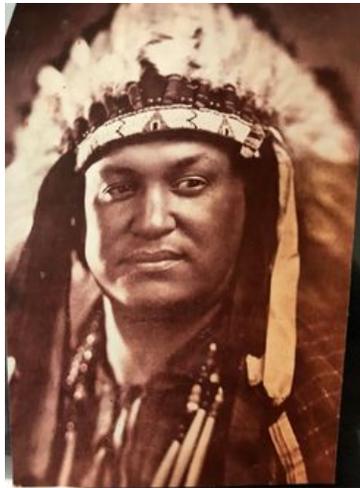


“Indians for Indians” (March 25, 1947)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Josh Garrett-Davis (guest post)*



Don Whistler

The “Indians for Indians Hour,” first broadcast from WNAD radio (640 kilocycles) in April 1941, is a long-standing landmark in both Indigenous and mass media history. Founded by Don Whistler/ Kesh-ke-kosh, the principal chief of the Sac and Fox Nation, the show reached nearly two dozen Native American nations in central and western Oklahoma--once estimated at 75,000 Native American listeners--whose homes and jurisdictions fell within the signal broadcast from the noncommercial station based at the University of Oklahoma. In representing many of the complexities of Native Oklahoma in a dialogue between performers and listeners, the show served communities otherwise neglected or misrepresented in American media.

Don Whistler (1894–1951) was born at the Sac and Fox Indian Agency and educated at agency, church, and public schools. He briefly gained national recognition as an early Native curator at the University of Pennsylvania Museum in the 1920s before returning home to work in s family businesses in Norman, Oklahoma, home of the state university and WNAD. For a time, he served as a superintendent in a Works Progress Administration (WPA) oral history project, the Indian-Pioneer History Collection, and, in 1938, was elected as the first Sac and Fox chief under the new form of representative tribal government adopted after the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act. In 1941, he used personal connections at WNAD to help establish what he always called the “Indians for Indians Hour,” even though the station named it simply “Indians for Indians” and it was only half an hour long.

Each Tuesday at 1:00pm, the show began with Whistler declaring, “Ahô nîhkâne! Kesh-ke-kosh a nîna!” This translated from Sauk as roughly, “Hello, friend! It is I, Kesh-ke-kosh!” He then listed the show number--the show selected for the National Registry was the 297th episode, airing on March 25, 1947--and introduced the week’s guest performers.

Whistler recorded most live shows on 16-inch discs, explaining on one episode later the same year, “We put those [performances] on a record and put it away with our other good Indian music to be kept for a long, long time.” His creation of a carefully numbered archive likely drew on his experience working in a museum and an oral history project, but it also built on the work of Indigenous performers who, for half a century, had also created sound archives, usually in collaboration with non-Native

anthropologists or with record labels.

The performers ranged broadly: War Mothers singing groups, like the Kiowa performers who appeared on this selected 1947 episode, which reflected the extensive Native service in World War II; singing groups promoting upcoming events on the burgeoning powwow and celebration circuit of central and western Oklahoma; Christian groups singing hymns or speaking sermons in both Native languages and English; Sun Dance or Native American Church singers who shared repressed religious traditions well in advance of the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act; school groups from some of Oklahoma's several Indian boarding schools; and others. The weekly listening and occasional performances by these schoolchildren—children who had often removed from their homes and communities by the federal government or churches--constituted a crucial part of the show. For 30 minutes a week, tribal representatives entered the schools over the airwaves--against the schools' official intentions to eradicate Native cultures.

Whistler generally avoided explicit politics on the show, which was not surprising given the number of tribal and other governments and the potential for controversy. But he did, for example, use the show to exhort listeners to write to Congress to protect the Indian Claims Commission when the new organization, the National Congress of American Indians, asked him to do so in 1948.

More broadly, though, the show demonstrated how noncommercial mass media could serve a dispersed community in a responsive way. One week, performers sent Whistler a telegram just an hour before the show to announce that they would perform the following week; Whistler was able to then enthusiastically confirm and announce that the group would be coming onto the program over the air almost immediately after. The hosts did not prescribe what performers should do. After Whistler passed away in 1951, Boyce Timmons (Cherokee) took over as primary host of the show. In an oral history, Timmons recalled, "If they'd ask us, 'What would you like for us to do?' I'd say, 'It's your program.... It's up to you what you want to do with it. You've got the time, and you just step in there and take it over.'"

While the show lost its place in Norman a few years after the station went commercial in the 1970s, "Indians for Indians" remains on the air, today, on KACO 98.5 FM in Anadarko, sponsored by the Comanche Nation and hosted by Edmond Mahseet (Comanche). It is now a three-hour program every Sunday morning.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.