

## Northern Cree

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

First Nations pow wow music is believed to have a long history, practiced since time immemorial. There are many different types of pow wow songs and styles, with different purposes and different dance regalia. The songs can honour, recognize special individuals or occasions, and heal. Many pow wow songs use 'vocables' that have no actual translation, while others have singing parts like choruses sung in Indigenous languages.

One of the most highly regarded pow wow groups in the world are 9-time Grammy nominated Northern Cree. Hailing from Alberta, they are the world's premier Pow-Wow and Round Dance singing group, with 40 albums recorded with Phoenix-based Canyon Records in a career spanning over 25 years.

Northern Cree formed back in 1982 when the Wood brothers, Steve, Randy and Earl, of Saddle Lake Alberta, traveled to Lapwai, Idaho to compete in a stick game tournament. Their first night there, they lost all of their money in the tournament and decided to sing at the Pow-Wow to fund their trip home. The following day they gathered together with their hand drums, though one of the brothers had to borrow a drum from a local museum. They sang many songs; ones that they had learned from their father and uncles. When the arena director asked for the name of their group, they looked at the faded words "Northern Cree" written on a drum and quickly made that their band name.

There was no question in the minds of those present - The Northern Cree Singers had a powerful sound. That sound began an incredible journey that would take them all across North America on The Pow-Wow trail, building a tremendous fan base for pow wow that had never been seen before.

Though the group originated from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation, it has expanded to 15 members over the years, and now includes members from Nations throughout the Treaty 6 area: Frog Lake Cree Nation, Onion Lake Cree Nation, Samson Cree Nation, Louis Bull Cree Nation and Poundmaker Cree Nation.

Since the group was founded, they have won hundreds of championship titles from every major Pow-Wow. In 2016, at the Gathering of Nations Pow-Wow in Albuquerque, New Mexico, they won the coveted 1st Place title in the Northern Style singing category. Their recordings have also won many prestigious awards, including multiple Native American Music Awards, Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards, Aboriginal Peoples' Music Choice Awards and Indian Summer Music Awards.

Outside of the Pow wow trail Northern Cree have performed at numerous music festivals, sharing the beauty and vitality of Indigenous culture with Native and non-Native audiences.

In 1998 they provided music for and appeared in the Hollywood movie *Grey Owl*, starring Pierce Brosnan and directed by Sir Richard Attenborough. And in 2013, they opened for the Tragically Hip in London's Trafalgar Square as part of Canada Day celebrations.

History occurred in February 2017 when Northern Cree performed onstage at the 59th annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. The world's biggest music stars were in the audience, including Beyoncé, Drake and Rihanna, just to name a few. The pop stars were mesmerised and visibly moved by Northern Cree as

they stood on a world stage with their hand drums, wearing beaded vests and vibrant coloured clothing, representing who they were as Indigenous people.

Steve Wood, the group's co-founder and longstanding group leader, tweeted of the experience, "When we hit those mainstream stages, the audience is in a little bit of awe until they can feel it. But when they feel it, it turns into a rock concert."

That year they took home a JUNO Award with fellow collaborators Tanya Tagaq and the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra for the ballet soundtrack *Going Home Star: Truth and Reconciliation*.

Northern Cree was again nominated for a Grammy in 2020, in the Best Regional Roots category, for their 40th album, *When It's Cold – Cree Round Dance Songs*. The album's themes cover good times and hardships, including an acknowledgment of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Although they didn't take home the Grammy, Steve remains positive that one of the longest running musical styles on the continent is being recognized today within a mainstream music industry event.

Northern Cree are role models within the First Nations community, consistently following Steve's Wood's motto: "If you believe in yourself, who you are, where you come from, your culture and more importantly your language, it will take you to places you have never even dreamed of."

I'm David McLeod, curator of Speak-Up! – Miigwetch, Thanks for listening, check out more of my curators comments.