

## *The Role of Music in Western Apache Culture*

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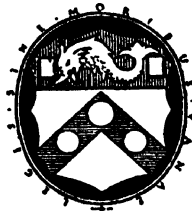


# MEN AND CULTURES

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## THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN WESTERN APACHE CULTURE

*David P. McAllester*

The discipline of the ethnomusicologist is comparative musicology in its broadest sense. It is obvious that music is a highly integral part of the culture in which it is found. This means that comparative musicology should be, and in our case necessarily must be, comparative culturology. This is why ethnomusicologists are drawn largely from the field of anthropology or at least have had extensive anthropological training.

This insistence on the relationship of music to culture should be unnecessary and would be if it were not for a peculiar trait in our own Western European culture: the bifurcation of the concept of culture. We *can* think of culture in the anthropological sense of the total way of life of a people, but we also think of culture in the sense of "cultivated," with a particular emphasis on art forms and art for art's sake. The result of this cultural trait of ours has been a separation of art from culture-as-a-whole. We are more likely to discuss the creative periods of Picasso than Picasso as a manifestation of the social, religious and economic pressures of his times, or, in other words, Picasso as a manifestation of his culture.

Similarly, in music, we are very prone to a consideration of music *qua* music outside of its cultural context. We are most likely to discuss a song as an art form, as pretty or ugly and why, and in many other ways outside its principal cultural function.

In recent years the functional, whole-cultural emphasis has been brought—I could say "has been brought *back*"—into our intellectual discourse by, among others, the ethnologist. And the ethnologist learned this whole-cultural perspective from his contacts with small homogeneous groups. Such cultures, as we have heard since the days of Herbert Spencer, have not compartmentalized art, religion, earning a livelihood, social organization and the other aspects of their lives. They live their lives whole and their cultures can be seen as wholes by the intelligent visitor.

The other anthropological perspective, the cross-cultural perspective, the comparison of custom across the wide gamut of diverse cultures, is less unique with us, but it has a special dimension when used by anthropologists. In our discipline as we learn the range of variation in human behavior, and, on the other hand, study the great unifying similarities, our comparative view is steadied and controlled throughout by the great lesson we have learned from our less sophisticated subjects, who are also our instructors, that cultural manifestations are meaningful only in their cultural context.

Let me illustrate these few words with an anecdote: I asked an American Indian if he thought a certain song, unfamiliar to him, was beautiful and his reply was: "I don't know. I don't know what the song is for." It was a question no one would have asked him in his culture and an answer I never would have received in mine. I saw then as never before why my teachers demanded that an anthropological education must include first-hand acquaintance with customs and attitudes different from my own.

In this paper I will try to apply the two perspectives, whole-cultural and cross-cultural, to the music of the Apache Indians of Arizona. I should say here that my remarks will apply only to the White Mountain Apaches, since I did not visit the other group of the Western Apaches on the San Carlos reservation, and these observations are based on only one summer's field study.

To get as far into Apache music as I could in a short period of time, I used the familiar techniques of the participant observer. I camped with Apache families, attended ceremonies and even assisted a medicine man in singing over a sick child. I learned some Apache songs since I have found elsewhere that even one or two songs, imperfectly rendered, are tremendous rapport builders. I secured the permission of the tribal council to make recordings and found the recording sessions invaluable with their long discussions of origin, use and meaning of songs. The questions that I asked centered around the following:

- How the Apaches "felt" about their music
- What musical instruments they used
- How old children were when they began singing
- Whether there was special effort to teach songs to children
- What the different kinds of songs were
- Was it a common thing to make up new songs
- Were there happy (sad) and pretty (ugly) songs
- Whether there were tabus of various kinds in music
- What Apaches thought of non-Apache music

I attempted to ask the more general questions first in any interview in order to avoid suggesting specific answers by specific questions.

By such methods I made at least a start toward learning the various kinds and uses of Western Apache music and attitudes toward music. In trying to present some of these I will use the cross-cultural perspective by comparing Apache music with our own, and I will attempt to provide the whole-cultural perspective with ethnographic detail and excursions into various aspects of Apache culture.

#### DIFFERENCES

One of the first differences to strike me was the difference in function. With us a principal function of music seems to be as an aid in inducing attitude. We have songs to evoke moods of tranquillity, nostalgia, sentiment, group rapport, religious feeling, party solidarity and patriotism, to name a few. Thus we sing to put babies to sleep, to make work seem lighter, to make people buy certain kinds of breakfast foods, or to ridicule our enemies. To the Western Apaches, music has a more direct function. For example in curing, the music is not to *predispose* the patient to getting well but is the direct cure. Taken so directly we call such a conception of music superstitious or magical and a confusion of cause and effect. Perhaps when our knowledge of music therapy progresses beyond its present infant stage we may get over feeling so superior in this matter.

Certainly one of the principle functions of Apache music is healing, and many aspects of Apache attitude towards music and healing are different from ours. I will list some of these:

(1) *Healing is social*. It is performed at a large gathering, the larger the better, by the medicine man, and all who know the chant even partly join in. There are

drummers, dancers and many on-lookers. The whole community, men, women, children and dogs are present, all participating, if only by being there. Healing is also social in another sense: social misdemeanors of the patient may be uncovered by the medicine man by the power of music. In the course of the chanting the practitioner may go into a state of trance. Everyone stops singing. The drummers go on beating the drums softly in unison (called "thunder drumming"). Emerging from the trance, the medicine man may reveal some selfish or other kind of antisocial act of the patient and pray to the supernatural for forgiveness and general blessing for all present.

(2) *Healing music is fun.* Drinking is considered necessary for the right feeling of group empathy and in order that the singing will be free and enjoyable. The atmosphere is not like that of our hospital or sick room but one of boisterous good spirits with shouting, clowning and flirtation going on. In the music itself, hearty yells are frequent and the parodying of words and music may occur. The songs may be interspersed with jokes and *double entendres*.

(3) *Healing music contains great power.* The words in the chants bring power to the patient and blessing to all who attend. Certain types of song are specific to certain ailments. In his trance the medicine man may discover that deer songs should be added at a certain time to a song made up largely of lightning songs. These powerful songs can also be dangerous if misused. The sanction is the danger of being struck by lightning or bitten by a snake or spider. As presented in the literature, such tabus are often stated as absolute. They may be so among certain groups, though we are beginning to learn a good deal about the difference between ideal culture and actual culture. For the Western Apaches I witnessed the results of a broken tabu. A medicine man sang very special songs for my recording in conditions of some secrecy and with the warning that it might bring lightning, since these matters should only be discussed in the winter. A very severe lightning storm did come up and five people in the community were so frightened by near misses that they had to have the help of a ceremonial practitioner. My medicine man was busy for some time healing one of these cases, and then came back and resumed recording with me. He went on recording the same dangerous songs. There is no doubt in my mind that he felt that they *were* dangerous songs, but it was a danger he could handle. This is certainly not the abject terror of the native before supernatural forces that we heard about from the early missionaries.

(4) *Healing music is not learned in an ordinary way.* Instead of being learned by ordinary memorization, healing chants are learned by ordeal and supernatural help. Putting himself under the tutelage of a ceremonial practitioner, the student listens to the songs for four nights without sleep. Then, perhaps several years later, the songs come to him in his sleep and he is ready, himself, to become a practitioner. Actually, of course, he hears these songs many times at ceremonials during this period, but this is the Apache interpretation of how healing songs are learned.

Other differences are:

(1) *Absence of certain types of songs* seems to correlate with striking differences between Apache culture and our own. There are no *lullabies* as such, though a mother might croon "baby, baby," over and over. Child training is, in general, more relaxed than ours, and Apache mothers do not seem to have to tell their children either to sleep or to eat. Babies are soothed and made much of but the whole attitude, as far as I could see it, was permissive: in fact the Apache from

infancy to adulthood seems to be on a self-demand schedule. This may well relate to the absence of *work songs*. In general such songs seem to go with group labor, and Apaches do not go with group labor. In a real sense they have not learned to submit to what Freud calls "alienated labour." They do not desire property enough to gain it by working at a tedious job they are not interested in. Nor do Apaches have anything like our large literature of *romantic songs*. Love songs tend to be joking and boisterous. The court of love is not an Apache tradition; men do not dream of the ideal woman.

(2) The Apaches do not have the concept of the artistic song performer. Anyone who can make himself heard is considered to have a good voice. A bad singer is one who does not know the song.

(3) The Apaches are parochial in their musical interests. They are not curious about songs from other cultures nor do they know them except for (a) very active converts to Christianity, (b) some of the younger men who know a few Navaho songs with English words, and (c) the children in school who all seem to know "Davy Crockett." In the mission services I attended, the lusty singing of the evangelist and his team and the very weak participation or silence of most of the congregation afforded a notable contrast.

(4) The small inventory of musical instruments seemed congruent with the Apache attitude towards property in general. They make a one-stringed fiddle (one of the few instances of a stringed instrument in the native New World), one type of drum, a water drum of buckskin over an iron pot, a flute with three or four holes made of a bamboo-like reed, and the bull-roarer (a flat stick whirled at the end of a cord to make a humming sound). The latter was said by some of my informants to be used in the Crown Dance, but there was none in the Crown Dance I saw at Cibecue in 1953. I had contradictory reports about the use of rattles but did not see any. These instruments are not kept on hand as prized possessions, though the makings of a drum are present in many households. But if a fiddle or flute is to be used, it is made and then quickly gets lost or broken. This is very like the Apache treatment of property in general: it is not something to take trouble over. Even a comparatively wealthy man lives in the same shack and thatched *wickiup* as his poorer neighbors—the only difference seems to be that he feeds more relatives. Livestock is an exception in this general attitude: horses and cattle are greatly prized.

(5) There is little conscious musical training of children. There seem to be no special inducements offered to children to teach them to sing. There are few special inducements offered to children in any area. They grow up to be like their parents without special urging. There is prestige and wealth to be gained by becoming a medicine man, but this is for young men. Children are not supposed to deal with sacred music. There are no songs which are specifically *children's songs*. Children sing simplified versions of the choruses of drinking songs or social dance songs.

(6) There is little singing done by the women. Those few who can join in a healing chant may do so. It seems to be much appreciated by the men but rather rare nevertheless. This is congruent with the general fact that religion is organized and practiced by the men, and relates very well with the fact that more women than men are converts to Christianity and sing in the mission services.

(7) There is little esthetic discussion in our sense. Appreciation of a song is nearly always phrased in terms of understanding it—of knowing what it is for. One or two informants did speak of preferring songs with long choruses and short

verses since these are easier to learn, but the usual preference was for the important healing songs or the sacred songs in the puberty ceremony. This "functional esthetic" is found very widely among preliterate peoples.

#### SIMILARITIES

Every similarity between cultures contains also its differences and, in the case of music, reminds one that music is far from being a universal language that communicates across linguistic and cultural barriers. For example, there is music with a specifically *recreational* function, as with us. But such songs have sacred phrases in them, and the singing is usually done by men only with women looking on or dancing but not joining in the singing. Love songs, which are also called drinking songs are most used in a drinking party, and this is the usual recreational situation.

There are songs that *children* sing, as mentioned above, but they are not children's songs as such. There is no literature of nursery songs: there is no nursery.

There are a few *obscene* songs, but they are very few as compared with our enormous body of such material. I was able to record only one which had reference to a man who ate too many cedar berries, had diarrhea and soiled his breech clout. There were similar references in some of the clowning that goes on during almost any kind of singing.

There are *gambling* songs intended to ensure success in the game, but they are either brief comical songs about the various animals that participated in a mythical gambling contest or are cast in the form of sacred chants.

Our spell-binding man with the guitar who is irresistible to the ladies has his counterpart in Apache folklore in the man with the flute. Butterfly songs and the flute are supposed to ensnare the senses of women. The element of magic may be said to be present in both cultures in this case, perhaps to about the same extent. However, among the Apaches almost nobody plays the flute today, and I could find no one who knew butterfly songs.

In this brief sketch I have attempted to give a picture of music in the life of the White Mt. Apache Indians. I have compared and contrasted Apache usages and attitudes with our own and I have tried to include enough ethnographic detail to supply the context in which the music is performed. I hope I have given the impression of a people who have much music and who love music as much as we do, but who come at it with strikingly different values and attitudes.

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