

## The Song Sings the Singer

### *A Reflection on Indigenous and Pagan Relationships to Music*

*By Stefan Sanchez*

I'd like to begin by setting a scene: Imagine a large clearing in a fairly densely forested area, about three hours after dusk. About one hundred people are gathered around a large bonfire in this clearing. The wood structure of the bonfire is six or seven feet high, with the flames reaching even higher, smoke ascending into the sky. The people around the fire are moving. Some of them are dancing in a clockwise ring around the fire, some of them are moving in and out of smaller groups, smaller circles of dancers form and disperse periodically, all to the beat of a set of drummers somewhere off to the side of the fire. These drummers are lost in their collective rhythm, likely unable to stop drumming unless shaken or too exhausted to continue, at which point another drummer will generally fill their place. Every so often someone will emerge from the crowd to add a flute, fiddle, jaw harp, or some other instrument's melody to the rhythm of the drums. Some people are dressed like anyone you might find on the street on any given day, but others are dressed in elaborate costumes, affixed with bells and metal plates whose movement accompany the drums. Some of these costumes are purely aesthetic, some are adorned with symbols of one or many religious traditions, and still others are fashioned to represent and even embody various spirits and gods.

If one moves away from the main bonfire, one will see many other fires in the distance, many with drummers and other musicians of their own. Some of these will be practicing songs which are meant to be played during tomorrow night's rituals, some songs will be thought of as rituals in themselves, and still others will simply be to provide atmosphere, but none of these distinctions are made at this time, or really any other time during this special gathering. The rhythms, melodies and lyrics are simply part of why we are here, and they do what they will in the same way that the people do. Often the people are unaware that they are singing or dancing; drummers will begin drumming without being aware of it; a circle of chanters might emerge at any point in the day, and quickly disperse as soon as its participants feel they are done; a guitarist will simply strum in front of the medical station while watching the sky.

What I've just described is an average night at one of any number of large festivals which serve as gathering places for many Pagan practitioners of many separate traditions. These festivals are places for people to gather, observe seasonal, originally agriculturally centered ceremonies, sell wares, share practices, and mingle. One will see many of the same sorts of things at a Powwow, or gathering of Native American peoples, a tradition which emerged between tribes and nations for effectively the same purposes in the nineteenth century. At both sorts of events, one will hear music in the air constantly, as well as the constant striking of dancing and marching feet.

Having grown up steeped in both American Indigenous and Contemporary Pagan traditions, I have observed that one simply cannot describe these cultural spheres accurately without addressing their rich musical histories. Not all of these songs are old, even some of the ones that would be described as traditional now, but they all harken back to some of the oldest cultural traditions in history. They all have some basis in what one might be tempted to call religion. This is to say that they all have spiritual significance, they all attempt to describe something about the place of the singer or dancer, or at least the world or cosmos in which they find themselves. Music has a special place in these cultures for a number of reasons, only some of which I would be able to even begin to describe, but the most obvious is perhaps the linkage

to what is often called “oral tradition,” music is not always “oral” in nature, but it is part of the same complex that oral tradition is a part of, that is, it is part of the body of transmitted knowledge and tradition.

Some songs, particularly those with lyrics, are literally meant to record, interpret and pass on stories, traditions, and other knowledges; others are meant to provide accompaniment to rituals or describe the human condition from the perspective of the practitioner or participant; and still other songs are simply meant to affirm the practitioner’s existence through self-expression. All three of these categories have examples which are written for “ritual” purposes, as well as entertainment purposes, but in many cases, a song written for ritual can become entertainment, and a song written for entertainment can be used for ritual. What I observe is that the line is often less and less clear in the modern day. Many songs are described as rituals in themselves both in Pagan and Indigenous circles, and many songs for entertainment become ritual in nature by virtue of when they come to mind and how they are sung. Some people care very greatly for some distinction between these two areas of life, and others are less concerned about it. In most cases however, these two stances are rooted in an understanding of music itself as living and agential, or at least that is how I might describe it.

The title of this essay is one I wrestled with for a number of reasons, I wasn’t entirely sure what it was that I wanted to convey, and when I realized the perfect title, I was still quite hesitant. The title is a reference to a song which was very popular in Pagan circles in the 1990s called “Two Witches,” and the name of group which performed the song is “Gypsy,” a term widely regarded as a slur for the Roma people in the contemporary, but which in the 1990s was used very widely in the Pagan community with a sort of othering reverence (Contemporary Pagan culture still struggles with its historical use of this term). However, the song is both historically and conceptually relevant. The lyric goes “When a dream dreams the dreamer, the dream’s the real. When the song sings the singer, the spell is revealed.” This song was written to describe in quasi-mythological, dreamlike terms the nature of a major Wiccan rite of passage and was widely regarded by the community as illustrative of many truths, including the idea that music, or expression generally, can take on a sort of agency separate from the expressor, representing its own sort of truth. This, I think, is the common thread between the Indigenous and Pagan worlds I grew up navigating, that music has its own spiritual quality outside of what it is used for. It can’t exactly be called “sacred” as it is not separate from the rest of life,<sup>1</sup> but it is its own spiritual force no matter what it is used for, and to ignore it is to misunderstand the Pagan and Indigenous spheres.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth explanation of the descriptive failings of the sacred/profane or sacred/secular dichotomy, see “Expanding Religious Studies: The Obsolescence of the Sacred/Secular Framework for Pagan, Earthen and Indigenous Religion” by Mikirou Zitukawa and Michael York