JOHN RAINER, Jr., Taos

October 24, 1975

Provo, Utah

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by S. I. Myers of the History Department of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, St. Louis, Missouri, 63135. The purpose of these interviews is to bring the Indian peoples' own comments to students in classrooms, and to foster greater understanding among the peoples of the United States by providing Indians the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions to a wider audience.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and ease of reading, but every effort has been made to preserve the original feeling. Conversations and opinions were encouraged on any subject of interest to interviewees; questions and responses do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the interviewer, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or St. Louis Community College.

This transcript series was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and by support from St. Louis Community College.

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Sam Myers:

Today I'm in Provo, Utah, at Brigham Young University, talking with John Rainer, Jr. And Mr. Rainer is from the Taos Pueblo?

John Rainer:

Yes, from Taos Pueblo.

SM: So then, in Taos, would you be a Tiwa?

JR: Taos is Tiwa.

SM: Would you explain that for me?

JR: There are approximately 18 pueblos in New Mexico, and we are grouped into certain linguistic stocks. Tiwa is one of the linguistic stocks we're divided into, and we are the northernmost pueblo in New Mexico, about 60 miles south of the Colorado border. There are about 1,600 to 1,800 Indians which make up the pueblo, and I would say that the pueblo is a little different from the other 18 pueblos, because we have been highly influenced by the plains tribes. Our way of dress, our language, the religion, the songs, have been altered slightly. Some areas have been altered quite a bit. For instance, in terms of dress, the way we make our moccasins, our leggings, breech cloths, shirts, and the way we tie our hair is very Plains. The physical characteristics are Plains, indicating, of course, some inter-marriage there. We have been influenced especially by the Cheyennes, Comanches. We have had a lot of relationship with the Apaches, who are not necessarily Plains, but I add that because the relationship with the Apaches goes back quite a ways.

SM: This differs from most of the pueblos who tended to try to stay to themselves as much as possible, didn't they, while Taos, probably the most famous now of all the pueblos, has had these connections
ranging across the country for all these years.

JR: I think it was pretty much inevitable, because we are the northernmost pueblo in New Mexico.

SM: Anyone travelling from the plains or from the northern mountain, Rocky Mountain area, into the south, would sort of come through that way, wouldn't they? Especially in the old days.

JR: Yeah, to either trade or raid.

SM: And you never knew which, did you?

JR: Right.

SM: The pueblo has been preserved, most remarkably too.

JR: The pueblo was still in use, it is still in use, but in 1540 when the Conquistadores were coming up the Rio Grande River, they found the pueblo there. That's not the original pueblo that they found. The original pueblo that they did find is about, oh a quarter of a mile north of the present pueblo. That pueblo burned down, and the pueblo which stands now is more recent.

SM: Built in the 1500's, or started at least?

JR: Around the 1600's, I believe.

SM: In fact, someone said there were a couple of rooms or buildings added on in the last few years.

JR: Oh yeah. What they do mainly is repair anything that falls in, caves in.
SM: And then it's probably one of the most picturesque, because they don't have any T.V. antennae on top of them, or electric light wires or telephone wires stretched over like some of them do.

JR: Plus the fact that the pueblos are more one, two or three stories, where ours is five stories.

SM: Some of them, in fact, are like a little cluster of village houses.

JR: Um hm.

SM: Whereas this one is uniquely an outstanding apartment house construction. Well, Tiwa is the linguistic group. Would it be accurate to say that you were a Tiwa Indian on the Taos Pueblo?

JR: It would be more accurate to say that I was a Taos Pueblo Indian.

SM: O.K. These things are sometimes difficult to pin down.

JR: Well, this can be confusing, because some Indians, some of the Pueblo Indians, identify themselves by the linguistic group they belong to. For instance, the Santa Clara Indians identify themselves as Tewas.

SM: And the Jemis are the only people speaking the Towa?

JR: There's Tiwa, Tewa, Towa, Keresan.

SM: And then the Zunis are another group that no one has connected, is that true?

JR: The Zunis are, I guess, the group that's a little further out in terms, not only of proximity but language and . . . .
SM: They'd be the fartherest except for the Hopis, wouldn't they?

JR: Yes. Then you run into the Hopis.

SM: Well, John, did you go to school up there at Taos?

JR: I did. There's a Bureau of Indian Affairs school there I went to up until the third grade. My father got in with Will Rogers, Jr., in an Indian organization in California, so we moved to Los Angeles.

SM: What was that organization?

JR: It was called Arrow, Inc., and I believe it was an extension of the National Congress of American Indians, in the sense that it was the fund raising part of the organization, so we moved to Los Angeles. Then we moved back, and he got a job as the executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, which caused us to move to Washington, D.C. Then we moved back to Taos Pueblo again, and he then got a job with the Utes in Towacoc, Colorado, the Ute Reservation there, as rehabilitation director, so we lived there for a year. Then we moved back to Taos again, and he's been in several jobs, working especially with Indians in the area of education. Presently he's the director of the American Indian Graduate Scholarship Service, and he's working out of Taos. So my father was very interested in my education, and he had heard about a college preparatory school in Colorado, called the Colorado Rocky Mountain School, which we visited, and it was very appealing to me. We found out what the tuition was, which was $4,000 a year, and that was a little too expensive for us, so we gave up the idea, but the school called us, and decided to give me a scholarship for the three years, so I was there for three years on a full scholarship. I was the only Indian there.

SM: On what basis did they decide to give you a full scholarship?
JR: I think they decided to give it to me because they were interested in getting minorities there.

SM: When was that?

JR: This was, let's see, I graduated in '61, so that would make it '58.

SM: They were a little ahead of the nation-wide movement, weren't they?

JR: Um hm. They were. They came from the East, and they had people there from different countries. There were 70 students there, but they never had any Indians or any ethnic minorities, so I was essentially the first one.

SM: That was a fortunate thing for you to run into a situation with the timing just right. You finished three years there then?

JR: Three years there. Then I came to Brigham Young University.

SM: Did you study music there?

JR: I studied two years on the piano there. Then I came here. I've always been interested in music, but I was frightened at the prospect of majoring in music here, so I went into art, and I decided that my urge to get into music was too strong, so I applied for admission to the music school here after a semester, and they didn't want to admit me, because they didn't feel that I had an adequate enough background to compete with the other students. So what I did essentially was I took so many music classes that they couldn't deny me after a while. So that was really interesting. The person who turned me down, happened to be my senior advisor my senior year here, and when I graduated he told my parents that they had to give me a lot of credit for sticking with the program.
SM: Because you hadn't had enough exposure to the kind of music courses that they thought you should have.

JR: Right. They are very western oriented. By western I mean occidental style of music, and they don't recognize the validity of ethnic music. That is, they don't put it on the same level as they do Mozart and Hayden and Bach and others.

SM: So you did then finish here in music and graduate with a degree in music?

JR: I graduated with a degree in music theory, and I got my master's in counseling.

SM: Here also?

JR: Yes. I want to leave next year and get a doctorate in music.

SM: Where do you plan to do that?

JR: I'm looking at Arizona State University.

SM: That's a beautiful place to go to school.

JR: It is.

SM: So then you have finished here. You're working here now as choir director, or what is your correct title?

JR: I'm the Assistant Coordinator of Indian Personal Services, that's my technical position.

SM: Then you have lots of responsibilities besides choir, haven't you?
JR: Yes. Actually this thing with the choir is relatively new. I started working with choirs back in 1965, but it was just last year that I developed a choir class that gives credit, and we sing mostly traditional Indian music, with a little bit of a modern arrangement. Now I say modern arrangement, contemporary arrangement. I use that in a certain context, because when you say contemporary arrangement you usually think of Hollywood style of arrangements of Indian music, which I deplore. What I attempt to do is really bring contemporary arrangement to Indian music, where most people take Indian music out of context and put it into occidental style of writing. And so I believe that if you're able to do it tastefully, you can not only preserve the traditional Indian music, but enhance it. I feel, first of all, that traditional Indian music is valid in terms of great music, and it has elements of greatness in it that I believe any music in the world has.

SM: Have you recorded any of it yet that your choir has performed?

JR: Yes we have, we recorded some. We hope to put out a record this year.

SM: Would it be possible to get one of the records for our library?

JR: I think so.

SM: So then, the choir directing is almost extra curricular, but still you're making it a very important part of your activity?

JR: Yes. I'm developing an Indian music class here, a course, as part of the Indian studies minor, and I hope to develop that into several courses and make music also a part of the elementary and secondary education program here on campus.

SM: Before we leave the idea of traditional Indian music, is there any
basic comment that you can offer on the symbolism, or what the people are doing when they're singing and chanting? I suppose it goes with the dancing too, doesn't it? There's more to this than the average non-Indian realizes, and if you can make a few generalities, it would help us understand.

JR: Well, Indians sing songs for many reasons, but, generally speaking, I guess the best way I can describe it is that when I was young, my father and grandfather taught us songs. They never explained the meaning of the songs, and Indians, to intellectualize is to take away from, but to feel emotionally is to learn the true meaning. So, in a sense, we learn through the spirit, through the emotions, through the observation of things around us. With our people, it is something to be respected for if you are known as one who learns by observing. So we learned by observing, and by singing, but the songs which we sing have to do with our relationship to each other as human beings, with the earth as a spirit who has a relationship with our spirit, with the universe in general, with reality itself. And as far as we are concerned, all existence, or all reality, has a spirit, and these songs are a means by which we express our relationship to all these things. So for us to learn something like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," in the elementary school, it's meaningless, because it has no depth, it has no connection to anything, it's what they call a "fun" song, and I'm still trying to figure out what "fun" means in that context. But for us, "fun" is a shallow term. In our culture we have learned to experience deeply, and to love deeply, and "fun" is an incomprehensible thing in that context.

SM: You mentioned the universalism of the feeling. I read that the singers and dancers, chanting as they moved slowly in a circular movement, is symbolic of the endless circle of the universe. Is that sort of thing valid?
JR: That can be valid for some culture, for some peoples. Some of the cultures, as you know, vary greatly, vary widely, and for people to say "Indian" and conceive of a certain concept of that term, to me is ... well, it's just not valid, because cultures differ so widely. We, as Pueblo people, of course, have a certain culture. When we look at the Pomos and their songs, the Pomos in California, this is very foreign to us.

SM: Yes, they lived a completely different type of life.

JR: Applies to songs, the language, everything.

SM: Now your own people had contact with the Plains, but still they are different.

JR: Um hm. The Plains we can identify with.

SM: But then the Eastern Woodland Indians would be something else again. Aren't there 70 or 80 different tribes represented here in your college?

JR: Tribes and blends.

SM: And so every one of them, with their own unique culture, would indicate something of the complexity of it. Of course, some of them are similar too.

JR: I think the diversity of the cultures is evidenced by the fact that several of the groups will not accept each other as valid Indians.

SM: Well this sort of thing is being overcome. There's a greater feeling of Pan-Indianism, if we can use that term, right now than there ever has been, I guess.
JR: Yes, that's true.

SM: What can you tell us more about Indian music that we are not likely to run into ordinarily?

JR: O.K. Indian music is very highly structured in terms of form, in terms of scale. I say this because many people who are not acquainted with Indian music hear something that I guess is parallel to what a lot of people call wailing, yelling, or chanting, anything that does not give the impression that it's something valid. And it's the exact opposite. Indian music, for me, is something very unpretentious, and because of its unpretentiousness, it has the ability to strike home to an individual, if he's able to identify with it. I had an experience here on campus where the Indian students put on a pageant, and they wrote songs in the western style. At the time I was taking music, and a professor went to the pageant. I had organized a choir, and we had sung the traditional songs before the pageant began. And I saw him about a week later—he was teaching contemporary music at the time—and he said, "You know I went to that pageant of yours,"—he means "you Indians"—and I said, "You did?" I was very surprised that he had gone to it, and he said, "You know most all of that music that was sung there is trash, don't you?" And I said, "Yes, I'm aware of that." By trash he meant anything less than Mozart, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and he said, "But there was one song that really hit home to me, and that was that one traditional Indian song that you did at the beginning, that your choir did." He said, "There's something about the song that was elemental, that was unpretentious, and did something to me, and I don't know what it did, but it really hit me." So that is an example, to me, of the power of Indian music, because of its unpretentiousness.

SM: And it has a profound feeling in a... is it fair to say, in a simple way where a person can reach a feeling or express himself, maybe. Is that true?
JR: Yes I think so.

SM: This kind of thing. Instead of just pleasant sounds, with Indian music each thing that is done, every sound that is made, has some meaning that is very personal to somebody.

JR: That's true. "Simple" is very deceptive in terms of Indian music, because Indian music is very complex. For instance, when you look at Plains Indian music, you're looking at a melody that is sung in a certain meter, which could be, if you're acquainted with meter, triple meter. The drum beat is beat in duple meter, and it's beat on the off beat to the triple meter. Now that takes a lot of talent to be able to sing and beat those two meters at the same time, to beat this in syncopation. And I think the reason this developed is because if you beat the drum on the strong beat of the melody, you're getting too much of a regimentation there, and it's too much of a choppy sound. But if you alter the beat of the drum, put it on the off beat, and on top of that, put it in duple meter, it comes out very flowing sound.

SM: Over a period of centuries perhaps the people evolved this?

JR: I'm sure they did.

SM: Until it got to be the thing they felt most effective and at home with, I suppose?

JR: Um hm. Well, that's just the Plains Indians. You look at different tribes and they're different. Tribal music varies widely.

SM: Does most Indian music have some sort of religious connection too?

JR: Well, I would say that for the Indian, life is religion. All of life is religion, and all of religion is life. The two are inseparable,
or were inseparable. That is, I'm speaking for my people, because I know them the best, and for us to act out of harmony with this philosophy is blasphemy, sacriligious. For instance, let me give you an example. When we went hunting, we considered this a sacred act, because it was necessary for us to hunt and kill another being so that we might live. So when we went deer hunting we held a special ceremony, and when the deer was killed it was blessed, and when we came home we held a ceremony in which we offered up our thanks to God for the privilege which we had had to take the life of another being, because we consider all life as sacred, whether it is within the deer, a plant or an insect. So when we killed, it was an act which was necessary for us to sustain our life at the expense of somebody else's, and in order for us to do that, we had to thank the Supreme Being in order to do that. Now take that out of context and look at killing in terms of sport, and this becomes a sacriligious act, it's a heinous act, really. To shoot to put a head up on a wall, to feel that you are superior to something else.

SM: One Indian woman up North explained how, in the mythology of her people, the various animals had come and said, "I give you this," and, "I give you that, that you may live your life," and so on, and then in turn, as the people took these for sustenance, they would offer a prayer to the animal as well as to the spirit—the animal had its own spirit. Like a Navajo girl told me, they like prairie dog, and when her father shot one once, she was surprised 'cause she didn't know her father was that religious, but he said a little prayer in thanks to the prairie dog's spirit, and she achieved a higher level of respect for her father when she heard that. It was a good story the way she explained it.

JR: Well, this is just not an ideology. This is something that we believe actually exists—that they do have a spirit. There's a joke going around now that the Indians say that the white man used to laugh at
them for praying for the plants. Now the white man is talking to the plants. (laughter) And I had a student come in, an Indian boy, who said that he had gone hunting last year, and he was tracking a deer, and came upon one that had its hind legs shot off. The hunters had apparently found it was a doe, so just left it, and it was obviously in pain. He looked into the eyes of the deer, and he told the deer that he was sorry over what had happened. He said as he was looking into the eyes of the deer he truly believed that the deer understood him, and forgave him for what had happened, because the deer knew that it was not his fault. So he shot the deer in the head to put it out of its misery. And this is the general feeling of those who understand and have been brought in this kind of a culture.

SM: It's quite different from some of the stereotype images we've had, and I hope we are correcting some of them. I think we are. It isn't often we have an opportunity to talk with someone who has the extensive training you have in music, as many people think of it, that heritage from Europe, for example, and still also the training and feeling and understanding of our native American music here. So I'm grateful for that opportunity.

JR: Well, so much of the time we have been stereotyped by others in this idea that Indian people are not quite as human as non-Indian people; they don't feel as much; they don't comprehend as much; they're not as intelligent, and I think today, Indians are beginning to assert themselves, and non-Indians are beginning to see that we're all human beings, and we all have basic needs, and none of us is really superior in terms of intelligence or any other attributes, as a whole, to anybody else.

SM: Yes, I think we're making progress, don't you, in that direction?

JR: Um hm.
SM: I'm looking forward to hearing that record.

JR: I'll be glad to send you one.

SM: Although I'm eager to hear everything you'd like to say, I know you haven't much time, and you have people waiting for you, so I appreciate your time, and then we'll look forward to learning more from the record itself. Thank you, John.