

Powwow Songs: Music of the Plains Indians
New World 80343-2

This album offers ceremonial and social music of Indians from the Great Plains. Although the styles of singing and drumming vary greatly in different regions and among different tribes, the forms of the music are similar, enabling musicians from many tribes to perform together. Most of the music here is intertribal singing of what are now the Southern Plains Indians, primarily from Oklahoma; Tracks 5-9 add the intertribal music of the Northern Plains Indians.

The setting for the music is the powwow, a general gathering, usually several days in length, that includes feasting, giveaways, arts-and-crafts sales, raffles, and the honoring of special guests and of veterans. The powwow itself has been transplanted to the cities, where an estimated half of the nation's Indians now live. Each powwow club, composed of Indian community members, takes the year-long responsibility of planning and raising money for this annual event. The need for prize money, gas money, and food for singers and dancers; fees for a master of ceremonies; and rental of public-address systems demands a complex volunteer organization.

Tracks 1-4 and 9-11 were recorded live at the sixth annual Kihekah Steh Powwow, Skiatook, Oklahoma, in August 1975. Tracks 5-8 were recorded by the Los Angeles Northern Singers in October 1975 at an informal performance.

Songs from the Southern Plains

The singers: Adam Pratt, leader Jack Anquoe, Henry Collins, Bill Grass, James "Chick" Kimble, Lionel Le Clair, Ed Little Cook, Oliver Little Cook, Morris Lookout, Joe Rush, E.R. Satepauhoodle, Harvey Ware, Chris C. White.

The singers from the southern plains represent a number of Oklahoma tribes: Pawnee, Ponca, Sac and Fox, Quapaw, Osage, and Kiowa. Only the Quapaw, Osage, and Kiowa were native inhabitants of the southern plains or prairies; the Pawnee, Ponca, and Sac and Fox originally lived in the northern plains. Bands of these latter tribes were forcibly moved south to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) in the late nineteenth century, though some smaller bands were allowed to remain behind.

Track 1 Slow War Dance Songs

After an introductory period that may include gourd dancing, feasting, and warmup round dances, the powwow begins with a processional danced to slow war dances or honor songs. The steady, unaccented quarter-note drumbeat sets the stately tempo, anticipating the entry of the elder singers.

The form of the song is set (AA' BCB' C'), but the number and kinds of variations are limitless. In the following set of four slow war dances, the first two are led by Adam Pratt, a Pawnee, and the third and fourth by Joe Rush, a Ponca. The leader sings the first phrase (A), and the chorus repeats that phrase (A'). The men then sing in unison; when all the men have begun singing, the women join in, singing an octave higher (BCB'C'). The

AA' BC section ends with several alternating accented/unaccented drum patterns, signaling the start of B'C'. B'C' closes with five accented drumbeats. In this recording each of the four songs is repeated twice and ends with a "tail" or coda, a repetition of B' C'. Variations occur in the repetitions. The leader may choose to begin A before the end of B'C'; similarly, A' may overlap A. This creates momentary polyphony and shortens the repetition of the song.

A free translation of the second song (in Pawnee) is "We are here on this earth, a tribe, anybody."

Track 2

Contest Songs for Straight Dancers (James "Chick" Kimble, lead singer)

Contests are an important part of powwows because large offers of prize money lure the best dancers. The Straight Dance, sometimes called Men's Traditional, embodies all the dignity of the old-time war dance. The songs are similar to those of the processional (Track 1) in form and execution, but the element of competition generates added excitement. Two songs are performed four times, with a coda. In each song the dancers yell enthusiastically at points of change, the tempo increases, and the singers push the pitch higher and higher.

Track 3

Contest Song for Fancy Dancers (Jack Anquoe, lead singer)

A crowd pleaser, the Men's Fancy Dance Contest features the multicolored costume of the Oklahoma Feather Dancer. The dancers execute intricate, athletically demanding steps to the music of "trick" songs. The possible variations can cause the dancer to misstep and lose the contest if he fails to recognize the actual song.

This Ponca song begins with a continuous drum tremolo throughout the AA'B sections. The singers end B with a downward glide. For the C section they set a fast pulse on the drum, finishing with five hard beats (as in Tracks 1 and 2 above). The dancers regroup, the song begins again, and all remains the same until the C section, 2 which now leads directly into a new D section telescoping the A, B, and C themes. Instead of ending with five hard drumbeats, the song ends with one, surprising all but those who know it.

Track 4

Round Dance

In contrast to the emphasis on individual expertise in the contest songs, the Round Dance offers a chance for everyone, even visitors, to participate. The drum rhythm is in a triple meter instead of the duple of the War Dance. Although the music is similar, A and A' tend to overlap more frequently, the singers' voices appear more relaxed, and the group spirit generates yelling and a feeling of enjoyment. Four songs are featured here.

Track 5-8

Songs from the Northern Plains

The singers: Colin Bearstail, John Eagleshield, Stewart G. Headley, Joseph Seaboy, Bill Vermillion, James R. Young

The Los Angeles Northern Singers represent the Sioux, Hidatsa, and Arapaho. While these tribes were not moved from their native regions, they were nonetheless forced onto reservations where many of them still live.

Track 5 Sioux Flag Song

Many tribes have composed “flag songs,” or “national anthems,” in their own language and style. These are performed at the beginning of a powwow or other traditional event. The songs are treated seriously: all the people stand, the men remove their hats, and no dancing occurs. Words are inserted in the second half of the song. A free translation of the Lakota (Sioux) words is: “The President's flag will stand (without end) forever. Under it, the people will grow, so I do this.” (Black Bear and Theisz, p.33). The entire song is performed twice.

Tracks 6-8 Grass Dance Songs

The Grass Dance, or Omaha, is danced primarily for enjoyment. This Northern Plains equivalent of the War Dance shares the form AA'BCB'C', but the performers sing in a higher range and use a greater degree of pulsation and vocal tension than the Southern singers. Overlapping phrases rarely occur, and glides at the ends of the C sections (rather than the altered drumbeats as in the southern songs), signal the B'C'. Here alternating accented/unaccented drumbeats, followed by five hard beats, end each song.

The Grass Dance Theme Song (Track 6), is performed four times with a coda. Track 7 has two repetitions with a tail. Track 8 repeats three times with no tail. In an actual powwow, women's voices and yells would fill out the texture.

Track 9 War Dance Song (Harvey Ware, leader)

This song was borrowed from the northern plains, and Joe Rush added words and adapted the song to the southern style. This group war dance is a good example of overlapping parts and the use of whistles and various yells.

Track 10 Slow War Dance, Vietnam Song (Jack Anquoe, leader)

The honoring of veterans is an important part of the powwow. This stately song is dignified and less exuberant than most war dances.

Track 11 War Dance Song (Flag Parade)

The Flag Parade ends the powwow. The first song here is performed four times with a coda. Ululation and rising pitch by the women in the second repetition create excitement. The second song is performed three times with a tail. The solemn tone befits the ending of this important annual event. -*Charlotte Heth*

Charlotte Heth, a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, is an Associate Professor of Music and Director of the American Indian Studies Center at UCLA. She has written and edited several articles, books, records, and videotapes on American Indian music. Ms. Heth has produced several recordings for New World Records:

80246-2 Songs of Earth, Water, Fire and Sky: Music of the American Indian
80297-2 Songs of Love, Luck, Animals, and Magic: Music of the Yurok and Tolowa Indians
80301-2 Oku Shareh: Turtle Dance Songs of San Juan Pueblo
80337-2 Songs and Dances of the Eastern Indians from Medicine Spring and Allegany
80343-2 Powwow Songs: Music of the Plains Indians
80406-2 Navajo Songs From Canyon De Chelly

Producer's Note

Special thanks go to the late Adam Pratt and Mrs. Pratt, Louis Stabler, James R. Young, and members of the Kiheka Steh Powwow Club and the Los Angeles Northern Singers. Michael Moore was invaluable as engineer and collaborator, and Edwin Schupman assisted with research.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Arapaho War Dance Songs and Round Dance Songs. Canyon 6092.
Chippewa Grass Dance Songs. Canyon C-6106
Chippewa: War Dance Songs for Powwow. Canyon C-6082
Gros Ventre and Assiniboine. Indian Records IR-490
An Historical Album of Blackfoot Indian Music. Folkways FE-34001
Ponca War Dance Songs. Indian Records IR-1000
Sioux Favorites. Canyon ARP-6059.

Songs of Earth, Water, Fire, and Sky: Music of the American Indian. New World 80246-2.

Songs of the Arapaho Sun Dance. Canyon 6080.

Winnebago Songs. Canyon 6118.

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Powwow Songs: Music of the Plains Indians

1 Slow War Dance Songs (7:54)

2 Contest Songs for Straight Dancers (4:58)

3 Contest Song for Fancy Dancers (1:18)

4 Round Dance (8:44)

5 Sioux Flag Song (2:01)

6 Grass Dance Theme Song (2:22)

7 Grass Dance Song (2:14)

8 Grass Dance Song (2:15)

9 War Dance Song (5:15)

10 Slow War Dance, Vietnam Song (2:40)

11 War Dance Songs (Flag Parade) (6:17)

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