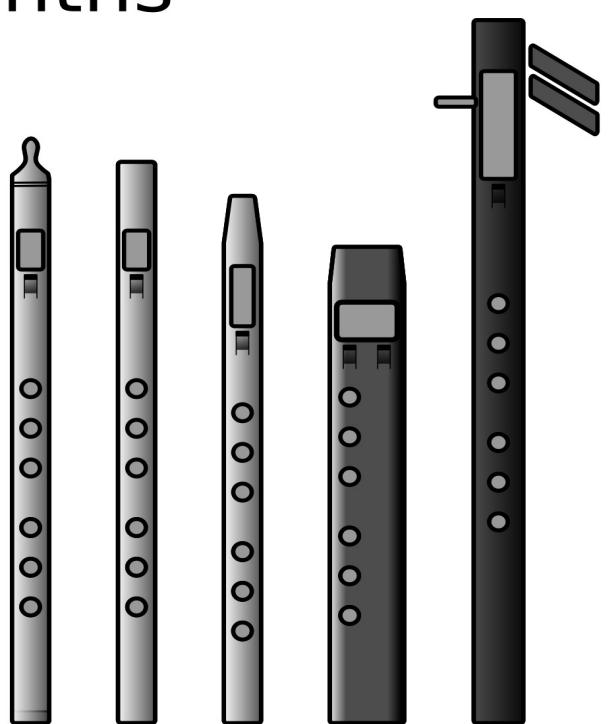


# PLAYING THE NATIVE AMERICAN FLUTE



Learnings over 18 months



by Lee Miles

# Playing The Native American Flute

Lee Miles

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/naf>

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# Introduction

This eBook describes the knowledge I have gathered during the first two years of my flute journey. I decided to write it all down to remind me of all the techniques and for those who might also be interested.

The Native American Flute initially appears very easy to play. Indeed it is very easy to start playing and producing satisfactory results. However, after playing for a short time the intricacies start to become apparent.

Learning to play the Native American Flute should be fun and rewarding. If you have trouble with any of the exercises then leave it and try something else. You can rely on your brain to process these new things in the background while you're doing other things or even sleeping. You will find that when you come back to retry things they will be just that bit easier the next time around, and the next, and the next.

Also remember that it's the things that you find challenging that are the things that you will need to work on so don't shy away from them completely. I have included a reference section at the end listing those sources which have helped me most during my journey so far.

Why a Hummingbird on the front cover? Well, Hummingbirds are believed to be messengers between worlds and by coincidence I obtained a flute painted with a Hummingbird.

I can tell you what I know

- James Richardson

# About the book

When talking about finger holes I always refer to them by their position counting from the mouthpiece of the flute. I am also assuming (for now) you have a six hole flute. The finger diagrams always show the mouth piece to the top.

If you have any suggestions or things you'd like included in the book then please contact me at [leemiles@outlook.com](mailto:leemiles@outlook.com).

# **Dedication**

To my wife June for listening to me playing and being positive about my gradual progress

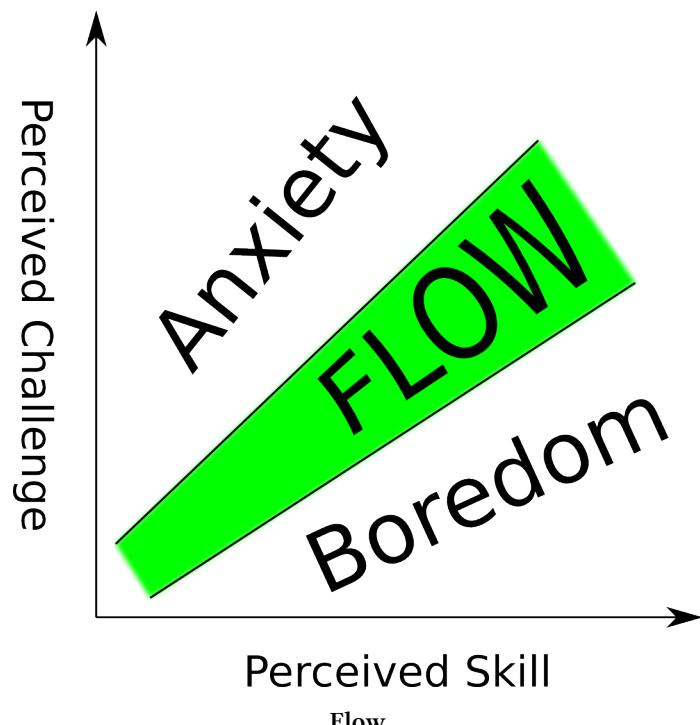
The Native American ancestors of times gone by who created such a wonderful instrument and  
shared it with the world

# Learning

I thought I'd throw in a random chapter on what I've learned about learning without going into any boring detail. There are various documents and books which have been written on the process of learning which you can find by using your favourite search engine.

There's this idea that there's a recognised level of information and challenge which will keep you interested and hooked on something. There's a book called "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience [Paperback]" by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. If the challenge level goes too high everything becomes too difficult and **you lose interest**. If the challenge level goes too low, everything gets repetitive and boring (because you're not learning anything new) and **you lose interest**.

What you need to try and do is keep somewhere above the middle bordering just close enough to difficult that you are always being challenged just enough to keep you progressing on at a steady rate which you find comfortable. Being there will always keep you interested and motivated.



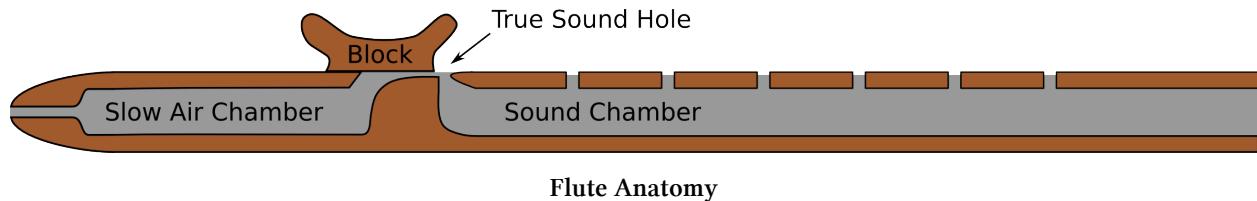
Flow is the mental state of operation in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. In

essence, flow is characterized by complete absorption in what one does. - The beginning of the wiki entry on Flow [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow\\_%28psychology%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_%28psychology%29)]

If you find something in this book too easy then just skip over it. Although you might find a nugget of information lurking in there so don't jump too quickly.

# Parts of the flute

## Small Air Chamber (SAC)

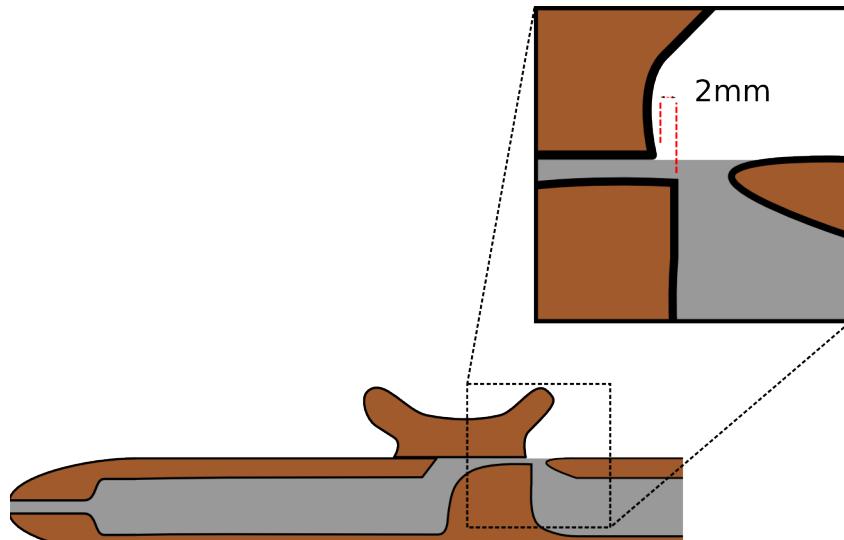


Flute Anatomy

## The Block

The block sits on top of the flute and is usually quite decorative. It has a small gap/channel along the bottom which allows the air to flow from the small air chamber and onto the true sound hole.

The block should be positioned a millimeter or two behind the edge of the true playing hole (see diagram) but feel free to move your block slightly to change the sound of your flute on any given day. Different flutes sound better with the block in slightly different places but they are usually around the same sort of area.



Block position

You can take the block off whenever you like. It's just a piece of wood tied on to the flute. All you have to remember is which way, front/back, it was when you took it off. Some flute makers make

blocks which are reversible, this allows for a slightly different sound to be produced if you want. This is usually fairly easy to remember by the shape of the fetish (animal carving) but some of the flutes have a square block. On rare occasions the block may be glued to the body of the flute. If this is the case then you will not be able to move the block at all, although it is a good idea to get in contact with the maker to confirm whether they glued the block or not.

It maybe that the block has temporarily become stuck possibly due to exposure to extreme heat. But if it cannot be moved easily always check with the flute maker before trying to prize it off as the last thing you want to do is damage the flute.

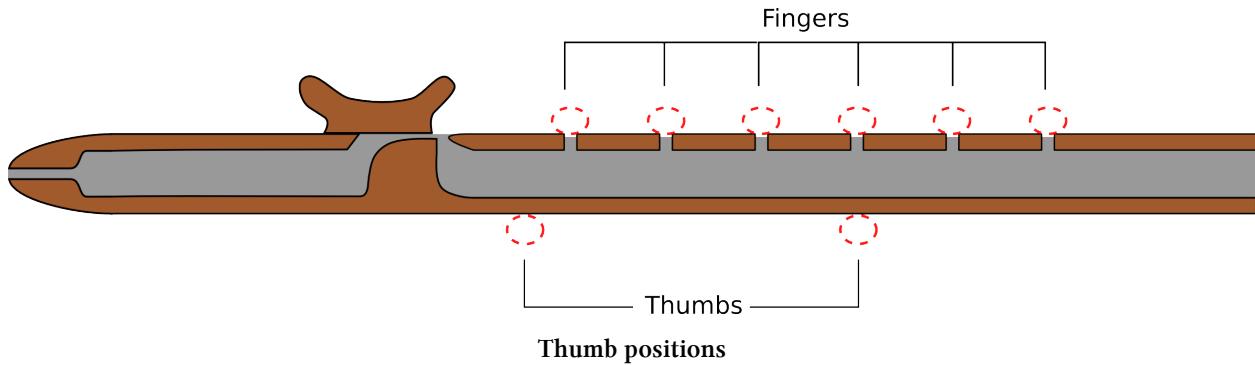
# Holding The Flute

Right handed players should have their left hand to nearest the mouth piece, right to bottom. Left handed players the reverse. Although, I am left handed and play right handed. This really is a personal preference and depends on what feels more natural to you. You should remember this when purchasing a flute. Sometimes the holes are offset in a slight curve to cater for the finger positions of the hand which will be covering them. It would be very awkward trying to play a right handed flute as a left handed player. I believe it's easier to buy right handed flutes than left, unless you have you're flutes custom made; which is actually a normal thing to do (see buying).



Hand positions

Thumbs should be placed on the centre at the back of the flute. Left thumb just above the first hole. Right an inch above the fourth hole. It can be beneficial to place, and keep, your little fingers on flute. This helps stabilize the flute when releasing all of the other fingers(advanced). This is however easier said than done and I keep forgetting to do it. This really depends on the range of notes you are comfortable playing. As you progress you will start to include additional notes which will be much easier played using the little finger to support the flute.



# Relax

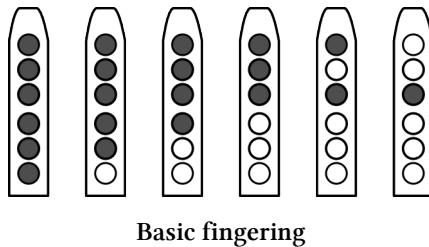


## Relax

Try to hold the flute in a relaxed manner. While placing your fingers completely over the holes is important, it can be beneficial to not grasp the flute too tight. With your fingers just placed laying on the holes it is possible to feel the air vibrations through the fingertips. Becoming more relaxed will also help the flow of your music. I like to have a nice relaxing cup of tea while playing. Although this does increase the likelihood of wetting out the flute quicker.

# Finger holes

Covering different combinations of finger holes produces different notes. The easiest thing to do at the beginning is to always keep the third hole from the top covered. Some people put a leather strap over the hole (or even a piece of sticky tape or a plaster). This will let you play six notes which have very easy finger positions. Later on we will look at the other more advanced fingering positions which allow a total of 14/17 notes depending on the design of your flute.



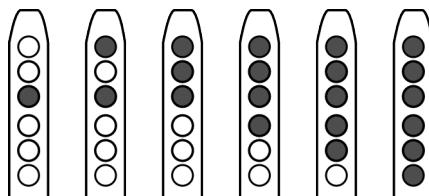
Although each finger position creates a different note you should really (at least at first) not worry about what the actually note letter are. Instead just try to remember the finger positions for playing for the pentatonic minor scale and/or your favourite tune. This is beneficial in the long run when you acquire more flutes (you'll have plenty before you know it, embrace your obsession).



The same finger positions will work on different flutes. You don't want to end up having to remember the positions of the notes on different flutes as that would just complicate matters. Although I'm sure it's second nature to the pro flute players.

## Finger Hole Exercise

With just the third hole covered try playing the note with a blow and then stop. Now cover the top hole as well and try playing that note with a blow and then stop. Now as slow as you like continue this in turn with the second, fourth and fifth holes. You now have your first 'easy' fingering notes. Once you've gone down the notes try going back up them *remembering not to let go of the third hole*.



Exercise 1

You should move slowly up and down those notes so that your fingers start to remember where the holes are and what order they are in. This will also get you used to synchronising your breath and your fingers. You should continue this even after you have got the hang of it as this will encourage finger memory and allow your playing to get smoother and more natural over time. There's no specific rules either. Once you're happy running up and down the notes you can try repeating the notes as and when you feel like it. You could start by playing just hole three, blowing two or three times and then moving onto the next note (one and three). Go up and down doing this and see how you get on.

# **The Start of Playing**

# Fingers

Must cover each hole completely otherwise air will escape and the sound will be wrong; squeaking and/or the note you are playing will go up in pitch.



You should place the pads of the fingers flat over the holes rather than use the end of your fingers.



finger-placement

Try not to hold the flute too rigidly.

# **Mouth**

You should place your mouth on the end of the flute as if you were using a straw. Try to partially cover the hole with your top lip. This will give you better control over the amount of air/breath which is entering the flute. In doing so you will be able to slow down the rate of air which is entering the flute. This will help conserve some of your breath and allow you to play for longer before needing to take your next breath.

# Blowing



## blowing-clock

Slowly, like breathing out normally. Blow from the back of the mouth **not the front**. This will produce a more solid, rounded sound. Blowing from the front, as one does when whistling, will produce a more harsh, hollow sound.

You should also practice by timing how long you can hold one note for. Try to keep your breath at a constant rate to keep the note even and controlled. You will need slightly more breath for the higher notes. Presumably there's a physic explanation for this but I don't know what it is.

# **Tongue**

Should be kept at the bottom of mouth (again not at the front otherwise the sound will be hollow).  
Later on the tongue will be used to help articulate, but not yet.

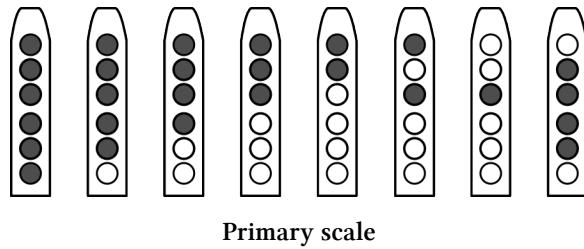
# Music Tablature

There are several sites that offer NAF tablature. The finger positions, represented by small flute images, are very easy to read as they are placed under the normal music score. Reading the timing on the score, however, may be a little more tricky but this can be ignored initially while you play to your own speed and ability. Ideally base your speed/timing on your memory from previously listening to the music.

- [flutetree.com](http://flutetree.com)
- yahoo groups - has a couple of groups which cater for Native American Flutes. There are quite a few tablatures uploaded by the forum members.

LIST MORE SITES

# Primary Scale

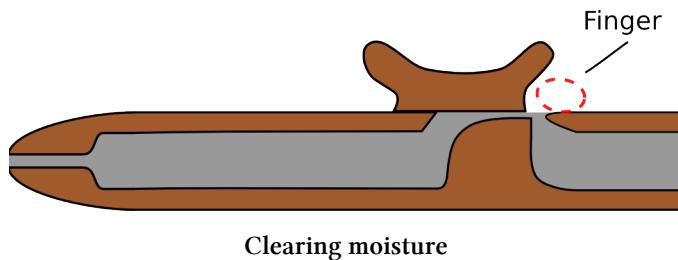


# Common problems

Squeaking is usually occurs if you are not covering the holes completely or you are blowing way too hard. It is possible to make the flute jump up in pitch (by and octave) by blowing harder while covering all the holes. Sometimes this is desirable but usually not while learning.

Flat notes are caused by blowing too softly. Sharp notes are caused by blowing too hard.

Deteriorated quality of play after a short/long time, maybe fifteen minutes plus. This is usually caused by the flute wetting out. This is caused by the heat from your breath creating moisture as it makes contact with the cooler surfaces within the SAC chamber and along the bottom of the block. To remove the moisture easily place one finger over the sound hole in front of the block and make a short, sharp blow into the mouthpiece. This will dislodge the moisture and allow you to continue playing for a while. This will only work upto a point. You will then have to stop playing that flute and play another one (one benefit of having more than one flute).



# How To Practice

Practice so that you can attain freedom

Scott August[^1]

If you're like me, practicing is one of those things that you know you are supposed to do it, but you're not quite sure how to practice well. Look through the sites listed in the reference section and find a tablature for a piece of music you know and ideally like. I haven't previously been very good at practicing but I have now fallen into a routine which works for me.

- **Learn the notes** While reading the tablature, play the tune over and over note for note. You'll probably find that you sound like a robot for the moment but that doesn't matter. Here we are just trying to remember the notes. Continue until you can play the notes without needing to read from the tablature or until you can play them while glancing every now and then at the tablature.
- **Play the tune** You should find you are now playing **automatically**. At this point you can move onto adding a little expression and feeling to the music and finally moving onto improvising the tune.
- **Improvise** Once you're comfortable playing the tune automatically you can start playing around with the notes and the timings. See the improvisation section for several simple approaches to help you.

Oh and remember. Keep relaxed and keep smiling. It will definitely help your playing flow more naturally. You may also find that after playing for an extended period you start making mistakes. In that case take a break. Either stop playing for the day or just noodle around for fun. Not all learning has to be carried out in a strict manner. Noodling helps too.