

An interview with Howling Owl of Raven Sky Native American Rock Band

by Yvonne Perry

Perry: Al, or should I call you Howling Owl, I've seen and heard you and Jimbo Hagey Junior play in several rock bands and venues around Nashville, but Native American Rock is a huge change in style for you guys. How did the band get started?

Howling Owl: Raven Sky was formed through a strange twist of events back in the spring of 2004. Sort of a 5 bank pool shot.

Timo and I have mutual friend named Greg who is a UPS driver that delivers to the Vanderbilt Hospital. One day Greg encouraged me to go listen to Timo who happened to be playing piano for the Vanderbilt Hospital cafeteria lunch crowd. I was impressed with his singing and piano skills immediately. A couple of weeks later Greg arranged for Timo and I to meet at a drum circle gathering at Centennial Park.

After talking with Timo at the drum circle we realized that we lived on the same street in the Hillsboro-West End area. I invited Timo over to jam in my rehearsal studio and soon we were starting to sound good with just drums and piano on Timo's original songs.

Three weeks later Timo and I found ourselves playing four shows for the pow wow at the Wilson county fair which was the state's most heavily attended. We had a great crowd reaction and made lots of contacts. This encouraged Timo and I to see what else we could do with our music. Soon after we were able to recruit Jimbo Hagey Junior who was a member of my recently retired rock and roll cover band. All we needed to complete the band was a bass player.

Several weeks later Timo announced that he had found our bass player. Timo met Phil at a fancy wine and cheese soiree. They had been drawn together and found themselves in a deep conversation about their mutual love of music and various musicians. Though Phil admitted he had not picked up his bass in about 10 years he was anxious to come over and see what he could do to help out. After we heard Phil's chops we were sure he was right for the band.

Timo, Jimbo, Phil and I soon began to rehearse on a regular basis. Although learning Timo's songs was not too easy for them at first, with perseverance things started to gel. Phil had an uncanny ability to pick out his own bass parts and lay down complex riffs to fit the songs. Jimbo added his well-known southern rock and roll flavor on guitar to kick things up a notch.

At Timo's suggestion we decided to call ourselves Raven Sky. According to Indian legend, a raven in the sky is the messenger for the traditional male pow wow dancer below. It is a symbol of the hardships the person has endured, and has overcome. This all seemed to fit pretty well with our mission as a band.

Perry: That is an amazing story. When I heard Raven Sky play a full set at 3rd & Lindsley, I was compelled by the lyrics that speak of the days when man and buffalo roamed free. I was enchanted by the way the band brought the story to life using modern riffs of the electric guitar, bass and keyboard. Those are not the kinds of instruments one would expect to hear in a Native American group. How did this mix of tribal chanting and rock-n-roll styling ever get together?

Howling Owl: Native American rock and roll usually involves lyrics which pertain to the plight, stories or dreams of the Native American, also known as the Nations People. The lyrics are blended with instruments which are traditionally used in the rock and roll genre such as electric keyboards, guitar, bass and the trap drum kit. What's incredible is that adding traditional flute, rattles, hand drums and other instruments which are indigenous to the Native American people add a true warmth and natural sound which is unique to all other music. There are no set rules about exactly which instruments to use or what direction to go. That leaves endless boundaries to take your music to.

Perry: Tell me more about the band members.

Howling Owl: Timo Cano on piano and vocals is the son of Yaqui and Apache-Chiricahua lineage and was born in Los Angeles where he was educated, worked with solo bands and followed the empty Hollywood dreams until he felt the vision calling. What started with theatre scoring and sweat lodges opened up the future for the time ahead which was to culminate with Timo working with Marcus Hummon on his musical "Warrior" the Jim Thorpe story at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center in Nashville, Tennessee. It was a dream come true. At the time Timo was on his way to New York when his van broke down and was forced to stay in Nashville with a temporary job which became a permanent job at Vanderbilt. That led to one great thing after another and eventually led him to make Nashville his home.

Phil Hart, bass guitar and vocals was born in Germany. Growing up as an army brat he saw much of the world at a young age. Coming from a musical family the bass guitar seemed to come natural to him. Phil has played with various bands and recorded in some of the finer studios in the nation. Phil became well steeped in the music business working for 19 years with positions at MCA Records and Billboard Magazine.

Jimbo, lead and rhythm guitar started playing after seeing the Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show. Born and raised in Nashville, TN, Jimbo has played in numerous cover and original rock and roll bands over the years. Jimbo traveled across the

country and provided lead guitar for *UP With People* in '75 and '76. He was a Gibson Guitars Endorsing Artist during the years Gibson was owned by The Norlin Corporation. *Flight, Illwill, The Lost Dogs* and *Switchleg, and Whiskey Biscuit* are just a few of the bands that Jimbo has ROCKED in, over the last 20 years.

I, Howling Owl, play drums and percussion. I have been involved in and around the music scene for nearly half a century. I didn't move to Nashville to get involved in music, I was just fortunate enough to be born here and now I can't leave. I began beating on pots and pans about as soon as I could walk and got my first real drum set at the age of 12. I am also an avid songwriter and guitar player and have written quite a few original songs and jingles. I also dabble with violin, banjo, keyboards, mandolin, harmonica and just about anything else I can get my hands on.

I have played in several local Nashville bands to include *The Pencils, Fragile Forest, Switchleg, and Knightvision*. I am still privileged to perform with *Tim Jones and the Orphan's Friends* from time to time.

Perry: Every song Raven Sky plays has a powerful message. Some of them address the state of affairs of the Indian nation and others embrace Mother Earth and call upon Grandfather Sky. The song entitled *Freedom* asks "What is a land without love?" There's mention of the American Indian wars fading into love for all people, and how we should see all things as one; to feel the fire in the sky and give in to the power of the soul; to walk into the flame and be born again. I felt as though I was traveling back through time with you guys to awaken the spirit of our ancestors. There is definitely a spiritual message in the lyrics of the songs. Do all the band members share a similar spiritual vision?

Howling Owl: I think that each of the band members have their own spiritual beliefs and each strives to live honest and moral lives. The lyrics in our songs are very personal for Timo. Timo believes all of life's gifts, including our songs come from the Grandfather spirit. Our songs were inspired by Timo's visions and dreams in the deserts of Nevada and Arizona. I think that we do feel that if any of our songs were to help someone connect to their higher power then it would be a very wonderful thing.

Perry: I agree. What are some of Raven Sky's goals?

Howling Owl: Basically our goal is to play music for people that they will enjoy listening to and we hope that our songs will stick in other people's heads as they have in ours. We want our music to be a source of hope and make people feel good. Soon we hope to move our show towards a more theatrical presentation with actors and dancers. Our goal is to develop our show into a true audio-visual presentation that will grip our audience and make them feel as though they were experiencing a vision of the Old World Story.

Perry: What about other venues? Where is Raven Sky playing next?

Howling Owl: July 22 at 3rd & Lindsey

Perry: I heard Raven Sky play at the Ryman in June. How did you get that gig?

Howling Owl: We played at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville as a part of the 8th annual Native American Dance Theatre. The director of the event, Cherokee Mangus, came to hear the band at one of our 3rd & Lindsley shows and liked us enough to ask us to be a part of the NADT. It was incredibly exciting for each of us to be up on a stage with so much history behind it.

Perry: Does Raven Sky have a web site or do you send up smoke signals? ☺

Howling Owl: Although it is in its infancy, our web site is up and going. The URL is <http://www.ravenskyband.com/> We hope to add more features soon and we will be selling our CD and other merchandise from the site in the near future. I feel that a web site is a good way to get information about your band out to the people and make connections world wide.

Perry: The band is pretty new, but I'm thinking you may have a CD out soon. How may I get a copy?

Howling Owl: Our CD is still in the mixing and mastering stage right now. We are recording out of Brush Hill Studios and the owner, Mickey Dent has been especially helpful to Raven Sky and is very interested in what we are trying to do. We would also like to give a special thanks to Jenny, our engineer for spending countless hours behind the mixing board for us. As soon as the CD is available we will have a release party somewhere and make an announcement on our web page.

Along with our website we have an e-mailing list for our fans where we will send out occasional show announcements and other info. If anyone would like to join it they just need to go to our website and click on the "Contacts" link to get on.

Perry: The songs are lusty and soulful, and demonstrate an ingenious blend of native tradition and modern rock. Putting together these rocking hot sounds while maintaining the spirit of the native must be a challenge. What is a typical Raven Sky band rehearsal like?

Howling Owl: A Raven Sky band rehearsal often begins with a sit-down session where we will discuss relevant band business and decide what we need to work on the most. Many times we will watch a video tape or DVD of one of our previous shows to observe and listen to what we liked and disliked. It is a lot like a football team watching a game film from the week before. We then try to work through the set list and tweak our sound and make sure everyone is headed in

the same direction. Sometimes we will play a measure of music through note by note just to make sure it all blends well. If we have any new material to work on we try to run through the verses and choruses of it a few times also. Afterwards we will sometimes go to a local restaurant to eat and discuss life, liberty and the American way.

Perry: Speaking of new material, how do you arrange a song for a band with such a unique style? Is there some magic involved to where it just gels and creates itself or is one person telling the others what to do?

Howling Owl: Most songs consist of a verse, chorus, lead break and bridge. With Raven Sky we experiment with different arrangements of each until we come up with something we all like. Many times we will throw in punches, breaks, changes, dynamics and a cappella parts to keep the song interesting.

The way we write and arrange a song is different for each individual tune. Sometimes we will just start with a guitar or piano riff that we like and go from there. Other times we will write music specifically to fit the lyrics. What's nice is we all have some sort of input in order to produce the final product.

Perry: Raven Sky, you convict me, move me and rock me with your jazzy ballads. You tell stories most people don't want to hear—stories about poverty in the land of plenty; suffering in the land of the Brave; the Red Man being evicted from heaven, and the Trail of tears that stripped away the spirit and tradition of the Native American. We welcome our native ancestors back to Nashville! Thank you for sharing your soul and your talent. I wish you all the best. Ah Ho!

Howling Owl: Thank you, Yvonne. Ah Ho!