

R. CARLOS NAKAI

A close-up portrait of R. Carlos Nakai, a Native American flutist. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. He has two braids of hair. He is wearing a blue collared shirt under a grey and white patterned vest with red and black geometric designs. He is holding a wooden flute vertically in his right hand. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting.

speaks
his
mind

BY DANIEL BUCKLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
CHUCK WEST

Think of a revolutionary device and somehow the Native American flute doesn't immediately pop to mind. But with that handcrafted cedar instrument, Navajo / Ute flutist R. Carlos Nakai is prying open the world of possibility for Native peoples as he spreads his music to every corner of the globe.

AT 53 [born 4/16/46], Nakai is one of the most prominent figures in Native American music. He took top honors in both the Best Male Artist and Best Flutist categories at the first Native American Music Awards in 1998 and top honors in the Best Instrumental Recording category in the 1999 NAMMYS.

Nakai is the first traditional player to earn a gold record for certified sales of over 500,000 copies (Nakai says, "It's around someplace") for 1989's *Canyon Trilogy* and is teetering on his second for *Earth Spirit*. In 1999 Nakai received two Grammy nominations—for *Inner Voices* with a 32-piece string orchestra, and for *Inside Monument Valley*, his collaborative with flautist Paul Horn, both in the "Best New Age Album" category. In 1994 Nakai's *Ancestral Voices*—a collaboration with guitar maker William Eaton and powwow greets the Black Lodge Singers—was a finalist for a Grammy in the "Best Traditional Folk Album" category.

His catalog of recordings is some 30-plus deep; idiomatically spanning everything from traditional Native American tunes to new age, jazz and classical genres. Renowned choreographer Martha Graham cast her last work, "Night Chant," to Nakai's "Cycles." In addition, Nakai has written and performed scores for film and television including work for the National Park Service, Fox Television, the Discovery Channel, IMAX, the National Geographic Society and many commercial productions. In addition, the flutist tours the USA, Europe and Asia 70-80 percent of the year, holds workshops on performance practice and has authored the book *The Art of the Native American Flute* with composer James DeMars.

ON THE FLUTE

He is busy! And all of this from a simple instrument, the original courting tradition of which had died out among

Nakai's Diné people long before he ever saw one.

It's one thing to do many things, but to do them as uniformly well as Nakai does is amazing. Dressed in tails for the symphonic soloist's spotlight, Nakai turns the tuning peculiarities of his clutch of flutes into painterly colors that complement the orchestra to perfection. He is a consummate virtuoso on the instrument, a brilliant improviser and a stylistic chameleon. But while a versatile collaborator, Nakai has never compromised the essence of his instrument.

"I started finding that I was developing a discipline for the instrument for myself," Nakai says of his musical journey. "The flute had a particular series of pitches that were related to standard European music practice (and other 'wild-card' pitches all its own). It took off from there. I started finding more ways to use this instrument than the traditional thing. Even today I continue to work with instruments tuned to the traditional system rather than find a flute maker that will make one pitched at A=440.

"Over the fifteen years I've been doing this, I've developed the philosophy that you should not try to change the instrument but rather to work with it and learn how to include it in other disciplines. This instrument is teaching me."

Teaching him and taking him places he'd only dreamed of.

"When I started early on I always wanted to be a symphonic musician. I thought I would be a symphonic trumpeter. That ended. But now, with this primitive flute, I'm sitting not in the orchestra section but right next to the conductor, and the conductor asks ME if I'm ready."

Nakai is a character. Make that an "individual." He says, straight-out, what's on his mind, without apology. In a non-Native world hyped up on romantic notions of Native American life and culture, it would be easy for Nakai to capitalize on that frenzy and



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then being left after the visit. Everyone goes in the middle of the night. You wake up in the morning and you're there with the dog. Your grandmother is there, who doesn't speak English, and she's telling you to get up because it's time to do the sheep. Your parents are gone. So you spend a whole day being shocked that you've been abandoned out there. But then you get used to it and start getting used to the temper of what it means to be out there."

He spent time on the Colorado Indian Reservation with an uncle in Poston—the former home of one of the U.S.' WWII Japanese internment camps.

"I learned a little bit about that camp and what Poston, Arizona stood for. I really enjoyed being down there with the Mohave and the Calhuilla over by Palm Springs. I would go to bird dances and funerals—all kinds of social private occasions with those people."

Nakai got shipped off to the Ute side of the family as well.

"One of my grandmothers said to never forget that I'm also a Ute," Nakai says. "They were captives way back when and they became Navajos by choice."

In later years I also found out that some of my great-grandmothers were from the Zuni pueblo and they had been running from the army at that time. They hid with the Navajos in the cornfields in the Ganado area and were taken to be Navajos.

Before my grandmother died she also informed me that I had a great, great, great grandmother who was Spanish. She was a child of a Spanish conquistador and a Navajo woman who lived down around Chambers, Arizona.

Having been farmed out like that and having all those influences gave me a real appreciation for what was important in my own life based on these things that I knew about myself but also activities and influences from everything surrounding me."

Nakai's father (who later became Navajo tribal chairman) and mother had a Native American radio program on KCLS in Flagstaff for six years when he was a boy.

"I used to go in with my parents when they would do their radio taping and select music for their programs coming up," Nakai recalls. "I would hear all this Native music and they'd ask which ones I really liked."

"The one that impressed me was a piece William Hoenclooud had done with a flute player," he recalls. "We're still looking for it today. I know it was on one of those big Canyon 78 RPM records. He talked a little bit about the music and sang the song, and then he played it on the flute. That was my first experience with flute playing, around 1956 or so. Ever since that time I had that thought in my mind."

In public school, Nakai was drawn to music. He dreamed of becoming a classical trumpeter. But a lot of life would intervene. Nakai served in the Navy during the Vietnam war, only to return to the States to be pelted with eggs and rotten tomatoes by protesters. He still has his dress uniform, splattered in garbage, in the closet of his home.

Back on the reservation too, there were resentments. Many of his friends had not returned from Vietnam. Some on the Rez cruelly asked why he had. Nakai hit a low point, took to drinking and drugging (he's long over those demons now), and had a nasty automobile accident. With his jaw mangled, all hopes for a career as a concert trumpeter vanished.

ON HIS MUSICAL CAREER

But in 1974, a chance meeting took place that would put Nakai on a new path. "We met this guy in Santa Fe carrying a bag of flutes around. 'I thought 'This is some scam,'" Nakai recalls. "I'd never seen flutes like that in my life. Then I heard one and I traded for a couple. I went to La Jolla and found out he'd been shown how to make these by an ethnomusicologist at Oklahoma University. It was on his floor in La Jolla that I realized I'd heard that sound before on the recording I'd heard years ago."

Nakai recorded his first release, *Changes*, while still teaching in Northern Arizona. He moved to Phoenix in 1984 where he learned of an Indian art market coming up that weekend at the Heard Museum. Nakai packed up 28 cassettes, hauled them down to the Heard Museum and pestered the woman in charge of presenters for a place to set up.

"People came around, heard my flutes," Nakai says. "I talked with them. Contacts started. Soon afterwards I got a call from the Heard to see if I would be interested in working with them in the planning stage of a new presentation to be called *Native Peoples: Our Voices, Our Land*."

Nakai would spend the next three years at the Heard, helping to design, among other things, the hogan that still resides there.

Another key alliance was made through the last of Nakai's 125 original copies of *Changes*—the securing of a record contract with Phoenix-based Canyon Records Productions.

"I was fortunate enough to have sold my last pow wow copy—the one with the beer stains and the cassette case that sticks to itself—to Bob Nuss at Canyon Records Indian Arts. He gave it to Robert Doyle and Raymond Boley (current Canyon Records Productions president and founder, respectively) and they called me. I thought it was just another flash in the pan. I'm waiting for the flash to end."



"On the pseudo performing things that allude to how we were before the cultural change came in the 1750s, ... I can't do that. I don't live there now, I will never live there and I will never tread in the past."

milk it all the way to the bank.

Nakai resents that practice outright.

"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," the former school teacher explains. "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."

"But I can also see what their suffering was all about. The human community, unfortunately, was always involved in survival as a priority. As with all other communities, we manipulated the environment so that we could survive better and we continue to do that even now."

Nakai's manner of doing things has ruffled some

feathers. But always his vision of where he's headed is clear. And he is prepared to let the chips fall where they may.

"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.'

But I will not carry a flag for anyone else. My Diné elders have always told me 'Only speak for yourself.'"

ON HIS BEGINNINGS

Nakai was born in Flagstaff, Arizona and spent summers in Cornfields near the New Mexico border.

"We had to learn a little bit about what communities we belonged to and learn what our cultural system was all about,"

Nakai explains. "The easiest way was to go out there and spend time with our maternal grandfather.

"I remember being tricked into the car with all my funny books and my jacket and

Nakai with a sampling of his extensive collection of handcrafted flutes, many sent to him from admirers.





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—Robert Doyle, President Canyon Records

"I try to find things that are interesting to me and I try to find involvements and collaborations with other musicians that would continue the story in the song. I've found musicians who have gone almost down the same path and who have a similar perspective on their own lives and the lives of those around them."

Nakai's place in the world of Native American music is secure.

"There are a couple of dozen great Native American flute players, of both Native and non-Native heritage," says Doyle. "But it was R. Carlos who brought it forward most succinctly and effectively, particularly to non-Natives. Would it have happened without him? Probably, but not to the same depth and intensity that it's happening."

"One of the most important aspects of R.C. is his artistic generosity. He has encouraged others to follow in his footsteps. He can't do it all, nor does he want to."

And Nakai's financial success has given Canyon a freer hand to give a shot to other emerging recording artists, and to document the traditions of a broader swath of the Native American population.

"In a way, his helping us allows us to develop other artists who might not necessarily have been considered by a commercial enterprise," Doyle notes. 