



4-4-08

Dear Native Colleagues,

It gives me great satisfaction to recommend Phil Moyer as a film producer who is intent on seeing an exciting true-to-life Native story come to the big screen in an honorable way. After receiving a copy of the novel, *The Last Algonquin*, I began to see the cinematic importance of the story, and joined Mr. Moyer's vision to help see the process through. I have found Phil Moyer to be highly respectful of Native cultures, and of equal importance, to have an honest curiosity about Native people that results in collaborative friendships that encourage growth and opportunity. I, myself, consider Phil to be a personal friend whom I respect.

As a working professional, I keep my ear to the ground for American Indian projects that are artistically satisfying while always upholding our tribal sovereignty. It is a serious business in the arts to make sure that our Native citizenship along with our sovereign rights are maintained, especially in projects that influence how Native people are perceived in the media. As Native people solely determine our own citizenship, it is vital that filmmakers collaborate closely with Indian people on media projects that affect how we are publicly portrayed.

Therefore, it came as a wonderful surprise last year when Phil Moyer introduced me to the story of "Joe" Two Trees of the Wappinger Nation, and Joe's sharing of traditional knowledge with a young boy scout in what is now the largest public park in New York city. After researching the story myself and consulting with a senior linguist about the Wappinger language contained in the book, Dr. Carl Masthay, I am convinced that *The Last Algonquin* is absolutely a true story. The chronicle of Two Tree's life is incredibly cinematic and compelling.

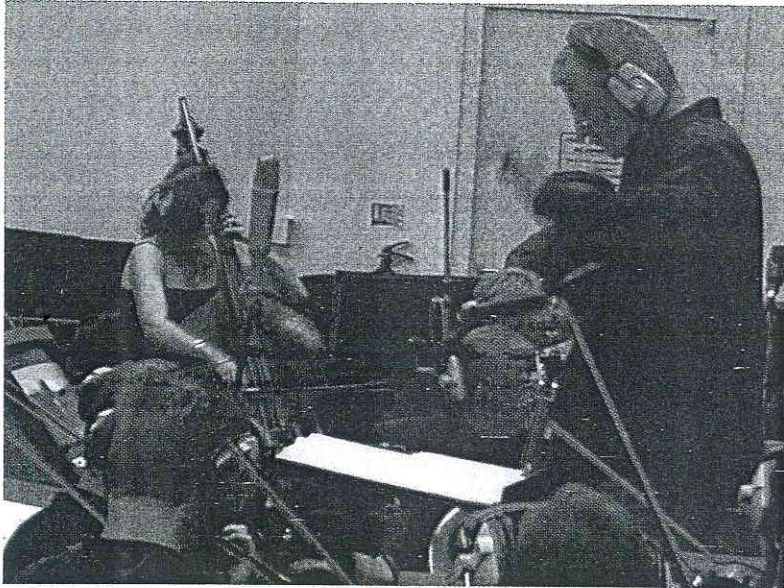
I personally and professionally endorse this film project, and already have agreed to compose the film's musical soundtrack. As an enrolled citizen of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohican Nation, Wisconsin, I am pleased to introduce you to Mr. Phil Moyer, who brings with him the astounding life story of a man who thought he was the last Wappinger alive, and of the young boy who heard his final story. It was a real honor to experience this book, and come to understand Phil's intense commitment to developing the film version in collaboration with Native people. I enthusiastically recommend him to you.

Sincerely,

Brent Michael Davids

DreamKeeper

Toward a New Indian Film Music



Nick Ingram conducts the *DreamKeeper* film orchestra.

Smoke Signals, directed by Chris Eyre, was touted as the first major feature film where script, direction, cast and music were all Native American. This was only partially true for the music, however; the music score actually was created by a non-Native composer, B.C. Smith, a personal friend of screenwriter Sherman Alexie. Only the source music (music heard within a film's plot, like music coming from a nearby group of performers in a restaurant, or from a car radio), and pre-existing and inserted music (known in the film industry as "needle-drop") were Native made. But the film contained a good amount of it, as well as a smaller amount of scoring (writing music to match the action in a film) by non-Natives.

Eyre's recent made-for-television *Skinwalkers* (see Sept./Oct. 2002) fared less well in musical terms, having only a minimal amount of scoring, and of that, most of it is non-

musical "effects" with no discernible melody and few musical characteristics.

Another Eyre film, *Skins*, also seems to be primarily needle-drop and source music. It seems he favors being the film composer himself, and ventures little into the areas of professionally composed scores or underscoring (the background music underneath dialogue that portrays the emotions, mood or underlying environment of a scene).

Alexie's latest venture, *The Business of Fancydancing*, is a bit better musically, although it is also primarily needle-drop and source music. The cues (the points where music starts and stops in a film) in *Fancydancing* are more musical ones, although Alexie also seems to avoid professional underscoring in favor of spotting the film himself (that is, watching the film and choosing places where music will be added). To his credit, he did try to get the Native cast to perform the music both on and off camera as an attempt to create a more grass-roots musical score.

Hallmark Entertainment's *DreamKeeper*, which airs on ABC May 11 and 12 (see Film/Video this issue), thankfully sets a new high musical standard for Native-themed productions. Working as the film's primary

music consultant during post-production, I had the opportunity to apprentice with the film's composer, Stephen Warbeck (*Shakespeare in Love*, *Quills*). The four-hour film has lots of source music in it, and I was the person primarily responsible for getting it organized and recorded. We recorded at the Minnesota Public Radio studio in Minneapolis, then headed off to England to work on the scored music at Warbeck's residence south of London.

As an apprentice, I worked alongside the composer, music editor and the copyist (the person responsible for entering into a computer the written music obtained from the composer, checking for errors and printing up all the scores and parts for each musician) to help facilitate a huge number of cues. Most of the cues were scored by Warbeck for small ensemble, but still there were more than 36 orchestral cues as well. Musically, Warbeck characterized *DreamKeeper* as equivalent to about 2.5 films worth of music! Without having the orchestral cues completely finished, we started recording the small-ensemble cues at Lansdowne Studio for several days, before finishing the orchestra recording in one ten-hour day at Sony Studio. The enormous task of composing all this music fell to Warbeck. I played several flutes for the recordings, including my quartz crystal flute, two wood flutes and various bird calls.

Short on time in the final composing week, Warbeck asked me to compose eight music cues myself, which I accepted as a true privilege. I wrote one cue for the Mohawk

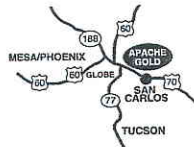
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"Thunder Boy" who is jumping and dancing around in a puddle (mostly percussion), as well as seven other cues for the two trickster characters, played by John Trudell (Coyote) and Gary Farmer (Spider). I scored the seven trickster cues for a self-made wooden "bow" box, boinging table knives, acoustic bass, two shakers and two vocal parts, and designed the music to resemble a comic 49er song. My written cues were recorded at Lansdowne by professional musicians during the week of small-ensemble recording, and later edited into the film by the music editor.

I must thank Stephen Warbeck for his wonderful composer mentoring, as well as director Steve Barron and producer Matthew O'Connor for giving me such a wonderful opportunity. John Fusco, who conceived and wrote the *DreamKeeper* teleplay, has suggested the possibility of having me score another full-length Native feature film as the primary composer. *DreamKeeper* has taken me one step closer toward writing the first full-length feature film score by a Native composer—one of these days, it will happen!

Brent Michael Davids (Mobicán) is a young composer whose has worked with the Kronos Quartet, the Joffrey Ballet and the Phoenix Symphony. In 2001, the latter performed Davids' 40-minute "Powwow Symphony," complete with dancers. His music features elements of Native American tribal music combined with Western compositional techniques attained from classical training. He often uses traditional Native American instruments of his own design in his compositions, including flutes made of quartz-crystal. He has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bush Foundation, Meet the Composer, ASCAP, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Sundance Institute. The Teldec label just released Davids' "The Un-Covered Wagon" composition on the CD Our American Journey. He is currently working on the first all-Indian radio opera, The Trial of Standing Bear, with Anishinaabe librettist Marcie Rendon, as well as several new choral works and his adventurous Tinitis String Quartet. Details: www.BrentMichaelDavids.com.

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