

INDIAN ACTORS ARE NOT ENOUGH: INDIGENOUS COMPOSERS EMPOWER NATIVE FILMS

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The process of creating our society is something we all do as artists and is a great responsibility we all share. There are as many kinds of art in the world today as there are people, and as many ways to understand what we do as artists. As a Mohican, I have come to know that "we" are the art "ourselves." Our dreams, experiences, knowledge and our lives are the importance of art. To know our art is to know intimately who we are.

We are not autonomous; we cannot help sharing our lives. We exist in a world of relationships that make up the existence of the world itself. Our society runs on a cause-and-effect system of reciprocity. How we live depends directly on our experiences of sharing. We barter and exchange, talk and listen, bewitch and heal, give and receive. We are each a person who is powerful and who lives in a life-and-death reciprocity with others. If we share life then art shares life. If we share art, then life shares art. When artists know that art and societies are reciprocal, they perform their art responsibly.

In music, I've learned that only performed art has vitality. Performance is not a secondary activity reserved for a time following art. Performance itself is essential for any creative process from its birth. Any artistic process remains powerless if not performed. Even written music, for example, needs a performable process from its outset, long before it ever plays in a concert hall.

Traditional indigenous people of the Americas understand the process of art-ing as the "flowering of the whole world." We create the world ourselves, we challenge each other and, as I see it, we call the process art.

As a professional composer, I know that our indigenous systems for creating the world also hold true for

the film industry, whether they know it or not. Hiring Indian actors to be in films is not enough. Indigenous people must saturate the entire process of creating films. In this way, the central importance of our music to empower Native American people embraces the making of indigenous films as well.

Each artistic, musical moment of indigenous life expresses the entire world in ways particular to that specific moment, whether it be on the rez or on film. Producers may not recognize the efficacy of Native American music to their films, but indigenous

Our woods and our people, together, invite each season to arrive like a cherished relative, and in turn, every season greets us with a song. These cycles and seasons are systems of communication, sharing, reciprocity and respect. Like vigilant midwives, we birth out intimate songs, then learn to sing them aloud and, together, create the medley of our world. We sing ... the woods sing ... the world sings. In truth and in fact, the eternal song of the seasons is our own song. BMD

composers can empower Native American films by bringing a world-shifting intensity back into the creative process.

Can Non-Natives compose indigenous music? The answer to this question rests on a comprehension of what we mean by indigenous music. If we think about the meaning of any music, we perhaps think in terms of musical categories. Music can be high art, an idea that, arguably, may not be indigenous to the Americas. While some indigenous practices incorporate what we might want to call music, the indigenous people, themselves, are likely to react indifferently to any notions of autonomous music, especially in the areas of ritual. In ritual, there may exist no separate category of art or music at all. Each artistic, musical moment of indigenous life expresses the entire world in ways particular to that specific moment, whether it be on the rez or on film.

For example, an anthropologist went into an indigenous tribal community looking for the (quote) sacred (unquote) trumpet used in ceremony. The anthropologist thought the more sacred the trumpet was, the more beautiful it should be. Only permitted to hear the sound of the trumpet in the forest, he conjured up images of an elaborately carved trumpet in his mind. Finally, permitted into the forest one night, he went to see the trumpet. When the trumpeters revealed the instrument, the horn shocked the anthropologist -- it was nothing more than a piece of plastic drainpipe! He asked the people if the old drainpipe

didn't "constitute a gross sacrilege." Yet, the people responded, "What does it matter what the molimo [trumpet] is made of? This one makes a great sound, and, besides, it does not rot like wood. It is much trouble to make a wooden one, and then it rots away and you have to make another."

The trumpet's importance to the anthropologist turned out to be vastly different from its importance to the tribe. The anthropologist looked for a sacred object while the tribe could not care less about the trumpet's sacredness; what they valued was the process of the ceremony. For the tribe, the trumpet was a way to talk with the forest in their ceremonies, and they were content to use a drainpipe. The ceremonial performance was crucial to the tribe while the trumpet itself was merely a leftover of that performance.

In the end, there are no doubt zillions of categorical ways to look at music, including music as product, as expression, as tradition, as theory, as . . . many things. Nailing down the meaning of music is a slippery task at best, so I began to consider another approach. I asked a different question: does the determination of meaning in music involve the indigenous people themselves? In other words, I began to think in terms of self-determination as a musical standard. In this way, the meaning of any music rests in the direct involvement of our indigenous people. It is how we work out our discussions -- agreements and disagreements -- that is important to the meaning of music. Do indigenous principles shape these discussions or do someone else's rules?

I have come to know that indigenous people determine the meaning of their lives on their own terms, and music is one way of working it out.

So, can Non-Natives compose indigenous music? For three strong reasons, the answer is No. First, as illustrated by the story of the anthropologist, indigenous people see and experience their lives in their own ways and voice those ways musically. As we immerse ourselves in our own indigenous communities, we shape our lives from those communities in the most intimate and remarkable ways. What an indigenous composer knows while watching a particular segment of film footage roll by may be very different from what a non-indigenous composer imagines while watching the same footage. After the completion of an Indian film, as Dr. Louis W. Ballard so aptly re-

marked, “. . . only an Indian will remain an Indian.”

Second, as Native Americans we are responsible not only for ourselves but for our communities as well. As a Mohican, the music I compose must bear up under the weight of tribal scrutiny. Creating music that empowers our people -- to the betterment of our Indian nations -- obligates us as indigenous composers! The resolute commitment to tribal communities does not come from Non-Native composers for whom tribal approval is not a concern.

Finally, our younger generations are struggling to find healthy identities in the face of many contemporary sicknesses. It is imperative that we try to provide good indigenous role models. Increasingly, Native Americans are finding themselves counted among the notable of Hollywood. When this happens, the good ones use their status to help encourage our indigenous leaders of tomorrow. If a Mohican composer, for example, was commissioned to compose a large Hollywood film score, that composer may become an indigenous role model for our younger composers. How could any Non-Indian composer be expected to do that? There's no way they could.

Yet, year after year, new Indian films are being scored without the professional help of Native American composers. Why? Producers, in large part, have been unwilling to participate with Native Americans in any genuine process of creation. The gross result of this practice is that our time-honored Native American lifestyles are earning big dollars for the industry but not for us. I have noticed that even our own indigenous film makers have yet to take full advantage of American Indian composed soundtracks; in most cases, even indigenous-made films limit their choice of music to guitar songs when not selecting either powwow or solo flute music.

I can illustrate a typical production tactic from personal experience. Once, a producer offered me the chance to compose the music for a nine-part documentary designed to outline the history of indigenous America. The chance to work with Natives -- from all over the country -- excited me, and I provided detailed suggestions about how to facilitate a

score based on songs from each Native American culture. I explained how to work with the indigenous musicians to design a well-crafted film score.

However, after almost two years of explaining why a Native composer was essential to such a project, they decided to hire a Non-Native composer because he could attract larger investors to the project with his three Grammy awards. The producer took all the scoring suggestions I could provide but missed the most important one of all: if the process of making a film is wrong, the film will be wrong!

How many stinky Indian soundtracks will emanate before someone in the industry gags on the stench? Are we expected to believe that Apaches actually sound like the recent film *Geronimo: An American Legend* leads us to believe? Did the producers think that the Apaches in the audience would not notice the Apache film characters speaking Navajo? The score for *Geronimo* was sickening. The occasional guitar twangs echoing over a low vocal drone were more suggestive of some new-age convergence -- or a bad bowl of chili -- than they were of Apache life.

Sometimes composers, not knowing what kind of music to add to a particular scene, will put sustained drones into a film; in doing so they hope, on one hand, to generate some undefined sense of tension while, on the other, to provide music so wishy-washy it would accommodate anything happening on the screen. In a perennial stream of drones and twangs dunked in watery echo effects, the *Geronimo* score sounded more like soup than music. If the process of scoring a film is wrong, the score will be wrong. When it comes to producing new film scores, Native Americans across the continent are being treated as if we are DUMB-dum-dum-dum, DUMB-dum-dum-dum. In addition, I wonder why several of our indigenous film makers give their primary attention to Indian actors and dialogue, when music scoring is no less important.

What can we do to make changes? First, I agree with Dr. Ballard; we must organize a unified Native American Music Association (NAMA). For starters, the organization could begin to assist Native composers in gaining acceptance in the film scoring marketplace. Working on behalf of indige-

nous composers, a unified organization could encourage more cultural sensitivity from Non-Native producers and Non-Native composers. Native American scores should be composed by Native Americans; this holds true not only for films but for all performing arts including works for symphony orchestra, opera and dance. The organization could encourage producers to seek out Native Americans to originate these soundtracks. Even more, composers who are not Native American should not be accepting Native American commissions.

Second, film festivals and workshops must place more emphasis on how the films are being made rather than on their subject matter alone. Who are the Native Americans behind the scenes? Who are the producers, script writers, directors, editors, light designers, and costumers? Who are the composers?

A good indigenous process is the heartbeat of a good indigenous film. My suggestion to festival planners is to facilitate a stronger educational component. In the months prior to a film festival, for instance, we could give music scoring workshops. After an intensive multi-session course -- covering the basic technical and business elements of film music -- Native Americans could strengthen their own unique approaches to scoring a film. The classes could culminate in a project where each participant creates a short musical score for a specific film scene. Then at the festival, a final workshop could begin by showing the short scenes complete with musical scores, one after another, and finish with constructive discussion and suggestions from the participants. Educational components, such as this, would bring the process of scoring indigenous films, and Native American music, to a culturally rightful place of significance.

After all, our music is not merely some "reflection" of who we are. Our music is power! Our music is our voice! When we dream music, learn music and share music, we are creating the medley of our world. It is our gift and our responsibility. Whether at home or at the movies, our music is empowering. The film industry has yet to learn what many Native Americans could tell you with one lip tied behind their back -- a good indigenous process is the heartbeat of a good indigenous film.