

Floyd Westerman Sings Both Indian and Country

By Richard La Course
AIPA News Director

Phoenix (AIPA) "Both Indian and country," that's Sisseton Sioux Singer Floyd Westerman, who calls himself a "country ballad expressionist" and who since 1970 has become one of the most admired and sought-after Indian men in America.

Westerman grew up orphaned in Dakota Sioux country, where country music blended in with the land. Country was the music he heard in his boyhood, and the music he heard in the bars. Now he likes the "pure sound" of the acoustic guitar and not the electrified kind. He has "FRAGILE" signs pasted all over his guitar case, which goes with him whenever he goes on the concert and powwow trails.

At 37 years of age, with two albums behind him entitled "Custer Died for Your Sins" and "Indian Country" and with the experience of many hectic and turbulent years of new Indian history in his mind, Westerman is staying plugged into the Indian scene, seeing a lot of it, and turning it into music.

Today the tall, slender and craggy Sioux, whose braids now reach down to his waist, says he is "a transient. I'm living out of a suitcase." He's in demand and constantly on the move. Lately he's been getting across the country from one Indian Awareness Week on one college campus to another, performing benefit concerts, and visiting the Eastern establishment universities. "There in the East," says Floyd, "they have more mythic feelings about us there things like the stoic withdrawal of the Indian."

"Sometimes (the travelling) slacks off. I'm not really happy taking a place and calling it home. I'm usually in and around Denver looking toward Phoenix." He recently gave up a home in deep south California only 14 miles north of the Mexican border, where he lived with a bounding shaggy dog.

"I was born without a family," he explains. He attended the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools in his Dakota boyhood, and at Wahpeton Indian School there one of his friends and classmates was Dennis J. Banks, a Chippewa who is now a national figure in the aggressive American Indian Movement (AIM). Floyd has sung with pain about the experiences of the Indian young people in the boarding school life.

"Being without a home is not hard for me to get along with. I never fully enjoyed being in a boarding school — that was something I had to resolve myself to. But now I'm no more nomadic deep down than I'm stationary. That's why I don't

have too much of a conflict."

He's not married so there's no wife to tie him to one place. "I see chicks in several parts of the country," he admits. "They're similar, maybe, but really different from me. It helps balance me out. They have different understandings, a different intellect, and it keeps me in check. Indian features are just fantastic and beautiful and always good to be around. A world of white faces makes you glad to be Indian yourself. Those whites want to be 'a half of one per cent Indian' themselves."

Floyd says "time has increased the popularity" of his first album entitled "Custer Died for Your Sins," derived from and named for the book by his good friend Vine Deloria.

"But past history is one thing. 'Custer' said it enough. Now with Watergate, the power and meaning of those songs has increased. Now I'm going to try to approach America from all sides — from the John Birch Society to the Liberal Left, and from the right and left sides of the Indian community too."

"I guess I use a lot of styles in my singing," he muses. "Traditional Indian music I sing only at powwows. I don't record it. I guess I'm a country ballad expressionist. I find that most people like Forty-Nine music, and I'm turned on by the Indian sound of it." Whatever Indians hear, Floyd believes, they traditionalize. To him that points out the "greater ability" of the Indian to learn the ways and language of another culture, but yet to make those his own.

"Mostly I use country sounds. I was influenced by Hank Williams, Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson — and Johnny Cash, until recently."

Around the country he sometimes uses songs to start people talking. "A lot of Indians get interested in what I sing and that's a conversation starter. They stop by and in 20 minutes we'll be carrying on and relating." As a public figure, he finds that people often think they own a piece of him. In crowds, people yell at him to sing and play their favorite songs.

"Everything comes out of experiencing a mood," he explains. "It's not something that comes automatically. More often than not I will sing, and sing more readily for Indian people than for others. Psychologically, we have to come together first before we can make any kind of real statement to non-Indians."

He recently spent several weeks going through Mexico, Yucatan and Guatemala where his music provided a natural bond. "I saw the mysteries of the Mayans. They have a dif-

ferent way of life — lots of hunting and lots of planting.

They live by their ruins and we live in ours. I saw some similarities in the features between the Mayans and the Plains Indians. Everyone was eager to learn from each other. They wanted to meet this 'Norte Americano Indian.' The Mayans have their own language and some speak Spanish. They like to hear songs."

He's also been up to Canada's Stoney Reserve in the Province of Alberta north of Montana for the traditional "medicine" gatherings there in the heart of the summer for the past few years. Tents are raised, fires are lit, and the sacred things examined. "Any Indian who has the feeling to inquire into spiritual beliefs and traditional ceremony — this would be something to try to get to see, the deeper side of existence — the good feeling."

(There is a streak of the Indian blues in him. Earlier he had said: "There's an optimistic side to existence, but I relate to a lot of things over which man has no control. Man is in for a sudden and severe shock. It has to do with man's sanity and stability. So many things are pulled toward helplessness things happen despite man's will. Beneath it all, the basic establishment of nature is reacting.")

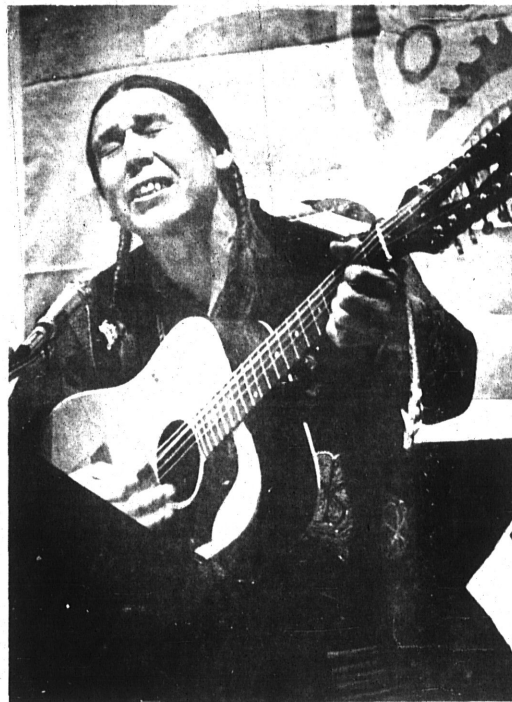
Westerman has been moving comet-like across the country and the things he's seen and heard have struck him in a particular way. "It does something to you to have notoriety," he confesses. "There's a lot of frustration. Just like every other American, I'm becoming increasingly frustrated by the inaction of the government to respond — and to respond correctly."

The more we see America fall apart, the more we look to our own communities to see if they are secure. But the white middle class and the lower class get poorer, and look what's happening to Indians. Rural schools shut down, needed services are being lost and in an almost tragic state. There's a belief that the BIA will provide services. But the BIA is mutilated by AIM and not yet back up on their knees. The life-needs and necessities are just not there. There's lots of repetition and bureaucracy underneath a desire for something better. Between guidelines and innovation —

that's where Indian problems get hung up."

How does he feel about Indian activism and Wounded Knee?

"A lot of people," he replies, "even in the Indian world put down Wounded Knee. It was by no means all negative — it



COUNTRY BALLAD EXPRESSIONIST — Sisseton Sioux Singer Floyd Westerman performed at the seventh annual Tundra Times banquet in 1969. Westerman has become one of the most popular Indian artists in the country during recent years and describes himself as a country ballad expressionist.

— Tundra Times staff photo

increased awareness of Indian needs on the part of the non-Indian public. The central question about Wounded Knee is what AIM asked, not what AIM did. The issues are valid and real. We must all pay more heed to the issues. Now we have the AIM trails — the issues of the American Indian being taken to court. A food legal defense gives us a better long shot."

He admires "a great many people," but foremost among them are the lawyer-brothers Sam and Vine Deloria, Eugene Crawford (a fellow tribesman to boot) and LaDonna Harris of Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO). "I admire all those Indians who believe in the cohesion of a stable starting point and basis of Indian life," he says. "There's still some futility in the Indian world."

When he sings concerts, he receives the standard fees of the concert circuit. But over half his time is now devoted to benefit performances and those who invite him to sing, expect him to play for free, including the provision of his own travel.

"I wish benefits included a

fare and a small fee," he muses. "Mine are complete 'treebies.' There are not enough dollars in the Indian world and we have to track white dollars. But a lot of people think I make a lot of money. I don't. I have no steady job. It comes when it comes when I do a concert and such. And I have conflicts in a controversy with Perception (over royalties on his two recordings) for which I've never been paid. There have been breaches on both sides, and you just make an out-of-court settlement. I'd rather get it said than see what I can get out of it."

Now he's looking ahead to the recording of his third album, despite the problems. "The first album maybe had too much meter and articulation. Maybe in this next one I'll use my own 'slur style,' which I think is more relaxing and better."

What does he think is the hardest aspect of his national prominence as one of the best known Indian balladeers in America?

"Saying the right thing even when I'm nervous and unprepared."