

Michael Jacobs

Powwow Gets a Pop and Rock Makeover


“Spiritual things are fundamental in my life,” says singer/songwriter Michael Jacobs (Western Band Cherokee). “I want to make music that makes people dance, or weep or pray. I want to give them something they can take with them, not just a few minutes’ diversion.”

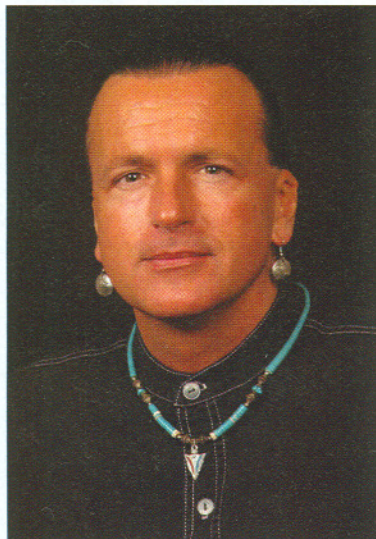
Jacobs delivers this on *They Come Dancing*, a collection of original tunes using the metaphor of Native American dance to trace the changes human beings go through from birth to death and the resurrection of the spirit.

“The songs explain why it is that we dance,” Jacobs explains. “Powwow dancing is not shamanistic or ceremonial, it’s celebratory, meant to express thanks, to give cheer to those who are sick or suffering, to pay homage to the elders, to encourage the youth and to keep them strong in their traditions. In most Western pursuits, attention is on the person doing an activity; it’s done for the self. But we dance for others, and the songs on the album reflect that.”

Jacobs planned *They Come Dancing* for a year, looking for a way to merge traditional powwow drumming and singing with contemporary folk, rock and pop styles. “I’ve seen dancers with Native bands and the dancers sometimes seemed like an afterthought; the music wasn’t tailored to the dancers. I wanted to create songs you could do traditional dances to as well as enjoy as pop-rock songs. I listened to a lot of Northern Plains singers to absorb the feeling of those songs. When I had the arrangements mapped out in my head, I went into the studio.”

Jacobs has a big, raspy voice, one that often draws comparisons to Don Henley of the Eagles, and he sings with an understated power that gives every lyric the ring of truth. There isn’t a weak song on the album, and many sound like potential standards. The title track is a prayer for unity and an invitation to the dance of life that combines traditional singing and drumming with Jacobs’ forceful acoustic guitar work. “Beauty Way” is a brief meditative piece that features Jacobs’ cedar flute and confident guitar work. “Nanabush” has an anthem-like feel and uses the Ojibwe hero and trickster Nanabush to address the human capacity for great good and great foolishness. A spoken-word piece, “Creation Story,” includes a subtle cedar flute soundtrack. It closes the album with a prayer that all beings can learn to live in harmony with each other and the Creator.

Jacobs comes from a Cherokee family, but wasn’t aware of his cultural background until he met some Cherokees from North Carolina at a powwow. “I had an epiphany. I realized that this was my path and I began to learn all I could about our people,” he says. After a lifetime of playing electric guitar in rock bands, Jacobs switched to acoustic and started writing songs about his awakening to the beauty of Cherokee culture. The positive audience response to the songs led to his first album, *Sacred Nation*, which won a Nammy in 2003 for Best Independent Recording. *They Come Dancing* is Jacobs’ second album. Its power and polish lay the groundwork for other artists looking for ways to combine Native tradition and popular music without diminishing the power of either form. 



Michael Jacobs
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MARTHA REDBONE

Skintalk

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Redbone has been building up a substantial East Coast buzz for the past five years, and she’s done it all on her own, gig by gig, without any support from a label, small or large. Along the way, she’s won the Nammy for Debut Artist of the Year in 2002 and Best Pop Album at the 2004 Indian Summer Music Awards for her first release, *Home of the Brave*. With *Skintalk*, Redbone has another winner, a solid combination of soul, funk, rock and Native music delivered the old-fashioned way: real musicians playing real instruments in real time. The production by Redbone—of Shawnee/Choctaw/Blackfeet ancestry on her mother’s side and Lumbee/African American on her father’s side—and her longtime collaborator Aaron Whitby is the perfect combination of gloss and grit. Redbone has a powerful voice, one that can roar or purr, but she’s not a showy vocalist; her remarkable pipes always serve the song without calling attention to her impressive range. Guitarist Michael Rabinowitz kicks off “Skin,” one of the album’s best tracks, with a blistering solo that calls to mind Jimi Hendrix, another Black Indian, before Redbone enters riding a funky New Orleans groove to explore some of the sexual and political aspects of skin color. “Just Because” is a smooth, jazzy R&B ballad, “God Created Woman” is a celebration of the universal feminine with a sanctified feel, while “Children of Love” combines traditional powwow singing by a small group led by Dennis Banks and a stuttering groove that sounds like Earth, Wind & Fire on the rez. For the time being, Redbone’s music is only available at www.cdbaby.com/cd/martharedbone2, but her talent is too large to remain a secret; she has all the chops necessary to become a major star.

VARIOUS ARTISTS

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This year is Makoché’s 10th anniversary, and they’re celebrating it with a two-disc set composed of a CD and a CD-ROM. The CD contains 20 tracks featuring work by nine of the artists that have built the company’s sterling reputation. There’s flute music from Kevin Locke, Andrew Vasquez, Joseph Fire Crow and Keith Bear, who also contributes “Mandan Heartbreak Song,” an ancient love song backed by traditional percussion and a contemporary string quartet. Lakota Thunder and Sissy Goodhouse contribute traditional teaching songs, and singer/songwriter Annie Humphrey is represented by two of her best works, including “Spirit Horses,” a powerful duet with poet John Trudell. The CD-ROM has 20 full-length songs with visuals that avoid the excesses of commercial music videos, clips of the artists talking about their musical journeys and the stories behind traditional songs, a short film about the United Tribes International Powwow, and the Nammy Award-winning video for Humphrey’s “Spirit Horses.”