

Playing Indians

Look, it's better than playing cowboys & indians. It might bring us a little closer to the real Native Americans and their traditions in time. And it's a way to build empathy, an identification that lasts – by having enough fun to stay with the process, by giving the action enough attraction that kids will want to repeat it.

I haven't tried this with children yet, but I will tomorrow afternoon, and then I'll report back to this chapter.

We'll start with the best known stereotype of injun drumming, heavy 4/4 with the accent on one. Each child with one hand on a drum, "throb drumming" together rather loosely, perhaps some of them with beaters seated around the bass drum we use for samba. (As far as I know, this might be the most authentic Native American drumming these kids will ever do because the real Sioux (this name was spelled over twenty different ways by Lewis and Clark in their journals back in the freedom era before English became standardized) sitting in a circle around a bass drum do not all hit the drum at exactly the same time; beaters arriving at the drum head at slightly different times create "the throb," the "feel" of collective drumming on one drum, and as the children get "better" at drumming 4/4 or 8/4 or 32/4 they may get too precise, or more precise each time, and lose their "authenticity.") As we get the throb going with the accent on one of the 4/4 measure I'll add 'HI a wa tha HI a wa tha HI a wa tha' as a song that goes right along with the beat. Longfellow's stereotypical Indian name can work as authentic vocables. They will be learning to sing and drum at the same time. A key skill to have and as simple as I can make it.

Then we'll attempt a children's song in powwow style from the Black Lodge Singers' album. We'll keep the same beat going but I'll try to copy what I imagine to be "the great plains grass dance descending melody" or what Curt Sachs used to call "the tumbling strain." It goes from a very high pitch to low mumbling:

Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Pluto too
They all live in Disneyland,
Disney land, Disneylaaand yooooooooo.

And if the children can groove with that, we'll go on to the Black Lodge Singers' version of the Flintstones with plenty of authentic "yabba dabba doo, yabba dabba doooooo."

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Here's what happened. The 4/4 Hiawatha stereotype in my head took about 20 seconds to get going, and within a minute or so Liz and about half the drummers were on the dance floor doing a kind of lean back and lean forward, lean back and lean forward hopping around that felt like real "powwow" and the best of Hollywood to me. I even heard some "war whoops" and some ululation celebration.

So I called everybody around to learn the song of Mickey Mouse and at first people were skeptical that this was a more real Indian song, but they could hear that I was serious and had some kind of grip on the Black Lodge spirit of children's songs in the Plains way, so they joined in more and more and then we added the drumming. They really got excited when I did the big thuds on "mouse" beats (2 and 4 of a 4/4 measure) which give it much more momentum and powwow feel. The dancers were back on the

floor in a hurry and soon the girls were doing flying cheerleader jumping jacks on the "mouse" thuds! In synch and very spectacular. They hunch down waiting for the cue of Mickey or Minnie to leap up on "mouse."

Squat, leap, stand, leap and then hop around, ever lower to the ground as we get to the last two "disneyland"s of the descending melody – that's how it might go very smoothly. Then the dancers wait squatting for the next round of the song to start.

We called it a piece of our repertoire that we could show to the 4th grade (remember "4th grade" seems very senior to most of these kids) next door, or to the parents. Took about 10 minutes to add an indigenous cultural tradition to our growing multicultural range.

I'm thinking about bringing in the real Black Lodge Singers tape at some point, but long after I'm sure that this is going to continue for a while and has a life of its own. I wouldn't want to intimidate any one child with a real recording of real Indians. But maybe it would inspire them to find the high falsetto and waver it more? Maybe they would get more of the feel of it? Would they feel freer to do what they have been doing?

"Is it a bird? Nooo!

Is it a plane? Noooooo!

Oh my gosh it's Mighty Mouse, Mighty Mouse, Mighty Mouse, yooooo!"

First you dance like a bird,

then like a plane,

and then like a mouse that thinks it's superman.

Pat Campbell:

The first time I heard the Black Lodge Singers, I was struck by the sound of the drums. It was the very “**1**-2-3-4” that I had been told, especially by famous ethnomusicologists, that we were not to accept as “authentic” and certainly never to perform. They said that the four booming beats, played by one drummer or precisely together by multiple drummers, went against the cultural aesthetic of Native American groups everywhere. This was Hollywood-style Indian drumming, misinterpreted by media-men to stand for the war dances of distant Indians in a John Wayne Saturday matinee movie. But listen to the Black Lodge Singers, and the throb drumming is there, loud and clear, “**1**-2-3-4”. Listen to this sound at pow-wows and informal sings, as I have, on the reservations of the Yakama and Colville Federated Tribes, where a cluster of men, each with their mallet-sticks, pound away on a communal drum the size of a dinner table, singing as they play. The drumming is sure enough four beats to our ears, sometimes each drummer in his own time, close but not always precisely on the same collective beat, sometimes pulsing on 2 and 4, yet with the first of four emphasized much of the time. Maybe the scholars were wary, as we all should be, of the misappropriation of music of Native American groups by film moguls, their reinterpretation of it, and even the canonization of this particular drumming sound as the symbol of “Indians at war”. Yet one cannot deny what one hears, and the throb-drumming of the Black Lodge Singers is decidedly these booming four beats.

* You can hear the Yakama Nation's songs and drums on Songs of a Yakima Encampment (Canyon CR-6129), Ya-Ka-Ma Singers (Meninick, P.O. Box 562, Toppenish, WA 98948), and Yakima Nation Singers of Status Longhouse (Canyon CR-6126-C).

For the songs of the Black Lodge Singers, listen to Kids Pow-Wow Songs, (Canyon CR-6274).

Charlie Keil Nov. 4th, 2005

Having done the "mouse medley" in Black Lodge style quite a few times with children over the past year and a half I can report that it works better and better. One experience of singing and drumming at the same time and they want more. Yesterday at Salisbury Central a 6 year old whispered the "request" in my ear and the mothers and children all had a great time. Everyone seems to know or suspect that we are playing with stereotypes, that what we are doing is somehow "naughty" or mimicking a forbidden "other."

Readers who are worried about the minstrelsy aspect of all this, white people in Connecticut doing a stereotypical "cover" of the Black Lodge Singers' children songs, should think a bit about all the money that has been made by The Rolling Stones doing a cover of Muddy Waters and Chicago blues bands, or Bob Dylan making a career out of copying Woody Guthrie, all the "tribute bands" making a living, the Elvis impersonators, and all the examples discussed in "Groovology and the Magic of Other People's Music" (article at the Music Grooves website) and in Chapter 5 of Music Grooves, "People's Music Comparatively: Style and Stereotype, Class and Hegemony". An argument could be made that almost all of popular or people's music is "playing with stereotypes." And the sooner kids learn how to do this the better!