

Jim Boyd: The Best of Who We Are

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published in *The Local Planet*, Spokane, Washington, June 7, 2002 (cover story)

First Place, 2002 Excellence in Journalism awards, Inland Northwest Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists (Personality Profile)

It's about twenty minutes to show time, and the Met is virtually empty. Not a good sign—particularly given that it's a free concert. Five minutes later, a cursory head count reveals around two dozen people scattered about the orchestra level, with probably less than half that in the balcony.

Even my four-year-old son notices the empty seats. He wonders aloud whether we're in the right place. I check my notes. Yep—the Met, November 15, 7:00 p.m. I look at the stage. Northern Quest Casino, the evening's sponsor, has a stand-up sign featured prominently. There's a guitar, a small drum kit, and assorted percussion instruments carefully and strategically arranged. It *looks* like a concert's about to happen...

At what must be 7:00, I hear the lobby door open—it's that quiet—and within moments the Met is filled to capacity. They're all Indians. And when Jim Boyd and Alfonso Kolb take the stage, every one of them cheers like a maniac—like these two are rock stars or something.

And then I remember: Boyd once opened for Mötley Crüe. He *is* a rock star.

That November concert eventually became a CD—*Live at the Met*, released February this year—and is selling remarkably well, considering that Jim Boyd is something of a local. You see, Spokane has a long history of ignoring local musicians; unless, of course, said musicians move away. That makes them better somehow.

Take Thomas Hampson, for instance. He's a baritone (a good one, we're led to believe), who makes the occasional visit back home to the Lilac City to sing arias and recitatives in front of a sea of blue hair in the Opera House. The local press fawns, the old ladies swoon, and soon after the concert Hampson flies back to New York, or Vienna, or wherever it is that budding opera stars reside these days.

Meanwhile, Jim Boyd is running a record company and studio out of Inchelium; writing and performing music; and promoting, marketing, and distributing said music. On the way he's won Native American Music Awards and the respect of his peers. Bonnie Raitt is one. She invited him to share the stage with her last September, less than a week after the terrorist attacks.

In addition, Boyd's collaborations with writer Sherman Alexie—another local—have led to gigs all around the U.S. and Europe; this coming fall he travels to Chile. Everywhere he goes, it seems, limos, red carpets, and crowds await. Except for Spokane. Even his CDs sell better elsewhere.

"This is a tough town to sell," Boyd admits. "In other towns, there's more than one paper, and it's easier to get press. But here, it's just hard to get the word out."

James Lee Boyd, born 46 years ago on Edwards Air Force Base in Southern California, is a member of the Lakes Band of the Colville Confederated Tribe—one of 12 tribes placed by the federal government on 1.3 million acres stretching from Inchelium to Omak. It used to be twice that size, until gold was discovered. "We don't have that part of the rez anymore," explains Boyd. "But," he deadpans, "we've got hunting rights."

Boyd's family moved around the country, courtesy of the Air Force, living in Nebraska and Tennessee before returning to Washington when Jim was in seventh grade. "We moved on and off the rez," he said, "from Inchelium to the base—which is, I guess, just another kind of reservation—and back. [The two are] totally different, though: on the base, you mow your lawn every week, get your hair cut every two weeks...it's very structured, very disciplined. Back on the rez, it's basically like living out in the country."

An admitted introvert, Boyd found solace in music at an early age. "I remember being about four years old and having all these plastic instruments," he recalls. "They were my toys. And then we moved from Fairchild to the rez and I started teaching my friends how to play instruments just so we could have a band."

Some of the first music Boyd remembers is that of Johnny Cash and Buck Owens—records that his parents listened to. “I still prefer that kind of country and blues-oriented stuff,” he says. “And when we were in Tennessee, I really got into soul...the Wilson Pickett sort of stuff.”

He picked up the guitar at age 12—his brother owned one, stashed underneath his bed. Jim would sneak in to his brother’s room, grab the guitar, and teach himself chords. “I ended up actually playing in this band. They were all high-schoolers and I was just this junior high punk kid who was the lead guitar player. I guess I kind of picked it up quick.”

Boyd knew then that he wanted to make a living as a musician. “I went to high school in the early seventies,” he explained. “Average White Band, Chicago, Tower of Power, Blood Sweat & Tears...you know—funk, horns...it was a good time for music. And even though my band at the time was only a three-piece, we played that stuff anyway—we’d play all these funk tunes ‘cause nobody told us we weren’t supposed to.”

After high school, Boyd entered the University of Washington, something of a culture shock compared to Inchelium. That lasted six months. He returned home, and for the next five years worked construction and played bars—the latter a habit that began at his Aunt Tilly’s place in Nespelem at age 16.

“As a kid you never expect music to be something that you’ll do the rest of your life,” says Boyd. “And in those days, it was pretty much ingrained that you should probably find something else to do. But my parents were very, very supportive.”

So he continued to work by day and gig by night, playing around the rez, when opportunity—in the form of a band called XIT—came knocking. “[XIT was] pretty well-known in Indian country,” said Boyd. “They were big when I was in high school. I had 8-tracks...I loved those guys. The bass player—I was 23 or so—he came up and heard our band at a party or something, and he asked me and our drummer...if we could play with them. We said, ‘Yeah, we’ve got nothing else to do.’”

From 1979–81, Boyd was a regular with XIT, touring Europe, partying, and generally leading the life of a traveling rock and roll star. In ’81 he joined Winterhawk, an Indian heavy metal band based out of San Francisco—the band who opened for Mötley Crüe and, it turns out, the Tubes. It was also a strictly non-drinking group.

“It was tough,” said Boyd, “because in between all these groups we had this other band called Greywolf. We played covers, and had this huge following around the rez. But it added to the alcoholism, you know, because we had that following...everybody gives you stuff for free when you’re playing these bars.”

Meanwhile, yet another original Spokane band was about to become a victim of local apathy. Beethoven, a group founded by guitarist Steve Daley, was initially modeled after the likes of Genesis, Jethro Tull, Yes, and Camel—and not making it. “Most bands at the time really weren’t doing a lot of original material if they expected to work,” said Daley, “so we decided we were going to do the commercial dance band circuit.”

Daley ran an ad in the *Spokesman-Review* for another guitar player/singer. “Jim responded to the ad, set an appointment, and showed up in this orange van—it looked like it had seen more than a few miles. He pulled out his Marshall and his Strat...we knew right away that we didn’t need to look any further.”

Boyd was particularly adept at Journey covers (he could do a mean Steve Perry), and, adds Daley, offered more than just another voice and guitar virtuosity. “Our agent kept telling us, ‘Image, image, image,’” explained Daley. “Jim gave us that. He was, uh...quite the spectacle to look at. He *definitely* gave the crowd an image.”

The association lasted only half a year. There wasn’t much money, and Boyd had a family to think about. Out of the five years of Beethoven’s existence, Daley calls those six months “one of the highlights of the band’s experience. It was just sheer delight to perform with him.”

Boyd had by now reached a point of diminishing returns. “I wasn’t writing any music,” he says. “I was this singer for all these bands who didn’t even know the words to the songs. Once I started focusing on the words, I started realizing, you know, some of the words to these songs are pretty stupid. That was the big realization: I wanted to do better than that.”

So it was back to school: first a degree in commercial music and jazz studies, then another in small business management, and finally certification in drug and alcohol counseling—the latter earned just a year after he managed to get sober himself. What prompted it was an incident between a car and a tree that Boyd calls “timely.” He didn’t stop playing, either. During this time, Boyd released two full-length albums, started his own record label, and, in what amounts to a pivotal moment in his career, he met Alexie.

“I met Sherman at the Columbia Folk Festival in, I think, 1992,” recalls Boyd. “He was doing a reading; I played a few songs...his book of poetry [*The Business of Fancydancing*] had just come out, and he already had my CDs. We

hit it off, and we just started collaborating on things all around the country.”

It was a fortuitous meeting—for both. “Jim is just plain decent, kind, funny, poetic and beautiful,” writes Alexie. “I love him and his music. From the very beginning Jim and I needed few words to communicate—just hand signals and grunts. I love looking across the stage and seeing a talented and sober Indian man. He’s the best of who we are. I want to put him on a postage stamp. His face should be on Mount Rushmore. And, he’s got great biceps.”

Suddenly, Boyd had a mentor. “I started seeing how to write—of course, I don’t write anything like Sherman—but it gave me direction. The music got simpler, I delved into lyrics, and then all of a sudden it was politics, religion, prejudice: all these issues that I never dealt with, all these things that I kept bottled up inside just hit me like a ton of bricks.”

He now had an outlet: through the medium of song, Boyd was addressing matters that, thanks to a shy personality, had previously remained largely ignored. His songs became more political (though subtly so), and Jim discovered a sort of catharsis through songwriting. “Yeah, I’m venting,” says Boyd, “but it’s only therapy when I write it. As soon as I’m done, it’s off my chest, and I don’t worry about it any more. When I’m performing, I’m just trying to have a good time.”

Being the Angry Indian has gained Boyd some notoriety—and the gigs to go with it. The problem is, it’s a far cry from the real Jim Boyd. “I don’t always want to be the political Indian activist guy,” he explains. “But that’s sometimes why I get hired. I don’t want to be the representative of all Indian people—either for Inchelium or the whole country. We’re all different, just like people in Spokane. Just like everybody else.”

Boyd wears the mantle of reluctant activist well. He seems to understand that he, like Alexie, is in a unique position to enlighten the masses. Unlike Alexie, though, Boyd’s style tends to be more subtle—an observational *reportage*, in a way—which often takes a couple of days for listeners to fully grasp. Particularly if you’re white: some of the stuff Boyd writes about shouldn’t be happening in modern America.

Steve Daley’s seen it with his own eyes: “I saw Jim one day coming through the parking lot [at my office building],” he recalls. “I went down to meet him in the lobby—he was there on other business—and I asked him to come up and see my office. By the time we got there, security had arrived. Someone had seen him in the parking lot and had actually called security.”

It took some prodding, but Boyd remembers the incident—and still laughs about it. “That stuff happens all the time,” he says, “and you just forget about it. That’s Spokane. That’s the way it is.”

It’s intermission—about 8:30—and my son has been asleep on my shoulder since about halfway through the third song. The Met crowd has been at times raucous; at other times quiet, hanging on every nuance, be it from Boyd’s guitar or Kolb’s shaker. During the first set, somebody kept shouting out song titles, and a couple danced in the aisle to my right.

I can’t sit through another hour of music with 40 pounds of dead weight on my chest, so I decide that intermission is a good time to leave. I figure when the CD comes out, I’ll hear the rest of it anyway.

On my way to the door, scattered snippets of conversation reach me. Somebody had bought a new pickup—an ’84 Ford (new?) with no rust and low miles—somebody else was heading to his cousin’s after the concert. For the first time that night, I feel a bit like an interloper—like I shouldn’t have been there, like I had no right to enjoy the music. It’s a foolish guilt that passes as quickly as it had arrived.

I’m walking back to the car, and I’m humming the melody from “Filtered Ways,” beautifully performed during the first set and coincidentally one of the first Jim Boyd songs I ever heard. There’s a chant in it that’s borrowed from an Indian stick game melody—probably ancient—and it’s been said to heal the sick. A well-dressed white couple gives me a funny look as they pass in the opposite direction. For a brief moment, I feel like an Indian. That, too, passes.