

Dawn Avery

CLASSICAL SOUNDS FROM NATIVE AMERICA

BY J. POET

CELLIST DAWN AVERY IS ONE OF THE FEW Native American artists playing classical music. Her father is a jazz drummer, and her earliest musical memories are of falling asleep against his drum set while he played along with Miles Davis records. She trained classically at the Manhattan School of Music and New York University and has played with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and the New York City Opera. She's toured with a Persian funk band; Velvet Underground co-founder John Cale; Okenti, her own world music ensemble; and the Taagi Three Sides Native chamber trio, among others. She's also interested in shamanism, healing and meditation. She's recorded albums focusing on classical, singer/songwriter and spiritual music.

Native Peoples: What is your tribe and tribal affiliation?

Dawn Avery: She:kon. I am of Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) descent and wear the Turtle Clan. My Indian name is *Ierihokwats*, which means "she digs deeply into her roots to learn."

What got you interested in the cello?

Have you ever seen how beautiful a cello looks? Like a strong woman you want to hold. In school, I wanted to play flute, but they said my music test scores were too high, so I had to take a stringed instrument. I had a tough decision later in life—whether to play cello or piano—and my dad did a ceremony with me to help me decide. Cello won. It's an amazing instrument in terms of its sound, vibration, the different things you can do it. I like to play it in unusual ways, like a percussion instrument, or a guitar, or bass, or like a melodic, sensual cello.

Tell us about your world music ensemble, Okenti; the North American Indian Cello Project; and your solo work.

Okenti, which means "sacred" in Kanienkeha, is me on cello, voice, percussion and dance; Thirza Defoe (Oneida/Ojibwe), who is a dancer, singer and flautist; and Larry Mitchell, our guitar player and producer. We are currently touring a show called "Ceremony: Rapidly Approaching Ecstasy." We incorporate film, dance, storytelling and music. The audience participates in a ceremony during the show. The music is predominantly from [our CD] *Rapidly Approaching Ecstasy* but also uses some new pieces and songs from *Our Fire: Native American Contemporary Songs*. The North American Indian Cello Project commissions new works by Native composers, with recitals and lectures that include traditional, contemporary and classical music by Native composers. I'm finishing a dissertation on Classical Native music in which I'm looking at compositions by Navajo composers [Raven] Chacon and [Tio] Becenti, along with my own work and that of the Mohican composer Brent Michael Davids.

What was the genesis of your new album, Rapidly Approaching Ecstasy?

I've wanted to record this project for over 20 years. It's a culmination of who I am as a musician, a person and a Native woman. The

True (Okenti Records, 2002)

Viento: CelloVision! (Okenti 2006) with Tom McGrath

Alchemy: Music for Meditation (Okenti 2006)

Tulpe (Okenti 2008) with Sarah Davol

Our Fire: Contemporary Native American Songs (Deer Star Productions, 2010)

Rapidly Approaching Ecstasy (Okenti 2012) with Larry Mitchell

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COURTESY DAWN AVERY

A ceremony with her father inspired Dawn Avery (Mohawk) to choose the cello over the piano.

seven tracks are named for the chakras within the human body, focal points for receiving and transmitting energy. The album includes chanting in Mohawk, Tibetan, Farsi, Hebrew, Sanskrit and Spanish. I received a residency to record at Rancho Linda Vista in Arizona and asked Larry Mitchell if he'd like to collaborate. He showed up in a Mini Cooper, packed with an entire recording studio and four guitars. Each morning, we got up early and walked through the desert to the barn where we had set up a studio. I led him through a meditation on the chakra of the day. He asked me for the vibe, instrumentation, cultural focus, tempo and key, then he worked to create a wondrous palette of sounds to improvise over. We play all the instruments on the album, and every choice was made from a place of spirit. Our creative connection was ecstatic. ☯