

The Native American Flute The Path is the way

The Native American Flute is an instrument that has a longer history than most people think. A man by the name of Dr James Knight excavated fifteen caves and the largest cave had sixteen dwellings in it. This area is called Prayer rock on a Navajo reservation in Arizona. Dr Knight found four flutes totally in tact some dating back to AD 620 to 670 all made out of box alder. The flutes were six whole flutes similar to the Japanese Shakuhachi. This is a unique design in North America. Due to the dry climate the buried instruments were in very good condition.

The Native American flute has been reported as the third oldest instrument dating back 60,000 years. Most flutes were made of an organic material such as cedar, cane bamboo or reed. River reed was used to make flutes in the southern part of the U.S. This was an easy flute to make which became the plains flute style, which has been the most common flute today. Some flutes had two to eight holes mostly built by the player. My feeling is that the flute that we use today was copied from a European recorder possibly brought over by some of the first explorers to make the passage across the Atlantic. I believe the Vikings or the English could have easily made the passage by island hopping from Iceland, to Greenland to Nova Scotia. No one truly knows where the designs came from and when. All the different tribes had such different flutes but, the one the chamber flute which we use today is more complex than any of the other flutes. My other theory is that Native Americans were so in tune with nature and spirit that the spirits taught them how to build and play the flute through meditations and vision quests.

Flutes were used in many ways depending on the tribe, the tribe of the NW coast used bone and cedar whistles for dance and spirit calling ceremonies. Tribes would often play songs while travelling; some of these songs are still used today. Another reason is for courting, a male would build a flute and play it for his beloved and once the ceremony of marriage has taken place the flute would be thrown away not to be played again, in fear of attracting another female. I'm sure some of the guys kept their flutes around in case the marriage didn't work!!! My theory is that the tribes were recognized by the songs they played while travelling, and the beat they used on their drums, one could hear a distinct sound from a distance away. I could imagine the sounds coming from a tribe playing flutes, drums and chanting all in just intonation in such a rhythm with nature. Each instrument tuned to the sounds of nature they had nothing else to tune to, something like just intonation. The sound must have been so beautiful.

The Native American Flute would see a darker time when tradition was lost as the Native American people were forced to assimilate into the main stream. The rules were harsh and unfair and caused some of these traditions to go underground. While the assimilation rules lessened the rebirth of the flute started to appear from tribes all over the country. The Renaissance of the Native American flute was on the rise in the 1970s with only a few knowledgeable flute builders as well as players. Some of these early builders learned from the relatives others learned from historical flutes and some learned from their own inspiration.

The 1980s saw a major shift in Flute making a flute player by the name of R C Nakai, he is one of the most prominent players of modern times. His playing inspired many to pick up the instrument which caused a greater demand for the instrument. Also books on how to build the flute came on the scene in the early 80s. Crafting of the flute is a really important shift prior to his shift a player would build his own flute by what he heard and what he felt, and what he had available to him in the surrounding area. Builders started using power tools and using soft, hard, and exotic woods from all over the world as well as different tuning systems. With the introduction of precision building they could make flutes in specific keys such as A 440. These Innovations allowed the Native American flute to play with instruments like the guitar and the piano and most instruments. The New Age movement grew with the flute in the 1980s because of the tonal and Zen like quality. With the rise of Yoga meditation and massage there was a demand for soothing meditation like music. The pentatonic scale allows the flute to play in a way that there is no bad note which makes for easy playing. As the market grew all kind of flutes were introduced such as drone flutes that work with two chambers one producing a constant drone while playing a scale with the other chamber. In combination of the quality of the instrument and the range of tuning systems the flute has become instrument well recognized and respected in music, and healing today.

The Native American flute, when we one hears the distinct sound it is mysterious, haunting and beautiful. The Pentatonic scale is tied in to a collective consciousness that has been around for thousands of years, used for healing and ceremonies. The breath tells a story of the wind and the wood tells the story of the earth, the notes play on each other taking one on a journey of life times. The journey brings one back to the origin of all things, where one is connected with the creator connected with thyself and their surroundings. The Flute tells a story that we are all one and that on this earth there is the dark and the light, and all should be acknowledged and respected. The story tells of what is to come, one can communicate with a higher consciousness not by just playing the flute but by listening as well. Playing different keys or tuning systems allows the player to access parts of the body like chakras, emotions and different organs. The intention one uses while playing is also very important, with the right intention and key one can navigate the flute specific for healing any healing purpose.

My experience with Native American Flute has been a great adventure. I started taking month long trips to Peru working with a psychotropic plant called Ayuasca. I worked with a French teacher there who would play various instruments including the Native American Flute. The spirit would take me on Journeys like I had never experienced before, past lives and pure consciousness. I've experienced such beautiful things in Peru, I have much gratitude for the music the plant and the teacher. Through that experience I've been guided to perform my own workshops with music and meditation. The flute had become my primary instrument in this process. I have had much feed back on what each instrument plays in the roll in a individuals journey. Almost every experience people comment on that the flute takes them on a comforting nurturing earth like journey, where they feel at peace with the way of things.

In today's world we have no way of knowing what is true until we look inside our selves and feel what is true. The Native American Flute allows the Player and the listener to access a part of there being that acknowledges the truth that we are all one and we are spirit in a human body having human experience. The flute has taking me on a journey that I hope continues for an infinite bliss.

Thank you to the spirit of the flute for this experience.

Scott Liess