

Recording Culture: Powwow Music and the Aboriginal Recording Industry on the Northern Plains. Christopher A. Scales. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, 338 pp., \$24.95, paper.

Indigenous peoples and their social worlds have long been described in bifurcated terms. Nowhere is this bifurcation more apparent than in anthropological and ethnomusicological discussions of indigenous expressive culture, including music. Christopher Scales' *Recording Culture* bridges this divide between traditional and contemporary indigenous musical genres through an analysis of the Aboriginal recording industry in the Northern Plains. Linking a so-called traditional genre of music—powwow singing and drumming—to its production, release and circulation via the contemporary powwow recording industry, Scales emphasizes the always changing, contested and creative zone that is powwow music recording culture.

Based on fieldwork carried out between 1998-2010, the author followed the northern Plains powwow circuit, sang and toured with a powwow group (*Spirit Sands Singers*) and worked as a recording engineer for Arbor Records, one of the preeminent record labels producing powwow music. Building on the work of Lassiter (1998), Browner (2002), Samuels (2004) and Diamond (2005), *Recording Culture* uniquely emphasizes the highly mediated, socially constructed aesthetics of Powwow recording worlds.

Recording Culture is divided into two parts: Part 1 (Chapters 1-3) examines the culture of the powwow grounds, and Part II (Chapters 4-7) examines social and political practices of the powwow recording industry. In Chapter One, Scales

examines the contrasting aesthetics and ideologies of “traditional” and “competition” powwows. Here, traditional powwows are more locally based and tend to emphasize one specific tribe, and competition powwows tend to be more inter-tribal, offer larger cash prizes and are more cosmopolitan in their aesthetic orientation. Chapter Two delineates some of the central ethical and aesthetic components of Northern Plains singing style, including its highly gendered dimensions (for example, only men are supposed to sit at the drum).

In Chapter Three, Scales compares live, studio and remote recording techniques for drum groups. The author contrasts a newer, locally based drum group with an older, more internationally known “drum” and through this comparison examines the social requirements of travel, the economics of singing and the distribution of social power in the powwow circuit. Scales importantly notes that male vocal production is the unmarked standard or norm in northern Plains powwow singing.

Chapter Four foregrounds intersections of race, culture and industry in non-Native owned powwow labels in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the city where Scales lived while doing his fieldwork. Here, the author discusses drum groups’ responses to the impersonal, legalistic nature of recording contracts: since contracts don’t reflect how relations are forged on the powwow grounds, drum groups generally disregard them in favor of more fluid professional arrangements and commitments. In tandem with this, Scales recounts Canada’s Bill C-31 and its effect on non-“status” Indians.

In Chapter Five, the author examines mediation, defined as that which negotiates between subject positions in a recording studio and also as the electronic

process of recording sound. Comparing a recording studio's post-production of Chippewa Cree pop singer, Mishi Donovan, and a powwow drum group, Lake of the Woods singers, both recorded in-studio, Scales demonstrates how powwow groups have more control over the final mix—how the CD sounds in its packaged form—than pop singers typically do. This is mainly because, in powwow recording, there is no “mixdown” process, where multiple effects, instruments and sounds are added to the initial tracks.

Chapter Six focuses on the idea of liveness as a fundamentally mediated sound but a coveted sound nonetheless. Here, Scales discusses how the sound of bells (on a powwow dancer's outfit) are sometimes requested by drum groups as an added sound after a recording is made to index its “liveness,” in this case signaling that a performance was made in situ on the powwow grounds rather than in a recording studio or remotely.

Chapter Seven examines drum groups' multiple motivations to record. Recordings, he concludes, are unique cultural texts holding symbolic status on the powwow grounds and thus are crucial for understanding relationships between performance and indigenous modernity more broadly (243). Examining the politics of music, Scales concludes, is to “not to deny its aesthetic value but rather to place aesthetics and pleasure at the center of the discussion” (257-258).

The main contribution of this book is to denaturalize the taken-for-granted category of sound recording as it pertains to powwow music, and this cannot be overstated. Concepts such as “race” and “blood quantum,” however, could be further denaturalized and framed as socially constructed categories rather than as

biological “facts.” This engaging book will be of interest to ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, non-specialists interested in powwow music and contemporary indigenous culture, and scholars in Native American and Indigenous studies. Included with the book is an excellent accompanying CD, produced by Arbor Records, featuring Gabriel Desrosiers and the Northern Wind Singers.

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