

HORSE SPIRIT

*The Story Behind
The Music*

A word from John Two-Hawks....

The music on this album tells a story. I wanted to share with you more about what the deeper meaning is within each of these songs, in the hope that it will increase your connection with this music and to the story from which it is born....

Track 1. Oyate (The People)

As I travel in the car on my way to South Dakota, thoughts of returning to my homeland and my people warm my heart. I think of our community, gathering, coming together, traveling from everywhere. The memories of Lakota warmth, laughter, hugs and handshakes make me smile as I look forward to reconnecting. There is a quiet depth in the souls of our people that is missing in many places outside of our culture, and so I look forward to being home again. I also know that a great challenge lies ahead, with fear to overcome and suffering to endure. But I put that aside for now and quietly smile as I think of touching my homeland and being with my people once again.

Track 2. Into the Night

Day one of the ride.... Minus 20 degrees, wind blowing over 40 miles an hour.... Snow crunching under feet and hooves. I face my fears head on. I meet Percy White Plume. He introduces me to the horse that will carry me for 8 long, grueling days. His name is simply, CH. 40 miles we would ride that day, long into the night. The moment when we all cut loose and ran like wind with our horses was both terrifying and exhilarating, as it was a first for me. Oh how my body suffered. My knees hurt so badly and my feet were so frozen that just walking was a challenge afterward. And oh the ice on CH's body and face. How I felt for him. He was a true warrior.

Track 3. Lone Rider

Two Lakota brothers, side by side, only the sound of the wind and the slow, steady crunching of hooves in the snow covered prairie.... My brother, my ciye, David speaks my name and beckons me to look around. I cast my eyes outward, and take in the grandeur of the endless winter plains, the quiet stillness which envelops us, and I hear David say, "We are here." Yes indeed my brother, we are. Two lone riders, Lakota brothers on Lakota horses, making a quiet sacrifice.

Track 4. Big Foot Pass

Day two.... December 24th, we ride to a place called Big Foot Pass, named so because Chief Big Foot and his people passed through that place in 1890. Day two is not as long and I am surer of myself after making it through day one, but it is no less painful. It is poignant to ride a horse under a highway and, hearing the cars zoom by, sense the disconnect between the modern world and our ancient Lakota tradition. I am glad to be cold and moving slowly on this horse knowing where I am going and why, rather than sitting in a warm car speeding along with no real direction.

Track 5. Red Water

Day three comes, and it is strangely warm, which makes the riding treacherous because the ground is melting, getting muddy and slippery. Many horses slip and riders tumble. No one is badly hurt. But CH never falters. His is my rock. Today is Christmas, and we ride through the Badlands. The warmth causes hoods and scarves to come down. Small hellos and gentle smiles greet me here and there along the way. At days end we come down a long hill, and at the bottom, three Lakota men sing an old song with a drum. The sun shines; I lean back, open my arms and give thanks.

Track 6. Tiyospaye (Family of Families)

It is the evening of the 3rd day, and I find myself in the community center on our reservation in Kyle, SD. A great meal has been prepared, and we sit at tables and chat, laugh and share. There is wasna, a sacred edible medicine, and wojapi, a berry pudding my grandpa used to make. Then the ceremonies begin, and Elder Chubbs Thunderhawk comes and asks me to play my flute for everyone. The honor is profound. The connection is palpable. I have waited a lifetime for this moment, and it is here. I help an elderly woman get a large bowl of soup into her car because her back doors won't open. This is Lakota life. The regular doors don't usually open for us, so we must help one another and find another way. How glad I am to help, and to be a part of my tiyospaye.

Track 7. Sacred Moments

December 27th.... back on the horse. CH carries me onward. The suffering, the sacrifice continues. The cold has crept back in. A long line of Lakota people on horses, carefully winds through the trees of a river bottom.... a sacred silence comes over us. There is something about this place. We pass by the grave of a sun dancer.... another sacred moment. Spiritual power is everywhere out here. This is our sanctuary. This is where we pray. In every sacred moment.

Track 8. Horse Spirit (Sung Nagi)

CH.... What a mighty horse. Strong, sturdy, sure footed, and fast as lightning. Lakota horses are like Lakota people. They are stubborn, strong willed and as free spirited as the wind. Hundreds of Lakota horses made the journey. I am proud to say that CH and I went the entire 135 miles together. Not many could say that. I dedicate this song to CH and to all the mighty Lakota horses that carried us to Wounded Knee and Pine Ridge. You are our relatives, our family and our friends.

Track 9. Into Wounded Knee

December 28th, the day we rode into Wounded Knee, just as Chief Big Foot and his people did in 1890. The temps dropped to minus 20 again, and the winds howled with the voices of our ancestors, pushing hard against our horses, causing them to gate sideways. Over 160 riders faced hard into the brutal winds and pressed on. The mass grave was visible as we descended into Wounded Knee Creek. What lied in wait for Chief Big Foot's people in 1890 weighed heavy on us. Even our horses seemed to sense the shadows swirling around us. The place where they camped that night is still there. And so are they. They went into Wounded Knee, and they never left.

Track 10. Crooked Gulch

December 29th, the day of the massacre of 420 Lakota children, elders, women and men. In some way, it feels like it just happened. The riders who finished at Wounded Knee stood beside their horses and made a circle around the mass grave as we who were to ride on into Pine Ridge quietly rode around them. All prayed in silence. I look through tears even as I write this. Wounded Knee is a terrible scar for Lakota people. A people's dream was buried there, and the sacred hoop broken. And yet we return to it, knowing that out of that crooked gulch we will heal and we will restore what was lost. We will rise from the ground and mend our sacred hoop.

Track 11. Spirits

As we quietly rode out of Wounded Knee I could feel the spirits of our ancestors thanking us. I had one more day to go on this ride, on this horse. I was weary, and so was CH, but those ancestors came and gave me and CH their strength. They gave us all their strength. Healing is a slow process. There is nothing neat and tidy about it. It is messy and it takes time. Lots of time. As a people, we have made this journey every year since 1986, and yet our healing is still not complete. There is much more to do. More rides. More journeys. More righting of wrongs. And yet, all along, every painful step of the way, helping us and giving us strength and hope, are our ancestor's spirits.

Track 12. Go Last

One more day, one last grueling journey of pain and suffering. One last sacrifice. CH and I went 135 miles together through the blinding cold, treacherous mud and exhausting distances. He never slipped, never stumbled, and never lost his rider. But on this final day, he was weary, and so was I. By the end, we were last, and I remembered the words of my grandfather, who always told me, 'go last'. I considered it a great honor to be the last rider. And when Jake Yellow Horse rode up and shook my hand, telling me 'wopila (big thanks) brother, you did it', I could not have been more honored. I hugged CH's neck and said the same to him, 'wopila my brother, we did it. We did it.

Track 13. Coming Home

A great ceremony awaited us when we arrived in Pine Ridge. Hundreds of Lakota people came out of their homes and cheered for us, taking pictures and whooping and hollering. It was a proud and healing moment for us all. As we all sat for a final meal I found myself next to Chubbs Thunderhawk, who would give me that night the greatest gift of all – my Lakota name. He bestowed upon me the name Siyotanka (Great Flute), sharing it with all who were there. I have never felt more at home in my homeland, with my people, than I did in that moment on that night. I had truly come home. On the back of a mighty Lakota horse named CH, I had finally come home. Wopila!

Track 14. Wopila (Great Thanks)

In the car again, on my way out of my homeland and back to my home, my wife, my mountains and my music, I have never been happier and more fulfilled at any time in my life. I watched the snow covered prairies pass by and turn into flat plains as I drove and reflected on my love for CH, my love for my people and my love for the land from which I come. I was forever changed by that journey. Thank you Percy, thank you CH, and thank you to my people. Wopila!

The Story Behind the Music of 'Horse Spirit' – by John Two-Hawks

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