MODERN MAYAN
The Indian Music of Chiapas * Mexico
RECORDED BY RICHARD ALDERSON

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The Indian Music of Chiapas, Mexico
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Side One

Band 1: San Juan Chamula, Nov. 1972
Chamula guitar music for the fiesta
of Todos Santos and young Chamula
woman praying over the grave of her
dead husband.

Band 2: Fiesta of San Bartolo, Venustiano
Carranza 1972.
Music for “trumpet Choir”. Three
large valveless trumpets, and large
and small drum.

Band 3: Fiesta of San Bartolo, Venustiano
Carranza, August 1972.
String quartet. Two guitars, violin,
and large harp.

Band 4: Fiesta of San Sebastian, Zinacantan,
String trio and three part harmony.
“Real Song” or “Little Maria”.

Band 5: Fiesta of San Sebastian, Zinacantan,
Large guitar, violin, log drum, and
rattle, “Tiger Stone Song”.

Small violin and guitar, with chant.
“Song of Peace”.

Two man prayer. “New Year’s Prayer”.

Band 8: Huistan, Fiesta of San Miguel, 1974.
Three drums and small flute.

Side Two

Band 1: Tenejapa Center, Fiesta of San Alonso 1972.
Violin and large bass guitar, “Ladies Dance”.

Large guitar, harp, and violin.
“Catrina Song”.

Large guitar, harp, violin, two drums
flute, and voices. “Bull Dance”.

Guitar, violin, and voice, “Kosh,
Kosh, Ivakan Kanan Chl”.

Large flute, drum, mandolin and guitar.

Two guitars and violin. “Majestie’”.

Large flute and drum. Good Friday
services.

Two drums and large flute. Carneval
music.

Two guitars and violin.

All selections recorded live at actual
festas in Indian communities.

This music was recorded by Richard Alderson,
a New York City recording engineer who lived
in Chiapas for six years. During this time he
befriended many groups of local Indians and
studied and recorded their music. Mr. Alderson
also plays Indian music on several<br>instruments. Frequent broadcasts of his recordings on local
government radio are greatly appreciated by
the Indian themselves. Mr. Alderson wishes to
thank the following persons for their aid in
making these recordings:

Flora Edwards
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Dr. Ursina Koehler
Antun Osil of Majosic, Tenejapa
And all the Indian musicians and
people of Chiapas.

Modern Mayan Music

The music of the indigenous people of
the southern Mexican state of Chiapas reflects
many varied influences, past and present.

These people are subsistence farmers,
with shepherding, cattle raising, hunting,
and handicrafts as secondary occupations.
Their diet consists of maize (mostly in the
form of tortillas) and beans. Vegetables,
fruit, and meat are occasional supplements.
Hot chile peppers are eaten with every meal.
Coffee, sugarcane beer (chicha), and homemade
rum are consumed regularly. Rum or “posh”
drinking is an integral part of all celebra-
ctions.

Because of the rugged, mountainous terrain
and lack of roads and communication,
each community, even within the same language
group, has its own distinct outlook. They
refer to their music as the “Real Song” and
their language as the “Real Speech.” Anyone
who wears different clothing or who speaks
differently is regarded as a foreigner no matter
what his origin.

The four languages spoken here; Ixoztli,
Tzeltal, Chol, and fojolabal, all share their
basic Mayan roots with both Aztec and Spanish
borrowings. A song may express the pan-
theistic catholicism peculiar to these people,
with many loan words from the Spanish, or it
may be a modern version of an ancient Mayan
incantation, mysterious and obscure today.

Ritual, social, and religious expression are
viewed as one concept by these people. This
is the “custom” or “custom”. Music is always
performed in the context of “custom”, never
for its own sake. Many members of the community
spend much time and expense practicing
“custom”.

The musician may be any member of the
community who can attain the skill to practice
“custom” through music. The musician may
enjoy his work, but always he is an obliga-
tion or duty. He is paid in food and drink
when performing, otherwise he must support
himself with other work.

Music is played on instruments either fab-
ricated by the musician himself or by a special
craftsman within his community or from a
neighboring one. The double-skinned drum, 3-hole
flute, and all string instruments are all based on
16th century European models as none of them
are known to have existed in the Americas be-
fore the arrival of the Spaniards. Other instru-
ments of cheap commercial manufacture are pur-
chased in “Ladino” or non-indigenous towns.
Only two instruments played today are of pre-columbian
ancestry, the rattle or “Sonaja” and the log
or “Beponas”.

The Chamulas are a Ixoztli speaking
people living in the cool altitudes near San
Cristobal las Casas. They make harps, guitars,
and violins of various sizes. They are used
by themselves and sold to other groups. These
instruments are hand built as one of the most primitive of tools. Pine and cherry
wood found in close proximity to their village
is used. They are sold for approximately 60
pesos or $5.00 apiece. These are all clumsily
constructed and unvarnished; they last only
a few years and are replaced. The sound
produced is weak but pleasant, and they re-
quire great skill and practice to play
naturally. Often when an instrument is being
initially tuned for the day, the musician takes
a mouthful of liquor and sprays the entire
guitar or harp, thereby thinning the violins
or pegs. While the Chamulas are important
as instrument makers, their own music is
rich in melody and poetry. The Chamulas
are considered by other groups to have in-
vented music. The Chamula song, “Bolon Chon”
is the best known indigenous melody among
other Indians and “Ladinos” throughout Chiapas.
It is often heard slightly changed played
by other groups. The Chamula women are
dapt at voicing prayers in a style ageless
and unaffected by recent culture. Band One.
The Izoztil speaking people of Venus tiano Carranzo are unique in that they live entirely within the confines of a "Ladino" town, while maintaining their indigenous culture. Their music is unlike any other in the region. The large drum which accompanies the trumpet choir is said by them to have been made by the "Holy Father" himself. The guitars, harp, and violin were all made in Carranza and are of excellent craftsmanship. One can easily sense a close relationship between this trumpet music and the trumpeteers in the famous murals of Bonampak.

Bands 2 and 3.

The Zinnacantecos, a Izoztil speaking tribe living near San Cristobal, maintain a rich set of "costumbres" and their music reflects this. They are the only group to practice part singing or harmony. They also employ the log drum, i'en i'en, or teponzotle, an instrument of pre-columbian origin. This instrument is regarded by them to be an actual god and is kept well guarded and tended in its own house. In recent years the Zinnacantecos have been making their own hardwood violins, improved over the Chasula model.

Bands 4 and 5.

The Izoztil speakers of San Pablo, Chiakhuian have remained less influenced by Spanish and Mestizo culture than perhaps any other group heard on this recording. They are conservative and proud. The ritual chant and prayer heard on bands 6 and 7 are typical examples of practices common among all modern Mayans.

Bands 8.

The Izoztils of Huistan are the only tribe in the area who continue to wear a large diaper-like garment of ancient origin instead of European style trousers. Their drumming is unusually syncopated and incisive for the area and exceptional three-holed flute artistry is heard here. Band 8.

The Izoztils of Ienejapa are indigenous farmers, growing a great variety of fruits, vegetables, and grains. They are strong walkers and runners. A unique instrument, the "kin", a large bass guitar, is heard here. They celebrate their version of the Carnaval Fiesta with great abandon and vulgar humor. Band 1 and 2, Side 2.

The remaining Izoztil speaking groups of Chiapas are represented by musicians from fenango performing a mysterious shepherds dance (band 3) by a haunting solo on the large seven-holed flute from Guacitepec (band 4), and by an unusually refined instrumental group from Petalcingo playing a dance of recent origin. Bands 3, 4, and 5.

The Choles speak a language close to ancient Mayan roots. The large, three-holed flute song heard here is typical of music played in indian communities on Good Friday. The Chol town, tila, houses a famous, miraculous black Christ, "El Senor de tila". The complex and formal violin selection which ends this recording is his special music. Bands 6 and 7.

Listening to modern Mayan music poses several problems. This music grew out of 16th century European foundations on one hand, and on the other it is unlike any other music anywhere. The European influence has been working continuously in indigenous life and consciousness from conquest times up to the present, yet there is a strong presence of the ancient Mayan spirit surfacing in the style and rhythms of this music today. Thus the tonal modulations in this music are simple and repetitive, and the harmonies are rudimentary. The rhythms, however, are complex and unrelated to European models or greatly transformed from them. The intonation, while based on the diatonic scale and peculiarly close to fixed western pitches, is subtly different from what any western musician would play.