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Saving Native American Music Starts Here

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Saving Native American Music Starts Here

By Charles Flowers

HOLLYWOOD -- Question: The state of Native American music is A) Better than it's ever been, or B) In need of better production, marketing and distribution?

The answer is C: Both.

With Native American music a category for its first GRAMMY Award later this month in Los Angeles, a half-dozen prominent GRAMMY members met under a fig tree at the Okalee Museum last month and discussed the state of the art.

The news was good - and bad.

Panelists included the prolific flautist R. Carlos Nakai, who has produced 37 albums in his career after trading beadwork for Comanche flutes at the Sante Fe Market; Latin flute sensation Nestor Torres who jammed with Miccosukee brother act Tiger Tiger, SOAR producer Tom Bee, who brought Chief Jim Billie to compact disc, and Ellen Bello, who started the Native American Music Awards less than five years ago, and gave one to Chief Billie in 1999.

Their perspectives were varied, but passionately delivered. The performances, which also included Sonny Nevaquaya, and the fabulous Seminole youth dancers, weren't bad, either.

Nakai offered this perspective on the audience for Native American music:

"They've still learning what our music is all about," he said. "Here we are in the 21st Century, and we're going to see who gets the first traditional GRAMMY award."

Bee, who wore label of "renegade" with pride, summed up the general opinion of the GRAMMY category for "Best Native American Music Album."

"It's a good day for Native American Music," Bee said. "But we've got to lobby for another category." Panelists said the judges generally excluded all but the most traditional performers. Indians like Chief Billie and Tiger Tiger who use contemporary instruments and forms to express themselves were all but left out.

The five finalists include four performers who might be considered traditional - pow-wow singers and others singing in their Native tongues - and Joanne Shenandoah, an Oneida songstress who has performed with her sister at the Broward Mall - singing songs in English for a decidedly non-Native crowd. Her album is called "Peacemaker's Journey."

Not surprisingly, Shenandoah is considered the early favorite for the award.

But, for the record, the other four are: the Black Lodge Singers for "Tribute to the Elders," Joseph Fire Crow for "Cheyenne Nation," Lakota Thunder for "Veterans Songs," and various artists for "Gathering of Nations Pow Wow." Bee produced this last entry.

Bee, a veteran of Motown productions in the 1970s, said he wanted his SOAR label, based in Albuquerque, N.M. to be a "little Motown." With sales of less than 1 percent of the estimated \$45 billion world music market, Native American music is a long way from being a dominant genre. But, with annual sales approaching \$500 million, according to Bee, it is being heard.

"We haven't even begun to scratch the surface," Bee said.

Torres offered this advice to Lee Tiger, who asked how Native American musicians in South Florida, could "get our Latin friends to get the door open a little farther."

"There is tremendous power in your music," Torres answered. "There is tremendous power in your very presence."

One complaint voiced by several panelists was the lack of unity among Native American tribes themselves, to promote their own artists and music. Bello, a non-Native based in New York, said that only a handful of tribes, including the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe of Connecticut and the Sandia Pueblo of New Mexico, supported the Native American Music Association.

She agreed with suggestions that tribes might want to form a foundation to help further all Native American musical forms - from hip-hop to traditional.

"We make a sincere effort not to be political," Bello said.

The GRAMMYS will be broadcast live on CBS-TV on Feb. 21.

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