

Healing to the Beat of a Different Drum

The Tony Redhouse Story

From the very improbable way that his parents met, through years in the wilderness when either drugs or alcohol could have taken his life, it is no small miracle that Tony Redhouse is alive and with us today. But for all the people he is now helping to stay alive, and for all those that he touches with his music and his healing ceremonies, there are many who are truly grateful that he is. Looking back, it's obvious that his personal struggles and dark times came along to mold and shape him into who he needed to be - there were no accidents, the steadfast pulse of his true destiny in life "never missed a beat."

From his youth, Tony was inspired by the sound of his father's Native American drum. Rex Redhouse would sing traditional Diné (Navajo) squaw dance songs in the home using drums he would make in the back yard to provide the beat. For traditional Native American people, the drum is the central force that keeps the songs, dances, and ceremonies alive in the hearts of the people. "It unites the feet of our people in dance, and inspires us to sing our personal songs from within," says Tony.

Rex grew up on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, and endured much hardship in his youth. His family had none of the modern comforts of running water, electricity, or automobiles, and as a child he was forcefully taken from his home and put in a government boarding school. But even though his father was Navajo, and his grandfather Hosteen Redhouse was a respected medicine man who was well known for his healing ceremonies all over the Reservation, Tony was neither born nor raised on the Reservation, and his mother is Filipino. The couple met in the early Forties during World War II when Rex, a quartermaster in the U.S. Army, was stationed in Manila.

With the Japanese invasion of the Philippines in 1941, families such as Tony's mother's came under siege and had to struggle to escape the hands of the enemy and to stay alive. They also had to leave their home when it became an unsafe place to be, and remained on the run, staying with family and friends in different places, for almost a year. To eat they had to learn how to transform motor oil into cooking oil; and meals often just consisted of meager rations of rice. They knew much hunger. To keep from being raped, all the females in the family had to appear as men, cutting their hair short, wearing pants, and smoking cigarettes. They lived in a constant state of fear.

But the Icasiano family were survivors, and maternal grandmother Concepcion took care of her family by being an entrepreneur. Capitalizing on what she could see as a chance to make money out of the American troops that now occupied the country, she started a honky tonk piano bar for the GIs which she named The Three Sisters. The name represented Tony's mother and her two sisters, who entertained the soldiers. It quickly became a place the GI's flocked to - an oasis of peace surrounded by the horrors of the war, due partly to the fact that Maria's brother (also named Tony) was a policeman and a bodybuilder of large stature who served as the bouncer!

Prior to the birth of The Three Sisters, Tony's mom did her part to help the family out by running a stand outside of their home selling liquor, cigarettes, and anything else she could think of, to the GI's that patrolled the area. Rex noticed her often and would always stop to buy from her, whether he wanted the items or not. He even learned to speak her language so he could communicate with her - it was love at first sight. Once the bar was open she was often put in charge of playing the honky tonk piano, and it was there that Rex first approached

her with a view to making his intentions clear. At first, because he could speak her language, and because of his somewhat similar Native appearance, Maria thought that Rex was Filipino, but as soon as she learned his name she knew he was not.

The union of this man and woman was not an easy one; it took time to do everything right to please both families. Both the Navajos and the Filipinos have strong traditional values and an inter-racial marriage was unheard of in those days, in both cultures. Once World War II was over, Rex had to go back to the Reservation and talk the matter over with the Elders, to gain permission to marry out of the tribe and to relocate to the city to start a career in the civil service so he could support Maria. This was a dramatic act that would separate him from his family and the Reservation life that he knew - no one had ever done that before so Rex was a true pioneer. In addition, to earn the respect he needed to marry into Maria's family, he also had to join the Catholic faith. Maria laughs about it now: "He had to learn my language and become a Catholic to marry me; but I spent the next fifty six years learning how to become a Navajo."

When Rex came back to the States to live he settled in Seaside, California, near Monterey; and Maria followed him there when the paperwork allowed. The couple soon had children, first Mary, then Charlotte, Vince, Tony, Lenny, and Larry. Tony is proud of a photograph he has of himself at age five dressed in full Native regalia (all made by his parents) and, significantly, carrying a little drum. He was taking part in an international children's pageant, representing the Native American race. His sister Charlotte told him that when their parents entered him into the pageant it became the catalyst for Rex to begin openly sharing his Native culture with the community he lived in.

The pageant was indeed a milestone in the family's life. From then on Rex, an otherwise reserved and conservative man, became very active in the Monterey Bay area, organizing Native American culture shows for parades, schools, and community organizations to bring an awareness of Native American ways to the melting pot of life in central California. "He became a trend-setter," says Redhouse. "He started a Native American club, too, to unite people from different tribes in the urban area."

Maria had started a new life in a new country, and in order to be around her new husband she had to do the things he did. She took it all in her stride and learned traditional Native American dancing, chanting, and crafts. Today she is 84 years old and lives in Tucson, not far from Tony, who moved there in 2004 to be close to her after Rex sadly passed away. Although his father is greatly missed, the couple's chance meeting in a far-off land gave them fifty-six years of happiness together before they parted. Their story inspires Tony to this day.

As his love affair with the drum continued, the young boy in the photograph went on to become a Navajo hoop dancer. This in turn fostered an interest in other indigenous drums as he became exposed to their sounds in the Monterey Bay area where he lived. "Listening to artists such as Santana and Mongo Santamaria changed my life," says Tony. "I got excited about Afro-Cuban, latin-rock and urban-soul drumming, and their sounds and rhythms swirled around in my head when I was performing my tribal dances." This fusion of ethnic musical styles during his youth formed the basis for the potent multi-cultural drumming that has become his signature style today.

He's also known for his vast array of percussion instruments, and has been called the Native American Airtu Moreira or Trilok Gurtu (Brazilian and Indian percussion giants) because of his eclectic and provocative use of tones and rhythms in various musical settings. "Everything that happens shapes us to our true destiny," says Tony. "My parents raised me in the Catholic faith, and I was an altar boy. Part of my job was to ring the brass bells during the church service when the priest performed certain rituals. I have never forgotten how they sounded, so clear,

and with such perfect tones. My love of percussion began back then, and to this day I still collect bells. One name of endearment my mother would call me as a toddler was Tone-Tone."

But Tony had a long way to go before he would find any kind of clear tone in his life. As a teenager he rebelled against his strict Catholic upbringing. He struggled with drug and alcohol addictions and was constantly in trouble. He remembers, with pain now, how he made his mother suffer with worry over her little boy, and how she would tell him that when he was gone at nights she would hear his conga drums playing in his bedroom when no one was there. It became her signal to pray for her son's safe return.

In 1973, when Tony was seventeen years old, and still struggling with his addictions, the family moved to Arizona when Rex, an auditor in the Army, was transferred to a base in Tucson. His siblings all had musical talent, too, and they often formed bands and played together. "I remember I joined a Temptation-style soul band at one time," says Tony. "But I never lost my desire or need to continue with my Native American music and dance."

His daily substance abuse played a major role in the following years, taking the young man to the depths of despair. But because of his addiction and recovery from alcohol and drugs he has experienced positive changes in his life that he can now share with others that are challenged with the trials of life. He uses his music to inspire souls in recovery from addiction, trauma, cancer, grief, divorce, and more. Whilst going through his recovery he realized that somehow it was in his destiny to experience these dark times: "It gave me an even deeper connection to what Native Americans call the Spirit, and others would call God," says Tony, "and I know for sure that I would not be as effective in my work today if I had not gone through what I did."

Finally free of his afflictions, Tony struck out on his own and moved to Phoenix in 1990. He started his own company presenting and teaching Native American craft and cultural programs in schools and resorts. More importantly, he worked as a consultant with Native American behavioral health organizations and substance-abuse programs. It was here that he began to realize what his life's work of helping to heal people would be.

His love of music continued, too. In the evenings he played in a Latin jazz group in dance halls across the city, applying the Afro-Cuban drum rhythms he had grown up with in California. He also played these rhythms to the beat of hip hop, techno, and rhythm and blues music spun by the DJs. He felt as though his life had come full circle. "The one constant in my life has been music," Tony says, "with the most important part being the healing power of the drum. Like my father before me I spend a lot of time making my own Native American drums. I stretch the skins and take time to ensure that the sound of the instrument is just right."

Tony's amazing connection to the drum became clearly evident when he visited his comatose father at St. Joseph's Hospital in Tucson just before his death in 2004. "My brother called me to notify me of his critical condition," he says. "I was in Phoenix and in a hurry to get on the road, but something stopped me in my tracks and made me pick up two of my eagle feathers and my drum." While he was alone with his father, and while he prayed over his body, Tony placed an eagle feather in each of his father's hands and used the drum to tap out a heartbeat as he passed it over his father's body from head to toe. The vibration went deep into Rex's consciousness and spoke to the soul of the dying man. As Tony hit the last beat of the drum, Rex's body responded with a seizure and his right hand grabbed the eagle feather. Tony recalls: "After the seizure, my father's body relaxed in such a way that showed me that his soul had been released. It was a clear sign to me that I had done what the Spirit had wanted me to do." When his father died, he was buried with the eagle feather in his right hand lying across his chest.

The experience helped Tony understand the true power of the drum and the way it connects to people's souls. "The vibration of the drum can go beyond the physical realm and touch the soul whatever state it is in, going straight to the essence of the person," he says. "It can heal or release them. It also possesses the female and the male aspects of the universe. The female side represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth - a nurturing, meditative, unconditional love of the Spirit. The male side can summon ancestors and awaken us to the spiritual realm. The balancing of these two aspects of the drum can create a life of harmony within us; it can give us access to the power of Spirit to inspire us and to give us strength for what we go through in life."

This experience with his father provided another turning point in the artist's life, and since that time he has used the drum, along with the flute and the power of the human voice in chant, the three ancient forms of expression that appear across all ancient cultures, to take his listeners into meditation and to simplify and heal their lives. He works in prestigious healing facilities, spas, and yoga retreats, but feels just as comfortable in his community drug and alcohol rehabs, AIDS clinics, cancer hospitals, and counseling centers.

He also loves his work as teacher and cultural consultant in schools, colleges, and at corporate conventions. He always involves his audience by getting them to dance, releasing them to feel free like children again, to have fun and feel the strength and peace within themselves, and each other, so that they see a picture of the universe in harmony, a vision of the world coming together. Anywhere he can help people to heal, is where he feels right at home.

After journeying through the dark, today Tony is definitely living and working in the light. He describes himself as a Native American sound healer, a motivational speaker, a Native American consultant, and a recording artist, in kind of that order. He says he used to play music for music's sake, for the performance of it. But then he realized that for him the music always had a message that he was trying to portray. Over time, the message overtook the performance so that now he plays only with a view to sharing that message.

He also believes that his mixed-blood heritage of Navajo Indian and Filipino gave him the strength to overcome the adversity that came his way to test and shape him. "The Navajo are an enduring people who survived great hardships," he says. "They formed an ability to adapt to challenges presented to them, whether from disputes with other tribes or war with the invading white man, and use them to better themselves." The Filipino side of his family also suffered greatly during the World War II invasion, and they too endured. Tony says: "My mother knew great hardships and learned to improvise to survive under difficult conditions. My own life is only a reflection of what happened to my ancestors. I couldn't have asked for better genes."

And just like his ancestors, and like his father and mother before him, he chose to be a pioneer, courting melodies from distant lands and marrying them with his own Native American music. "I hope that this eclectic blending of diverse musical expressions from around the world will inspire people to appreciate their own unique and valuable place in this Universe," says Tony. "Regardless of the challenges we are facing, or the hardships we have survived, we each have a beauty within us that contributes to the harmony of this 'Song and Dance' called Life!"

As he goes forward into the next stage of his life, Tony wants to create music that will display all the different facets of it. He wants to serve as a bridge across cultural boundaries, fusing the gap between races, lifestyles, and spiritual perspectives. His passion is to capture the hearts and minds of people and transport them to a place in life that they can call peaceful.