

## War Party

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

Hip-hop is widely thought to have originated within impoverished Black neighborhoods in the United States, like the South Bronx section of New York City in the late 1970s.

It provided an outlet to be heard, to share realities and struggles. Today, hip-hop remains a vehicle for many people of colour to share experiences and to incite change. The genre has long been a place for political and social commentary; and this history propelled the establishment of a Native hip-hop scene that grew quickly during the late '80s to early '90s.

War Party are regarded as hip hop pioneers, who opened the public's mind and proved that Native hip hop existed and certainly had something important to say.

Founded in 1995, War Party hail from Hobbema, Alberta, now known as Maskwacis. Its founding members are Rex Smallboy and Ryan Small. Other members include Karmen Omeosoo, Bryan Omeosoo, Tom Crier and Cynthia Smallboy.

War Party grappled with issues they experienced on a daily basis: be it systemic oppression, cultural genocide, the generational effects of residential schools, substance abuse or youth suicide. They didn't shy away from any of it. They focused on positivity and hope during their live shows, and inherently knew what Indigenous youth needed to hear.

War Party started recording their brand of hip hop in 1999, with an independently-released debut CD entitled *The Reign*, released in late 2000. *The Reign* went on to win the 2001 Canadian Aboriginal Music Award for Best Rap or Hip-hop Album.

With that, War Party had arrived, and they soon made music history as the first Indigenous rap group to have a music video air nationally on Much Music. The video for "Feeling Reserved" offered Canadians a glimpse into the lives of Indigenous youth and their communities. In 2001 it received a Canadian Aboriginal Music Award for Best Music Video.

With a message in their music, War Party was front and centre on CBC, MSNBC, APTN and radio across the country. They pushed boundaries and the definition of hip hop itself, spitting rhymes that spoke for Indigenous youth, many of whom felt their voice had not been heard so clearly before.

War Party's energetic live performances brought them to stages at the World Expo in Nagoya, Japan and the First Peoples Festival at the Smithsonian museums in Washington, DC.

They released an independent EP titled *Exclusive Rez Cuts*, that won the 2002 Canadian Aboriginal Music Award for Best Rap or Hip-hop Album. Their second full-length independent release, *The Greatest Natives from the North*, went on to receive nominations for the 2003 Native American Music Awards and the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards. Their last album, *The Resistance*, was released in 2015.

They collaborated with rap icon Chuck D of Public Enemy on that album, and evoked strong emotions on soundtracks for dramatic films like *Dreamkeepers* and *Stryker*.

War Party released four albums in total, but more importantly, they inspired generations of Indigenous youth to believe in their voices and to acknowledge that their stories and their place within the community truly mattered.

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