

Jeremy Dutcher

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

Historically, Indigenous music has been marginalized, tokenized, ignored or even changed to reflect a mainstream definition. Early recordings were made by anthropologists with the belief that Indigenous people would lose their music and culture to colonialism.

At the turn of the twentieth century, anthropologist William Mechling travelled to the New Brunswick region to study the music of the Wolastoqiyik people. Between 1907 and 1914, he collected more than 100 wax-cylinder recordings of their traditional songs.

Those cylinders were stored in Canadian archives for more than a century, unavailable to the general public. They sat on shelves as many traditional practices were outlawed by the federal government.

Enter Jeremy Dutcher, who grew up with his drum learning traditional songs. Since he was a child, Jeremy deeply connected with music. As a young adult, he completed a degree in music and social anthropology at Dalhousie University; his formal classical training leading him to become an operatic tenor.

After talking about the old ways and the music of his people, Jeremy was advised by Maggie Paul, a Wolastoqiyik Elder, to seek out William Mechling's recordings at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec.

In 2012 he entered the archives. It was as though he was meeting ancestors who wanted to share with him; not only was he hearing their songs, he was hearing their laughter and at times he could hear others nearby.

Jeremy was particularly moved by one song, roughly translated to "The Fisher and the Water Spirit." It opened his mind to new possibilities, to connect his two musical worlds – classical, jazz and traditional songs – with his language. Their voices were not going to be forgotten; as a song carrier he was determined to keep their voices alive.

Today, there are about 10,000 Wolastoq people living in First Nations communities within the region of New Brunswick, Maine, and Quebec. And, according to Jeremy, fewer than 100 people are fluent in Wolastoqey.

The inspiration provided by the wax cylinders guided Jeremy through the process of releasing his first full-length album, *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa*. The album's eleven tracks pay homage to his ancestors by mixing his voice alongside digitized versions of theirs, and quickly garnered glowing reviews in national music publications.

The album's popularity ushered in a cross-Canada tour in 2019, with Jeremy playing many sold-out shows from Vancouver to Halifax, often with local symphony orchestras. I can tell you it is a sight to behold; Jeremy sitting at a grand piano, his powerful voice filling the room, frequently leaving his audience silenced, moved and offering his performance a standing ovation.

Jeremy was short-listed for a Polaris Music Prize in 2018, and he received a 2019 JUNO Award for Indigenous Album of the Year. He notably performed at both events.

A passion for language, culture and music, and the respect he carries for his Elders, laid a pathway for Jeremy Dutcher to create First Nation music that flows into mainstream culture, inspiring Canadians to have conversations about the country's history and the meaning of reconciliation.

As a two-spirit person, he is also an advocate for LGBT rights and recognition.

Today, Jeremy makes his home in Toronto and his work continues to be rooted in community and traditional songs. He has respectfully taken traditional music and made it new again, perfectly fitting into the recent wave of new Indigenous music moving across North America.

I'm David McLeod, curator of Speak-Up! Click on more of my Curator's Comments to learn about other artists, like Jeremy Dutcher, whose music is a force for change. Miigwetch