concept of stress and anxiety would no doubt seem strange to Native Americans who lived prior to contact with Europeans. Conforming to time schedules, striving to acquire material goods on an individual basis, having to balance family and work commitments, experiencing the frustrations of traffic tie-ups, dealing with mortgage or rental rates, coping with urban crime, and other stressful realities of modern life are typically dealt with by individuals or family groups. While Native Americans of the past were confronted with stressors such as floods, famine, war,


and disease, the structure of their society and belief systems placed the responsibility of responding to the stressful stimulus on the tribe more so than the individual. Because they believed that every occurrence had a spiritual cause, the tribe would band together to fight the problem through spiritual means. For example, when the tribes of the Plains were faced with starvation due to the disappearance of the buffalo from their hunting grounds, a poor growing season, and inadequate government rations on reservations, they responded by participating in the Ghost Dance. The idea was not to calm oneself in the face of a stressful situation but to take action to bring about a spiritual reversal of the circumstances. Since the flute was most frequently played by individuals, communal singing, dancing, and drumming would have been the preferred means of handling stressful situations.

Native American music, the flute in particular, would be particularly likely to be the subject of invented traditions due to the interruption of ceremonial and musical practices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Hobsbawm explains:

There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned which has not seen the ‘invention’ of tradition in this sense. However, we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated: in short, when there are sufficiently large and rapid changes on the demand or the supply side.\(^4\)

Such rapid changes certainly occurred for Native Americans during the nineteenth century. As society has changed for the Native American, so too has the role of the flute. Clearly, the Native American flute of today is not the flute of the past nor are its current

traditions those of the past. They have been reinvented to suit the culture of today’s world.

Although the Native Americans of the NEOFC may have initially taken up the flute as the result of a desire to connect with a musical tradition of their ancestors, they hold no illusions that they are adhering to a historically accurate custom. The continuation of ancient traditions, while possibly being an initial motivating factor, seems to become less significant as these people develop their own bonds with their flutes. The connection that they feel with their flute music and the satisfaction they derive from it takes precedence over the desire to repeat a tradition practiced by Native Americans of the past.

The flute’s cathartic appeal probably lies in its simplicity. In their quest to build instruments that could play several chromatic octaves with perfect intonation, Europeans produced mechanically complex instruments that require a great deal of technical skill on the part of the musician. Until a high level of competence is achieved, pouring out one’s innermost feelings during a performance is extremely difficult. The ability to play musically and emotionally is subject to the musician’s technical ability. As most music teachers will attest, many beginners take so long to master the necessary skills and are so focused on the technical aspects of their instruments that they must eventually be taught how to play with feeling. Struggling with the demands of their instruments over time causes them to lose the emotional connection to music that they may have felt when singing as young children. Since beginners can play melodies on the Native American flute with ease, it is possible for them to play expressively from the outset. As flute players become better acquainted with their instruments, their improvisations tend to
become longer, have more complex melodies and forms, and contain more embellishments. However, the ability to express emotion through improvisation on the flute seems as easy for the beginner as it is for the advanced student.

If the goal of flute players is to express themselves through a Native American-based musical means, it could be argued that they should be able to do that just as effectively through drumming or dancing. The answer may lie with the fact that, as a wind instrument, the flute uses not just the hands, but also the breath. Singing is the ultimate form of personal musical expression. The sound is formed from within the body and the words from within the mind. For people who feel that their voices are inadequate or are hindered from singing traditional Native songs because of their inability to speak their ancestral language, using the breath to produce sound through a simple cylinder may serve as a satisfying substitute. The flute can give them a voice.

When several Native American NEOFC members were asked what they thought the future holds for the flute and Native American music in general, the consensus was that the essence of Native American music (its ties to the natural world, and its spiritual and stylistic aspects) should be preserved. These traditional elements of music should be maintained in music that is being composed or performed today, but otherwise it should be allowed to evolve in any manner that suits the needs of the people who play and listen to it. While they believe that music used for ceremonial purposes should remain true to its roots, they also welcome the development of new styles of Native American popular music such as reservation rap, hip hop, folk, and blues.

Much of the interest shown in American society for Native American customs and traditions has involved the Indian lifestyle prior to 1900. There has been a fascination
with the Native American imagined as a simple being living in harmony with nature, or as a primitive savage. Movies and television have instilled the idea that “authentic” Indians use bows and arrows or tomahawks, sing in vocables with drum accompaniment, wear headdresses made of hundreds of feathers, and live in tipis. Not only are these stereotypes inaccurate for today’s Native Americans, but some of these customs were never followed by many tribes who populated the continent. Although most people have seen these images associated with Native Americans, far fewer have seen movies about modern life on a reservation or heard twenty-first century Native American music. There has been a tendency to view Native American culture as dead, its traditions frozen in time prior to the twentieth century. Huib Schippers has observed this tendency in Western culture to view the traditions of others as static, and states:

…most non-Western cultures in fact have traditions that constantly change with the demands of the times, in an organic way, or in a conscious effort to retain relevance to their audiences. The mechanism underlying this process, which may be composed of systems of transmission, peer-pressure, and a number of other factors, accounts for the occurrence of what is generally referred to as “living traditions.” Change within certain boundaries is not only allowed, but in fact is part of the essence of these traditions.5

Sherry Johnson also cautions against making musical authenticity a “bounded concept, with no room for the flexibility or dynamic processes that constitute culture, and musical practice in particular.”6 The reinvention of the Native American flute is a natural outcome of the dynamic processes influencing modern Native Americans, and should be viewed as a legitimate form of Native American musical expression.

The flute differs from singing and dance music in that the latter genres have developed modern versions while still retaining traditional ceremonial forms. This is true at least in a Pan-Indian sense, since some tribes have lost their own ceremonial songs and dances and have adopted those of other tribes. Flute playing, however, exists only in the modern form, with no traditional counterpart. This fact could lead some to minimize its cultural importance or legitimacy, since flute repertoire and performance techniques cannot be tied conclusively to the ancient past. It is important to remember that Native American culture did not die with the advent of the twentieth century, and is still developing and evolving. Recent musical developments are growing out of the contemporary Native American lifestyle, just as the music of the past reflected the lifestyles of the people who created it. Modern Pan-Indian developments such as the powwow and the flute are becoming so ingrained in Native American culture that future generations will probably accept them as traditional Native American customs.

The transient nature of today’s society has given rise to the category of world music, with many musical styles evolving or becoming popular as a result of immigration and diaspora. As cultures meet and interact, new genres of music evolve from elements of their traditional musics. As John Connell and Chris Gibson state:

A world of much greater mobility, transience, urbanization and rapid technological change was marked by new musical diversity and eclecticism. The rise of world music marked western capitalism’s relentless need for new sources of inspiration and innovation, the construction of new sources of diversity and new areas for production and consumption.  

---

8 Ibid., 351.
Certainly, the twentieth-century version of the Native American flute fits into this scenario as it arose from Pan-Indianism, provided an element of spiritual and emotional inspiration, and supplied consumers with user-friendly instruments and enjoyable recordings. Connell and Gibson identify several elements that are associated with world music. Typically the artists are not considered stars of the commercial recording industry, the music conveys a sense of emotionality, and the music is associated with an unchanging temporally fixed past and exotic (usually distant) site.\(^9\) In the case of the Native American flute, the exotic site and temporally fixed past would relate to its origins in pre-Columbian North America. Thus, Native American flute music fits within the scope of world music. Since the 1980s, there have been numerous examples of well-known American and European recording artists collaborating with “world” musicians in order to infuse their music with new sounds. Paul Simon’s joint venture with the African vocal group Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Pearl Jam’s recording with Pakistani Qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and the metal band Sepultura’s collaboration with the Xavante Indians of Brazil are a few examples.\(^10\) The logical next step in the evolution of world music may be collaboration between ethnic or third-world musicians, and flutists such as R. Carlos Nakai have already begun laying the groundwork for such ventures. In the same way that Native Americans have borrowed elements from various tribes to create Pan-Indianism, the current trend of combining flute with folk or traditional instruments of other cultures may herald the beginning of a new musical concept: Pan-Indigenous music. Just as Native Americans have banded together to create traditions set

\(^9\) Ibid., 344.
\(^10\) Ibid., 348.
apart from the pervasive “white” culture, so too the colonized indigenous peoples of the world may band together through modern technology to assert themselves against the influences of transplanted European culture and to affirm the value of their own musical heritages.

What has become of the NEOFC members of Native descent in the years since the group’s demise? One founding member, Michael Searching Bear Smallridge, has begun a successful recording career and won a 2009 Native American Music Award (NAMMY) in the World Music category.¹¹ The others have quietly gone about their lives, making flutes, and giving local performances and educational talks about the instrument. In the months preceding the disbanding of the flute circle, six or seven non-Native flute players from the Cleveland area began attending meetings on a regular basis. Interestingly, those people have continued meeting informally on their own since the break-up of the NEOFC. Occasionally, original members of the flute circle will participate in an activity with the informal circle, but for the most part, the informal offshoot remains a group of non-Native hobbyists who enjoy getting together to play the flute. Only time will tell whether another official flute circle will emerge in Northeastern Ohio.

---

REFERENCES


Holtz, Carla. E-mail message to author, January 16, 2009.


Kuhl, Sherrie. E-mail message to author, April 2, 2010.


