



PHOTO BY MATIKA WILBUR

# Americans among us

*Photographer Matika Wilbur embarks on a project to document Native American tribes in all 50 states*

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Matika Wilbur is leaving Seattle this month to take up an extraordinary mission: to visit all 50 states and photograph and document all Native American tribes in the nation.

Wilbur, who is enrolled in the Tulalip tribe and was raised in the Swinomish tribe, has dedicated much of her professional career to photographing, lecturing on and informing people about contemporary Native American people and culture. So far she has focused mostly on local Salish tribes, but now her goal is to document the entire culture all over the United States.

"I'd like to update the identity of the Native American person and create a 21st century image in people's consciousness, so through that we can build cultural bridges, demolish stereotypes, honor traditions and leave a legacy," Wilbur said.

Documentary photography has not always been Wilbur's goal. She started out as a fashion photographer for big-name companies.

It was the "type of photography where you can make a living," she said.

It didn't last long, though. On a Malibu, Calif., set of a big shoot with a \$35,000 budget, surrounded by picturesque green grass and blue sky, Wilbur began having doubts. "I was like, what am I doing selling things?" she recalled. "I don't want to do this."

Then, through a connection of her father's, she went on a documentary shoot of indigenous people in South America. She worked for about three-and-a-half months in the Sacred Valley, south of Machu Picchu.

But after having a stunningly visual dream, she once again had a change of heart:

"I had this dream with my grandmother, and it was the only dream I've ever had with my grandmother. We were shoe shopping, actually, for sparkly red shoes ... and she said, 'What are you doing photographing these Indians when you haven't even photographed your own? Go home. Be with your own people.'"

So Wilbur did.

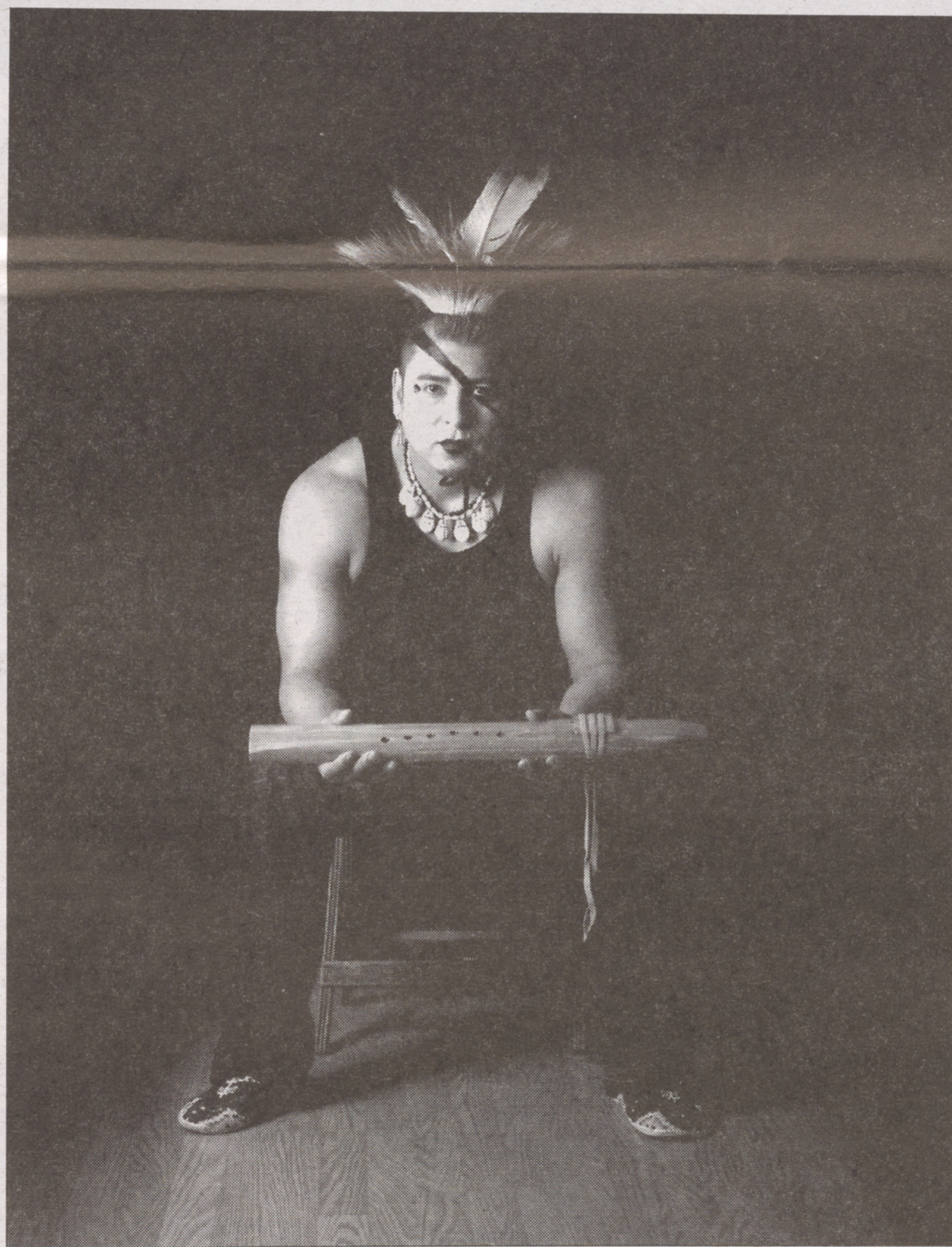


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The first project born out of her time at home is entitled "We Are One People." For it, she photographed Native American elders from Coast Salish tribes, including the Swinomish, Tulalip, Upper Skagit and Lummi Nations. Then she did her second and third series, "We Emerge" and "All Alone."

"You know, I didn't expect to be a documentary photographer or artist. I didn't have any expectations of the outcome," she said. "And people loved it — and people bought it — and I sold the whole series."

Her work has been showcased at the Seattle Art Museum, the Royal British Columbia Museum of Fine Arts, the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, the Nantes Museum of Fine Arts in France and the Kitterredge Gallery at the University of

Puget Sound. She has permanent, viewable collections at the Swinomish Cultural Center and Tulalip administration building.

Her next project, "562," plans to take things to a new level.

Wilbur said the plan came from a desire to explain to people that Native Americans are still alive and still have a culture all their own, and not the kind that you see in old John Wayne movies.

"The stereotype is that Native people live in teepees and wear leather and feathers," she said. "People don't realize that there is very much a living, breathing contemporary culture within indigenous communities."

When Wilbur would lecture at other places, particularly on the East Coast or in other countries, people were often amazed

or shocked that Native Americans even existed.

"When you go to different places in the U.S. and you exhibit your work, people don't realize we're still here, you know?"

Wilbur recounted one story of when she visited Germany and a woman approached her and said, "I want to touch your hair; I've always wanted to touch an Indian's hair."

Inevitably, while lecturing, people would ask her questions about contemporary Native American culture, but she could only tell stories from her own life and experience. Wilbur said she wanted to change that, to increase her perspective and knowledge.

"You can't form an opinion until you've gone to visit all those different tribes."

Because she has other obligations as well, Wilbur said the trip will be broken up into segments, going to different places at different times, and often coming back to Washington to do other work.

A lot of her time will be spent on the road. Originally, her idea was to drive around in an RV equipped with a photo lab and a darkroom, but she said she might try for something more economical. Friends have come out in support of her, opening up their homes to her, so she said it may be more feasible to set up temporary bases at those places. She is using Kickstarter, a funding platform for creative projects, to raise funds for the project.

Wilbur has 1,095 days to complete the project. This means she has to shoot about four different tribes each week, she said, and has to finish shooting by August of 2015.

The Burke Museum, the Tacoma Art Museum and the Seattle Art Museum have already come out in support of the project, with exhibit dates tentatively set in 2015. Wilbur also plans to print a publication showcasing the photos. Above all, her goal is education, she said.

Wilbur's list of projects extends past "562." She said she has long dreamed of creating a giant, mobile longhouse with which she can travel the nation. With it, she could inform people that Native Americans are still very much alive and are still their own people.

"My idea is not just to create an exhibit but an experience for people, a humongous longhouse that honors tradition by having potlatch," said Wilbur, speaking of the Native gift-giving ceremony. "Guests can come and feel respected and have a sharing of culture, traditional song and dance and food."

*This story was first published by the Ballard News Tribune, where Zachariah Bryan is editor.*