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Forgotten Aboriginal Musicians Survived Residential Schools, Police Brutality To Make These Stunning Songs

Greg Gadsden The Huffington Post Canada



SUGLUK

When Willie Thrasher first hit concert stages in the Northwest Territories during the late 1960s, his band the Cordells played Kinks and the Rolling Stones covers. That is, until an old man at a winter dance gig suggested he produce original music based on his heritage.

"I'd never seen this guy before. He came there and sat down and said, 'Why don't you write Inuit folk music about your culture, about your ways,'" Thrasher explains over the line from his current home in Nanaimo, B.C. where he works as a city-sanctioned busker. "I didn't know much about our culture at the time because the residential schools were meant to take all that away from us."

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wouldn't get to see his family for 10 months of the year, and was left alienated from his ancestry while undertaking white-washed schooling in Aklavik, Inuvik, and Yellowknife.

"My life was very confusing there," Thrasher says of the experience. "It brought a lot of loneliness, but music kept me going. Very rarely I'd hear drumming and dancing of our culture because the residential school told the missionaries to take the Indian and Inuit out of the child. You've got to burn it out of us."



Willie Thrasher

After first picking up the drums, a Ringo Starr-inspired skill honed at the Grollier Hall residential school in Inuvik, Thrasher put his focus on learning guitar and learning about his background. The latter, he says, was partly done by watching old National Film Board



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while playing the folk circuit.

After making an impression as a solo artist in Ottawa, he was contacted by the CBC in the late '70s about cutting a record. The result, "Spirit Child," brings together autumn crisp acoustic guitar, psychedelic string bends and Thrasher's tender, transformative tenor. "It's about the journey of my life," Thrasher explains, "picking up stories and legends I'd learned from my people and putting it to music."

His journey, and those of his musical peers, may have been lost to history had it not been for the "Native North America: Aboriginal Folk, Rock, and Country, 1966-1984" compilation. Assembled by archive-scouring record label Light in the Attic -- which rose to fame rediscovering Rodriguez, the forgotten 60s singer who was later the subject of Oscar-winning doc ["Searching for Sugar Man"](#) -- features "criminally undocumented but utterly revolutionary" music made by indigenous artists spread across Canada and the Northern United States.

Feature continues after slideshow



The Stars of "Native North America"

Curated by Vancouver music historian and DJ Kevin "Sipreano" Howes, the 34-song set ranges from the spry and jangling garage rock of Salluit, Que.'s Sugluk and Lloyd



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delicately finger-picked "I Pity The Country," in which he addresses the oppression of native peoples at the hands of police, the media, and "bumbling" governments in a captivating, condemning baritone.

Dunn, who passed away last year, released several solo LPs and directed the 1968 National Film Board short "The Ballad of Crowfoot," naming it after his protest song and using vintage footage to tackle colonialism. His career was instrumental in Howes' decision to put together the compilation.

The Ballad of Crowfoot



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[The Ballad of Crowfoot](#) par [Willie Dunn](#), [Office national du film du Canada](#)

With many of the recordings buried for decades, listeners and modern-day musicians alike are just now discovering their power. Along with the rest of his electronic trio A Tribe Called Red, Bear Witness has been bringing First Nations issues to the public with their self-described Electric Pow Wow music, most recently with the synth-wobbling, Thanksgiving-timed anti-colonial piece "[Burn Your Village to the Ground.](#)"

The beatmaker says that looking back at the aboriginal folk scene of the '60s and '70s reveals that while progress and awareness has been made over the last few decades, the themes of the past remain relevant today.

Forgotten Aboriginal Musicians Survived Residential Schools, Police Br...

old because they haven't been heard. It's really helpful, especially when you're in that position, to hear that there has been this history of other artists trying to say the same thing. As frustrating as that might feel, it's also a really good to know that you're continuing something."

Another fascinating story behind "Native North America" is that of Willy Mitchell, a musician of Algonquin and Mohawk descent whose career was nearly ended before he even set on foot onstage following a police shooting the night before his first gig.

Taking an interest in rock 'n' roll as a teenager, he started up the band Northern Lights at the Kitigan-Zibi reserve in Quebec. In 1969, while putting up posters in nearby Maniwaki for their debut performance, Mitchell ran into some friends on the street, one of whom offered some Christmas lights he could use as stage decor.

But just as Mitchell learned that the lights were stolen, a police car turned the corner. While his friends escaped, the 15-year-old was ordered to halt. He dropped the lights and fled for a nearby snow bank. The policeman fired off a few rounds.



Willy Mitchell and Desert River Band



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hole, and saw the warm blood splashing. I put my finger in there to stop it. I could feel my teeth. I got up and he was standing there with the gun; it was almost like he was going to finish me off. "

Mitchell was eventually taken to hospital, later settling in court for \$3,000 over the near-fatal shooting. The three-week stay in the hospital didn't deter his musical aspirations, but rather pushed the artist to go ahead and hone his poetry and songwriting skills. What was left of the settlement money after legal fees was spent on a white Fender Telecaster.

Mitchell's traumatic incident partially inspired "Call of the Moose," one of three songs recorded at 1980's Sweet Grass Festival in Val d'Or that he helped organized. The rustling acoustic cut alludes to the crack of the police gun that cut him down, while also incorporating visuals of Ojibway chants, Cree dances, howling wolves and the call of the moose "as she lays down to die."

"'Kill'n Your Mind' is a song about my own people who were laughing at their own culture and even elders who weren't involved or who weren't taught any traditional spirituality," says Mitchell of one his other included cuts. "So when they would see someone from the elder group burning sweet grass or smudging, they'd say things like 'hey, your steak is burning'. We were trying to educate people at the time, starting with Val d'Or, because there was a lot racism. Still is."

Feature continues after video



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While the acts featured on "Native North America" performed across the continent in relative obscurity throughout the '60s and '70s, one aboriginal singer of the era managed to break onto the global stage, folk icon Buffy Sainte-Marie.

But as far as interacting with other indigenous artists during that era, Sainte-Marie said in an e-mail that there was, sadly, "hardly anybody in those days to connect with. It was pretty lonely out there in show biz."

She describes the era's "Indian music" as being much like "black music before the record business discovered it: lots of talented singers, players, songwriters, audiences, styles, both traditional and everything else, but invisible to most mainstream listeners."

Throughout her vast and varied career, she's addressed genocide and racism with "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying," delivered anthemic pow wow rock hit "Skywalker," and remains politically active offstage in movements like Idle No More, making her an inspirational figure to generations of musicians.

"I think my success with such a wide variety of music has tended to broaden our scene beyond just one genre and, I'm told, to inspire First Nations people I've never even met to do their own thing, both within and beyond their own communities. It's an incredible thrill to be told by another artist that my contribution has somehow impacted their own lives."

The impact of "Native North America," meanwhile, is already being felt. Since its release, the album has received international acclaim, including in [onetime '60s rock bible Rolling Stone](#). A second volume of the series exploring indigenous artists further south in the U.S. is already in the works and Howes has plans to deliver a grander exploration of Dunn's back catalogue.

"They're as relevant today as when they were recorded," Howes says. "Songs that sing about the destruction of our environment, the corporate bottom line dominance, political conservative landscapes, greed...these are some of the things, amongst a lot of others, that are being discussed in these songs. We need these songs as much today."



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North America" artists are continuing their musical journeys, Thrasher is happy that the spirit of those early days be heard by a new generation.

"We were young. We just wanted to travel everywhere to pass on our message, our culture and our ways by radio and TV, right across Canada or wherever we can. The message is still very strong."



Music From Native North America

Gregory Adams The Huffington Post Canada

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