

Grandfather Drum Is Just Part Of The "Eagle Beak" Family

Eagle Beak continued from front page — Ronde). "It's just like your grandpa or grandma; is how it's to be treated. We call it our grandfather."

The Eagle Beak Singers, a tightly knit group of local young men, most of them Tribal members, all with a strong Grand Ronde connection, have been listening, learning and doing what the Elders taught since the group was formed in 1994.

The original members, all of whom are still with the drum, are Shane Harmon, Dustin Harmon, Bobby Mercier and Joe Hostler (Grand Ronde).

Most had sung in different drum groups previously like Dancing Again Singers, from Siletz.

"We sang in a more contemporary, up tempo style," said Mercier, a Cultural Specialist for the Grand Ronde Tribe and a self-described "song freak," searching for and downloading Native music on his laptop.

"So we hit a couple pow-wows and people said that we had a good sound and that we harmonized well together," said Mercier.

After a few years, brothers Anthony and Jesse Quenelle (Grand Ronde) joined the group, then Richard Sohappy (Yakama) and Lawney Havranek (Grand Ronde/Siletz) came on board.

Former members Dorian Soltiz (Warm Springs/Grand Ronde) and Tyrone Ike (Warm Springs) still sing with the group and Tribal members Travis Mercier (Grand Ronde) and Sam George (Grand Ronde) have been sitting in recently, learning songs. The group is always happy to let anyone who's interested sit in and learn, as long as they behave respectfully and follow the rules.

"We sweat a lot together," said Sohappy. "We all know each other really well. It's like a big family."

Eagle Beak has become one of the most well-known drum groups in the Northwest and has fans all across the country. They are ambassadors of the Tribe, representing Grand Ronde wherever they go. They know that when they travel, they are being watched to see if they are well mannered and respectful.

"Everyone knows that when we go somewhere we're always being watched, how we talk, how we act," said Hostler.

The group is asked to sing at schools, museums, funerals, groundbreaking, Tribal Council events, all kinds of government functions, and of course, pow-wows.

"We don't ever say no," said Mercier. "We're always more than willing."

They get their name from the design painted on their first drum — an eagle's head superimposed on a mountain. They went to a pow-wow and the ring announcer asked what their name was. Problem was, they hadn't thought of one yet. So they just said "eagle beak." The name stuck and has ever since. They still have the painted drum. They take it out every once in a while to play it.

"Now the name has come to mean like the eagle's beak is where the sound comes out, that beautiful sound he makes... that's how we sing, man," said Mercier.

The drum they use today is made of red cedar, a sacred wood. It is a full size pow-wow drum, over two feet across. Buffalo hide is stretched on one side and elk hide on the other. Numerous 1, 5, and 10 dollar bills have been rolled and tied to the strings, as offerings, as well as braids of sweet grass and sage bundles. It has its own special carrying case and it sleeps in the living room at Shane and Dustin's.

"He's always out in the living room, but we keep him in his case, make sure he's warm and comfortable," said Harmon.



Formerly The Flying Guitars — Eagle Beak performed at the Grand Ronde Veterans' Pow-wow in July. From left are: Lawney Havranek, Anthony Quenelle, Richard Sohappy, Shane Harmon, Bobby Mercier, Dustin Harmon and Sam George.

Photo by Brent Merrill

If you ask the members why they started singing, they will all tell the same thing: that there was something about the sound of the drum, something about the singing for the people that made them feel so good, they knew that they wanted to do it for the rest of their lives.

They also will all tell you that they could not do it without the support they receive from their families, the wives and mothers who are always near.

"They take care of us, feed us and are a big reason we've been able to do it this long," said Harmon.

"Yeah," said Mercier. "They've always been totally supportive. We do this for our families, so that these good things, these songs and prayers will come back on our families, one day when they're needed."

Most of the songs they sing are about coming into the dance arena and dancing well for the people, explained Mercier.

Other songs are sung to honor specific events or people, like Veterans or Elders.

"Some songs ask the warriors to come out and protect us, and by dancing their dance everything will be okay," said Mercier.

The majority of the songs are sung in the Cree language. The group can sing in the local language, Chinuk Wawa, but are waiting for the right time.

Eagle Beak members are very dedicated. They have to be willing to give up their weekends. They must be on call at a moment's notice. When around the drum, members must always behave in polite, respectful manner. They must not drink or do any drugs. To do so would disrespect the drum, and everything it represents. It may even be dangerous. Like many Natives, Eagle Beak members believe that disrespecting a sacred object can bring sickness or misfortune.

"It's hard to explain," said Mercier. "People who drink or use drugs have negative spirits on them.

It's very easy for that negative energy to jump off and make somebody sick or something. So if there's anyone like that around the drum, we ask them to leave. We're very protective of our drum."

"That's right," said Anthony Quenelle. "Everything you put into the drum, you get out of the drum. Whatever comes out not only affects you, but it affects everyone else, too."

There are other rules as well. They do not set things on top of the drum. The drum is placed on a blanket so that it does not touch the ground. Sweet grass and sage are kept near so they can bless it when needed. They even have a blow dryer to dry it out so it sounds best. When at pow-wows they must always stay close, so they do not miss drum roll call.

The group always helps out whenever they go anywhere. They talk to the Elders, shake hands with everyone, and help clean up. It's all part of being in a popular drum group and they know it's expected of them.

Fans have long wondered when the group will release their first album. It's a matter of timing, said Mercier.

"When the time is right, it will just happen. We've got plenty of songs. We're just waiting for when everybody is here, no one is sick, no one is out on fire call and it will just happen."

Eagle Beak members all agree that the strict rules and the hectic schedule are well worth the reward they get — singing for the people in a good way, being positive role models for Native youth, traveling all over as representatives of the Tribe, and keeping alive the traditions of the Elders. They believe that if they sing and dance and practice the old ways then it will be good for the people, and they will always be looked after.

"Drumming brings us a lot of joy...it gives us a sense of identity, a sense of extended family. It's one of the things that define who we are," said Harmon.

"It's all part of grandpa taking care of us."

Co-Ed Basketball Camp Held



Tribal youth ages K-5 got a chance to learn some basketball skills as well as score some spiffy new t-shirts, courtesy of the Grand Ronde Tribal Youth Education Department's Annual Co-Ed Basketball Camp. Tribal Recreation Intern Trinity Hall (right) put together the event, with the help of volunteers like Tribal Housing Development Coordinator Duane Hussey, (above) and many others.



Photos by Peta Tinda