

Multitalented Nakai Quartet Crosses Over With Roots Intact

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By DON HECKMAN
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R Carlos Nakai is to Native American flute music what James Galway has been to Irish music and to the classical flute. That is, the performer who has crossed over from a relative niche market into the wider public consciousness. Nakai, in addition, has done an extremely effective job of bringing his take on Native American—or indigenous—music into the mainstream. That he frequently has done so by positioning it in far-ranging settings, from New Age to jazz, may bother some purists, but there's no denying that his recordings and performances have brought wider visibility to Native American culture.

On Saturday night at El Camino College's Marsee Auditorium, Nakai's quartet demonstrated the ease with which he surrounds his playing with varying backdrops—in this case primarily oriented toward jazz. With musical associates Mary Redhouse (voice and bass), AmoChip Dabney (saxophones, keyboards and bass) and Will Clipman (percussion), Nakai performed material from his current album, "Ancient Future" (no connection with the group of the

same name), tossing in a few earlier pieces such as "Go 'Round Mary" and "Big Medicine" for good measure.

For the most part, his various flutes were used to deliver melodies and, on occasion, repetitious chantlike patterns behind Redhouse's vocals. On several pieces, Nakai played a pocket trumpet, an instrumental skill no doubt dating to his work with Don Cherry, who used a similar instrument. The versatile Dabney was also prominent, moving from one instrument to another, doubling up—a *lá* Rahaan Roland Kirk—on one number to play two, then three, saxophones simultaneously.

But the most fascinating aspects of the performance were delivered by Redhouse, who surely has one of the most remarkably versatile voices in any area of music. Ranging easily across five octaves, producing extraordinary, birdlike calls in her top register, chanting with convincing expertise while somehow managing to simultaneously play effective electric bass, she was the star of the evening. Redhouse's skills were so impressive, in fact, so musically intriguing without losing touch with her Navajo roots, that one hopes a recording of her own efforts will soon be arriving.