



Chicken Scratch and Flutes

...The Sound of the Northern Plains
Dana EchoHawk

Say the word 'art' and most people think of something to look at, to admire and hang on their wall, to place on a shelf or perhaps wear. But, as an expression of the artist and his culture, art takes many shapes, and forms. . . including the sounds and rhythms of music.

When a tourist asks me what type of Indian art to buy during their travels I tell them this.

"Before looking at the beautiful quillwork, beaded pouches or paintings to carry home with you, listen to the songs, feel the drums and watch the dances."

The sounds and rhythms will lead your senses to the heart of the people you are visiting. Through their music, you will begin to know their culture. Then your selection of art will retain a special meaning. Years from now you will remember and hear the music in your head

and heart. You will remember the people, the landscapes and their culture.

The art of song and dance are the strongest form of art available for sharing culture. It can be traditional coming from historical and cultural places or it may be contemporary.

So, before buying art when traveling to a unique cultural area, listen to their songs.

As you travel through the Northern Plains, you will hear the pounding rhythm of the drums. It's part of the landscape.

There are many sources of Native American music for travelers. Turn up the radio and find KILI Indian Radio broadcasting out of Pine Ridge Reservation; check for powwow dates you can attend; buy a CD of a northern drum group like Black Lodge. Roll down

Sounds of the Northern Great Plains

your car windows, let the wind blow and drive through Indian Country with the songs and drumbeat of Native America in your ear.

Bill Center, an elder Oglala Lakota man, knows about northern plains songs. He holds a small hand drum when he sings, his old hands beating it slowly, repetitively.

He tells this story. "My uncle Charlie Killsree composed lots of songs." He is thoughtful for a moment, but then chuckles. "I saw it once with my own eyes" he says and then continues.

"There's a big hill on Pine Ridge Reservation. It's called *Csheopa*. It means Quails or Pheasants. It's near Grass Creek outside Manderson." He stops talking for a moment, remembering and then he continues. "The hill is hard to climb in a wagon. But one early morning, we went up and right on top they were there. One rooster was singing and all the others were dancing around him in a circle. When we got closer they scattered and flew off. But, their little scratch marks were there in the grass and dirt, all around in a circle. Knowing that they do this is probably why my uncle Charlie uses the Quail as his inspiration for his songs."

Now, Bill sings his uncles songs. Together with his friend John Old Horse, they sing battle songs; love songs and chicken scratch songs. The "Sad For Four Days Song" simply translates, "When the people get together and my other half is not with me, I get sad for four days."

The drum is not the only instrument of song for Native people. Listen close to the wind and you will hear the flute.

Calvin Standing Bear, Lakota, plays his Native American flute, melodious and pure. The memories and dreams of his audience sail with him as he plays his Siyotunka Bird

Head or Goose Neck flute. Sometimes he puts his flute down and signs, but when bringing it again to his lips, the flute has its own song. Calvin stretches his arm out as if pointing to an Eagle flying off in the distance and sings about Lacrosse, an old game played by Native people.

Songs are part of Lakota tradition and culture, as important today as they were hundreds of years ago. While in the northern plains, listen and you may hear Calvin's flute and song.

"They're ready out on the field
Our warriors are for real
They're ready to play the game
And this is what they say
Heya ha, Heya ha." ✈

