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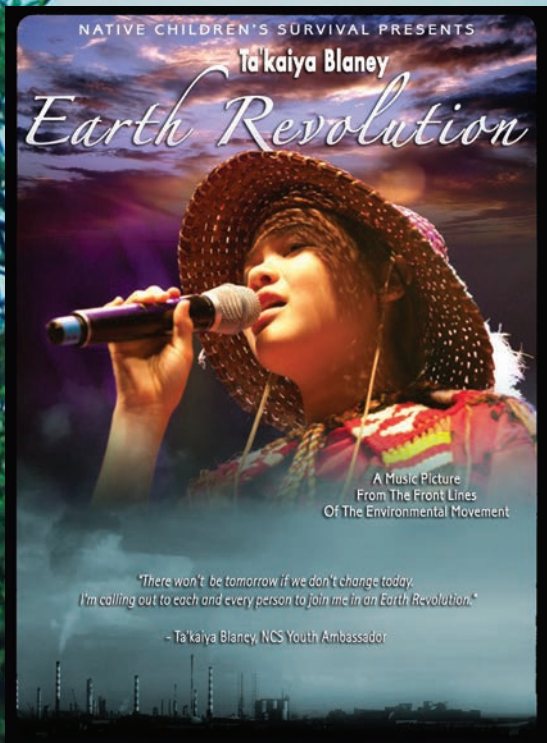
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Cultivating Identity

Grammy-winning musician Robert Mirabal returns to farm the Taos land that raised him



Born to a family who farmed in Taos Pueblo for centuries, Robert Mirabal wanted nothing more as a kid than to escape that fate. “We were dirt poor,” he says. “It was all about survival. I never expected to do what I’ve done.” What he did was live a musician’s life. The artist, now 48, moved to New York in his early 20s and began to fuse hip-hop, funk, and rock influences with traditional Pueblo technique and sound. He produced his first album at age 22 and went on to tour internationally with percussionist Reynaldo Lujan, collaborate on two Grammy-winning albums, compose an acclaimed soundtrack, and he’s even seen his handmade flutes displayed in the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

But now, says Mirabal, standing in the doorway of a shed on his Taos Pueblo property, he’s come full circle to the material that inspired many of his lyrics from the start. “About five years ago I had a dream,” he says. “In the dream the Corn Maidens came to me and told me, ‘We have ten years left. If you help us, we’ll help you.’ I’ve been helping them ever since.”

According to Pueblo cosmology, the Corn Maidens are deities representing life and abundance. The dream is what prompted Mirabal to initiate a project with his friends Nelson Zink and the late Steve Parks, a longtime Taos gallerist and art dealer, to return Taos Pueblo to its pre-World War II agricultural heyday, when wheat and corn were grown in great abundance to feed American troops. They launched Tiwa Farms, a program designed to reintroduce traditional crops and growing methods to the wider community. Using ancient ways to provide for present needs mirrors his inclination to incorporate ancestral rhythms into contemporary songwriting.

Mirabal lifts bag after bag of seeds he’s been curating and planting for the past

several years: corn kernels from the high Andes, Pueblo corn, blue and yellow, white and red, Hopi corn, and corn from Mexico, all stacked on shelves buckling under the weight. There are other seeds too, beans and squash, but it’s the corn that compels him most.

Within the first year, using old tractors and plows, 45 fields were planted; another was added prior to growing season this year at Taos Pueblo. By encouraging this return to agriculture, Mirabal has sparked a renewed interest in the ancient farming techniques long used by Pueblo farmers.

Mirabal is planting traditional, organic crops. Here he holds the seeds for Taos White and Taos Blue corn.

Taos Pueblo has other gardeners joining the movement. The area’s Red Willow Grower’s Co-op now has a year-round farmers market. In 2012, Tiwa Farms became a part of the Po’Pay Society, a non-profit named after the leader of the 1680 Pueblo Revolt that provides agricultural educational programs to keep customs—from storytelling to pollen gathering to arrow making—alive in the community, especially among the youth.

Mirabal has become an avid storyteller on his website, and covers everything from spring snow runoff to weather patterns on mirabalnativeflutes.com and the blog Tiwa Farms Journal (tiwafarms.blogspot.com), with revealing vignettes about working in the fields.

The movement’s success has been evident in the many Pueblo residents returning to their fields to till the land. One Taos Pueblo grower reports that he couldn’t afford to plow his fields and didn’t even consider farming until he heard about Tiwa Farms. Three years ago, he began growing corn, as well as other traditional crops, and plans to add other varieties this year.

For Mirabal, that prescient dream of the Corn Maidens is no less real than the corn he’s been collecting. “Out here, we live in a world of metaphors,” he remarks, returning the seeds to their bags and the cool darkness of the shed. But in the collective upper and middle Pueblo fields, as well as on his own land, where the Rio Pueblo and an acequia run, his work extends beyond metaphor. He’s even become an outspoken advocate for organic farming and a poetic interpreter of its toil.

“When I go out to work in the fields, it’s as if I’m going to meet my beloved,” he says. “I have a relationship with the fields and the seeds I plant, and as with any relationship, it requires work.” Although machinery is used to plow the Pueblo fields, it’s mostly old and outdated, and much of the work at Tiwa Farms is still



Mirabal says Taos Pueblo can build a sustainable food system by returning to traditional crops and low-impact farming practices.



Robert Mirabal and his daughters, Masa Rain (left) and Kona.



done the old-fashioned way—with bare hands in the dirt.

It's little wonder, then, that the young Mirabal longed to leave for an easier life and livelihood. Performing music, though fraught with its own challenges, certainly seemed easier on the body. But now he sees it differently. "I wish I could transform the farming into money," he comments wryly. "I have kids to support, and the music has blessed me with the ability to do that." His two youngest daughters go back and forth between Mirabal and their mother, Dawn, his ex-wife. When they're with him they can be found helping their father remove kernels from corncobs to be ground for flour.

Top: Mirabal recalls Good Deer Concha, who was one of the last farmers to plow with a horse (circa 1960). Right: Last year's harvest survived despite struggling with scant precipitation.

"It's ironic really," he continues. "I spent my childhood wanting so badly to escape this destiny, which is why I began playing music, but in a sense they are cousins, music and farming."

He's starting to deftly merge the two. Mirabal's recent collaborations include *Ironhorse*, a multimedia album he's creating with another award-winning New Mexican rock artist, Robby Romero. They released a CD, with a video in the works, and in December 2014 played a sold-out show at the Taos Center for the Arts followed by a sold-out evening at the Farmhouse Cafe and Bakery. At the event, they rolled up their sleeves and cooked a traditional dinner to benefit a Tiwa Farms initiative to bring organic meals into Taos schools. On the menu were deer stew with piñon nuts, buf-falo tamales, and a dessert of butternut squash with dried fruit and rice drizzled





with honey. Except for the rice, all of the ingredients were hunted or grown at the Pueblo. After dinner the pair performed an acoustic set from *Ironhorse*. In spring they threw another meal-music event to continue the organic school-lunch program and to raise funds for the Taos Pueblo Head Start garden.

“Everything’s connected,” says Mirabal. He looks out toward the mountain, from where the Rio Pueblo flows. “You know, the corn is the only plant that gave itself to the people,” he adds, holding up an ear of dried blue corn. “This can sit around for

hundreds of years, and all it needs is for a human to come along and plant it.”

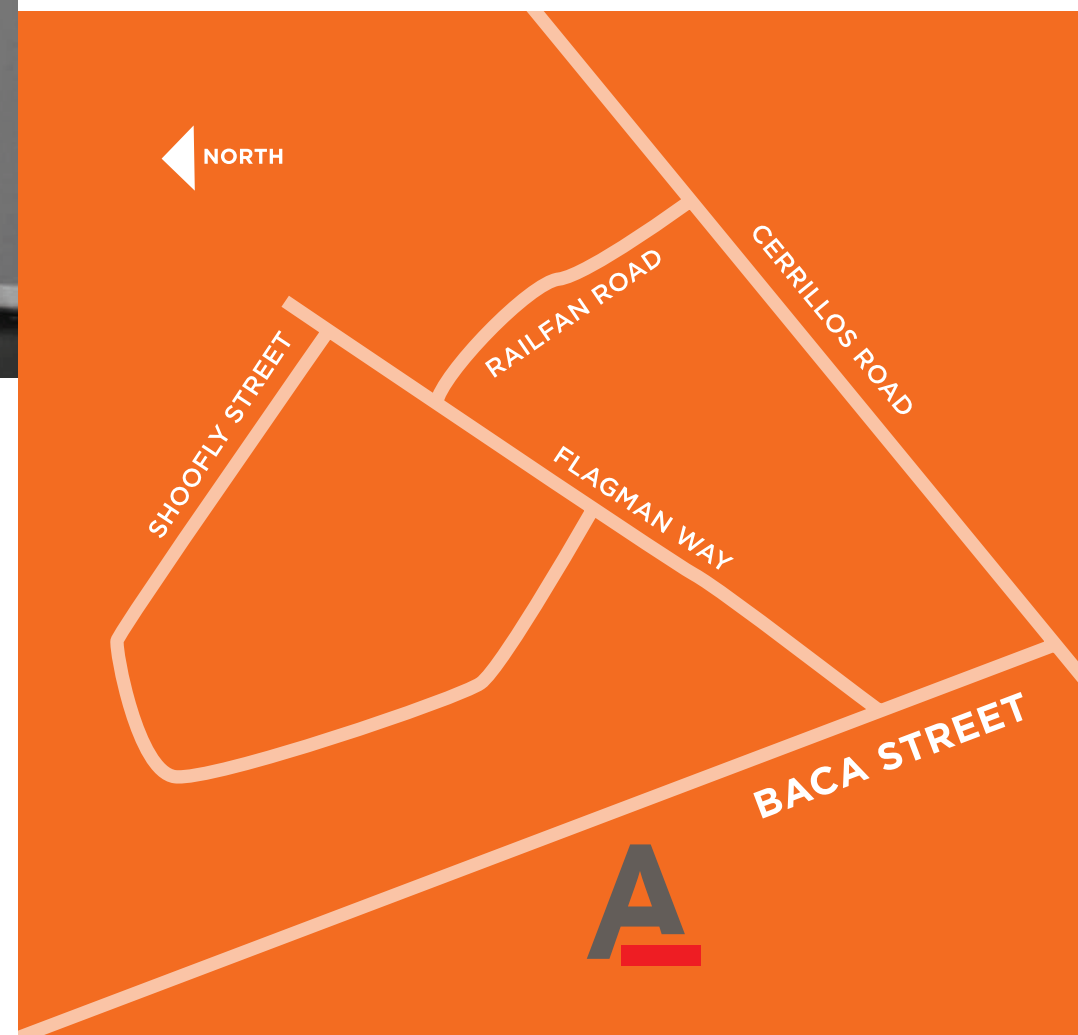
Mirabal continues to tour and play on his own as well as with other musicians. He recently returned from South America, where he has a large fan base, and he tours Europe regularly. Clearly, music is in his blood. He remembers one of his elders, Frank Samora, who was immortalized in the late Frank Waters’s book, *The Man Who Killed the Deer*. “Frank Samora was a great man,” he says. “He taught me many things and he gave me my Indian name, Flute Song.”

Mirabal playing the didgeridoo in performance with Robby Romero (left), Mina Tank (middle), and Dakota Romero at the Taos Center for the Arts.

These days, the musician’s connection to the land is as deep as song. In summer months, the corn plants stand more than six feet tall. “We could feed a village,” he says. “This is who I am,” he adds softly. “I live this life. Born a Pueblo farmer, raised a Pueblo farmer, die a Pueblo farmer. Nothing more, nothing less.” ✱

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