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TOP STORY

Bill Miller to make his return with new album in June

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Acclaimed Native American musician Bill Miller is set to release a new album in June, after a long and arduous journey to healing that has inspired him to create once more.

Courtesy / Bill Miller

Three-time Grammy Award winning Mohican musician and painter Bill Miller has spoken with God and channeled his warrior spirit to reemerge stronger than ever from a darkness no man should have to witness.

Whether it's the sky blue of discovering his heritage as a young man, the bright yellow of touring with Tori Amos and Pearl Jam at the height of their successes, the grays of reservation isolation, the reds of abuse or the deep black of losing two children, the deeply spiritual man who played flute on Disney's Pocahontas' "Colors of the Wind," has much with which to paint from life's ever-changing palette.

"Art in its raw, beautiful sense brings people healing, intensive healing. It gives us a new way to see color, a new way to see depth," Miller said. "The shadow of things brings other things to life and it also brings my spiritual life to a complete circle. It feels fuller than it's ever been."

Standing before the canvas of today, things look bright for the man set to release his first new music in more than a decade this June, award-winning folk music which, since release of his first album in 1983, has been rich with Native American tradition, instrumentation and culture.

But the road to healing has not been easy.

“I don’t know how I would have made it without my art, my music and my faith,” Miller said. “I don’t know what I would have done.”

Miller was born to a poor family of 11 living on the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican reservation in Wisconsin, a place deeply troubled by issues like abuse and alcoholism in the 1950s.

“When I lived there, the reservation wasn’t a prison by any means, but I felt separated and I didn’t feel good about that,” Miller said. “I liked The Beatles as much as any kid.”

At 10 years old, his father bought him a knockoff Fender and Johnny Cash’s native-conscious “Bitter Tears” album, an album he’d play on a national tribute for decades later.

“I became addicted to playing and feeling the release of emotions in the guitar,” said Miller of setting about playing along with the radio locked away in his room in secret.

In both music and with his school’s boxing team, he found escape from isolation and the unpredictable wrath of his Army champion boxer father.

“The majority of boxers I was on a team with in high school came from very abusive homes, alcoholism and domestic violence. We were already set, cocked and loaded,” Miller said. “But our coaches taught us how to manage our emotions in the ring, so we could take those three rounds or those three minutes. First is observation, second is interpretation and third is application.”

At his mostly white school, 20 miles off the reservation, that mental and physical toughness would come in handy.

“We always had to prove ourselves,” Miller said. “... Our people are so resilient, and so persevering. It’s in my blood. I’m a warrior.”

After traveling the country and falling in with other tribes and peoples, working and helping them out in order to more fully understand his heritage the old-fashioned way, Miller received his true name, which means “Bird Song.”

Miller then made for art school in Milwaukee under encouragement of his art teacher Mr. Smith.

“Man that turned my frickin’ life around,” said Miller, of the simple ‘I believe in you’ his father never offered.

Those mid 70’s acoustic shows and local rock shows with a band of Vietnam veteran friends were the first times Miller, who stuttered due to his childhood trauma, had ever worked up the courage to perform in front of others or even tell them about his skill.

His courage was rewarded quickly, as he was soon discovered by two strangers at the back of a bar. Those silhouettes turned out to be Arlo Guthrie and Richie Havens, who took him on tour with them.

“Dude, that opened up the world to me,” Miller said.

In 1986, songwriter Michael Martin Murphy brought Miller to Nashville.

“Nashville taught me some great lessons about being who I am, and I love Nashville for that,” Miller said.

Miller would meet Vince Gill as a young Oklahoma boy sitting at the Bluebird Cafe, before he even had a record out. The pair talked for a few hours and remain connected to this day.

“That’s a quality Nashville has in everything,” Miller said. “None of those guys told me I need to change or be more like that guy, cut your hair. No, They just love me for who I am. That’s all I needed was family. I swear to God I have the best musical family in the world right here in Nashville.”

By the early 1990s, his teacher’s encouragement had taken him far.

“If you’ve got somebody who believes in you, then you meet six people in this little frickin’ coffeehouse who give you a standing ovation, then 60 people, then 10,000 on tour with Tori Amos, and then 26,000 with Pearl Jam. You’re making an effect,” Miller said. “People believe in you.”

That’s not to say that prejudice didn’t still rear its ugly head. For every moment, like being hand-picked by Tori Amos and Bono to open for the former on a 238 date tour, there was a moment like the three-day performance to stop a telescope from being built on sacred Apache land with the likes of Pearl Jam and The Butthole Surfers.

“Eddie treated me like a king, but the audience went ape on me like ‘What is this crap?’ said Miller. “Eddie came out in the middle of it and told them to shut the (expletive) up and listen to me. I got a standing ovation that night and the next night too.”

Miller was able to bring his music to a much wider audience with his enlistment to work Disney’s 1995 animated classic “Pocahontas” on recommendation of an orchestra member.

Disney wanted an authentic performance, and they found one in Miller.

In the late 1970s, Miller had met a drunken Native selling beautiful hand-carved flutes for \$50 to get beer money during a Bluegrass festival. Miller gave him several hundred.

“That flute he gave me that day, I used that flute he hand carved when I did the “Pocahontas” soundtrack for Walt Disney, I played “Colors of the Wind” with Vanessa Williams on that freaking flute,” Miller explained.

Such a performance only came after ten years of lessons, again in secrecy, this time with traditional native flute players.

“I listened to the wind, to the rivers, to the birds, to different varieties of leaves, walking and spending hours in the woods with these guys, listened to nature and calmed my heart down. There was a lot of powerful teachings before I ever even played or recorded flute,” explained Miller.

In 1995, the world and its many award shows heard loud and clear.

“They edited some of my best parts out, man because I was jamming,” said Miller with a laugh. “They put little short clips. You have to hear the cut, not the one in the movie, that’s a different singer and a different orchestra, but when the credits come at the end. That’s the one I’m on.”

— In the years that followed, Miller was releasing acclaimed music routinely, but he became disillusioned with touring life —

and chasing success, turning to his wife and five children.

“It just started rolling so fast,” Miller said. “I was living for other people. When you’re on a big label sometimes you just try to impress them or try to please people.”

“I just wanted to come home. I felt empty out there many, many times. I didn’t want it.”

Years later, in the new millennium, Miller’s life would change drastically once again over a period of just five short years.

First Miller and his wife divorced. Then, in 2016, he lost a son. In 2017, he lost his mother to cancer. Last year, on June 13, Miller lost a daughter.

At his darkest hour, that same day, Miller called out for God in a parking lot as a grieving father who hadn’t recorded anything new in a decade.

“Emotions are 100% real, but they’re not always the truth. I was wrapped in the emotions of failure and being a victim, the loss of my kids, and just not being able to come back from divorce, I just felt failure.” Miller said. “I was looking everywhere else than where I was supposed to.”

God provided him what he needed.

“He said ‘You need to respect yourself more than you’ve ever done before because I made you. I’m your creator. You’re a warrior and you’re a healer. Start respecting yourself. As you respect yourself, it’s going to come back in all you do because you’re respecting me. I am your father,’” remembered Miller. “That’s when I started to change. I stopped being a victim.”

In the aftermath, he remembered the days of his youth back on the reservation.

“I felt a failure as a father and a musician, but that’s not for me to feel anymore. I’ll never feel that way. No, I’m not a failure. That brought up a piece of me that I needed to see again,” Miller said. “I’m back in the ring again basically.”

Now, the time for observation and interpretation is passed and this June, it’s back to application for the artist.

“It’s like someone has a big bowl of corn seeds and says ‘when you are going to plant these?’” said Miller of his inspirations.

And he’s picking up where he left off, this time with a record that, he says, will have a supernatural feel and feature “a few darker colors” than anything he’s ever released before.

“I’m done people pleasing. I’m done. Been there, done that. I’m going to please my heart and soul. I’m going to please my children and people who love me and that’s it,” he said. “I’m ok with that. My main goal is to reconcile. I’ve reconciled my dead father, an alcoholic man. I’ve learned how to forgive him. I’ve reconciled with people who have spit on me at concerts, hated me because I was native ... I have a spirit in me that rises above those flames.”

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