

**Whidden, Lynn. *Essential Song: Three Decades of Northern Cree Music*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007. 174 pp. 18 photos/figures including nine musical transcriptions. Includes a CD with 52 tracks. ISBN: 978-0-88920-459-1**

\*Since the 1970s Lynn Whidden, a professor at Brandon University, has been learning from Cree informants in northern Quebec and more recently in Manitoba. In this book, she provides documentation and context of their changes in music-making from the ancient hunting songs and other traditional musical expressions through to contemporary practices. The impact of contact with Europeans and Euro-Americans resulted in the adaptation of fiddle music and hymns. More recently, country music, and to a certain extent the pan-Indian powwow songs, have become predominant in northern Cree communities.

The content of the book is beautifully framed by an initial description of how Whidden dealt with native students over the past three decades in the classroom and then an “Afterword.” Because the native students’ background was so far removed from non-aboriginal students, and English was their second language, Whidden had to teach these students very differently in the 1970s and 1980s as they studied to qualify for a teaching degree. By the 1990s, her students no longer generally had Cree as their first language, and their conduct was similar to their non-native colleagues. In addition, students in the 1990s generally wanted to find out more about their musical heritage. That theme is echoed in the “Afterword” written by Stan

Loutitt, who himself is trying to learn more about his people’s heritage including their language, traditions, and music.

As Loutitt himself has discovered, the old hunting songs are no longer being used because the life style of the Cree has changed so dramatically. Whidden’s principal informants were six Cree-speaking hunters in Chisasibi, Quebec, in 1982 and 1984. In all, she recorded 86 hunting songs and old hymns, three of which were repetitions of songs recorded in 1982. The biographical profile for each of the main informants, William Jack, George Pepabano, Robert Potts, Abraham Martinhunter, Samson Lameboy, and Joseph Rupert, provides a summary of their repertoire and singing styles.

Whidden has designed the book to follow the song genres chronologically. Beginning first with the hunting songs that have been used for hundreds of years to facilitate their sub-arctic economy of subsistence hunting, Whidden then examines hymns and fiddle music adapted after European contact. More recently absorbed are Gospel songs, country music, and music associated with the pan-Indian powwow.

In each case, Whidden pays close attention to the context of the repertoire being discussed and how the Crees made/make each of these genres a part of their daily existence. This includes discussion of performance practice. Even if most of these genres are vocal in nature, the Cree singers do not use the

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same type of vocal production. The songs on the accompanying CD with 52 tracks illustrate these differences. She even backs up her personal assessment and description of the timbral difference used in a hunting song as compared to a hymn by giving the signal analyzer reading of harmonics. For the hunting song, there were six harmonics on the opening note, while the hymn opened with just two harmonics (154).

Along with the detailed descriptions of the repertoire giving context, text, and translation into English, this study is extremely valuable for considering each musical manifestation within Cree existence. The details of the relationship of the hunter with the bird, animal, or fish, through the particular song being used, underlines how different the view of the Cree person is from a member of the Canadian dominant society.

Because of the meticulous care given to observation and description, I was surprised to find some other aspects glossed over. For example, Whidden uses the term Sun Dance, a non-native appellation, rather than the more accurately translated Thirst Dance, which is the term used by Plains Cree. Another area of concern was the terminology used to refer to various First Nation groups. Although there is one footnote to refer to the different dialects of Cree (153), Whidden offers no explanation as to why certain monikers were chosen or that Native tribe designation continues to undergo revision. With regard to the East Cree located around James Bay, they now prefer the designation Eeyou Cree. This term is not used once in the book, but when one accesses the Chisasabi website, the term “Eeyou” appears prominently.

Both Ojibwe and Ojibwa appear to be used interchangeably for what is the same cultural group. The index does point out that Chippewa is similar to Ojibwe. The Ojibwe now generally prefer to be referred to as Anishinaabe. The latter term never appears in Whidden’s book, although “Anishnabe” occurs without any explanation of its meaning. In fact, Anishnabe is the term now used by Algonquin to refer to their language. It seems that Whidden has used “Algonquin” to refer to the specific cultural group and “Algonquian” to refer to the linguistic family of which the Cree dialects are a part.

On page 78, I was taken aback to read the statement that Sankey had introduced hymn singing during worship services. Hymns have been part of the Christian church tradition for hundreds of years. In fact, reference is often made to Ephesians 5:19 as a New Testament sanction of hymn singing in worship. Granted, there have been periods when certain divisions of the church would only allow psalm singing to be done during the actual services; however, Luther strongly stressed the need to sing hymns during the church service, and that was long before Sankey.

Also, this reader would have appreciated an explanation of how the author differentiates between a hymn and a Gospel song. If Whidden used one of the commonly accepted distinctions, it would consist of the following: a hymn would be musically more complicated but rhythmically simple with a theologically charged text; a Gospel song would be musically simple, but possibly more rhythmically complex, textually simple with much emphasis on the individual’s personal faith rather than God. On that basis, it would be possible to make even a stronger case for

the popularity of the Gospel song among the Cree, as it would be closer to the values that Whidden pointed out in their hunting songs.

Similarly, I was disappointed not to have a bit more background on the powwow and the 49er genre. Today the latter term can be used for an exotic dance or group dancing that is far removed from the 49er tradition associated with the social dancing after the powwow. Even though its origins are obscure, some of the theories in an endnote of its appearance would have been helpful for the reader. In addition, I was shocked to find no reference to the research of Tara Browner. Neither her book, the most comprehensive and detailed source available on the powwow, nor her earlier essay appear in the Bibliography.

Whidden does not seem to recognize the influences of the Wild West Shows or the rodeo on the development of the native powwow. On page 105, she even attributes the origin of judging and prizes found in many contemporary powwows to agricultural fairs. The Plains area, where she does say the powwow originated, was not known originally for its agriculture. Its economic basis, after the bison disappeared, was cattle herding and the long trek northwards to the railway lines. Many native cowboys took part in that trek and were ready to show off their skills (see Keillor 2002). Later, in more organized situations, prizes with money became the norm. Since dancing often occurred at these rodeo events, prize money also began to appear for the specific dances that are now a part of the contemporary powwow.

*Visions of Sound* does appear in the bibliography, but I was surprised that References Cited:

Whidden did not use its reference on page 104 to support her conviction, one that I support, of an indigenous Cree fiddle prior to European contact. I was somewhat mystified by the decision to have two sections for the bibliography, one listed as sources and the other as bibliography. It seems that the first one is for resources actually referred to in the text, but “Preston 1975” appears in the text but not in the “sources.”

In spite of these quibbles, I want to underline that this is a particularly valuable document on northern Cree music. Prior to its appearance, we had only limited resources to understand the music of the subarctic Cree, which is so different from that of the Plains Cree. Chief among these resources is the East Cree language website. It has under “Stories and other oral material” some 59 song recordings, some of which are recorded by Whidden, but there are others including Shaking Tent songs and explanations. *Essential Song* makes those aural documents even more informative by providing the contextual information for their use and creation. Whidden does include a transcription of a fiddle tune in *Essential Song*, but does not include any of the recordings that she made of fiddle music on the CD. It is now possible to access interviews with Eeyou Cree fiddlers and watch videos of their fiddling and the accompanying dances, at the Eeyou segment of the Native Dance website. All libraries dealing with musical expressions and Native Studies should have this book in their collection.

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