

'WHITE' MUSIC AMONG THE BLOOD INDIANS OF ALBERTA

ROBERT WITMER

This paper examines the impact of non-Indian music on the contemporary musical culture of the Blood Indians, a tribe of approximately 3,500 members living on a large reserve in southwestern Alberta. The material was obtained during a field trip to the Blood reserve several summers ago.

Currently a substantial amount and variety of non-Indian music is available within the normal "consumption purview" of the Blood. It includes Christian church music, music heard (and learned) in schools, music disseminated through mass media, music heard in bars and dance halls, and music heard at fairs, rodeos, and parades. Among many Blood this entire corpus is referred to as "white man's songs," or simply "white music" — the designation I have adopted. According to the contentions of informants and my own observations, white music has by no means been ignored by the Blood. Country-western music in particular appears to have amassed a considerable number of enthusiasts and consumers. And, of course, Blood youths being educated in integrated public schools generally share to some extent the musical preferences of their non-Indian age-mates, that is, various types of commercially disseminated "pop" music.

The most telling indication of the impact of white music on the musical culture of the Blood is the existence of over four dozen publicly acknowledged active Blood *practitioners* of white music. (The figure "four dozen" may seem to be an insignificant number out of a population of over 3,000; however, the number of publicly acknowledged adepts of modern Plains Indian music is scarcely larger.) The main criterion used for including an individual in the category "active practitioner of white music" is the ability to play a Western musical instrument, even if this amounts to nothing more than strumming a rudimentary guitar accompaniment for vocal performances. Another criterion is that these individuals are truly *active* (as opposed to passive) practitioners: that is, their involvement in white music is self-directed, and independent of white patronage.

During my fieldwork I focused on a sample group of eight active Blood practitioners of white music, ranging in age from 21 to 75. Despite the differences in age and various other individual differences, they exhibited a common profile of musical attitudes and experiences which, I believe, is also representative of the Blood community of white music players at large.

The characteristic Blood practitioner of white music is a male singer of country-western and sacred songs who accompanies himself on the acoustic guitar. If he is a young man he will perform rock and roll and rockabilly material in addition to country-western and sacred music, and he will own an electric guitar. He became involved in these musical activities as a teenager or a young adult. At present he is unable to recollect any particular set of circumstances which led him to an involvement with white music, except for a general desire to somehow combat the monotony and frustrations of reservation life. Involvement in white music-making has generally precluded an adoption of the other typical Blood adaptational strategies for combating the unpleasant conditions of reservation life, such as pow-wow dancing, heavy

drinking, and involvement in Indian music-making. He is, therefore, not bi-musical, and in fact claims to be incapable of rendering so much as a single musical phrase in the Plains singing style, although when pressed he will admit to a mild interest in Indian music.

He does not believe that his youthful experiences as a "passive practitioner" of white music in school and church influenced his decision to become an active practitioner, nor does he admit to a close relationship between the music he heard and performed in school and church and the music he presently performs and enjoys. He feels that he is essentially a self-taught musician; what he knows about white music has been gained through imitating phonorecords and studying instruction manuals. He claims to be able to read music, or at least to understand the principles of musical literacy, and attaches considerable importance to this accomplishment.

A common profile is also evident in the non-musical values and behavior of the Blood practitioners of white music. The most prominent trait held in common is an evidently strong devotion to Christianity, characteristically the result of adult conversion to either the Mormon Church or the Full Gospel sect. Other prominent traits include abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and other narcotics, a "white" work ethic, and optimism concerning material success. Most, and perhaps all, of these traits can be attributed to religious convictions. The Blood practitioners of white music are all gainfully employed and none are economically "down and out" by Blood reserve standards.

It is important to note that Blood involvement in white music-making is not a *result* of strong adherence to Christianity, although the two traits can both be considered as being — at least to some extent — emulations of white culture, and therefore complementary. The fact is that active involvement in white music is typically undertaken several years before adult conversion to Christianity. The impact of religious convictions can be seen, though, in the prominence of sacred songs in the repertoires of Blood practitioners of white music. The white music practitioners are quite aware that their way of life, both musical and non-musical, sets them apart from the reserve populace at large.

The picture which has emerged is that the Blood Indian practitioners of white music are a small homogeneous group of highly acculturated individuals who are "Indian" only by virtue of the fact that they live on an Indian reservation and have an Indian ethnic background — a group of "red-skinned 'poor whites'" to use George Devereux's apt phrase.¹ This characterization is not entirely accurate; nor should it be assumed that the adoption of white musical values and behavior is an essential feature of an overall tribal acculturation pattern. In other words, there are many Blood who appear every bit as acculturated as the Blood practitioners of white music, but who have not adopted a white orientation in their musical lives; some of these individuals are, in fact, active practitioners of Indian music. We are led now to a consideration of why one segment of the acculturated Blood community adheres to Indian music-making, while another segment has adopted

¹George Devereux, *Reality and Dream*, Anchor Books (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 35.

non-Indian styles. What is the significance of white music and music-making for the small group of acculturated Blood who add this evidently non-essential element to the typical acculturation pattern?

The first point is that the rejection of Indian music-making in favour of white music-making might not always derive exclusively from a negative assessment of the *sound* of Indian music. It may instead be due, at least in part, to an individual's negative assessment of his own potential as a practitioner of Indian music. In the words of an informant: "I have interest in it [Indian music] but it takes a good voice to sing it – a strong voice – and I haven't got that." Other essential requirements of traditional Indian music-making which some Blood practitioners of white music mentioned as lacking in their own musical makeup were a 'fast' ear and a good musical memory. In other words, white music may be seen as an *alternative* (and perhaps even a second choice) style which admits into the circle of musical activity those individuals who have the desire to perform music, but little faith in their aptitude for indigenous Plains music.

A second consideration is the self-image of the Blood practitioners of white music. Like most economically successful and nominally Christian Blood, they appear to have a strong self-image as "progressive," "achieving," and "revitalized" people. Unlike the acculturated Blood adepts of Indian music, however, they reveal through their behavior the belief that some identity with "Indianness" is incompatible with their overall stance, and potentially destructive to it. In other words, they tend to avoid social situations in which Indian music characteristically occurs – extended and boisterous neighbourhood drinking parties. To the temperate Christian Blood practitioners of white music, such social situations are considered unseemly. Here, then, is an additional indication that they have not necessarily rejected Indian music on the basis of its sound.

We have already suggested that Blood participation in white music-making can be seen simply as another manifestation of a general assimilation of white culture, along with adherence to Christianity, the Protestant work ethic, and so on. The adoption of white musical values and behavior has an added significance, however. Some of the performance practices used in Blood Indian renditions of white music are not direct imitations of observed white models; nor are all Blood Indian conceptualizations about white music reconcilable with our own ideas, let alone traceable to them. To take the latter point first: I feel that some of the remarks made by Blood concerning what they find unique and characteristic about white music have a certain "symbolic" significance, in that they reflect some Blood conceptualizations about white culture at large.

When asked what they found characteristic about white music Blood informants invariably mentioned first that it possessed a written notation (or words to that effect). It also became apparent through questioning that in the thinking of most Blood musical literacy is considered to be a prerequisite to the performance of white music. Therefore, the mastery of white music is thought to demand not only musical ability, but a great deal of academic ability, and more patience and perseverance than Indian music-making. As one informant put it: "The white man's [music] is not very easy. You've got

to read music, and it takes a lot of patience to learn . . . it's educating, and a person who likes education would likely want to learn [white] music." In other words, the Blood appear to associate white music-making with general "self-improvement" and intellectual pursuits.

This conceptualization is reflected in practice: all of the Blood practitioners of white music with whom I talked proudly claimed to have achieved at least a modicum of musical literacy. Although they perform some songs from memory and claim to have learned some songs "by ear" they prefer to learn and perform from written sources. Indeed, in all of the performances I witnessed they referred to sheet music and to self-assembled manuscript "fakebooks" for almost all of their renditions. These aids to performance are used not only for recalling song texts but also for chord symbols; and in many cases informants claimed to be referring to the melodic notation as well. The expression "playing by ear" often signifies nothing more than playing from memory a song initially learned from a notated source. The dependence on notated sources in actual performance is certainly not an imitation of observed white models. In fact, it is directly contrary to the practice which Blood musicians can observe among their white counterparts in live and televised performances: among typical white practitioners of the musical styles to which the Blood are partial (i.e., country-western, sacred, and rock music), musical literacy appears to be neither a characteristic nor an aspired-to attribute.

Another frequently-mentioned characteristic of white music was the purportedly "fixed" identity of songs, which was seen to be another function of their being expressible in notation. To most informants notation was seen as a convenient authoritative device which fixed the "true" identity of songs, thus lifting the thorny problem of musical mistakes into the realm of rational. In a white song, according to one informant, you can "tell when it's wrong . . . but you can't tell him [referring to a performer of Indian songs]: 'Here's a note that shouldn't be in there.'"

To summarize, then: Blood verbalizations about white music and music-making both inform and reflect their general conceptualizations about white culture. The knowledge that white culture is literate, while traditional Indian culture is non-literate, is a common distinction on the Blood reserve, and this knowledge appears to strongly colour Blood notions of what constitutes the essential trait of white music, i.e., notation. The emphasis which Blood musicians place on patience, perseverance, and academic and intellectual prowess as essential attributes for the mastery of white music relates to a general cultural distinction which both they and local whites constantly refer to: namely, the supposed inability of Indians to match the achievements of whites in activities requiring the above-named attributes. That is to say, patience, perseverance, and academic and intellectual prowess are considered to be white traits, both generally and with specific reference to music. To individuals suffering under this inferiority complex, even a moderate level of accomplishment in white music (or the knowledge that some fellow-Blood have achieved this distinction) appears to provide a considerable boost to individual self-esteem, and in certain cases to ethnic self-esteem as well. The Blood belief that their culture is generally more

“casual” and less “authoritarian” than white culture is also reflected in verbalized distinctions between Indian music and white music: the Blood notion that white songs are definitive entities for which there are authoritative (i.e. notated) versions which can serve as models for all copies, and with reference to which mistakes can be isolated, is in marked contrast to verbalizations about Indian songs and performance practices, in which the concept of mistakes (or variants) was impossible for them to elucidate.

It appears then that white music represents something to the Blood which, according to their own conceptualizations of it, is alien in many of its aspects to their indigenous cultural values. The attributes which Blood musicians consider essential for the mastery of white music do not rate highly in the traditional Blood scheme of instrumental values;² yet their imagined lack causes a great deal of self-doubt and self-denigration, since they are thought of as being basic aptitudes and values of white culture which lie beyond the ken of most Blood.

White music-making among the Blood reserve populace is attributable to a variety of conditions and influences, but from the point of view of “symbolic behavior,” it seems evident that the desire to disprove stereotyped notions of Indian intellectual and academic ineptitude, and lack of patience and perseverance, has been an extremely important impetus. In other words, there appears to be a certain desire among the Blood practitioners of white music to “meet the white man on his own turf,” as it were. Wachsmann’s probe is illuminating: “Is it not possible that . . . the contact milieu places high reward on the achievement of Western traits regardless of whether or not they coincide with indigenous characteristics?”³

It is no doubt true that the Blood practitioners of white music currently enjoy country-western music and related genres more than any other musical styles within earshot. I have attempted to show that this fact alone does not account for the white orientation of their musical lives. The determinants of their current musical values and behavior have been not only musical, but non-musical as well, with non-musical determinants being as important – and perhaps more important – than musical ones.⁴

*York University,
Weston, Ontario*

²Anthony D. Fisher, “The Perception of Instrumental Values Among the Young Blood Indians of Alberta” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1966), chapters 3 and 4.

³Klaus Wachsmann, “Criteria for Acculturation,” in *Report of the Eighth Congress of the International Musicological Society, New York, 1961*, Vol. 1 (Kassel: Barenreiter-Verlag, 1961), p. 147.

⁴This is a revised version of a paper read at the seventeenth annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Toronto, 1972.

Résumé: Robert Witmer traite des praticiens de la musique des blancs parmi les “Gens-du-Sang” de l’Alberta et parle des raisons qui attirent les Indiens vers la musique des blancs et ce que cela révèle au sujet de leur culture.