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# Music of the Alaskan Kutchin Indians

Recorded and Edited by Craig Mishler



Featuring Charlie Peter



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SIDE 2

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

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# MUSIC OF THE KUTCHIN INDIANS OF ALASKA<sup>1</sup>

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The Kutchin Indians (more properly pronounced Gwich'in) are a relatively small Athabaskan tribe of about fifteen hundred people occupying a vast area in northeastern interior Alaska and northwestern Canada. Like all northern Athabascans, they are of the same racial and linguistic stock as their more widely known southern kinsmen, the Navajo and Apache, though with the passage of many centuries, their respective cultures have diverged widely in nearly all respects.

The Alaskan or western Kutchin are today divided linguistically, socially, and geographically into two main groups. The Gwich'yaa Gwich'in--"People of the Flat Lands"--are comprised of the residents of Chalkyitsik, Circle, Birch Creek, and Fort Yukon; and the Neets'ee Gwich'in--"People of the Mountains"--are those who reside in Venetie and Arctic Village on the Chandalar River. At one time, the people in the flatlands were isolated into small bands and had more specialized names, but in modern times the outboard motor, airplane, and snow machine have broken down this isolation, and widespread intermarriage has all but erased these former distinctions.

In aboriginal times, the Kutchin were a nomadic people who followed the game and lived together in large numbers only in the warm summer months when the salmon were running up the Yukon and its tributaries. Indeed, the name "Yukon River" appears to have come from nyukwanjik, a Kutchin word meaning "River where there are moss-covered summer houses." Somewhere along the way, the -njik ending, which corresponds to "river", was either dropped entirely or translated directly into English, and nyukwan was transformed into "Yukon". The case for this interpretation becomes even more convincing when we discover that the Kutchin name for Fort Yukon is Gwich'yaa Zhe--"Flat-Lands House", and two other early white settlements on the Porcupine River are still referred to as "Rampant House" and "Shuman House".

Fort Yukon, founded in 1847 by Alexander Hunter Murray of the Hudson's Bay Company, is in many ways the hub of a whole network of rivers whose watersheds define the western territory of the aboriginal Kutchin. In addition to the Yukon, the Porcupine, the Chandalar, for example, the Black River and Birch Creek also continue to be occupied by Kutchin-speaking people, and two other important tributaries, the Christian River and the Sheenjek ("Dog Salmon River"), have only recently been abandoned, although both are still used occa-

<sup>1</sup> The music on this album was recorded in the winter of 1972-73 under a fellowship grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.



sionally for hunting and trapping. Now a log-cabin community of five hundred people with daily scheduled air service from Fairbanks, Fort Yukon has become an important communications, transportation, and supply center for everyone who lives along these river systems.

Though they are in the swirl of rapid acculturation and social change, the Kutchin are a proud and happy people who still maintain many of their fine traditions. The beadwork sewn by Kutchin women cannot be matched anywhere in Alaska today--moosehide mitts, slippers, belts, knife and gun sheaths, Bible covers and mukluks are richly ornamented and colorfully decorated with a dominant four-petalled flower pattern. Twelve of these flowers, symbolizing the twelve disciples, are stiched to the church altar cloths on a background of white bleached moosehide, consummating the art.

Equally impressive are the oral talents of Kutchin storytellers, who seem to flourish in the more remote outlying villages of Chalkyitsik, Venetie, and Arctic Village, where there is no radio station actively competing for the Indian ear. The Episcopal missionaries, who made many converts well before the turn of the century, seem to have convinced the people that their animal creation myths were pagan and heathen (probably more for their frank sexuality than for their theological content), so that today the myths are denigrated by some Indians as being "just like fairy tales". The stories which are openly encouraged are more on the order of what folklorists like to classify as legends. Popular Kutchin legends can be roughly divided into: tales about famous warriors, tales of survival under extreme conditions, tales about the feats of famous medicine men, and humorous tall tales pregnant with exaggeration.

Still, the most beautiful part of traditional Kutchin culture is the music. All of the aboriginal ceremonies have now completely disappeared, yet there are still many of the older people around who can sing--and sing well. The style is always solo a cappella, and the old-timers say

that even before the coming of the whites, no drums or other musical instruments were used for accompaniment, except occasionally a couple of sticks of wood that were beat against one another for rhythm. Any public group singing outside of the church is a great rarity now, and individuals perform only upon demand, though elsewhere in Alaska, as with the Koyukon Athabascans farther downriver, song leaders and public group singing still predominate in a style strikingly similar to the western Apache and Navajo.

Kutchin songs address a great variety of subjects and tend to fall into the following categories: dance songs, love songs, medicine songs, story songs, songs of tribute and farewell, and New Year's songs. Kutchin songsters, like Kutchin storytellers, seem to be remarkably free from taboos or restrictions of any kind. Songs can be performed by women as well as by the men, by day as well as by night, in summer as well as winter.

The old-time fiddle dance music which flourishes so well in Kutchin villages undoubtedly owes its origin to Hudson Bay traders and voyageurs of the mid-19th century. In his journal for the year 1860, Robert Kennicott, an important early explorer and naturalist, describes "a Christmas ball" held at La Pierre's House, on the Upper Porcupine River. The principal trader and postmaster at La Pierre's House was one James Flett, an Orkneyman and an old voyageur who had acquired an Indian wife. Also present to celebrate the holidays were a large number of whites and "a dozen or so" Indians. In this earliest account of the Kutchin dancing to square dance tunes, Kennicott writes:

The dancing was, I may say without vulgarity, decidedly 'stunning'. I should hardly call it remarkably graceful. The figures, if they may be called such, were only Scotch reels of four, and jigs; and... the music consisted of a very bad performance of one vile, unvarying tune, upon a worse old fiddle, accompanied by a brilliant accompaniment upon a large tin pan.



Thus, the introduction of Scottish folk music and folk dances to the Kutchin can probably be attributed to James Flett and his friends. The Flett surname still enjoys a fairly wide popularity among the Kutchin living in Fort Yukon, and the explorer William Dall, visiting Fort Yukon in the spring of 1867, noted that most of the inhabitants there "are from the Orkney islands and the north of Scotland, while a few are French Canadians, with a mixture of Indian blood".

Charlie Peter, at seventy-two years the oldest living Kutchin fiddle player, recalls that this kind of music was already going strong when he was just a boy, and he remembers such old-time Indian fiddlers as Jacob Luke, Alexander John, and Artie Linklater. So although it was originally a white man's art, this music has been so well incorporated into Kutchin tradition that many of the tunes are popularly known by their Indian names, and they survive quite independently from the commercial country music played and heard in Alaska's white communities.

As it is performed today by the western Kutchin, the music for the dances is provided by a fiddler and a rhythm guitarist, and both use small electric amplifiers for their instruments. Even in the outlying villages there is always at least one gasoline or diesel generator to provide electricity for the community hall when special events such as movies or dances are held. Usually, when there is an all-night dance, there will be two fiddlers and two guitar players--two teams of partners--who spell each other every two hours or so, for many of the dances take ten or twelve minutes to complete, and at a fast tempo in a crowded hall, this can be hot and exhausting work.

Male callers are often used, but sometimes there is not enough sound equipment on hand, and the amplified music completely drowns out the caller's voice. Nearly everyone knows the basic steps anyway, and the caller only seldomly interjects a variation on the standard patterns. The people are fond of one-steps, two-steps, fox trots,

waltzes, jigs, schottisches, round dances, line dances, and running sets; and this wide variety generates continuous interest over many hours at a time.

The enormous popularity of this dance music can be measured by the regularity of its public performances. Dances are customarily held on every major holiday of the year: New Year's Day, Easter, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, as well as for special occasions like weddings, for the ordination of Native priests into the Episcopal clergy, and especially for the annual spring carnivals, when dances are held every night for a week and go full steam until four or five o'clock in the morning.

The geographic extent of Indian square dance culture in the far north is still relatively unknown. Upriver, it is still possible to observe some of the dances at Eagle, among the Han Athabascans, and the Han fiddlers claim they hear this music played live on radio CHAK in Inuvik, N.W.T. There is even good reason to believe that many of the same tunes heard on this record are played all the way down into northern Alberta.

One of the most encouraging things about this dance music is the great number of active practitioners. Among the Neets'ee Gwich'in especially, there are nine or ten young, self-taught fiddlers, and though they do not possess the great repertoire of Charlie Peter, they are usually quite skilled and sometimes technically even more proficient. It is also the young people who take the greatest delight in the dancing, and it can be expected that they will still be kicking their heels to the Neets'ee T'yaa for a long, long time yet to come. That's good news.



## NOTES

Side I, Band 1: SONG OF THE SNOW GEESE FLYING OVER  
THE MOUTH OF THE YUKON  
(Daniel John--Fort Yukon)

This song, delicate in its tonal qualities and subtle in its rhythmic awakening, comes from a man who could be called a northern Leadbelly. With his nose broken, and his face full of hard lines, Daniel has endured long terms in prison on a variety of criminal charges, and yet somehow, beneath all this hardness, is a repertoire of droll stories and a song as tender and lyrical as this. Translated freely, it says:

"The snow geese and the ducks are coming in  
at the mouth of the Yukon.  
You can see the orange color of the sky at  
dawn."

In the second part of the song, Daniel's voice simulates the flight of the birds climbing, gliding, dipping, and flapping their wings.

Side I, Bands 2-4: THREE LOVE SONGS  
(Lily Pitka--Fort Yukon)

Many years ago, when Indian people fell in love, it was customary for them to compose songs to express their deep feelings for each other. The first melody heard was learned by Lily when she was just a young girl living in Stevens Village. (Lily is Kutchin by marriage rather than by birth.) The person who taught her the song, Lucy John, is an old woman over a hundred years old, now living in a nursing home in Fairbanks, and still singing.

The second song, "Sheenjit Gwiizuu"--"I feel so bad"--was learned by Lily in Fort Yukon, though its origin is not certain. Her third song, "Goodbye Sheenyaa" is very popular and widely known in all of the Kutchin villages. It began to circulate back in the 1950's, when the woman who composed it, Annie Cadzow, sang it for her husband

Peter when she left him for another man. The translated text reads:

"Tell me goodbye.  
Shake my hand.  
Don't cry for me."  
(final lines omitted in this version)

Side I, Bands 5-7: THREE MEDICINE SONGS  
(Silas John--Arctic Village;  
Stanley Luke--Fort Yukon;  
Johnny Frank--Gold Camp)

Indian medicine men--dinjii dashan--obtain their magical powers through a bird or animal, and they communicate with this animal by "sleeping to" the owl or the frog or the other creature. "Shenyati's Owl Song", performed by John Silas, has been passed down from the most famous medicine man of the Gwich'yaa Gwich'in. Already a legendary figure, Shenyati' was described by some of the first white men to make contact with the Kutchin, and he is said to have had anywhere from seven to twenty-eight wives. When Shenyati' died in 1893, people up and down the Yukon knew about it right away because they knew Shenyati' slept to the owl, and they could hear the owls crying. Another powerful medicine man, Henry John, inherited this song and the power that went with it, and Silas in turn learned it from him. In translation, Silas sings:

"I look to the east  
When I'm young I look that way  
And when I'm born  
I'm born to the owl."

Stanley Luke introduces his song about the caribou shedding their horns, a song that belonged to Ch'eeghwati', one of Shenyati's rivals. Ch'eeghwati' learned it from a dream. Johnny Frank learned his song from his grandfather, named Galaik, shot and killed his broth-in-law with a muzzle loader, and then brought him back to life by singing this song, also learned in a dream.



Side I, Band 8: WAR SONG

(Johnny Frank--Gold Camp)

The Chandalar people engaged in many wars with the Eskimos of the Arctic Slope, and Johnny has two long tales about famous Indians victorious in battle. This particular song came from an Indian woman who lost her whole family in one of these battles, and to arouse her people to take revenge, she sang this song to them. Johnny, who is still spry in his nineties, lives alone with his eighty-five year old wife, Sarah, at a place called Gold Camp on the Chandalar River, thirty-eight miles from the nearest village. He is truly one of the grand old gentlemen of the north.

Side I, Bands 9-10: CROW DANCE SONGS

(Myra Robert--Venetie;

Lily Pitka--Fort Yukon)

The two tricksters in Kutchin mythology are Crow and Wolverine, but of the two, Crow is the least despised, because sometimes he is known to be a benefactor to man. In the old days there was a Kutchin Crow Dance ceremony that has faded away completely in modern times. Myra Robert, a star storyteller and songstress combined, renders the part of this ceremony which includes the Crow's squawking, and Lily Pitka interprets a brief version of the dance which followed. Michael Mason, in his book The Arctic Forests, described the Crow Dance as he saw it in Fort Yukon in 1920, helping us to visualize and reconstruct the way in which these songs must have originally been used:

A man lies flat on his back, his feet flattened out at 9;15 and his hands spread to represent fins. He is supposed to be a dead fish, and generally looks rather realistic. A woman or boy, enveloped in a big black shawl, then comes on the scene. She (or he) is a crow and usually imitates its walk, croak, and movements to perfection, as she pecks the fish's eyes out and begins to eat it. Sometimes there are several crows and they fight and squabble over the fish. After a while a

man, enveloped in a white sheet, swoops on to the little supper-party, uttering the raucous scream of the fish-eagle. The crows flap away with cries of disappointment, and the eagle continues their meal. The play is brought to a climax by the fish suddenly returning to life and the eagle beating a disconsolate retreat.

Side I, Bands 11-12: SONGS OF TRIBUTE

(Myra Robert--Venetie)

Myra sings two traditional songs in what is called the "high language"--a very formal style of speaking which is understood today only by the middle-aged and older Kutchin. The first song was passed down from Old Robert's mother (Myra's husband's paternal grandmother), whom she calls shoot'oo vahan. When this woman's sister died, she started crying and singing this song, referring to the heavens:

"My older sister, they say it's good up that way.  
Go there. (first two lines repeated)  
Take all your relatives with you.  
Take them all with you to that good place.  
My older sister, they say it's good up that way.  
Go there."

The dead sister's name was T'eevii, the daughter of a famous legendary figure named T'eeviti', who fought heroically against the Eskimos.

The second song here is also a song of tribute, but it is more like a eulogy in that it was sung by the best friend of a famous hunter as he lay on his deathbed. His friend paid tribute to him by recalling all the great things he had done in his life.

Side I, Band 13: THE BOY IN THE MOON

(Myra Robert--Venetie)

Story songs are relatively rare among the Kutchin, but Myra's last two songs were given at



the end of her long tale about "The Boy in the Moon". At the end of this story, the boy tells his grandmother that if she looks up at the moon and sees him packing a shoulder blade and an intestine full of moose blood, she should tell everyone to grab a little something and start sharing it with each other. He goes on to tell her that when the moon is eclipsed, they should watch his shadow. If it goes right through, it is a sign that there will be a good winter ahead, but if they see his shadow go across and come back again, it means they will have a hard winter. Finally, the boy sings two songs--the first is a happy song for a good winter; the second a sad song for a bad winter. The final short segment appears to be an epilogue.

Side I, Band 14: NEW YEAR'S SONG  
(Lily Pitka--Fort Yukon)

The old-fashioned Indian way of celebrating New Year's was to have a group of people go around from house to house with a large square piece of canvas outstretched between them. At each house they would raise and lower the canvas while they sang this song, and soon the people inside the house would come out and throw something onto it--usually food, but sometimes a piece of fancy beadwork or even a little money. When every house had donated something, the people would assemble at the community hall for an evening of dancing and potlatching. The same melody was used among the Han Athabascans at Eagle, and the custom of carrying the canvas from house to house is still practiced far downriver among the Koyukon Athabascans at Kaltag.

Side I, Band 15: GOODBYE SONG  
(Lily Pitka--Fort Yukon)

Lily sings one song she made on her own many years ago when she was just a young woman. Each fall, she and her family would load up their boat with supplies and leave Fort Yukon to spend the

winter at a camp located just above the mouth of Preacher Creek, a tributary of Birch Creek. One year, just after they had pushed off and were starting to float downriver, Peter Deechiitsik stood on the river bank and gave them a farewell gun salute. Suddenly this song came to Lily while she was sitting in the boat, and though she didn't sing it just then, she often sang it later on to express her sadness in leaving such a good friend. Singing "Goodbye Sheenyaa" was also commonplace on these farewell occasions, but it was done in a context of friendship rather than romantic love. (See Band 4)

Side I, Band 16: STEAMBOAT SONG  
(Silas John--Arctic Village)

Born in 1905, Silas is Daniel John's uncle and Myra Robert's youngest brother. When he was a young boy, Silas dreamed he would play the violin some day, and he did, but his greatest gift is for singing, and his steamboat song, a small masterpiece complete with falsetto, was learned from Salmon Grant of Tanana. Steamboats plied the Yukon from 1897 until the late 1930's, and it was an overwhelming, exciting experience for the early Indians when they heard a whistle and saw the white prow of a great paddle wheeler come around the bend. Silas' song, like Lily's, is a song of goodbye, but it is full of joy and energy as it announces the names of the small villages along the Yukon where the steamboat will land.

Side II<sup>1</sup>, Band 1: RED RIVER JIG--CH'EENATSII  
CH'ARADZAA

As the most popular of all Kutchin dances, the Red River Jig is the one tune which allows the ind-

<sup>1</sup> All selections on Side II are played by Charlie Peter, violin, and Stanley Frank, rhythm guitar, except for the Rabbit Dance, played by Jimmy Roberts, violin, and Lawrence Roberts, rhythm guitar. The Double Jig and Fox Trot are played by Charlie Peter unaccompanied on violin.



individuals to display their virtuosity and strut their best form. The floor is occupied by only one couple at a time, but the dance allows for a fast sequence of couples, spelling each other at short intervals of about a minute. In the words of Charlie Peter, this dance means "Open floor for everybody. Women, take your turn. Men, take your turn."

Each year at the village spring carnivals, jig contests are held to determine the best individual stylists among the men, women, and children. Competition is stiff and considerable cash prizes are awarded to the winners. Performing this tune is especially hard on the fiddler's endurance due to the great number of couples who want to participate, and in the take heard here, the listener will detect a switch in fiddlers as Jimmy Roberts takes over from Charlie Peter almost without missing a beat. It is not known whether the "Red River" in the title refers to the Red River of Manitoba or the Arctic Red River, a tributary to the Mackenzie River in the Northwest Territories.

Side II, Band 2: DUCK DANCE--DATS'AN CH'ARADZAA

The Duck Dance is performed with three, six, or twelve couples. The basic unit consists of three couples, lined up one behind the other and facing in the same direction. Apparently this dance has nothing in common with the aboriginal Duck Dance witnessed by Michael Mason in 1920, who described young men armed with clubs and spears dancing around a medicine man who chanted and beat time on a tambourine.

Side II, Band 3: BRANDY

Brandy is a line dance. Longways sets of five or six couples are arranged so that the men face the women in two parallel rows. The lead couple joins hands and sashays down the middle from one end to the other and back again. After doing this a second time, elbow to elbow, reeling begins. The dance continues until all six couples have completed three cycles of reeling, and finally, at the very end, the two lines advance towards each other doing a jig step.

Side II, Band 4: RABBIT DANCE--GE CH'ARADZAA

This is one instance of an aboriginal dance which may have been adapted to violin accompaniment. The initial formation of this line dance is identical to the one used for Brandy. After each sashay is completed, the couple does an elbow swing, but after the second elbow swing, the woman in the lead couple becomes a rabbit and runs away from her partner, who then becomes a lynx in pursuit. There is a mad chase lasting for a minute or two until the rabbit is tagged, and during this time the two rows lock elbows and transform the lines into parallel fence-like structures which the rabbit and lynx must run around. When the rabbit is caught, the lead couple retires to the foot of the set, and the next couple starts its first sashay. When the couples have all finished this cycle, another cycle is begun, this time with the man becoming the rabbit and the woman the lynx. Because it demands so much in physical energy and dexterity, the Rabbit Dance is almost exclusively a young people's dance.

Side II, Band 5: VIRGINIA REEL

A third line dance done with great gusto, the Virginia Reel is performed by the Kutchin with complete fidelity to the manner in which it is done elsewhere in the United States. Richard Kraus's book, Square Dances of Today and How to Teach and Call Them has a detailed description of the steps for this well-known American folk dance. One primary difference between the Virginia Reel and the other Kutchin line dances is the use of one-hand reels rather than elbow-to-elbow reels.

Side II, Band 6: DOUBLE JIG

The older Indian people are still very fond of the Double Jig, but this is one dance that is being performed less and less often these days and may disappear in the next few years. Essentially, it involves two couples on the floor who take turns dancing the jig around each other. The composition of this Indian tune is attributed to the late Charlie Loola.



Side II, Band 7: FOX TROT

To give the dancers and musicians a break from the exhausting pace of the jigs, square dances, and line dances; lively fox trots, one steps, two steps, waltzes, and schottisches are often played, and are favored by the older people. This selection is untitled.

Side II, Band 8: EIGHT COUPLE--NEEKEE DO

As its title would indicate, this is a dance choreographed for eight couples. Facing one another in two long lines of alternating men and women (as opposed to the division by sex in the line dances), partners come together doing a jig step and quickly change the shape of the set into two rows of four couples, so that the men are on the inside, back to back. At a certain point signalled by the melody, an elaborate weaving shift takes place that is quite difficult to describe without a diagram. Each dancer spends one round in each of the four positions, twice without his partner, and twice with his "corner". After four of these shifts, everyone is back home, and the dance is concluded.

Side II, Band 9: SQUARE DANCE, SECOND PART

The most complex and dazzling of all the steps is the Square Dance, which has two parts, always done in sequence. These dances resemble the earliest known forms of English country dances (prior to 1650), and are identical with what Cecil Sharp identified as the "Kentucky Running Set" when he visited southern Appalachia in 1917.

As with the Neets'ee T'yaa, an almost unlimited number of couples can participate--almost as many as the floor will hold. A huge circle is formed of alternating men and women, and the running set commences with a small circle formed by the two couples closest to the caller. After each

round, the lead couple advances counterclockwise around the ring to involve a new couple, while the couples left behind progressively follow in their wake until everyone has made the complete circuit. A variation in the running circle is "the bird in a cage". The tune heard here is an old Irish melody, "The Girl I Left Behind Me", but "Soldiers of Joy" is another favorite used for this dance.

Side II, Band 10: FOUR HAND REEL--NEETS'EE T'YAA

The second most popular Hutchin dance is what they call Neets'ee T'yaa, literally meaning "Mountain Rope", but is also known in English as "The Four Hand Reel" and "The Lady's Earring Dance". Actually, it is a variant of the Circle Two-Step as described by Lloyd Shaw in his book, Cowboy Dances. Forming a large ring, as many as twelve couples may participate in this dance, and as with the Red River Jig, the fiddler adjust their violins to a special tuning that is not used with any of the other dances.