

# Talking Stick

A R T S N E W S L E T T E R

many people of different cultures feel they have a kinship with traditional Native American arts. Some have supported native artists by presenting them in their galleries and museums. Others have recorded our songs, some

have learned our dances. Many traditional designs have found their way to modern fashion. Some of this we look at with raised eyebrows, especially if we are talking appropriation. Then, there are collaborations between musicians such as Dave Amram and Floyd

Indian people, in general, when presenting our art to the wider world, have done so through western mediums. We work in such media as film, video, print. We write books and perform plays. We create web sites, such as the noted Buffy Sainte-Marie site, and we take photos of life on the rez. We perform in opera and in symphonies. Much of this work is reflective of the particular communities in which we live, be it rural Native or the urban art world. By using western technology, we are able to tell our stories to the whole world, and on the whole, we are very pleased with that. So, it is sage to say, that when looking for a wider audience, we look to the west.

Kamala Cesar, on the other hand, looked to the East.

Kamala (Mohawk) is the director of Lotus Music and Dance Studios/Lotus Fine Arts Productions/Center in New York City.

Lotus specializes in offering music and dance from the rich indigenous cultures of Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Americas and Europe, by presenting performances and classes. Since 1984, the center has been at the forefront of multi cultural dance and music in the metropolitan area, featuring programs such as South Indian Dance, Filipino Tribal Dances, Hawaiian and Tahitian Dance, Flamenco, Burmese Dance, West

African Dance, to name but a few. Lotus also presents a series with Tom Porter and the Mohawk Singers and Dancers.

Born in Brooklyn to a Mohawk mother and a Filipino father, Kamala grew up in the small Filipino community there. She recalls "My mother had a cousin from Akwesasne who had married a Filipino man. Upon hearing this, she said "What's a Filipino, anyway?" Soon, she had moved to Manhattan, and soon she, too, was married to a Filipino.

Both of her parents came to the area due to circumstances brought upon them by the colonization and assimilation policies of the ruling classes at the time. Her mother was sent to Spanish Boarding School in Canada, where she was forced to speak English and hide her Mohawk identity. Her father's people were from the South Philippines, where the society was a mesh of many different tribal cultures - all being suppressed by the foreign government at the time. When they came together, they made the then often inevitable choice of raising their children as English speaking Americans. "I did not know I was Mohawk until I was in high school." Kamala states quietly.

If life is a circle, then Kamala has come full circle. Her travels to the East, and exploration of the culture there, enabled her to come home and connect with the Mohawk culture here.



by Steve Torm

Westerman that combine the best of two different musical cultures.

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### EDITORIAL POLICY

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In 1968, while studying at Berkley in California, she began working with an experimental street theatre company. The company used dance, music, poetry, and was very concerned with the spirit. At this time, a friend told her of a woman who was giving classes in a style of South Indian dance called Bharata Natyam. This is a classic South Indian dance form and Kamala, intrigued, took a few classes. The teacher, an American, was a student of the master artist of this discipline, T. Balasaraswati, who was based in India.

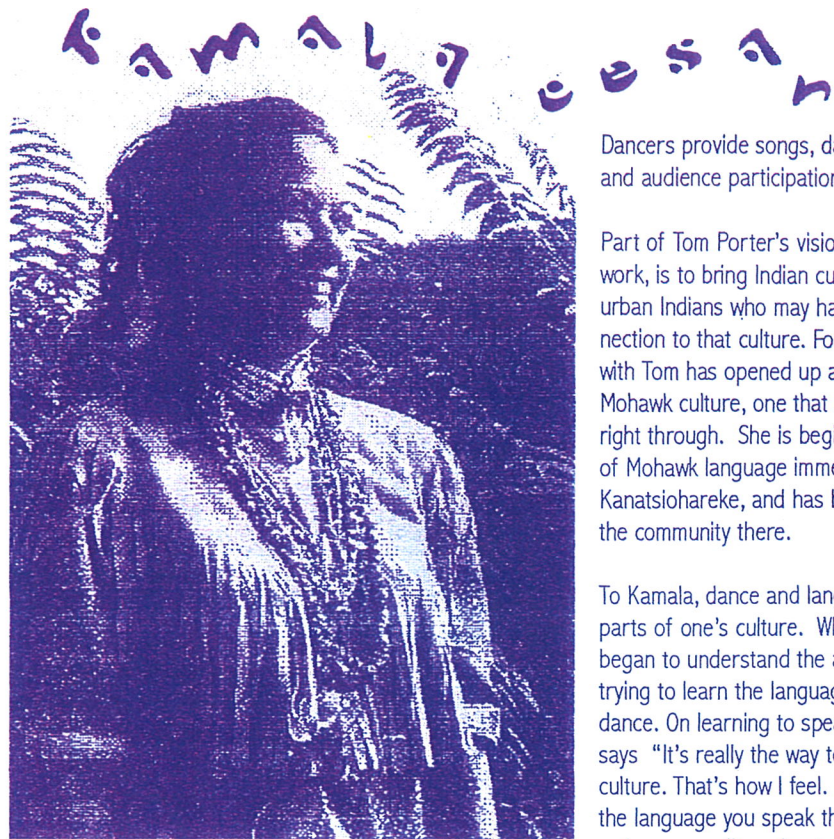
Seeing the dance performed for the first time, Kamala recalls "here was this woman, not even Indian, and she was completely transformed. She was beautiful. While I was watching this person dance I was experiencing something intensely deep - it was very emotionally involving...I didn't understand the language, or even really the story, but the experience was so intense. It made me cry, it was so beautiful". Kamala smiles, remembering, and says "I wanted to be that!".

She wrote a letter to the Master, Balasaraswati, and thus began a twelve year apprenticeship under the tutelage of the Master. Studying both in the United States and in India, Kamala, was encouraged by Balasaraswati to perform as well as teach. "She said to me, 'some people will do this as a hobby, but for you it's a profession...I really didn't know that this would be my life'".

Since becoming a Master of Bharata Natyam herself, Kamala has performed all over the United States, in Asia and in Europe. After the Master's death in the early 1980's, Kamala knew she had to carry on the tradition. In 1984 she founded the Balasaraswati Institute of Indian Music and Dance, and in 1988, Lotus Fine Arts Productions.

With her work at Lotus, she is an ambassador of ethnic and indigenous dance. She presents programs in NYC schools, does outreach to the various communities in the area, and offers dancers and teachers a place to practice their art. Lotus has collaborated with such groups as The Dance Theater of Harlem, Danza Espana, the Chinese Folk Dance Company,

The World Music Institute and the Mohawk Singers and Dancers.



Dancers provide songs, dances, and stories, and audience participation is encouraged.

Part of Tom Porter's vision, in presenting this work, is to bring Indian culture to many of the urban Indians who may have lost their connection to that culture. For Kamala, working with Tom has opened up a window into her Mohawk culture, one that she has climbed right through. She is beginning her third year of Mohawk language immersion classes at Kanatsiohareke, and has become close with the community there.

To Kamala, dance and language are integral parts of one's culture. When in India, she began to understand the art of her dance by trying to learn the language (Tamil) of the dance. On learning to speak Mohawk, Kamala says "It's really the way to understand the culture. That's how I feel. When you speak the language you speak the culture. This makes me really understand what it means to

be Mohawk".

Kamala Cesar is a woman of incredible integrity and artistry. From my limited knowledge of Bharata Natyam, I do know it takes strength, grace, and an innate sense of beauty to master this art. Kamala possess all of these traits.

Before I left Lotus, Kamala sat me down and showed me the 28 single hand gestures that are part of Bharata Natyam. She did this by gleefully performing them, with song, in Sanskrit.

Rarely have I been so charmed, and rarely have I left a meeting in awe of an artist of such stature. East to West, Kamala has come full circle.

