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Features

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### American Music's Native Roots

Native Americans shaped the various sounds and styles of American music

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j. poet

To most non-Natives, the music of North American Indians sounds almost otherworldly, the sound of a culture as far removed from the mainstream as may be possible in this modern digital world. That perception, however, is essentially wrong; Native people, like their sisters and brothers from Africa, have been influencing American music and culture ever since the first Europeans, Natives and slaves from Africa met on this continent almost 400 years ago.

Pura Fé – a Tuscarora woman known for her work with Ulali, an a cappella female trio that blends Native music with contemporary styles – has been investigating the connection between Native and African-American music for decades. On her *Follow Your Heart's Desire* album, she blends both styles to make this connection clear. "People forget Charley Patton [the Father of the Blues] was Choctaw, Scrapper Blackwell was Cherokee, all the early jazz and blues people were mixed; it was like another race that gave birth to this rich musical culture, a race that's largely been forgotten about. My people, the Tuscarora of North Carolina, were known for harboring runaway slaves – black, white and Indian. They were escorts on the Underground Railway and helped stir up the slave uprisings that happened around here, so the races have been mixing and influencing each other for a long time.



Pura Fé

"The call-and-response thing in blues and gospel and its modulation is what Indians call Stomp Dance," Pura Fé explained. "The blues shuffle rhythm is a Round Dance, the heartbeat of Native music. Taj Mahal talked about this with me. I had been singing with Lee Gates, who is Albert Collins' cousin, and he pointed out how similar my wailing was to the sound of Lee's guitar. Taj said that the wailing guitar you hear in rock and blues is the sound of the powwow singers; nowhere in Africa do you hear that kind of guitar playing. It's obviously a Native expression."

"The majority of African-American people have some Native blood," said Taj Mahal, another blues artist who has spent time investigating the connection between African and Native American music and culture. "Oscar Pettiford, Lowell Fulson, T-Bone Walker, even Snoop Dogg, you can see the Native blood in his face. He's so laid-back and bluesy and has such different sound, possibly a Native sound."

"That fast vibrato you hear in the vocals of Little Brother Montgomery, in songs like the 'Vicksburg Blues,' it's both African and Native. That vibrato and tone, you have to work at it from the back of the throat and nose to crank it and go up into that falsetto that happens. He might look Creole, but when you hear him sing, it's Native America singing."

"There were 100 years where the races blended hard core," Mahal said. "There were Black Indians in jazz, blues, gospel, everything. It's an untapped history and when people start investigating it, they're going to be surprised."

There is one place in the United States where the Black Indian connection is close to the surface: New Orleans. Black Indian tribes like the Wild Magnolias, Wild Tchoupitoulas, Fi Yi Yi and others celebrate their shared heritage every Mardi Gras season. Cyril Neville of the Meters and the Neville Brothers – a musical family with roots in the African, American Indian, French, Spanish and Caribbean communities – has been investigating the African–Native American connection all his life. "We have Native blood, but we're not sure what Nation," Neville said. "It goes back hundreds of years. The shuffle and hesitation in the second line rhythm is probably a combination of the two musical cultures. Africans and Natives had similar ways of worshipping and playing music, and they were thrown together by racism and slavery. I think the history of American music is more Native and black than European."

"My uncle, Big Chief Jolly [George Landry of the Wild Tchoupitoulas], said the Black Indian tribes were started out of reverence for the help [Indian Nations] gave us during slavery. There are a lot of Native/black people in this country who have forgotten their tribes and languages and origins. New Orleans is the only place that it's celebrated."



Cyril Neville

New Orleans also produced songs that trace their origin to both African and Native American roots. "Before the Dixie Cups did 'Iko Iko,' it was done by Danny Barnes, in 1947, as 'Jockamo,'" Neville said. "It's probably a combination of Indian and African with a bit of Creole thrown in, but ask 100 people, you'll get 100 different answers."

Neville says the unique interracial and intercultural blend of New Orleans could be traced back to Congo Square, a gathering place where races and cultures mixed musically, socially and sexually. The square was outside the city proper and served as a market where slaves and Indians sold and bartered goods. Music eventually entered the mix, and gave rise to the New Orleans sound.

"Congo Square was named after the fact," Neville said. "It was a Native gathering place where they probably had corn festivals and harvest festivals. After the Haitian Revolution in 1804, where people with hoes and clubs threw out the French slave masters, the slaveholders in New Orleans – some of them rich escapees from Haiti – decided to appease the slaves by letting them blow off steam. My assessment is that in the beginning the Africans were going out there to worship and play music with the Native people and they'd all cook and play music together and eventually it attracted the Europeans. They came to see what the hullabaloo

was about and they [the Europeans] started throwing money at the players. It was the first time that Africans played music for anything but to honor the ancestors or religious rituals. The Europeans allowed it so Haiti wouldn't happen in America. That's my version of the story,

anyway."

The Tuscarora of North Carolina and the Black Indians of New Orleans are only two echoes of what must have been a common sound in the American South during the early history of our country; Africans, Indians and sometimes European indentured servants mixing cultures, bloodlines and music, but as Pura Fé says, the story of this self-created race is still to be told.

"I've been trying to get people to hear these connections and recognize [Native] contributions to the blues for years," Pura Fé concluded. "It's an important story and when its descendants tell it right, it will build a bridge between Native music and the mainstream. People will finally acknowledge our part in the creation of American roots music and culture."

*(j. poet is the music editor of Native Peoples magazine. He lives in San Francisco and writes about Native, folk, country, Americana and World music for many national and international publications and Web sites.)*

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