

Celebrating Native American Indian Lives - Indigenous Reggae music in the United States

At the Tenth Annual Native American Music Awards (NAMA) ceremony a year ago last October in Niagara Falls, there was much to celebrate. It was the anniversary of a decade of national recognition of indigenous musical achievement, and there was another year of exciting new music. The wide array of musical genres represented at the NAMA ceremony exposes the modern myth that indigenous music in the USA today is primarily chanting and drumming. In fact, today's Native music in North America is nearly as diverse as popular music as a whole: ranging from gospel, jazz and polka, to pop and rock; from country, folk and blues to punk and metal, and even to rap and reggae. There are even indigenous orchestral works.

The NAMA ceremony offers ample evidence of this diversity: the Best Country music award went to Tracy Bone, the Best Blues was awarded to Jimmy Wolf, the nod for Bluegrass went to Jim Boyd, the best Native American Church recording was by Janelle Turtle, and the best Gospel Inspirational Award went to the Cherokee National Youth Choir for traditional songs sung in their native language. Also represented was the powerful punk/metal politics of Blackfire from the Navajo Nation, whose (Silence) Is a Weapon won the Record of the Year Award; and from the hip hop community were the Dago Braves and NightShield. Native Roots, reggae artists from Albuquerque won Best World Music Award for their CD Celebrate, with its messages of Native pride, hope, Peace and respect for all people.

Native Roots' CD Celebrate is a compelling and complex collection of traditional sounds and values combined with the modern reggae sound, and elements of the One Love philosophy espoused so strongly by Bob Marley and Black Uhuru -- and today by many others, including Burning Spear and Marley's sons. Celebrate honors indigenous people's lives as it explores spiritual, personal and moral issues of daily life. Its sensibility is felt in the tone and tempo of the songs: at times it is joyous and up-beat -- insistently danceable -- and at others pensive and prayerful or full of oratory, sometimes playfully personal, but also subversive and incendiary. Interestingly enough, the tempo of the first song on the CD "Celebrate our Lives" doesn't sonically embody a celebratory mood because the sound reflects its frustrated call for unity, reminding listeners of the torturous indigenous past and lamenting the lack of oneness among Native Indian people today. In "Na Stop" the musicians call for a "war with words" tempered by a "war with love" and education, in order to turn the tables on oppression and injustice.

As an example of the interaction of two distinct cultural elements -- on the one hand indigenous people and their values and beliefs, and on the other One Love philosophy as espoused by Jamaican Rastafarians -- the CD provides a window into contemporary Native consciousness and identity. It exemplifies how certain Native American Indian artists today combine enduring wisdom and historic indigenous memory with critical elements of Rastafarianism, more specifically with references to Bob Marley and One Love. Loosely based on Rastafarian beliefs, One Love espouses spiritual, cultural, economic and political self-determination and independence from dominant bureaucracies and relationships, which according to One Love practitioners is "Babylon System." Wholeheartedly embracing Peace -- "Let hate be your enemy," and a brother and sisterhood of all people around the world, One Love says we are all One, in Love, with One Heart, and especially One in love of Jah on High, Lord of Lords, King of Kings, the One true God.

Native American Indian Reggae

The Native American movement was real strong in northern Arizona -- I grew up on a reservation there -- and we just

listened to Bob Marley every single night. What he said seemed to relate directly to what we were experiencing. The message was that we needed to lift up and stay strong when everything was pushing us down. That was my first experience with reggae music and Rasta.

-- John Williams of Native Roots to Austin Daze, 8-13-07

Experiments with reggae music appear in many Native American Indian musicians' work today -- from the powerhouse Red Earth in Albuquerque, to rappers Yaiva and Rollin' Fox and rockers Clan/Destine in Arizona; from Ras K' Dee in San Francisco, over to the rapper Shadowyze in Pensacola, and up to Brenda MacIntyre in Toronto. But indigenous reggae is represented most decidedly by Native Roots and Casper Loma Da Wa in the Southwest, Tchiya Amet in San Francisco, Vick Silva in Los Angeles; and now the young Christian reggae artist Wade Large in Utah, only three of whom we touch on here.

Reggae has been a significant part of Native American Indian culture since it was first brought to reservations in the mid 1970s -- as we heard above from John Williams (Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux). It eventually flourished there quite widely throughout the 1980s and into the 90s. Up in northern Arizona in Hopi, Culture Connection initiated countless concerts in the early 80s with "traditional" Jamaican reggae musicians such as Freddie McGregor, Burning Spear, Michigan & Smiley, Mutabaruka and Black Uhuru -- all playing up on the mesas in Hopi and throughout the Southwest. In the early 90s the Wailing Coyotes emerged from the Havasupai at the Grand Canyon. And, when asked by Robert Roskind, the One Love healing author, how Bob Marley's music was first introduced to that tribe: "... members of the Supai Nation said several people had brought it there in the 1970s, including Supai Waters, a tribal member," and one of the community's "Keepers of the Secrets." (Roskind 40)

In 1992 Joy Harjo, worked with John Williams and his sister Susan as a part of Poetic Justice, a dynamic jazzy, tribal reggae band that quite skillfully accompanied the renowned poet as she eloquently imparted her work. They toured the country in support of their album Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century in 1996. That same year, again in northern Arizona at the corner of the Hualapai reservation on US Route 66, Tribal War, a "band of Havasupai Indians... adopted Rasta as a lifestyle... play[ing] political reggae with a spiritual vengeance." (Golosinski) Only a year later in 1997, Casper Loma Da Wa released his first CD Original Landlord. By 1999 John Williams and Emmett "Shkeme" Garcia (Santa Ana Pueblo) had formed Native Roots and released their first album A Place I Call Home. Over the course of the next decade Native Roots has released two more albums, Rain Us Love (2001) and now Celebrate. As we've discussed, the sound of Native Roots' reggae evokes strong emotions. Many indigenous listeners are drawn primarily to the supple rhythms, strutting bass and polyrhythmic beats -- attending concerts to dance and skank and get lost in the reggae beat itself. But

reggae lyrics, too are a powerful attraction.

When asked why some Native people respond so favorably to reggae music and its message, and why he personally finds it appealing, Casper Loma Da Wa (Hopi/Diné) replied,

I think what it is basically is that...I've always looked at reggae music as struggling music. These musicians are coming out of poverty and singing about the exact thing as here...they are talking about how they can't pay their rent....How times are hard.... Every reservation in America is below the poverty level....the Native people can relate to what the Jamaicans are talking about...because they're the same way....People are so poor that they struggle every day. And it's the same deal in Hopi." (Koblah 30)

It's the combination of respect for traditional values, a contemporary sensibility of indigenous American resistance, and a rejection of the dominant culture of the "whiteman" that is characteristic of Native reggae musicians.

Making Sense of Native American Indian Reggae

To achieve a deeper understanding of why reggae has been so appealing to some Native American Indian musicians, we need some type of theoretical framework. It will help us answer the questions: How do traditional values and sounds interact with modern production and One Love reggae philosophy to produce a music that not only speaks to thousands of indigenous people, but also to a widely diverse non-Native audience? How did One Love moral values become a part of indigenous American discourse and identity narratives? What is it that has brought Native Roots, Casper and the others to express their Native pride in their indigenous roots through the instrument of reggae music?

The theoretical framework I apply here borrows from a model applied by Arnold Krupat, the Jewish-American literary critic, to Native American Indian literature. Krupat identifies three types of values he considers vital to understanding indigenous survival, which he drew from English cultural critic Raymond Williams (1977). In *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature*, Krupat examines the concepts of 1) dominant, 2) traditional or "residual" and 3) emerging values, and discusses how each type is present with varying degrees of influence in any social entity at a given time. Concentrating on the traditional and emerging values of the artists discussed here, we touch on the dominant narrative only in contrast to the other two.

Dominant Values

Through their control of wealth and resources, dominant social groups in our society exert power and influence over the vast majority of material relationships, in order to control the outcomes of those interactions in their favor. In the fields of music and popular culture this means more than simply ensuring sizable profits for the international corporate entities that dominate almost all musical expression. It also means promoting conformity to certain dominant rules and values. This pressure to conform Krupat calls "cultural hegemony". (22) NAMA's very existence shows that popular music is not a corporate monolith, but the main tendencies of the hegemonic system are to homogenize and co-opt the most creative popular musical expressions in order to better control them. This tends to have a corrosive effect on how music is produced. But opposition to it has inevitably led to the development of strong independent Native American Indian owned production companies. And since the broader distribution of the internet now makes real exposure to interested parties a more realistic opportunity for those not prominent in the mainstream, indigenous music is being heard more and more across the country. Corporate restrictions force "different" and innovative artists to the edges of a culture such as ours, and Native American Indian music is no exception to this rule. As we've seen, Rastafarians name this complex -- Babylon System -- and sing to "chant down Babylon."

The dominant hegemonic preference is for emotional love songs, party songs, clubbing -- these days even in strip clubs -- and self-obsessed possessiveness. Snoop Dogg and his crew exemplify

twisted norms that dance around the dominant mainstream -- spying across the room, confident of a conquest. His male gaze represents a significant component of corporate musical production as it depends on possession and control, conforming to dominant values and relations. Outside this mainstream primarily only because they self-identify as indigenous and cast a different gaze, Native American Indian artists may aspire to conform to the extent they must in order to expand their audience, but their material being and different values hinder much success.

Interestingly enough, in a hopeful turn in his analysis, Krupat argues that "cultural hegemony is necessarily limited" in its effectiveness, since any "totality" such as a dominant Pop Market -- in our case influenced by Gangsta infused hip hop -- is criss-crossed with contradictions such that a reggae influenced Jason Mraz shows up in concert on the NBC Today show (8/7/09) and Sean Paul's reggaeton bounces up on Pop radio. This is because "we always get in practice varying degrees of dominant, residual and emerging values." (Krupat 23) As we've seen, the beliefs espoused by the musicians discussed here resist dominant values and emphasize oppositional ones -- the values of their audiences seem to mirror that pattern as well.

Traditional Values

The land is a gift from the creator. Showing respect for the world is a way to give thanks to the creator for all that has been given. We must do what mother Earth wants us to do.
--- Mary Miguel, Tohono O'Odham elder, July, 2009

The traditional values and beliefs held by those who came before are considered in Krupat's analysis to be "residual". But tribal values are more effectively perceived as enduring knowledge of the past and historic ritual -- wisdom and understanding that have been retained throughout millennia of "survival" (Vizenor 1994) of the harshest physical and political conditions. For some people spiritual and moral values -- rooted in the past experience of their people -- hold stronger sway than for others. And the traditions that are carried forward hold different economic, political and educational implications for the diverse participants. Depending on the emphasis on specific aspects of a story, the same tale can teach different lessons. Further, Native American Indians live in community; but, they are also members of distinct communities. "Native people are tribal people and cannot be described as one," explained Potawatomi/Creek sculptor and painter Douglas Coffin in Tucson in 2008. (Coffin) So, distinct knowledge resonates differently for each group. And it resonates more completely when driven by music. "Native American Indian stories are told and heard in motion," writes Gerald Vizenor. (1993 xiii) Native reggae gives new meaning to this expression. Further, the rhythm and beat of this music is linked, not only with language and social experience, but also with "the textures of the grain of the human voice. And these links are maintained first and last through drumming." Inevitably, "where there is drumming there is dancing." (Hebdige 11)

It is presumptuous for a Midwestern non-native to summarize indigenous traditions, especially in light of what Douglas Coffin has said about Native people; they can't be described as having one culture. But as Mary Miguel explains at the beginning of this section, there is above all respect for Mother Earth. This respect extends to all that inhabits the Earth, with respect for others, especially elders and children. Traditionally this respect grows from the extensive kinship networks that provide familial support and cooperation. And a very real strength of ritual traditions is that they offer a dramatic alternative to all the consumptive materialism and dominant values of the hegemonic corporate culture. So too does One Love offer an alternative. The Brother and Sisterhood of humanity of One Love also finds resonance among some Native people, considered here as an emerging set of values.

Emerging Values

Emerging values in this case are much more than the spiritual and political expression of One Love philosophy. In one of the most exciting aspects of indigenous culture today, there is a flourishing of theoretical and activist work regarding traditional and emerging

values in Native communities. The work of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Craig Womack, Paula Gunn Allen, Robert Warrior, Taiaiake Alfred and Cheryl Suzack, among many others, has provided plentiful insight into indigenous life. Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) has claimed indigenous identity does not depend only on the title to land, nor simply on saving Native languages, but depends primarily on "a way of life that has its own particularities, patterns, uniqueness, structures and energies." (Ortiz xi) Some recent work actually reaches into traditional forms of culture in new ways with new theories to develop Native cultural understanding. Prominent in the discussion of the "adaptability" of traditional forms, Lisa Brooks (Abenaki), states that traditions have survived millennia because they are adaptable, citing both Warrior and Womack, (Brooks 251-252). While this is an advance for Native culture and theory, it poses a problem for our analysis here; there is no clear demarcation between traditional and emerging values in indigenous communities today -- those lines are in flux. One love philosophy therefore is competing with an array of other philosophical systems in Native American Indian identity narratives.

One Love is alive and well today and espouses that people everywhere deserve respect and independence. Since Rastafarians read the Bible carefully, they find different sections to inspire their belief in One Love than do traditional Protestant and Catholic religions. They cite different stories and parables and draw inspiration from the Book of Wisdom to resist, prosper and live life fully as rebels against Babylon. Interestingly enough, One Love values have been primarily spread through reggae music; it is an emerging oral tradition.

Part of the reason One Love reggae has taken root around the world can be seen in Neil Savashinky's research, an academic analysis shedding light on the influence of reggae and One Love philosophy. In the New West Indian Guide, in 1994, Savishinsky described several of what he saw as "universal attractions" of Rastafarian reggae music for indigenous people around the world, including: its independent "spirituality", its "anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist stance", its demand for "deliverance from poverty and oppression," its assertion of a "dignified self-image and identity", its emphasis on understanding "indigenous traditions and culture," and its call for a return to a more "natural and traditional way of life." (Savishinsky 272-74) John Williams of Native Roots clearly states the parallels for most of these ideas in indigenous people:

There are a lot of parallels: the universal concept of understanding and respect and everyone coming from the same heart and soul -- but at the same time standing up for what is right and speaking out against bad things.... A lot of reggae lyrics are positive and deal with celebrating everyday what we have and who we are... Our message is pride in being Native, but also pride in being whoever you are -- universal pride. The other message is not to look back to the past, but to think about the future in a positive way.... Maintaining spirituality; the importance of prayer, the importance of culture, and the importance of respecting one another are also our messages.... That is exactly along the same lines as Rasta." (Interview with Austin Daze)

More than one of these characteristics can be observed in other artists we briefly mention here.

Because we are not experiencing a simple coincidence of interest between Native people and Rastas, but a real "union" of ideas; we can look to another new concept to try to understand how One Love reggae has influenced some Native people. The Native reggae artists here still maintain autonomy in their existence. They are distinct from Rasta One Love. The term "elective affinity", outlined by Michael Löwy in his *Redemption and Utopia*, enlightens us metaphorically regarding the forces that make seemingly disparate entities form a merger of values, a "union" or "elective affinity" according to Löwy. (7) In this case it has been a mutual choice between heterogeneous elements: Native peoples and Rastafarian reggae artists. But they have interacted without forming a new entity, because the indigenous people have remained distinctly Native American Indian. These

artists accept certain aspects of One Love philosophy at the same time that they hold close their own Native identities. And some of the Rasta reggae artists, such as Mutabaruka, actually have been changed by their visits with indigenous people, writing to confirm that the conditions in Jamaica and on Indian reservations produce the same struggles.

Redemption and transformation can be part of an identity that expresses values in a philosophy of love and life. There are elements of messianic millenarianism -- including an apocalyptic future -- in the Rastafarian conception of Redemption. These are softened in One Love, especially by Native musicians, who tend toward self-transformation, even though millenarianism does exist as a strain in some indigenous religions. The concept of redemption when found in Native American Indian spirituality seems to parallel Rastafarianism in that the truth of life exists as "events that are public, part of the visible world, not spiritually internal." (Löwy 17) "By their works you shall know them." But Rastas don't just chant down Babylon to seek redemption, they call out to celebrate "Roots and Culture" -- to know the past and its accomplishments, values and lessons. They also call on Jah (Yahweh) to deliver the "suffer-ahs" from oppression. Rastas spiritually believe in One God as other Abrahamic religions do. Jah, Rastafari, Ras (Prince) Tafari, was incarnated in the late Haille Selassie of Ethiopia, with the prophet Marcus Garvey featuring prominently, especially for messengers such as Burning Spear. One Love itself tends to be detached from these roots, but they are underlying elements (residual) in the overall One Love discourse. And for the artists discussed here, as we've seen, One Love has as much to do with Native Pride as it does with who the creator is and was.

Now with this framework in mind, we can take a closer look at two more of the most important indigenous American reggae musicians working today, Casper and Tchiya Amet.

Casper Loma Da Wa

As we've mentioned, Casper Loma Da Wa ("Beautiful Sun"), the Hopi/Diné reggae singer and rapper first released *Original Landlord* in 1997. Performing across the country and internationally, at festivals and other venues, he released *The Sounds of Reality* in 2001 and *Honor the People* in 2004. Casper too has received NAMA awards. His own unique musical and spiritual vision is a vibrant combination of traditional indigenous attitudes and beats with modern reggae sound techniques, again with notable influences of One Love philosophy. There are no compromises with dominant values. He tells stories of real reservation life, of youth suicide, and the suffering and struggle to survive and prosper on land that was never taken away from his own ancestors by force by the "whiteman". He honors women and treats them with respect, and focuses long and hard on Native Rights and indigenous Sovereignty.

Casper told Brenda Norrell at *Indian Country Today* in 2005 to "question authority", he urges Natives to use their senses to determine truth. "Don't listen to the crap the government is trying to push down your throats, believe what your elders told you." Casper calls for Leonard Peltier's freedom, and is generally more explicitly political than Native Roots -- addressing specific environmental and human rights issues -- with much less influence of One Love. He was first inspired to bring his message of hope and struggle through the medium of reggae music when he heard the Jamaican reggae musicians perform on the Hopi reservation as we've seen, most espousing One Love Rastafarian beliefs. On *Original Landlord*, in "Dread Dem Come," Casper documents the formative meeting of two cultures when he remembers the trips of the many Rastafarian musicians from Jamaica who "Dem come to Hopiland", describing the Culture Connection "Reggae Inna Hopiland" concerts up near Kykotsmovi. In addition to the big names who performed in Hopi, Casper gives credit for influencing him -- nurturing his interest in One Love -- to Jamie Cirrito of Tucson's continuously active Neon Prophet, and to Ira Osborne of the now defunct Arizona reggae band One Blood, as well as to Danny Clarke from Jamaica's *Meditations*. (Personal e-mail, 12-1-06)

Casper's music is infused with hope that comes from both traditional and emerging values. And, he has a keen awareness of the

power of language and song; his lyrics and his microphone are his "only weapons". But while Casper uses a mild patois and borrows One Love phrases; he is not an uncritical supporter of all things Jamaican. He's been outspoken about the contradictions within reggae music that have found many musicians from the island praising the "taming" of the wild, Wild West, reflecting dominant values. Casper rightly sees this as the U.S. conquest of indigenous land through "manifest destiny". Early on he took on the task of "chanting down Babylon" by speaking truth to power, when he challenged the early reggae and ska artists' fascination with American "western" films. Casper made Jamie Cirrito's insight his own when he chanted Neon Prophet's "West Was Won":

*"Let me tell you how the west was won/the west was won in a murder style....
From coast to coast/from sea to sea/it all used to be Indian Country,.....
Then one day they met the white man/ who came with a gun in his hand....
They called it manifest destiny.....In a murder style.
(Cirrito) [1]*

What follows in the song is a sobering litany of many historical military conquests and murders of indigenous men, women and children that comprised the "winning" of the West. In the background, the chant is repeated: "Now hear this!" Casper wants everyone to know the truth about how the West was really "won." In "No Indian" Casper raps that he is not an "Indian from India," but a "true native" who still holds claim to the land as the "original landlord" -- to land that was given by the creator to his ancestors. Recognizing that those ancestors are both men and women, and despite the leading role played by Joy Harjo as an early Native American Indian reggae innovator, today there are few indigenous women performing the music.

Tchiya Amet

The central issue that confronts American Indian women throughout the hemisphere is survival, literal survival, both on a cultural and biological level.

Paula Gunn Allen 189 (emphasis in original)

As noted above, another artist who strongly expresses her Native beliefs in the context of One Love reggae is Tchiya Amet, currently living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Amet was raised on Chicago's

South Side, and developed her reggae sound in Austin, Texas -- performing reggae long before the end of the last century. She discovered her multicultural, indigenous heritage when she started raising her children. Tchiya Amet's first CD entitled Rise Again Truth (1999), on which she sounds at times similar to Sade, combines both Native traditions and One Love, containing songs to natural living and representing her Cherokee heritage as well as to Jah Rastafari. She raises the feminist spirit with the song entitled "Tribe of Dinah". Her second album Black Turtle Island remains firmly rooted in indigenous culture, values and rhythms, and continues to explore contemporary ideas and One Love beliefs, carrying the wisdom and teachings of the elders into the future, and resisting dominant values openly. But sometimes it is not only Native elders, but also African-American ones whom she cites. Poems of both Langston Hughes and Marcus Garvey rest organically side by side with traditional indigenous lyrics. All this with a captivating roots reggae accompaniment and a massive horn sound -- with Amet's vocals reminiscent of Sister Carol at times and even similar to Ricki Lee Jones on occasion. In fact, Tchiya Amet performs the rootsiest style of reggae among the musicians considered here. But all the artists discussed -- Amet, Casper and Native Roots -- combine their indigenous culture with some elements of One Love, incited by the infectious reggae sound.

Conclusions

All three of the artists addressed here share a dedication to their Native roots and identities with a strong influence of One Love philosophy, always with an awareness of what is current in the dominant market. The actual combination of these elements in musical expression varies widely. And, all these artists celebrate Native lives in an eloquent illustration of Chippewa novelist and theorist Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance", which embraces so much more than simple survival, and goes further than establishing endurance and perseverance, to include resistance -- even vibrant defiance -- with playful humor as well (1994).

Indigenous reggae is advancing with conscious lyrics that tend to uplift and activate indigenous people, never forgetting to have fun. Spirituality sits side by side with the documentation of appalling social conditions, and a willingness to dance ones troubles away. Though audiences aren't huge, venues are consistently well attended when indigenous reggae rhythms are heard. Native American Indian reggae will continue to enlighten, entertain, and earn awards as time unfolds.

NOTES:

[1] This was the first reggae song on the subject of Manifest Destiny. It was originally recorded in 1984 in Jamaica by Jamie Cirrito, a New York City native with Buddhist influences in his One Love approach who has lived in Tucson for decades; Cirrito traces distant Cherokee ancestors.

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