

# R. Carlos Nakai: American Indian Flutist

**The only American Native to have a platinum record, along with  
two gold records, eleven Grammy nominations, Native American Music Awards  
(Nammys) and a Governor's Arts Award**

## **R. Carlos Nakai, American Indian Flutist**

Considered the world's premier performer of the Native American flute, R. Carlos Nakai holds the distinction of being the only American Native performer performing in the Indigenous genre to have a Platinum Record-*Canyon Trilogy*- with over one million sold. He serves as an effective ambassador in reaching new concert audiences consistently drawing capacity or near capacity houses. Nakai has a successful career in many genres of music. He is an eleven-time Grammy® nominee who has many fans who follow him into the concert hall.

As one of the most renowned and influential American Indian musicians of the modern era, Nakai has spent decades weaving the ancient sounds of his heritage with contemporary musical forms, creating a body of work that transcends genre and brings Indigenous traditions to audiences worldwide.

Nakai's upbringing was steeped in the stories, songs, and communal values of his ancestors. Growing up in the Southwest United States, he experienced both the challenges and the beauty of life as an Indigenous person in a changing world. His family's encouragement and his exposure to traditional ceremonies laid the foundation for his later artistic journey. He also gained an early appreciation for the importance of cultural preservation—a theme that would become central to his life's work.

Nakai's approach to the Native American flute is both innovative and respectful. Rather than simply replicating traditional songs, he has expanded the instrument's expressive possibilities. Through new fingering techniques, extended melodies, and harmonics, he blends the flute's haunting tones with elements of jazz, classical, and world music. He also composes original works for flute integrating influences from his heritage with contemporary sensibilities. His music carries a universal message of peace, healing, and connection to the land.

Some of his most celebrated collaborations include partnerships with composer and pianist Peter Kater, guitarist William Eaton, and virtuoso world percussionist Will Clipman. These collaborations have resulted in genre-defying works that unite traditions from around the world, such as the Grammy-nominated albums “How the West Was Lost,” “Ancestral Voices,” and “Awaken the Fire”. Nakai’s recordings have reached listeners worldwide and have been used in films, documentaries, and therapeutic contexts.

Nakai has also been an outspoken advocate for Indigenous rights and cultural preservation. Through his music and public work, he highlights the importance of land, language, and ceremony, urging others to recognize the wisdom embedded in Indigenous traditions. His efforts have contributed to broader conversations about representation, respect, and the role of the arts in cultural resilience.