

# Kokopelli Abuse

BY FRED STENSON

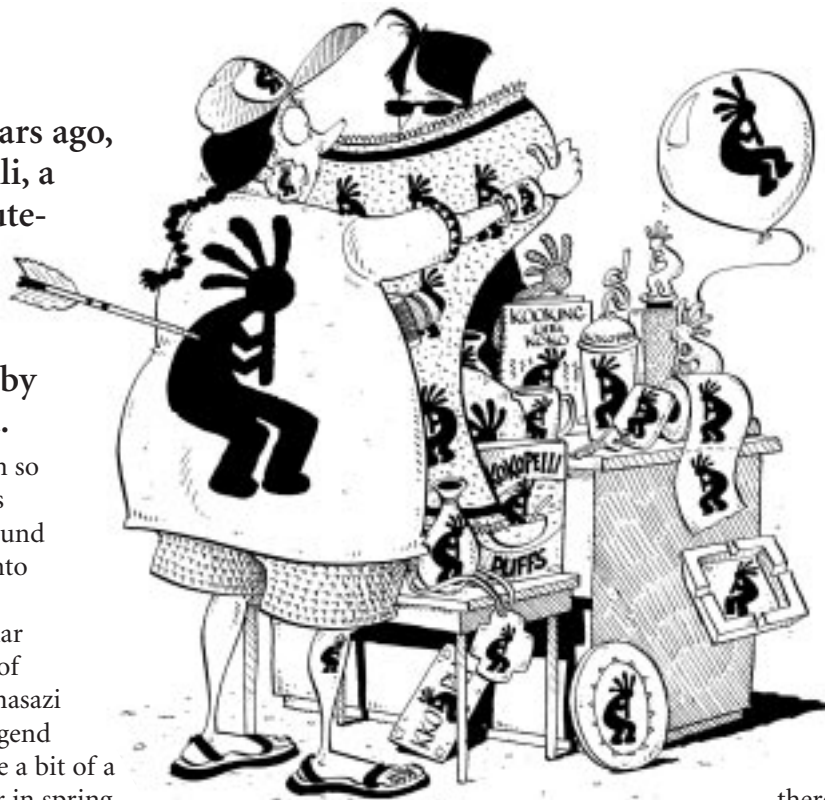
Around 2,000 years ago, the first Kokopelli, a hump-backed flute-playing, corn and fertility deity, was carved on a cliff by an Anasazi artist.

To me, he doesn't seem so much hump-backed as stretched and bent around his flute. He is really into it, really getting down.

Kokopelli was popular from the first. Images of him proliferated on Anasazi walls and rocks. His legend grew. He was said to be a bit of a seducer, a major player in spring-time mating rituals. Besides his flute, he carried babies, seeds and a blanket, which, when you think about it, is all a guy really needs. In the Winnebago tradition, Kokopelli had a detachable penis which he sent down to the river to cavort with bathing maidens—when he was too tired to go there in his entirety, I guess. This might be where we're headed with the Internet.

At any rate, Kokopelli was well represented on cliffs, murals, vases and baskets in the historical Southwest.

Cut to the present.



Last winter, I did the frozen wet-back thing, fleeing the unseasonable warmth of Alberta for the snows of Arizona. No complaints. The desert was beautiful. On my travels, I noticed a disturbing thing. Kokopelli, surely once the property of the original people of the land, had been hijacked by the great American consumer machine. In gift shops, Kokopelli was everywhere: on tea towels, cookbooks, brooches, neck pendants, key fobs, T-shirts, CDs (“The Flute Stylings of Kokopelli”; “Kokopelli plays Sinatra’s Greatest

Hits”). Free-standing Kokopellis. Kokopelli bookends. Kokopelli in steel, wood, plastic, ceramic—and I’m sure, somewhere, though I didn’t see it, there must have been a Kokopelli in hemp, because, as we know, hemp is large.

In every Mexican, or vaguely western, restaurant, Kokopelli was on the walls, the placemats and the menu. When the waitress leaned over to take our orders,

there he was again on her earrings. Drive-by Kokopellis. Kokopellis on civic-minded flags.

In total, though I wasn’t counting, I bet I saw a thousand Kokopellis. I certainly saw him more often than I saw Letterman, Dubya, Hillary or Bill—ininitely more than Al Gore who has perhaps by now fully mineralized to become a standing stone in Tennessee.

Anyway, my point is that Kokopelli is seriously over-exposed at the moment, and that no consent has been given. He has been, to use the official word, appropriated, and appropriated to within an inch of his

myth. It should be stopped, but the question is, “How?” (Watchers of vintage cowboy/Indian movies and TV shows will know that the question, when it comes to native people, very often is “How?”)

Given that the Anasazi diasporized several hundred years before the first ceramic Kokopelli key fob emerged from a kiln, even the shrewdest American class-action lawyer will not be able to pull Kokopelli out of the public domain and bestow his commercial rights to the present day Hopi, Zuni or Pima. But I think something else, in the name of fair play, might be possible: something like a Kokopelli Tax.

If the makers and retailers of every consumer object sporting Kokopelli’s shape were to contribute one measly buck (which they would pass on to the consumer in an eyeblink anyway) to an international Kokopelli Trust, said funds could be used for some collective First Nations purpose, say, the buying back of the Americas from the invading infidel. I’m not saying my calculation is dead on, but I estimate this could be achieved by century’s end.

If a century seems too long, the scheme could be broadened to include the commercial use by non-natives of much other First Nations stuff. Sitting Bull’s stoical visage, for example, could fetch a pretty penny. General Motors should pay a hefty retroactive sum for the Pontiac.

And let us make no exception of the uses people have found for the wise sayings of native elders. Particularly offensive are the ones that appear in New Age hotel, resort and restaurant bathrooms, usually on little scrolls, usually above the toilet paper dispenser. Farseeing as he was, when Chief Seattle said, “Whatever befalls earth befalls the sons of earth,” did he really mean to vouch for the greenness of recycled toilet tissue and towels? By “man did not invent the web of life,” was he really applauding the fact that no animals were inconvenienced during the creation of the bar of soap? I think not. Put a toonie in the jar, please!

When First Nations people are enriched beyond their dreams by the Kokopelli Tax, I hope they might spare a thought and a dime for Kokopelli’s having been a flutist. What I have in mind is the siphoning off of a bit of the Kokopelli Tax stream for a Musicians’ Retirement Fund. Many musicians become indigent in old age, and this would certainly help them. Such a fund might also be the only way that future generations can be spared further reunion tours of Crosby, Stills & Nash. As for Neil Young, true spiritual descendant of Kokopelli, he should be free to rock on as long as he wants.

**Fred Stenson** was nominated for this year’s Giller Prize for his novel *The Trade*.