

“*We Are Here*: The Story of the Tongva/Gabrieleno People”

by Ted Olson

“The People of the Earth” and Their Mission

The ancient and enduring Tongva culture inspired the contemporary music on this album. The Tongva people today live in southern California where their ancestors dwelled, having maintained a meaningful, mythic connection to the very land and sea that had sustained those ancestors. The new compositions heard herein reinterpret Tongva myths and invoke an authentic sense of place while summoning ancestral spirits. For listeners with no prior awareness of this remarkable story of cultural survival, *We Are Here: Ekwa Chem* has the power to change perceptions of southern California, literally and figuratively.

Before now, public knowledge about the Tongva (generally translated from that tribe’s language as “the People of the Earth”) was mostly relegated to local placenames from that language, such as Topanga, Cahuenga, and Rancho Cucamonga. But the vast majority of southern California residents and visitors are unfamiliar with the culture that gave those places their names. This album, then, is timely—indeed, it’s long overdue—because it replaces the prevailing popular narrative on southern California (in large part shaped by Hollywood’s manufacturers of commercial myths) with a deeper, older story about the region—a story that channels ancestral voices of the people who were here first and who knew this place best.

Before colonization, the Tongva people had dwelled in Tovaangar, their ancestral homeland sandwiched between the San Gabriel Mountains on the east and the Channel Islands to the west, including the lands within present-day Los Angeles County and Orange County. It was a diverse and fertile homeland, encompassing

approximately 4,000 square miles, in which the Tongva sought sustenance through hunting and gathering while engaging in trade with other tribal groups. Regularly travelling between the coast and the Channel Islands, the Tongva had developed sophisticated nautical traditions.

The arrival of Catholic missionaries to California during the eighteenth century forced change to the Tongva way of life. Many tribe members died from introduced diseases, and others were expected to convert from the tribe's traditional monotheistic religion to Christianity. Trying to survive by adopting a Western way of life, tribe members were denied legal protections, civil rights, and social equality.

The term *Gabrieleno* has been used in reference to the Tongva because it reflected the tribe's longtime presence at Mission San Gabriel Arcángel. Founded September 8, 1771, by Spanish Franciscan friars and built in the hills east of present-day Los Angeles, Mission San Gabriel Arcángel flourished because of the labors of tribal members. Living at this Mission like slaves, the Tongva contributed significantly to a local economy based on farming, raising of livestock, and production of wine and brandy. That co-existence was contentious, and in 1785 a medicine woman known as Toypurina and a baptized Indigenous man named Nicolás José initiated a bold but ultimately suppressed revolt against the friars. The arrangement at the Mission continued into the nineteenth century, and the Tongva population grew (as an indication of this growth, approximately 6,000 ancestors were buried at or around the Mission). Other Tongva settlement areas existed nearby; for instance, a parking lot at California State University, Los Angeles, was made by paving over Tongva graves.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Spain authorized the construction of numerous Catholic Missions across California, all in the effort to control Alta California (the northern province of New Spain) through the conversion of Indigenous people. The first was Mission San Diego de Alcalá, established on July 16, 1769, by Father Junípero Serra, a Franciscan friar. The next few decades brought the construction of 20 additional missions, including the one at San Gabriel. Those 21 missions remained in operation after Mexico's 1821 displacement of Spain as owners of Alta California; Mission San Gabriel Arcángel continued to prosper because of the Tongva people who lived and labored there.

At the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded this territory to the United States. In 1850, shortly after the United States absorbed California, the lands held by the missions were confiscated by the new tenants, a situation imperiling Tongva and other Indigenous communities across the state. One of the earliest California governors imposed a bounty system, and a Native Slave Market was implemented. Meanwhile, the establishment of Indian boarding schools nationally led to the isolation of younger people from their elders, which interfered with the dissemination of traditional culture across the generations.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, amidst this protracted trauma, a few non-native ethnologists began documenting Tongva culture (most notably, Alfred Louis Kroeber, who in his *Handbook of the Indians of California* incorrectly surmised that the tribe's culture had "melted away" by 1925). The Mission Indian Federation was formed in 1919, but only one tribe received federal recognition—and it was not the Tongva. The federal Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 promised societal equality for Indigenous people, but the Tongva continued to lose ground literally and figuratively. The drive to extract oil from the Earth fueled a land rush across southern California, and, as cities sprouted and suburbs sprawled, a building boom yielded a population explosion in parts of the state. Many if not most new residents—other than encountering a Tongva placename or finding a stray arrowhead or other artifact—did not know the tribe had ever been there.

Federal hearings in 1993, collectively referred to as the California Tribal Status Act, were held to address the history of unratified treaties and past discrimination; those hearings inspired further legislative efforts to redress past treatment of Indigenous groups. But subsequent legislation—specifically, the 1999 Indian Gaming Compact—caused division in that the policy pitted tribes across California against one another in the competition for economic opportunities.

Recent years have presented the tribe with opportunities for healing. In 2007, the United Nations issued a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, establishing global standards for ensuring the survival, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous groups, including safeguarding rights for self-determination, preserving culture, and securing connections to ancestral lands. In 2019, California Governor

Gavin Newsom issued a public apology to the state's Indigenous people for the history of violence they had experienced. During the 2020s, several political leaders—including Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, Pope Francis, and President Joe Biden—publicly acknowledged the continuity of cultural survival of the Gabrieleno San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians.

Recovering Tribal History

The Tongva culture at the heart of this album may be ancient, but the musicians who made this music—all of whom are Gabrieleno—bring contemporary perspectives to their interpretations of time-honored tribal values. These newly created songs, performed with freshness and joy, espouse the Tongva principle of *hiiken* (sharing breath and spirit) while celebrating the long-held commitment of the tribe to living in balance with the environment and to giving back to the natural world.

Present-day members of the tribe can trace direct lineages, verified by a certified genealogist, to ancestors who were part of the San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians. The tribe was recognized by the California Legislature in 1994, with the understanding that its history was documented in archives associated with the Catholic missions. Governed by the Gabrieleno-Tongva Tribal Council, the tribe maintains a democratically structured and elected five-member tribal council, with the general membership providing oversight during tribal meetings. The tribe's main office (the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center) is located near the historical Tongva settlement known as *Sibangna*. Tribal leaders have not had a legal mechanism for negotiating to create a federal reservation for a tribe not officially recognized by the federal government. Utilizing an alternative approach, those leaders, through the tribe's nonprofit organization, recently acquired land through an arrangement with the Presbytery of San Gabriel, which in 2025 gave land—or, more correctly, gave back land—to the Gabrieleno San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians. In its newly acquired tribal landholding (1/2 acre, featuring some donated buildings), the tribe hosts cultural ceremonies and tribal meetings, offers programs for youths, and maintains a community food bank.

Chief Anthony Morales, the tribe's main leader since 1995, reflects upon the tribe's core beliefs: "We learned from our elders to respect life, to respect Mother Earth, to respect the part of our lives that give us life." Accordingly, Chief Morales and other leaders have long stressed the importance of documenting tribal culture and educating non-natives about Tongva cultural history. The latter has been necessary because, according to tribal elder Art Morales, "There were books when my daughters were in grammar school and high school that stated we were extinct."

The Album

Mona Recalde, Director of Community Outreach for the Gabrieleno-Tongva San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians, explains that *We Are Here: Ekwa Chem* is intended to highlight the tribe's historical presence in Los Angeles and Orange County. This album is also meant to shed light on the colonial experience of the Tongva and on the role of the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel throughout tribal history. Relating that "the school system hasn't always been forthcoming" when representing the stories of First People/Indigenous groups, Recalde hopes that *We Are Here* will convey the complex story of the Tongva/Gabrieleno to a diverse and widespread audience.

Agreeing with Recalde that *We Are Here* aims to boost public awareness of that story, Chief Morales believes that the album channels the voices of Tongva ancestors. "I'm of the belief," he relates, "that these songs and the stories they portray build from the past, utilize the present, and educate the next generation. The next generation will continue to tell these stories into the future long after my journey is complete. These songs reveal that our culture is not extinct."

We Are Here showcases new songs composed by Andy Guiding Young Cloud Morales, an experienced creator of songs and dances inspired by traditional Tongva stories. The songs on the album evoke the natural world, representing the three landforms sacred to the Tongva—the mountains, the coastal inland, and the ocean. Having long served as a dance captain for his tribe, Andy Morales observes that both modes of expression—songs and dances—are inextricably linked in Tongva culture.

Morales learned traditional songs and dances from his mentor, the late Mark Acuña. Raised by a Tongva grandmother, Acuña was an English professor at Mt. San Antonio College. After years in academia, Acuña dedicated himself after his retirement to studying Tongva culture, including the tribe's language and its songs and dances. He compelled other people, including Andy Morales, to learn the tribe's heritage. Speaking to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in 1996, Acuña said: "So much of the culture was wiped out that we're still going through the whole business of recovering the language and the songs." Through his efforts, Acuña reawakened among modern-day Tongva/Gabrieleno a deeper awareness of tribal cultural history. While Acuña's songs and dances were cultural and social in nature, not sacred or ceremonial, they left a deep impression on Andy Morales. Upon recognizing that the young culture leader was dedicated to understanding the tribe's history, the mentor said: "I'm passing the torch to you."

In his own work, Morales creates songs through "observing, seeing things" and through trusting his intuition. "The songs come to me—the ideas come to me—through intuition," he confesses. "I start with a melody, then I channel the words." *We Are Here* braids together traditional and modern perspectives on the meaning of being Tongva, and the songs simultaneously navigate literal and spiritual landscapes. In one of his songs, Morales relates his experience while on the 20-mile ferry trip from mainland California to Catalina Island. "A school of dolphins was jumping out of the ocean, and I started writing the words and the melody for my song, moved by a belief that 'dolphins are the caretakers of the world.'"

In another song, Morales honors "the Lone Woman," who lived alone on San Nicholas Island (located 60 miles from the mainland, it is one of the Southern Channel Islands) after other tribal members on that island were relocated to Mission Santa Barbara in 1835. Padres from that mission forced the island's Indigenous people (the Nicoleño) onto a boat, but the Lone Woman either remained behind intentionally or, according to a later tale, swam back to the island to find her baby left behind by the padres. The baby died, but the Lone Woman survived on the island for 18 years, eating shellfish and seal; in 1853, an early American settler in California, George Nidever, led the expedition to "rescue" her. Taken by boat to Santa Barbara, the woman—christened Juana Maria—soon died from dysentery. A century later, she became the subject, in fictionalized form, of the 1960 Newbery Award-winning historical novel, *The Island of the Blue*

Dolphins. Its author, Scott O'Dell, didn't make clear was Juana Maria's specific tribal identity. In all probability, she was a Nicoleño, a Shoshonean tribe closely related to the Tongva. Morales' song for *We Are Here* reclaims the Lone Woman as an iconic Tongva culture hero.

An important influence upon Morales's songwriting was the field recording work by linguist John Peabody Harrington (1884-1961). Harrington's recordings on wax cylinders captured many speakers of Tongva and other Indigenous languages, and those recordings, held in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution, have served as the basis for recapturing elements of the Tongva language. Harrington also recorded Tongva music traditions, including a song entitled "Toki Toki," sung for Harrington in 1913 by Fernando Kitsepawit Librado, who allegedly had learned the song from Juana Maria (one translation of the lyrics reveals her perspective: "I live contented because I can see the day when I want to get out of this island"). Morales learned "Toki Toki" from that recording and taught the song to modern-day tribe members. Harrington also recorded performances by Tongva musicians singing songs in praise or imitation of birds (those recordings of "bird songs" are held today in the Santa Barbara Museum). To underscore the significance of that tradition to his tribe, Morales composed his own bird song, subsequently recorded for this album.

We Are Here also features a composition in which Morales invokes the continuous presence of mountain lions in the historic territory of the Tongva, from the precolonial period into the current century. Acknowledging the totemic role of the mountain lion to the Tongva historically, the song offers hope that the animal will remain wild and free in that territory. Morales sees the mountain lion's endurance as symbolic of the tribe's possibility for survival.

We Are Here closes with a final piece sung in the Tongva language entitled "Neophyte," which interprets the biblical passage known as the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). This song affirms the Christian faith of many tribe members today. Recalde states, "This is not intended to be a Christian album. We simply wish to affirm that the Tongva people are Christianized natives who lean into both our Christian and our Native identities."

Acknowledging the challenge of attaining visibility for the Tongva/Gabrieleno, Recalde hopes that this album will make people aware of the tribe's ancestral homeland in southern California and of the tribe's continued presence in the region today. Chief Anthony Morales believes that this album can broaden awareness of the Tongva by inspiring future projects, including documentaries and film soundtracks. Summarizing the songs he composed for *We Are Here*, Andy Morales says, "All are the voices of the ancestors. They are giving us the songs."