

Dr. Duke Redbird

Tansi, Boozhoo, Hello and Welcome to The National Music Centre' Speak Up! Exhibition, celebrating the voices of Indigenous music trailblazers past, present and future.

When the average person reflects upon music and poetry in Canada, particularly from the 1960s through the 90s, few Indigenous names usually come to mind outside of Buffy Saint-Marie. But Dr. Duke Redbird, an equally important and prolific Indigenous artist, has been creating within the Canadian arts and culture scene for the better part of a century.

Since the 60s, Anishinaabe Elder and honorary Doctor, Duke Redbird has been sharing teachings and perspectives as a wisdom keeper. His life and career has been shaped by his many talents as a poet, painter, actor, television journalist and educator. He is also an Indigenous folk music trailblazer.

Duke performed spoken word poetry at coffee houses and folk festivals throughout the 1960s. A charismatic figure with an eloquent baritone voice, he offered an Indigenous world view when social movements were taking place globally. His powerful delivery eventually caught the attention of CBC television and he was booked in 1970 to perform his most famous poem, "Old Woman", on The Tommy Hunter Show.

In 1975 Duke collaborated with Manitoba singer-songwriter Curtis "Shingoose" Jonnie and recorded a song based on Duke's poem *Silver River*. The track appeared on the 2014 compilation album *Native North America Vol. 1*, going on to earn a Grammy nomination for best historical album.

Throughout his career, Duke has performed with iconic musicians and longtime friends, including Joni Mitchell, Bruce Cockburn, and celebrated actor and Duke's mentor, Chief Dan George. He has been honoured with awards and invitations to recite his work nationally and internationally, but for many Canadians he is familiar as the 15-year veteran Arts & Entertainment reporter for Toronto's City TV.

In 2005, Duke was honored by the Indigenous community of Toronto and recognized as an Urban Elder and Wisdom Keeper. In this capacity, Duke's messages inspire hope and vision for the future.

Duke believes that mainstream Canadian culture has long denied Indigenous people power and rights, while appropriating and romanticizing Indigenous heritage. Duke has said that, "The dominant culture wanted to embrace the things that we represented but they didn't want to engage with us. I wanted to represent the First Nations view to the world because we had come out of very difficult times. I had gone through quite a brutal childhood at the hands of western European culture and I wanted to speak to that."

Thanks to his advocacy, an Indigenous land acknowledgement now precedes the singing of O Canada at all 588 schools across the Toronto District School Board. And at OCAD University he helped build the Indigenous Visual Culture program. He strongly believes that new generations of activists will be embracing Indigenous causes.

Today, at 81, Dr. Redbird hasn't slowed down. He maintains an active career, particularly as an education consultant and speaker. His legacy continues to inspire and remind others that possibility is far wider than you may suspect.

I'm David McLeod, curator of Speak Up! Click on more of my Curator's Comments to learn about other artists, like Dr. Redbird, whose life and words are a force for change. Miigwetch