

First Nations Music in Canada

The First Nations people have been living in what we now call Canada for many thousands of years. First Nations language and culture vary from nation to nation. Although there is great diversity among First Nations people, music acts as a unifying force. Singing, dancing, and praying are common to all First Nations peoples. Let me tell you of this in a story about First Nations music.



Early explorers and missionaries wrote the early history of Canada when they came to our country. Unfortunately, they wrote very few descriptions of First Nations musical life. The information we have about the history and variety of First Nations

musical instruments comes to us from instruments preserved in museums and private collections. The number of instruments is small, consisting of

membranophones (which just means drums!) and *idiophones* (which are noisemakers such as rattles, rasps, and clappers).

Many of us have played with a membranophone, or drum.

It may have come from a toy store, or we may have made one from a pot, pan or cardboard box. In this case,

our creation would be both a membranophone and an idiophone! Idiophones are instruments made on the spur of the moment out of materials that are easily available. Some of us have made other creative idiophones. An example is creating a "mouth organ" by placing a sheet of thin paper over a clean comb and blowing on the paper to produce distinctive sounds. Finding objects that produce a musical note is fun. We soon learn that holding a piece of grass taut between our thumbs and blowing hard produces a funny sound. Blowing across the top of a bottle creates foghorn sounds. Moistening the edge of a crystal glass then running your finger around it will produce a ringing musical note.

and so will strumming or plucking an egg slicer. Several kids together could create a unique kitchen symphony! Can you think of other idiophones?

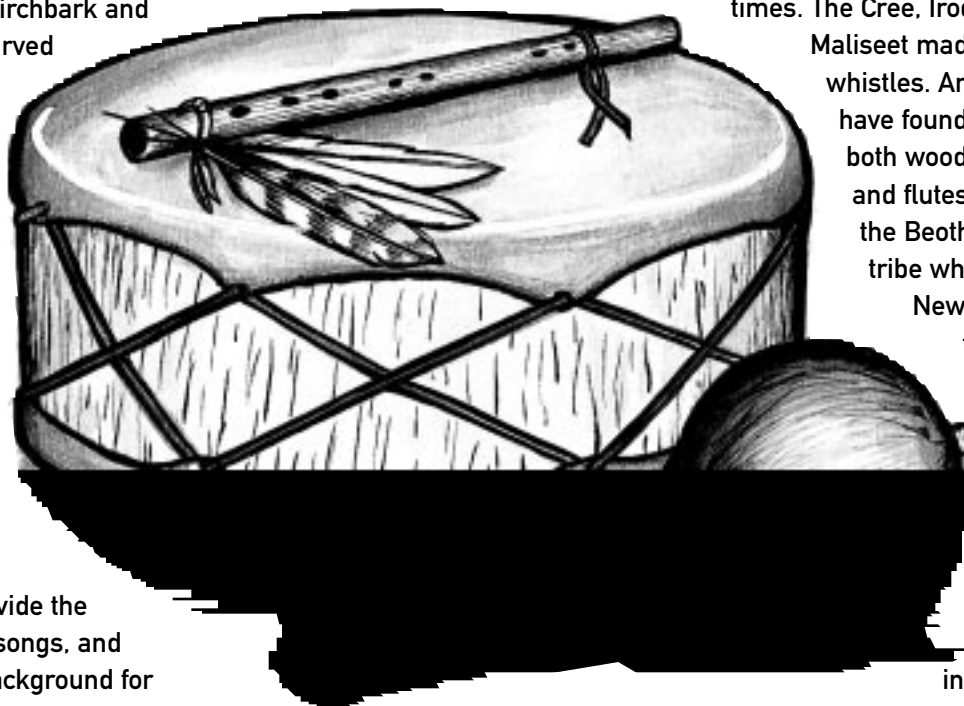
Traditionally, First Nations people, being resourceful and creative, used the materials at hand to make their instruments. They made gourds and animal horns into rattles; many rattles were elaborately carved and beautifully painted. In woodland areas, they made horns of birchbark and drumsticks of carved antlers and wood. Drums were made of carved wood and animal hides.

Drums and rattles are percussion instruments traditionally used by First Nations people. These musical instruments provide the background for songs, and songs are the background for dances. Many traditional First Nations people consider song and dance to be sacred. For many years after Europeans came to Canada, First Nations people were forbidden to practise their ceremonies. That is one reason why little information about First Nations music and musical instruments is available to us.

Today, a revival of pride in First Nations art and music is taking place. First Nations people are recovering the knowledge, history

and beauty of traditional First Nations art, music and musical instruments.

Drums are closely associated with First Nations people. Some people say, "Drumming is the heartbeat of Mother Earth." First Nations made a great variety of drums. Healers sometimes use miniature drums. There are also tambourine-shaped hand drums, war drums, water drums, and very



large ceremonial drums. Their size and shape depends on the First Nation's particular culture and what the drummer wants to do with them. Many are beautifully decorated.

In many First Nations cultures, the circle is important. It is the shape of the sun and moon, and of the path they trace across the sky. Many First Nations objects, such as tipis and wigwams, are circular in shape. Traditional villages were

often arranged with the dwellings placed in a circle. To this day, many First Nations people hold meetings sitting in a circle. Meetings often begin with a prayer, with the people standing in a circle holding hands.

Hand-carved wooden flutes and whistles are less common than drums, but are also a part of First Nations traditional music. Ojibwe men played flutes to serenade girlfriends and to soothe themselves and others during hard times. The Cree, Iroquois and

Maliseet made and used whistles. Archaeologists have found evidence that both wooden whistles and flutes were used by the Beothuk, an extinct tribe who lived in Newfoundland until the early days of European settlement. The human voice, however, is the primary instrument of all First Nations. As it is in

most ancient cultures, singing is the heart of First Nations music.

Every song had an original owner. Songs belonged to a society, clan, rite, ceremony or individual. In some cultures, one could buy the right to sing a song owned by an individual. The original owner would then teach the buyer to sing the song. Many traditional songs are still sung by First Nations people who follow traditional ways.

Activity #1: Quiz

Please fill in the blanks.

Membranophones are _____

Idiophones are _____

Three kinds of First Nations membranophones are _____

Two examples of First Nations idiophones are _____

The primary First Nations musical instrument is _____

Activity #2:

Variation of an Ancient First Nations Game

"Hi, I'm Duma. That is a Mi'kmaq name. I am going to teach you my variation of an ancient First Nations game called "Paquessen." The Algonquin First Nation people of north-east Quebec originally played this game. People of all ages like this game and any number of people can play."



You will need:

- 9 flat white buttons
- Red nail polish
- 1 large wooden bowl
- A blanket
- Counters (the number may vary)

(Counters are tokens to keep score. You can make them by cutting pieces of cardboard into two-by-two-inch squares, or you can use bottle caps).

- Paint one side of each button with red nail polish
- Choose a scorekeeper.
- To start the game, each player in turn places the nine buttons in the bowl and says which colour, red or white, he or she chooses.
- The player holds the bowl and suddenly throws the buttons in the air, letting them fall on the blanket.
- The player counts the buttons by colour.
- The scorekeeper keeps score by writing each player's count on a piece of paper.
- The player with the highest score wins the round.
- All the other players pay the winner of the round with one counter each.
- The winner of each round sings a short song while the others listen.
- Play the game for as many rounds as you want or until one player has more counters than any other player.
- At the end of the game, the final winner of the game (the person with the greatest number of counters) tells a short story while the others listen.

"I enjoyed sharing this First Nations game with you. Have fun with it! Bye"

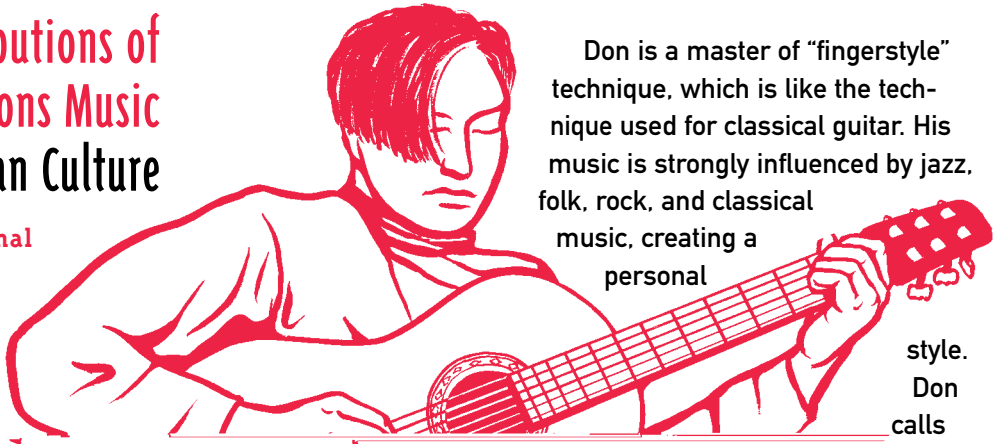
Contributions of First Nations Music to Canadian Culture

Profiles of Selected Aboriginal Musicians

First Nations singer and storyteller Jerry Alfred helps to preserve First Nations language and traditions. Jerry is the Northern Tutchone (too-SHOW-nee) "Keeper of the Songs." He lives in Pelly Crossing, a village in central Yukon, 300 kilometres north of Whitehorse. He was born in the nearby community of Mayo.

Jerry managed to keep his Tutchone language despite many years spent in a residential school. Like his father before him, Jerry was named a Song Keeper at birth. A Song Keeper collects songs and sings them at potlatches and other First Nations ceremonial occasions. A self-taught guitarist, Jerry combines modern guitar techniques and the traditional music of his people. His 1994 recording, "Etsi Shon" (EET-see-shown) or "Grandfather Song" helps to keep his language and the spirit of his people alive.

Don Ross, guitarist and composer, is the son of a Mi'kmaq mother and a Scottish immigrant father. He is a band member of the Mi'kmaq community at Millbrook, Nova Scotia. Don was born and raised in Montreal and speaks both French and English. He earned an honours degree in fine arts (music) at York University in Toronto. He is one of the most respected musicians in Canada and is known as one of the top guitarists in the world. In September 1996, Don won the prestigious U.S. National Fingerstyle Championship for the second time and is the only guitarist to have done so. In 1988, Don was the first Canadian, and first Aboriginal person, to win this prize.



Don is a master of "fingerstyle" technique, which is like the technique used for classical guitar. His music is strongly influenced by jazz, folk, rock, and classical music, creating a personal

style. Don calls his style

"heavy wood!"

Buffy Sainte-

Marie was born into

the Cree community of Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan.

She received a PhD in Fine Arts from the University of Massachusetts. She is a


songwriter, performer

and artist who has written huge hit songs that

were performed by other famous artists including Elvis Presley, Barbra Streisand, and Neil Diamond. Her song, "Up Where We Belong" won an Academy Award.

Buffy has earned many other awards, including the United States award for Lifetime Musical Achievement in the Arts. She has also received a medal of recognition from Queen Elizabeth II. France named her "Best International Artist of 1993." Buffy continues to draw large crowds to her performances. In Denmark, 100,000 people attended a concert! But she has never forgotten her beginnings and her people, and she regularly performs in the smallest First Nations communities. Nor does she forget other musicians. In 1993, she helped to create a special award category within the Juno Awards competition to recognize the best recordings of Canadian Aboriginal musicians.

Buffy received a Lifetime Achievement Award in Arts at the 1998 National Aboriginal Achievement Awards.

These and other First Nations artists serve as role models for all Canadians, not only First Nations. 

First Nations music and song help to define Canada as a distinctive country. First Nations music and song are often part of major international events.

This information is also available on the Internet at: <http://www.inac.gc.ca>.