



The Redmen Blues Band: Cecil Gray (lt), Terry Tsoigh (ctr) and Patrick Tointigh (rt).  
Photos by Nancy Smith, Lightninghorse Photography

# THE EMERGENCE OF NATIVE AMERICAN BLUES

By Murphy Platero

Some years ago, I saw a picture of the infamous and influential bluesman Stevie Ray Vaughan in a magazine, and he was not wearing his usual hat, but a colorful Native American headdress. He wasn't Native, but the only reason I could figure why he had changed his look was to make a statement and honor a People he admired, just like how he wore Indigenous jewelry when he came on the scene. I believe he was making a prophetic statement among those who loved and followed this amazing music called blues: look out, it's coming and it's going to be spectacular – Native American blues. And Stevie was right – he foretold the coming like John the Baptist making the way in the wilderness for the coming of a new and wonderful message and sound. Today, we see this prophecy coming to the forefront of blues music through the voices of many Native American artists.

As musicians, most of us hear something that catches our ear or our curiosity. At first, it's just a melody, lyric, a note or a riff, and from down within, we are drawn to it. Each of us has our story, and though they differ from one another, one thing is always true: we make a choice, a decision, a commitment, and we start this journey.

Music has always been a huge part of Native American culture. Through the changes from one generation to the next, from the very beginning of the first wave of modern music, each generation of Indian country was there – drawn to the sound. In most tribes in North America, each generation is taught by the elders that we have a song and a prayer for everything that surrounds us, for everything has life and is sacred.

One of the genres blasted through the radios on the reservations in the 1950s, '60s and '70s was the blues. With its

lush melody and tender lyrical sound, slow soothing guitar solos to explosive riffs, words of hardship, pain and tears – the blues imparts a story that many Native Americans know all too well. Those who were told that everything has a song, now took the blues and made it their own.

But it wasn't new – it's been there all along – the blues was a part of Indian country. I think it's worth mentioning that when we look deep under the surface to the actual creation of the blues – the Delta blues in particular – one name rises to the top: the "Father of the Delta Blues," Charlie Patton. This Black man from the Delta was half Native American, born on a plantation to his mother who was a full-blooded Choctaw, which just goes to show we've been there from the beginning.

One of the first Native bands to emerge on the blues scene came from the plains of South Dakota. A young Lakota family formed the band Indigenous, with the guidance of their father, Greg Zepher, Sr., a well-known spiritual advisor, spokesperson for the International Indian Treaty Council and accomplished musician in the band The Vanishing Americans. Indigenous debuted in the mid-1990s and became known by the blues community within a matter of years. Featuring older brother Mato Nanji on vocals and guitar, sister Wanbdi on drums, brother Pte on bass guitar and cousin Horse on bongos, Indigenous brought a tremendous pride to the Native community.

Let me pause here to tell you how I fit into all this. From the Eastern Agency of Navajo Nation, I started a family band in 2004, The Plateros, and we toured the U.S., performing at some of the most amazing venues. Just a year later in 2005, we performed at the largest Pow Wow in the world, The Gathering of Nations. As I handled the vocals and bass guitar, and his cousin



Martha Redbone. Photo by Craig Bailey, Perspective Photo

kept beat on drums, my 12-year-old son Levi amazed the audience on lead guitar as he slid across the stage, shredding the blues.

The band evolved into Levi and the Plateros, consisting of Levi on guitar, cousins Douglas Platero on drums and Bronson Begay on bass guitar. In 2012, they joined with Indigenous for The Kinship Tour, and have continued forward screaming notes that shatter across every stage they hit, joining Indigenous on their national tours off and on, to date. Recently, Levi Platero has launched his career as a solo artist.

It's been amazing to have the privilege of playing music across the country. I've shared stages with gifted musicians, such as Grammy and Native American Music Award (NAMA) winners Bill Miller (Mohican) and Micki Free (Comanche/Cherokee), among so many others. From coast to coast, Native artists and bands are emerging onto the blues scene in a big way, telling their unique stories, changing preconceptions and making their mark in blues history.

The first national tour The Plateros were asked to be a part of was The Native Music Rock Tour, sponsored by the Seminole tribe of Florida and International Hard Rock Cafe, where I first met Martha Redbone. I was so taken by her voice that flowed with a strong conviction, yet so smoothly. Born in Kentucky of Cherokee, Choctaw and African-American descent, she rose to the calling with her style of R&B, Appalachian folk and a solid flare of blues under the surface. This award-winning songstress gave us a closer look into ourselves with her powerful lyrics of love and conviction with her husband, pianist Aaron Whitby.

One year, we were invited to a Native American music festival in downtown Fort Collins, CO, where we had the privilege of meeting an amazing blues solo acoustic guitarist

from the Crow Nation. Cary Morin, a soulful blues musician, caught my ear with his beautiful, simple presentation and powerful voice. He has toured parts of Europe and the U.S., and his scope of music makes the statement that Natives sure can sing the Delta blues.

In California, you'll encounter a great talent from the La Jolla Indian Reservation in San Diego, CA: Tracy Lee Nelson. With his hard-hitting perspective of the blues on an Indian reservation, Tracey's unique voice, original lyrics and blues guitar work come straight from his heart – writing, singing and performing songs that should have been spoken of long ago. In 2018, he won a NAMA for Best Blues Recording for *Blues Loving Man*. A bit north in Los Angeles clubs, you will find the Hopi Blues Band, a collection of eclectic musicians from around the country who have joined forces with LA HOPI, singing the blues on heartache, the destruction of the earth, the sorrows of colonization and bringing light to sustaining Hopiland.

Over in Arizona, the Cody Blackbird Band (Cherokee/Dakota) fuses traditional Native American flute music with blues, rock and a jam-band sensibility. In 2017, they won a NAMA for Group of the Year.

I've also come across Oklahoma bands including Blues Nation; Cecil Gray Native Blues – who was inducted into the Oklahoma Blues Hall of Fame in 2015, nominated six times for a NAMA and won a NAMA in 2004 for Best Blues/Jazz Recording; and The Redmen Blues Band, a three-man band of Oklahoma Blues Hall of Fame artists, consisting of Terry Tsoitgh



Pura Fé. Photo by © Clement Puig



Robert "Freighttrain" Parker. Photo by Aaron Winters



Levi Platero. Photo by Nancy Smith, lightninghorse Photography

(Kiowa) on harmonica, drums and vocals, Cecil Gray (Kiowa) on guitar, harmonica and vocals and Patrick Tointigh (Kiowa/Apache) on bass and vocals.

From Buffalo, NY, of the Seneca Nation, The Iroquois Confederacy, there is bassist Robert "Freighttrain" Parker, who – among other recognitions – was the first Indigenous artist inducted into the Buffalo Music Hall of Fame in 2015, won the 2018 Best Blues Album at the Indigenous Music Awards for *Freighttrain Live* and is nominated again this year. His Indigenous heritage infuses sensibility and passion into the messages he delivers in his music.

Then there is a whole section of great blues bands that have made the blues part of their lives from the First Nations, north of the border, like Juno Award-winning artist Derek Miller of the Mohawk Nation, who I met years ago in Hollywood, FL, at the Seminole Hard Rock concert stage. He joined us on stage and we belted out a Stevie Ray Vaughan tune as the crowd went wild.

Born in [Ontario](#) into the [Cayuga Nation](#) of The [Iroquois](#) Confederacy, there is the amazing Gary Farmer and the Troublemakers. Then there's Murray Porter, a Mohawk piano player from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory, with a voice that shows a bona fide bluesman who has known about troubled times and grace.

There is also Pura Fé, who grew up in New York City, moved to North Carolina and relocated to Northern Saskatchewan, Canada, a few years ago. She comes from a musical family, claiming no less than eight generations of Tuscarora women singers through her maternal line of the Indigenous Tuscarora Deer Clan. Her slide guitar skill and powerful voice have made her one of the most talented Native blues artists in Indian country.

I could go on and on about the Native American artists in the blues scene, all of whom are out there and rising to their calling. The plain and simple thing about Native blues music is that it is spiritual – the connection with a song is personal and true. I love its power; how a song with only three chords can move the human soul.

In tribal levels, singers are able to make connections with the spiritual realm of this world and sometimes beyond. The best way I can explain this is from one of the greatest influences – Jimi Hendrix, part African American, part [Cherokee](#) – who brought modern blues rock to the forefront in the late '60s, when he got on stage with his style of pure raw music. When he played his guitar, his entire performance was a spiritual experience to those who saw and heard him, to some it was a life-changing moment.

Although we Native artists are of different tribes, our customs and culture differ, we speak different languages and we all know we are not the same, we have respect for one another. In a wider spectrum, we are One Nation, playing the blues. 🎵

Murphy Platero is from the Eastern Agency of the Navajo Nation, and is Sagebrush Hill clan-born for Edgewater People clan. He is a singer, songwriter and guitarist who started playing music in 1975. He gives credit to his father for his musical education, who was a Christian minister and guitarist himself. In 2004, Murphy started playing blues as a bassist in the award-winning family band, *The Plateros*. Today, Murphy continues writing and recording his music. He lives with his wife and family in To'Hajiilee, NM.



Mato Nanji of Indigenous. Photo by Ron Adelberg