



Playing Historically-Correct Rim-Blown Flutes of the Ancient Southwest

by Peter Phippen

Peter Phippen is a Grammy Award nominee, International Acoustic Music Awards nominee, and multiple Native American Music Awards nominee. He is a performing and recording artist specializing in traditional flutes from around the world. Throughout the past three decades, Peter has researched the history and performance technique of flutes, both ancient and modern.

In his approach to world flute performance, Peter is an experiential, natural folk musician with a penchant for creative and artistic musical improvisation. He offers a captivating collage of sound images, covering the folklore and history of flutes from around the world and throughout time. Peter performs an enchanting mix of the very old and the very new in music. He has shared the stage with R. Carlos Nakai, Michael Graham Allen (Coyote Oldman), Xavier Quijas Yxayotl, and many more.

As a recording artist, Peter Phippen has recorded four albums for Canyon Records. He has also recorded for Promotion Music Records and appeared on Curb Records, Lifescapes, Sounds True, and Heart Dance Records.

What are rim-blown flutes? A rim-blown flute is an end-blown flute or edge-blown flute that is an open tube type of instrument. It lacks any type of internal mechanism that directs the airstream for sound production. Instead, sound is created by directing the airstream against an edge on the upper end of the tube. This edge can be notched, sharpened, or left natural. Examples of rim-blown flutes include the Anasazi, Hopi, Yuma, Mojave, and Pomo flutes.

Michael Graham Allen: There are many rim-flutes in the Western states, probably more than 25 variations, most quite similar. All in all, there were quite likely more than a hundred rim-flutes of different tribes. One outstanding flute that comes to mind is the Hupa three-hole, rim-flute. I also have a replica of a little-known two-hole Lower Pecos Canyon flute. Among the simple and usually small four-hole flutes, there are many, usually made of elderberry or cane. Miwok (Yosemite area), the Yokuts (CA), and many others tribes made simple small flutes with four holes placed approximately in the middle of the flute. There were even rim-flutes among the Northwest Coastal people. This is a huge subject!

I first encountered the ancient Southwest American rim-blown flute upon my introduction to the late Dr. Richard W. Payne ("Doc") in 1999. I was staying with him at his home in Oklahoma City. One day, Doc started going through his collection of world flutes, trying to find one that I had not before seen. After many failed attempts, Doc reached for his Hopi flute, the one that appears on the inside cover of his book, *The Hopi Flute Ceremony* (1993). He asked me if I knew the identity of the instrument that he held. I was stumped.

Doc proceeded to explain to me that what he was holding was a Hopi flute. He asked me if I knew how to play that flute type. As he handed it to me, I looked at the rim and it reminded me of an Egyptian ney or a very long kawala, an Egyptian end-blown edge aerophone. So, I was able to play Doc's Hopi flute with an oblique embouchure, meaning that the flute is held off to the side at an angle. The severity of the angle can vary from player to player.



Left: Peter is playing a small six-hole, rim-blown replica of a flute from Gypsum Cave, Nevada, made by Rich Purdy.

Right: Peter Phippen is playing a Michael Graham Allen Hopi flute replica in an oblique manner.

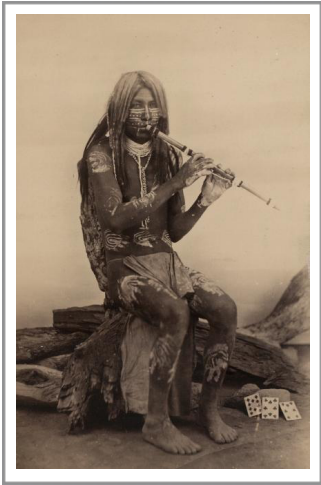
Photos: Victoria Shoemaker



With the oblique approach to playing a rim-blown flute, the side of your mouth acts like your chin, as if playing quena or the shakuhachi. I tell people that to get the embouchure correct, it is like kissing your mama goodnight when you were a little kid. You pucker up your lips, leave a small opening or aperture, then lean the side of the flute's opening against your lips and the part of your face where your mouth meets your face. I have seen people play with only their lips in this manner, as well. Below is a good video illustrating the oblique embouchure. In this particular instance, the player is demonstrating the ney and the kawala. On YouTube it is titled, "The Differences Between Ney and Kawala. Are [sic] they sound so differently?"

www.youtube.com/watch?v=DySjQm-fGhY&fbclid=IwAR2EU3wo7to_GoF4HgM_oyGzv7wB7uzQXGRFdOMIA69aYPOmxrTBmoZjVBo

There is also a famous photo of a Yuma flutist from Arizona that illustrates the oblique manner of playing. (below left photo)



I also played Doc's Hopi flute straight on, meaning held in front of me. The right photo and the below right photo is an example of me playing a rim-blown flute straight on. The flute at the right that I am playing is a Rich Purdy Grand Gulch replica. The flute that I am playing in the below right photo is a Michael Graham Allen Hopi flute replica.

Interestingly, Doc showed me how to play the Hopi flute with an interdental embouchure. I thought to myself, "Why I would want to play it that way with that windy sound that it produces?" Now, that is my favorite way to play the instrument. After doing some research, sure enough, there were photographs of the Hopi in the late 19th century playing with the interdental embouchure. Ultimately, I believe that this is how the instrument was meant to be played. (below left and middle photos)



I played the Hopi flute incorrectly for many years, like a quena or a shakuhachi, because the sound was soothing and warm to me. I also played it obliquely when I wanted to get a little more volume. After many years, I decided to undertake the challenge and play with an interdental embouchure. I was lucky to have met Rick Wilson (www.oldflutes.com) when he was in Eau Claire showing antique European flutes in a presentation at the University of Wisconsin. Rick played the Iranian ney with an interdental embouchure. After he went home, I called him and he assisted me over the phone concerning the proper mouth placement to achieve the interdental embouchure, as well as how to place the flute rim on my teeth and tongue. I remember Doc showing me this, so I already had a visual in my mind. So, I went after it! It took me about 6 months to learn this playing technique. It was truly a messy endeavor, as drool would run out of my mouth and drip half way down the flute. It would actually soak my t-shirt. Eventually, the drooling stage stopped, thankfully.

As I practiced, the most difficult part of playing interdentally was pulling the flute away and then putting it back in my mouth consistently, so

that I produced a sound each time. I worked on that for a few months, and I still do. It all depends on the instrument and the curve of the rim. It is difficult to find historically-correct instruments, as many makers put a small notch on the front rim of the flute. Some makers even put a severe slice on the rim like a shakuhachi, as well as the back side of the rim, tapered/angled slightly to fit into the chin. Usually, the rim is too thick on all Pueblo flutes. The historically-correct flutes do not have that tapered chin area or a slight slice or notch on the front rim.

This is all well and good if you just want to produce a smooth, warm tone. However, I believe that the rim-blown flute was played all three ways: interdental for sheer volume, so that people could hear you coming from a long way away; oblique for easy access up into the third register; and possibly straight-on like the shakuhachi, as most players play now, for calming and quiet reflection.

Unlike the shakuhachi, the modern rim-blown flutes that have a severe shakuhachi-type blowing rim and the slant in the back for the chin rest cannot withstand a significant airstream as an actual shakuhachi. It is impossible to play this type of rim-blown flute obliquely or interdentally because of the chin rest. Thus, this flute type is limited, with regard to how it can be played.

Some other makers create a very minor slice on the blowing rim and a minor slant on the chin rest. These instruments, even though they cannot take as much air as a shakuhachi, are typically capable of playing using all three playing techniques. I do own flutes made by makers who create instruments that are made with an historically-correct rim system. This, in my humble opinion, is how these instrument should all be made. In keeping with tradition, there should not be any cross pollination with Japanese flutes.

Something that I have noticed about the modern rim-blown flute replicas is that the bore diameter has increased. This allows for easier playing, if you want to play straight-on or obliquely. It is not as easy to play these flute types interdentally, however. Historically, the bore on rim-blown flutes was narrower than on the replicas being produced today. I do not necessarily think that this is a bad thing, but there must be a way to find a happy medium since these are instruments that you will spend years learning how to play properly. All three playing techniques are valid and will take time to master. So, when purchasing a flute, this is something to consider. There are three playing techniques to be learned over a long period of time. There is no room to grow if you purchase a flute that is a one-trick pony, meaning that it can only be played one way.

Smaller rim-blown flutes like the Grand Gulch, the Pomo, and the Yuma flutes are usually played obliquely, because that is how they were historically played. If you play these flutes straight-on, they are too quiet because they are so short and narrowly-bored. Because of this bore type, it makes playing interdentally significantly difficult, if not next to impossible.

I am not the culture police, so make the flute choice that is best for you. Choose what sound appeals to you.



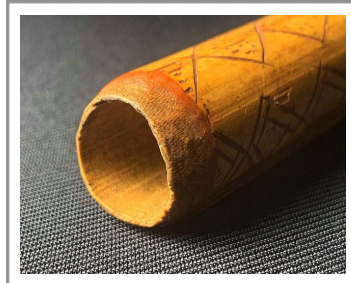
Small Bone Flute
Blowing Edge



2.6 Shakuhachi
Blowing Edge



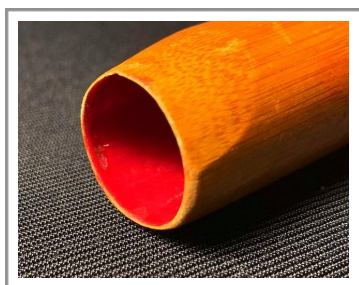
Anasazi Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



Antique Yuma Flute
Blowing Edge



Broken Flute Cave Anasazi
Replica Blowing Edge



Hopi Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



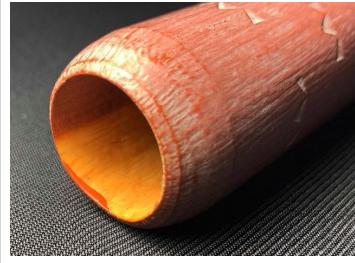
Grand Gulch Replica
Blowing Edge



Hopi Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



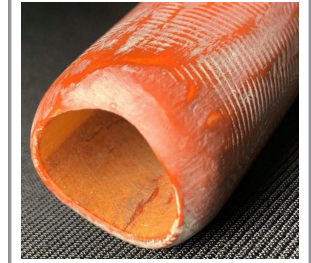
Hopi Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



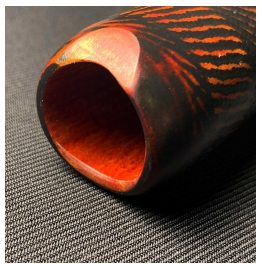
Anasazi Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



Yuma Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



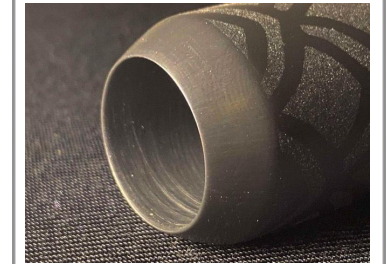
Hopi Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



Anasazi Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



Mojave Flute Replica
Blowing Edge



Anasazi Flute Replica
Historically Correct
Blowing Edge

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