

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Native Musicians in the Groove. By Vincent Schilling.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7b7140pc>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 35(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Goertzen, Chris

**Publication Date**

2011-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Native Musicians in the Groove.** By Vincent Schilling. Summertown, TN: 7th Generation, 2009. 132 pages. \$9.95 paper.

This book belongs to the publisher's Native Trailblazer Series, which is characterized on the book's back cover as shining "a spotlight on the contributions of Native Americans and First Nation Canadians who provide inspirational role models for young readers." This book fits the bill, with prose pitched at a teenage audience and with positive socialization as the obvious and acknowledged primary goal. The author wrote two previous books in the series, *Native Athletes in Action* (2007) and *Native Men of Courage* (2008). He neither claims nor evinces any special expertise in music. Nevertheless, there are modest but significant ways that the book deserves a readership broader than the teenagers who constitute its primary target audience.

It's a small book, divided into ten chapters, each of which is devoted to a given Native musician or group. Here are the names of these protagonists, along with their tribal affiliations and the genre of music that they have explored (in both cases, described with the exact wording employed in the book's index), listed in the order in which they are discussed in the book:

Michael Bucher, Cherokee, vocalist and composer of music to protect sacred sites

Mary Youngblood, Seminole/Aleut, Native American flutist

Crystal Shawanda, Ojibwa, country music singer

Blackfire, Navajo, punk rock and traditional Navajo

Leela Gilday, Dené, vocalist and composer with a message of hope and empowerment

Four Rivers Drum, variety of tribal affiliations, powwow drum group

Jamie Coon, Creek/Seminole, vocalist combining jazz and pop rock

Mato Nanji, Nakota Sioux, guitarist and leader of the band Indigenous

Shane Yellowbird, Cree, country music singer

Gabriel Ayala, Pascua Yaqui, classical guitarist

The average of four photos assigned to each essay almost always includes one or several photos of the artist(s) performing, in four of the ten cases has one of them as a child, and twice portrays them with family members, all positive images. In addition, the author gives several insets of inspirational lyrics by the subjects and further insets concerning topics that don't fit into the nicely paced flow of the prose, notably one about powwows, one about the institution of the honky-tonk, and a pair citing additional biographical detail. Following every essay, the author cites the performer's Web site. This demonstrates that these are real people willing to be contacted by young readers.

Nearly every essay follows the same tacit plan. The following elements appear approximately in this order: some biographical detail (often including a subject's moves in and out of Indian communities, their early and/or family exposure to music, and a careful and full description of tribal affiliations), facing and overcoming prejudice, narration of a pivotal inspirational moment or event, hard work, professional struggle, being beset by but triumphing over self-doubt, and professional success. The author often quotes encouraging advice from the performer. The repetitive structure of the essays builds some momentum and suggests that many more similar stories could have been told or could coalesce in the future, perhaps even the story of the young reader of the moment.

The essays, taken together, illustrate the wide variety of ways an identity can be shaped and end up as primarily Indian, whether skin tint or physiognomy seem to support that emphasis. Especially useful in this regard is the essay about the drum group Four Rivers Drum, the members of which hail from the Virginia Tidewater (as does the author). When each member's tribal associations are cited, this presents a complex picture. The array of genres in which aspiring Native performers have strived and succeeded is quite telling and helpful. In addition, some notable details emerge. For instance, country singer Shane Yellowbird began singing to overcome a stuttering problem (this reviewer heard him at a recent Choctaw Fair in Mississippi). Crystal Shawanda, alone in this group in not feeling that she has experienced prejudice, was nevertheless surrounded by other problems found in her Native community.

This reviewer regrets what others might consider a virtue of the book. Every story has a happy ending; each striving musician eventually achieves success. Every Indian teenager knows that this must reflect a willful choosing of evidence, and such an artificially rosy scenario risks being dismissed altogether, rather than cherished for its optimism. Citing a few partial or complete failures would have given the series a more realistic feel. We all know that only a small fraction of even the most talented and industrious young people who attempt to earn a living with music actually manage to do so, and all of us who teach music know that we are teaching self-discipline and pride as much as technique and musicianship. After all, trying energetically to become a professional musician results in the building of a strong character. That in itself is quite valuable, whether a given striver ends up playing music for a living, managing a store, driving a school bus, or working in some other respectable job.

*Chris Goertzen*

University of Southern Mississippi