

Louis Webster

Webster was born in Green Bay in 1949, as he put it a "Heniz 57" variety of Woodland Indian: Menominee, Oneida, Ojibwa, Stockbridge, Munsee, and Potawatomi. He was adopted by grandparents and raised on the Menominee Reservation at Neopit. A talented musician, he began playing rock music around 1960, moving quickly from surf music to the British Invasion to the San Francisco sound. In the late 1960s he roamed the country, spending several years in San Francisco. By the time he returned to Wisconsin the highly political American Indian Movement was strong and Webster became caught up with Indian politics and culture. Soon he was participating in an Indian musical and theatre group and leading Little Big Band, an aggregation that combined blues, country, and bluegrass, with Indian drum rhythms, singing in vocables, and Webster's end blown wooden flute playing.

Although once common among Wisconsin's Woodland Indians, the courting flute declined as a part of cultural life early in this century. Certainly it was not a part of Webster's youthful experiences. While taking courses at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in the early 1970s Webster was shown a Sioux flute and a number of other native instruments by an ethnomusicologist. Fascinated, he decided to make one himself. Soon he was making more and working flute tunes into his musical compositions. An active participant in the emerging midwestern powwow scene and a man with roots on the Menominee reservation, Webster soon encountered other flute players, young and old. And he began to make more instruments for barter or sale to this clientele and, eventually, to anthropologists.

Webster sometimes fashions his flutes from local cedar, but prefers redwood for its grain, looks, workability, and durability. He buys redwood from the lumberyard in blocks, then gouges and chisels out the interior to form the two halves of a flute's body which are eventually glued together. The thickness of the wood and the wooden reed, bound to the top of the flute with a "saddle," give the flute its sound. Webster's flutes are made to play a seven tone scale and have six or seven holes. While some of his flutes are plain, others are quite elaborate, with their saddle taking on the form of a duck or bear, and their bottom ends assuming the forms of birds and beasts, including the woodpecker. These are not traditional Menominee designs--some of them resemble Sioux designs--but they often incorporate Menominee clan animals. Webster reckons that he gets some of his motifs from dreams, a typical source of inspiration for Woodland peoples. Dreams are also a source for Webster's music, although he also patterns his playing after the sounds of birds and after tunes heard on the powwow circuit.

Supplimentary materials: 1) taped interview and index; 2) color slides and B&W photos.

Availability of instruments: Webster prefers to sell rather than loan an instrument (for \$200 to \$400); some of his flutes are also for sale at the Oneida museum and at a convenience store in Keshena.

Special Considerations: Webster may be hard to reach and it would be prudent to contact him as early as possible; an address and some phone numbers are on the tape index. Webster is a fine musician and would be excellent in a public program; his tools and materials are also pretty portable for demonstrations of the flute-making process.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for
Cedarburg Cultural Center
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): November 6, 1989
Interviewee: Louis Webster
Address: General Delivery
Neopit, WI

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP
Stereo: no Dolby: no
Tape Brand/Length: Sony HF-60
Amount Used: Side 1: all
Side 2: 1/3

General Subject: musical instrument
making

Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary,
Lewis Koch

Recording Location: home of Russell
Barnes, Keshena

Phone: Webster has no phone. He might Other People Present: Russell
be contacted through parties at [REDACTED], Barnes
or through Irene Dickinson of Human Services,
Menominee Reservation, [REDACTED]

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

Webster is split up from his wife and children who live in Nashville, Tennessee, and is living with friends and relatives on the Menominee Reservation. I contacted him by leaving messages and then accepting a collect call from Webster. We agreed to meet in a restaurant parking lot in Keshena. Upon meeting we visited a local convenience store where numerous Indian crafts, including two of Webster's woodpecker flutes, were for sale. Lewis Koch took some pictures. Then we headed out of Keshena east on a county road to the trailer of Russell Barnes. Webster had his musical equipment set up there (he plays guitar, flute, fiddle, mandolin, and, recently, pedal steel guitar in rock and country bands). He also had several flutes on hand and was working on several more at work bench. Koch took pictures first and then I interviewed Webster. After soliciting his biography and information about his craft on cassette for about an hour, I switched to the Nagra and recorded examples of flute playing and of the fiddling of Indian tunes.

TAPE INDEX

Tape 1, Side 1

1. Announcement. [Instead of November 6, I give the date as October 6.]
2. Born 1949 in Green Bay, adopted by grandparents at 8 months. Raised on the Menominee Reservation at Neopit.
3. Was going to the university in Milwaukee. Took a course where he encountered various Indian instruments. Apache violins, rattles, a brass flute and a wooden one in the mallard duck shape of the Sioux. Was inspired to try to make a flute. "It turned out real good and I've been making them ever since." [Since ca. 1971.]
4. Hadn't seen Menominee or Ojibwa flutes up until that time. Since making and playing them has encountered other Woodland flutes. L has also made and traded lots of flutes in past 18 years, inspiring some revival.
5. An old gentleman locally, Matty Boyd, has an old war flute, but not a courting flute. L reckons by the early 1920s a lot of the traditional people have gone underground with their culture, including the courting flute. Now there is a recurrence, resurgence of sharing the "old things."
6. On techniques. Uses coarse and fine wood rasp, straight blade and half moon carving chisels, uses glue and some clamps (used to use leather to strap the pieces together). In the old days used to use pitch instead of glue, but maintenance and strength better with glue.
7. Biggest flutes L makes about 2' long. Tone varies with size. Most of his flutes are about 15", has made them 12", 11", with smallest being 6".
8. You can use black ash, but cedar more popular. Considered a sacred tree. Leaves used for incense, smoke used in purification ceremonies. L likes redwood. Has beautiful grain, harder than the cedar. L thinks with softer wood get a more tender sound, crisper with harder wood. Gets wood at lumberyard. Hasn't got time to cure it. "I'd be an old man" if I went out in the woods to get the right tree. This way L can make as many flutes as he wants a year.
9. Finds making the flute relaxing, gives sense of accomplishment, and something to barter. "Living on the res, you ain't got much money. So you've got to make do with what you got."
10. Designs. Some of his flutes are "straight flutes," with body, saddle, and reed--the three essential parts--but no ornamentation. A real flute must have a good sound, the reed must vibrate just right, otherwise it's just a toy.
11. Flutes generally have six holes, seven note system, with notes representing four directions, the earth, the heavens, and where you blow is yourself. You give it life, the breath of wind. [A good quote for DHD.]
12. Before glueing the top and bottom of the flute together tries to get the thickness just right to make a good vibration in combination with the reed. Sometimes you can overwork making the reed and then it will never work. The "saddle" clamps the reed on the flute's body. The positioning of the reed, and

therefore its vibration, can be adjusted by shifting the saddle. This kind of adjusting takes the most time in making the flute. Sometimes he gets it right right away. "Those are the days I really love." Has gotten better over the years.

13. L gets inspiration for the design of some of his flutes from dreams. Dressed one up with claws and fur and a head. The woodpecker heads pay tribute to that bird, "woodpeckers are powerful, have a lot of medicine." Woodpecker feather fans are used in the peyote religion.

14. Quite a few older fellows who have gotten flutes from L. They play them, but often only for themselves, when they want to pray. When L gets "out of it," he plays his flute to get himself right.

15. L says some young people are using the flute to court. In the old days you had to court in front of the whole village, "you didn't just run off in the woods." You had to get a flute and play love songs for your sweetheart. Nowadays L hears a lot of flutes at powwows. Each flute is different, "like a fingerprint . . . has its own spirit to it."

16. Meets different Indians at powwows. L takes his flutes, might trade for mocassins, ribbon shirt, leggings, etc. Uses his flutes to barter. Also gets a lot of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists . . . "Those are a lot of my customers too." [DHD?] The latter usually give L his price.

17. Lots of the tunes L plays from dreams, inner feelings, being around powwows and Indian music.

18. L very intrigued with Kevin Locke's playing, considers him a master. Also has recordings by Carlos Nakai and Stan Snake. Has heard some people experimenting with flute along with synthesizer, guitars, banjos. L would like to do this someday.

19. Used flute with his Indian rock band, Little Big Band. Was involved in the Indian movement. Played the national AIM (American Indian Movement) song, used to use that for his band's opening song. Started playing his flute with it as a joke at first, but liked its sound and kept on.

20. Did a lot more with the flute in his band, but the band broke up before the group reached its full maturity. Hard to find musicians to play his original music nowadays. Would like to do some multi-track work.

21. L does a song that's a take-off from the whippoorwill, tries to imitate loons, does the eagle call.

22. If L had the wood and the paints he needs, would make flutes every day. Usually tries to keep a stock of 20-30 flutes for traveling. But pretty well cleaned out over the summer.

23. Six hole flute is on the seven notes system. You can get other variations by bending notes, picking up different fingers. [Someone knocks on the door.]

24. L has looked at flutes at the State Historical Society in Madison. Some of

the flutes lack the vibrato, are toys not instruments. Was trying to sell a flute to Joan Freeman, curator. Figured maybe she was looking for something that looked a little older. "I can do that too. Make a flute, not paint it, hang it outside for a month or two. It'll look old. Maybe that's what I should have done."

25. Indians use just about anything to make something, use any kind of material they can get their hands on. The flutes he saw at the SHSW were just plain looking flutes. One was made out of a gunbarrel. You couldn't get a note out of it.

26. L raised on the Menominee Reservation. Is Menominee, Oneida, Chippewa, Stockbridge, Munsee, Potawatomi in his background, Heinz 57. "I tell people I can go just about any reservation. I always got a blanket and I always got a bowl and spoon." Has relations all over.

27. Every tribe L knows of has some type of flute. Birdheads pretty common in midwest and southwest, further east Cherokees and others make sideways not endblown flute. L thinks of himself as somewhat of a Woodland flute maker, but also an artist in his own right. "Most of the flutes I make are copies from what I've seen before, but lot of them are my own designs. I like to experiment with designs. I've made deer legs and eagle heads, woodpeckers, robins, loons, and of course different straight flutes."

28. Some people want a straight flute with a saddle made a particular way, as a wolf, a bear, a bear's paw--clan totems.

29. L's rock music days. Began in 1960 playing in the fashion of the Ventures, played some C&W too. Then inspired by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Went to San Francisco for a few years, inspired by Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Grateful Dead, Carlos Santana, Michael Bloomfield. By the time he got home American Indian Movement was happening. Didn't know much about it, but soon got into it. Music changed to singing about Indian issues, looking at his own roots.

30. Wrote the music for a song called "From the East Came Freedom," about the "bullshit" brought to Indian people by the American government. Most songs after that about Indian issues, love of an Indian girl. Has done a little more writing with a country flavor now since he's playing fiddle and mandolin more.

31. With Little Big Band played electric Indian music mixed with blues/rock/country/bluegrass. Had a consistent bass drum and vocables on many numbers.

32. On Indian fiddling, figures there's an Indian style. Plays a few songs himself that are based on Indian songs, "Grumbling Old Woman" and "Rabbit Dance."

End of Side 1, Tape 1, Begin Side 2

33. Announcement.

34. L tries to copy what the birds are doing around the lakes. Does the Whippoorwill. [DHD?]

35. Loons making love. [DHD?]
36. Sounds of other birds heard in a tree in Ohio.
37. Eagle is too hard to do, more like a screech. Tries it but it doesn't quite work.
38. L's Dream Song on the flute. [DHD]
39. Another flute tune [maybe more lively for DHD than Dream Song?], an Oneida song combined with some western song.
40. Another flute tune, a take-off from the AIM song.

L gets out his flute

41. Tuning up.
42. Harmless Old Woman, followed shortly afterward by singing of tune in vocables [DHD Indian fiddlers program?]. A song L made up for one the plays he used to do. A background song for coyote the trickster.
43. Rabbit Dance.
44. Picks out the tune on the fiddle strings and sings vocables with Rabbit Dance, a fragment.

End of Session