

ETHEL + ROBERT MIRABAL



Photo: Tim Black

THE RIVER

Study Guide

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ABOUT: ETHEL

“In the hands of ETHEL, American music is alive and well.” (The Washington Post)

Established in New York City in 1998, ETHEL quickly earned a reputation as one of America’s most adventurous string quartets. 20 years on, and the band continues to set the standard for contemporary concert music. Known for its enlivened playing blending uptown, conservatory musicianship with downtown genre-crossing, ETHEL has been described as “indefatigable and eclectic” (The New York Times), “vital and brilliant” (The New Yorker), and “infectiously visceral” (Pitchfork). Since its inception, ETHEL has released six feature recordings (one of them nominated for a Native American Music Award), guested on 35+ albums, won a GRAMMY with jazz legend Kurt Elling, and performed in 14 countries, 45 states, and 250 cities.



Photo: Matthew Murphy

At the heart of ETHEL is a collaborative ethos – a quest for a common creative expression that is forged in the celebration of community. In addition to premiering 21st century works by a broad range of groundbreaking composers; the quartet creates and tours rich, often multimedia, productions in which community engagement is a key element.

ETHEL is the Resident Ensemble at The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Balcony Bar, Ensemble-in-Residence at Denison University, and 2018/19 Quartet-in-Residence at Kaufman Music Center’s Face the Music.

ETHEL is Ralph Farris (viola), Kip Jones (violin), Dorothy Lawson (cello), and Corin Lee (violin).

ABOUT: Robert Mirabal

Musician, writer, singer and storyteller, Robert Mirabal is Native America's most dynamic and best-selling artist. In addition to the music and instruments he creates, he is also a celebrated painter, poet, playwright and farmer. He is the author of 4 publications: *A Skeleton of a Bridge*, a book of poetry and prose; *Running Alone in Photographs*, a novel; the *Taos Pueblo Corn Grower's Guide*; and *Po' Pay Speaks*, a one-man show. Mr. Mirabal is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Award for the collaborative music and dance score with the Japanese duo Eiko and Koma, entitled *Land*, two GRAMMY® awards, and the New York Dance and Performer's "Bessie" Award for composition.

Hailing from Taos Pueblo, the only living Native American community designated both a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and a National Historic Landmark, Robert Mirabal began playing the flute at the age of eighteen. Many genres of music inspire Mirabal, including music from West Africa and Haiti, Japanese Taiko drumming, Celtic music, and even rock and hip-hop.



Photo: Nina Roberts

ABOUT: *The River*

Continuing a deeply successful six-year collaboration inspired by ceremonies dedicated to the Sun, ETHEL and Robert Mirabal, Native American musician, instrument builder, and two-time GRAMMY® Award winner, present their next evolution of the cross-cultural concert experience. The inspiration this time is Water as the embodiment of Spirit, and its essential role in Life on Earth. The audience is immersed in a flow of music, narrative, and ritual that evokes timeless Native American traditions through contemporary musical artistry. As delivered by these master performers, the effect is breathtaking, even ecstatic.

The program is an integral journey in instrumental virtuosity, song and storytelling, created uniquely for this event. From An Kha Na to Peace Calls, through rushing rapids and still, sacred spaces, ETHEL and Robert Mirabal illuminate the magic and majesty of The River which connects us all. In retreat together at Mirabal's home on the Taos Pueblo, each of the artists brought original musical or poetic works with special significance to the group: Mirabal's own An Kha Na, his Taos-traditional Wi-Wa, Kip Jones' Tuvan Ride, Jay-Red and TSOMA, Dorothy Lawson's Gat'té, and Ralph Farris' Rana Run and Tsintskaro Memory (after the Georgian traditional Tsintskaro). As the Pueblo River rushed past the door, storms came and went, and coyotes howled in the night, the pieces grew in scope and depth, each player contributing layers and insights. Influences were drawn in from Hawaii, Arizona, Mexico, Ecuador, Morocco, Nigeria, India, Mongolia, Tibet, Japan, and the country of Georgia. In sum, the sound is dazzling, and the spirit full of generosity, love, and gratitude. Every audience will find their hearts healed and their hope raised.



Taos Pueblo

Taos Pueblo is a Native American tribe and village, with a population of 2,000 people, located on the northern border of New Mexico. It is the northernmost of all the Pueblos and sits on a vast plateau at the base of Mount Wheeler in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The word Pueblo can refer both to the Taos people and the village structure itself. Through the center of the village flows the Rio Pueblo, which originates from Blue Lake, 27 miles to the northeast. *P'ó Whe-a*, the Taos name for Blue Lake, is the spiritual home and sacred ceremonial site of the Taos people. The village itself is comprised of buildings constructed of a clay-like material called adobe. The structure itself dates to between 1000 A.D and 1450 A.D. The village, comprised of these mud and straw structures, is an ancient reminder of the resilience of Taos Pueblo's culture.

In Taos Pueblo, each person has a personal understanding, a societal understanding, and a tribal understanding. Since the culture is thousands of years old, and the language is not written down, children of the Taos Pueblo grow up very differently from children in U.S. cities. They learn through art, song, dance, and food. They also learn through ceremonies which are based on life events, family, agriculture, medicine, tribal ritual. There is not a specific word for art in Taos Pueblo; these things are taught by example and through experience.



Photo by Luca Galuzzi – www.galuzzi.it

Taos Pueblo is an agricultural society where corn, beans, squash, herbs and other vegetables are grown. Growing their own food helps the residents of Taos Pueblo relate to the foundations of their lives: water, land, and ceremony. Agriculture is of critical importance to individuals, societies, and the tribe, producing food, and inspiring goals, rules, and ceremony.

Native Americans, and other indigenous peoples worldwide, have an attitude towards planet Earth as home, mother, host, and partner. Their attitude is respectful, often worshipful of the connection of Earth's systems and a dedication to maintain them. Agricultural activities foster this connection.

The language spoken in Taos Pueblo is Tiwa, a masculine and feminine pair of Tanoan dialects. It is a conversational form of a very old language that has never been formally written down. Other Pueblos have variants of this language that are not necessarily easy to understand even by speakers of Tiwa.

The transition from ancient to modern is a constant issue in Taos Pueblo. The two must be fused together for the culture to thrive. Changes in history have defined Taos culture – first, the invasion of the Spanish Conquistadors in the 1500s, secondly, the encroachment of America’s mainstream culture including the use of cell phones, computers, and other technologies. Sadly, even though surrounded by a wealth of information and resources, some Taos youth, and even adults, do not speak their own language or understand the depths of their heritage. The role of ceremony, language, food, music, and dance all contribute to maintaining Taos Pueblo’s community and ecosystem.

The Taos people have had to fight many battles to protect and retain their land and traditions in the face of colonialism and materialism. One of the most famous of these is the legal battle for Blue Lake, the sacred spiritual and ceremonial center of Taos life. In 1906, congress took much of the Taos homeland, including Blue Lake, and made it part of the Carson National Forest. Soon after, tourists began arriving and, for the first time since European conquest, ceremonial pilgrimages to the lake were interrupted. This threat to the Taos way of life led to a 63-year struggle, which ended in 1970 when the Senate voted to return Blue Lake to the Taos people.

Part of the great power and resilience of the Taos people comes from their longstanding commitment to secrecy, social conservatism, and tradition. For example, the Pueblo Council only allowed electricity to be installed in 1971 and it is still not used within the pueblo walls. Activities such as communal adobe re-mudding and the teaching of Tiwa reinforces tribal traditions. Significant to the resurgence of Taos identity and culture was the return of Blue Lake. It is said, “for something to remain a secret, it must be kept forever sacred.” Because of the preserved beauty of the pueblo and its scenic location, Taos draws many visitors. As a result, tourism also plays a role in its economy, providing a financial impetus to preserve traditional ways of life.



Facts about Flutes

Without rain there are no crops, without crops there are no people, without people there is no music and no dance.

- Besides the instruments of the string quartet, which are violin, viola and cello, The River features a fourth instrument, the Native American flute, called Tu'put'seen-ay in the Pueblo language, Tiwa.
- Classified as a woodwind instrument, a Native American flute creates sound by the flow of air passing through it. It has two chambers, one for the mouthpiece, and one for the resonating chamber.
- The oldest Native American flutes are estimated to be up to 60,000 years old. The earliest examples were made of bone.
- Historically, each flute is uniquely created to fit its individual player by measuring the length of the forearm. The finger holes are created based on the player's natural finger placement. The member of the tribe who would make these measurements and flutes was called the Elk Dreamer. Today, the flutes are tuned to scales like modern instruments.
- Historically, Native American flutes were typically played by men in courtship, but since a resurgence in these instruments' popularity, both men and women can express themselves with expertise.



Photo: Nina Roberts

Water is Life

In Taos Pueblo, as for the rest of the world, water is life. Newborn babies are washed in the river, where the cold water causes them to inhale sharply and take their first 'power breath'. The water they enter as a newborn flows to the sea, is caught up in evaporation, and many years later, after old age, comes down again as rain onto their final resting place, completing the cycle. Taos is a dry land with a short growing season, and farmers there are keenly aware of how important water is, and how much of it is necessary to maintain and flourish as a community.

Without water, there would be no life on earth. In the hydrological system, water is constantly recycled between the oceans, the atmosphere, and the land. Precipitation enables plants to grow and soils to form, creating the planet's regions of natural vegetation, and the ecosystems that support animal life.

Water plays a major role in shaping natural landforms like the Grand Canyon. It is also key to the successful placement and development of human settlements and cities. Yet in many parts of the world, people do not have safe water to drink and suffer from diseases caused by water-borne organisms and pollution. It is estimated that 770 million people lack access to safe water, and more people have a mobile phone than a toilet!

Experts argue that world demand for water is increasing at twice the rate of population growth. It is predicted that by 2025, half the world's population will face water shortages. This could lead to conflict and even boundary wars – 300 major rivers cross national frontiers and access to their water is likely to be disputed.

For ETHEL and Robert, it's important to treat our water with gratitude and respect, treasuring and protecting the access we have. This means thinking carefully about industrial projects, such as hydraulic fracturing or "fracking," and the placement of utility or resource pipelines relative to our aquifers and surface water. Beyond simply learning and being informed, for some people respecting water can mean taking social or political action. In a popular example, Coca-cola used to make their soda with a process that had terrible effects for farmers in Kerala, India. Concerned citizens made their voices heard, and Coca-cola solved the problem by adopting a new process that doesn't use nearly as much local water.

In an effort to protect this essential natural resource, it is also crucial to be aware of our personal use of water. To be conscious preservationists, it is necessary to adopt the basics of water conservation: not to waste water, and not to buy products of companies known to waste water. Simple changes in day-to-day living such as shorter showers, turning off water when brushing teeth or shaving, repairing leaking pipes or faucets, planting drought-resistant species and not watering lawns when it rains can make real impact on water conservation.

Vocabulary

Culture: the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.

Tradition: an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom); a belief or story or a body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable; the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction.

Community: a unified body of individuals: such as the people with common interests living in a particular area; a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society.

Ecosystem: the complex of a community of organisms and its environment functioning as an ecological unit.

Heritage: something transmitted by or acquired from a predecessor; something possessed as a result of one's natural situation or birth.

Ceremony: a formal act or series of acts prescribed by ritual, protocol, or convention.

Society: an enduring and cooperating social group whose members have developed organized patterns of relationships through interaction with one another; a community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests.

Indigenous: produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment.

Empathy: the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

Before the Show

1. Ask your students what kind of music they listen to. Where do they hear music? On the radio? Visiting older relatives? Do they hear different music in different situations or for specific holidays? Have students share and discuss the various kinds of music they hear and when this music is heard or performed. What is it about a certain genre of music that you like? Assemble a list of styles of music.
2. Listen to excerpts from *The River* and engage in a discussion with students using the following prompts:

[CHANT](#)

[TUVAN RIDE](#)

[PEACE CALLS](#)

- What makes one genre of music different from another?
- When music has no words, what does it make you think about?
- Can you recognize what instrument is playing what notes?
- How does the music make you want to move?
- What qualities of the music appeal to you?
- Is this music different from the music you listen to on a regular basis? Do they share similarities? How are they different?



Photo: Nina Roberts

After the Show

1. Questions to consider:

- What qualities did the music contain?
 - Did the music convey a story? What kind of story does it tell?
 - What was different about experiencing the music live versus listening to the recording in class?
2. Have students write a review of *The River* performance for the school or the local newspaper. What is the best way to describe the performance for those who did not attend? What words summarize the music or describe the costumes? What was the most memorable part of the performance? Students should be told about this exercise before attending the performance, so they can watch carefully and notice important details.

3. Response Questions

- How does your family pass down their culture to you?
- How do you identify yourself? What kind of groups do you belong to?
- How has the use of technology affected your life or learning process?
- What is the role of art and music in your life?
- As times change, and technology advances, how do we preserve the past?

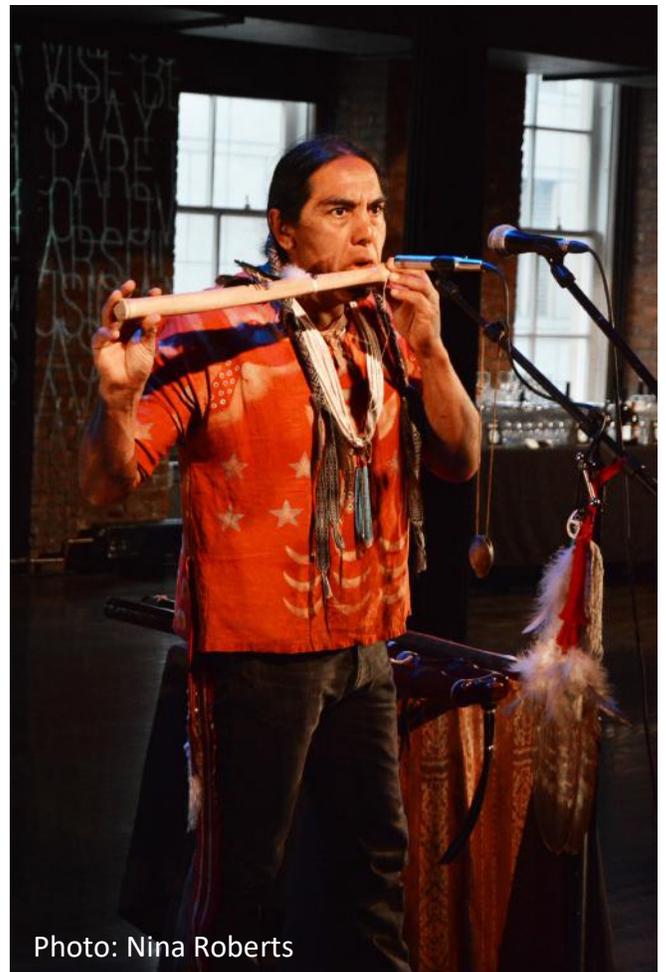


Photo: Nina Roberts

Additional Resources

[More on ETHEL](#)

[The River Promotional Video](#)

[About Taos Pueblo](#)

[UNESCO World Heritage Centre](#)

[National Park Service](#)

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