Northern Style Powwow Music: Musical Features and Meanings

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Abstract: Modern powwows are important social rituals closely linked to expressing affirmations of Native identities. Based on her fieldwork in southwestern Ontario and Southern Alberta, Anna Hoefnagels explores methods of classifying powwow music that may serve as pedagogical tools, and ways of teaching and understanding Northern-style powwow music.

Music is the central feature of contemporary powwows, around which other activities—including dancing, socializing, and shopping—revolve. Physically, the musicians and their drums, called drum groups or Drums, are at the centre of the powwow, with a series of concentric circles emanating from the Drums in the form of dance area, audience, vendors and the camping area. The Drums provide the music that accompanies the dancers, which is the central and most spectacular aspect of the powwow.

Powwow songs have common features with one another; yet when one listens closely to these songs, one realizes that the songs are quite distinct from one another. There are regional differences in powwow singing, due to the geographical and tribal origins of both the songs and the musicians. However, to the uninitiated, powwow songs may all sound the same. Fortunately, as Tara Browner (2000) indicates, "pow-wow music exists in a Pan-tribal (as opposed to tribal-specific) context, [so] the vocabulary its musicians use when talking about song making and performance is almost entirely in English..." (p. 215). Despite potential political conflicts regarding language and terminology, this shared vocabulary makes conversations with musicians about their music much easier than they would be if there were different or specific descriptive vocabulary. Yet the Pan-tribal nature of this repertoire also means that songs spread rapidly throughout the powwow circuit, regardless of the origin of the songs. The inter-tribal sharing of powwow music allows for generalizations to be made about powwow repertoire; yet as Stephen Blum emphasizes, often the locally-constructed and multiple meanings and features are of significance for analytical purposes (1992: 178-209).

The issues surrounding the vocabulary used about powwow music and its emic/etic and local / universal contexts must be considered in examining this repertoire; yet ethnomusicologists and "civilian" powwow-goers who wish to learn more about this repertoire may find the vast number and types of powwow songs to be daunting. Since powwow music is an orally based genre, musical notation is limited in its usefulness, both for the musicians and casual listeners. Furthermore, since the song performed must be suitable for the accompanying dance, it is problematic to separate songs from the dances for analysis purposes. Moreover, often the type of the dance dictates the prominent musical features of the song. Another challenge for listeners is that powwow songs share many common musical features, which easily identify a piece as a powwow song, but may also make many pieces sound similar. The challenge of identifying powwow songs is augmented by the fact that the same song may be used for different purposes and to accompany different dances. Based on many years' experience attending powwows and examining powwow music in Southwestern Ontario and Central Alberta, as well as a review of relevant literature and interviews with powwow musicians and dancers in Canada, I have developed an approach to classifying powwow music that might serve as a pedagogical tool and listening guide for teaching about and understanding Northern Style powwow music. I also argue that certain musical choices made by musicians create a sonic identity for each drum group, and that certain song features have symbolic meaning and are indicative of larger cultural issues.

Northern Style, Southern Style

A group of men[1] sit around a large bass drum turned on its side and strike it in unison. Their songs are characterized by repetition, a fixed form, and an overall descending melody that spans the range of the men's voices. But powwow musicians make a strong distinction between "Northern Style" and "Southern Style" powwow song, a distinction that is both musical and geographical. Although I focused on northern-style powwow music (and this is also the dominant style of music performed at powwows in Canada), many

[1] Although women do drum in some areas, in most parts of Canada powwow drumming is exclusive to men. Women may gather around the men and sing, but they do not strike the drum.

powwow musicians commented on the differences between northern- and southern-style powwow music, as have numerous ethnomusicologists.[2] A simple distinction between northern and southern style is that "in the north, war dance songs[3] are slower and longer; in the south, they are faster and shorter" (Powers 1980: 218). Jimmy Dick, a Cree singer in Toronto and lead singer of Toronto's Eagle Heart Singers, drew the following comparisons between northern- and southern-style singing:

> *Dick*: If they were northern style, there's a northern style that has a really high-pitched sound, and if they're low-pitched you know they're a southern group ... Because southern style is every song ... every round goes faster and faster... And then northern style it's usually the second ... after the second time, the third and fourth time, they would pick up speed.... Every second time in the northern style the guys will pick up to another speed level, and then their last level will be really fast, that will be the third level.
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> *Anna*: So then in northern Plains there are three levels of tempo, whereas in southern they just keep speeding up?
>
> *Dick*: Yeah. Every time. [4]

Singer Vydel Sands of London, Ontario's Eagle Flight Singers offered this description of southern style powwow singing, highlighting the geographic regions where it is primarily heard:

> Southern style is mainly referred to as ... the drum groups that belong to Oklahoma, Omaha, mainly around that area. They use a totally different style of voice, they go down really deep, like low-key opera almost [in the lower end of their vocal range]. And the beat's pretty much the same, but between ... like one verse in a powwow song includes the lead, half the body, another half of the body before you do the next lead. That's called one start and every powwow song, or one pushup[5] or what have you ... But for southern style, mainly between ... halfway through the verse in every song they do three beats [three hard taps on the table] Like that. It sounds pretty wicked, the really hard drummers, they'll get their sticks flying way up there, hard, most of their drums are pretty huge.... (Interview 10 March 2000)

As is evident in the name used to distinguish these two styles, geographic designations are often evoked in the categorization of powwow music. According to Orin Hatton, northern style originated *circa* 1920 in the area around North Dakota and has spread throughout the northern Plains and beyond (1986, p. 202). Harold Powers postulates that geographic boundaries delineate the areas in which each of these styles is most characteristic, such that "song styles that are northern Plains in origin tend to circulate on the northern Plains, while southern Plains styles tend to remain in their own geo-cultural area" (1980, p. 217). Ethnomusicologist Tara Browner offers the following overview of the geographic locales for these two styles of powwow music in the United States: "The northern style area includes Drums from the central and northern Great Plains, Canada, and the Great Lakes regions, while southern singing is synonymous with Oklahoma" (2000, p. 217). Drawing from the explanations offered to distinguish northern and southern style powwow singing, the following table outlines the main differences and geographic locations for these two styles:

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[2] See, for example: William K. Powers (1980 and 1990); James Howard (1983); Thomas Hatton (1986); M. Sam Cronk, Beverley Diamond and Fransizka von Rosen (1987); Lynn F. Huenemann (1992), and Thomas W. Kavanagh (1992).

[3] 'War Dance' is a generic term used by ethnomusicologists and powwow music practitioners to refer to music of this repertoire.

[4] Interview 16 July 1997.

[5] Vydel is referring to the standard form used in powwow music, which comprises an opening incipit by the lead singer, which is repeated and expanded by the rest of the group, leading to an internal cadence and the repetition of the song, without the incipit. This is the form of one song, which is repeated between two and eight times at a powwow. The term "pushup" refers to the number of song repetitions. Song form is explored in more detail later in this paper.

Table 1: Features of Northern and Southern Style Powwow Music

NORTHERN STYLE	SOUTHERN STYLE
⇒ high-pitched singing	⇒ low-pitched singing
⇒ songs speed up after 2nd, 3rd and 4th song repetition (three levels of speed)	⇒ songs speed up after every song repetition
⇒ honour beats occur at the end of the first phrase of the tail	⇒ honour beats occur mid-verse
⇒ found in Great Plains area in Canada and U.S., also Great Lakes region	⇒ primarily found in Oklahoma

The musical differences between northern- and southern-style singing are well known by musicians and ethnomusicologists; however, at the close of the twentieth century, the geographic boundaries for northern- and southern-style powwow singing have become more fluid. This was evident at various events in southwestern Ontario at which both northern and southern style powwow music was performed. Mark Lavallee, a singer with the group Snake Island Singers, and its precursor, Otonabee Singers, based in Sarnia and Peterborough, Ontario, commented on his group's ability to sing both northern and southern style, a feature of Otonabee Singers which brought his group special recognition by other Drums during the early- and mid-1990s:

> Otonabee, we always had our own unique style. And another thing about us was that we were able to sing all styles of song. A lot of drums couldn't do that. We could sing contemporary, we could sing original, we could sing southern, just at the drop of a hat (Interview 7 June 2000).

Snake Island's success in performing southern-style songs supports their reputation as a cutting-edge and versatile Drum. However, the majority of songs performed at powwows in this region of Canada are northern style, and as such, the remainder of this paper focuses solely on northern style powwow music.

Common Musical Features: Melodic Contour, Song Structure, Singing Style, Song Repetitions and Honour Beat Placement

Despite the number of northern style powwow songs performed on the modern powwow circuit, many features of this repertoire are common and define this genre. The singing style of a Drum group and melody are the least fixed features of powwow music; yet these are often the criteria that aurally define a Drum and distinguish songs. The overall melodic contour of powwow songs is very distinctive compared to other genres of music and is generally described as "terraced descending" (Parthun 1978, p. 24-25). Lynn Huenemann offers the following comparison of powwow music with European music, highlighting the distinctive melodic features of powwow songs:

> In contrast with the ascending contour of many European melodies, Plains Indian [or powwow] songs start high and generally descend phrase by phrase to the end of the song or chorus (1992: 145).

In his analysis of Plains war dance songs, William K. Powers suggests that singing style also distinguishes northern and southern style:

> The melody is characterized by descending, pentatonic scales. The pitch of the song is generally higher in the north than in the south. There is a variety of voice characteristics: in the north songs are sung falsetto at the beginning, dropping into raspy, throaty registers. In the south there is an absence of falsetto but an abundance of nasal, quavering tones. In the classic styles of the north one hears stressed vocables resembling falsetto shouts or yelps (1990: 32).

The descending melodic contour of powwow songs is a fixed feature of this genre of music and is closely tied with song structure. The lead singer's opening incipit is usually pitched at the uppermost register for the song. Although this melodic introduction usually has a descending motion to it, the entry of the rest of the group repeating this incipit immediately moves the pitch level back to its opening level, and the expanded melody continues its descent. The melodic extension of the opening phrase is also characterized by a gradual

melodic descent to the final note of the piece. A repeat of the verse, without the incipit, reiterates the overall descent of the melody. As the final cadence approaches, the lead singer repeats the song's incipit, creating an overlap between the end of the verse and the next song statement, while taking the melody back up to its opening high pitch. Many scholars of powwow music address this common structure of the songs,[6] offering similar descriptions of this song form. Thomas Vennum defines it as follows:

> ... the structure of the vast majority of powwow songs conforms to the so-called incomplete repetition form, a typical performance consists of a lead singer's introduction, followed by the group repeating this phrase, adding several more phrases in a gradual melodic descent and terminating usually on the lowest tone. The melody is then repeated without its first phrase, the whole of this constituting one statement of the melody. A song consists of an indeterminate number of such statements with a tail or coda used to conclude it (1989a, p. 19-20).

Although the song form described by Vennum is perceptible to listeners familiar with powwow music, the most useful guideline to powwow song form is that which is easily heard: a lead singer starts the song solo with a melodic incipit (A); this incipit is repeated and extended by the rest of the singers leading to a full internal cadence (A1); following the full cadence another phrase is sung by the entire group (B); ending with an overlap of the lead singer commencing his incipit again. As such, powwow music has more of a tripartite form of A (lead) A1 (seconder and group plus extended phrase) and B (the repeated material that follows after the full internal cadence).[7] These are the most audible features of the structure of powwow songs, allowing for an "aural" interpretation or analysis. The majority of powwow songs adhere to this 'incomplete repetition' form, in which there are internal repeats of sections between the solo entries of the lead singer. However, variation in the song and phrase lengths occurs. This structure of powwow music has also been interpreted for its spiritual significance:

> So the first part is the one where the leader sings. He comes on really high and he's alone and he starts off the song. That's the part where he calls on the Creator. That's what that part represents. He calls the Creator and says come and listen; we're gathered here the way you intended us. Then there's a second part when all the singers come in. And that one calls all the spirits of the animals and plants to come and listen—asks them to join in. And the third part calls on the men, people to come. Then the last part—the last part always goes...It sort of goes down like that. That's the part they say that blesses all of nature like—asks all of nature and gives thanks. I've just been told that by an elder (Geraldine Nadgewan cited in Diamond, Cronk and von Rosen 1994: 31).

Closely linked to the melodic contour and structure of powwow songs is the singing style of the performers, which is "characterized by a high, tense, heavily pulsated voice" (Cronk, Diamond and von Rosen 1987, p. 76). As Powers indicated above, northern style singing is often interpreted as falsetto singing.[8] However, this notion that powwow singers use falsetto in their singing has been examined by Thomas Vennum, a scholar of Ojibway music. He asserts that powwow musicians do not sing falsetto, but rather have learned to sing in the uppermost register of their voices:

> The Ojibway style of singing today represents the easternmost part of a large music culture area—the northern plains. It is closely related to a general indigenous musical style that extends through the

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[6] For example: Orin Thomas Hatton (1974: 127); Lynn Huenemann (1992: 145); and William K. Powers (1987a: 40; 1990: 17).

[7] This is also referenced by Lynn Huenemann: "the lead singer starts the song (melodies start high); the lead phrase is "seconded" (repeated) by the group; the main body of the song (the chorus) is sung through and repeated; the lead singer then "picks up" (starts) the song over again." (Huenemann 1992: 145).

[8] Thomas Hatton similarly also commented on the falsetto sound referring generally to the northern Plains style of singing: "Two methods of vocal production give rise to two types of falsetto singing quality. Each of these is most obvious at the outset of a song as both settle into a medium-high chest voice for the bulk of the song. In the first method, which allows singers to sing quite high, air is forced through a tightly constricted or pinched throat, producing a raspy and often piercing sound. The second method, which allows execution of a more difficult singing style, utilizes a fairly relaxed open throat that produces a warbling sound." (Hatton 1974: 128-129)

> Dakotas as far west as Montana and into Canada in western Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. This type of singing is characterized by melodies with wide ranges - frequently a twelfth, sometimes even two octaves—that are placed in the highest part of the singers' voices. This results in singing that is extremely loud, forceful, sometimes even shrill. Singing also includes vehement vocal attacks of tones, which produce almost a barking effect, as well as heavy pulsations of the vocal chords. Songs are *not* sung in falsetto, but through practice Plains musicians have simply raised the tessitura of their singing (1989b: 8).

Vennum comments elsewhere on singing style in relation to the effect of women singing with the male drumming groups. Women may join men in some powwow songs, standing around the circle created by the male drummers and singing an octave higher than the men at specific places in the song. Vennum comments on the singing style of women and its effects on the song:

> The tone quality of these women is nasal in the extreme (formerly they even pinched their noses), and they tend to sing slightly sharper than an octave above the men, perhaps as much as a quarter tone ...The women use the same vocables and articulations as the men, but the nasal, drawling quality of their singing precludes the strong rhythmic pulsations of the typical male vocal production (Vennum 1989a: 20).

Observations of powwows in southwestern Ontario and a sample of songs reveal some common features of the singing style of Drums. Southwestern Ontario Drums are all-male groups, although on occasion a group may be joined by female friends who know the song that is being sung. Singers do not sing falsetto, but do sing in the uppermost register of their voices, sometimes creating a strained sound as they reach for high notes. A common characteristic of the singing style is the vibrato and pulsation that the singers frequently incorporate, most easily detected on long-held notes. These are the two main vocal features that are most prominent in Drums, and they are related to one another. Vibrato is a wavering of the voice produced in the throat to ornament sung notes; pulsation is produced through the singers' breathing to create quavering tones (in some cases singers bob their heads to emphasize the pulsation).[9] When adding pulses to the singing, singers give a rhythmic quality to the held note, often reflecting the drum pattern of the song.

Another characteristic of singing style that emerged from these performances is the "strained" quality of some men's voices in particular sections of songs.[10] Since most songs begin at the upper end of the song's melodic range, which is also often at the extreme upper range of singers' voices, some voices sound very strained as they begin to sing the high phrases. In some cases, this sense of strained singing may be compounded as singers "attack" or accentuate the starting note of high musical phrases. Similarly, singers may "scoop" their voices to reach higher notes, in that they may slur the last note of one phrase and slide their voices up until they hit the note of the new, higher phrase. At the ends of phrases, singers often "drop off" or slur the final note to a third below. These features of powwow singing style are often a stylistic feature of a song, an individual singer or a drum group, and are characteristic of this genre of music. Another common vocal feature of this genre is the placement of whoops, shouts, yelps or ululations by singers to indicate their enthusiasm for the song and to show that they are enjoying themselves, often corresponding to the sound of "honour beats" or accents on the drum.

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[9] According to research by Frances Densmore on the Ojibway singing style in the early 1900s in Minnesota, vibrato has been and continues to be an important feature of Ojibway singing valued by the singers:

> One of the characteristics of Chippewa [Ojibway] singing observed during this study is that a vibrato, or wavering tone, is especially pleasing to the singers. This is difficult for them to acquire and is considered a sign of musical proficiency. The vibrato may seem to indicate an uncertain sense of tone, but the singer who uses it is ready to approve the song when sung with correct intonation (Densmore 1910: 4).

[10] These descriptions of singing style are impressions that I have as an informed listener. Many of the terms that I use to describe singing style borrow from others' vocabulary. Moreover, I also incorporate some terms that I have consistently used in my analysis to highlight certain musical features. By "strained," I mean that it sounds as though the men are pushing their voices to their uppermost pitch levels, producing a 'throaty" sound quality.

Other features common to northern style powwow music are the number of times a song is sung or repeated, [11] and the use and placement of honour beats. It is typical for songs to be performed four times for all competitions and social dances, such as Intertribals, and for some ceremonial events and dances, such as Eagle Feather Retrievals and Flag Songs. For some ceremonial Specials, such as Honour Songs, songs are repeated as many times as it takes for the honouring to be completed, and Intertribal Songs and other social songs may be repeated more than four times, depending on its purpose and timing within the powwow. Often the master of ceremonies announces the number of song repeats for a dance, referring to the repeats as "pushups."[12]

According to Jimmy Dick, songs are generally repeated between four and seven times to reflect the sacredness of these numbers to Native beliefs (Interview 25 July 1997). He summarized the symbolism of the number four by recounting the various guises in which this number is important, including the four cardinal directions, the four colours of humanity, and the four sacred plants. He also indicated that the number seven is significant: human life moves through periods of seven years (1-7 childhood, 7-14 youth, 14-21 teenage, 21-28 young adult, etc.), and the Ojibway have seven grandfathers and seven resting places. Culturally meaningful explanations such as this offered by Dick reflect the spiritual dimensions of powwows that are often unknown to audience members.

After the designated number of times a song is repeated, Drums may add a "tail" or extra repeat of the final section of a song in order to prolong it. "Tails" may be also added in competition songs as a way of "tricking" the dancers, or in social songs to lengthen the song's duration. Many songs also have honour beats, or a series of accents in the drumming, that are added at particular structural points in the songs. Honour beats usually number between four and seven strokes, again reflecting the sacredness of these numbers to Native spiritual beliefs and teachings. Powers comments on the use of honour beats, or what he refers to as "accented duple beats": "The accents, varying from four to seven beats, are largely determined by one drummer. The average number of accented beats is five in most northern Plains songs" (Powers 1990, p. 118). Honour beats are usually performed by one drummer, while the others maintain the regular drum pattern; honour beats are characterized by stressing every second beat of the drumming, and are often prefaced by a group of three quick accented strokes. Honour beats regularly occur in songs with an even drumbeat, including Intertribal Songs, and certain competition songs, and sometimes appear in songs with a long-short drumming pattern.

Honour beats are consistently placed, structurally, in the performance of northern style powwow music,[13] although some song repetitions do not incorporate honour beats. They typically occur in the repeated internal phrases of songs and, as stated above, are often accompanied by ululations from the singers. Honour beats serve both musical and spiritual functions. Musically, they cue the drummers to "come together" on their drumming, or to effect change in the dynamics or the tempo of the drumming. Spiritually, honour beats signal the dancers to turn towards the drum, raising their left hand in response, and often their dance steps reinforce the honour beat accents.[14] Through this gesture, the dancers honour the drummers and the Creator, while the drummers similarly honour the dancers, each other and the Creator (Interview with Bruce George, 3 August, 1995).

The musical features of powwow music, including the fixed melodic contour, song structure, singing style, number of song repetitions and placement of honour beats, are common to Northern-style powwow songs. However, the variation in some of these features distinguish one song from another; and in many cases, the musical choices that drum groups make about their performances serve to distinguish their "sound" from other drums who may share many of the same songs in their repertoires.

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[11] A number of authors comment on the number of song repetitions, including Powers (1987a: 40; 1990: 117), Huenemann (1992: 145), Whidden (1983b: 33), and Parthun (1978: 24).

[12] This is commonly known by powwow practitioners in the region of southwestern Ontario. Vydel Sands reiterated this common practice at powwows: "Four pushups [song repeats] would be a Contest Song regular, no matter what style, Fancy, Jingle, Grass, whatever." (10 March 2000)

[13] See Browner 2001 for a comparison of honour beat placement vis-à-vis southern and northern style (both northern Plains and Great Lakes region) powwow music.

[14] According to Jimmy Dick, the left hand is favoured over the right due to its proximity to the heart (Interview with Jimmy Dick, 16 July 1996).

Song and Dance Genres: Rhythmic Differentiation

The common features of powwow music may encourage a listener to believe that the songs are all alike, a confusion which is further compounded by the fact that a vocabulary to approach the analysis of this repertoire is not clearly established. For example, the names used in reference to different songs and dances are problematic, for they do not clearly indicate what the songs sound like, where they are found, or how they are used. While some songs and dances are named for their tribal origins, others are named for their original purpose or their new purposes. Furthermore, some terminology refers to songs, whereas other terms refer to the style of dance that may be danced to the songs. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of powwow music is its classification according to song genre and purpose, which is especially challenging due to the multi-sited history and local practices of contemporary powwows. Indeed, the variability in the terminology used for this repertoire is highlighted by the fact that the same song can be used to accompany different dances, which themselves are distinguished by style of dress and the sex of the dancer. In dance competitions, men and women do not dance together, and even within men's and women's dancing, there are different styles that are coordinated with their dance outfits. Men's dance categories include Traditional, Grass and Fancy, and women's categories are Traditional, Jingle Dress and Fancy. The following is a discussion of dance styles found at powwows and the variety of names used to reference them:

> The powwow features two kinds of dances which everyone does, plus a few others which are done by smaller numbers of participants. The two most prevalent dances are the so-called "war-dance" and the "round dances." War dancing is the kind of dance in which each individual develops a particular dancing style based upon his or her regalia, some elements from his or her vision quest, or something related to family history ... Both men and women recognize at least two kinds of war dances. For the men, there is the so-called "fancy dance" ... and the "straight" or traditional war dance ... Most of the women dance a style of war dance that would be called "traditional," both in outfit and in its dance step. Some of the younger teenage women, however, dance a fancy dance called the Shawl Dance, in which a woman wears a large shawl with long fringes that wave back and forth as she dances ... The other most common kind of dance is the round dance, sometimes called a friendship or unity dance, in which the dancers and the spectators arrange themselves in a huge circle side by side facing inward and dance to a pulsating rhythm by stepping to the side and then bringing the feet together again (Brown and Toelken 1988: 57-58).

These descriptions indicate the problem of terminology for powwow music and dance genres, for many terms are used to refer to the same type of dance step or the origin of a dance.[15] The challenge of classifying this genre of music is compounded by local terminology and regional differences in practices: "Some songs are known by nick-names (e.g., "Night and Day"), the group that sings it the most, the composer's name, or by the man in the group who likes it most" (Hatton 1974: 136). Contributing further to the complex picture is the fact that some songs can be used for different purposes, such as for an Intertribal Dance and for Grand Entry or for different dance categories in dance competitions. As such, the interchangeability of a song is primarily based on the appropriateness of its musical features to the style of dance the song accompanies. During an interview with Jimmy Dick, we listened to a Grand Entry Song on Eagle Heart Singers' album. I asked him what the song was about and if there was a title for the song. His response to these questions indicate the variable uses of the same song:

> Well this song is used as an Intertribal Song, Grass Dance Song, or a Grand Entry Song. There are three different ways of using it ... some people know it as a Grass Dance Song, other people use it as a Grand Entry Song (Interview July 25, 1997).

Singer Vydel Sands similarly acknowledged the interchangeability of songs:

> *Anna*: Could you sing an Intertribal Song for a contest?
> *Vydel*: Yep. It depends on ... there's a lot of songs out there that we call kind of like everything songs, as long as it has a straight beat it can be used for nything. Intertribals, Traditional, stuff like that, it's just

[15] In his examination of powwows in the Plains region, William Powers categorizes War Dance Songs according to the communities and events at which these dances are performed. (Powers 1990: 29-30)

learning the beats that go with it. If the song doesn't match the beat, though, it's not really good to try to make them match. If it's a quick song you want a quick beat. It's a matter of how the vocables are put, and where the ups and downs in the song go (Interview 10 March 2000).

Also of significance is the fact that that although songs are used interchangeably, many do have a known and explicit function. Composers of new powwow songs often inform people of the song's purpose and its designated dance when they teach it to others. Butch Elliott elaborated on the designated purposes of songs in an interview:

Anna: ...If there was a Grand Entry Song, for example, could that same song be used as an Intertribal?
Butch: Well, it shouldn't. There *are* Grand Entry Songs, there are songs for that. In learning how to do that we used to do that all the time, interchange songs. But now it's coming a little more strict. Like drums todaym if they call for a specific song, you should know the difference... I've seen that happen. I've seen where they've asked for a specific song, and the guys didn't know that particular song, or what they were calling for, so they'd sing an Intertribal song. And that was really ... people who would know the difference now of course would say, "Well, those guys sang an Intertribal song."...
Anna: ..How can you distinguish between an Intertribal and a Grand Entry Song in the way of the music?
Butch: Well, in some cases you can't. Like they both sound the same. But the singers would know or people would know that that's an Intertribal Dance or that's a Grand Entry Song.
Anna: So there's an association with the song?
Butch: Yeah (Interview 2 October 2000).

Another issue in variable uses of songs is that contemporary songs are less interchangeable than original songs due to the content and sentiment of the song text. This was explored in an interview between Tara Browner and Robert Rendon at a powwow in South Dakota:

Tara: What's the difference between, say, a song for a Fancy Dance contest and a song for a Grass Dance contest? Do you have certain songs that go to certain things?
Robert: Yeah, that's the whole purpose for words in straight songs. Certain word songs are only sung for certain things, depending on if it was a song made for women or if it was made for men. And then also the speed—the speediness of the song, compared to your traditional or fancy dance. Straight songs can pretty much be sung for anything, and that's just judged upon by the singers on whether or not they want to sing for that certain category, that certain song. There are some honor songs that are straight songs that are only to be song [sic] for honor songs. But rarely do you find a honor songs [sic] that are straight—most of them have words in 'em (Browner 2000: 229).

The variable uses of powwow songs to accompany different dances make song classification difficult. At powwows in southwestern Ontario, Drums select songs to accompany dances and Specials, the order of which is determined by the powwow committee and the master of ceremonies. The main consideration in choosing a song is that it is appropriate to the dance, has a suitable tempo, and a drumbeat that reflects the steps of the dance. However, the feature that is the most obvious indicator of the style of dance that will be performed is the drumming pattern that might be used. This has been reiterated in interviews with powwow musicians who said that the tempo and pattern of drumbeat distinguish powwow songs from one another, both sonically and functionally (in terms of what the song is used for at a powwow).[16]

There are three main patterns of drumming that distinguish the style of dance: 1) even, regular drumming (e.g. even beats with occasional accents or honour beats added); 2) regular drumming alternating with tremolo sections; and 3) a drum pattern characterized by a dotted rhythm or long-short pattern. The drum pattern is the most easily discernible feature of these songs and cues the dancers to the appropriate dance

[16] The vocabulary used to distinguish drumbeats is inconsistent amongst musicians, in fact, rarely do they refer verbally to drumbeat as they tend to illustrate by tapping out sounds instead. Since most musicians do not use a specific vocabulary in reference to the drumbeats for different songs, some terms are used rather loosely and may refer to different features of powwow music.

steps.[17] Drawing on field notes and observations made at powwows in southwestern Ontario, the following table delineates the types of dances performed in this region for each of the drum beat types. The songs are first categorized according to drumbeat (even, even with tremolo sections and dotted rhythm), then according to whether the song is used for ceremonial or non-ceremonial purposes. Ceremonies that take place are for honouring people or to fulfil rituals that may required, such as retrieving a fallen eagle feather. The non-ceremonial songs primarily serve three purposes: social dances (S), in which all people can dance; competitive dances (C), in which dancers in each dance category compete with one another for cash prizes; and/or exhibition (E), in which dancers from selected categories demonstrate their style of dance without being judged:

Table 2: Common Powwow Genres According to Drum Beat

even drum beat		even drum w/ tremolo sections[18]		dotted drum beat	
		Ruffle Shake Song (C, E) Sneak-Up Song (C, E) Trick Song (C, E)			
NON-CEREMONIAL[19]		CEREMONIAL		NON-CEREMONIAL	CEREMONIAL
Chicken Dance Song (S, C)		Grand Entry Song		Round Dance Song (S)	Healing Dance
Contest Dance Song (C)[20]		Flag Song		Side Step Song (S, C)	
Crow Hop Song (S, C)		Healing Song		Two Step Song (S)	
Exhibition Dance Song (E)		Honour Dance Song			
Fancy Dance Song (C)		Retreating Song			
Grass Dance Song (C)		Retrieval Song			
Hoop Dance Song (E)		Veterans' Song			
Intertribal Dance Song (S)		Victory Dance Song			
Jingle Dress Dance Song (C)					
Tiny Tots Song (E)					
Traditional Dance Song (C)					
Intertribal Dance Song (S)					
Jingle Dress Dance Song (C)					
Tiny Tots Song (E)					
Traditional Dance Song (C)					

With the exception of the Hoop Dance,[21] the songs listed under the "even drumbeat" category accompany dances in which the dancers move independently, circling around the dance area in a clockwise

[17] In his generalized overview of Native American powwows David Whitehorse includes a section entitled "Tempo and Cadence." Whitehorse indicates that all powwow songs have a two-beat pattern, with songs distinguished from one another according to the accentuation patterns, or lack thereof, of the drum. For example, he suggests that War Dances, which are used for Grass Dances, Fancy Dances, Contest Songs and Sneak-ups, have a two-beat pattern in which the first of the two even beats are accented. Conversely, for the social dances, such as Forty-Nine songs, the second of the two even beats is accented; and for Honour Songs and related "ceremonial" or "processional" type of songs, both beats are struck evenly with no accents (1988: 26-27). In this description, Whitehorse does not account for the long-short drum pattern that accompanies many dances, including Side Steps, Two Steps, Round Dances and some Honour Songs. This template for drumbeats is also used by Black Bear and Theisz in their study of Lakota powwow songs, who similarly reference all songs with a 1-2 pattern (1976: 14-15).

[18] Another dance that could be included in this category is the Snake Dance. However, this is not a standard dance at powwows in southwestern Ontario.

[19] Not listed here are the Smoke Dances, which are Haudenoshaunee social dances that have recently been introduced into some powwow programs in southwestern Ontario. It is very unique in these events as the music is not created by the powwow drum and a group of singers, but by an Iroquois water drum and one singer. Smoke Dance Songs have a much quicker drum beat than most powwow music and a singing style that is not as high-pitched as powwow music. Introduced in the late nineties as a social dance, powwow at Six Nations has included a Smoke Dance competition in recent years, while other powwows in southwestern Ontario are also incorporating Smoke Dances as social dances.

[20] At some powwows the master of ceremonies used the specific category of dance in reference to the song title (e.g. "Men's Traditional Song"), whereas others indicated the dance category and simply asked for a Contest Song.

direction, their feet stepping in time with the drum. Musically these songs are very similar to each other; the only distinction is the tempo of the drumbeat of these songs, which vary from slow to fast according to dance category. Competition songs are generally categorized according to three basic song tempi: slow (often used for Traditional Dance competitions) medium (for Jingle and Grass Dance competitions), and fast (for Fancy Dance competitions). Powwow musician Vydel Sands describes these tempi:

> I was telling you about beats earlier... the Fancy dancers and maybe the Jingle Dress dancers, they require a faster beat [tapping quickly]. And if you start tapping your beat like that [tapping slower], some of them will be scattered, they won't want to dance, they'll want another Drum that knows what they're doing so you got to know what you're doing as far as that goes. And it's the same with Traditional and Grass, a lot of Traditional and Grass it's just a nice straight beat, something they can cruise along to. If you do it way too fast, that's not a style that they're accustomed to, that's more for Fancy... Men's Fancy, you get really fast songs for [tapping] their second songs, because you're trying to make those two bustles that they wear on the back, and all their colour, you want to see them spin around and fly. And with the Women's Fancy they imitate the butterfly. So they'll try... if you sing a quick one for them, it's up to them how they're going to use their gracefulness. And then you got the Jingle [tapping slower], which is a basic... you want a song fast enough that's going to make those cones on their dress sound nice and full... You don't want it fast, because you won't hear that 'shuh, shuh, shuh.' You can't have a fast beat for that one. I'd say a medium-fast there. Traditional is more of a, get a good bouncy beat going, because they've got a lot of stuff to show off as well. And they got to get all their moves incorporated with their style of dance, too. And the Ladies Traditional is more of a [tapping] softer beat. It's not a slow, slow one, it's... you keep theirs slow because they don't really require much for dancing, it's more for style of their outfit. They get all their fringes moving... (Interview 10 March 2000)

As indicated by Vydel, the primary feature that distinguishes one song from another in this category for the dancers is the tempo of the song.

The next broad category of music performed at powwows in southwestern Ontario is characterized by an alternation between regular, even drumming sections and sections of tremolo. During the tremolo sections, the singers continue to sing the song, but strike the drum randomly, with various accents added by individual drummers. The types of dancing accompanying these songs reflect the changes in drum pattern. During the even drumming sections, the dancers move clockwise around the dance area to the beat of the drum. During the tremolo sections, however, the dancers make gestures that imitate the hunt or war exploits (during a Sneak-Up Song), demonstrate their physical prowess by executing acrobatic movements and jumps (Ruffle Shake Song), or test their listening skills by attempting to predict when the drum will change its drum pattern or stop altogether (Trick Song).

The final category of drumbeat that is used to delineate dance type is that in which the drumbeat has a long-short. The accompanying dancing is reflective of the drum pattern, and is either performed individually facing the centre of the dance area (Women's Side Step), for social dances such as the Two Step (couples dance together, often linking their arms and moving clockwise around the dance area with their right shoulders facing the centre of the dance area) or a Round Dance, in which all the dancers join hands in the dance area, facing the centre of the dance circle, and they step to their left, around the dance area. The long-short drumming pattern of these dances is very distinct and, as with the songs in the other rhythm categories, is recognized to accompany specific dances.

The musical features of powwow music, including the fixed drumming patterns and accompanying dance, the fixed melodic contour, song structure, singing style, number of song repetitions and placement of honour beats are common to northern style powwow songs. However, the variation in some of these features distinguish one song from another; and in many cases, the musical choices that drum groups make about their performances serve to distinguish their "sound" from other drum groups that may share many of the same songs in their repertoires. Also of importance is the fact that for some of these musical features, there are cultural meanings or explanations that highlight symbolism and cultural meanings that are not explicit to

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[21] The hoop dance is an exhibition of one or two dancers, who dance on the spot to the drum beat while using many hoops (usually between nine and twenty-one) to create forms and images while they dance.

this repertoire. These cultural meanings add an extra dimension to the powwow repertoire, which for many powwow participants serve as a symbol or embodiment of their spiritual beliefs. This is also evident in the nature of the texts that are sung to powwow songs, as explored below.

"Original" and "Contemporary" Songs: Texts and Vocables

Texts used in powwow music can have a literal or symbolic meaning. Similar to the classification of songs as either northern or southern style, another important factor that differentiates powwow songs is whether they have text or vocables.[22] Powwow practitioners in southwestern Ontario classify songs according to the nature of the "words" in their music, using the labels "Original" for songs that make exclusive use of vocables, and "Contemporary" for songs that incorporate words in a Native language or English. This was explained in an interview with Jimmy Dick:

> *Anna*: And then what's the difference between contemporary and traditional powwow music?
> *Jimmy*: Contemporary music is all word songs. That's how it is categorized. And traditional music is just straight melody.
> *Anna*: Like vocables?
> *Jimmy:* Vocables, yes.
> *Anna*: And with contemporary they use words...and vocables?
> *Jimmy*: Yeah, words, more words than vocables.
> *Anna*: But they might include vocables at the ends of phrases?
> *Jimmy*: Yep, yep, to finish off a song (Interview, 14 April 2000).

These labels are used by powwow musicians to classify their songs and to describe a particular Drum's preferred repertoire, in addition to their classification as northern or southern. The labels used to distinguish these two categories of music reflect the relatively recent phenomenon of singing contemporary songs by powwow groups.[23] Many musicians indicated the relatively recent trend of singing texted powwow songs. For example, Mark Lavallee offered the following explanation of the origins of contemporary songs, indicating that these songs were first introduced on the powwow circuit in the mid-1980s:

> You wouldn't think that word songs would be called contemporary, but it is. And the reason being is that all those word songs were pretty well lost, for many, many years. And the only way that one nation could sing another nation's song, is by the melody of the song, they don't know the language. So that's where they got the chanting from, that's where that came from. And there was chanting right up until about 15 years ago. You know, all of a sudden there was a revitalization of all these word songs. And then they probably thought there's these new songs coming out, everybody's making these new songs with words in them, so they called it contemporary (Interview 7 June 2000).

Similarly, Jimmy Dick specifically pin-pointed the year that he first heard contemporary powwow songs, as well as the groups that he first heard performing this new song style:

> *Anna*: And how contemporary is contemporary. Like when did that start? Like word songs?
> *Jimmy*: I think it was 1988, I think...About 1988.
> *Anna*: And did that start in the Plains as well?
> *Jimmy*: Yes, yep.
> *Anna*: Do you have any idea what started that or what made people start doing that?

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[22] Some powwow musicians that I interviewed used the labels "Original," "Traditional," and "'Straight" interchangeably, although the distinction between the terms original and contemporary were consistent in reference to songs vis-à-vis their texts.

[23] Musicians continue to compose songs in both categories and to revitalize songs from the past:
> *Anna*: And if you're singing in original style, are those older songs then, or can they be new songs as well?
> *Mark*: They can be new songs as well. But a lot of them are older songs. A lot of them are... or some songs that were sung are maybe over a hundred years old. And they have got lost but have been found. And we just revitalized [some old songs] on the powwow circuit around here. But at the same time there are new songs that we've adopted too." (Mark Lavallee, 7 June 2000)

Jimmy: I think this group that played at a powwow they started to learn more of those word songs, you know?

Anna: Did they make them up?

Jimmy: I think people, the old people, started to teach them, telling them about songs, you know? And also as they go along they make up their own. And that is how it just kind of, everyone picked it up after a while.

Anna: Is it a particular group that started it that you know of?

Jimmy: Um ... I think it's mostly the Plains people, like from Saskatchewan, Alberta, around there. Those guys were the ones. Because I know the first time I heard was Thunder Child Singers, they sing in their own language, and Red Bull Singers in 1988 (Interview 14 April 2000).

As a relatively new phenomenon in powwow music, the distinction between texted and non-texted, or contemporary and original songs is one way in which Drums differentiate each other and form a sonic identity for themselves. For example, Eagle Flight Singers, a well-known northern-style powwow group, exclusively sings original style songs, and Snake Island Singers, another northern-style group from Ontario, performs both contemporary and original style songs depending on the performance context. In each of my interviews with musicians, it was clear that the distinction between original and contemporary songs is very important in defining a Drum's overall musical style, repertoire and identity. However, Drums may perform songs from both classifications for special events or at powwows in which they are not competing.[24]

The performance of texted music may raise various issues around language, particularly in terms of group members' fluency with the language of the contemporary songs they perform.[25] Although some people are fluent in their Native language, many more are seeking instruction to gain fluency and to reclaim their heritage.[26] According to Jimmy Dick, many people are drawn to the contemporary song repertoire due to the increased interest by First Nations people in their traditional language (Interview 14 April 2000); in some cases, singing these songs facilitates language learning. However, various challenges are posed for the members of Drums that perform contemporary songs that incorporate a language or dialect different from their own. Similar to the cultural expectations and protocol involved in borrowing songs, musicians must also take care to correctly enunciate the words of a contemporary song and they should also understand the meaning of the song. Jimmy Dick explains:

Anna: So if someone didn't know the language it would be difficult for them to sing a contemporary song?

Jimmy: Um hmm. Because if you don't know how to speak your language too, that's always a setback too. Because you can't really be able to sing these songs, because they're fast, too, the words are really connected close together with the songs. So you have to ... and then that's how you learn the language too. 'Cause if you have really good listening skills and you practice the songs over and over and you listen, then you ask somebody "Hey, what does that mean?" And then they'll tell you. "Oh, okay."

Anna: So would a whole drum group then need to know what that song, what those words mean?

Jimmy: Um hmm. That's like I was saying too, that's what they got to understand too, that song, what it's about, where it had come from. 'Cause someone will come and ask you, right, and it's better to know than to not know about it, 'cause you'll feel like a fool if you don't. You sing that nice song and then...

Anna: ...You don't know what it means. What if somebody sang the song with words and they were kind of pronouncing them wrong, or saying the words wrong, would that be bad?

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[24] "We strictly stay to the original style, which is chanting. And we don't go to word songs, which is called contemporary now.... We do sing contemporary songs, but not when we go to competition" (Interview with Mark Lavallee, 7 June 2000).

[25] This is also suggested by Thomas Vennum, who indicates that "... the dwindling number of speakers of the Ojibway language has led to a declining use of meaningful song text therein; thus an increasing number of songs are performed only to vocables." (1989b: 1-2). This was written around the time that contemporary songs were introduced at powwows in the region of southwestern Ontario and therefore may not reflect the trend of incorporating text in powwow songs.

[26] This is evident in the number of language instruction programs offered at various Native support institutions in Toronto, often in conjunction with the Toronto Board of Education. For example, at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto and the Native Women's Resource Centre, classes are offered in Ojibway, Cree, and Oneida, at introductory and intermediate levels.

Jimmy: Well, I think that would be corrected, you know. I think....
Anna: They would be told, "Say it right"?
Jimmy: Yep, yeah. They'll be reminded, "This is how that song goes." ... It's important to know the pronunciation (Interview 14 April 2000).

Vydel Sands similarly commented on the importance of knowing what the text in a contemporary song means:

> We heard a group that was trying to sing a contemporary song with the words and all that. They might know how to say those words, but [someone may] go up to them and say, "What did you just say there?"... So it's kind of important, if you're going to be doing that, that you know what that song means, not just how the words go. A lot of the word songs are associated ... if you were to sing in English we'd say things like, "All the beautiful dancers come enjoy my music." So they're saying that in their own language, things like that (Interview 10 March 2000).

The introduction of contemporary songs to the repertoire of powwow music is an interesting phenomenon for a variety of reasons: i) it suggests that the revitalization and renaissance of Native culture and language has impacted on song composition and performance; and ii) it indicates that some Drums are interested in creating music that is based on their own language instead of relying on vocables and the languages of other Drums. Furthermore, at least among the Ojibway, the performance of texted songs suggests a return to earlier social music practices. Writing in 1978, ethnomusicologist Paul Parthun found that by the 1970s, texted war dance songs were not performed in the same region that they had been in the early 1910s. Comparing his own research findings with that of Frances Densmore, Parthun summarized his conclusions:

> All of Densmore's war dance songs had partial Ojibwe text. Rarely is a song texted throughout, and we must assume that vocables were used to occupy the remainder of musical time. She did not, however, consider vocables to be important, and little detailed information is found concerning the types of uses. It is evident from her transcriptions that vocables were always used in song endings, since the endings are never understood ... The kinds of vocables used in war dance songs do not seem to have changed much since 1900, but the number has diminished ... It is important to add that the current war dance songs do not have text (Parthun 1978: 22-23).

Parthun's analysis suggests that historically, the Ojibway had war dance songs that incorporated both text and vocables, but through the course of the twentieth century, texted songs lost favour with the Ojibway, who instead preferred songs with vocables. Since the publication of Parthun's findings, however, there has clearly been a return to texted songs, in the form of contemporary powwow songs.

The classification of powwow songs as original or contemporary is important for a variety of reasons, including the identity of the Drum and the issues around performing songs with a Native text: according to musicians, Drums must take care when performing contemporary songs due to their textual meanings. Musicians have acknowledged that original songs are easier to learn because they do not have to concern themselves with the proper enunciation or meaning of Native texts. However, original songs and the use of vocables generally raise various issues around the meanings of vocables historically, their cultural significance and ubiquity in cultures around the world.[27]

Summary and Conclusion

Clearly, the description and classification of powwow songs is complex. Although there are some "fixed" features or common characteristics (singing style, song form, drumming patterns, etc.), the interchangeability of songs to accompany different dances, and the variety of possible names used to refer to a single song may make it difficult to make sense of this large repertoire. The following table summarizes the features that are most evident in northern style powwow songs and which can serve as an approach to

[27] See William K. Powers, 1987b. "The Vocable: An Evolutionary Perspective," *Beyond the Vision: Essays on American Indian Culture.* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press): 7-36.

classifying powwow music in this region (and which could be used as a template for powwow music more generally:

"Fixed" Features
Melody: Descending contour to phrases ("terraced descending")
Song Form: AA1B ("incomplete repetition")
Singing Style: High tessitura, "strained," vocal pulsations
Location/style
Northern or southern
Song types
Original (vocables) or Contemporary (texted)
Drumming patterns
Even beats, even beats alternating with tremolo or long-short

Despite these generalizations about powwow music, it must be remembered that like most genres of contemporary music, this repertoire is dynamic and changing, with new songs introduced with each summer's powwow circuit and through the increasing number of commercial recordings. Furthermore, as a "snapshot" of powwow song features as heard in performances in limited geographic regions, this article serves as a point of departure for additional analyses of this vast repertoire.

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