

Mali Obomsawin

Flynn Student Matinee Study Guide



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About Mali Obomsawin (pronounced MAH-lee Oh-BOMB-suh-win)

Mali Obomsawin is an award-winning bassist, singer, composer, and bandleader from Abenaki First Nation at Odanak. Mali, who uses both they/them and she/her pronouns, carries several music traditions in the music they perform and write, including American roots, rock, and jazz. Their debut album “Sweet Tooth,” which was released in 2022, foregrounds the ongoing history of Indigenous contributions to blues and jazz, threading them together with hymns, folk songs, and field recordings of Mali’s relatives at Odanak First Nation.

Mali was raised on ancestral land in central Maine and in Québec on the Odanak First Nations Reserve, and studied jazz at Dartmouth College. In addition to being a musician, Mali is a community organizer dedicated to land justice and tribal sovereignty.

About the Odanak First Nation

The word Odanak, in the Wabanaki language, means the site of a village where people live. The Wabanaki village called Odanak today is located in Quebec, in the Saint Lawrence River Valley.

The term [Wôbanakiak](#) includes many culturally related groups of Indigenous peoples who are the original inhabitants of present-day Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, parts of Massachusetts, and parts of southern Canada. Wôbanakiak translates to “people of the dawn.” Different spellings and pronunciations of Wôbanakiak, including Wabanaki and Abenaki, result from English, French, and Dutch attempts to pronounce the native language.

Historians have often confused the identity of the peoples and tribes that make up the Wôbanakiak, because so many of them shifted their residence during the 17th and 18th centuries when they were forcibly removed from their homelands by European invasion. Many tribes are



Aerial view of the community of Odanak today

represented in the Indigenous people who moved to Odanak. The term Wôbanakiak includes all of the Indigenous people from what has come to be known as northern New England who have called Odanak home. Today, around 400 Wôbanaki live in the communities of [Odanak and nearby Wôlinak](#). The entire population of the Abenaki nation has doubled in the last decade, and currently stands at roughly 2,100 members.

For the Wôbanaki, their homeland, [Ndakinna](#), is animate, communal territory, supporting both human and non-human inhabitants in reciprocal social and spiritual relationships. Present-day Wôbanaki are working to preserve their land, traditions, and future through initiatives including the [Bomazeen Land Trust](#), which was co-founded in 2020 by Mali Obomsawin. It is the first ever Wabanaki land trust, whose mission is the **rematriation**, perpetual protection, and healing of ancestral Wabanaki spaces. The organization seeks to empower Wabanaki and BIPOC

communities with land access and the traditional skills and knowledge of their ancestors. They also collaborate with conservation groups, land trusts, and private landholders, and provide education to the general public about Wabanaki studies, history, and ongoing issues.



You might not be familiar with the word “**rematriation**,” but maybe you’ve heard the word “repatriation,” meaning to return someone to their own country or land. In Wabanaki culture, as in many Indigenous cultures, women are recognized as carriers of land and water wisdom, which is why Bomazeen Land Trust and other Indigenous organizations with similar missions use the feminine term “rematriation” when referring to the concept of returning land and resources to Indigenous peoples.

Members of the Bomazeen Land Trust planting seeds

For more about the importance of the rematriation work of organizations like the Bomazeen Land Trust, listen to “[Healing the Land IS Healing Ourselves](#),” an episode of the podcast All My Relationsm, and explore the [educational resources](#) on the Bomazeen Land Trust’s website.

Music: Influences, Traditions, Instruments

“Telling Indigenous stories through the language of jazz is not a new phenomenon... My people have had to innovate endlessly to get our stories heard - learning to express ourselves in French, English, Abenaki... but sometimes words fail us, and we must use sound.”
-- Mali Obomsawin

Mali Obomsawin’s music honors the Indigenous ability to shape great art from the harshest fires of colonialism. Wabanaki sounds and culture forms the bedrock of Obomsawin’s music. In their album “[Sweet Tooth](#),” Obomsawin blends Wabanaki stories and songs passed down in their own family with tunes addressing contemporary Indigenous life, colonization, continuity, love and rage. It’s at once intimately personal, featuring field recordings of relatives at Odanak First Nation, but also conveys a larger story of the Wabanaki people, stretching across the domain of their confederacy from Eastern Canada to Southern New England.

One of the songs on the album arranges an Abenaki ballad from as early as 1730, and communicates in the Abenaki language the story of the founding of Odanak. The album also includes a composition that evokes the more than 12,000 years that passed before the arrival of Europeans on Wabanaki land. Though these millennia are often used to define Native cultures pre-European colonization, the real story is that the Wabanaki have always been open to new ideas, hungry for new technology. They were some of the earliest people recorded by anthropologists in the 19th century, and they embraced recording technology as readily as they’d embraced any other worthy technology brought by outside means.

Another song on “Sweet Tooth” incorporates a field recording from the mid-1900s of [Théophile Panadis](#), an Odanak citizen who dedicated his life to safeguarding, sharing, and perpetuating Abenaki traditional knowledge and language.

Obomsawin’s music also shines a light on the Indigenous history of jazz – which swept through Indigenous communities as a result of the residential school system. In 1879, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School opened in Pennsylvania, with the express purpose of assimilating Indigenous youth into white American culture and destroying their roots to their cultures and communities. Among the many abusive and destructive practices enforced in these residential schools, children were not allowed to speak their native languages, wear their traditional clothing, or participate in their religious or cultural practices. It was a brutal, federally funded operation that lasted until 1978, with around 357 of these schools across the United States.

Music was one of the tools of cultural genocide implemented by these schools. Girls were taught piano; boys were taught brass band and marching band music. The school bands performed in parades, during presidential inaugurations, and other events, all with the goal of indoctrinating young people away from their cultural heritage.

However, when many students left these schools, they formed their own bands. They wore their cultural clothing while performing marching band music, challenging the ways they were depicted and viewed by non-Native people.

Today, several such marching bands still exist and perform, including the Fort Mojave Tribal Band, Zuni Pueblo Marching Band, Navajo Nation Band, and Iroquois Indian Marching Band.



Some of these contemporary bands have been transcribing their traditional music into brass instrumentation. As Navajo and Ute musician R. Carlos Nakai says in the 2012 documentary [Sousa on the Rez](#), “It’s a way for young people to be traditional and modern at the same time...to be in the world without losing yourself.”

The Navajo Nation Band performing in 2009 in Shiprock, New Mexico

Mali Obomsawin's music also contains influences of free jazz. Free jazz is a style that focuses on improvisation and experimentation rather than compositions built around harmony and fixed rhythms. The American musician Ornette Coleman (1930-2015) is known as one of the primary founders of the genre of free jazz.

As a genre, jazz has a long and often-overlooked history of Indigenous musicians. Many of the most celebrated jazz musicians had Indigenous heritage, including Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Mildred Bailey, Jim Pepper, Thelonius Monk and Don Cherry.



Ornette Coleman in 1971



Obomsawin performing with members of their 6tet

You can check out the members of the Mali Obomsawin Sextet (meaning six musicians!) [performing a piece from “Sweet Tooth” here!](#) These are the instruments you’ll likely see during the performance. In the clip, you’ll see Zack O’Farrill on **drums**, Taylor Ho Bynum on **cornet**, Mali Obomsawin on upright **bass**, Noah Campbell on **soprano saxophone**, Allison Burik on **bass clarinet**, and Miriam Elhajli on **guitar**.

Reflection Questions

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about jazz, what comes to mind?
- What do you know about the Abenaki, Wabanaki, or Odanak First Nation?
- Have you ever experienced Indigenous art forms before? If so, which ones?

After the Show:

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of jazz?
- How did the show meet or break your expectations of Indigenous music?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?
- What are some of the instruments or types of vocalization that stood out to you the most?

Resources

- Mali Obomsawin's website
<https://www.maliobomsawin.com/>
- NPR Interview with Mali Obomsawin about "Sweet Tooth"
<https://www.npr.org/2022/11/05/1134294116/odanak-first-nations-mali-obomsawin-tells-indigenous-stories-through-music>
- Short documentary: "Sousa on the Rez"
https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_508-3t9d50gh3n
- Bomazeen Land Trust website
<https://www.bomazeenlandtrust.org/>
- Deerfield History Museum: About the Wôbanakiak
<http://1704.deerfield.history.museum/groups/lifeways.do?title=Wobanakiak>
- Odanak First Nation Website
<https://caodanak.com/en/histoire/>
- About Théophile Panadis
<https://parks.canada.ca/culture/designation/personnage-person/theophile-panadis>