



AHTNA HERITAGE DANCERS
perform at the Quyana Alaska
annual celebration of dance.



Drum Beat

**Alaska Natives bring unique energy
to performance arts** BY ERIC LUCAS



CLARK JAMES MISHLER

For many generations Iñupiaq mothers in Kaktovik, Alaska, have sung a calming lullaby to their babies that goes, roughly, *añaña aa añaña aa añaña aa aa aa*. Such singing is called *qunu*, and it may be thousands of years old.

Allison Warden is an Anchorage-based performance artist whose heritage traces back to Kaktovik, on Alaska's North Slope Arctic shore; she fondly remembers her grandmother singing *qunu* to her. So Warden has incorporated the line into one of her songs, *Ancestor from the Future*, an engaging and thought-provoking piece that challenges young people to choose lives with purpose.

"It's time! It's time to wake up and remember why / why you arrived on the earth / not just to survive / but to give birth to your dream / you are worth everything!" she chants, vigorously striding the stage, then smiling and adding, soothingly: *añaña aa añaña aa añaña aa aa aa*.

Ancestor from the Future is definitely not a lullaby. In fact, it's a rap song. But it, and Warden, perfectly illustrate modern Alaska Native performance arts, a rich and dynamic blend of old and new, of indigenous tradition and global invention, that greatly enlivens life in the north.

Alaska Native performers live and work in places ranging from Ketchikan, at the southeast edge of the state, to Barrow, on the Arctic Coast. They might be a band of Yup'ik drummers, singers and dancers circled up on stage

at midwinter's Festival of Native Arts in Fairbanks, thrumming out a centuries-old song-tale about whale hunting. They might be Athabaskan fiddlers whose reels and waltzes reflect an art their ancestors adopted from Hudson's Bay Company agents almost two centuries ago. They might be Tlingit village residents showcasing a drum-and-spoken-word allegory about romance between disparate cultures. They might be Alutiiq performers whose guitar-led performances meld Russian folk songs and ancient dances depicting seagull courtship. And they might be members of a modern recording group, Pamyua, performing at the Anchorage Museum, whose danceable world music blends Yup'ik, Inuit, pop and African rhythms.

The ingredients for these types of performances include traditional hand-held animal hide or fabric drums, tapped from below with sticks (Iñupiaq) or from above (Yup'ik); formalized dance moves that, like hula in Hawai'i, symbolize discrete things such as a raven's walk; chants and songs whose steady rhythms ebb and flow like tides; and costumes that range from Athabaskan beaded caribou-skin dresses to elaborate Eskimo fancy parkas. Or they might include beatboxes, electric bass guitars, hints of '60s dances such as "the Jerk," and jeans, tennis shoes and ball caps worn backward.

All these, and more, thrive equally in a land where song, dance and chant have filled the air for millennia. Some such performances would be recognizable to one of Allison Warden's ancient ancestors. Some would fit well at a 2014 rave, mashup or world-music concert almost anywhere.

Warden—who performs under the name *Aku-Matu*—is



FACING PAGE Performers dance to celebrate Qu yana during the Alaska Federation of Natives' annual convention in Anchorage.



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Soren Rain Adair fiddles at the Festival of Native Arts at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. // Nunamsuat Dancers perform at the Qu yana Alaska celebration in Anchorage. // The popular band Pamyua. // Performance regalia is a blend of practical and traditional. // Hand-held animal-skin drums. // Huna Tlingit performers dressed in regalia share personal stories in the Tribal Dance and Cultural Legends program at Icy Point Strait. // The Suurimmaanitchuat dance group from Barrow at an AFN Qu yana performance. // The Troth Yedtha' dance group during the 2013 FNA. // Lyle James, co-leader of the Tlingit Woosh. ji.een Dance Group from Juneau at last autumn's AFN convention in Fairbanks.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHERMAN HOGUE / EXPLORE FAIRBANKS (2); CLARK JAMES MISHLER; KATIE O'CONNOR; CLARK JAMES MISHLER (2); COURTESY; ICY STRAIT POINT; SHERMAN HOGUE / EXPLORE FAIRBANKS; JRANCHETA / FESTIVAL OF NATIVE ARTS

ALLISON WARDEN performs her rap song *Ancestor from the Future*.



INUA BLEVINS

“It’s time!
It’s time to wake up and
remember why / why you
arrived on the earth / not
just to survive / but to give
birth to your dream / you
are worth everything!
añaña aa añaña aa
añaña aa aa aa.”
— Allison Warden

a globally prominent rap artist whose stage persona features flamboyant plastic headdresses and regalia that suggest a caribou or polar bear. As she’s performing *Ancestor*, she’s accompanied by prerecorded beats created by a Seattle-based DJ, WD4D, and looks and sounds as 21st century “modern” as anyone you might see on MTV or YouTube. Mention that, and Warden laughs.

“We’ve always been modern people, we Iñupiaq. Inventive. High-tech,” Warden points out. “Believe me, when you’ve survived for thousands of years in the High Arctic, your technologies are as cutting-edge as any on Earth.”

And so are your presentations. Sean Topkok, a Fairbanks resident of Iñupiat, Sámi, Irish and Norwegian heritage, performs with his group, Pavva, a goose-hunt dance that he learned from a Yup’ik dance master and received permission to present—altered slightly to include a move representing a shotgun.

“Some of our songs in Pavva have been passed down through many generations,” Topkok explains. “Some are entirely new. I love dancing. I love cross-cultural dancing. If we lose these dances we lose our culture, but we have to keep adapting the dances, and ourselves, to modern times.”

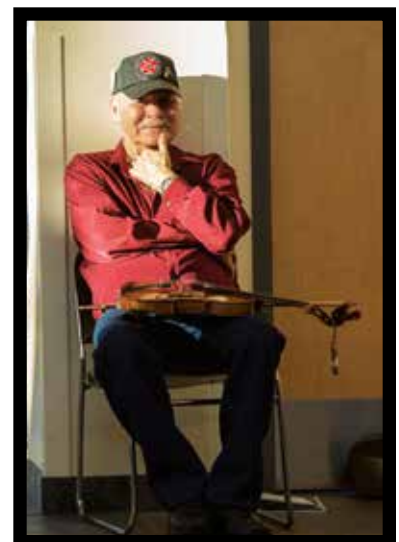
Sharing, adapting and changing freely are intrinsic parts of Alaska Native artistic culture, says Aaron A. Fox, a Columbia University ethnomusicologist who has not only studied Native music, he is also the academic guardian of recordings made of traditional Iñupiat songs in Barrow in 1946. Allison Warden has listened to such historical recordings, and some of the sounds she discovered now appear, in modified form, in her 21st century raps.

“Iñupiat society is the original open-source culture,” Fox

says. “Modern society has a lot we can learn from them.”

Most Alaska visitors experience these complex, robust and colorful arts in a largely traditional form—as commercial presentations at high-traffic visitor venues such as Native heritage centers.

These performances are all marvelous examples of the cultural wealth of people who have inhabited the Great Land for thousands of years. Yet even these presentations represent change—sometimes as simple as the tennis shoes most dancers now wear, and sometimes as culturally distinct as the commercial element that was unknown in Native communities before European contact. The old performance ethic deemed song, dance, chant and story important cultural benchmarks that were meant to be shared at family, village and regional gatherings. The



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BILL STEVENS is an Athabaskan from Fairbanks who travels the world to play his fiddle.

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modern adaptation is that Native performance arts are deemed completely worthy of recompense.

Though this sort of evolution has sometimes engendered skeptical criticism in Native communities, Alaska's approximately 140,000 Native residents are, for the most part, happy to see their cultural heritage move dynamically into a new millennium.

"There have been some questions from elders about turning our cherished traditions into modern theater shows," acknowledges Russell Dick, chairman of the Huna Totem Corporation, the business arm of the Huna Tlingit people

Performance Gatherings

For centuries, Alaska Natives have gathered to share song, dance, food and camaraderie—often in fall and winter, a practice that continues today. These are splendid opportunities to experience the song/dance/chant tradition. Performances often stretch long into the evening. Food and art are also integral parts of such gatherings, including those listed below:

FESTIVAL OF NATIVE ARTS, FAIRBANKS:

Each winter (March in 2015) Native groups from around the world visit the University of Alaska Fairbanks for a celebration that ranges from art sales to songfests; fna.community.uaf.edu.

QYANA: A performance event that's part of the annual Alaska Federation of Natives convention each October, this usually takes place in Anchorage, but occasionally convenes in Fairbanks. Every Alaska Native group is represented; www.nativefederation.org.

CELEBRATION, JUNEAU: Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian dancers, performers, artists and community leaders fill the streets of Alaska's capital in early June; www.sealaskaheritage.org/celebration.

POTLATCHES, FEASTS AND POW-WOWS:

A wide array of other gatherings brings dancers and performers to Native communities around Alaska, often semiannually, from Barrow in mid-winter to the midsummer's World Eskimo-Indian Olympics in Fairbanks; consult local events calendars to find these. —E.L.



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in their eponymous village just south of Glacier Bay. “But most of us recognize—especially the younger generation—that if we don’t make sure these cultural traditions are presented to the public, and brought into the 21st century in style and form, they will disappear.”

an engaging example of this two-faceted approach catches my attention while I’m watching a dance/song/storytelling presentation at Icy Strait Point, a visitor center operated by Huna Totem that welcomes about 145,000 cruise ship passengers a year.

The Raven Love Song is a simplified version of a traditional tale presented by dancers accompanied by singers, a storyteller and a drummer. Though Raven longs to court the lovely Wolf, she spurns his advances, turning away as Raven prances around her.

“Tough luck tough luck tough luck,” chant the three singers at the side of the stage, a Tlingit “Greek chorus” whose counterpoint to the tale engenders laughter from the audience once they recognize it’s an ironic chant ... in English.

As mostly traditional as the Huna show may be, it’s not hard to draw a line from the Raven’s drum-cadenced dance to the irrepressible modern pop of Pamyua, a wildly popular Alaska band whose four members represent Yup’ik, Inuit, Danish and African-American heritage—and whose music is thus likewise influenced. What may be Pamyua’s best-known song, *Bubble Gum*, is an effervescent dance tune (the band labels it a “drumsong”) that melds Yup’ik language; a deep, slow seal-skin drum beat; ’60s pop flavors; and lively West African rhythms. But its most meaningful song, *Pulling*, is about searching for ground squirrels near co-founders Phillip and Stephen Blanchett’s home village of Nunapitchuk, near Bethel.

There, as in so many remote Native villages in Alaska, 19th and 20th century missionaries campaigned to stamp out

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traditional song, dance, chant and language, and the Blanchetts' mother, Marie Meade, did not herself perform a traditional dance until she was in her late 30s. Her sons thus consider themselves cultural ambassadors who bear their traditions into the future, call their music "tribal funk," and believe wholeheartedly in the human value of artistic interchange and growth.

"When you hear the Yup'ik language, it's very funky," says Phillip Blanchett. "Lots of glottal stops, extremely percussive. So combining that with African rhythms and harmonies makes perfect sense to me. It's my heritage—all of it."

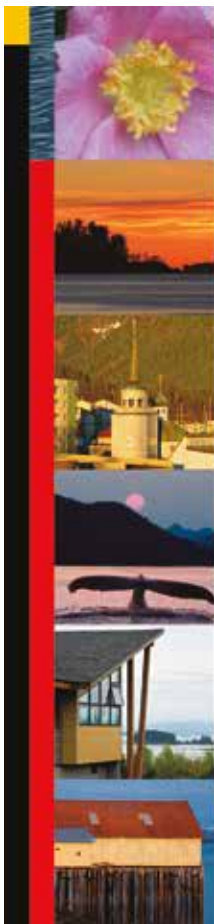
Such a distinct and public identity is intrinsic to the Alaska Native cultural renaissance. One of the Native community's most respected leaders, Athabascan Chief Jerry Isaac, former president of the Tanana Chiefs Conference in Fairbanks and now Alaska region vice president of the National Congress of American Indians, recalls that he learned to drum, sing

and dance as a boy. But Isaac dropped all that as a young adult. Only relatively late in life did he pick up these traditional performance arts again, and he now leads an Athabascan dance group in his home village of Tanacross.

"It's my badge of identity," Isaac declares. "If you don't step out and say

who you are, you participate in letting other people say who you are." Like Pamyua's Blanchett brothers, Isaac can call on multiple musical backgrounds—Alaska's Interior peoples practice and revere both traditional drum, dance and song, and the Scotch-inspired fiddle music they adopted *continued on page 184*






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from page 45 almost two centuries ago.

"Can I dance a jig? Well, I try, but it's not pretty," Isaac laughs.

In 1973, a group of Native students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks discovered they were homesick. Spending the school year in Fairbanks, far from their home villages, they missed the musical gatherings they had grown up with. That was the genesis of the Festival of Native Arts, the annual mid-winter gathering that now draws thousands of celebrants to the Golden Heart City for three days of performances ranging from Iñupiat to Tlingit—one year a Cheyenne singer came thousands of miles to add his version of High Plains Indian song.

The theme this past February was "Sharing the Voices of Our Ancestors," and the kickoff open-mic portion allowed performers of all persuasions to participate.

"Sharing music and dance is an integral part of Native culture," says Cathy Brooks, UAF professor of Alaska Native Studies and Rural Development and longtime adviser to FNA. "It's wonderful to see."

It is indeed. Over the years I have marveled at the fiddle virtuosity of Bill Stevens, a Fairbanks resident who travels the world performing Athabascan-style reels and jigs.

I've been amazed by the ability of a young Tlingit performer in Huna to artfully (and loudly) mimic the call of a raven—"How'd I learn that? I practiced a lot while I was riding my bike to work; that way I wouldn't be embarrassed," Johan Hinchman says, grinning.

I've admired the profound transformation represented by a Haida/Tlingit dance group, whose two-nation makeup represents coastal peoples who two centuries ago were often at war—not sociable dance gatherings.

I've watched with appreciation as an Athabascan drum group called audience members to come up on stage and join in for the final number of a performance—drawing more than 40 people, ranging from young toddlers and teens

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to 70-year-old elders.

I've heard *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and *Amazing Grace* in Athabasca. I've seen a drum group from Barrow that performed at President Barack Obama's inauguration. I've seen an Iñupiat dance that represents building an igloo—and a Yup'ik dance that represented the delights of ice cream. "The words translate to 'I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream,'" songwriter Sean Topkok told the audience.

"Well, OK, not really," he added, exemplifying the wry humor that is often an intrinsic part of Alaska Native performance arts.

Finally, after celebrating ice cream, I was summoned to do what everyone is called to do at a Native performance—take part. Topkok reprised the igloo-building song, and the men in the audience were invited to stand and perform the motions that represent cutting and stacking the blocks. We swept our hands from low to high, to the beat, demonstrating our strong arms. Did I say, on the beat? Yes, on the beat, I stamped my feet, swept my arms, stacked the blocks. I sat down five minutes later warmed by the effort of the athletic dance and the embrace of the occasion.

"We are ambassadors of the human race in the sense that all of us are," Philip Blanchett says of Pamyua, "and humor, song, dance and spirit are our expressions of this."

Allison Warden, who has performed around the world, believes her artistic themes reach far beyond Iñupiaq tradition, but are completely grounded in it.

"I like to think of myself as a dream of my ancestors—and now I'm living that dream," Warden says.

And for we who watch—and join in—it's not a dream at all. ▲

Eric Lucas is a contributing editor.

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