

Apryl Allen: Singer/Songwriter Gives New Voice to Native Heritage

by AJ Naff

Comanche recording artist Apryl Allen is a natural entertainer. The award-winning singer and songwriter has released two albums in quick succession, the second of which – *Shape Shifter* – was nominated for four Native American Music Awards. *Shape Shifter* has become a cultural phenomenon, earning a place in the Comanche Nation Historical Archives and the Oklahoma Historical Society Indian Archives. A voting member of the Recording Academy, an advisory member of the Native American Music Awards, and president of her own music production company, ADA Music, Apryl Allen has emerged as a creative force in the music world.

Apryl's earliest interest in performance surfaced when she was two years old. She'd dressed herself in a bright pink bathing suit and patent leather shoes, then jumped onto the fireplace hearth as if it were a stage. "My mom asked, 'What are you doing, Apryl?'" recalled Allen. "I told her, 'Well, I'm going to be Miss America and an actress and a singer when I grow up!' So I guess that's when it all started."

In 1993 Allen was crowned Miss Arizona USA and went on to compete in the Miss U.S.A. pageant. From there she pursued acting and singing, ambitions that she fell in love with. "If you had asked me at the time, I would have thought I would be more of an actress than a singer," she said. She was striving for an acting career in the early 90s, but kept hitting brick walls in the industry. Then she met her husband and decided to take her life in a different direction. "I just decided that it was a dream and I gave it a great shot, but I was going to lay it to bed, get married and live happily ever after."

But her creative ambitions kept reemerging, with more and more emphasis on music. One day her husband overheard her singing a song to herself. "That's a great tune," he said. "Who wrote it?" It was a song that Apryl had written. "I thought, quite frankly, that everyone had the ability to hum a melody and add lyrics to it because it comes so easily to me," she said. Her husband encouraged her to write down her melodies and lyrics. Thirty songs later, he encouraged her to venture into a recording studio and send the resulting tracks to her friends in the music business.

Apryl had met Richie Cannata, Billy Joel's original saxophonist, when she was Miss Arizona U.S.A. Cannata was touring with the Beach Boys at the time and Apryl had the



opportunity to introduce the band at a performance in Arizona. "Richie and I became friends and mailed Christmas cards back and forth," she said. Cannata had produced such artists as Jennifer Lopez and Celine Dion, so the thought of sending her recordings to him mortified Apryl. But her husband assured her that if she didn't send Cannata the tracks, he would send them himself. Cannata liked what he heard and invited Apryl to his studio in New York.

The effort resulted in Apryl's debut album *Morningsong*, which she dedicated to her mother, who passed away in 2002. At the time, Apryl's primary interest was in songwriting; she wanted other artists to perform her compositions. Julio Fernandez, Spyro Gyra's guitarist, was one of the musicians Cannata had invited to collaborate on *Morningsong*. After hearing Apryl's singing voice, both Fernandez and Cannata agreed that she

should sing the tracks for the album.

Morningsong spans several musical styles - country, pop, jazz and bossa nova. "I really feel I don't have any boundaries in style," she said. "Recording this album taught me what my abilities were." The album was very well received, surprising listeners with its finely honed versatility. One of the tracks, Velvet Voice, which Apryl co-wrote with Julio Fernandez, earned numerous accolades, including #1 Jazz Song for May 2009 on OurStage.com.

As a child, Apryl fell in love with the drums, dancing and singing that took place at pow wows. She was also inspired by artists such as Sting and Annie Lennox, who blended lyrics and music together to tell stories. "That's kind of where my music comes from, telling stories," she said. "I always had this idea of taking traditional Native American sounds, melding them with contemporary sounds, and having the music become mainstream so the whole world could hear it."

While working on *Morningstar*, Apryl had an idea in mind for another project, an album that included the Comanche language in its lyrics. She called the Comanche Nation seeking someone to help her translate her music. Videll Yackeschi, an elder of the tribe, offered to help and Apryl flew to the reservation to meet with him. She stayed with her aunt during the trip and the two would talk through the night, telling family stories. "You hear stories when you're younger," recalled Apryl, "but when you're a kid, it goes in one ear and out the other."

Her aunt began pulling out paperwork on the family's history, including a 1901 letter from the Oklahoma Historical Society depicting the death of her great-great-grandfather, Black Moon. "It was the most amazing story, even though it was about his death," she said. "But his accomplishments, where he was in life, and how it was completely taken away from him – that intrigued me. I knew right away I wanted to write a song about that." As she heard more stories about her ancestors, the album began to take form. "I wanted to write these stories about family members and incorporate the Comanche language. The result was *Shape Shifter*."

At the suggestion of Wallace Coffey, then-chairman of the Comanche Nation, Apryl entered *Shape Shifter* in the Native American Music Awards. "To be frank, I wasn't really expecting much because nobody knew me yet," she said. "It's difficult to try and promote an album unless you have a huge record label behind you." The album was nominated for four Nammies and took home the award for Best Pop Recording of the Year (*Black Moon*).

Apryl held the release party for *Shape Shifter* at the Comanche Nation Complex. "I wanted to thank them for the help they freely gave me and the kindness they showed me while I was there," said Apryl. She was nervous because tribal elders would

be attending the party. She also expected only those who were directly involved with the project to make an appearance. "Almost two hundred people showed up to the party. I was completely floored."

What Apryl didn't realize when she began the project was that there are only about three people alive today who can read, write and translate Comanche fluently, so including the language in the album was of enormous cultural significance. Chairman Coffey was so proud of the achievement that he proclaimed November 7th "Apryl Allen Day." "I don't think I've met anyone who's had a day named after them," she said. "Words can't describe how I feel. I am so honored to have had that bestowed on me."

Tribes from across the country have praised what Apryl has done for the Comanche Nation and Native Americans as a whole. Some tribes, where very few members speak the Native language, have even asked her to help develop similar projects for them. "I became very serious about listening to the elders in our tribe and in storytelling," she said. "We, as a people, need to remember our past. That's what will help us achieve our dreams and avoid repeating our mistakes." ♣

For more information about Apryl Allen, visit www.aprylallen.com.

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