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Into the wild: Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Colorado

A Grammy-winning CD showcases American Indian singer-scholar

By Cathy Cockrell

As a musician and a scholar, “I’m very much about saying ‘we’re here,’” says American Indian singer and composer John-Carlos Perea. In February, that message of survival got a worldwide stage, when the Paul Winter Consort CD *Crestone* — featuring Native American contributions from the Berkeley doctoral student — won a Grammy for Best New Age Album.

Perea, 33, was in San Francisco watching the award ceremony online as the envelope was opened and the winning recording announced. “When they read our names, I almost had a heart attack,” he says.

Celebrating a high corner of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of southern Colorado, *Crestone* features a handful of original pieces by Perea (performing voice, pow-wow drums, and cedar flute). It also showcases “Witchi Tai To,” a song from the Native American church that saxophonist Jim Pepper introduced to mainstream audiences in 1969, in a fusion-jazz arrangement that remained on the Billboard charts for weeks.

As it happens, Pepper, a Creek-Kaw jazz musician who died in 1992, is the subject of Perea’s dissertation at Berkeley, where he studies ethnomusicology with a focus on American Indian music. His research, in part, probes the origins of “Witchi Tai To,” which is said to be of Comanche origins.

For the *Crestone* arrangement of the song, Paul Winter used a Brazilian rhythm section, overdubbed with Perea’s singing. He also invited Perea to write a portion of the liner notes. “One of Paul’s major concerns was that the history of the native people in the U.S. is being erased,” says Perea, who discusses American Indian musical tradition in his written contribution to the CD. “If I didn’t have the background from Berkeley,” he says, “I wouldn’t have been able to do that in as effective a way.”

Of Mescalero Apache and German-Irish descent, Perea first began playing professionally at 19. His solo and collaborative recordings (featuring his Northern Plains vocals, pow-wow drumming, and electric-bass guitar licks) date back to the late 1990s. After hearing Perea on a recent release, Paul Winter invited the young musician to participate in the *Crestone* project.

“When he called I was totally blown away,” Perea recalls.

The primary recordings for *Crestone* were done at 15,000 feet, capturing the natural acoustics of North Crestone Lake. Perea, however, was studying for his qualifying exams at the time and couldn’t join Winters. Luckily, the renowned world-music exponent offered to record the Berkeley grad student in a less-pristine setting, in Redwood City.



Niki Megeloo photo

Singer-scholar: John-Carlos Perea

For Perea, the collaboration on *Crestone* has opened up new research possibilities. Through Winters he has met musicians who played with Jim Pepper — whom Perea regards as a major figure in popularizing American Indian music. “Without him, I wouldn’t have much of a musical or performing or academic career,” he says.

Not only Pepper but “a lot of the family” inform Perea’s contributions to *Crestone*. Some tracks — including “Blue Horse Special,” composed by Perea’s grandfather — are by or about “local American Indian community members who have passed on,” he notes. “It couldn’t get any better.”

For more information, see John-Carlos Perea’s [discography and downloadable musical tracks \(http://www.myspace.com/johncarlosperea\)](http://www.myspace.com/johncarlosperea).

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