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TLINGIT MUSIC IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

The 30-mile wide strip of mainland and 80-mile wide island chain known as the southeast Alaskan panhandle is the home of about 10,000 Tlingit (and also of about 2,000 northern Haida and Metlakatla Tsimshian). In the same way that the rich natural resources and social complexity of these groups contrast with those of Indians of the Interior, such as the Athabascans, so does Tlingit music contrast with that further inland. Particularly evident is the elaboration of Tlingit ceremonial dance costumes, including formal potlatch headwear, Chilkat blankets, dance bibs and dance tunics. Tlingit dance paddles and dance staffs, Raven rattles and round rattles, and the unusual carved painted wooden box-drums, are highly stylized in design and formal in use. Less evident but perhaps more significantly, Tlingit musical sound may reflect social structure. The social stratification inherent in Tlingit chieftainship is suggested in the occasional part-singing which is heard, and the bipartite nature of balanced matrilineages is suggested in the particular kind of melodic polarity heard in many of the songs.

Tlingit dancing, too, may reflect narrowly defined social status in a society that formerly consisted of nobility, commoners, and slaves. Dance movements are relatively tight and restricted, especially when compared to neighboring dance styles, such as that of the Alaskan Eskimo. Dance performance prescriptions are strictly observed, and reflect clan rivalries and sib solidarity.

Musical borrowing is a Tlingit cultural value, extending even to the use of Russian sailors' hats and Japanese kimonos for potlatch dancing. These were observed and carefully copied during the late nineteenth century, when foreign ships put into

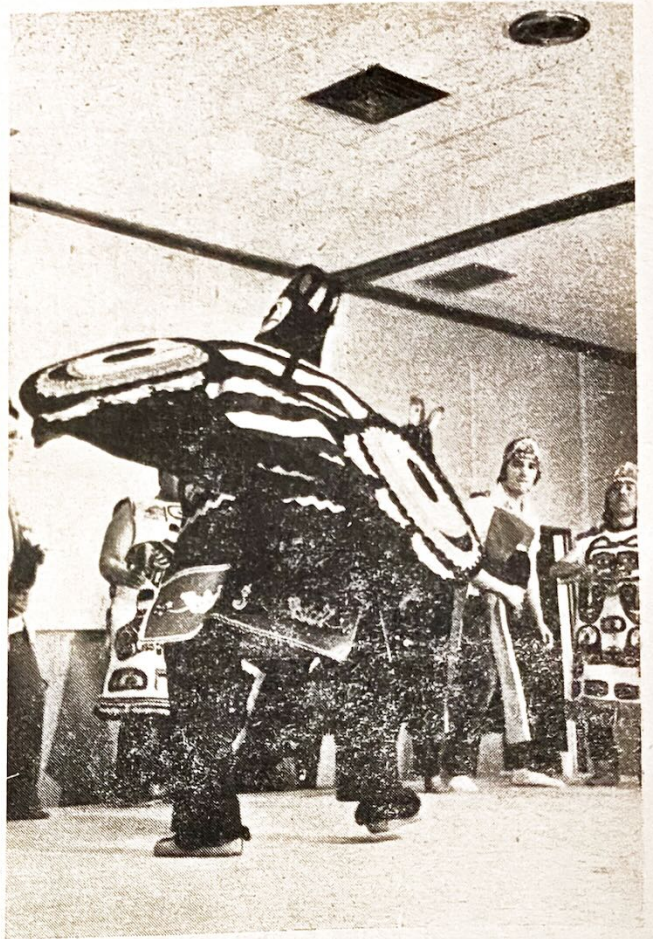
harbor. Songs and songwords are borrowed but their adoption is formalized and highly selective, the Tlingit cultural filter permitting the use of certain Haida, Tsimshian, and Athabascan material where specific advantages are perceived. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, Tsimshian songwords were thought to enhance the Tlingit shaman's supernatural powers, being incomprehensible and therefore somewhat mystical.

Much social and musical change has occurred in the present century, and the rich pre-potlatch incantation has given way to an emphasis upon post-potlatch dancing. Changes in Tlingit lifeways and worldview have brought about corresponding changes in musical attitudes. For instance, the recent weakening of Tlingit matrilineality has resulted in the fact that offspring now unconcernedly and publicly sing songs belonging to the father, this despite the still strict clan cleavage between the mother's side of the family and that of the father (who belongs to a clan other than that of his children). Tlingit music, like the Tlingit language (of which there are but 1,000 speakers left), is today caught in two powerful crosscurrents: the negative one of assimilation into the dominant White culture, and the positive one of Native cultural renaissance. Evidence of the influence of the former is seen in the fact that few Tlingit youngsters are familiar with the ancient songs and dances. Evidence of the latter was to be seen at the Alaska Native Brotherhood Conference at Yakutat, in November of 1974. There, nearly one hundred elaborately costumed Tlingit dancers gathered to perform their traditional dances. Other evidence was to be seen at the Alaska Native Arts Festival, at

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PLATE 1. Tlingit dancer Jim Austin of Juneau does the Raven dance. Note, from bottom to top, the floral pattern representing the earth, the ocean waves, the Thunderbird eyes, and the thunder.

PLATE 2. Rear view of the Raven dancer, showing his spread "wings". The other dancers sing and provide a rhythmic accompaniment on the drum and the rattles.

PLATE 3. The Seagull dancer of the Gie-san dance-team from Douglas Island.



PLATE 4. *The Gie-san dance-team drummer wears one of the famous Chilkat blankets, plus a ceremonial headdress. Note how Tlingit children are encouraged to participate in traditional dancing.*



PLATE 5. *The famous Tlingit Button Blanket, here worn with a Bear-ear head-band.*



PLATE 6. *The Tlingit war rattle is carved with clan emblems and contains pebbles. The spherical shape contrasts with the well-known Tlingit Raven rattle, which is long and pointed.*



PLATE 7.

Alaskan Tlingit Indian dancers at the Alaska Native Brotherhood Conference held at Yakutat. Here the dancers, usually in a circle, stand in line for a special movement. Note the dancer's fringed mittens, which are shaken in time to the drumming, so as to make the fringes dance. Note the salmon emblem on the center costume, and the Yakutat folk-tale depicted in the design on the costume at the left.



PLATE 8.

Many Tlingit children travelled long distances to the ANB Conference in order to dance in the traditional costumes they had made for themselves. The pattern on the first headband is derived from ancient tattoo designs, which were available only to the rich. That on the second headband is called "outside of the cockle clam" (yuh-thlu-thate). That on the third is derived from a motif signifying "head of the salmonberry". Most of the dancers depicted appear to belong to Eagle clan.



PLATE 9.

Aged Tlingit drummer accompanying the Yakutat dance-team. The design is derived from one commonly found on Tlingit basket lids. Note the padded, wound beater. The drumhead is of caribou hide and is stretched by thongs tied in the back, and which act as a handle.

PLATE 10.

Drummer Martha Shields accompanies the dance-team from Saxman. Dancer at left bears a double-headed eagle on the back of her short dance-cape. Note the famous Tlingit button blankets in center.



PLATE 11.

Carved Tlingit dance-paddles are painted with traditional clan emblems and insignia; they are used as an extension of the arms into space, and add energy to the dance motion. Fringes on dance costumes are an idea borrowed from the neighboring Athabascan Indians, who had more access to caribou hide and used it in strips as ornamentation.



PLATE 12.

A dancer from the Salmon clan stands next to one from the Hawk clan. Traditionally, the different clans entertained and hosted each other in a very formal manner at musical potlatches, at which were arranged marriages, treaties, and other important social matters.



PLATE 13.

Tlingit drummers Martha Shields and Harry Bremner rehearse their rhythms and their songs backstage. A musical error is believed to be an ill omen.



PLATE 14. *In ancient times, much Tlingit music was performed for economic reasons: to cement friendly relations during a trade meet, or to accompany the distribution of surplus goods to assembled potlatchers. Today, at the ANB Annual Conference, funds are raised by singing the special Collection Song. Money is thrown on the floor before the dancers, to the accompaniment of sung exhortations from the leader (right).*

PLATE 15. *The Sergeant-at-Arms then steps forward (center) and makes a typical Tlingit oration praising the generosity of the assembled participant. Note the eagle emblem on the front of the dance-tunic. At such fund-raising dances, there is stiff competition between clans, to donate the most.*

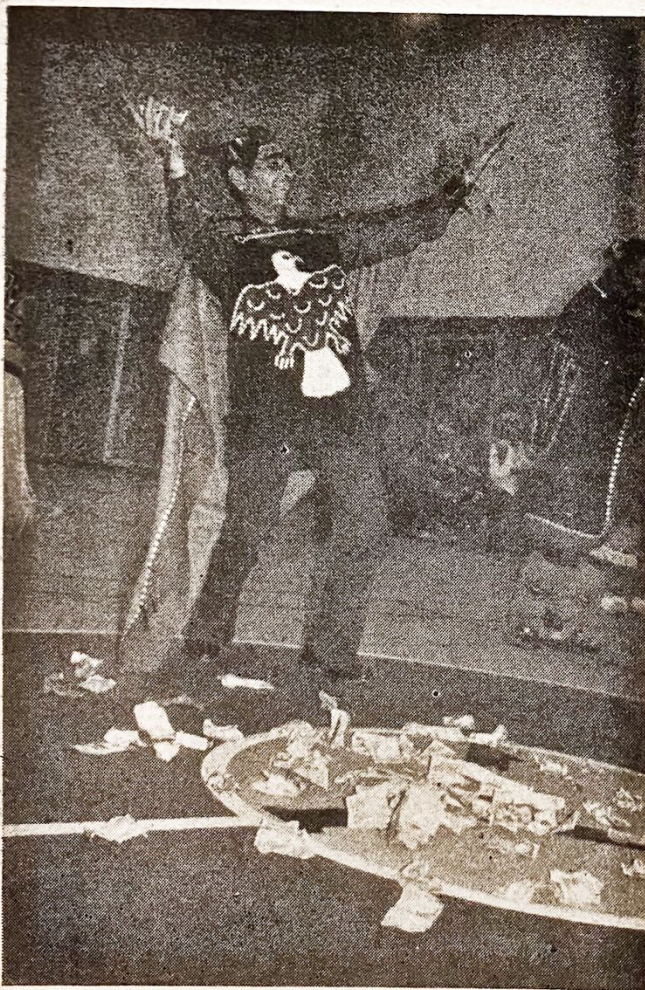


PLATE 16.

The donations are then put into a bag and formally carried off by two Tlingit officials, to be counted.

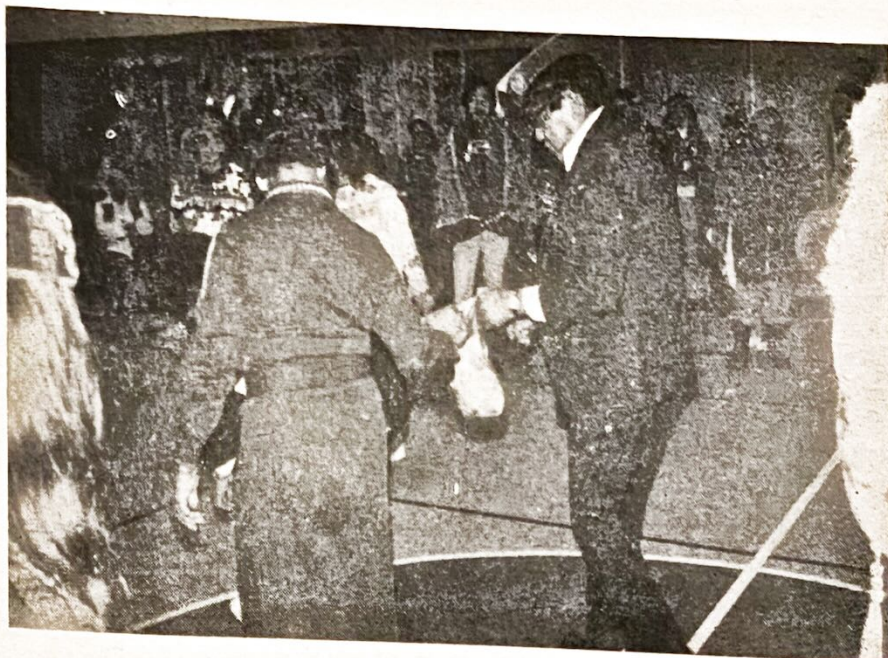


PLATE 17.

Some of the ancient ways of the Tlingits, Haida, Tsimshian, and Eyak of Southeast Alaska are being lost as the knowledgeable generation passes away. Here is Annie Harry, last of the Eyak. Born 73 years ago in Cordova, Annie served a famous American linguist (Dr. Michael Krauss) as informant in order to reconstruct the valuable but almost dead Eyak language. Clan emblem on the Conference Table is Bear (note the ears). Figures are commonly depicted double-sided or opened-out; this permits the viewer to see more than in real life. It may derive from the Tlingit subsistence skill of skinning animals.



PLATE 18.

Joe Johnson Sr is another well-known Tlingit, skilled in musical lore. Here, in Juneau, Johnson demonstrates Tlingit drum rhythms as the Alaska Marine Highway Ferry passes on its way to Haines.



Fairbanks in April 1975. There, forty schoolchildren from the Tlingit town of Angoon gathered to react ancient musical ceremonies taught to them by the elders of Angoon. Under the Johnson-O'Malley Act, funds have been made available to pay local Tlingit dance experts to teach children their traditional musical heritage, during school time. The main dance instructor, himself the grandson of a Tlingit shaman, ensures that the correct facial paint, dance costume, ornamental headwear, and other dance accessories are used for each type of dance or ceremony. This spiritual renewal of Tlingit music is taking place in other villages in the southeast: Hoonah, Saxman, Sitka, Haines, Yakutat, and Kwackwan.

Tlingit songs are thought to originate from the spirits of the mountains and the ocean. Often, they constitute personal histories. A woman who lost her son by drowning 'heard' a melody in the waves on the beach, and composed a song recording the tragic incident in her life. Later, on the death of another member of the family, the woman added another verse. Tlingit songs often record past migrations, and other aspects of tribal history. To understand the songwords, it is often necessary to know Tlingit legends and myths, elements of which may be referred to obliquely.

There are six main song types: shaman's songs, children's songs, peace songs, dance songs, and proprietary clan songs. In the songs, it is the words which show the divisions and selections most clearly, for the music itself may be rather free and irregular. A common format is as follows: refrain, stanza one, repeat of stanza one, repeat of refrain, stanza two, repeat of stanza two. The melody of the refrain finds itself expanded and developed in the stanza, often to allow for a new set of songwords.

Some songs consist largely of meaningless syllables, which act partly as a memory device to recall the melody. Where real words occur, these often possess suffixed vocables, and have their inner vowel sounds changed, as part of the formality of musicmaking. Animal and bird calls are common within the songs, including Raven calls, whale spouting noises, and Tsimshian whistle calls. These happen mostly near the ends of phrases. The taking of breath is emphasized as a musical and dramatic device, rather than as a necessary evil in music. Songs are accompanied by dramatic gestures indicating the sky or someone present in the audience. An important individual for whom a song may have been composed, should not be mentioned specifically by name, within the song.

Regarding the sound of Tlingit music, there is usually a beginning leap upward, of an octave or a fifth, usually followed by a gradual descent and then another rise. Throughout the course of a performance the overall pitch tends to rise; this is intentional and is thought of as a form of variation of the melody. Melodies are commonly constructed and elaborated by being transposed upward or downward in short sections. The transposed distance is usually a fourth or a third. Descending major thirds are common. Clusters of major and minor seconds

are frequently found. At the time of historic contact, the Tlingit were beginning to develop a form of vocal harmony, consisting either of drone plus melody, or melody in fifths. It appears that the period of intensified contact interrupted this musical development, so that it never really matured. Forward motion within the melody is imparted by series of repeated notes, increasing musical tension, or by gradually decreasing note-value, moving from long, held tones to shorter, faster ones.

Tlingit drumming usually falls on the afterbeat of the song, so that voice and drum obey different pulses, providing a variety of interesting accents. Drum and voice hardly ever start together. Often, the drumming may begin first, and may take the form of a rapid tremolo, out of tempo. This would appear to be an imitation of a rattle. Within the song, dramatic portions are emphasized by ceasing drumming altogether, so that the voice proceeds alone for a short period.

Tlingit dance costumes traditionally bear clan emblems, and are among the most colorful of American northwest coast Indian apparel. The usual context of Tlingit dancing is the potlatch, a festive and musical occasion on which rivalries and enmities are set aside in favor of emphasizing friendly relations between different groups. The potlatch is thus an integrative institution, and singing and dancing are two of the main ways in which social harmony is achieved.

A new function increasingly emphasized in Tlingit dancing is community pride and cultural identity, the various dance-teams representing specific villages at inter-village gatherings, and the sound of the music and the style of the dancing representing Alaskan Tlingit Indianism. The readily identifiable Tlingit dance costumes, particularly, bring home to participant and spectator alike the ancient cultural beliefs concerning music, namely, supernatural aid in composition, the private ownership of songs, and placation of the hunting spirits via lively and entertaining animal mimicry. All of these are seen in the use of the carefully designed and implemented Tlingit dance costumes, which take long hours to create and are of high monetary value. Even in the changing Alaska world of oil, timber, and fishing industries, the Tlingit of the southeast maintain great pride in their unique musical heritage. One of the most popular dance-teams is that led by Johnny Marks of Douglas Island, the Gie-san Dancers, shown here. Another is the Chilkat Dancers, from Haines. This group was formed in 1959, and immediately won the first prize of the Annual Intertribal Ceremonials at Gallup, New Mexico. Today they rehearse and perform in their tribal house on the parade grounds of old Fort William Seward. Nearby — in the old military hospital — is the headquarters of Alaska Indian Arts, Inc., an associated organization. Here ten to twelve Tlingits carve emblemmed wall panels, totem poles, and soapstone artifacts, as well as making silver bracelets and copper plaques, or executing fine block printing. Over one hundred people have gone through the Alaska Indian Arts

training program, a program which is closely allied to Tlingit music through the production of ceremonial costumes such as are shown here.

Tlingit music, like Tlingit sculpture and painting, is a unique art form worthy of the rich culture which has typified the Northwest Coast Indians for many centuries. It is a valued tribal possession which, despite half a century of acculturation and assimilation, has survived and is now taking an upward turn. The Tlingit people recognize the importance of retaining the unique ethnic identity which has

for so long distinguished the lifeways of their forefathers, and are taking steps to ensure that their children at least have a choice of musical styles — to sing and dance like a Tlingit or to be merely a copy of their economically stronger, newly-arrived brothers.

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