

Joanne Shenandoah

Celebrating Life Through Music

Joanne Shenandoah is one of today's most revered Native American singers and songwriters. A Wolf Clan member of the Iroquois Confederacy, Oneida Nation, Shenandoah, whose Native name translates as "She Sings," has released 14 recordings and her music has been included on over 40 compilations. She's performed with such legendary entertainers as Kris Kristofferson and Willie Nelson, has recorded music for film soundtracks (including the indie hit "Transamerica"), and has won more Native American Music Awards (Nammies) than any other artist.

By the time she was five years old, Shenandoah was on stage singing for cultural presentations and dances. Both of her parents had tremendous musical talent – her dad, a jazz guitarist, had played with Duke Ellington – and music was her family's form of entertainment as she was growing up. "Music was very family involved," she reflected. "My dad got me singing Sam Cooke for a 3rd-grade talent contest. I won the grand prize, this little girl singing 'September in the Rain.'"

Shenandoah attended boarding school in her teens where she was immersed in classical-oriented music. She learned to play several instruments, including clarinet, flute, cello and piano. Though engrossed in classical music at the time, she did enjoy other musical influences as varied as Billie Holiday and Jimi Hendrix. "While it might sound funny," she admitted, "when I was sixteen I was very into Wayne Newton."

Shenandoah's first big concert happened in 1990 for an event called the Pahasapa Festival. "Ironically, I didn't know that music was for me," she recalled, "even though I probably sang at everyone's wedding and had been performing on stage since I was a little girl." She was invited to perform alongside Floyd "Red Crow" Westerman and Buddy Big Mountain on a bill that featured such artists as Neil Young, Jackson Brown, John Denver and John Trudell. "I remember thinking to myself, 'Hey, this is a lot of fun. I should do this more often!'"

Shenandoah began writing her own songs, leaving behind a lucrative career as an architectural systems engineer. "I had all of the things in life that I thought of as important," she



recalled. "From my office window I saw a tree being cut down and knew that I, too, had been uprooted and needed to follow my natural gift." She left her firm in Washington, D.C. and returned to Oneida territory determined to forge a career as a musician. One of the first songs she wrote was sent out before she had obtained the necessary copyrights and ended up on Kenny Rogers and Barbara Streisand albums. "I didn't receive credit for the song, but remember thinking, 'Maybe I do have an opportunity to do music.'"

Her first album, titled "Joanne Shenandoah," is a blend of country and Native music. "I call it my 'cowboys & Indians' album," she said. "It's self titled

it because I didn't know if I would be recording anymore. It was kind of like my beginning, just to give it a shot." Shenandoah follows a ritual with each album she records, thinking the project through in terms of theme and breathing into it its own life. "Every song is part of who I am and each album is like a chapter in someone's life. I believe they're ancestrally inspired and my guardians are there with me as I create them."

Shenandoah has performed with some of the biggest names in the business and even recorded a demo for a spot on Frank Sinatra's "Duets" album. "I've actually wine and dined with Sinatra," she recalled. "He said to me, 'So, you're a singer huh?' I almost made it onto 'Duets,' but wasn't well known enough at the time." Shenandoah, though, remained focused on her craft, never becoming star struck by those with whom she's performed and never allowing disappointment to get the better of her. "I think it's all in the attitude of what you can do."

During her extensive touring, Shenandoah had the opportunity to work with a multitude of Native artists whose craft wasn't receiving the recognition she felt it deserved. She spoke with then-CEO of Foxwoods Resort Casino, Kip Hayward, among others and convinced them to establish the Native American Music Awards. "There was so much great talent in Native music," she said. "We launched it right then. It was an incredible night." They were even able to get Wayne Newton, one of Shenandoah's early influences, to host the awards show.

In addition to her 11 Nammies (more than any other performer to date), Shenandoah has been nominated for three Grammy awards. “The first Grammy nomination, they sat me next to Beyonce,” she said. “It was all very exciting. The second nomination, as I went through the process I realized the red carpet is a lot of glamour.” When she received her third nomination, her family were welcoming new babies and she didn’t attend the ceremony, opting to be with her family during a very special time. “And that’s the year we actually won.” She received the Grammy for her singing and writing on the album “Sacred Ground.”

“For me, the awards are getting emails from people around the world telling me how my music has made a difference in their lives,” she said. “That’s the reason we keep on going and working hard.” Shenandoah wants to impart to her listeners a new sense of belonging, a new sense of responsibility – not only to themselves, but to their families and to their nations. “The music, I think, encompasses being whole and being a part of this thing we call life. I have a sense, when I finish my concerts, that people are of one mind and in a state where they’re celebrating life through music.”

Since Shenandoah has been on stage most of her life, her foray into acting was a natural one. “To me, acting is an extreme and phenomenal art,” she said. “It’s one thing to perform with a full symphony, but for me acting is really a lot of fun.” Shenandoah was asked to audition for the 1992 mystery “Thunderheart.” She studied with Frank Hauser, the acting coach who instructed the legendary Sean Connery and Katherine Hepburn. Shenandoah was recently featured in “The Last Winter,” a thriller on global warming starring Ron Perlman.

Though venturing into other mediums, Shenandoah plans to continue with music. “I have another album coming out, which will be more folk in nature,” she said. “Then I have some other meditation music I’m working on, as well, with my daughter.” She is also working on soundtracks for other documentaries and is, of course, still performing. “I’m doing everything I love. How many people do you meet in life who truly enjoy what they do?” ♣

For more information on Joanne Shenandoah, visit www.joanneshenandoah.com.

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