

Williams and Ree: The Funniest, Most Politically Incorrect Comedy Team You've Never Heard Of - Rock and Roll Globe

Tim Sommer

9-12 minutes

This Native American/Caucasian duo have no reservations about their half-century on the casino circuit



Williams and Ree

If you are not a fan of the Grand Ole Opry and you don't spend time at casinos in the Plains states, it is likely you haven't heard of the music and comedy team of Williams and Ree.

This is terribly sad, because Williams and Ree, who have been in business for over fifty years, are raucously funny, rabidly corny, quick, combusting with a unique energy and wit, and hugely entertaining.

But today, let us begin by noting that there is a rather enormous difference between art, music and humor that veers into what modern day Trader Joe's-shopping Americans call "Politically Incorrect," and plain ol' hideous Hate Speech. As I write this, Michael Che, one of the few bright lights on the creaking, outdated, grasping dusty cavern of habit and nostalgia called *Saturday Night Live*, is being assaulted by the Twitards for making some jokes about older women. I would like you to think about those jokes, or any art that's been labeled "politically incorrect." Did those jokes cause someone to bully someone or throw a brick through a shop window? Did those jokes incite anyone to march down the street carrying a Tiki Torch, or clobber a woman, minority, or LGBTQ person? Did it?!?

Friends: If we are going to preserve reasonable outrage at what is truly Hate Speech – i.e., that which incites violence, discrimination, and hate – you better learn to distinguish between a fucking joke and an incitement to prejudice. Got it?

Now let's talk about Williams and Ree.

Earlier this Autumn, I found myself doing something every single music fan must do at least once in their life: I attended a live broadcast of the Grand Ol' Opry. It was a joyous, irony free experience, where you leave all your ideas about red state/blue

state identity at the door. The only goal is the deep and constant connection between the audience and artist, and the artist and the extraordinary history of the Opry.

On this particular evening, of the ten artists who performed – including Opry favorites like the Whites, Gene Watson, Connie Smith, and Crystal Gayle – only one act got a standing ovation. Only one act certifiably brought the house down.

This was a music/comedy duo I had never fucking heard of called Williams and Ree.



Williams and Ree on TV

I was blown away, on two entirely different levels: First, it was utterly gobsmacking to find there was an act that was so freaking big, yet an asinine, pedantic, superior, know-it-all life-long music geek like myself had never heard of them. Secondly – and more significantly – these guys were very goddamn good, and the sold-out Opry audience held on to their every word, pun, and giggle for

dear life. A regular act at the Opry, the Native American Casino circuit, and a popular support act for major country artists, Williams and Ree – also known (in all the publicity, promotion, and merch) as “The White Guy and the Indian” – consist of Bruce Williams, 69, a lanky, long-haired Caucasian who looks vaguely like some guy who used to play in Foghat and now sells insurance, and Terry Ree, 70, a rotund Native American who looks like he used to play in The Association and now sells insurance. Williams plays bass and Ree plays guitar, and they punctuate their delivery and underline their punchlines with musical fills, short bits of songs, and parodies of famous tunes. Both are able musicians, and their timing as comedians is extremely musical: They have the same sense of point, counterpoint, melody, breath, and rhythm as a very experienced band, even when doing non-musical material.

Oh...and almost all their material is profoundly, joyously, and unapologetically politically incorrect, and centers around stereotypes of Native Americans and Caucasians.

And that was probably the most wondrous and revelatory thing about discovering Williams and Ree, who have been together for 51 (!) years: They remind us that an artist can be politically incorrect without being mean spirited. In all their jokes about Republicans, Democrats, Native Americans, Caucasians, Rednecks, Hippies, etcetera, there isn't one hateful word, not one sentence that could make someone feel bad about themselves.

How have Williams and Ree mastered being politically incorrect without being mean spirited?

“I don't think that we've mastered that,” replies Bruce Williams.

“We've only just done it to excess. Usually we have a disclaimer at the beginning of our set saying you might be offended by whatever we do, and so far that has gotten us through most times...but we

do still get complaints.”

And so begins our quick conversation with “The White Guy”...

Williams and Ree



The Indian
and
The White Guy

Williams and Ree publicity shot

The Indian and the White Guy thing was built into the act from the beginning, in the late 1960s?

When we met in college in South Dakota and started pickin' and singin' together, well, first of all, we watched the Smothers Brothers, and then we'd emulate their timing, and then we'd go watch Rowan

and Martin and emulate their timing. And then we found this group called Dennis and Cree; they were two guys that fronted a band, and they told jokes, so we actually just blatantly stole their act and started touring with it. Then we got booked into a couple of clubs where Dennis and Cree were very popular, so we got fired immediately. So we had to come up with our own stuff, and we just started adlibbing. Terry would tell a joke, and I would chime in, and, eventually, that led to the Indian-white man humor. Instead of the Smothers Brothers doing “mom always liked you best,” we would do “you stole my land.” That’s how that whole thing developed. Terry would say something about “you dumb white people,” and then I would get a little zinger in myself about his tribal experience. Funny, I’m probably more native than he is; I mean, I identify more with the tribal culture than he does. He likes living that white lifestyle.

When I tell you that I had never heard of you, yet you completely *owned* the house at the Opry, are you surprised?

(Laughs) We’re the highest paid unknown act in the world. We’re not unhappy about the little niche we’ve carved.

I am enormously impressed by the musicality of what you do, the rhythm and melody to your delivery – even when you’re not doing songs. There’s this locked-in-ness that is completely impressive.

Yeah, we worked on that at The Comedy Store in Los Angeles in the late seventies; we had to do a fifteen minute set, and they would give you the light, you know, and that meant you had to get off the stage, so you couldn’t really waste words. That was our training ground where we got to hone everything into little chunks and bits, and that was invaluable for our timing. At the Opry, we’ve got eight minutes up there, so we really can’t waste words.

VIDEO: Williams and Ree Good Times at Opryland Hotel

How many times you have you been on at the Opry?

In the last year, we've been on for two days every two months.

It's also clear that you really enjoy playing bass – five string bass – and the way you use it to punctuate your work is really interesting. I mean, you actively use the bass to tell your jokes, set the rhythm of the jokes, and set up and reveal punchlines.

Yeah, I overplay, because Terry (on guitar) is just chording along, so I completely overplay. It's become my style – it's comedy lead bass, I guess.

I find, on one hand, there's a link between what you do and what Kinky Friedman does, and certainly Tenacious D as well. You are sort of somewhere between, oh, those two acts and maybe some Smothers Brothers, too. And on the other hand, it's very Prairie Home Companion. So there's a lot of potential appeal in there. So I'm curious why there's not more awareness of you outside the heartland.

We do have nice pockets of following on the coasts; it's just that the buyers don't recognize the worth of it. There's usually a nice following there, but it takes a while to build that up, and if you don't get a chance to work a venue consistently, then that all goes away.

I would assume that you guys started doing a lot better once the Indian casino thing started happening in the '90s.

Yeah, that was just a huge heyday for us; native casinos really tacked another 30 years onto our career. We were at every casino, and we worked 'em forever, like clockwork, sometimes two three times a year. They would bring us in because it was native entertainment, and they were native casinos, so it was the perfect fit. But the regimes change pretty frequently at those places, and

the next regime would be like, “Oh, we’re not having any of the same shows that that last regime had because they were losers, so you’re out.” It’s surprisingly and extremely political. The older we get, the harder it is to start the cycle with each new talent buyer.

VIDEO: Williams and Ree at the Spirit Lake Casino February 17, 2018

Are you surprised that you and Terry have been doing this for over half a century?

Oh, yeah, because we were the “live fast, die young,” types you know? We grew up in that generation where we all thought we’d be dead by 30, so it is really amazing. What’s even more amazing is that we’ve haven’t saved a damn dime. Our retirement got tied up in some retirement homes, and we lost all our money.

I’m sorry about that.

Yeah, we have no 401k, anymore, so we have to keep working until we die.

Wow...okay... are you prepared to do that?

Yes. Absolutely.

I highly recommend you see Williams and Ree if you ever get the chance. You can find their dates – and links to videos, audio clips, and other merchandize – here: <https://williamsandree.com/>

