

Harry Rusk was a respected Dene country artist who was born on July 5, 1937 on a trap line near Fort Nelson, British Columbia and grew up in the tiny hamlet of Kahntah – a Slavey community. Harry attended a one-room school in Fort Nelson and at the age of 12 contracted tuberculosis and was sent to The Charles Camsell Hospital in Edmonton where he battled TB between 1949 to 1953. On one faithful day, when there were 563 patients in the hospital, country star Hank Snow stopped by the hospital for a quick visit prior to a gig in Edmonton, “The Singing Ranger” as he was known met Harry on June 13, 1952; this chance encounter would greatly inspire Harry to sing and play guitar. Let’s take a listen to Harry Rusk with a song connected to his home territory, The Northern-Lights Waltz here at NMC’s Speak Up Exhibition.

That was Harry Rusk with The Northern-Lights Waltz, Harry’s mother Mary heard the story of her son meeting Hank Snow and sent him an old guitar she bought for him from selling moosehide moccasins she’d sewn together. Upon his return home from the hospital Harry studied Hank Snow’s music on an old gramophone. As a young man in Fort Nelson, Harry began hosting a country music radio show on CHFN called “Country Time With Harry Rusk”, and hosting dances with his “Harry Rusk Dance Band” between 1955 to 1963.

In 1965, Harry moved to Edmonton and performed on ITV television, on shows like “Lil Ole Opry” and “The Chuck Wagon Show”, which led to an invitation to perform in Toronto on CTV’s “Country Music Hall of Fame” and then in Halifax on CBC’s “Don Messer Show” and “Country Time”. In 1967 Harry entered Joe Kozak’s Studio in Edmonton, that led to several albums and radio hits with his original songs, that included this track “Rose of Mexico” by Harry Rusk.

That was “The Rose of Mexico” inspired by Harry’s daughter dancing as a child in a Mexican styled dress, in total Harry placed six songs on the RPM Country Charts between 1968 to 1973. That track being one of them, as well as “The Red Man and the Train” which appeared on the third of his 10 albums. He also released several 45 single records.

Harry remembered the exact day, it was June 13, 1972 at 1:30 pm when Hank Snow phoned him to be his guest in his Nashville home with an invitation to be on the Grand Opry stage during The Ernest Tubb Midnight Jamboree on June 30th. This would lead to Harry becoming the very first fully Indigenous musician to take the historic stage Nashville. Let’s take a listen to a song that was inspired when Harry met a couple holding hands on the shore of Lake Louise after he landed on the shore by canoe, he learned they were childhood sweethearts who hadn’t seen each other for decades. The white haired couple were still in love and became engaged. This inspired Harry Rusk to write this song “Leaving Snow Prints in the Snow”.

That was Harry Rusk with “Leaving Snow Prints in the Snow”. Harry went on to perform on the Grand Ole Opry stage dozens of times between 1972 to 1996. He also appeared on its radio Station WSM.

Throughout the 2000's Harry continued to perform with his wife, Gladys at schools and churches with an emphasis on gospel music. Harry took pride that he never drank and led by example, he also never recorded songs about drinking alcohol.

As a member of the Dene Nation, Harry is the recipient of many awards and honors that include a lifetime achievement award from the National Traditional Country Music Association, The Queen's 25th Anniversary Medal for Achievements in a Music Career and in 2004 he was honoured with a 'Legend of Canadian Country Music Award.

Harry Rusk journeyed to the next world on March 20, 2025, he was 87 years old. His contributions in the music world as a Dene artist broke barriers for others to follow, he will be long celebrated and recognized within the Speak Up! Exhibition at the National Music Centre.