"Great Spirit Listen": The American Indian in Mormon Music

P. Jane Hafen

isconceptions of native Americans began with the misnomer "Indian" based on a navigational error. Mainstream Mormon art, literature, and music, which grants the American Indians a Book of Mormon history and destiny as Lamanites, embraces and propagates many historical misconceptions transferred from secular sources. Congregational singing has been one of the most pernicious offenders. Authors, composers, and congregations unwittingly perpetuate subtle prejudices and racial stereotypes each time one of the historical hymns about our "red untutored Indian" brothers and sisters is sung. While hymns such as "O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man," "Great Spirit, Listen to the Red Man's Wail" and hymns with more general topics such as "The Wintry Day Descending to its Close" but including a reference to a "savage Indian band" are being gradually eliminated from Mormon hymnody, a new generation of uneducated racism is being bred on "Book of Mormon Stories." The Church has overlooked the potential of talented native American musicians and artists to contribute not only a native American point of view, but viable native American art.

The American Indian has often been fondly regarded as a species of noble savage, an ideal popularized in hundreds of travel books dating from the sixteenth century on and given new impetus by French social philosopher Rousseau in the mid-eighteenth century. H. Neal Fairchild, British scholar and historian, defines the noble savage as "any free and wild being who draws directly from nature virtues which raise doubts as to the value of civilization"

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(1928, 2). This second-hand noble savage definition requires ignoring basic native American values of tribal affiliation, place, and community. Indigenous myth and ritual clearly express the centrality of these "civilized" values in Indian culture. However, since the first European contacts, the image of native Americans has derived from the noble savage idea, vacillating between the romantic notion of the natural nobility of uncivilized man, or the contrary view of the barbaric savage in dire need of civilizing, with occasional attempts at synthesizing these two poles of definition.

The noble savage is one of many European ideas that attempts to comprehend New World discoveries. The new land seemed virginal, unencumbered by historical burdens and social demands, and offering, in addition, seemingly unlimited resources. It appeared to be a paradise on earth (Smith 1950). Curiously, the natives filled a dual role in paradise: they were both the epitome of natural human development and a practical obstacle in claiming the land and its bounties.

For the religious, Indians provided an opportunity to convert the heathen, both in the Southwest and New England. But their presence in the New World also posed complicated theological questions such as whether they descended from Adam, how they arrived in the Americas after Noah, and if they indeed had souls. Puritans Roger Williams and John Eliot saw the Indian as Edenic man, degenerated to a vile state (Teunissen and Hinz 1973, 41). Mainstream Puritans carried the idea even further, justifying their less than equitable treatment of Indians with typological arguments. In the Puritan world of divinely illuminated human reason, "the savage state itself was a divine sign of Satan's power: a sign of struggle and sin" (Pearce 1952, 201).

The Book of Mormon may resolve many of these theological questions, but American/Mormon cultural and social heritage, including real and imagined Indian dangers from pioneer times, still colors Mormon artistic interpretations of the native American. The noble savage invades most arts, Mormon and gentile, historical and contemporary. While Puritan and early American hymns are similar to Mormon hymns with references to "Zion," such as Isaac Watt's "Where Nothing Dwelt but Beasts of Prey" (1718), such references are rare and without the imperative theological connections found in Mormon hymns. Even American missionary hymns have only general references to "heathen nations" while Mormon hymns have a unique and vivid imagery of native Americans (Christ-Janer, Hughes, and Smith 1980, xii, 78, 120).

The first Mormon hymnal, *Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of the Latter-day Saints* (1835) was compiled by Emma Smith with the assistance of W. W. Phelps. Phelps's own "O Stop and Tell me Red Man" was included, as was Parley P. Pratt's "The Solid Rocks Were Rent in Twain." Many subsequent hymns were published in Mormon periodicals such as *The Morning and Evening Star*, while a special hymnal for the English Saints, the *Manchester Hymnal* was published in 1840. Other official hymnals were: *Psalmody of 1857*, *The Psalmody of 1889*, and *Songs of Zion* (1908) which included new hymns with Indian references, "Great Spirit Listen to the Red Man's Wail!" "O'er Gloomy Hills of Darkness," and "For the Strength of the Hills."

LDS Hymns of 1927, known as "the green book," added these hymns with brief Indian references: "We're Proud of Utah," "O Wouldst Thou from Bondage," and "Deseret, Deseret! 'Tis Home of the Free." *Hymns* (1948), in use until the fall of 1985, added "The Wintry Day Descending to its Close," retained "O'er Gloomy Hills" and "For the Strength of the Hills" and eliminated all of the other Indian hymns (Cracroft 1981). The forthcoming hymnal (September 1985) will delete "O'er Gloomy Hills" and add no new Indian hymns.

W. W. Phelps (1792–1872), author of twenty-nine of the ninety songs in the first 1835 edition, wrote "O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man" (1927, no. 64), dropped from the 1948 hymnal.

> O Stop and tell me, Red Man, who are you, why you roam,
> And how you get your living; have you no God, no home?
> With stature straight and portly, and decked in native pride,
> With feathers, paints and brooches, he willingly replied.

The Indian recounts his fall from light in Book of Mormon times "some thousand moons ago." He readily acknowledges his progenitors' uncivilized state:

> And long they've lived by hunting instead of works and arts,
> And so our race has dwindled to idle Indian hearts.
> Yet hope within us lingers, As if the Spirit spoke,
> He'll come for your redemption, and break the Gentile yoke.

The red man then expresses hope that his people will "quit their savage customs, to live with God at home." Phelps's lyrics reflect the Puritan work ethic: hunting is idleness and a nomadic society is therefore not only homeless but godless. He also repeats the Puritan assumption that the Indian, once exposed to the gospel, would quickly and willingly embrace a new life of obedience, with innate nobility overcoming acquired savagery.

Another hymn describing the plight of the contemporary Indian from a Book of Mormon perspective is "The Solid Rocks Were Rent in Twain," by poet-apostle Parley P. Pratt (1807–57), which appeared from the first edition through 1948. The first thirteen stanzas tell of Christ's crucifixion, his visit to America, the Nephite destruction, and dwindling of the Lamanites . . .

> Until the Gentiles from afar,
> Should smite them in a dreadful war,
> And take possession of their land,
> And they should have no power to stand.
>
> But their remnants wander far,
> In darkness, sorrow and despair,
> Lo! From the earth their record comes
> To gather Israel to their homes.

Pratt's metaphorical description of the Indian "remnants wander[ing] . . . in darkness" refers, of course, to their religiously unenlightened condition and "Lo" may allude to Alexander Pope's well-known

> Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind
> Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind
> (Pope 1733, 9; Berkhofer 1979, 79).

The 1908 *Songs of Zion* adds to the previous two hymns a more sympathetic description of the oppressed and benighted Indian nation: "Great Spirit Listen to the Red Man's Wail!" (1927, No. 77). This hymn, adopting an Indian voice, calls out a cavalry of clichés:

> Great Spirit, listen to the red man's wail!
> . . .
> Great Chieftain, save him from the palefaced foe!
>
> His broad, green hunting grounds, where buff'loes roam
> His bubbling streams where finny thousands play
> The waving prairies, once his happy home,
> Are fast departing to the Christian's sway.
>
> With curs'd firewater's stupefying flame,
> (Which lulled the senses of our chiefs to rest)
> And soft-mouthed words, the cheating pale face came
> And stole our lands and drove us to the west.
>
> Our gray-haired med'cine men, so wise and good,
> Are all confounded with the dread disease,
> Which ne'er was known to flow in Indian blood
> Till white men brought it from beyond the seas.

An angel replies with comforting promises:

> Not many moons shall pass away before
> The curse of darkness from your skins shall flee,
> Your ancient beauty will the Lord restore,
> And all your tribes shall dwell in unity.
>
> The arts of peace shall flourish ne'er to die;
> The warwhoop and the deadly strife shall cease;
> Disease shall then depart, and every sigh,
> And health and life shall flow in every breeze.

The hymn ends with assurances of a glorious Indian redemption. In spite of the trite and melodramatic lyrics, Penrose sympathizes over the white man's

disruption of the Indian way of life. However, sympathy does not prevent misconception and stereotyping. Penrose assumes that all Indians are prairie-dwellers and that one day "all . . . tribes shall dwell in unity," whereas tribal distinction is of vital importance to most native Americans. Recognizing only one pattern of civilization, Penrose regards the Indian as savage and uncivilized. Accordingly, the only choices for the Indian are to become civilized/assimilated or eliminated through disease or extermination. Another misconception is the belief that the Indians' darker skin would some day undergo a literal change (absolute assimilation), a common expectation until the recent 1981 rewording of 2 Nephi 30:6, in which "pure" was substituted for "white": "And their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a *pure* and a delightsome people" (italics added).

Other 1927 hymns make occasional mention of Indians, usually in the context of white occupation of the virgin wilderness, in which Indians are associated with woodland animals (Smith 1950, 84). In William Wills's "Deseret, Deseret! 'Tis Home of the Free" (*Hymns* 1927, No. 189), for instance, the Indian is paired with the more dangerous wilderness animals:

> Where the savage has wandered, by darkness debased,
> Where the wolf and the bear unmolested did roam.

Theodore Curtis proclaims in "We're Proud of Utah" (*Hymns* 1927, No. 324) that the state was "won from a hostile band." And Charles W. Penrose again celebrates the western Mormon liberation in the hymn "O Wouldst Thou from Bondage" (*Hymns* 1927, No. 376) describing the plains with "waving grass, Where the red man roams in his pride." Roaming is a verb associated with wild animals not civilized, city-building Saints.

The 1948 hymnal retains only three passing mentions of Indians. "O'er Gloomy Hills of Darkness," (No. 127) by Williams, first appeared in the 1908 *Songs of Zion* (No. 28). Commemorating the gospel message to the world, the second verse begins:

> Let the Indian and the Negro,
> Let the rude barbarian see
> That divine and glorious conquest
> Once obtained on Calvary.

"For the Strength of the Hills" (No. 241) also first appeared in *Songs of Zion.* The 1927 hymnal added a new fourth verse which again pairs the Indian with the animals:

> Here the wild bird swiftly darts on
> His quarry from the heights
> And the red untutored Indian
> Seeketh here his rude delights
> But the Saints for thy communion
> Have sought the mountain sod.

This verse was retained in the 1948 hymnal but was deleted in October 1971.[1] In Orson F. Whitney's (1855–1931) poem "The Wintry Day Descending to Its Close" (No. 292), a reverie symbolic of earthly redemption, the third and fourth stanzas reflect on the western settlement, "where roamed at will the savage Indian band." The new hymnal (September 1985) will change "savage" to "fearless."

In addition to hymns, traditional Mormon folk songs contain vivid, often savage, images of the Indian. In "St. George and the Drag-on" (Kaufman 1980, 24) by Charles L. Walker, even "prowling Indians" cannot endure that "awful place." In "Root, Hog or Die" (Kaufman 1980, 14) "bloody redskins" are classified among wild animals as part of the wilderness landscape. The savagery is explicit in "The Ox-Team Trail" (Cheney 1981, 53):

> And bands of redskin beggars
> Molesting through the day
> Would steal at night and kill
> When they were brought to bay.

Conforming to the stereotype of Indian barbarism in "Mountain Meadows Massacre," the Mormons dress "in Indian garb and colors," and attack "rush-[ing] in Indian style," whatever that may be (Cheney 1981, 203–4).

"Book of Mormon Stories," from the current children's *Sing With Me* (Bates 1980, B-87), though ostensibly not about latter-day Indians, harbors two very contemporary misconceptions. One is the vacant land philosophy — "Lamanites met others who were seeking liberty/And the land soon welcomed all who wanted to be free" — and the other is its melodic stereotyping of Indian music. The first line descends along a quasi-pentatonic scale. The second phrase, beginning "Long ago their fathers came. . . ," maintains the pentatonic feeling and begins at a lower pitch than the opening phrase, also semi-accurate. The stereotyping occurs in the left-hand accompaniment that exploits a "tom-tom" rhythm by utilizing open fifth chords and a rhythmic afterbeat:

Long a - go their fa - thers came from far a - cross the sea.
Book of Mor - mon stor - ies say that we must bro - thers be.

[1] Some editions attribute the lyrics to Lorenzo Snow (*Hymns* 1948, No. 241), but the 1979 printing attributes the lyrics to Felicia D. Hemons, altered by Edward L. Sloan. Hemans (1793–1835) was a popular English poet whose favorite topics were home, country, and nature.

The "bold" rhythmic imagery may inspire children to imitate tom-toms and chanting as well as reinforce other misperceptions bred by movie versions of Indian music and culture:

Giv'n this land if they liv'd right - eous - ly.
Giv'n this land if we live right - eous - ly.

Among contemporary Mormon composers, only William F. Hanson has studied native Indian music and topics (Hanson 1937). Intensely interested in the Ute Indians and their traditional ceremonies, Hanson wrote and produced *The Sun Dance Opera* in 1913 in Vernal, Utah, based on combined Sioux and Ute traditions (1967, 132–76). The production was successful and traveled throughout Utah in occasional productions until 1935. In 1938, *The Sun Dance Opera* was performed twice on Broadway.

The original score is unavailable, but the libretto has been published in Hanson's *Sun Dance Land*, which also includes a history of performances. The plot is a love story, superimposed on a reenactment of the Sioux Sun Dance ritual. The lead roles were played by non-Indians, but Indians performed the ceremonials. Unfortunately, in production the *Sun Dance Opera* probably resembled a glorified Wild West show superimposed on a love-triangle melodrama. In early performances one main Indian character was even a centenarian "Old Sioux, reported to be a cousin to Sitting Bull and a veteran of Custer's Charge" (p. 80).

Hanson's fondness for the Indian people is apparent through his devoted efforts to present them and their practices to the public. However, while the Wild West show genre may have appealed to the public, no evidence exists of any impact on Indian-white understanding or appreciation. Old Sioux appears to be the stereotypical wise old tribal chief. The ceremonial, though authentic in some ways, is a mix of Ute and Sioux, two disparate tribes. And Hanson's narrative does not depart from the usual dehumanizing labels: squaws, papooses, and braves — never men, women, or children. He even quaintly describes the stage cues as "tell 'em times" (p. 84). These flaws are only partially mitigated by native Americans performing their own music. Neither popular and folk nor official Church music have altered the traditional image of the Indian as essentially benighted, savage, and uncivilized.

In this combination of neglect and stereotyping, LDS music has not differed significantly from mainstream American music. Early twentieth-century composers Edward Macdowell and Rudolph Friml produced a fair share of Indian love songs, but these pieces were more characteristic of late Romanticism than authentic Indian melodies. Hymns usually emphasize lyrics, but lyrics are a

minor consideration in native American musical practices. Native American music, because of its scalar patterns, pulsing rhythms and unique vocal styles, may be the most misunderstood artistic expression of native Americans. However, recent interest in American Indians and the increased education of native Americans has resulted in recognition of contributions by native Americans to American ethnic musics.

In the late nineteenth century, a number of anthropologists traveled among various Indian tribes and recorded the native music using primitive recording devices. In so doing, however, Francis Densmore, Gertrude Kurath, and others unwittingly preserved a disappearing oral tradition. Catalogued in the Smithsonian Institution are the songs of many tribes who no longer carry on the oral traditions, nor speak their native tongues. The primary purpose of these early anthropologists was to demonstrate the role of music in primitive societies, not assess its aesthetic value. More recent work conducted by David McAllester studies the aesthetics of Navajo music.

Native American song and dance is a folk-art, and thus has no identifiable composers. Techniques vary with tribes and geographies; however, a disguised complexity is perhaps the most typical feature of native American music. To describe this music as chanting, whooping, and drum beating is to ignore the aesthetic intricacies of a highly organized musical style. Difficult to accurately transcribe, it demonstrates a complexity involving specific scalar and rhythmic patterns, balanced cascading phrasing, frequent pedal harmonies, imitative rounds, and an abstraction of vocal styles that eliminates texting in favor of vocables.

One contemporary native American composer has attempted to integrate native traditions with modern and Occidental styles of music. Louis Ballard (Quapaw, Oklahoma), instructor emeritus at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is known for works that use native American melodies in a symphonic or large choral setting.

One of Ballard's students is Mormon musician John C. Rainer, Jr. (Taos Pueblo), a collector of traditional songs and styles who also arranges and composes pieces for voice, drum, and flute. Making his own flutes in traditional style, Rainer has gained national prominence as one who is attempting to preserve a rapidly disappearing tradition (Romney 1982). Rainer has also creatively superimposed native American musical idioms on traditional Mormon hymns such as "I Need Thee Ev'ry Hour." In Rainer's version for mixed chorus, the men begin on a pulsating tonic tone. The women then sing the melody in unison over the men's chant, which emphasizes the pentatonic qualities of the melody in a haunting and beautiful amalgam of both familiar and foreign. Merrill Bradshaw recalls "hearing that hymn in a way I had never thought of before, . . . sending chills down my spine" (Bradshaw 1983).

Perhaps the most popular native American Mormon contribution to music is the song "Go, My Son" by Arliene Nofchissey Williams, a Navajo, and Carnes Burson, a Ute. The text is set in a 1960s folk music style.

> Go, my son, go and climb the ladder;
> Go, my son, go and earn your feather;
> Go, my son, make your people proud of you.

Work, my son, get an education;
Work, my son, learn a good vocation;
And climb, my son,
Go and take a lofty view.

From on the ladder of education
You can see to help your Indian nation;
And lift your people up with you

(Smoot 1968, 41).

"Go, My Son" confronts a major contemporary Indian problem: education. Although sentimental, its emphasis on community and tribal affiliation grounds this song in authentic Indian values. The song is directed from a first-person speaker to "my son." In Navajo kinship, the terms may be used to designate other relationships besides a literal father and son. As the last line admonishes, the son's education benefits more than the one individual. The repetition of the phrase "my son," despite sexism, recalls the simple repetitive structures of traditional Navajo poetry. These native American Mormons have employed both popular and traditional musical styles without sacrificing native American values of tribal recognition and community.

Kate Kirkham's study of institutional power suggests that subtle forms of racism are more effectively perpetuated by conformity than by open prejudice and bigotry (1977, 21). As long as native Americans remain a voiceless minority, they will continue to be erroneously defined by the inherited stereotypes of popular culture. They will be dehumanized by references to braves, squaws, papooses, chiefs, and redskins rather than men, women, children, leaders, and human beings. They will be a subordinate nation even as they are sentimentally draped in noble savage rhetoric and admired. Being defined by the dominant majority is a very powerful form of cultural bondage from which native Americans should be encouraged to break free by expressing their own cultural values and identity in music, literature, and art.

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