

Willie Dunn

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

Whether as a singer, songwriter or filmmaker, Willie Dunn was and remains an unquestionable trailblazer. His topical music and folk style, and the spirit of his work, forged a reclamation of the Indigenous voice.

Willie's heritage was Mi'kmaq, Scottish and Irish. He was born in Montreal in 1941 into a large family that appreciated the arts. His parents, in particular, were early influencers: his father, William, was a poet and his mother, Stella Metallic, would often tune the family radio to the Metropolitan Opera. It wasn't a surprise that in later years Willie recorded T.S. Eliot's poetry or Shakespeare's sonnets with a hand drum and traditional singing.

Willie was about 15 years old when he received his first guitar and taught himself to play. He loved music so much he would sneak into Montreal cafés to watch country and blues acts, then go home and write songs himself.

Willie's world view expanded in his 20s when he served three-years in the army, receiving a United Nations medal for his service in the Congo.

When he returned to Montreal in the sixties, the folk explosion was taking place and his brand of music fit in perfectly with the times. He and his guitar began touring clubs across the United States including New York's Greenwich Village and the legendary Caffè Lena in Saratoga Springs, where the likes of Bob Dylan and Emmylou Harris played. In fact he has often been compared to his contemporaries; icons like Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen and Pete Seeger. Willie's name truly stands amongst the best.

But being an Indigenous performer sometimes presented challenges. One time in club in Kenora, Ontario, he was heckled off stage by some demeaning audience members who took issue with his lyrical content. He apparently shrugged it off; losing no faith in his music. And there is another story of Willie reportedly whispering into the Queen's ear during her visit to Canada in '71, saying, "We are not your children anymore." Demonstrations of strength and fortitude like these earned Willie the reputation of a Native Peoples ambassador.

Willie also made several powerful music-themed films, including his groundbreaking 1968 National Film Board short *The Ballad of Crowfoot*, about the 19th-century Blackfoot Chief. The film is an engrossing, multi-layered look at the tribulations of Indigenous peoples: stolen lands, the eradication of prairie buffalo, disease, religious conversion, and cultural appropriation, told through a montage of archival photos, newspaper headlines and etchings. Willie's song of the same name provided the soundtrack to the film, which is widely recognised as Canada's first music video, and Willie the first Indigenous film director at the NFB. *The Ballad of Crowfoot* went on to win seven international awards, including a Gold Hugo for best short film at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1969.

That same year, Willie helped establish the Native Council of Canada. He and Tony Belcourt, the founding president of the Métis Nation of Ontario, understood that without Indigenous voices being heard, Canada could not truly move forward as a country.

Between 1972 and 2004 Willie recorded six albums, including his self-titled album *Willie Dunn*, as well as *The Pacific*, *Metallic* and *Son of the Sun*. These led to decades of touring and performing at large venues internationally, in Italy, Switzerland and Germany. Some of his music was even recorded on a German label as they understood the importance of his voice.

Willie was inducted into the Aboriginal Walk of Honour in Edmonton. He also earned a lifetime achievement award at the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards.

Willie Dunn crossed over into the spirit world on August 5, 2013 in Ottawa after a battle with cancer. He was 71 years old. His legacy is incredible; a true artist who is so brilliant, he can't be ignored or ever forgotten.

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