Chapter 1

The Many Forms of Wisconsin Indian Music

Program 1 Performances

1. Badger Singers, "Flag Song." 2. Wisconsin Dells Singers, "My Friend, That Grizzly Bear Said So." 3. Meckawigabau, "Gí dagá wadan." 4. Frank Montano, Woodland flute music. 5. Long House Singers [women's ensemble], "Alligator Dance." 6. Preservation Singers, "Da ge na zaya nel." 7. Oneida Singers, "Hymn #18 (What a Friend We Have in Jesus)." 8. Robert ("Bobby Bullett") St. Germaine, "Lac du Flambeau Reservation." 9. Frank Montano, "My Spirit Friend."

Powwows and Perceptions

Visitors attending a performance at the Indian Bowl in Lac du Flambeau or the Stand Rock Ceremonial in Wisconsin Dells, or one of the dozens of annual festive powwows in the Upper Midwest, see colorfully garbed men and women dancers circling a large dance drum. Four or more performers around the drum sing as a group, simultaneously keeping a steady beat to guide the dancers' steps. The singers—both men and women—and the instrument form a unit referred to as a "drum." Most powwows feature more than one such aggregation, typically including a local "host" drum as well as visiting drums. To save the singers' voices and conserve the dancers' strength, the drums alternate in providing the music. An emcee indicates which drum should sing and the sort of song required at each phase of the powwow.

Though there are numerous types of American Indian music—gospel, the "courting" flute, fiddling, and country—it is the percussion instruments—rattles, hand drums, and especially the large dance drum—that continue to capture the popular imagination as symbols of Indian music.

At secular powwows, some Woodland Indian musicians use a commercially manufactured marching-band field drum, which rests on a blanket or mat and is played horizontally. But the preferred instrument—required for ceremonials—is a handmade wooden drum with rawhide heads, "dressed" with decorative trappings and suspended from the outward-curving poles of a traditional drum stand.

While non-Indian audiences may enjoy American Indian dance as an exotic spectacle at powwows or on stage, most non-Indians have little enthusiasm for Indian drum dance music. Ojibwa musician Joseph Ackley recounts a telling incident:

> I was painting a house in Milwaukee and I had some tapes on a boom box, powwow music, you know, to listen to while I was painting. Well, after a

> while, the lady there came out and said, "What is that terrible racket?" So I turned it down for a while. Then after a while, she was playing the organ in the house. So I looked through the window and said, "What is that terrible racket?" (Ackley 1992 I)

In fact, most non-Indians have probably not heard authentic Indian singing, but have learned instead—from Hamm's beer commercials and chanting Atlanta Braves fans—a stereotype of "Indian" music that is based on Hollywood theme music in western movies. Public radio station WOJB on the Lac Court Oreilles Ojibwa reservation near Hayward, Wisconsin, is one of the few tribe-operated stations whose listeners are mainly non-Indians. Jeff St. Germaine, host of WOJB's "Drum Song," joked, "When I come on, you can hear 'em [non-Indians] switching off all over the place!" (St. Germaine 1991 I).

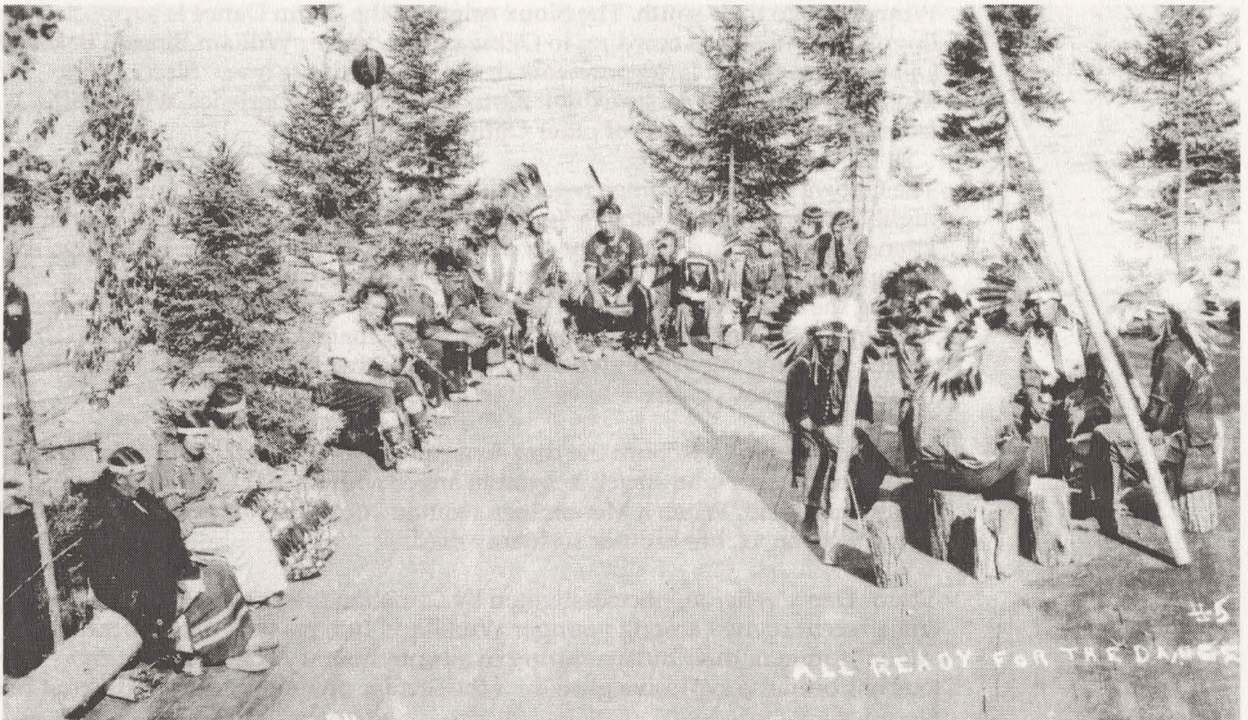
The negative reaction of European-Americans to Indian music has a long pedigree. Numerous early and recent non-Indian observers express disdain for it. For example, Henry Schoolcraft, a government agent assigned to the Ojibwa territory early in the nineteenth century, married an Ojibwa and kept a journal that has been invaluable to researchers. But he still recorded this harsh opinion in 1821: "It is perhaps all we could expect from untutored savages, but there is nothing about [their music] which has ever struck me as either interesting or amusing . . . " (Vennum 1982). Missionaries disliked the non-Christian religious associations of ceremonial singing and dancing. The Reverend Gilfillan, who worked among the Ojibwa of northern Minnesota, echoed Schoolcraft's scorn. In an 1897 speech, he complained of Indians "whooping and dancing around the drum . . . and having a veritable orgy which made night and day hideous for weeks" (ibid.).

The Big Drum

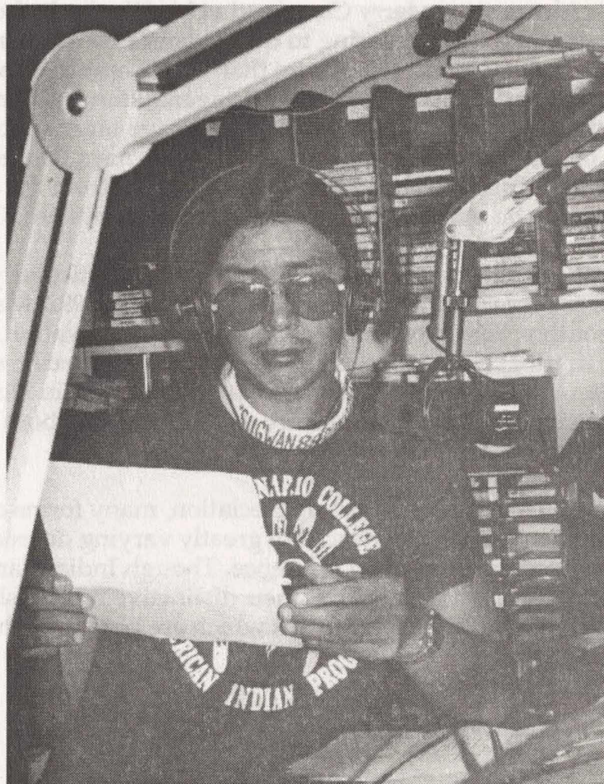
Some nonspecialists outside the Indian community have a more positive attitude to Indian music, but they base it on a romantic notion of its spirituality and antiquity. Actually, outsiders are unlikely to hear sacred ceremonial singing, since performing such songs for outsiders is forbidden. Furthermore, far from being ancient, perhaps unchanged since prehistory, the music of the Woodland and Plains tribes in the Upper Midwest is dynamic, ever changing and evolving. Even the use of the large drum is relatively recent. Drum Dance religion emerged in the later nineteenth century as the Woodland Indians' response to a catastrophe—the destruction of their former way of life by rapidly arriving Europeans. Its wider dissemination has continued into the twentieth century. While several types of small hand-held drums were known earlier, the big drum seen in powwows today spread from the west to the east as a specific and most notable component of a new religious belief and practice.

Big drums were first used in the Grass Dance, a messianic movement which may have originated with an Omaha warrior society. Though the Grass Dance spread widely among the tribes of the Great Plains, the Woodland tribes received the big drum from a different source, the visions of a legendary Sioux prophet, Tailfeather Woman. In the 1870s, Tailfeather Woman spent four days hiding from rampaging white soldiers in the lily pads of a west-central Minnesota lake. During this ordeal, the Great Spirit revealed to her the way of constructing the drum and performing the ritual songs. Tailfeather Woman taught her people the Drum Dance, believing its performance would stop the white soldiers from killing Indians and end the traditional emnity between the Sioux and the Ojibwa (ibid.).

Once a band or tribe make the drum and thoroughly assimilate the ritual, it becomes their duty to pass the drum and its ritual to another tribe or band. In the traditional clockwise direction, the Sioux passed the Drum Dance to the Ojibwa to their east, who in turn passed it to the Menominee, Potawatomi, and



Powwow participants at Wisconsin Dells, postcard ca. 1920s **Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection**



Jeff St. Germaine, host of WOJB radio's "Drum Song," Lac Court Oreilles Ojibwa reservation, 1988 **Photo: Jim Leary**

Winnebago to their south. The Sioux origin of the Drum Dance is supported by linguistic evidence. According to Ojibwa drum maker William Bineshi Baker, the Ojibwa term for the large powwow drum is *bwaanidewe'igan*, "Sioux drum" Moreover, the ritual songs exhibit Sioux musical characteristics, which differ from the musical features of older Ojibwa songs (ibid.).

The Ojibwa and Menominee regard the drum as a sacred object and treat it as a highly honored living being, a "grandfather," whose physical needs they must attend to and toward whom they must behave respectfully. They may give it a name and ritually "feed" it—by placing beside it food which they later divide among the singers—and "dress" it in decorative wrappings which they must keep in good condition. They must visit it and maintain proper decorum in its presence. When one band give the drum to another band, they bid the drum farewell and may continue to visit it in its new home.

Numerous legends recount the dire consequences of neglecting or mistreating the drum. A man who struck a drum in anger with his fist later was crippled in an auto accident. When a Menominee woman attempted to smash her husband's drum with an ax, her brother suddenly died.

Drum Dance religion, once castigated by Christian missionaries, has been enjoying a recent revival among younger Woodland Indians who are embracing a revitalization of their Indian culture in a contemporary context. Even more obvious has been the explosive growth of the secular powwows during the past two decades.

Since the powwows are intertribal and Indians often travel great distances to participate in them, they have engendered a blended "pan-Indian" musical and dance style. For example, in August 1989, when I visited Winnebago dancer/drum singer Jerry Cleveland at his Waukesha home in the Milwaukee metro area, he was preparing to depart later that day for a powwow on a Cree reserve in rural Manitoba—more than seven hundred miles away. He commented that he had designed a thinner octagonal dance drum for his group so that it would take up less room in his van and leave more space for family members to sleep on their frequent lengthy highway journeys. Moreover, he asserted that the dance style in Manitoba would be no different from the style in his local area. He expected to be a contender for the prizes offered there (Cleveland 1989 I).

Recently a contrary movement has emerged, particularly in reservation communities, to preserve tribally specific traditions. In 1992, Marvin DeFoe, the director of a youth program on the Red Cliff Ojibwa reservation, instituted a program to bring in tribal elders to teach the youth tribally specific songs, dances, and clothing design. Nowadays, at Red Cliff and elsewhere in North America, many Indian singers and dancers aspire to proficiency in both the generalized and specific traditions.

Despite a lack of non-Indian appreciation, many forms of Indian music continue to evolve in North America, with greatly varying degrees of European and/or African-American musical influence. Though Indians are surrounded by a vastly larger non-Indian population, their distinctive musics show no signs of vanishing and remain expressive forms which are unique in the Upper Midwest.