

Yokuts and Paiute Songs and Culture book reviews

(Note: the CD is no longer available.)

1. The book: "Yokuts and Paiute Songs and Culture," by Alfred Pietroforte

What it's about: (From the Publisher) "Our nation's first folk songs were those of native inhabitants. This book attempts to resurrect the early remnants of Indian folk songs sung in California. These songs reveal the Yokuts and Paiutes of California and their ancestors to be a people with rich feeling and imagination.

"As a musician and collector of folk songs, Pietroforte embarked on a mission in 1949 to collect native folk songs, only to discover very little information even existed prior to 1840. His only alternative was to visit rancherias and reservations firsthand and find those interested in preserving their past to form a link in the chain that ties together past with present.

"Pietroforte made friends with the singers and taped tribal information they and family elders provided. He succeeded in preserving a sample of the music and culture of the Yokuts and Paiutes in the pages of this book. The book contains 25 of the old songs captured on tape, which were later transcribed and set to music. A CD with these songs is included in each book."

About the author: Pietroforte has been involved in education for at least 40 years, first as an elementary school teacher and principal and later as an instructor at the College of the Sequoias.

(James Ward, **Choices**, *Visalia Times Delta*, April 27, 2006)

2.. "Yo wi yowi he We ya ha..."

The cracking voice of a tired elder sings the words of a Paiute cry dance song meant for a burial ceremony. The voice on the CD is heavy with the weight of a tribe losing its roots, its language, its songs, perhaps cornerstone of its culture.

While researching early California folk music as a Fresno State student for a California History Seminar in the summer of 1959, Al Pietroforte stumbled upon an extremely understudied and unrecorded subject, original folk music of indigenous Californians.

With that early spark of interest, Pietroforte took on an unprecedented study of the culture of local Native American Tribes and in mid-April of this year re-released his research in "Yokuts and Paiute Songs and Culture" through Naturegraph Publishers.

The 61-page book includes a 25-track CD of original recordings of Native Americans from Pietroforte's 1959 study.

Pietroforte's research focuses on the songs still sung by residents of the Santa Rosa Rancheria in Lemoore and Paiute Tribe in Baker.

Pietroforte originally released his study in thesis form and then published it in a book titled "Songs of the Yokuts and Paiuts."

The first edition, released in 1965 was used as supplementary curriculum material for Tulare County grammars schools in units of early American History and has since been widely accepted by Native Americans and National historians and sociologists.

With original copies long lost and the subjects long passed, Pietroforte just released his second edition of the book with fresh title, "Yokuts and Paiute Songs and Culture."

The reprisal of Pietroforte's text comes at an interesting time for local Native Americans.

"There is now a resurrection of culture." Pietroforte said. "There is a move to preserve songs and language. There are now nation-wide pow wows where different tribes can exchange dances and culture."

The book itself is Pietroforte's own effort to preserve a piece of not only Native American culture but of California history.

The book begins with a brief general history of the music among Native American tribes referencing early writing from the first California Missions. But the majority chronicles Pietroforte's study with descriptions of the subjects interviewed and the songs they have preserved from their tribes' pasts.

With a sociological tone, Pietroforte pencils the details of his visits with a 94 year-old Visalia woman from the local Wukchamni tribe. Pietroforte describes Mary Garcia Pohot as a sick elderly woman restricted to her bed. But upon request, Pohot eagerly sings her long-memorized native music without moving from her bed.

Pietrofortes includes two of Pohot's songs with translations from his first meeting with the songster. One song is used to accompany dance while the second is titled

"Whirlwind Song." Pohot's song describes the movement of the whirlwinds rising in the dust during a dry spell in the valley.

The recordings include an assortment from various elderly tribal members from throughout Visalia and Baker. Subjects interviewed and recorded range in age from 53-99. But Pietroforte features a majority of songs from Manuel Leon of the Lemoore Rancheria near Lemoore. The author documents an on going relationship with Leon as his main subject in his research. Sixty-one pages in length, the book is a short read with half of the text describing Pietroforte's research method and half translating the recorded music, including written musical notations and lyrics. Pietroforte also includes a chapter on how to apply his text and recordings in an educational setting as well as tips on how one can conduct his own research on the subject. The book includes photos of several elderly tribal members, all of whom have long since passed away. The small piece of history offered in Pietroforte's text is a treasure and leaves readers wishing Pietroforte had managed to stretch his research further. Pietroforte's work catches a slice of history and cultural roots, which may have otherwise been buried with those Native Americans featured in the pages of "Yokuts and Paiute Songs and Culture." Since conducting his research, Pietroforte's findings have been added to the library at The Smithsonian Institute, the Library's of Congress and the Chatagua House in San Francisco (to name a few). Pietroforte is a former educator and instructor of the Language Arts at the College of the Sequoias and currently resides in Visalia. His free time has recently been spent rewriting and editing parts of his original copy of "Yokuts and Paiute Songs and Culture" for its republication this month. "We hope that through reading this new edition, we can 'walk with the Native Americans' and capture the images of their old way of life. They remind us that 'The Earth is our mother.' We are more alike than we are different," Pietroforte said upon the release of his work. (Andrea Camarena, **Lifestyles. Sun-Gazette**, April 26, 2006.)

3. The Quest

As a collector and singer of folk songs, Pietroforte begins his research on the earliest kind of folk music in California.

"Obviously, I zeroed in on the Indians," he said with a smile. "Music is the soul of their culture," he continued. " It captures the spirit of the indigenous people."

Pietroforte quickly found this particular subject was not an easy one to explore. For the most part, reference material on the history of Native American music was not readily available.

"In fact," he explained, "any information prior to 1840 was very difficult to come by."

Pietroforte found out the hard way that it took a special kind of exploring to dig up the past. It took acceptance into a culture not inclined to reveal their spirit "to a white man".

The journey took him to Indian burials, sweat houses and various ceremonies from Bishop to Santa Rosa Rancheria, and everywhere in between.

Part of Pietroforte's research also involved finding authentic recordings of ancestral songs made by California Indians. He immediately found this was not plausible.

So, with a reel-to-reel tape recorder in hand he trekked deep into reservations and rancherias hoping to document and save what little was left of an important facet of their culture.

Some did not want to have the songs recorded at the time. Those who did, such as Tachi Indian Leon Manuel and Wechihit Indian Josie Atwell saw the value in preserving their native songs and stories. "They were very delightful and cooperative," said Pietroforte.

The Songs

Included with Pietroforte's book is a collection of the original songs reproduced on a compact disk.

Music was an important part of Indian life, explained Pietroforte. Songs tell us where they have been, what they have accomplished and what we can learn from their past.

Each song is an interpretation, said Pietroforte. "They are words intermingled with vocables," which are spoken words. For example, "Song of the Snowflake," sung by Mono Indian Molly Pomona describes the gentle falling of the snowflake. The "Acorn Song," sung by Atwell, is a work song. While women ground and cured acorn meal, they sometimes amused themselves by singing this song.

Songs were sung for burial rituals, to the spirits, and about nature. "There were lullabies and love songs," added Pietroforte. When Manuel and Atwell began singing, Pietroforte said he was transported into a different culture.

"I felt very close to these people and understood something about their civilization, their culture, their way of life," he said. "Their music was closely intertwined with their feelings, with their emotions. there were happy songs, there were sad songs. Songs for hunting, songs for fishing." **Renewed Spirit**

After all is said and done, Pietroforte is happy with the end results. The revised edition "Yokuts and Paiute Songs and Cultures" is a book that preserves their history, music, and their cultures," he said. "It's not a seminal work. It's another link in the chain that connects the past and the present." Today Pietroforte's book and recordings have been embraced by elementary school, colleges, libraries, museums and interested musicologist. The Smithsonian Institution has also used this work in their library resource books because much of it is original research. There is an old Indian saying that "when the old songs die, the great dreams are forgotten." It seems, as of late, that a renewed interest in these songs has emerged. Today, many are still being sung at powwows and other types of observances. "If they don't remember them or didn't record them," Pietroforte said, "they have them now." This study was Pietroforte's special contribution to honor the early inhabitants of California. The memory of the singers, their songs and stories are kept alive for future generations. Pietroforte has been involved in education for the last 40 years, first as an elementary school teacher and principal, and later as an instructor in Language Art Department at the College of the Sequoias. (Barbara Swarm, **Leisure**, *The Sentinel*, June 2, 2006.)