



Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Indian Blues: The Indigenization of American Popular Music

Author(s): John W. Troutman

Source: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (May - Jun., 2009), pp. 42-46

Published by: [University of Oklahoma](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20621591>

Accessed: 26-08-2015 21:52 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Oklahoma and Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *World Literature Today*.

<http://www.jstor.org>



Indian Blues

The Indigenization of American Popular Music

John W. Troutman

Native artists today perform not only at powwows but also in rock and hip-hop clubs. In fact, American Indians have performed European and African-derived music for centuries. The following essay reveals one facet of this history, when Native musicians turned the federal government's "civilization" campaign on its head, indigenizing the music meant to detribalize them.

In 1955 anthropologist James Howard cast a dim light over the expressive culture of American Indians, remarking that powwows reflect a "process by which socio-cultural entities . . . are losing their tribal distinctiveness and in its place are developing a nontribal 'Indian' culture."¹ He believed that American Indian musical traditions were fast becoming generic, "pan-tribal" performances that reflected a decreasing vitality and

diversity of songs and dances. Any powwow singer or dancer would immediately reject his analysis on the simple basis that tribally specific—and clan- or family-specific—songs have vastly multiplied over the past century, just as intertribal powwow culture has proliferated to an extraordinary and quite heterogeneous degree. Yet equally profound in growth to powwow culture are the ways in which American Indians have also manipulated

ABOVE The Navajo rock band Blackfire

and refigured other forms of music, in the process developing new means within expressive culture to perform their identities as indigenous peoples.

Just as the continued expanse of intertribal powwow culture has facilitated the sharing and development of new varieties of songs and dances, Native singers, musicians, and dancers of all varieties continue to access every available musical arena, including cyberspace. The Native American Music Awards, or "Nammys," are telling: they comprise over thirty genres of music and provide awards ranging from best powwow and Native American Church recordings to best blues and hip-hop recordings. Indeed, many Native musicians have recognized popular music genres as opportunities to expand their tribal, oral traditions. For example, the 2008 Nammy Record of the Year award went to Blackfire's (*Silence Is a Weapon*). The two-disc set is a tour de force by these veteran "Alter-Native" and punk rockers from the Diné Nation. They describe themselves on their MySpace site as a "traditionally influenced, high-energy, politically driven group comprised of two brothers and their sister. Born into the heart of a political land dispute area on Black Mesa in the Navajo Nation, this Family's powerful music reflects the Hopes, Freedoms, and Barriers of today's world." Blackfire in fact tours the world and has gained respect in many circles; their 2002 album *One Nation Under* featured the last recorded vocals by punk legend Joey Ramone, and David Fricke, *Rolling Stone* magazine's premier music critic, has promoted Blackfire in his columns. (*Silence Is a Weapon* consists of one disc of charging, protest rock-n-roll interlaced with Diné chants; the other disc is solely Diné ceremonial vocal and drum songs. Both discs suggest musically what it means to Blackfire to *be* Diné today, and the album demonstrates their extraordinary ability to weave thousands of years of ideas into one musical text. In effect, these artists have refigured the meaning of what constitutes their tribal, and indeed "Indian," music altogether.

The practice by American Indians of fusing tribally derived music with that of Anglos and African Americans has existed for a very long time. Sacred music in missions and churches probably provided the first and certainly the longest-lasting variety of this blending of traditions, and the genres of American secular, popular music have provided another. In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of Native musicians such as Cree singer Buffy Sainte-Marie, Kaw-Creek

saxophonist Jim Pepper, and Dakota singer Floyd Red Crow Westerman gained international fame for their rock, jazz, country, and folk recordings. These musicians and others gained an even higher profile in the midst of the Native protest movements such as the takeover of Alcatraz Island, which captured the national media's attention at that time. Westerman's album *Custer Died for Your Sins*, for example, provided an equally scathing soundtrack for Vine Deloria Jr.'s groundbreaking

Native peoples for quite some time had been blowing the saxophone, sawing the fiddle (or violin), and strumming guitars and mandolins. How they came to those instruments and to these new styles of music becomes particularly revealing when we consider the ways in which the practice of music had become so divisively, politically charged in Indian Country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1969 "Indian manifesto" of the same name. While some performers were more subtle than others, popular music concerts and recordings provided extraordinarily powerful and far-reaching opportunities through which Native peoples could deliver politically charged anthems before audiences of many thousands, dramatically raising the profile of issues facing indigenous peoples.

Despite the attention that this wave of Native artists received in the 1960s and 1970s, the embrace of secular, popular music by Native peoples, and its potential for expanding opportunities for expressing tribal and Native identities, has a history that stretches back to long before the late twentieth century. Native peoples for quite some time had been blowing the saxophone, sawing the fiddle (or violin), and strumming guitars and mandolins. How they came to those instruments and to these new styles of music becomes particularly revealing when we consider the ways in which the practice of music had become so divisively, politically charged in Indian Country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Over the course of several decades in the nineteenth century that were comprised of intense and often brutal efforts by the federal government to force Native peoples from their homelands and hunting grounds and onto small reservations, the government began to increasingly adopt the view that American Indians must individually “assimilate” into American society if they were to survive at all. Administrators within the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) took it upon themselves to determine exactly what that “American society” meant, and in turn what it was about “Indian society” that seemed such a hindrance to their assimilation agenda. As OIA officials drew lines in the sand in the late nineteenth century, surveying and then selling off reservation lands once protected by treaties, they also surveyed expressive culture, determining which forms were satisfactory for the making of a model American citizenship, and which challenged the OIA agenda of detribalization. Not unexpectedly, most dances deemed “Indian” by the OIA were blacklisted in orders passed between 1882 and 1923.

Dance restrictions were varied and created unique circumstances on each of the reservations throughout the country, but the OIA was particularly concerned to prohibit a number of both ceremonial and social dances that had gained incredible currency during that period among tribes in the Northern and Southern Plains. Those dances, namely the Sun Dance, the Omaha Dance, and the Ghost Dance, appeared to the OIA as facilitators of tribal or intertribal celebrations of indigeneity (although in their own parlance, they typically, and synonymously, referred to them simply as “savage,” “heathen,” or “Indian” dances). The dances seemed to threaten the OIA officials mostly because they seemed foreign and un-Christian, because they were organized by Native people themselves, because the songs were typically sung in tribal languages, because they were often associated with communal events such as “giveaways,” and because they seemed to celebrate the clan or tribal ties that the government was attempting to sever. Local OIA agents indeed struggled during those years, with few successes, to dismantle all utterances of expressive culture

that they considered antithetical to their goals of breaking tribal bonds and liquidating remaining tribal estates. On the reservations of the Northern Plains, the raiding of dance halls, the arresting of dancers, and the withholding of treaty-guaranteed rations—not to mention the atrocities committed by the Seventh Cavalry upon Big Foot’s band and their traveling companions at Wounded Knee in 1890—all figured into the government’s arsenal of curtailing various expressions of cultural practice. Indeed, the assault on tribal customs was quite expansive at the time, but also expansive were the creative efforts by tribal peoples throughout the continent to resist such assaults.² Because of their arduous defense of these songs and dances, intertribal powwow culture and Stomp Dances, among other such expressive practices, flourished in the twentieth century rather than withered away in response to the assimilation agenda.

That assimilation agenda, however, was waged in multiple arenas, not just that of the reservations. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Native children were increasingly placed by government agents and missionaries into federal Indian and mission boarding schools. Keeping in line with the assimilationist philosophy that defined for the OIA the ideas of what constituted uncivilized “Indian” music, the OIA boarding school curriculums included instruction only in what it construed as “civilized,” European-derived forms of music. In their study of Native American education, K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty have argued that in fact the boarding school administrators sought in this manner to contain, control, and otherwise manage all aspects of life for the students through purging any influences they considered dangerous and oppositional to their goals; the schools were “arguably the most minutely surveilled and controlled federal institutions created to transform the lives of any group of Americans. The schools [were designed to] neutralize the Native languages, religions, economies, politics, family structures, emotions, and lives that seemed to threaten American uniformity and national identity.”³ Every expression of music was therefore highly politically charged because the civilization agenda of the OIA depended entirely



LEFT A music class at the Carlisle Indian School, one of many boarding schools established to teach Native American children and “neutralize the Native languages, religions, economies, polities, family structures, emotions, and lives that seemed to threaten American uniformity and national identity.”

upon the close monitoring of every musical utterance emanating from both the reservations and the boarding schools.

Boarding school teachers, matrons, and superintendents all got in on the act, training Native boys and girls in the arts of “civilization”—comprised, of course, of Euro-American compositions, instrumentation, and musical theories. Brass marching bands served to regiment and discipline the boys, considered unruly and unrefined in their Indianness. Various bugle calls ordered the daily existence of the boys and girls, blaring musical commands to rise, march, eat, learn, work, study, pray, and sleep every day—some twenty-nine bugle calls filled the grounds of Carlisle Indian School from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.⁴ Girls practiced piano in order to rehearse the parlor duties of a future of domesticity. Boys and girls together sang hymns, and some learned to perform the scores of Bach, Mozart, and other European composers that were considered the pinnacle sonic achievements of white civilization. To the eyes and ears of OIA officials, music was indeed politicized in this era of American Indian history.

Musical education in the schools was often quite elaborate, despite the fact that most of the school administrators remained alarmingly unable or unwilling financially to provide for the basic medical and nutritional needs of the students.⁵ Many of the schools in the early twentieth century maintained thirty-member mandolin orchestras, glee clubs, harmonica orchestras, string quartets, choral ensembles, jazz bands, and of course large brass bands to perform martial music. Ostensi-

bly these musical organizations were a terrific PR tool, demonstrating to the non-Indian public through city park and parade performances how the government was succeeding in “civilizing”

Many of the schools in the early twentieth century maintained thirty-member mandolin orchestras, glee clubs, harmonica orchestras, string quartets, choral ensembles, jazz bands, and of course large brass bands to perform martial music. Ostensibly these musical organizations were a terrific PR tool, demonstrating to the non-Indian public through city park and parade performances how the government was succeeding in “civilizing” the Indians.

the Indians. They were also designed to inculcate decidedly middle-class, white American cultural values among the students.

In this way, thousands of American Indians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gained a familiarity, if not fluency, in Euro-American derived instruments that included pianos and stringed parlor instruments as well as the saxophones and cornets. From the schools, hundreds of Native singers and musicians toured the country in all sorts of ensembles, from the Indian String Quartet to the Blackfeet Tribal Band to the Nez Perce Harmony Chiefs. Following their departure from the schools, in the first few decades of the twentieth century many like Blackfeet horn player Joe Morris formed all-Indian jazz bands while

others like celebrated Creek-Cherokee singer Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone performed semi-classical compositions at the Metropolitan Opera and the Hollywood Bowl. Of course, though they were introduced to new musical forms and ideas, few actually bought into the premise of “civilization” (versus their own supposed “savagery”) that the government hoped they would invest in. Rather, they developed their own meanings for the new music they performed, quite often derived their own pleasures from it, and in doing so many developed new ways to demonstrate through this music the pride in their tribal and Native identities that the government had sought to eradicate.

Some of these musicians used their new forms of musical training and resultant audience access to publicly criticize the federal government, predating the musician activists of the 1960s and 1970s by decades, and their efforts did not go unheard; savvy to the new, cutting-edge technological opportunities that the early twentieth century provided them, they could broadcast their music and messages to potential audiences of millions through the advent of radio technology. One such artist was the Yakama-Cherokee tenor singer Kiutus Tecumseh.⁶ Tecumseh regularly toured the country in the 1920s and 1930s, gaining incredible exposure along the way. In 1929, for example, he embarked upon a massive U.S. tour, singing at radio stations in thirty-three major cities from New Orleans (WSMB) to Boston (WNAC) to Salt Lake (KSL). He was broadcast live on the radio on all but 13 days of the 128-day tour.⁷ Tecumseh sang semi-classical and popular songs of the day, and he knew that he was considered by booking agents as novelty entertainment for non-Indian audiences, as an “Indian singer.” Yet, unexpectedly for his audiences, he would often chastise the federal government, for example, in its pessimism toward Native intellectual ability, which largely prohibited opportunities for Native people to seek higher education. Concerned about the welfare of Native students, he also routed his American tours so that he could visit them in as many boarding schools along the way as possible. Newspapers such as the *Washington Post* covered his criticism of the OIA’s penchant for giving jobs to whites over qualified Native applicants, and he took Yakama land claims cases to the commissioner of Indian Affairs.⁸ These musical performers expressed the

modern concerns of Native peoples in unprecedented ways; such public access had never been available to Native people before, and many such as Tecumseh took full advantage of it.

Popular music arenas provided Native musicians like Tecumseh new opportunities not only to join in public conversations on Indian policy but also to develop new ways of expressing their tribal and indigenous identities in the modern world. The legacy of those early boarding school students and their rejection of government detribalization objectives is witnessed in the decades since, as Native peoples have proliferated tribally derived dances and songs as much they have innovated the genres of American popular music. Indeed, Blackfire’s cultural and musical inheritance, as well as its contribution in those veins, runs as deep as the knowledge and experiences of the Diné people and as wide as the thousands upon thousands of American Indians who first began experimenting with new musical genres long, long ago. □

University of Louisiana at Lafayette

John W. Troutman is Assistant Professor in the History and Geography Department at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he teaches courses on American Indian history and American popular culture. His first book, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934*, is forthcoming in May from the University of Oklahoma Press.

Editorial note: Adapted from *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934*, by permission of the author and the University of Oklahoma Press. Copyright © 2009 by the University of Oklahoma Press (oupres.com). All rights reserved.

- 1 Clyde Ellis, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary H. Dunham, eds., *Powwow* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), ix.
- 2 For a detailed examination of this resistance, and of the politics of American Indians in popular music from the period, see John W. Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1890–1934* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).
- 3 K. Tsianina Lomawaima & Teresa L. McCarty, “To Remain an Indian”: *Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (Teachers College Press, 2006), 2–3.
- 4 Annual School Calendar, U.S. Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, “15–16” (Carlisle Indian Press, September 1915).
- 5 These shortcomings were detailed in an independent government report published in 1928 that reported vastly insufficient medical care and nutritional foods available to boarding school students. Subsequently many of the schools were closed as the OIA placed a new emphasis on day schools. Institute for Government Research, “The Problem of Indian Administration,” in *Studies in Administration* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1928).
- 6 Tecumseh was originally named Herman W. Roberts, but he changed his name and I have followed his preference here.
- 7 “1929 Radio Broadcasting Itinerary, Chief Tecumseh,” author’s collection.
- 8 “Chief Holds Whites Responsible for Race,” *Washington Post*, November 24, 1930.