



War Dance

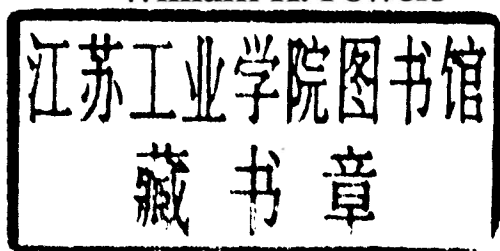
Plains Indian Musical Performance

William K. Powers

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For David P. McAllester

Acknowledgments

A number of people have continued to lend encouragement to my work on music and dance. Foremost is my wife, Marla N. Powers, and my sons, Jeff and Greg. Marla continues to be my best critic, and in many ways each work of mine is a collaborative effort.

Next, of course, are all the singers and dancers whom I have met and performed with since 1948. In particular, all my ideas about music have been inspired initially by Henry White Calf, with whom I stayed at Loafer Camp; Edgar Red Cloud, of Pine Ridge; and William Horncloud, who in 1989 was 86 and still filled with enthusiasm for powwows and other Indian celebrations. My adopted father, Frank Afraid of Horse, remains my model of traditional Plains Indian dancing, and during his lifetime was considered one of the best by all who knew him.

Much of my time has been spent on the Pine Ridge reservation, where my adopted sisters, Zona Fills the Pipe and Sadie Janis, and my niece, Darlene (Janis) Shortbull, have made me and my family feel like part of theirs. The late Clarence Janis was in many ways my mentor, and he is sadly lost but happily remembered. In recent years, photographic and other archival materials have been made available through the kind offices of Reverend Earl Kurth, S.J., former President of the Heritage Center, Inc., and Reverend Peter Klink, S.J., Superior of Holy Rosary Mission, Pine Ridge, South Dakota. In particular, Brother C. M. Simon, S.J., Director of the Heritage Center, Inc., and the Red Cloud Indian Art Show at Holy Rosary, has made our stay each summer fruitful and entertaining. It

would be difficult for me to name one other person who has been so dedicated and helpful to Indian artists, and to those of us who rely on his experience and knowledge of tribal arts to write about them.

Finally, it is with great pleasure that I humbly dedicate this volume to my friend, colleague, and teacher, David P. McAllester, Professor of Music and Anthropology Emeritus at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. I first met Dave at the Society for Ethnomusicology meetings at Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1965. He was particularly instrumental in helping me make up my mind to pursue an academic career in anthropology after having already spent 20 years singing and dancing Indian. He was also responsible for my subsequent attendance at Wesleyan, where I continued to sing and dance Indian for my room, board, and master's degree. His graciousness is matched only by that of his wife, Susan, who made all students at Wesleyan welcome, and I was lucky enough to be one of them. Most of all, I want to say that I regard Dave's attitude about life in general as admirable. He has a profound and loving respect for nature and people, and knows a lot about both. Although his own specialization has been with the Navajo, his philosophical ideas are steeped in cultural relativism tempered with an uncanny respect for that which is culturally similar as well as for that which is socially different. His ideas are applicable to all people who sing and dance. It has been a sincere pleasure to work and to be with him in the past, and he has my continued respect and profound admiration.

Introduction

The following essays represent my thoughts on Plains Indian music and dance over the past 30 years of publishing on the subject, particularly in the now defunct journal *American Indian Tradition*, and later in publications such as *Powwow Trails* and *American Indian Crafts and Culture*. More recently, most of my work has appeared in the *Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* and other academic journals.

My interest and involvement go back much further, to the time when I first encountered Lakota Indians from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in my home town of St. Louis, Missouri. Like many other white boys of the time, I had already learned to perform what I perceived to be Indian dancing, beginning at age nine when I served as mascot for an Explorer Post called the Piasa Society. As was true with other such groups throughout the United States, there was not much expertise, but there was a great deal of enthusiasm. A number of academics began this way, and it is still a pleasure to meet someone at a conference whom I originally knew as an Indian dancer.

Anyway, it was 1947 when I accompanied my eighth-grade class from Scruggs School in South St. Louis to Keil Auditorium, the site of the International Folk Festival, which was headed by a dynamic woman named Sara Gertrude Knott, who was well known in folklore circles. Each year she directed and narrated the festival, which included the songs and dances of peoples from all over the world. Of particular interest to me was the fact that each year the festival

opened with a selection of dances by American Indians. In the past, a group of Kiowas “held the contract,” as they say in Indian country, to participate in the folk festival, but for some reason this year the singers and dancers were “Sioux” from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. This was particularly heartening to me because, like so many other young people of the time who read about Indians, the “Sioux” were my favorite but I never believed that I would be seeing them in person. That day I watched more eagerly and perhaps more nervously than ever before as the four Lakota men performed such dances as the Omaha dance, the Scalp dance, the Victory dance, and the Sacred Bow dance.

After the Indian part of the program concluded, I couldn’t contain myself. Having been brought up in a theatrical family, I was very familiar with the numerous ways one could enter a theater, so I slipped away from my class and headed outside for the stage door. Apprehensive that the doorman would be reluctant to let a kid into the dressing room backstage area, I prepared myself and announced in a loud voice, “I want to see the Indians—please.” Much to my relief, he rather nonchalantly, without looking up from his newspaper, said, “Second floor dressing rooms,” and pointed the way over his shoulder.

When I got to the second floor, I could smell what I later discovered was *waḥpe waštemna*, a sweet grass that the dancers used to pack with their costumes to keep them fresh. At the end of a concrete hallway there were dressing rooms and I could hear the men talking. I peeked into each of the rooms until I finally got to theirs. There they were:

John Colhoff, known as White Man Stands in Sight, was famous in his own right, having served as the public relations director for the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council and as summer curator of the Rapid City, South Dakota, Sioux Indian Museum. His name was listed frequently as a respondent for many western historians, particularly George E. Hyde of Omaha, Nebraska, who has written many wonderful histories of the Plains Indians.

Edgar Red Cloud, the singer for the group, was grandson of the famous old Chief Red Cloud of the Bad Face band of Oglalas. Later I would get to know Edgar very well, and he would be one of the first of the Lakotas to teach me how to sing and speak Lakota.

The other members of the groups were Joseph Elk Boy and Daniel White Eyes, who were old-timers whom I would never see again but whose families I would one day soon sing and dance with at Pine Ridge.

Self-consciously I said "*Hau Kola*," one of ten expressions I had learned since first reading "Sioux" history in the third grade.

"*Hau*," they replied, somewhat surprised but nevertheless delighted upon hearing a gangling white boy who could at least say hello in their native language.

They made me feel at home immediately, just as they would at Pine Ridge in years to come. We talked about singing and dancing, and later I planned to come back every day as long as they were in town, which was an all-too-short five days. I did come back every day and relieved John of some of his chores. When the old-timers were too tired, for example, I would take them back to their hotel in downtown St. Louis by bus, being quite proud to walk next to what I assumed to be the tallest men I had ever seen, both of them with long hair and wearing moccasins with their street clothes.

Best of all during those five days was the invitation to come to Pine Ridge. Although my mother and father were somewhat concerned about their only son running away with the "wild" Indians, I made arrangements, at the advice of John, to contact the Jesuit Mission Bureau in St. Louis, which in turn put me in touch with the Reverend Leo Doyle, S.J., who was Superior at Holy Rosary Mission at Pine Ridge. Holy Rosary of course was well known to me. It was a focal point during the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, and many of the priests, brothers, and nuns had been mentioned in the history books for their efforts to make peace with Indians who had left Pine Ridge to go up to the Stronghold at Sheep Mountain in the Badlands.

After waiting what seemed to be an eternity for a response from Father Doyle, the letter came, and I was invited to come. The next summer, I went. And I have returned nearly every year since. Frequently I have made as many as four trips a year in order to conduct research that was in some way seasonal. Each year, I feel the same exhilaration I felt in 1948.

Since 1948, I have continued to go to dances that are now generally called powwows, but that at one time were referred to by tribal

terms usually translated as “dance,” “celebration,” or more frequently “doings.” The original term *pauau* was used to designate a curing ceremony in an Algonquian language, and did not become popular nationally until the mid-1950s. Although the term was used widely in Oklahoma to designate a week or weekend of singing, dancing, feasting, and other events such as giveaways and trading, it did not receive wide attention until after World War II, during which time many people became highly mobilized, relocated, and came in contact with other people they had never known before. It was no different with American Indians, and I attribute much of what was later known (erroneously, I think) as Pan-Indianism to the high degree of mobility achieved after the war.

Most of the tribes on the Plains, to varying degrees, have been hosting celebrations to which tourists were only incidental. Possibly owing to easier access to the tribes in Oklahoma and the fact that 67 tribes had been removed there since the early nineteenth century, much of what passes as powwow today is derived from Oklahoma, particularly the contests. As I have stated in other works, costumes for the dancers tended to remain tribally oriented for lady dancers (the preferred term on the Southern Plains) but were much more flexible for the male dancers. Later in the book I discuss such costume and dance styles as “fancy” and “straight” dance, “traditional” and “Grass” dance, but the point I want to make here is that for over 40 years I have witnessed not so much a rapid change in Plains Indian musical performance as a consistent return to earlier forms of singing, dancing, and costuming. Just as the late 1980s have witnessed a recurrence of musical, dance, and clothing styles of the 1950s and 1960s, so the same phenomenon has been happening in Indian country.

Continuity and change in American Indian musical performance, whether it is predictable or not (it usually isn’t), means that the sum total of tribal cultures that we call American Indian is very much alive and well. Although there certainly are other aspects of culture that contribute to this viability—kinship, religion, economics, and politics—there is no doubt that musical performance is perhaps the most vital because it is the most visible. Much of what one knows about kinship, for example, requires some knowledge of the native language. And many religious ceremonies were or recently have

become forbidden to outsiders. Tribal politics is such a specialized form of government that understanding it is almost limited to those actively involved. But music and dance are generally secular; they are open to the general public, frequently not only to watch but also to participate. Even the restrictions placed on non-Indians joining in powwows, which came about largely as a result of the unrest of the 1960s, have been reversed. Last year, one of the best powwows I attended was the second annual International Brotherhood Powwow, held in a beautiful setting near the town of Porcupine, South Dakota. People from all over the world attended—people from different tribes, different nations, different ethnic groups—and the sentiment that prevailed for the entire duration of the weeklong celebration was one extremely reminiscent, at least to me, of the later 1940s and 1950s, when drums and dance grounds were open to everyone who had an interest in American Indian culture.

What I hope the essays in the volume will do is provide some background, including the history, the continuity, and the change that I have witnessed in American Indian culture from the perspective of Plains Indian musical performance. Some of the essays, written in the early 1960s, are just as significant today as they were then, but I have revised all of them to indicate precisely what time period I am writing about. I can remember in 1968 I wrote about a new dance craze that had invaded the Lakota reservations from Canada and North Dakota—the Grass dance. It was so different from the traditional dancing I had seen before. There were lithe dancers in fringed and ribboned costumes, porcupine headdresses sporting crests made from plume-tipped choke springs. Moccasins were replaced by sneakers, and many of the dancers wore sunglasses. They bounced and shook as they danced in a “hip” way that I had never seen before. It was soon to be replaced, however, by other styles that my friend and colleague R. D. Theisz was to characterize as the “New Sioux.” And that was what replaced the Grass dance, but only for a short time.

In the 1980s, again the younger dancers are out there in heavily fringed costumes, somewhat modified from the 1960s, but they are dancing the same Grass dance with the same trick steps. But there are some significant changes in the songs, and perhaps the 1980s will herald what I consider to be the most significant change in

powwow singing ever to be heard, a style that I have witnessed since about 1985 but that seems to be taking hold as we move into the 1990s. Just like the earlier Grass dance, the songs come from the north—Canada, North Dakota, Montana. Like the original Grass dance songs that were sung totally with vocables, these new songs are sung almost entirely with words, and frequently the words are abbreviated so that only someone familiar with the song style can understand them. Moreover, they are sung by nearly all the tribes on the Northern Plains. They are sung mainly by young people, and many of the older generation are opposed to them. Sound familiar? These songs not only contain words, sometimes not even sung in complete sentences (one of the complaints), but they are extremely syncopated and peppy. They are fast, and just as the traditional songs of another era brought the dancers onto the dance floor, these songs, too, make the young people want to dance. Who can say what will replace them (if anything), and who can say, if replaced, when they will return? Perhaps in the year 2010, when in all likelihood powwows will still be the focus of musical performance.

Chapter 1, “The Future Study of American Indian Music,” attempts to place Plains music and dance in a broad perspective showing how they have been studied in the past. I am more interested in what is happening on the reservations and Indian communities, a position I call a “reservationist” (as opposed to “preservationist”). The difference between the two positions largely reflects the attitudes of those who see Indian music and dance as thriving cultural forms of expression, and those who would see them as dying out and therefore necessary to salvage.

Chapter 2, “Plains Music,” provides a brief history of the study of Plains music, particularly by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, and also opts for distinguishing between certain geographic and regional styles of music and dance most often identified with the contemporary powwow.

Chapter 3, “War Dance,” provides a description of the most popular dance of the powwow along with idiosyncrasies found on the Northern and Southern Plains.

Chapter 4, “Music in Motion,” discusses the major differences between what I call “tribalism” and “intertribalism,” the latter a

term I much prefer over the specious term “pan-Indian” (which I discuss later in the book). I also focus on the diffusion of Plains Indian music and dance, which has been a major subject of study in anthropology since the establishment of the discipline in the United States by Franz Boas.

Chapter 5, “The Powwow,” discusses the larger context in which the War dance appears and describes the other types of dances usually found interspersed between War dances.

Chapter 6, “Pan-Indianism Versus Pan-Tetonism,” offers the hypothesis that differences in forms of the powwow and regional styles are created not only through repeated performance but also through one’s sense of tribal history, religion, material culture, and language, all of which help in part to define music and dance style.

Chapter 7, “Pan-Indianism Reconsidered,” is a review of the literature on the concept of Pan-Indianism beginning with James H. Howard’s seminal article in 1955 and ending with his 1976 study of the Gourd dance. My point is that a premature concern with the idea of Pan-Indianism really misled and misdirected the study of Plains Indian music and dance by focusing too sharply on what many anthropologists, historians, and ethnomusicologists believed to be a nationalization of American Indians. In the process of following this rather limited position, the fact that individual tribes were still very much concerned with their own sense of ethnic identity was all but obscured, thus creating a need to label any modern developments as “revivalistic” rather than seeing them as a continuum of earlier tribal customs.

Chapter 8, “Songs of the Red Man,” Chapter 9, “Toward a Sound Ethnography,” and Chapter 10, “‘Sioux’ Favorites,” constitute three discographic review essays that provide descriptions of Plains songs still available on disc and tape from Canyon Records, Indian House, and the now defunct Songs of the Red Man label. In these essays I try to complement the sounds of the singers by adding some notes related to the history and culture of the tribes involved. I have also taken the liberty of providing some translations of songs in Lakota.

Finally, in Chapter 11, “Have Drum, Will Travel,” I make some observations on why I think Plains Indian music and dance have

received the interest, if not fame, that they have, and why they will continue to symbolize a strong and burgeoning contemporary American Indian culture not only on the Plains but in every corner of the world where American Indians are highly respected, admired, and imitated.

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