
Historic Flute Traditions of Native North America in Transition: 1890 to the Present



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Abstract: Creating and playing flutes is a practice that dates back thousands of years in Native North America. While coming close to extinction in the decades after 1900, a few old time players kept the tradition alive until younger generations of Natives could take it up and revitalize it. As part of this revitalization, however, the instrument was also recontextualized over the time period from about 1980–1995 as something for mass entertainment purposes, and as part of this process the very structure of the instrument changed in order to incorporate Western (European) concepts of intonation and timbre. This article traces those changes through a crucial period.

Keywords: Native North America, blocked flute, transition, revitalization, Nevaquaya, Nakai

Introduction

In the pre-European-contact Western Hemisphere, wind instruments of two larger families, flutes and panpipes, were found on both continents. Although panpipes vanished in North America by 1700, the introduction of horses by Europeans actually broadened the areas in which flutes were played, as the performance of the “courting flute” (a wooden block flute) spread from its origins on the fringes of the Great Plains outwards with the expansion of the Native tribes known as the “Horse Cultures.” The other primary form of flute (also a block flute), known today as the river cane flute, was found in a broad belt from the American Southwest (pueblos) through the Southeastern Woodlands. While both of these flutes are similar in the way they produce sound, the construction process and materials used are markedly different, and they are contextualized differently in Native culture. Performance of the courting flute was directly tied to vocal songs, with the normative practice being first to play the song on the flute (which set the pitch and outlined the contours of the song) and then to render the song text using the human voice.

By 1890, as tribes were confined to reservations, the vocal-song-based flute tradition began to fade away, and was only kept alive by a small group of players such as Belo Cozad (Kiowa) and Richard Fool Bull (Lakota). These men, whose lives spanned the end of the “Indian Wars” through the time of the “Indian New Deal” in the 1930s, brought the instrument from the past into the present, ensuring its survival as an instrumental performance medium, but not so much the continuation of the traditional older song/language-based styles, which disappeared as courtship practices changed. Instead, the Native flute revival of the late 1970s, spearheaded by “Doc” Tate Nevaquaya (Comanche), introduced a new programmatic style of playing, and in 1982 Carlos Nakai’s (Navajo/Ute) album *Changes* opened up the instrument to non-Native performers and forever transformed the audience base. This essay will focus upon the pivotal period between 1890 and the present day, including the 1979 release of the programmatic album *Comanche Flute Music* by Nevaquaya and the trajectory of tonal and pitch transformations by Nakai, and will trace the instrumental repertory from traditional Native flute “song” through contemporary and often non-Native flute “piece.”

Historical Background

In pre-contact North America, flutes were associated with a number of different performance practices, including courtship on the Great Plains and use in curing rituals in the Northeast.¹ Within Eastern Woodlands areas crisscrossed by pathways through dense forests, travelers often played the flute as a signal of peaceful intentions when approaching an unfamiliar town. The construction of the flutes themselves was relatively uncomplicated: A stick or branch, usually of cedar, would be split open horizontally and wood scooped

¹ Marcia Herndon, *Native American Music* (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1980), 25.

or burned out of each end, with some left in place about a third of the way down the branch shaft (to form the “block”). Then openings would be burned or drilled through at specific points, including on each side of the block, and the wood on the outside of one side of the branch would be flattened out over it, with a carved piece of wood, known as a “saddle” or “bird,” fitted in a way to help channel a thin stream of air from the smaller air chamber to the larger one. When the inside of the instrument was completely finished, the two halves would be put back together, usually with pine pitch and often with binding straps (the diagram in Figure 1 shows a cutaway version of a finished instrument). Adjusting the “saddle” created the embouchure, and resulted in an instrument that is not difficult to play, even for someone with no experience—which was and is an important aspect of the Native flute. As far as tunings went, as a solo instrument, flutes did not need to be matched to specific pitches and were therefore made according to the physical dimensions of the maker, with a palm and a half’s distance between the air hole at the front of the saddle and the first finger hole, and a thumb’s distance between each air hole. From the mouthpiece to the end of the flute would be the distance from tucked under the arm to curled under the fingers. In this way, flutes fit the physical dimensions of their makers.

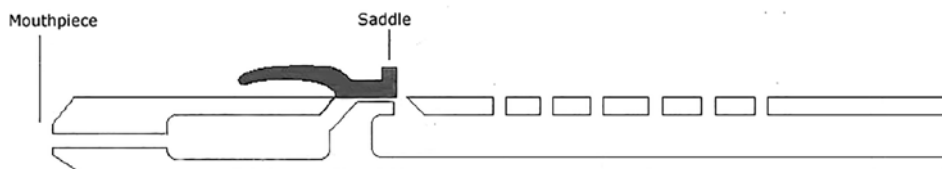


Figure 1: Native American block flute diagram

Flutes were made in a number of different external configurations, but most common were the relatively undecorated styles (as seen in Figure 2) and the “Bird’s Head” flutes, which were found on the Northern Plains. The symbolism of the bird has multiple explanations—some conflicting—but the most common ones are either that the bird’s head symbolized male potency (phallic), or, from a woman’s perspective, that the depiction of waterfowl, which often mate for life, augured well for the future.

The typical practice of playing the flute in Lakota (Northern Plains) society was a culturally acceptable way for a man to court a woman in an attempt to “make” her fall in love with him. The Lakota way of courtship was complex: A man not only had to win the heart of a woman, but he also had to convince her parents that he was capable of supporting her. So, before a young man could even consider looking at a woman, he had to showcase his desirability by earning war honors, killing buffalo or other large, dangerous animals, or stealing horses as a gift for his potential wife’s parents. When a young man felt he was finally ready for marriage, he would go *winole* (to seek a woman). His first stop was at

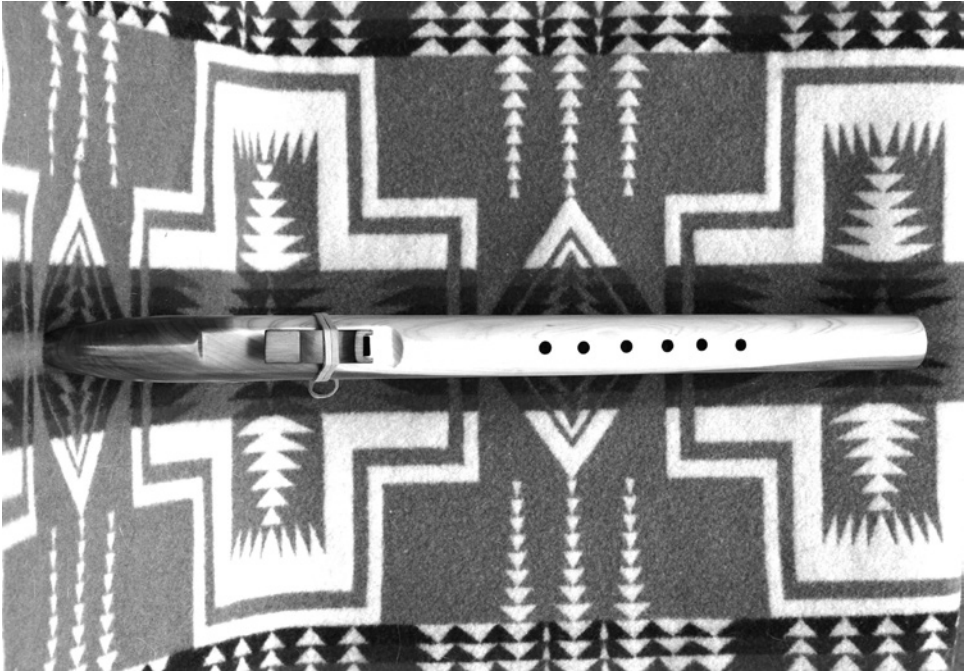


Figure 2: An undecorated flute in the style common to the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains regions (flute made by Tara Browner)

the home of the local “Elk Dreamer,” a spiritual figure who claimed special “medicine” or powers over women. The Elk Dreamer would give the young man a flute called a *Siyotanka*—a flute with the open end carved and painted like the head of a waterfowl—and a love medicine song, with the power to enchant the selected young lady. These love songs, called *Wioste Olowan*, had both melodic and vocal/textual components. Customary Lakota performance practice was for the man to sit outside of his intended’s lodge in the early evening, first playing the song on the flute and then singing the same melody with a text about love. If the song was powerful enough, the young women would fall in love with him. If not, then the spurned suitor reconfigured the text into a kind of teasing song, sung from a woman’s point of view.²

Survival of the Tradition

During the post-reservation era, from the 1890s through the late 1960s, flute performance traditions (including the art of making flutes) nearly died out, in large part because societal changes no longer supported the complex practices of courtship whereby men wooed women with flute playing. During this period, two major players emerged on the

² William Powers, “The Art of Courtship Among the Oglala,” *American Indian Art Magazine* 5(2) (1980), 41–43.

Plains: Richard Fool Bull (Lakota, late 1890s–1981) and Belo Cozad (Kiowa, 1864–1950).³ Fool Bull was more of a flute maker, and sold his instruments to tourists on the Pine Ridge reservation for decades in order to support himself. They were of the bird's-head variety, usually painted like the head of a mallard duck, and with a large bore and finger holes. Fool Bull flutes can still be found in out-of-the-way antique shops (see Figure 3). Cozad, who was of an older generation and from the Southern Plains, played flutes that he had inherited, and toured Bureau of Indian Affairs schools performing and telling stories for the students. He had a sense of his own role as a culture-bearer, and would often admonish students to remember what he had told them for as long as they lived (see Figure 4). Other than Fool Bull, Cozad, Stephen Mopope (Kiowa), and a more obscure Lakota player named John Coloff, flute-playing was not a regular part of Native life on the Plains.

This state of affairs continued until 1967, when Comanche artist “Doc” (Joyce Lee) Tate Nevaquaya (1932–1996) met “Doc” (Richard) Payne (1918–2004) in Oklahoma. Payne, a non-Native collector and maker of Native-style flutes, gave Tate a flute to play. Doc Tate had heard the Kiowa player Stephen Mopope when he was a child, and had memories of how the instrument should sound but no direct connection with any family playing tradition. Payne, a medical doctor, had also travelled extensively, researched Native flute traditions, and amassed a collection of about 1 000 instruments.⁴ Together, the two of them almost single-handedly revived the Native flute-playing tradition, creating new songs inspired by programmatic influences such as the weather and the beauty of the seasons, the Oklahoma landscape, and personal relationships with others.

Revitalization and Change

Nevaquaya recorded a small private-label release in 1976—*Indian Flute Songs from Comanche Land*—and his nephew Tom Mauchahty-Ware released *Flute Songs of the Kiowa and Comanche* on Indian House (another small label), and both began to tour Oklahoma playing for small gatherings and county fairs.⁵ Then, in 1979, Nevaquaya released *Comanche Flute Music* on Folkways Records, a mid-sized label with a huge catalog and a large following. With songs titled “Jesus I Always Want to be Near You,” and “I Saw an

³ Edward Wapp, “The American Indian Courting Flute: Revitalization and Change,” in *Sharing a Heritage: American Indian Arts*, eds. Charlotte Heth and Michael Swarm, Contemporary American Indian Issues Series, Number 5 (Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, UCLA), 52. See also Edward Wapp, “The Sioux Courting Flute: Its Tradition, Construction and Music” (MA thesis, University of Washington, 1984).

⁴ Richard Payne, due to the size and breadth of his flute collection, and his proselytizing on behalf of the instrument, was an enormously influential figure in the Native flute revival, but also a highly problematic one due to the slipshod nature of his research. For example, he insisted that the Plains flute, in its present form, was an outgrowth of complex whistles made in the Pacific Northwest, and did not appear until the 1880s. This is absolutely countered by the existence, in a museum in Bergamo, Italy, of a flute in essentially a modern form that was collected in 1823.

⁵ A third player, Woodrow Haney, also became active during this time. Haney, who was Seminole and Creek, played a Plains-style flute in performance rather than a cane flute as would have been his tribal patrimony.



Figure 3: Richard Fool Bull playing a Lakota Bird's-head (Siyotanka) flute



Figure 4: Belo Cozad (Kiowa) at the Sherman Institute, July 1941, Riverside, California

Eagle Fly," Nevaquaya moved beyond the courting tradition and into programmatic music inspired by nature and spirituality, something that in Native flute practices was a tectonic shift. Nevaquaya's song choices opened the door for the instrument to be perceived in an entirely new way, as a vehicle for performance outside of a specific tribal tradition.

Then, in 1982, Navajo/Ute player R. Carlos Nakai released the album *Changes* on cassette, and his label, Canyon Records, marketed specifically to non-Indians with interests in "New Age" spiritual practices. And although curiosity about indigenous cultures has a long history, anthropologist Michael F. Brown notes a shifting in the 1980s, when interest in Native cultural output, specifically by New Agers, began to gain traction.⁶ Nakai's output fit perfectly into this trajectory. *Changes* is an album made up of Native songs, but many are not specific to the flute. Moreover, it showcases Nakai's signature interpretive style, which includes a clear, open sound and a specific set of ornaments that he uses for every single song he plays. Nakai was trained in the Western tradition on trumpet before moving to Native flute due to a lip injury, and there is a predictability to his playing,

⁶ Michael F. Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 21.

combined with a nod to Western musical aesthetics—no squeaks and squawks here—that makes his performances very friendly to the non-Native ear.

In the years that followed, Nakai made a series of recordings that marked either an adventuresome musical spirit or a bastardization of the Native flute, depending on one's point of view. As he tells it, Nakai had been looking for ways to move beyond the solo performance tradition into duets and trios with other instruments, and in 1988, in collaboration with lutenist William Eaton, he released *Carry the Gift*. The problem Nakai initially encountered working with Eaton was that of matching pitches on instruments, as traditional Native flutes were not tuned to the Western diatonic system. This was solved by Eaton's utilizing scordatura tuning on his lute, and produced a striking collaboration. Scordatura, however, was not going to be a solution to performing with most Western instruments, especially those in the keyboard families. For this knotty issue, Nakai turned in 1987 to Ken Light, a non-Native flute maker, and requested that he create a number of Native flutes in specific tunings and keys in the Western system.⁷ Then, in 1990, Nakai recorded the improvised album, *Natives*, with New Age keyboard player Peter Kater, and the floodgates opened. Suddenly it was possible to use Native flute in conjunction with common Western instruments, and anyone willing to pay for a flute "in the key of ..." could have an instrument that was easy to play decently (although hard to play well). Groups known as "flute circles" began to proliferate, and with them an industry of mostly non-Native flute makers catering to every possible whim, including double drone flutes, bass flutes, and flutes embedded with semi-precious stones. As a rule, non-Native players prefer improvisation to traditional flute songs based upon vocal songs, which makes sense as they are not part of the tribal tradition.

The conclusion of ethnomusicologist Paula Conlon's master's thesis hints at new manifestations of Native flutes in New Age forms, but most authors writing on the Native American flute focus on biographies of Native artists such as Doc Tate Nevaquaya, Kevin Locke, and R. Carlos Nakai.⁸ One Native scholar, however, was beginning to investigate the topics of both appropriation and Native representations before her untimely death in January of 2007. Pauline Tuttle (Mi'kmaq), in an unpublished essay she was working on before her passing, created a framework for understanding Native flute performance through the usage of the terms "American Indian flute," for old-style instruments tuned to the physical dimensions of their makers, and "Native American flute," for instruments made to play in the Western diatonic system.⁹

⁷ Ken Light has a company called Amon Olorin Flutes, and by his own reckoning has sold over 8 000 instruments.

⁸ Paula Conlon, "The Flute of the Canadian Amerindian: An Analysis of the Vertical Whistle Flute with External Block and Its Music" (MA thesis. Carleton University, 1983), 101.

⁹ Pauline Tuttle, unpublished personal correspondence with Tara Browner, 22 November 2004.

Thinking of the instruments in this way also allows a discussion of the performances that go along with them, specifically “flute songs” with the former, and “flute pieces” in the case of the latter. This allows the instruments and their performance to be somewhat disentangled from the knotty issues of race, representation, and appropriation, although, at some point, the question of why non-Native people are so drawn to a traditional instrument, played completely out of its traditional context, must be addressed.

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Recordings

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