

# Silent Music

The Animal Flute Players on the  
Wells Petroglyph Preserve in  
Northern New Mexico



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Herman Agoyo  
Former Governor, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo  
Former All Indian Pueblo Council Chair

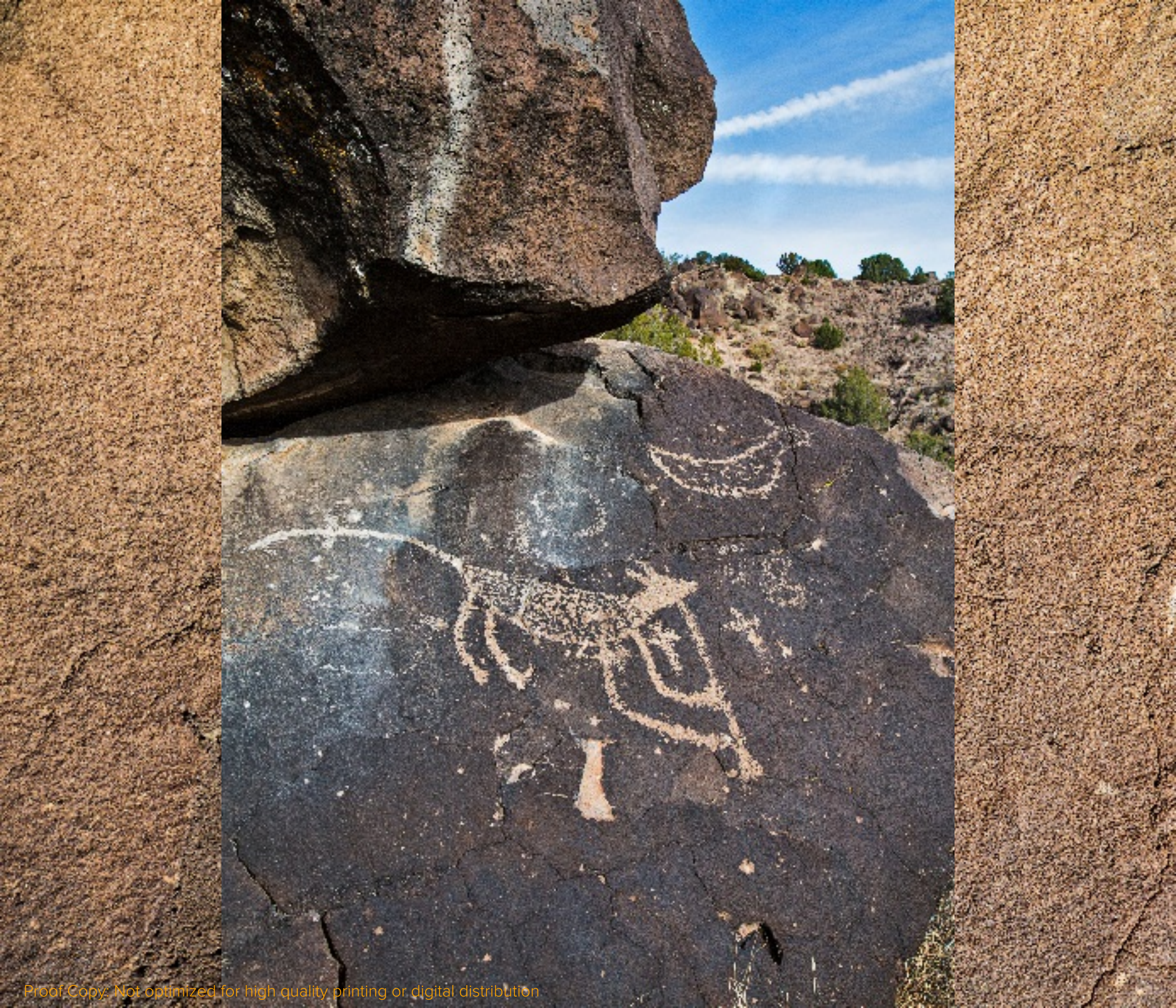


Katherine Wells and John Kincheloe  
Photography by Charles Mann



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Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Books



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## **Foreword**

Matthew Martinez

Mesa Prieta, in the Northern Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico north of Santa Fe, is the largest petroglyph site in the state. My Pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh, is at the south end of the Mesa, and is a big part of the history here.

Humans have been part of this history for 10,000 years but only began to carve images into the boulders 7,500 years ago. Around 1300 A.D. Puebloans came into this area. They built multi-storied pueblos and conducted ceremonial dances for rain and to keep the world in balance. The Puebloans made tens of thousands of images on the boulders over the centuries – ceremonial

figures, rare animals, flute players, geometrics, and hundreds of other subjects.

The Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project was founded to protect this sacred place and to educate people about it. As people we are all connected to the stories and to story making. It is through story that we create meaning. The petroglyphs serve as storybooks by which we remember the past and honor our history. Mesa Prieta is one of the most important cultural and archaeological sites in New Mexico. It has become known because of the work of the Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project and its staff and volunteers.







# Preface

Janet MacKenzie

The beautiful high volcanic landform known as Mesa Prieta lies above the confluence of the northern Rio Grande and the Rio Chama. This sacred place hosts an estimated 100,000 rock images and other vestiges of human cultural pursuits, tangible and intangible, expressed over 10,000 years. We find them near trails, structures, springs, shrines, and subsistence activities.

Despite Mesa Prieta being a discreet cultural landscape with edges bounded by slumps and steep drops, it is connected to the wider world by communication routes thousands of years old, which show evidence of human activity from the remote past to today.

While no Paleo-Indian petroglyphs have yet been identified, there are Paleo stone tools. The earliest images were made about 7,500 years ago by Archaic Period hunters and gatherers who left behind mysterious, very dark and deeply pecked geometric forms and, later, animal track images. They account for perhaps 5-10% of Mesa Prieta images.

About 1300 A.D., Ancestral Pueblo people migrated into the Rio Grande valley, bringing with them a tradition of pictorial imagery, the "Classic Rio Grande Style." They created about 80% of the petroglyphs on the Mesa, many of which we believe are related to ceremony. This assemblage features amazing images of shields, animals, humans in ceremonial

contexts, flute players, militaristic images, and images related to fertility: water, copulation, and birthing scenes.

Foreigners arrived in 1598 when Don Juan de Oñate brought many European settlers north along the Camino Real from Mexico to Ohkay Owingeh. He created the Southwest's first Spanish capital at the southern tip of Mesa Prieta, resulting in a huge number of Christian iconographical petroglyphs.

In the first half of the 20th Century, names and dates and letters related to the Works Progress Administration are common, particularly on the Wells Petroglyph Preserve. Making images on rocks is a persistent cultural activity in America's Southwest: peace signs, names, and beautifully designed glyphs continue into the present.

The Wells Petroglyph Preserve may be the most concentrated area of petroglyphs on Mesa Prieta. The Preserve has been recorded twice: in 1993, the last Rock Art Field School of the Archaeological Society of New Mexico found more than 6,000 elements; in 2004-2009, the Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project found some 60% more images, bringing the total to more than 11,000! Recorders are now highly trained and include Pueblo and Hispano youth interns who may be recording images made by their own ancestors! It is truly our privilege to bring the little-known significant features of Mesa Prieta into the public consciousness.







# Animal Flute Players of Mesa Prieta

John Kincheloe

Images of ancient flute players are found painted and pecked into stone throughout the American Southwest. The diminutive musicians are nearly always depicted in profile as males, and perhaps as many as half of those on Mesa Prieta are ithyphallic. A distinctive feature of many flute player petroglyphs is his humped back. The figures are variously depicted as standing, dancing, running, seated, or even lying down.

What did the flute players mean to the Ancestral Pueblo People who made them? This we cannot know with certainty. Their full significance has been lost to the centuries. But we do have some valuable clues that point us toward an understanding of them. Ancient image makers placed flute player petroglyphs alongside other important images that shed light on their significance. Tribal accounts, folk stories, and ethnographic studies of the Pueblo People also give us hints about their meanings. The flute player was associated with rain,

fertility, and abundant game. He was linked to human procreation, and may have been thought of as a seducer of women. Among some Pueblo People, his music was thought to melt the winter snow and bring warmth. In yet another aspect he was a bringer of seeds and gifts. Perhaps the hump on his back represented a trader's pack.

What instruments did the Mesa Prieta flute player petroglyphs hold? The archaeological record indicates that over time Ancient Southwestern flutes were made of various materials. The earliest flutes were made of reed or cane. Next to be made were wood flutes, then ones of bone. Though mostly bone flutes are found at Classic Pueblo archaeological sites, it is most likely that the instruments of the petroglyph flute players were made of cane or wood. Bone flutes were comparatively short and could be played with one hand. The flutes depicted with the petroglyph flute players, however, are lengthy and most are being played with two hands. Ancestral Pueblo

*In American popular culture, the petroglyph flute player is dubbed "Kokopelli," but this is an unfortunate misnomer. The Puebloan Hopi People honor a traditional katsina (respected spirit) named Kookopölö, but though humpbacked, he does not carry a flute. The traditions of that Hopi katsina clearly have no connection with ancient Southwestern flute player petroglyphs. Nevertheless, despite the facts of the mistaken appropriation of name and image, "Kokopelli" is omnipresent at tourist and entertainment destinations throughout the Southwest. In fact, from Albuquerque to Australia, stylized images of the humpbacked flute player called "Kokopelli" decorate key chains, hand towels, earrings, refrigerator magnets, mugs, curtains, and T-shirts. Whatever the original meaning of the Ancestral Pueblo flute player may have been, that has been further obscured by the consumer-driven cultural noise of the 20th and 21st centuries.*



flutes were endblown flutes, very different from the contemporary “Native American Flute.” To play a simple endblown flute the musician had to tilt the instrument out from his body at nearly a 45 degree angle. This accounts for the distinctive profile we see in flute player petroglyphs. Some flutes in petroglyphs are pictured with flared ends or gourd attachments, and the practice of adding similar symbolic attachments to flutes is continued in several present-day Pueblos.

Undoubtedly there are hundreds of flute player petroglyphs scattered along the twelve-mile length of Mesa Prieta. Recording teams on the Mesa have documented more than 150 flute player petroglyphs at the 181 acre Wells Petroglyph Preserve alone. An unanswered question is why there is such a high concentration of flute player images at this particular location. An even deeper puzzle presents itself when we recognize that among these petroglyphs is a unique category of flute player images – astonishing petroglyphs that depict animals that are playing flutes. Almost all the flute player petroglyphs in the Southwest are

anthropomorphic – the instrument players are bipedal and their bodies resemble human form. At Mesa Prieta, however, images of more than a dozen flute-playing animals in various guises have been pecked into the basalt. They are rare and remarkable. It is astonishing that their silent music has echoed on the Mesa for more than five centuries.

Four of these creatures appear as quadrupeds playing flutes. There is little agreement about what specific kind of animals they are. Speculation ranges from mountain lion to coyote, antelope to rat. Perhaps they are creatures of myth from the First Stories of the Tewa Pueblo People.

We encounter the quadruped flute players as creatures that are somehow between animal and human. They make flute music as only humans do, but their four-legged form speaks to their animal nature. In traditional Pueblo thought, the distinction between human identity and animal identity was often a fluid one. First ancestors of certain Pueblo People were identified as animals.







Kinship with animals was and continues to be part of clan and society identity. Elsie Clews Parsons, the foremost ethnologist of the Tewa commented in *Tewa Tales* that, “Throughout Pueblo folk tales is expressed the idea that animals or birds have but to take off their skins to become human.” Certain animal materials – antlers, skunk fur, shells, pelts, feathers, for example – are variously regarded as symbolic, empowering, and sacred. Of some Pueblo ceremonial dances, it is said that the dancer gives his body to become the animal’s body. We cannot know the meanings these animal flute players held for those in the past, but knowing that transition between animal and human worlds was and is common in Pueblo thought opens up the idea that these quadruped flute players were possibly beings of two worlds.

One thing we observe about the quadruped flute player petroglyphs is that all of them have tails, and some are exceptionally long. But other flute players also have

tails. Though these other flute players are not depicted as quadrupeds, their prominent tails place them in the animal flute player category. In some cases they resemble humans with tails. As with the quadrupeds, the significance of these animal flute players eludes us. Some have thought of these flute players as shamanic figures who, on paths of healing or ecstasy, are beings in transformation and knowers of special animal powers. This seems unlikely, however, as we consider that there are multiple images of these tailed beings. They seem to have been produced by several makers and experienced by many. They don’t seem to be expressions by or about the solitary work typical of a shaman. To the contrary, their power seems to have been expressed and experienced communally.

Viewing the animal flute player petroglyphs in the context of the time period in which they were created gives us other possibilities for understanding them. The cultural period just before the Mesa Prieta petroglyphs were

*Knowing about the Tewa term, “po-wa-ha,” can enrich our understanding of the ancient flutes. The term’s literal meaning is “water-wind-breath.” Rina Swentzell (Santa Clara) has described the Tewa understanding of po-wa-ha as the mystical life force that flows through all things, animate and inanimate. Its wind flows through and enlivens all of the universe. Human breath and life are a part of that wind, and it is understood as a force that connects all things. Breath rituals for the Tewa and other Pueblo People connect the individual’s heart (soul) with all of the created world. It is customary at several Pueblos to tie feathers to the end of traditional flutes. The Hopi know those feathers as “flute breath.” Understanding that the flute player’s music is associated with his breath and with po-wa-ha, we can get a sense, perhaps, of the great power the flute player petroglyphs must have conveyed to the Ancestral Tewa.*







created (Coalition Period, 1200-1350 C.E.) was a time of great changes, epic migrations, conflicts, and social disruption for Pueblo Peoples. It was during this time that the Tewa came together and began to forge their new identity. Those who migrated to the Rio Grande valley alongside Mesa Prieta were searching for new ways to live together, new allies in the region, new architectures to accommodate diverse communities. It is not unreasonable to view the animal flute player petroglyphs as new imagery that was created to help overcome divisions within the new communities. Perhaps the animal flute player petroglyphs are found in abundance on Mesa Prieta because they were an innovative symbol or blending of symbols that served some unifying social function in their time (Classic Period, 1350-1600 C.E.). We can never fully know that history, but we do know that the animal flute players must have been products of their social and political circumstance.

Several other animal flute players have distinctive pinched waists and are often identified as “ant bodied” or

“insect bodied” flute players. Ethnographic and folkloric accounts from the Pueblo People at Hopi tell of the importance of the Ant People for those who would become Hopi. As it was told, in both the First and Second Worlds of creation the Ant People cared for humans by giving them protective warmth and food. So generous were the Ant People with their food that their waists grew thin, as they are to this day. Was this a Tewa story, as well? Did the image of ant bodied flute players relate to some notion of protection or blessing? We are left without an answer. We do know that for the Hopi another insect is closely related to the flute. The hump backed cicada (In Hopi, *maahu*) is the patron of the Blue and Gray Flute Societies. Recognized for the music it makes in summer, the cicada is also regarded as a keeper of heat. Stories tell of its ability to take human form, melt the snow with flute playing, and hasten the growing season. We can wonder, then, if the Ancestral Pueblo People in the East told that same story. Were those so-called “ant or insect bodied” flute players on the rocks actually thought of as “cicada flute players,” bringers of warmth and harbingers of spring?







Because the image of the flute player has become romanticized in our day, it is surprising to some that flute player images are often found in association with Pueblo iconography related to warfare. A particularly striking example of this on the Mesa is a wide petroglyph panel that features an armadillo-like flute player flanked on both sides by warriors. The animal flute player plays his flute in the direction of the tallest warrior, who in his battle regalia displays a massive war axe. Behind the flute player are warriors shown in profile with their bows. Ritual peck marks on the panel are an additional warfare-related feature.

Ritual pecking is often found in association with Pueblo war shrines. The flute player animal, wearing a necklace just as the tall warrior wears his, is an intentional part of this warrior panel. The animal image and its larger panel suggest to us that flute playing may have been part of the ceremony of warfare for the Ancestral Tewa.

We also find an animal flute player playing to a figure wearing horned headgear and bearing a Sun Shield. (see p.21) Shield images are prominent on Mesa Prieta, and they are emblems of Ancestral Tewa warriors and their war societies. Beyond this significance, the design of this shield invokes the power of the Sun Being. The shield's feathered edge is thought to depict rays emanating from the Sun Deity. Sun Old Man was regarded as life-giving and empowering, and it was the special patron of the warrior. Flute players on the Mesa were frequently placed in association with images of beings regarded as most powerful, as if to petition or praise them. Another animal flute player on the Mesa, placed as it was on the top surface of a boulder, seems to both seek and offer a blessing by playing his song before an emblem of Sun Old Man. (see p.24)

*We do not know why the Ancestral Tewa People depicted so many flute players in the "Bowl Area" of the Wells Preserve. Were the images there part of special ritual activities that took place in that specific space? Were the images understood as animating marks that actualized powers or presences within the rock? Do the flute player petroglyphs indicate that actual flutes were played in proximity to them? Did that cupped-out part of Mesa Prieta provide advantageous acoustical environments for flute playing – locations where sound was uniquely amplified or reflected, or places where boulders provided beneficial windbreaks for playing?*









Still another plays his instrument beside an image of Avanyu, the feared and respected Horned Water Spirit of the Below World, who was thought to control water, floods, earthquakes, and lightning. The zigzag form of the Avanyu symbolizes his connection with lightning. Each lightning bolt he threw was thought to be tipped, like the warrior's arrow, with a sharp obsidian point. (see left)

### *A Pueblo Emergence Story*

*This portion of a Hopi-Tewa story of the First People's emergence from below the earth surface may hint at the meanings of the tailed animal flute players on Mesa Prieta:*

*"When they were way underneath they were ants. Then they came to another place and they turned into other creatures. At another place they became like people but with long tails.... They had a flood there and they were crazy.... They planted reeds and sang a song to make the reeds grow.... Under there, where they were living, there was only a little light, and so they did not know yet that they had long tails.... Just then when the flood came close to their village, they went up, they all went up.... When they came out, that time they came out with no tails."*

*– Collected from a Tewa narrator by Elsie Clews Parsons in Tewa Tales, 1926*







10:30 a.m.



One animal flute player petroglyph is unique in its association with the Sun Being. It is beautiful in the way the animal tilts his head up at an expressive angle, as if he is playing his flute to the sky. But the deeper significance of this animal flute player is revealed as we watch the mid-day shadow at Equinox move slowly to align with the graceful line of its back and head. At the mid-points of the Sun Being's annual journeys back and forth between the Winter Solstice point and the Summer Solstice point, and at the

11:45 a.m.



sun's highest position on those days only, light, shadow, and the form of the animal flute player intersect to herald the propitious time of Equinox.

Knowledge of the time of Equinox was certainly something owned by specialists among the Ancestral Pueblo People – select individuals who were watchers of the sun. They were keen observers of how light and shadow fell across the land as Sun Old Man made his journey. By



11:55 a.m.



observing the light on this animal flute player we can witness the genius of those Ancient Skywatchers who helped their people know the movement and powers of the Sun Being, so they could best determine times for planting, harvesting, the proper days for initiations, political transitions, and ceremony. In our day, light from the sun and shadows on stone still herald the Equinox – the times of balance, the times at the middle-point of the Sun Being's long journey.

Noon



Other solar markers have been discovered on Mesa Prieta. How many other animal flute players might be Equinox and Solstice markers? That and many other things about the animal flute player petroglyphs on Mesa Prieta still await discovery.







# Hearing a Silent Music

Katherine Wells

In 1992 when I purchased the land on Mesa Prieta that eventually became the Wells Petroglyph Preserve, I knew that there were some images on the giant basalt boulders. I knew almost nothing about who had made these wondrous pictures. Little did I know that this mesa would turn out to be the largest petroglyph site in New Mexico with an estimated 100,000 images, including 150 flute players on the Preserve alone. Or that among them I would find a silent music so beguiling that I would devote the rest of my life to the care and protection of these ancient flute players and their companions. Nothing in my life has been as exhilarating as their discovery, as the pure, high notes of those flutes greeting me in this serene and silent place. This desert home took me in but required much in exchange. There was no free lunch. These flute players and their legions of friends tasked me with doing my damndest to see that each image be recorded and catalogued, that the descendants of those who made them, especially the children, be reintroduced to them. And, that they be protected as such splendid productions of the human spirit deserve.

I never thought the petroglyphs were mine. I always understood that they belonged to all of us, that I had won some cosmic lottery allowing me to work hard

and long on their behalf. From the beginning I pondered their fate, understood that I was living in a museum *par excellence*. But it is a museum with no walls, no roof to protect it. Centuries of overgrazing and tantrums of rain cause erosion and form new arroyos. Boulders roll. The glyphs themselves are sturdy except when assaulted by humans with rifles, spray paint, or saws attempting to hack the images off, like ripping canvas from a frame.

I began to take my mortality more seriously after the death of my partner, Lloyd Dennis, in 2001. Research and much pondering led me to give nearly all of my property to The Archaeological Conservancy, a national organization headquartered in Albuquerque. Earlier, in 1999 I and other petroglyph buffs and neighbors founded the Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project. In 2002 we started recording the images. We began giving frequent tours and creating education programs for Pueblo and Hispano children.

Over the years those working with the MPPP became ever more aware of the importance of this cultural legacy. As we recorded more and more petroglyphs on pieces of property adjacent to the Wells Petroglyph Preserve, the question on everyone's mind was, what WILL happen to the images? Will the silent music



be forever lost to the ravages of humans and nature? If MPPP is no longer able to sustain its work, is it possible to give this sacred place a protected future? Pueblo People believe ancestral spirits continue to reside among these petroglyphs. The history of all who have ever lived in New Mexico is represented on this twelve-mile long Mesa. These facts are an ongoing call to action.

Several years ago, the MPPP began the process of seeking National Monument status for large tracts of land on the Mesa. The site's quality and quantity of images more than qualify it for such status. Discussions with representatives from local Pueblos whose heritage is preserved on the Mesa, with owners of large tracts of land on the Mesa, and with the Bureau of Land Management encouraged pursuit of this goal. The BLM was more than

willing to seek federal funds for land purchases and the maintenance of a monument. Unfortunately the winds of political change have intervened. The process has been long and complex, but MPPP continues to pursue this objective.

The MPPP's small staff and a hundred volunteers strive constantly to raise the funds needed to continue recording petroglyphs and entering the information into our complex database. We put endless energy into our STEM-based education programs about the Mesa for underserved local children and teens. We offer tours of the Wells Preserve to help educate people about the site. We deeply appreciate the support of all who, at this critical time, join with us to preserve this unique and irreplaceable piece of New Mexico's past and future.









## Photography

Charles Mann: front cover, back cover, 6, 8, 10b, 10d, 10e, 13, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 27.  
John Kincheloe: 10a, 10f, 22, 23.  
Norman Doggett: 10c.



## Illustrations

Katherine Wells: 7, 26, 28.



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[www.mesaprietapetroglyphs.org](http://www.mesaprietapetroglyphs.org)







