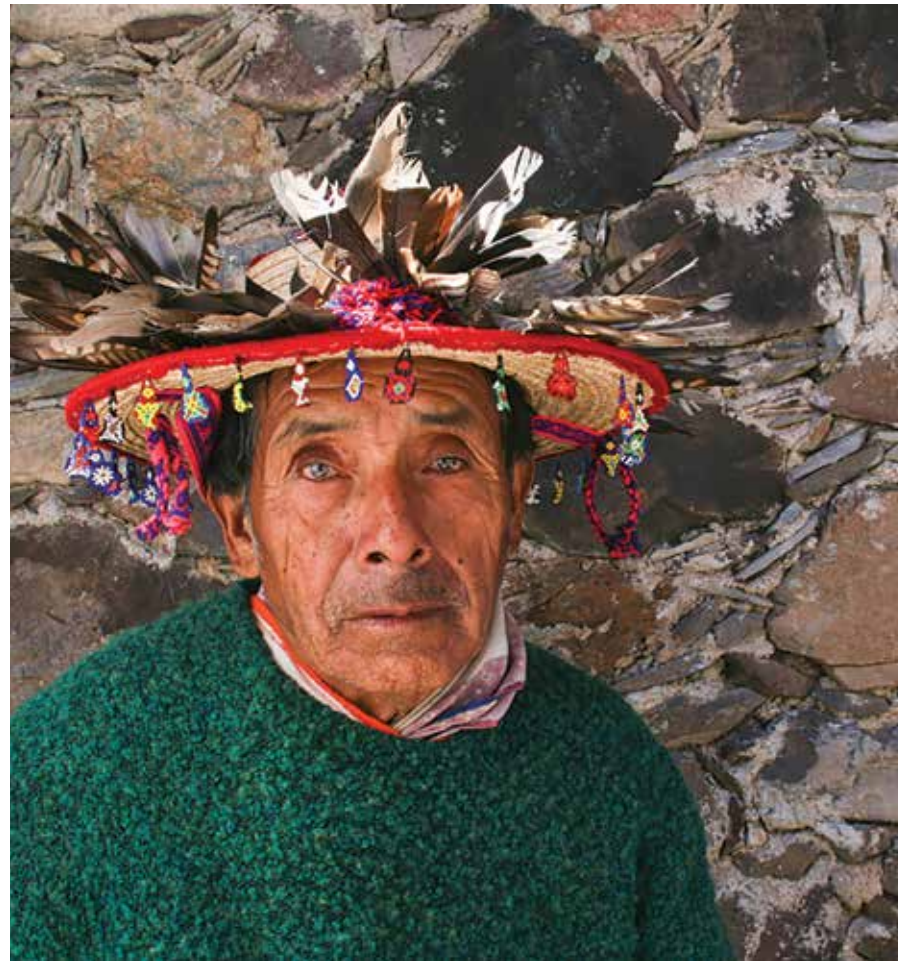


# THROUGH THE DARK

CARLA WOODY



*Huichol Woman from Zacatecas, Mexico.*



*Huichol Shaman in Bolaños, Jalisco, 2006.*

*He gazed at Señora Isabel then back at the boy, whose reddened face was moist with sweat. "Señora, I don't think you have any idea what a beautiful child you have. What ideas! His writing doesn't match his age. He's not a normal child. You have to do something with him. We have to help him!"*

**T**HE BOY FIDGETED. He was in foreign territory, held prisoner by his mother's hand on his arm. They sat side-by-side in matching chairs before the great divide of a massive desk. His mother's voice rose and fell. Words tumbled over each other as though, if she didn't get them out fast enough, the man considering them would summarily swat them out the door, no different than pesky insects.

An hour before, his mother pulled him along inner city streets into a massive building. They finally stopped in front of one door among several down the long hall. She smoothed her skirt and combed fingers through his black hair. With a deep breath, she opened the door. The secretary looked up.

"Please, I would like to see the director," his mother said.

"Do you have an appointment?" The secretary appraised them, noting their dusky skin and worn clothing. When she shook her head, the secretary motioned them to a row of chairs against the wall and picked up the phone. They waited.

The man behind the desk was impeccably dressed in a gray suit matching the color shot through his dark hair and mustache. The lines in his face softened as he listened, shifting attention from the Indian woman before him to the boy, eyes downcast, clutching a notebook in his lap.

"Maestro Caracalla, I am Señora Isabel. This

is my son Xavier. He's different, a good artist. In school he always fights because no one understands him, not the teachers, not the other kids. He's always thinking. Since he was old enough to hold a pencil, he always draws and writes about everything. He's like an old person in a little boy's body!"

The woman continued at length, relating how, in the last two years, her son kept running away to live on the streets. Xavier slept in parks, skipped school, survived by selling newspapers and shoe shines. Terrified, she would search and drag him home, if she was fortunate to find him. But the next day he'd be gone again. He wouldn't do what his father wanted: to set aside these silly pastimes and work making shoes to help support the family.

"We have seven children. Xavier is the youngest boy. We are very poor. But he is so different, and I'm afraid what might happen to him. Is there something you can do?" She finished softly.

Maestro Caracalla gestured to the boy's notebook, "Is this your work?"

Xavier froze in his chair and prayed to disappear. He didn't think the Maestro would hit him like his father did, but he dreaded the reprimand he knew would come. He whispered, "Yes."

"Show it to me then." The room was silent save the sound of Maestro Caracalla slowly turning pages after scrutinizing each one. Finally he closed the book. Looking over wire-rimmed glasses, his eyes seemed to bore into Xavier's very soul. He gazed at Señora Isabel then back at the boy, whose reddened face

was moist with sweat. “Señora, I don’t think you have any idea what a beautiful child you have. What ideas! His writing doesn’t match his age. He’s not a normal child. You have to do something with him. We have to help him!”

Maestro Caracalla told her to bring the boy back the following Monday, handing over a long list of art materials to buy. There’s not enough to eat! How can we buy art supplies? Guilt flooded Xavier’s mind. He was certain of a dead end. But at the appointed time his mother delivered him to the Maestro. She could only muster a clean new drawing tablet and 6B pencil, keeping even that small expenditure hidden from her husband. The secretary ordered a sandwich for Xavier, although he said he didn’t need anything.



*Huichol Artist, 2011.*

“Ah, there you are,” the Maestro swept in from his office. He took Xavier by the hand and led him down the hall. They stopped in all the classrooms where he spoke to the teachers, “I want to introduce Xavier. He’s coming to take classes.”

That is how an eleven-year-old Huichol Indian boy from the streets came to attend Escuela des Artes Plásticas, the art school in Guadalajara, Mexico, the youngest pupil ever to sit alongside regular university students. They became his peers and friends. Maestro Caracalla continued as his benefactor for six years, making sure he had all the classes he needed: writing, painting, art history and more.

Xavier couldn’t wait to get to school. He would jump on his bicycle at 5 a.m. to deliver newspapers. From there he’d make a beeline for classes, not wasting a moment with anything else. Work and learning became his life. After a few years, he was assigned a wall and told to paint a mural as part of an art project. People were astounded at the results and word got around. *Espiritus Guardianes* depicted Aztec spirit guardians straining against the wind, their arms protecting ancestral pyramids.

There were those who didn’t believe a fourteen-year-old could be responsible for such artwork. The newspaper wanted an interview. But when the reporter came, Xavier ran away. Shy about his work, he didn’t believe in himself. When he was seventeen, he graduated. At eighteen he became the youngest teacher in the history of the school.

The man sitting before me now is in his late fifties. He retains an air of innocence that has accompanied him since childhood. His voice is soft. It contains no resentment when sharing stories about the difficulties of his very early

years or abuse he suffered at the hands of his father. Xavier Quijas Yxayotl sighs. “I thank the Universe for this man, Maestro Caracalla, who understood me, and for my mother who wanted to do something for me. From the time I first entered the art school I was so connected. People were making sculptures, painting in the gardens. I started my profession when I was a kid. It was like a dream for me!”

His grandfather played the flute and drums, encouraging Xavier from a young age to learn music. He took to it equally as with art, starting to compose and make flutes even though no one taught him how.

Still Xavier felt a hole. As he developed into a young man, he longed for connection to his Huichol heritage. In the 1940s, his grandfather had moved the family from their home village due to unrest brought about by lingering military occupation from the Cristero Rebellion, the last armed uprising from the Revolution, and seizing of Huichol lands. They eventually ended up in Guadalajara. His parents hid any links they could to their indigenous past.

“To be an Indian in those times? It was bad,” Xavier shakes his head in emphasis. His grandfather was the one person who could have introduced Huichol traditions to him, but he had turned away from his lineage and embraced Catholicism.

“I didn’t pay attention to my grandfather because I was embarrassed. He was connected to the Catholic Church! I didn’t understand why people went to the church and did things for the saints. I didn’t like it and didn’t believe these things even when I was young. It was controversial because I didn’t believe it! Look how much money the Church made from the people! My family thought something bad would happen to me. To talk this way in



*Huichol Girl, Tepetzotlan, Mexico, 2011.*



*Huichol Men, 2011.*



*Huichol Women, 2012.*

Mexico!" he says. "So even though they denied their roots . . . for me, it was wonderful!"

At the age of nineteen, Xavier took matters into his own hands; he ventured into the mountains to find where his grandfather was born—without knowing the location—and to connect with his people. The backpack he carried held minimal supplies for a week. He stayed three months. The village medicine man was a childhood friend of his grandfather's and welcomed him. One night they had a big peyote ceremony.

Xavier sat cross-legged on the sunbaked ground. The circle was rows deep around the center fire. He'd never been involved in such rituals, never even drank alcohol. The old medicine man ladled murky liquid into gourd

bowls from a large crock. Helpers started passing them. Firelight bathed the participants in a glowing cocoon against the inky darkness beyond. Xavier leaned forward, watching with rapt attention as first one and then the next took healthy swallows from the gourd making its way slowly along his row. When empty, a helper brought another full bowl.

The closer the gourd got, the stronger adrenaline pumped, instilling the undeniable urge to spring up and flee. Xavier's heart raced. He closed his eyes and willed himself to stay put. He felt a nudge to his shoulder. His neighbor offered the peyote. It was his turn. Oh no! But he put out his hands to take it and followed the measures he saw others take: a long swallow. The inside of his mouth rebelled with the terrible

bitterness; he struggled to keep from retching. There were more rounds passed. Within a short time, he was transported to another world with swirling colors and felt connection to all things, unlike anything he had known.

He reached for the flute at his side. Not knowing how he got there, Xavier was standing before the blaze. He began to play a song he didn't know. Suddenly, little men jumped from the middle of the fire onto his flute! As they landed, their bodies torched the flute! Still Xavier played. People were staring at him. They stopped the ceremony. This kind of disruption was not done. Finally realizing, Xavier halted abruptly, "I'm sorry!"

But the old medicine man said, "It's okay, Xavier. We want to hear you play." The flute

played itself on and on, and the little men did their fire dance on its length, until great emotion washed through him. He couldn't contain the deep sobs that interfered with the music. Xavier touched his chest, attempting to comfort himself. Then he was running into the night. Later, he remembered nothing of what transpired in the dark.

The sun had barely begun to peek over the mountains. Xavier's body shook, the biting cold brought him up sharply, along with pain all over his body. Disoriented, he opened his eyes. He didn't know where he was. He had blood all over his arms and hands. Then he realized he had fallen into a gulch—right on top of a cactus. When he attempted to move, the cactus needles dug deeper into his butt. He spied two Huichol



**Huichol Clothing**, Museum of the Americas,  
Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2011.

friends sitting on a big rock at the top, just talking. Xavier screamed for help. They ignored him and carried on with their conversation. He picked out the spines best he could, yelping with misery, and finally pulled himself out of the ravine, cursing them. The men turned away and started to walk. Xavier followed behind.

"You didn't help me!" he yelled at them.

They turned to him. One said, "Yes, we helped you, Xavier. We spent the whole night making sure the coyotes didn't eat you. Stop your complaining! This is your experience. It's not our experience."

Xavier speaks softly to me, "After I heard that, I understood. Your life isn't the responsibility of others. It's your own experience of life. You have to be responsible for what you are doing. If you're doing bad things, you have to pay the price. If you're doing good things, the same thing. "With these little words," he said, "I understood the message for me. After that I worked more with my spiritual feelings and helping others, too, by making ceremonies, making music, and painting to wake up the consciousness in the people."

From that early time he wanted to play the instruments of his ancestors. But they were only found in museums. "In 1534 the invaders came and massacred everyone. They wouldn't allow drums or flutes. Why? Because this represents power to the Indians! Break these rules and they would kill you! If you wanted to play instruments, you had to play the guitar or violin from Europe. A lot of Indians played the guitar and violin but with the Indian rhythm. It was different and beautiful. In the 1700s they started to play like that," Xavier explains.

But he sought to resurrect the ancient ritual instruments lost to decimation. He started going to the museums and looking at old books to view what he could. Studying books

or things behind glass to reproduce a design is one thing. Recreating the sounds that permeated sacred ceremonies lost in time was another thing altogether. In many indigenous traditions, the call to an inspired life or service comes through dreams and visions. Those who receive them—weavers, midwives, ritual musicians, artists, healers of any sort—probe alternate realities. They are not taught through apprenticeship, rote memory, or the more mundane ways of the mainstream world. The how-to and images emerge through another realm with full instruction complete. The same was true for Xavier. The fire flute expels a flame as it is played; its creation came through the peyote ceremony. The mechanics to produce the acoustics of every flute, whistle, rattle, and other percussion instruments that graced long ago rituals came to him in the night.

"I only use tribal instruments that I make, how my ancestors played. I know they sent me the messages. When I'm performing on stage, I feel someone there guiding me. Nobody knows how the Maya or Aztecs played. The sacred books were burned. There aren't any documents. What happens for me is because the ancestors played what they played. It's coming from another dimension."

All elements in his evocative compositions issue through instruments made with his own hands, each piece a work of art embellished with symbols, masks and animals. Croaking frogs, turbulent winds, splashing raindrops, a death scream or lyrical notes are strung together in such a way to create a mood or portal. Xavier is represented by Canyon Records. His group is called Ancient Americas with five members performing tribal music and dance. Accolades are numerous: seven nominations for the Native American Music

Award, performances for the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Rome, museums and expositions around the world, and the Indie Award for his Crossroads CD. He's been the subject of two PBS documentaries and his music has been used as soundtracks in others. Probably the most unusual opportunity came through a call from Mel Gibson to create period-authentic Maya clay flutes for the movie *Apocalypto*. Xavier wasn't allowed to play the flutes he made due to Union rules, but he taught the actors to do so.

Today Xavier Quijas Yxayotl lives in the mountains of Northern California and returns frequently to his native Mexico. He continues to provide ceremonies when called upon, show his art in juried shows, and compose the music his ancestors gift to him. In Native traditions, such people are called by the Creator to dedicate their lives: to serve their communities and the wider world. They are often challenged with difficult origins and somehow make their way through the darkness. Xavier is a ritual artist and musician, in every sense a maestro. He has not lost humility along the way, the sign of a true healer.

"Everything has movement in life. There are always changes. I'm very grateful to the Universe who put the correct people and travels in my path. If I was to be born again, I would change nothing. I only want to learn and grow my own spiritual beliefs. This is my correct mission in life." Xavier gets a faraway look in his eyes and finishes with some advice. "Follow your heart. Always! Be yourself and everything will come from the Universe if we always follow our heart. Be authentic. Everything will come in the correct time. You have to be fluid like the water in the river." ❖