

DINEH TAH NAVAJO DANCERS

In American Indian society, dance serves many needs. It asserts cultural identity, fulfills family and community obligations, and provides a sense of belonging. For dancers and audiences alike, the compelling beat of the drum, often called the heartbeat of Native people, elicits a visceral and emotional response. For many Indians, dancing is a lifelong pursuit. The reasons to dance are many: social, seasonal, as part of an age-related or life-cycle ritual, for feast days and agricultural ceremonies, at honoring ceremonies, medicine rites, and clan events. Some dances tell a story; others may be for curing, prayer; or initiation; still others may be for courting or hunting. Above all, dances-and the songs and rituals in which they are embedded- "allow Indians of today to reaffirm their ties to a living culture," as Charlotte Heth (Cherokee) wrote in *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions* (National Museum of the American Indian, 1992).

Native American dance traditions include songs and, in many though not all traditions, drums or rattles. Drums vary in size and shape, from small hand-held water-drums and flat frame drums to larger, freestanding, cylindrical drums and the big drum that powwow singers use. Dancers may be adorned with bells or jingles that add to the rhythm, while ribbons and feathers enhance the movements or add sacred elements. American Indian dances tend to emphasize the group rather than the individual, especially in ceremonial dances. Powwow competition has placed more emphasis on individual skills, but even there, viewers tend to see, and be dazzled by, an overall impression of massed movement and color; even during the individual competitions when a much smaller number of dancers take the floor:

Ceremonial dancing tends to be non-athletic, close to the earth, somewhat restrained, with small steps. Sometimes this is because dances are done in confined areas, like the longhouse or the small houses of the far north, or because a dance can be in many repeated parts, often taking hours to complete, so there is an emphasis on endurance and the conservation of energy. One dance that allows for individual expression is the hoop dance, perhaps the most spectacular opportunity for athletic display available to Indian dancers. Otherwise, writes Heth, "few traditional dances offer individual freedom of expression."

Certain dances may be done only in the community setting; ritual and ceremonial dances may exclude outsiders. But there are plenty of opportunities to watch, and, in some cases, even participate. At pueblos in the Southwest, for example, annual feast days are generally open to the public, and offer an opportunity for outsiders to experience traditional dances in the community context. Friendship dances, danced in a big circle, and certain couple dances, like the Navajo two-step, also provide an opportunity for Native and non-Native alike to experience the sense of camaraderie

and joy of dancing to the drum and rattle.

In his preface to *Native American Dance*, the director of the National Museum of the American Indian, W. Richard West, Jr. (Southern Cheyenne/Arapaho) writes, "Whether it is ceremonial or social in nature, native dance is an essential part of being-it may be wonderfully entertaining, but it is never regarded as entertainment." On the other hand, there is a history of performances by organized groups, some of which travel far from their home communities in which the dances-and dancers-were nurtured. For such performances, dancers are careful to honor traditions, often seeking permission of their elders to perform only the more social, public dances and not those that may only be done in the context of ritual and community. They dance to further understanding among cultures and to demonstrate that Native people are still here, with a direct, unbroken connection to their ancient past and traditions. But they also dance to entertain and to earn a livelihood.

The Dineh Tah Navajo Dancers was founded in 1993 by Shawn Price. Most of the dancers are students at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. This gifted, energetic group of young dancers is dedicated to providing audiences with an entertaining and educational look at Navajo traditions. They have performed extensively in the Southwest, at the annual Indian Summer Festival in Milwaukee, and were one of eight dance groups invited to perform at the First Americans Festival that celebrated the grand opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall in September 2004.

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Further reading

Heth, Charlotte, general editor: *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 1992.

Ortiz, Alfonso, ed. *Handbook of North American Indians*. Vols. 9 and 10, "Southwest." Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1979, 1983.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site www.loc.gov/folklife

