

Robert "Tree" Cody

Sharing Native Tradition Through Music and Dance

by AJ Naff

Robert "Tree" Cody, an enrolled member of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, is an award-winning recording artist, a talented dancer on the powwow circuit, and a lecturer on the traditional Native lifestyle. With a total of five Nammy awards, as well as a Grammy nomination, Tree is also one of the most recognizable performers of the Native American flute. An active performer and dancer, Tree appears both solo and with his dancing troupe, Native Wisdom, and has no intention of slowing down.

The stepson of iconic actor Iron Eyes Cody, Tree was introduced early on to music through his stepfather's extensive record collection. "He had all different types of music, mostly the old 78s that were out at that time," said Tree. "I would listen to the music, listen to the songs, particularly this sold flute song." Tree had played the Native flute since he was a small boy, so this particular album resonated with him. "I would say I've always had that interest in the flute."

Dancing, as well, is an art form that is intrinsic to Tree, who started attending powwows at the age of six. "I've been dancing every since I can remember, ever since I could walk," he said. "I was always dancing, all the time." The powwows he attended were in a traditional vein, with the dances being a pure form of expression with no competitive or decorative element. The outfits consisted of a lot of beadwork, but no bustles or feathers.

"I used to enjoy watching those old dancers," said Tree. "They were probably in their 60s or 70s, but man, they still danced like they were twenty years old." Inspired by this form of expression, Tree became more and more involved in powwows, eventually being drawn into fancy dancing, a high-energy form of dance that features very bright regalia. As he got older, though, Tree returned to his traditional dancing roots. "I still dance traditional. You just move and let your body dance to express itself."

In the early 1980s Tree recorded a Native flute album for Indian House, a studio in Oklahoma. This was Tree's first recording session and it turned into a powerful experience for him. "There were several elders from the Northern Cheyenne Tribe there just listening to me," Tree said. "The album came out alright. I was a little bit nervous, but in a way I was



comforted that they were there. They kind of showed their approval of my flute chops."

Then, once he moved back to the Phoenix area, Tree walked into Canyon Records to introduce himself. "I'm Robert Tree Cody from the northern tribes," I told them. "I'm half Maricopa, half Lakota, I'm a Native American flute player and I'm darn good." The introduction was made to Ray Boley, the head of Canyon Records at that time, and Robert Doyle, the current head of Canyon Records.

They set up a session to get a sense of Tree's musical abilities. "I just thought I'd go ahead and give it a whirl, just to see if it would work out," said Tree. "They asked me to step out of the studio for a moment.

When I came back in they told me they liked what they heard. Within two weeks after that interview, I recorded my first album with Canyon."

Tree never imagined that his flute playing would earn him any awards, but to date he has won five Native American Music Awards, including awards for Male Artist of the Year and Best Flautist of the Year. "It made me feel ok, you know? It was an achievement," Tree said of his first Nammy. In 2007 his album "Heart of the Wind" was nominated for a Grammy, which took him by surprise. "Out of 11,000 entries that were submitted in the Native American category that year, man, I made the final five. I couldn't believe that."

For Tree, though, his focus isn't on the awards his music wins, but rather on the perspective he offers on Native flute. "Even though I've dabbled in some contemporary styles, there are those of us in Indian Country who know these traditional songs," he said. "I just want people to know the Native American flute can be played in any genre of music the world can provide."

Tree has performed the Native flute with reggae bands, jazz ensembles, Caribbean steel bands, heavy metal bands, and even harmonic orchestras. "I'd say one of my greatest achievements was when I played Native flamenco," he said. "That had never been done – a Native American flute with a flamenco guitar. So that's my main goal, to let people know that the Native flute is a beautiful instrument that can be played with basically any kind of music."

Tree's career is also focused on sharing Native American traditions and wisdom with young Natives across the U.S. "My

love of lecturing goes back to my dad, who would travel to schools all over the country,” said Tree. He has lectured not only on reservations, but also in schools and universities in the U.S., Canada, and overseas, addressing the stereotypes that persist about Natives in popular culture. “What I want to do is share my knowledge and my traditional way of life and teach these kids a better understanding of what we as Native American people are all about.”

Tree is currently touring with a dance troupe called Native Wisdom, which is focused on traditional Native dancing. “What we try to do is show the world what the origins of these dances are,” said Tree. “We explain where the dances started and why, the significance behind the outfits. You know, the good stuff.” Native Wisdom brings in dancers from all over Indian Country, ranging from the northern tribes, into Alaska, and even some of the Native tribes of Mexico, which shows a connection among all tribes.

“People are very inquisitive,” said Tree. “They’re always asking how the dances started and what they mean. So that’s what we’re all about.” Native Wisdom is active on the powwow circuit and also performs for public and private events. “We

have the knowledge that we’ve acquired through the years of attending powwows. I’ve learned the stories of how these dances originated and we try to utilize that in our programs.”

Tree is also an active solo performer, not only on the powwow circuit, but for civic and charitable performances, as well. “Several of us Native entertainers donate our time to help a good cause,” he said. One of his slated performances was for the Boys & Girls Club on the Gila River Indian Community reservation. “Other than that, powwows, powwows, and more powwows.”

“I am a person that would like to meet many people from many walks of life from all over Indian Country,” said Tree. He encourages his fans to follow him on the powwow circuit and to introduce themselves to him. The message that he works to convey, both in his music and with Native Wisdom, is to honor the traditional way of life. “We need to encourage our youth to learn their languages, learn their culture, learn their history. This is something that they need to do because they are the future.” ♣

For more information about Robert “Tree” Cody, email rtreecody@yahoo.com or visit Native Wisdom on Facebook.

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