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Comanche Flute Music

PLAYED BY
DOC TATE
NEVAQUAYA

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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INTRODUCTION BY R.CARLOS NAKAI

DOC TATE NEVAQUAYA, *originally issued as Folkways Records, FE 4328*

WHILE MY OWN FLUTE JOURNEY began in the mid-1970s, I remember back in 1958 when I heard a Dakota singer and a Central Plains flutist perform a traditional song vocally, and then on flute. That sound has intrigued me ever since. Hearing that direct relationship of the flute to the vocal music of Indigenous America encouraged me to look around and find that sound. In 1979, I purchased an Ethnic Folkways recording in an Indian music shop in Phoenix, Arizona, thinking that the music on it might be of interest to me. The cover photograph of Doc Tate Nevaquaya in traditional clothing and holding a flute quite impressed me at the time — I couldn't quit grinning about owning this recording.

Comanche Flute Music, FE4328, played by Doc Tate Nevaquaya, produced by Verna Gillis, cover design by Ronald Clyne, contained a four-page sheet of descriptive notes about the Comanche flute. Needless to say, this 33 1/3 LP is still in my private collection of traditional music and is never, for any reason whatsoever, lent out.

When our amerind world "turned upside down" with the dissolution and dislocation of tribal communities by encroaching colonial expansionism, many songs, stories, and family histories contained within the lyrical message of traditional music — and many forms of material culture as well — were

cast aside or forgotten in the struggle for survival. Still, throughout the reservation period, certain individuals and families from tribal communities all over North America encouraged an underground railroad of the mythic sacred ceremonies and chants of The First/Original People, enabling remnants of the Old Culture to be passed on to each succeeding generation of Indigenes.

More recently, social programs for revitalization of traditional North AmerInd culture and lifeways helped indigenous cultures rebound after a long period of suppression and proselytization by often well-meaning American social politics and private entities. Doc Tate Nevaquaya was a link from the Old Culture to the new generations.

In the course of my flute journey, I met Tom Mauchahty Ware, Doc Tate's nephew, and Richard Payne, who presented me with one of his flutes — made to Doc Tate's specifications. Tom and other traditionalists encouraged me to do my own thing with this unusual and blessed sounding instrument. Tom always told me how his uncle would like to meet me one day, but unfortunately his passing was relayed to me by Tom one morning in April of 1996. I reflected on this as the passing of another carrier of the long history of culture, tradition, and philosophy that may never be replaced, but will endure nonetheless in recordings of this nature. They will also endure in the souls of future generations of Indigenous North Americans, as they keep with them the songs and stories of the life experiences of countless generations of our ancestors, whose aspirations and dreams we are now responsible for carrying further into time.

2004

DOC TATE NEVAQUAYA AND THE NATIVE AMERICAN FLUTE

BY EDWARD WAPP, *Institute of American Indian Arts*

DOC TATE NEVAQUAYA (1932–1996) expressed his Comanche heritage musically through the Native American flute. His compositions and arrangements of a variety of Native American vocal genres have inspired a new generation of Native American and nonnative flute players. Although the older flute tradition declined during the first half of the 20th century, and while many of the old melodies are no longer played, Nevaquaya inspired the creation of new and innovative flute compositions, creating an extensive repertoire for the instrument. With the flute's revival during the 1970s, the flute's context, function, and music changed. Nevaquaya played an important role in this movement, retaining tradition on one level, but manifesting ideas for change.

In Native American tradition, the flute was played by a young man to serenade a prospective bride. It became his voice, relating his amorous feelings, intentions, and commitment to the young woman. Early in the evening, just as the sun began to set, he would position himself near her dwelling and play. At the same time, the entire village would enjoy the music. Oral tradition tells that, on occasion, several flutes could be heard at once. Among some tribes, as soon as the young man and young woman had married, the flute was put aside and never played again; in other tribes, a man might play his flute into old age.

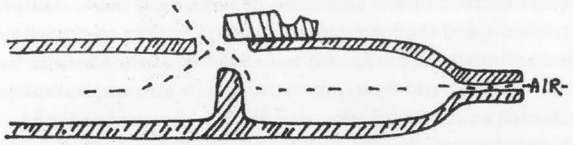


DIAGRAM OF A NATIVE AMERICAN BLOCK FLUTE MOUTHPIECE

Various materials were used to construct Native American flutes, but cedar wood was the favorite. The cedar tree is always green and living throughout the four seasons. Among many tribes, cedar smoke is used as a blessing in Native American ceremonies. The instruments are fipple flutes, each with a tubular shape, a whistle mouthpiece, and an attached ornament, carved in the shape of a bird, horse or Indian saddle and providing a flue for the passage of a stream of air across a lip. Six finger holes create a scale with a tonal range of an octave, more or less. A Sioux model has only five finger holes.

Traditional flute melodies were adaptations of vocal love songs; however, since the human voice can produce and shade pitches but the flute can produce only specific pitches, flutists in most cases (because of the physical limitations of the flute) could only hint at the source melody. Doc Tate Nevaquaya overcame these limitations by innovating and breaking away from tradition, and the repertoire expanded. His flute repertoire included love-song adaptations, but he also included Comanche Christian hymns, social dance songs, and fresh, innovative, purely instrumental compositions that reflected an emotional state, described an aspect of native life, or depicted the natural world. In expanding the repertoire, he expanded the flute's playing technique.

In traditional style, the flute's natural scale was used to play melodies, decorated by a certain amount of ornamentation. Some makers managed to construct a flute that would produce a natural warble on the instrument's fundamental pitch (all finger holes covered, creating a rapid alternation between two pitches). The warble imitated the rapid pulsation created by singers of love songs to disguise their voices. Nevaquaya experimented with cross-fingering to expand the modal possibilities of the flute, successfully expanding its scale and tonal production. To embellish the melodic line and accent the melody, he added more elaborate ornamenting techniques. Since few makers can construct a flute with the natural warble, Nevaquaya created a similar effect by using a very rapid breath pulsation, producing a warble on pitches other than the fundamental.

Doc Tate Nevaquaya's artistic life went beyond flute playing. He was a self-taught painter; many of his paintings depicted scenes from traditional Comanche life. Some included a flute player. Just as his paintings depicted music-making, he tried musically to depict scenes of Comanche life. When he was scheduled to exhibit his paintings, he always treated his audience to a concert of his flute music. When at last he made recordings of his new techniques, compositions, and approaches to flute playing, he inspired a new generation of flute players.

I first met Doc Tate Nevaquaya in Apache, Oklahoma, while visiting my uncle. I was interested in playing the flute, and I happened to mention it to my uncle. He told me about Nevaquaya, so we went to meet him. He was personable and gracious. Later, in the early 1970s, when he was in the Southwest to attend an exhibition of his artwork, he visited my studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I was the Musical Arts Director at the Institute of American Arts. He walked through the door carrying a large bundle of Native American flutes, which he took out one by one and on which he played melody after melody. Afterward, we lamented that very few Native Americans knew about the flute, its traditions, and its music, and we agreed that the tradition needed to be revived.

In 1974, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded me a grant that enabled me to spend a month in Oklahoma, where I spent many hours talking with Nevaquaya about the flute and its music. He showed me some of his technical and ornamental innovations. For example, what is now known

among flute players as the quick release, abruptly releasing the fingers in opening all the finger holes, he called "puppy yelps." We gave several performances for all-Native American audiences there. One memorable performance was for the entire student body at the Fort Sill Indian School, held in the school's gym. Through the years, until his death, our paths crossed many times for visits and to share the same stage.

In 1976, Doc Tate Nevaquaya released the first full commercial album devoted solely to American Indian flute music. It was recorded and produced by his lifelong friend, K. D. Edwards. The two grew up together in southwestern Oklahoma. When Edwards wanted to start a recording company, to be called Native American Music, his first choice for a recording artist was Nevaquaya. Edwards had heard him play on many occasions and wanted to expose his mastery of the Native American flute to a wide audience. The recording included ten selections chosen from traditional vocal song adaptations, adaptations of non-Comanche flute melodies, Nevaquaya's personal and innovative compositions, and an ever popular Christian hymn, "Amazing Grace." The recording was titled *Indian Flute Songs from Comanche Land*. The recording was marketed in cassette and eight-track formats.

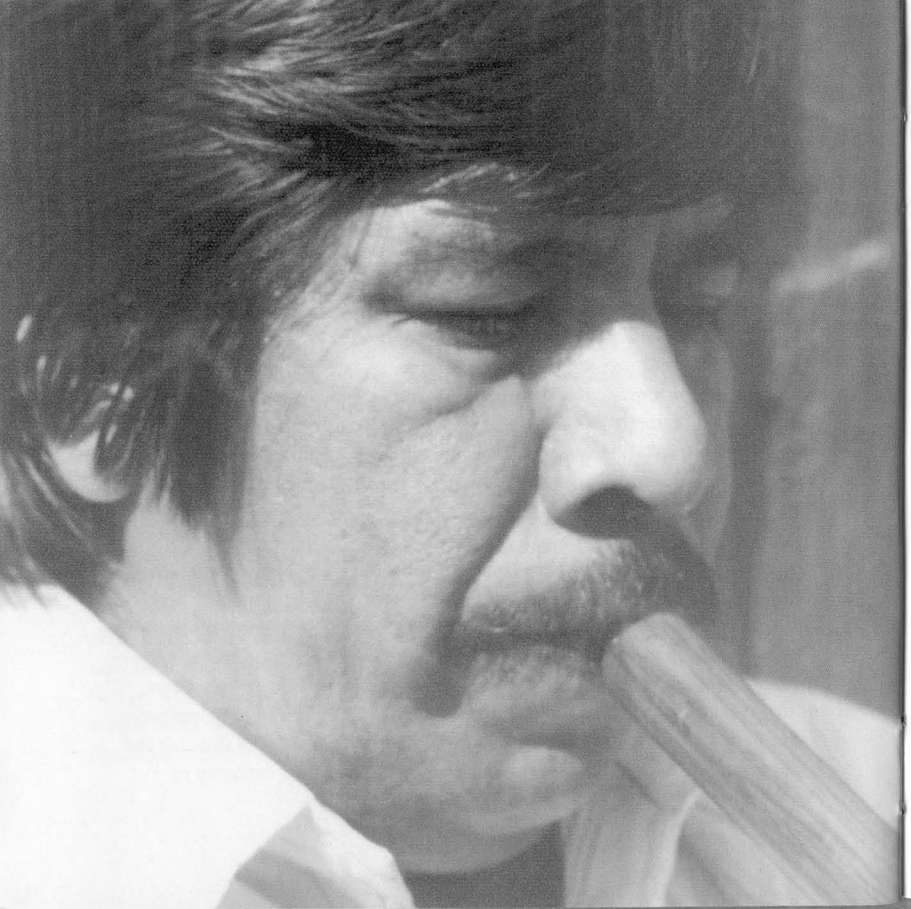
Following Edwards's release came the Folkways Records album *Comanche Flute Music*, recorded and produced by Verna Gillis. It was released on LP in 1979 as part of the Ethnic Folkways series. Nevaquaya recorded twelve selections. These were similar to those recorded by Edwards: a Comanche Christian hymn, adaptations of non-Comanche flute melodies, his own

compositions, and one piece by his son Edmund. But uniquely, Gillis recorded Nevaquaya explaining each selection, and the recording includes his remarks. The Gillis and Edwards recordings paved the way for a plethora of Native American flute recordings produced by several companies that featured the music of now-prominent flute players, such as R. Carlos Nakai, Kevin Locke, and Tom Ware. The recordings of these artists were distributed widely, helping spawn an abundance of Native American flute music and further innovations for the Native American flute and its repertoire.

When the Native American flute tradition was revived, certain aspects of it were retained, and the tradition as a whole was reinterpreted. When I began to research that tradition, very few elders knew much about it. What seemed basic was that it was played by a young man to court a young woman; it was played exclusively by men; its repertoire was instrumental versions of love songs; and it could be used as an amulet for love medicine. With the flute's revival, some aspects of tradition have been retained, but many changes have occurred. The flute is no longer played solely within the context of courtship, but at art exhibitions and fairs, on commercial recordings, as entertainment at organizational meetings, and in concerts that feature it. It was once played only by men, but now, women excel in playing it and composing for it. Several women have made commercial recordings and won awards for their artistic work with it. Experiments combining it with other instruments have found their way into commercial recordings.

Doc Tate Nevaquaya, a traditionalist, gave concerts of solo flute music only. Louis Ballard, a Native American composer, experimented with combining the Native American flute with Western musical instruments. In 1969, he published *Ritmo Indio*, a work for Native American flute and woodwind quintet, followed by *Mid-Winter Fires* in 1970. The latter work was composed for Native American flute, clarinet, and piano. Since then, many new compositions have been composed and published by Native Americans and nonnatives. These compositions range from solo works to large orchestral pieces that feature the Native American flute. Flute players themselves have experimented with placing the flute within the context of jazz and rock styles and combining the instrument with non-Western musical instruments. Two major challenges in combining it with other instruments are the traditional flute's nonstandard scale and the varying pitch from flute to flute. A new generation of flute makers has tried with some success to standardize the instrument, but in the process, they have transformed the flute into a new instrument.

Before the revival of the Native American flute, very few Native Americans were making the instrument. Dr. Richard Payne, a retired Oklahoma City surgeon and close friend of Nevaquaya, contends that he gave Nevaquaya his first flute. Payne's hobby was collecting and making flutes, and he is a prominent figure in the revival. He worked with Nevaquaya to refine the instrument. Later, nonnatives began to make the flute for financial gain, and their enthusiastic experiments destroyed the traditionality of the Native American flute; at the same time, however, their experiments helped create a new category of Native American flute music.



New compositions are being composed for the new type of Native American flute. A flute player or composer can request a maker to construct a flute with a specific pitch that will allow the flute to be played with other instruments. As an example, a flute maker may be asked to construct a flute with a fundamental pitch (all finger holes covered) where A is 440 cycles per second. This can easily be achieved with modern technology; however, such a constructed flute moves away from being a traditional one. Many changes (new compositions and experiments with flute construction) have been made, mainly by nonnatives.

Doc Tate Nevaquaya performed throughout the world and received many awards, such as the National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1986 and the Artistic Treasure of Oklahoma award in 1996. Nevaquaya himself broke from tradition by composing purely instrumental flute music, opening a path toward the new category of flute music heard today on commercial recordings. When he consented to make recordings of Native American flute music for K. D. Edwards and Verna Gillis, he did not know that the recordings would be the catalyst for the Native American flute's transformation and rebirth. Now, as we begin the 21st century, we ask, where will his contributions lead us? Will this new type of Native American — and American — music flourish and grow? or will it become a relic of the past?

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO
MAY, 2004

ORIGINAL NOTES BY VERNA GILLIS

DOC TATE NEVAQUAYA (1932-1996) of the Comanche tribe was born in Fletcher, Oklahoma in 1932. He was delivered by Dr. C.W. Joyce, after whom he was named. The name "Joyce" was replaced by "Doc" early in his childhood. "Tate" was his grandfather's partner's name and was added when a Christian name was required upon entering Ft. Sill Indian School. His Indian family name is Nevaquaya, which means "well-dressed." Doc Tate lives in Norman Oklahoma and makes his living as a traditional Indian painter, and as a flutist/composer of traditional Indian music.

When I first heard Doc Tate's music, I was particularly moved by the reverberations of the breath, and of the melody as the extension of the breath, due to the unique structure of the Comanche flute he played (see drawing on page 5). It is a very personal music, an intimate music, and requires careful listening to hear subtleties and nuances of phrasing, and to catch the melodic differences in the songs.

During the recording session with Doc Tate (July, 1978), as we went along he explained the songs and told me about himself and the flute. The communication of words and music blended for me that hot afternoon in Oklahoma City so that the experience became not only the recording of the music, but the 'person' of Doc Tate as well. It was my desire to in some way duplicate that experience for the listener that made me decide to mingle Doc Tate's music with his words. Doc Tate emerges, as do all traditional musicians, as a cultural conduit for a set of beliefs and values that are reflected in all people's musics.

I would like to dedicate this album to Don Cherry, for whom this music, also, is "roots."

WRITTEN 1979

CREDITS

Produced by *Verna Gillis*
Recorded in July, 1978 by *Verna Gillis* and *Bradford Graves*
Assisted by *Ivan Rubenstein-Gillis*
Mastered by *Pete Reiniger*
Photographs by *Verna Gillis*
Drawing of flute by *Bradford Graves*
Production supervised by *Daniel Sheehy* and *D. A. Sonneborn*
Production coordinated by *Pete Reiniger*
Editorial assistance: *Jacob Love, Mary Monseur, Atesh Sonneborn*
Design and layout by *Caroline Brownell*

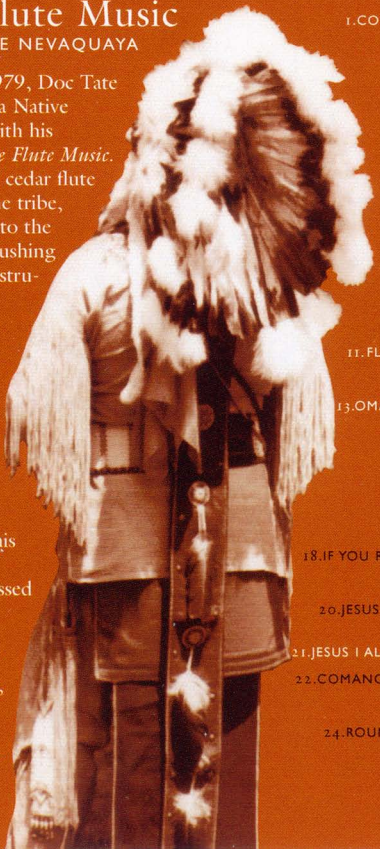
Dedicated to Don Cherry and Max Bradford Rubenstein-Miller

COLLECTOR'S SERIES

Comanche Flute Music

PLAYED BY DOC TATE NEVAQUAYA

Originally released in 1979, Doc Tate Nevaquaya kick-started a Native American flute revival with his recordings on *Comanche Flute Music.* Versed in the traditional cedar flute stylings of the Comanche tribe, Nevaquaya paid respect to the music's heritage while pushing the boundaries of the instrument and composition. Nevaquaya developed a style of playing that reflects the subtleties and nuance of the human voice. Playing everything from traditional Comanche songs to Christian hymns and his own compositions, Nevaquaya interpreted his world through his flute. Doc Tate Nevaquaya passed away in the spring of 1996. Though nothing can replace a lifetime of accumulated knowledge, Nevaquaya's legacy and innovations live on in the reissue of *Comanche Flute Music.*



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