



The Native American Flute

Yule 2010 Workshop Notes
by Craig Phoenixwolf

Introduction to the Native American Flute.

What is the Native American Flute? The Native American Flute is a woodwind instrument with origins as old as 2000 years ago. The traditional flute was not tuned to specific keys as were instruments of the settlers from Europe. Each flute was tuned by ear. Each note blending and harmonizing with the next. This gives the Native American Flute a good sound and also makes it easy to play for even those who are normally not musically inclined or struggle with formal music. Legally, in the United States, only flutes made by registered members of the Native American People can be called Native American Flutes.



Within the Native Peoples there were groups who, like the Aborigine Nations here in Australia, believed that a woman should never play a flute. The flute was a young man's instrument. It was a tool of courtship and love. Many call the Native American Flute the "Love Flute". Elders tell that a woman is so powerful, that even her touch could destroy a flute's special ability to win the heart of the one it was played for.

Legend has it that...



The flute came to the people by way of a young man who had nothing. He fell in love with a girl whose father was a leader, a man among men. As the young man had nothing, he could offer the girl and her family nothing, meaning he could not even speak to her. He ran up a hill, sat beneath a tree, and began crying. The wind felt sorry for the young man and began to gently blow around him so as to dry his tears. A woodpecker began pecking a tree branch above the young man's head. Although it was irritating, the young man did his best to ignore the woodpecker. Soon, the wind began to blow through the holes pecked in the tree branch. The branch fell from the tree and the young man recognized the gift he had been given. As the young man walked down the hill a bull elk challenged him with a bugling cry. The elk sang his love song to the cows when he realized the young man was no threat... and the young man learned to play this song on his flute.

That night he sat down behind the lodge of the girl he loved and played the song given to him by the bull elk. For four nights he did this. He knew that the young woman he desired was listening as no one came out of the lodge to chase him away. On the fifth day, he followed the young woman to the stream where she went to get water each morning. He hid in the bushes and played his song. When she turned, he stood, showing himself for the first time. He told her. "I know I am not much to see, and I know I have nothing to offer you but myself. I will protect you and provide for you if you will have me. If you can look at my eyes and tell me that you are not in love with the song that my heart makes for you, then I will

leave you and say no more." Of course, the young woman was indeed taken by his song, as songs are very powerful when they are sung correctly. And the young couple became the first to come together because of the flute. And the young man, he came to be known as "Tayazo hoksine" or "Flute Boy"

There is something haunting and romantic about a flute played from the heart that touches people.

As an instrument it can play traditional western music but when it is set free to just sing from the heart as it was designed to be played, magick happens.

The Native American Flute has a strong cultural history and is considered the only instrument indigenous to the United States. It is important to note that some still feel that the Native American Flute should only be played by those to whom it is a part of their culture.

As a cultural instrument the Flute was not only apart of courtship but spiritual and ceremonial life. Amongst the tribes of the plains it was said that the flute was also used as a way of announcing yourself because the tribe would be able to hear the flute in the distance and recognize the tune and style of the player.

Kokopelli

Kokopelli is a flute player, a vagabond with a pack on his back, a lover, a coward and his image is on just about anything you can imagine. But who is Kokopelli?

Kokopelli appears in petroglyphs and stories. Pronounced "Coke-a-pellie", his legends are a popular part of south western America.

Kokopelli is a fertility deity, usually depicted as a humpbacked flute player (often with a huge phallus and feathers or antenna-like protrusions on his head), who has been venerated by some Native American cultures in the Southwestern United States. Like most fertility deities, Kokopelli presides over both childbirth and agriculture. He is also a trickster god and represents the spirit of music.

Among the Hopi, Kokopelli carries unborn children on his back and distributes them to women (for this reason, young girls often fear him). He often takes part in rituals relating to marriage, and Kokopelli himself is sometimes depicted with a consort, a woman called Kokopelmana by the Hopi. It is said that Kokopelli can be seen on the full and waning moon, much like the "man on the moon."

Kokopelli also presides over the reproduction of game animals, and for this reason, he is often depicted with animal companions such as rams and deer. Other common creatures associated with him include sun-bathing animals such as snakes, or water-loving animals like lizards and insects. Some scholars believe that Kokopelli's flute is actually a blowgun (or started out as one). Alternatively, the "flute" may actually be a pipe for smoking tobacco in a sacred ceremony, or some other device entirely.



In his domain over agriculture, Kokopelli's flute playing chases away the winter and brings about spring. In this role he is an appropriate deity to be thinking about at Yule as we prepare to shake off the cold of winter and look longingly towards the spring.

Types of Native American Flutes

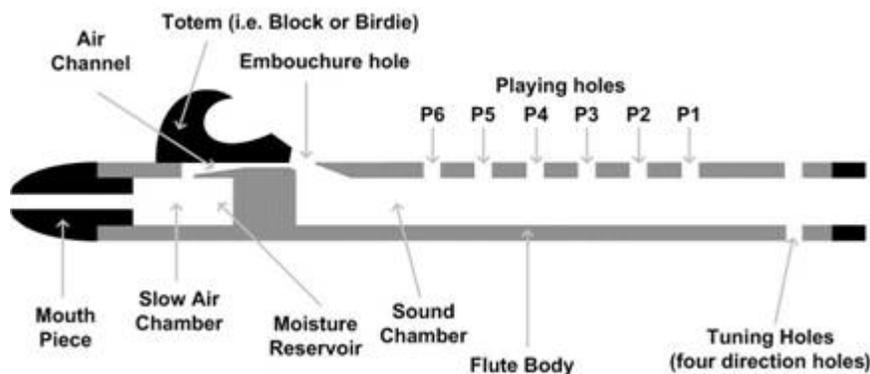
Native American Flutes are crafted using basically the same methods for 2000 years, though there are some variations in individual flutes. Some flutes are based on the Native American Flute and play in the exact same method but the craftsman makes no claim to being an American Indian so the flute he makes is considered a copy. Many prefer to buy flutes from craftsmen who are also musicians as they understand how to tune the flute to sound as beautiful as it can.

Materials can make a difference to the tone of the flute. River cane and bamboo, cedar and even pine are common but many other woods are used too. The plains tribes tended to use river cane to make their flutes because it was readily available to them and was a familiar material used to make weapons such as blow guns, baskets and other tools. Tribes from other regions used different timbers depending on what was available. The material and size of the flute change the tone and effect the playability of the flute. Smaller bore flutes of shorter lengths tend to be high pitched while larger flutes tend to have deeper tones.

"Does the choice of wood affect the flute's voice?" The answer is yes...in a subtle and hard to describe way. The soft woods like western red cedar have a mellow, hazy sound and the hard woods like cherry and walnut have a clean sound. Also, it's usually possible to get more volume from a hardwood flute. But these distinctions are subjective. One thing we can say with certainty is that the differences are very minor. Maybe the most important reason to buy a flute of a certain wood is because you like the way it looks!

When choosing a flute it is a good idea to hear it to get an idea of the tone and sound. It is after all going to be your voice.

Native American Flutes were not traditionally tuned as is the case with the instruments of the European settlers but most flute makers tune to a Pentatonic Scale. This means it is tuned to a scale of 5 notes. While many flutes, traditionally have 6 holes they are still tuned to the pentatonic scale. The fourth hole on a six hole flute is not normally used and is kept closed by the ring finger of the left hand or even covered with leather to blank off that hole. Some craftsmen have done away with the fourth hole all together. The fourth hole is used when playing some variations of the pentatonic scale but most flute players follow the tradition of covering the fourth hole. It also serves as a good point to hold the flute when playing.



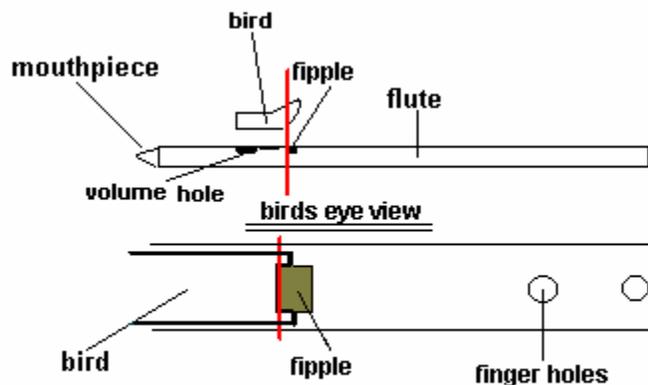
Playing Your Flute

The Native American Flute was once a living part of nature. When you play the flute you give it life once more. You put the heart back into the wood. This it welcomes and returns in song.

There are many resources on how to play the Native American Flute that are well worth checking out. Search Youtube for video lessons by Odell Borg. I have found his lessons easy to follow and enjoyable to watch.

Here I will give you a brief overview of the method of playing the Native American Flute. I will outline the method of playing the scales of your flute.

The Native American Flute is designed to be blown into and allow the flute to direct the air correctly. Air blown into the mouth piece is forced down the air channel and split by the fipple. The flute is designed to make playing it as easy as blowing and as natural as singing. Cover all the holes with your fingers and blow into the flute. You should find the flute produces a tone. You will not need to blow very hard. This is the beginning of playing your flute. When you go to play you should make sure that the bird or totem is positioned correctly. The chart below shows the correct position.



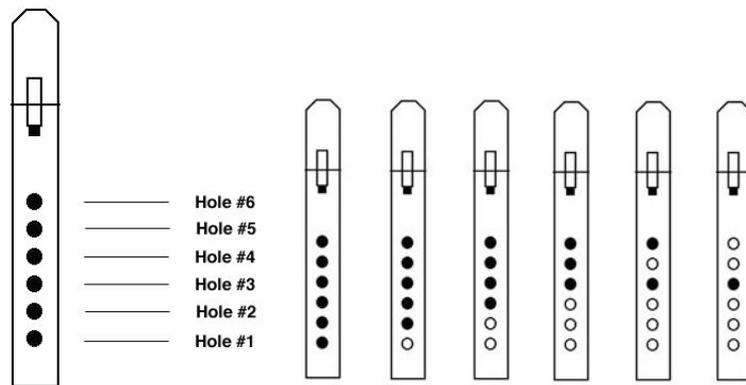
NOTE The red line indicates where the bird should be placed in relation to the fipple

Once the bird is positioned correctly, hold your flute with your thumbs on the underside and cover holes 4, 5 and 6 with the first three fingers of your left hand and holes 1, 2 and 3 with the first three fingers of your right hand. (You can reverse this if you feel more comfortable that way, swapping left hand for right.) You should cover the holes completely with the pads of your fingers. You should feel like you have a good grip on the flute and it should feel comfortable. It has been said that by having the ring finger of the left hand over the fourth hole, that this symbolizes the marriage of the flute to it's owner.

Now try blowing into the flute. How did it sound? Was the sound harsh? Did it make a good tone? Did the note feel weak? Breath is a big part of playing the Native American Flute. Too

hard and the note will break, too weak and the note will fail to sound clear. Try blowing harder or softer until you get a nice sounding tone.

The following chart gives you the basic fingering to play a scale.



Starting with all the holes closed blow into the flute. Then lift the finger off the first and lowest hole. Blow again a little bit harder. You will find each additional hole you open you will need to blow harder to create a good tone. One after the other open up each hole except the fourth hole, if your flute has one.

Congratulations you have just played the scale.

This is the foundation of playing the Native American Flute.

Like all instruments you begin by practicing the basics. Working your way up and down the scale.

When you are confident with your scales you can start experimenting. Opening and closing the holes in sequence will always produce a harmonious sound. Just remember that at this stage the fourth hole is not ever opened and to open each hole only if the holes below it are open too. Finally start slowly. Speed and skill with the flute will come in time. Sooner or later you will get bored with playing the scales and you will start to experiment with different combinations of breath and fingering. You will try something, like it, and try it again. You are on your way into a new world of sound.

Remember to Breathe

Breathing is a big part of the process of making the Native American Flute sing. How you blow into the flute will make a difference to the tones produced. As you get a feel for your flute you will see that you can make music and develop tunes by varying the breath. Short breaths and long breaths add variety to the notes and give you the beginning of rhythms on which to begin playing songs. Different flutes will take different amounts of breath to play. Some very little while others need a lot. Playing your flute will help you find what amount of air your flute needs and also help you practice controlling your breath so that you can play easily.

Using your breath alone you can add a variety of sounds to the way you play your Native American Flute. How you hold your mouth, where you position your tongue or how you

move it changes the air pressure and flow adding a new richness to your playing. Try short harder breaths. Try fluttering your tongue. These can create the distinctive trill of the flute. Remember the key is to breath and to blow into the flute to produce pleasing sounds. Experiment and then if you like the sound add it to your playing.

At first, you might find that your playing sounds a little harsh. Practice will allow you to learn to make it subtle. You will be surprised how quickly that will happen.

Fingering

How you move your fingers to open and close the holes of a Native American Flute is the second method of developing rhythms and your own songs.

Beginning with the basic scale, lifting each hole in turn bottom to top and back again, we can begin to add variety to the sounds. Adding trills with your fingering by rapidly opening and closing one hole a couple of times can be an effective punctuation to the song you are playing. Another technique is half holing the flute, that is to open the hole partially by sliding your finger off instead of lifting the finger. This changes the tone.

Between breathing and fingering you have the basics of playing your own music.

As an instrument, the Native American Flute can let your heart sing.

Playing from the Heart

The Native American Flute was designed before sheet music came to the Americas. The people who played these flutes did not have formal music, they played from the heart. There are songs available that have been translated for the Native American Flute, playing from the heart is still the most rewarding way to release the power of the flute.

As you are playing an instrument designed for improvisation and made to be played by people who have no musical training, the flute is a wonderful instrument for people who wish to express themselves musically who previously had thought playing a musical instrument was beyond them. This is because of the way the Native American Flute is tuned. Modern flutes are often assigned keys to conform to western music but traditionally, the Native American Flute was tuned by ear so that each note was in harmony with the next note as you played the scale.

Playing in the traditional manner is liberating and can produce some inspiring music. Look about you and see what inspires you. The birds in flight. Clouds drifting by. Majestic mountains. Rolling oceans. Your song becomes the experience, a story to share with others through sound or to relive over and over for yourself.

There is no right or wrong. Some things will sound better than others but it is your voice and unique as you are. You will play sour notes and then hit perfect ones. You might like the way an unexpected sour note sounds though and add it to your music as an accent to your playing. The beauty of the Native American Flute is that there are no hard rules. It can be played and experimented with.

That is not to say you can not learn to play western music on the Native American Flute. Some times you might imitate by listening. I have found the high pitch of the mini flutes go well with the themes of MASH and XFiles. You might however want to learn more formal songs. There is nothing wrong with that either. For those who wish to expand their repertoire there are sites and books which have converted the sheet music into tabular music or a pictograph as shown below.

Cherokee Morning Song.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the Cherokee Morning Song. The first staff starts at measure 1 and the second at measure 7. Each note is accompanied by a fingering diagram of a flute with dots indicating finger placement. Above the diagrams are rhythmic counts such as 3/, 4/, 1/2/, and 3/4/. Below the diagrams are the lyrics: 'wen'de ya ho', 'wen'de ya ho', 'wen'de ya wen'de', 'ya ho ho ho ho He ya ho He ya ho ya ya ya', and 'ya ya'.

This simple tune is played and repeated to each of the four elements or directions. North, south, east and west.

When Reading Tabular Music you will usually find the format will show the sheet music, the fingering and words. Above the fingering is the rhythm or count of the tones to help you get the tune right. One of the best sources is flutetree.com. Many have sound samples to help you get a feel for the music's sound and rhythm. You can also select for 5 or 6 hole flutes.

The Native American Flute as a tool of Magick

The Native American Flute is for me a tool of Magick. It is something that we put so much of ourselves into as it's players. We breath life into what was once alive. We give it heart where now it is empty. It can become apart of us and take on our energies. Each flute is unique I have found. Each flute has it's own voice and much like the wands in Harry Potter, each flute will have a player that it responds to.

Because we have empowered the flute with so much of ourselves it can become a powerful tool in magick.

In ritual work it can be played to build energy and played at faster and faster. It can be played softly and be used to meditate as you let your fingers move softly over the flutes holes. It can be used as a wand or sword would be to direct energy and to focus it.

It can be apart of ritual playing the role of the wind or adding a soft melody for the Goddess to offset the beat of a Drum that might represent the God.

When played the flute's music can have a compelling effect on the others. It can be calming and peaceful. You can use your flute to help relax someone who is restless allowing the music to act as a lullaby.

Then there is the use the Flute Boy used in the story of the origin of the flute. The Native American Flute is not called the Love Flute for nothing. Playing your heart song for the one you love can be an intimate and romantic act.

The possibilities are endless.

Care for your Native American Flute

As a an instrument, the Native American Flute needs some basic care to maintain its condition and tone.

Flutes should be stored where they cannot be crushed or stepped on. A flute that has been damaged can be hard to repair and might even be unrepairable. Should you get a small split in the flute I suggest you use a little super glue to fill the split and then sand it gently to smooth it it. This will strengthen the flute again and keep it playable. Splitting usually occurs if the temperature changes a lot or the flute dries out too quickly and is often more common with bamboo or cane flutes. Timber flutes have thicker walls and unless hit or crushed, are less likely to split. All flutes should be oiled and cleaned regularly. It is recommended you regularly rub the flute down with some oil. A 50/50 mix of isopropyl alcohol and baby oil is an effective cleaner and protector of the flute. Depending on the material the flute is made of, your flute might need monthly rub downs for about 6 months to help condition the flute. After which once every six months will be sufficient. The isopropyl alcohol is available at chemists.

Natural materials reacts to the weather conditions. When it is cold the flute can actually shrink slightly and this might cause some separation especially between the bird and the flute. This can be made worse by playing the flute when it is cold. It is recommended that you warm the flute by holding it a while before playing the flute to reduces the likelihood of separation and well as condensation which will choke the flute. Condensation can build up in the mouth piece and under the bird. When you play on a cold day or where your flute is cold, your flute will water out quicker. This is not spit but the moisture in your breath condensing on the colder surface of the flute. After a while this can close off or choke the air flow from the mouth piece to the flute body.

This can be corrected simply. Firstly put a finger over the hole immediately in front of the bird or totem and blow hard. This will push the water out of the narrow channel under the bird. If it does not it might be necessary to remove the bird and wipe the channel underneath that runs from the sound hole to the fipple. Then holding your flute firmly with the mouth piece facing down swing or flick the flute to shake any moisture out of the flute. When you swing the flute make sure you have plenty of room so as to not hit the flute on

anything and also be aware you are shaking out fluid, your friends and family might not appreciate being splashed.

You will find as you play the flute more you will have less issue with it watering out. This is mainly because you will build up the muscles in your face that will reduce the amount of air going into the flute and therefore cut the amount of water. You can also take steps to reduce watering out. Don't drink a hot beverage before playing. Avoid playing after having sugary drinks such a soda. Brush your teeth. While the flute does not care if you have bad breath, most tooth pastes have a drying effect that reduces moisture in your mouth.

Avoid temperature and humidity extremes as much as possible. Don't leave your flute on the dashboard or rear window of your car where the sun could overheat it. Don't play it in the shower with the water on. Don't set it on the couch, or on your car seat either where someone might sit on it. Don't ask your dog to fetch it for you.

Simple care of your flute will allow it to give you many years of enjoyment.

Here's a fact.

Flutes improve with age. We don't know why this is and there are many theories out there about why this might be. The important thing is, the sound quality improves with age. So an old flute isn't like an old loaf of bread. It's more like a vintage wine.

Suppliers of Native American Flutes

In Australia there are only a couple of suppliers of good Native American Flutes while in the United States there are many suppliers.

In Australia I have bought flutes from Bushies Boxes and from Spirit Winds. Both make flutes based on the Native American design. Bushies Boxes is a craftsman who has taught himself to make the flute and while he has no musical background he does make a reasonably priced beginners flute. Spirit Winds are makers of musical instruments and are priced from around \$150 for a bamboo flute up to around \$350 for a wood flute. Another maker here in Australia is Craig Sixbears of Earthsong Flutes. I have not owned one of Craig's flutes but have seen them and believe the quality is definitely there.

In the USA my favorite maker is Charlie Mato-Toyella who makes flutes from river cane as well as eastern and western cedar. His instruments have proven to be good quality and I have found both Charlie and his wife Jessie to be very approachable for advice and care for flutes. They sell directly via their online store as well as via ebay. Another maker of Native American Flutes I feel has a good reputation is Odell Borg. He has some beautiful instruments.

Some final thoughts

In this document we have gone over the fundamentals of playing a Native American Flute and it is my hope that you will have gained some understanding for what a rich and rewarding instrument the flute can be. One of the final words of wisdom I will share is playing the Native American Flute is meant to be fun and relaxing. If it feels like work, you will stop enjoying playing. If that happens, put it aside for a while.

The flute is such a beautiful instrument you will find that it draws attention. Recently I was playing in a public park while watching my daughter ride her scooter. There was a wedding party getting their photos taken. At one point I was approached and my first thought was they were going to ask me to stop. Wrong. They wanted the guys in the bridal party to have their photo taken with the flute guy. There I was sitting between two guys in suits and I am in sweat pants and an old t-shirt. This poor couple will always have as part of their wedding memory the guy who sat in the park playing the flute.

The point to this story is two fold. Learning to play the flute is a rewarding personal journey that can be as fun as you wish to make it. It does not have to be something you keep indoors. Playing out in parks on river banks or anywhere the mood takes you can be fun just remember, never play in public unless you are dressed nice, you never know when your photo might end up on someone's facebook or as part of their wedding album.

Contact Me

by email phoenixwolf68@gmail.com
by facebook www.facebook.com/phoenixwolf

Useful Web Links

Charlie Mato-Toyela	blue-bear.onerednation.com
Spirit Winds	www.spiritwinds.com.au
Earthsong Flutes	www.earthsongflutes.com.au
Odell Borg	www.highspirits.com
Bushies Boxes	oilboxes.tripod.com
Flute Tree	www.flutetree.com