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May 16, 2012

Salt Songs to Break Your Heart

<http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/counties/san-bernardino/salt-songs-to-break-your-heart.html>

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[http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/assets_c/2012/05/Matthew Leivas, Sr, Chemehuevi Indian of the Chemeheuvi Reservation, California,-thumb-580x433-28654.jpg](http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/assets_c/2012/05/Matthew_Leivas,_Sr._Chemehuevi_Indian_of_the_Chemeheuvi_Reservation,_California,-thumb-580x433-28654.jpg)

It's a windy, bright spring day at the Joshua Tree National Park's Visitor Center at the Oasis of Mara, in Twenty-nine Palms. A small group of people stand in the preternaturally vivid sunshine that the Mojave Desert is so famed for on the south side of a cluster of palm trees, indigenous to the area, intently concentrating, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

At the center of the circle of people is a solid, dark-haired man, who begins to rhythmically and soulfully chant and sing, and he shakes, with practiced precision, a surprisingly large, loud gourd rattle that is painted a deep red with black patterns, and filled with dried palm tree seeds. The wind blows in fitful gusts, so hard that at one point, it blows one of the desert's indigenous residents, a huge raven, sideways when it tries to lift off.

But the music and rhythm and singing never stop. And that's when I notice the tears in the eyes of the singer, desert native and Chemehuevi Indian Salt Song singer Matthew Leivas, Sr., and am surprised to feel tears welling up in my own eyes, too. I know intuitively I am participating in these songs, not only observing, but really feeling them, although the words are sung in a language I've never heard, Chemehuevi. I ponder the words of Salt Song Singer Larry Eddy, whose words Leivas quoted before he began to sing: "I'm going to sing you these songs. But before I sing these songs, I'm going to break your heart."

The songs, Leivas told us before he began to sing, bring the singer and listeners back to "a time when all of creation was connected, when there was no separation, back to the thread of continuity between spirit, people, and the geography of the plants, animals and land." The Salt Songs are at the core of Chemehuevi life, and they were, until a decade ago, almost entirely forgotten. "Doing the Salt Songs brings back all of creation again," he says.



The raven tries to lift its heavy wings again, and then waits on a palm frond, just above Leivas's head, as if it would much rather sit in the pulse of the rattle and human song than brave the wind, wherever it might take him. Even a small cluster of red ants, who were frantically scrambling before Leivas unwrapped his gourd rattle carefully from a bandanna and began to sing, have stopped, and gathered, spellbound, as if they know that they, too, are part of the cycle of songs.

I've come today for a weekend class to Joshua Tree National Park - celebrating its 75th anniversary this year - offered by the Park's Desert Institute, which offers classes (#) and lectures to the general public in the spring, winter, and fall in the sciences, culture, and the arts as they pertain to the Mojave Desert and in particular, to

the area encompassed by and surrounding the park. Leivas, who lives at Lake Havasu on the Chemehuevi Indian Reservation, 100 miles east of here, has come today to sing. In fact, as he's told us earlier in the day, today's ceremony is only a foreshadowing of a weekend of ceremonies, featuring Leivas and other Salt Songs Singers at the upcoming Chemehuevi Days June 1-3 at Lake Havasu Landing.

Before Leivas began to sing, he shared the knowledge and wisdom imparted by the formation of the Salt Song Trail Project, sponsored by the Storyscape Project of the Cultural Conservancy at San Francisco

State University (#) under the direction of Philip M. Klasky and Dr. Melissa Nelson, as well as the guidance of Chemehuevi elders including Leivas and Vivienne Caron Jake (Kaibab Paiute) that began a little over ten years ago to resuscitate, revive, and re-connect the endangered stories, songs, languages and the protection of ancestral lands. The songs of the Salt Song Trail, which have been sung for centuries by the Chemehuevi, and their affiliated members of the total of 14 bands of Nuwuvi, or Southern Paiute, people, whose territory ranges through the Mojave Desert, southeastern Nevada, southwestern Utah, and northwestern Arizona.

Until a little over a decade ago, little academic or anthropological research had been done to study and learn about the desert's native American people, including the Chemehuevi. Although he gave much attention to the nearby Palm Springs-area Cahuilla Indian people, famed anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber - noted for his early 20th century studies of Ishi, reputed to be the last Yahi Indian of California, very little about the Chemehuevi in his still widely-referenced Guidebook to the California Indian, published in 1925. Carobeth Harrington Laird, who was married first to the noted linguist John Peabody Harrington and spent many years among the Chemehuevi -- and as the wife of George Laird -- is perhaps the only Euro-American researcher/writer who gave a fairly comprehensive nod to the Chemehuevi, in her books *The Chemehuevi* (1976), and *Mirror and Pattern* (1984,) both published by Malki Museum Press in Banning many years after her actual time spent among the Chemehuevi population, in the 1920s and 1930s.

Despite the outstanding contributions made by Laird, remarkable as they are, the widespread cultural decimation and displacement of the majority of California Indian people, including the Chemehuevi that occurring in the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries took a heavy toll on their population, not to mention their cultural practices and preservation. In addition, the continuity of their cultural practices and identity was further broken down by the federal government's relocation of many Indian children, including Chemehuevis, to government boarding schools; Leivas himself attended the Sherman Institute in Riverside, CA in the 1960's. But now, in the early 21st century, thanks to the efforts of Leivas, the many other Southern Paiute working towards the reinstatement, practice and preservation of the Salt Songs, and the Cultural Conservancy - along with the Native American Land Conservancy, headed by Kurt Russo and based in Indio - has elicited a new and serious academic and indigenous understanding, preservation and perpetuation of the indigenous culture and lives of the Chemehuevi Indians of the Mojave.

And the songs of the Salt Song Trail. We are hearing just a few of them today, as rendered by Leivas. According to the Cultural Conservancy Storyscape Project, "the Salt Songs are the sacred songs of the Nuwuvi people and describe a physical and spiritual landscape spanning ocean and desert, mountains and rivers, life and death." The songs themselves form, as a whole, a ceremonial trail that connects the sacred places and locations into a long, continuous loop, and reveals the complex relationship between people, place, and story.

The Oasis of Mara was once a well-used Chemehuevi village site until the time of the Willie Boy tragedy. Then the small group of Chemehuevi living there were re-located to the Coachella Valley and designated as the 29 Palms Band of Cabazon Indians. Still, the strong presence and resonance of Chemehuevi life remains here, testimony to the enduring, living legacy of these desert people, and the Salt Songs, themselves. In a desert

known for its widely-spaced surface water sources and oases, this was, and remains, one of the highly-valued places of water, shelter, rest and renewal. Part of the oasis is now inhabited by the 29 Palms Inn, which is known, in part, for its huge garden, which provides the restaurant there with fresh food. According to Leivas, who is also a leader in the renewal of indigenous farming and agriculture practices at the Lake Havasu/Chemehuevi Reservation, many plants used traditionally for his tribe as food, medicine, and more, are grown here.

The sun has discernibly lowered on this beautiful, motion and emotion-filled afternoon on those of us who stand in reverence and awe to hear but a few of the centuries-old songs of the Salt Song Trail – whose entire cycle comprises 142 songs and takes from sunset to sunrise to sing – being sung so powerfully, so beautifully, and so heartbreakingly.

We have been told earlier that Leivas must leave the Oasis of Mara and be on his way well before dark. His presence and his singing are continually requested throughout the desert southwest. He has a long drive home. And then there is his involvement with his tribe's farming renewal and sustainability projects back home. Not to mention the educational trips he leads to the desert's Old Woman Mountains Preserve, another area visited and named in the Salt Songs, in his work with the Native American Land Conservancy. He's also helping prepare for the long weekend ahead at Chemehuevi Days early next month.

But Leivas sings and shakes his gourd rattle powerfully, on and on, while we all stand, alongside the perched raven and the cluster of ants, enraptured by his compelling songs. These are the songs of the ancestors, of the desert dwellers of yesterday, today and tomorrow, all harmonized into one. I look to the west; the sunset is just beginning to flush the horizon into a hue of pink and red, and is sharply backlit by a montage of Joshua Trees. A coyote darts behind a large creosote bush, and several people walk towards the park visitor center. And here, the songs continue on. And for just this sunlit moment of time, even if just a tiny wink in the bigger diorama of desert place and life, we become part of the song, just as this song belongs to yet another song.

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Top Photo: Matthew Leivas, Sr, Chemehuevi Indian of the Chemeheuvi Reservation, California.

Credit: Ruth Nolan

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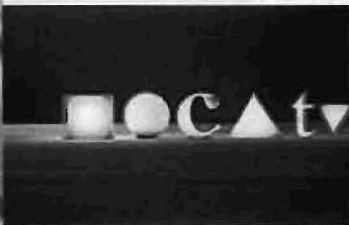
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