

Smoke Signals Radio Archive Episode 1998-09-05
Segment 6
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Dan and Mary Lou Smoke present two different reviews of the film Smoke Signals to listeners. After, Dan and Mary Lou discuss the use of radio broadcasting within the film as a way to teach non-Indigenous viewers the importance of the oral tradition and spoken storytelling in Indigenous cultures.

Host(s): Dan Smoke, Mary Lou Smoke

DAN SMOKE: Aanii! Boozhoo! Sge:no! Shekoli! And Mary Lou is going to read a review of *Smoke Signals* the movie that was printed and published in Time Magazine.

MARY LOU SMOKE: Miigwetch, Dan. "They've got to have it. [Inaudible]. *Smoke Signals*, which is adapted from some of his own short stories by Sherman Alexie and directed by Chris Eyre, who also does a cameo in the movie [inaudible] the result of the whole movie is a shrewd portrait [inaudible]."

DS: Miigwetch, nya:weh, Mary Lou. And this is by Louis Grey. Louis Grey is a freelance reviewer. "In a summer full of movies about catastrophic disasters and remakes, a small independent film about Native Americans is making the rounds and delivers an entertaining time for those lucky enough to see it. *Smoke Signals*, written by Sherman Alexie and directed by Chris Eyre, both Native Americans, is a movie about Indian humour, tragedy, frybread, binge drinking, and a road trip to redemption. Like his books, Alexie has written a screenplay that sounds familiar as a powwow and tasty as a fresh piece of frybread. Humour in the face of death, irreverence in the face of structure, and a story that explains more about how hope floats than Sandra Bullock could. In short, it's a film about two not-so-close friends who embark on a journey to retrieve the ashes of a father of one of the two whom left his family years before. It's the 'how's' and 'why's' that make the film so special. Indian films have always had one lingering problem—they were rarely accurate due to ignorance or bigotry. Even well-meaning films created either the noble savage or some other inaccurate stereotype. Contemporary films about Indians were even more misleading. This film is not the definitive movie about Native Americans, rather, a real story about Indians. Plus, it's funny, real sad, and insightful. Indian director, Indian screenplay, and a first-class Native American cast make this a special project."

"There have been other films, but this is the first to get a major distribution deal. Ranked by some critics as one of the 10 best movies released this summer, it sparkles with sharp dialogue and wit. It is probably the best movie made by an Indian, and it had a great cast. Adam Beach plays Victor Joseph, the son of the deceased father. He gives a good performance, but his angst leaves him little room to wiggle emotionally. Evan Adams plays his childhood friend, Thomas Builds-the-Fire. He is the narrator, watcher, and voice for those emotions too painful to say. He is a talented actor, and he makes the most out of his part. The supporting cast steals the movie. Suzy Song, as played by Irene Bedard, comes across smart, sexy, and strong. She confronts Victor Joseph, painting a surprising and revealing picture of the father, Arnold Joseph. Gary Farmer is the Robert De Niro of Indian country. His immense talent put on display as the absent father, Arnold Joseph. He has to play a character that is sad, tragic, comic, and drunk. No matter what scene he is in, it's impossible to ignore him."

"**Tantoo Cardinal**, one of the busiest and most respected actresses anywhere, plays the mother with sad resignation. As Arlene Joseph, Cardinal brings the most out of her character

which unfortunately is underdeveloped. The real show-stealers are Elaine Miles (Lucy) and Michelle St. John (Velma). The two quintessential reservation girls full of energy, humour, and resilience. They offer comic relief at key moments. Although not preachy, the movie does not condemn drinking, nor treat it as some kind of right of passage. In short, it treats it much like real life. For added Indian humour, John Trudell as DJ Randy Peone and Leonard George as Lester Fallsapart are hilarious as radio personalities giving traffic reports on deserted reservation roads. There are movies released this summer that offer millions of dollars in special effects, but none of them offer the kind of dialogue given in *Smoke Signals*. Go see this movie. Buy your tickets at the most expensive time of the day. Your investment will ensure future Indian films. See it twice.

DS: And yes, I just wanted to say in closing that yeah, I really liked the scenes with John Trudell and Leonard George. They were really funny. John Trudell is sitting in a trailer broadcasting, that's where the transmitter is, the radio transmitter, and he's broadcasting from inside this little dilapidated trailer, and then out on some reservation road out by the boundaries of the reservation or someplace, Leonard George sits on top of a van and he's giving road report. And like, there's one vehicle that comes through about every four or five hours or something like that. I mean...

MLS: Yeah, that was funny, especially because he's sitting on top of the van in a lawn chair and I think he's got a little umbrella, eh? I think he's got his hat on. Just sitting there, just waiting, that's all. And the whole audience that's listening to the radio station are just kind of hanging in there waiting for somebody to drive along so they can hear about it. And also, they catch up on some gossip too because he tells what their activity is in the car as they're going by so people are aware of what they're doing.

DS: Yeah, I mean, the dialogue between John Trudell and Leonard George was very revealing. It's funny because that's how it is on a lot of First Nations communities, even in our own community right here in London you see a lot of that. You see a lot of people kind of joking about how another person is doing and giving the news on how another family is doing, and just passing commentary that...well, in this movie, it was really humorous the way radio is, I guess. It's a statement about the oral tradition because it seems like everyone was tuning into the radio and John Trudell...when you see the radio, you think of these big, huge production studios and on-air booths of a movie like *Fraser*, but when you saw John Trudell's radio set-up, it was a trailer that was falling apart, and inside the trailer was a transmitter, his DAT player, or I think maybe there was a CD player in there, 8-tracks, I couldn't believe all the 8-tracks that were in there, and cassettes. I mean, they were still...that's the state of Native radio in many communities. We have a sister station out here on the **Onyota'a:ka First Nations, Oneida**, and they now have a transmission with I think about 15 watts of power so that it reaches the whole community, the whole reserve, and all they had in there was what, a turntable?

MLS: Yeah, they had a turntable and like a cassette player. They did have a CD player because there was some CDs there, but there was only about eight CDs and five cassettes, and that was all their music. But I've heard that they have more since then. But since the day we were there, there wasn't even chairs to sit down. There was a chair for whoever was DJing, but there were no chairs for guests. They're looking for all kinds of equipment, but they're just starting off.

DS: Oh yeah, I think in time though, the music will be forthcoming, the CDs...all they have to do is start networking with some of these record companies and distributors, and any distributor worth its salt will provide them with courtesy CDs to play on the air because its advertising for them, its promotion for them. And so that's just up to them to start to write to some of these

distribution record labels. And also, the fact that they have, they're just a makeshift right now. That's how you have to start. You start small, and then you gradually build an infrastructure that will meet your needs. Because I know at **Six Nations**, that's all they started out with. They just started broadcasting from the basement of one of the vacant buildings in the town of **Ohswéken** and now, today, they have a nice working budget that's funded by fundraising activities right on the air, like that radio bingo.

But like, in the movie *Smoke Signals*, it seems like the radio station is supported because listeners are tuning in and they have...John had all kinds of music there to play. But it was good. I think it's the spoken word that's really important. It's not so much the music, it's more the spoken word, what actually gets relayed over the air. I think that's the statement that Sherman Alexie is trying to pass on, that the message is in our oral traditions, the message is in our oral wisdom, passing it on from one to another and sharing that, and passing that on to each other instead of hoarding that and being selfish with it. We have a responsibility to give it away. And by giving it away, by that action, we are actually holding onto it, we are keeping it.

DS: So, we're going to...let's listen to right now, **Jani Lauzon**. This is from her **Blue Voice, New Voice** CD. Jani performed at the men's healing and wellness conference last year, and just before her performance I ran into some friends of mine. One of them was Monique Mojica, who plays Thomas Build-a-Fire's grandmother in the movie *Smoke Signals*. And at the time that the men's healing and wellness took place, I think it was in mid-August or late July, Monique had just gotten back from **Coeur d'Alene**, where they had just finished filming the movie *Smoke Signals*. And so, I asked her about that experience because Jani was talking about it as she was introducing one of her songs. She mentioned that Monique had just been in this movie where the whole cast was Native, and that the producer was Native, the director was Native, the screenwriter was Native, so what an experience that must've been. And Monique was saying that it was such a joy working in that kind of an environment, that no longer did she have to educate the director. No longer did she have to educate and show the screenwriter what it is to be Native.

That Chris Eyre, the director, and Sherman Alexie, the producer and kind-of director, they already knew the sensibilities of Native people. And so, there was no overt education that had to take place, that Monique was saying she has to do when she's on non-Native sets. When she's on a non-Native set, this happens all the time where she, and if they're dealing with Native issues or Native concerns, she has to educate them. She has to show them. She has to spend a lot of time and energy teaching what it is about Native people that's unique to Native people. But in this case, she didn't have to. It was, in fact it was already understood, it was already an identity of that movie set. That was such a joy, she said, to work in. So, this is Jani Lauzon singing "**Wabakii Bezhig**." "Wabakii Bezhig," here on *Smoke Signals*.