



BY LYNNE ROBINSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL CURRY

“My Grandmother Medina

would tell me stories of our Native grandmothers who were taken captive,” Gary Medina Cook tells *Trend*, as we talk over coffee and breakfast at Legacy Café in Taos one early December morning.

Medina Cook sits across from us in a corner of the café, his long, dark hair tied in a ponytail under his black cowboy hat. Except for the crimson scarf around his neck, he’s dressed all in black, right down to his boots: a stark frame for his mestizo features. More rock and roller than academic or filmmaker, he is at once easygoing and self-consciously aware that he is called to remember a forgotten history.

“That is truly where my film *The Genízaro Experience: Shadows in Light* was born,” he says as he recalls his grandmother’s kitchen in Questa, New Mexico. This film, released in 2022, has brought new attention and acclaim to Medina Cook, adding to his rich life as a renowned musician.

Lorraine Medina Cook, his mother, was *genízara*—of Spanish, Comanche, Ute, Apache, French, and Pueblo heritage—with no single tribal affiliation. His father, Richard Cook—of English, Scottish/Irish, and Choctaw descent—was an artist from Fort Worth, Texas. “My father didn’t speak much about his Indigenous great-grandmother,” Medina Cook relates, and his awareness of her connection to the infamous Trail of Tears still nags at his conscience.

His parents moved him and his siblings to Louisiana for a few years during their early childhood, before returning to Santa Fe when he was 8. He remembers the stories his grandmother

told him sitting around her kitchen table when they visited her during summers, at Christmas and other holidays.

The term *genízaro* is a Spanish word taken from the Italian word *giannizzero*, which in turn was adapted from the Ottoman Turkish term *yanıçeri* (“janisary”). The Turkish word referred to slaves from other cultures who were trained as soldiers for the Ottoman Empire. *Genízaros* were Native American women and children captured by the Spaniards, or Natives purchased by Spaniards from tribes that held them captive. Spanish laws forbidding slavery forced the buyer to bring them into their homes and in turn, introduce them to Spanish (i.e., Catholic) customs; they were classified as indentured servants rather than slaves.

As far back as the 1500s, there are records of Spaniards taking young Indian boys and training them to guard Spanish communities from raiding tribes like the Navajo, Ute, and Comanche. Eventually, these displaced people began to lobby the New Mexico authorities for land of their own to settle and farm. In exchange for their service, they were given land grants in strategic areas, and during the mid- to late-1700s, towns including Ranchos de Taos, Abiquiú, Las Trampas, Tome, Ojo Caliente, and Questa were established as *genízaro* buffer settlements against raiding tribes.

Medina Cook’s ancestry ties back into this convoluted and rich heritage. He was a professional musician in Los Angeles until a decade ago. He attributes his love of music to his mother, who bought him his first guitar at age 12, recognizing perhaps that her sensitive son needed a creative outlet. By the age of 15, he was wowing local musicians and bands, and was regularly invited to jam.

At age 16, he dropped out of school

to pursue a career in music. He played at many clubs around Santa Fe and Albuquerque for about three years before moving to LA, where he was quickly hired as a session musician. Although self-taught on guitar, he enrolled at the Dick Grove School of Music, where he studied composition and jazz. He has played with many leading artists, including Joni Mitchell and Sting, who were intrigued by his use of a device called a Roland VG-8.

“You could plug your guitar with a special pickup into this device, and then you could detune the guitar itself electronically in the [device] and create all these wild sounds,” he explains. He accompanied Mitchell to perform at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and worked on Sting’s 1999 album *Brand New Day*, modifying the sound on some tracks using the device. “A couple years ago, I heard Sting was coming to Taos as the last show of his tour, and called his people to see if I could arrange an opening slot for Robert Mirabal and myself,” Medina Cook recalls. “He already had an opening band, but he let us play a couple songs and bless the show with a Tewa prayer.”

While in LA, Medina Cook married, had two sons, and even cut his hair to work for a time in management at Yamaha (the music instrument company) to support his young family. It was the eventual demise of that marriage that brought him back to New Mexico. He remains extremely close to both of his sons, who are clearly chips off the old block: Ryan is a touring drummer, while Sean cowrote and produced “A Bar Song (Tipsy)” for Shaboozey, which currently holds the record as the longest running number one song on the Billboard Hot 100.

Medina Cook chuckles as he tells me he discouraged both sons from becoming professional musicians. “I really tried

Gary Medina Cook with one of his many guitars kicks back in Taos.



to get them into sports,” he says with a smile. This proud dad recently flew out to Nashville when it was announced Sean was up for a CMA award. He will be at the Grammys in LA in February to root for him there as well.

The Genízaro Experience: Shadows in Light features music by Native musicians Rita Coolidge, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Bill Miller, as well as Michael Martin Murphey, Tyrone Wells, and Felix Peralta, plus poetry from American Poet Laureate Joy Harjo, also of Native heritage, and special appearances by actor Raoul Max Trujillo (*Apocalypto*) and the late Native activist and poet John Trudell.

Although he wrote the music in 2019 for his first film, the short *Tomena*, which is the precursor to *Genízaro*, about a songwriter from an Indian reservation who’s in a creative rut, he didn’t create all the music for *Genízaro*. “I wore so many other hats,” he reasons, “I didn’t need to do all the music, too!”

Medina Cook continues to sit in with friends like Miller and Martin Murphey and others if they are passing through Taos, but since being bitten by the film



Los Comanche Dancers perform outside St. Francis Church in Los Ranchos de Taos. Top: Medina Cook shoots footage for his film of Francisco “El Comanche” Gonzales, at the front of the famous Los Ranchos de Taos Church. Opposite, from top: The filmmaker (far left) performs on acoustic guitar with Robert Mirabal (Taos Pueblo). Medina Cook with his students at the Institute of American Indian Arts view a film in December 2024 as part of their curriculum.

bug, it has captured his creative spirit, as has the genízaro experience itself. “When I decided to come back home, I moved to Taos and began to explore those roots,” he explains.

He recalls the final words his grandmother Medina spoke to him before she died: “Remember who you are and remember where you come from!” After several decades in LA he considered relocating to Nashville to try his luck as a studio musician there, and went to check it out.

“On my return flight back to LA, I stopped off in Albuquerque to visit my parents, and I ran into an old friend while sitting in on guitar with a band at a local bar,” he remembers. “She started talking about Taos. Being that my mother and her family were from there, I suggested we take a drive up north. We looked at land in Valdez and I showed her Arroyo Seco, where the Medina side of my family planted roots in the 1700s.” The visit re-awakened his love of Taos and in



2015 he decided to resettle there.

He reflects that he also has “Taos Pueblo connections with my great, great, great grandfather, who was hanged in Taos Plaza for his role in the revolt of 1847 that killed Governor Bent, and so many more connections to this land and place. This sense of returning home transcends art: my entire sense of self was reshaped after I discovered *querencia*, my place of belonging.”

Outside on the Plaza, Danza Azteca de Anáhuac entertains a gathering crowd while we talk about cross-cul-

tural ties and blood memory. “I did not grow up on a reservation or in a pueblo,” Medina Cook says. “Because of that, I don’t identify as Native, but I do identify as an Indigenous New Mexican. I understand our ancestral connections and remember where our mixed blood dries.”

By 2019, as a student at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, he was thinking about creating the documentary that would later become *Genízaro*. “For my final thesis at IAIA, I was searching for ideas when,” he re-

calls, “my Grandmother Medina’s spirit spoke to me. I remembered the amazing stories she would tell me in her kitchen about our ancestors—those Native American grandmothers enslaved in Spanish households. While doing research on the topic, I found a book by Moises Gonzales and Enrique Lamadrid titled *Nación Genízara*. That is where I learned the word genízaro. I realized that the stories my Grandmother Medina had shared with me were that of the genízaro.”

The pandemic forced Medina Cook to fill several roles when creating the film. He’d just begun working on it when restrictions were announced, leaving him unable to assemble a film crew, and with no budget to speak of. “I did everything,” he tells us. “It was a labor of love. It was just me and my camera. Many of the interviews never took place because of COVID. Some people didn’t feel comfortable doing interviews at the time.”

Medina Cook says he wanted to explore the origins of Indigenous slavery along with other themes includ-



Looking north as one approaches Taos, NM 68 delivers this stunning view of the Taos Gorge, domed Ute Mountain on the horizon, and the Taos Plateau, the homelands of Medina Cook's ancestors.

ing cultural hybridity, equality, genetic genealogy, and tribal recognition. Over the decades the children and grandchildren of genízaros have intermarried with local Hispanics, Natives, and other ethnicities, further blurring their identity. In fact, identity—or rather, its absence—is the crux of the film.

“Genízaros embody duality in the human condition and celebrate two worlds: Indo and Hispano. I am quite proud of the film and learned a great deal about my own ancestral connections. The people tell their story, which is my story as well. *The Genízaro Experience* is a blending of spirits that embodies cultural hybridity and duality in the human condition.”

Featuring artists and authors, professors, scholars, and those still living in genízaro communities who continue to practice their mixed-blood traditions, the one-hour documentary was quickly picked up by PBS after its release and has brought both the film and its maker to the attention of critics, fellow academics, and researchers. Clearly, *The Genízaro Experience: Shadows in Light*, is timely, to say the least. The film continues to be shown at festivals, and with each screening, more and more people are becoming aware of this mostly invisible, and nearly forgotten, history of some of New Mexico’s most intriguing communities and their founders.

These days, the former high school dropout is an adjunct professor/staff member of his alma mater, IAIA in Santa Fe. “When I came back to New Mexico, a friend encouraged me to get my GED. After I did, my dad suggested, ‘Why not go and get a degree?’ I was already in my 50s.” He smiles at the memory.

He drives down to Santa Fe several days a week from Taos and admits there are days when he questions the long commute. “But Taos is home,” he says softly, as we leave the café. “This is where my roots are.” ❁