

# The Songs of Our Life

Through their time-honored ritual of bird singing, Tribal members share the story and spirit of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

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Wearing ceremonial ribbon shirts, the Pai nik tem Bird Singers perform bird songs, which describe the wonder of creation, the naming of all worldly things, and the story of the First People.



The Pai nik tem Bird Singers, shown in Andreas Canyon, include Agua Caliente Tribal members, Pai nik descendants, and four natives from other Cahuilla tribes. They perform at about 15 gatherings per year.

On a warm day in late May, members of the Pai nik tem Bird Singers file into Andreas Canyon dressed in long black pants and ceremonial ribbon shirts. In their hands, they hold rattles crafted from dried gourds and filled with seeds. Agua Caliente Tribal member and lead singer Peter Arviso Jr. initiates the first song. The rhythmic “tsch tsch tsch” of the gourds and the deep voices of young men fill the canyon. Cottonwood trees dance in the breeze, and water tumbles over rocks in perfect harmony with the steady beat of Cahuilla bird songs that tell celebrated stories. Past, present, and future funnel into a single moment.

Above, a white cloud changes shape as it slowly moves across the brilliant blue sky — a fleeing rabbit, an old woman smoking a pipe,

a dog with a bone. No matter what form it takes, it’s still a cloud. So too, the story of the Cahuilla bird songs can be told 100 different ways, yet the message is always the same: How the Cahuilla people found their way home after the death of their creator, Mukat, and all they learned along the way.

Their songs, which number more than 300, chronicle the Cahuilla migration from start to finish when sung in a certain order. “The bird songs talk about our journey,” Peter explains. “We did a full circle all the way around, flew over the San Jacinto Mountains, and found our homeland. Everything we do in life is a big circle; we always come back to where we started.”

Eli Andreas, a bird singer and grandson of Anthony “Biff” Andreas Jr., says the songs contain essential life lessons learned during

the migration of his people, while fellow singer David Johnson Stanley sees the songs as a celebration of Cahuilla society. “They are what brought us together,” he says.

Like great doors opening to the beginning of Cahuilla life, bird songs describe the wonder of creation, the naming of all worldly things, and the story of the First People. However, a few doors remain shut, the keys lost long ago. “Some of the bird songs are considered ancient Cahuilla,” Eli says. “Some of them we can’t translate, or we may know only one word. But that one word could help us figure it out, and surrounding tribes may know other words in ancient Cahuilla.” Without any written records, this oral tradition depends heavily on accurate transference of the songs and Cahuilla collective memory to gain greater insight into their history.



Dancers’ movements mimic birds on the ground, often with one arm curled in front of their bodies.



Bird singers serve as stewards of the songs, which tell how the Cahuilla people found their way home after the death of their creator and contain essential life lessons learned during the migration.



“The bird songs are important because we have to keep our tradition alive,” Peter says. “We have to teach the younger kids to honor the songs, respect their elders, and carry on the tradition.”

David says all members of the Pai nik tem Bird Singers — and other bird singers today — understand their venerable roles in delivering the songs to future generations. “We know the significance of passing them along and, branching out even further, learning the language and understanding past traditions,” he says. “The groundwork was laid for us and for generations before us. We’re just keeping it rolling.”

But it wasn’t always so. Wedged between solemn reverence and passionate reconnection was a time when the songs were in danger of disappearing forever.

“At one point, Cahuilla bird songs were almost lost,” Eli explains. “From our reservation, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, the only bird singer left was Joe Patencio. He’s the one that brought it back. He taught a lot of the young men who grew up around that generation.”

Eli’s grandfather and his uncle John Andreas sang with Joe Patencio when they were children, but then lost interest, Eli has since learned. Fortunately, Joe saved the songs on cassettes, and when he died, Biff Andreas

took ownership of the recordings and formed a group of bird singers.

“I remember my grandfather telling me that when he was growing up, the elders would just get together and sing,” Eli recalls. “He said he was the first one to actually have his own group and go out and perform.”

As a child, Eli often would sing with his grandfather. “My mom grew up with bird singing, so as soon as we could hold a rattle in our hands we’d go out and sing with my grandpa at fiestas, powwows — any type of gathering.”

Like Eli and most of the Pai nik tem Bird Singers, David and Peter were exposed to bird singing as young boys. And, like most, they detached from the tradition as they matured into teenagers.

“When I was two years old, my mom threw me out there [with the bird singers],” Peter recalls. “I’d play the gourd for a few songs, then I’d go play in the dirt.” He didn’t learn the songs and wasn’t interested in participating until he grew older.

Peter, who grew up on a different reservation than Eli and David, was in his mid-20s before he found his voice and started singing. Without an elder to guide him, Peter mastered Cahuilla bird songs with help from his cousins. “It didn’t take too long, because I was so hungry for it,” he says. “It’s always been in me.”



ABOVE: Bird singers perform in a line with the leader in the center. During performances, singers often break formation and dance while the group continues the song. OPPOSITE: Peter Arviso Jr., Bird Singer.

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— Eli Andreas

For David, bird singing has been a part of his life for as long as he can remember. As a child living on Andreas Ranch not far from the canyon, he was surrounded by Cahuilla traditions. But when his family later moved to Desert Hot Springs, they left bird singing behind. “We lost it,” he says. “I wasn’t going to powwows; I wasn’t going to fiestas. We grew up with bird singing and weren’t doing anything with what we knew.”

David and others of his generation realized they had a responsibility to continue the tradition. “It was time,” he says. “Time that we took it and kept it going. There are elders still singing the songs, and we give all respect to them because without them, there would be no us.”

Eli is grateful to Joe Patencio for teaching the songs to his grandfather and says the songs might have been otherwise completely lost. After his grandfather died, Eli and his cousins asked the elders for permission to sing the songs Patencio gifted to Biff Andreas. “We asked Moraino Patencio if we could sing his grandfather’s songs,” Eli explains. “Moraino gave us his blessing.”

Energized by the green light, the young men, many of them cousins, began learning the songs about seven years ago. They made rattles, practiced singing with each other, and formed a group. “It started off small, and then we got more and more members,” David recalls. “It’s really coming together now.”

The Pai nik tem Bird Singers perform at 15 or more gatherings annually. According to Peter, the core group comprises Agua Caliente Tribal members, Pai nik descendants, and four natives from other Cahuilla tribes. No one is discouraged from singing or dancing with the group, regardless of age or tribal affiliation. Native women and girls may dance, but only the men sing.

While each member makes and uses his own gourd to keep the beat during the songs, the leader’s gourd should always be the most audible, says Pai nik tem singer Isaiah “Duke” Andreas Galvan. “If your gourd is louder, you could mess up his rhythm.”

Bird singers perform in a line with the leader in the center. During any given performance, a few singers break formation and dance while the group continues the song. “When we go out and dance it’s not by rank or design,” David says. “If you feel like dancing, you dance.”

When the men dance, their movements mimic birds on the ground, often with one arm curled in front of their bodies. “Ever watch a bird catch his food and eat it?” Eli queries. “He puts a wing out to protect it. We’re protecting the rattle because it’s sacred — especially after all the hard work and time it took to make it.”

Dancing enlivens the crowd and the singers. “When everyone’s voice is vibrating, you can feel it in your chest,” Duke says. “Then you’re like, ‘I gotta get out there and dance to this one; this is my jam!’” He says singing and dancing

transport him to another time and place. “I go back to when I was five years old. I hear all the other singers who were singing back then, and I see all the other dancers who were dancing back then. And I remember how fun it was.”

For others, singing bird songs is an adrenaline shot for the soul. “After a day at work, I’m kind of tired — I don’t want to do anything,” Peter says, “but when we start bird singing, suddenly I have all this energy. I just want to be out there.” He also turns to bird songs for personal rejuvenation. “There are some days when I don’t feel as strong as I should, so I’ll come to [Andreas Canyon] for what I call ‘rebuilding my medicine.’ I sit and listen to the stream and sing the songs, and I come back one with my heart.”

Sometimes Peter brings his family with him when he retreats to the canyons for healing. He says it’s vital that his children understand that their culture and heritage are rooted in bird songs. “I tell them, this is what our people have done for thousands of years. It’s what my grandfather and his father and grandfather did. The bird songs are not just about going up [on the stage] to sing; it’s a lifestyle we have to live. We have to always be respectful and have a clear mind and a clear heart.”

Bringing bird songs into the public eye helps ensure the tradition’s survival, David believes. “It’s important that we share our culture, because if we don’t, all is lost,” he says. “Our identity of who we are and what we’re passing on is going to be lost. Bird singing is not for show; it is to share.”

Peter offers sage advice to those experiencing bird songs for the first time: “Keep your heart open, your mind open, and accept the songs for what they are. If you can listen to the songs that way, you’ll feel it. You’ll feel the medicine.” ●

## Ribbon Shirts and Rattles

Just as fingerprints determine an individual’s identity, ceremonial dress and objects define the character, location, and tribal affiliation of native people. For Cahuilla bird singers, these fingerprints manifest in the form of rattles and ribbon shirts.

Cahuillas have used rattles made from dried gourds for thousands of years, long before the arrival of the Europeans, says Eli Andreas, a member of the Pai nik tem Bird Singers.

In Cahuilla native style, each bird singer crafts his rattle by selecting a gourd, or squash, which grows on a vine, similar to watermelon. Once the squash completely dries, he cuts a hole large enough to scoop out the guts. Then it’s boiled for approximately 20 minutes, often filled with rocks to keep the gourd from floating to the top of the heated water.

To create the rattle sound, bird singers fill the gourds with palm seeds from a place of spirit. “My seeds are from Andreas Canyon,” says Peter Arviso Jr., lead singer of the Pai nik tem Bird Singers. The rattle handle is usually a piece of cottonwood whittled down to size, then carved and shaved. The handle is affixed to the gourd using a strong adhesive.

It’s a time-intensive process that demands patience and solemn consideration of the message the rattle sends about the singer’s personality. “Sometimes we paint our gourds with a favorite color or sometimes with a symbol to show where we’re from,” says Isaiah “Duke” Andreas Galvan. Some

singers prefer to accentuate the gourd’s natural look by adding a light coating of spray gloss.

Gourd rattles may resemble maracas — a perception Eli quickly diffuses. “We wouldn’t want someone from another culture to accidentally grab one of our rattles and go ‘Oh, it’s a maraca!’ Our creator taught us how to use them. They are sacred.”

The ribbon shirts bird singers don are essentially tribal wear modified for present day. “It’s our modern way of dressing because we can’t really dress the traditional way with grass skirts and no shirts,” Eli observes. Ribbon shirts were

largely influenced by Spanish celebratory style, Eli explains.

“Traditionally, we only had a few colors,” Eli says. “Red is a sacred color for all Native people — that’s one of the reasons we wear red.” In the years that followed, surrounding tribes selected representational colors, similar to professional sports teams. “The Agua Caliente, we wear blue a lot; for the Morongo Band of Mission Indians it’s maroon; Torres Martinez Desert



Cahuilla Indians is black; Pala Band of Mission Indians is green; Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians is red; and Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians is red and black. So when the other bird groups started coming around during my grandfather’s generation, you could identify where they were from by their ribbon shirts.

“Today, bird singers have their own style. Some groups dress the same; others like to use patterned material for the shirts and different ribbons. Really, it’s whatever works.”