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Seeing the past and future through Canadian music

By Nate Smelle

Recognizing the current state most of the world finds itself in these days, one cannot help but think fondly of Canada.

However, when posed recently with the question of what Canada means to me, I soon found myself staring at a blank sheet of paper for the next four hours. From where did this writers block arise, I asked myself. Certainly, my love for this country runs deeper than my cynical impression of Justin Trudeau, Stephen Harper and every other mendacious minister to leave their mark on this country's highest office.

Snow-blind from gazing at the white sheets on my desk, I got up and went over to the window to see if there was anything outside that might inspire a little much needed patriotism. To my dismay there was nothing but a lonely maple tree and a wind-torn flag straggling in the breeze. Mixing up a glass of Canadian Rye from Forty Creek with an equal portion of maple syrup I had made the year before, the scent ignited a tiny spark encouraging me to put on some music.

Dropping the needle on Neil Young's Harvest album, I sipped slowly and listened. Before I knew it, there I was, sitting by the fire pit at my grandparents' cottage, staring up at the stars and hearing Old Man for the first time.

Man, if I only had a loonie for every time this album made things better, I laughed to myself.

Suddenly I remembered driving across the country for the first time, listening to the same ten songs over and over again as I crossed from one province into the next. I can recall thinking at the time how perfectly his music fit with the local landscape and culture no matter where I was. Popping into my head was the image etched in my brain of an elk ? the first elk I had ever crossed paths with at that point in time ? crossing the highway in Jasper in front of a double rainbow to the words ?When I look through the windows, and out on the road, they're bringing me presents and saying hello.?

Getting up to pour another glass of maple flavoured memory enhancer, I flipped the album over to side one.

?Think I'll pack it in and buy a pick-up, take it down to L.A. Find a place to call my own and try to fix up. Start a brand-new day.?

The last time I could remember these words resonating so powerfully with me was back in 2006 on the first night I moved into my place in L'Amable. It was at that precise moment that I first fell in love with this place and began to call it home.

Sitting in the same chair, listening to the same songs, I thought about how different my life, Canada and the world had become.

Thinking about these changes when the needle raised itself from the vinyl, I walked over to the record player and put on Gord Downie's Secret Path album. Since experiencing him perform the piece in its entirety at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto last fall, it has become a staple in my catalogue of go-to albums. Like Neil Young's Harvest, it is one of those rare pieces of music that seems to fit perfectly in every time and space.

The music, the art, the message this album puts out are tragically timeless, but in my opinion necessary for all Canadians to absorb if Canada is to move forward on the path of truth and reconciliation. Downie's lyrics and music accompanied by the graphic art of Jeff Lemire, paint a vivid picture of the story of Chanie Wenjack, a young boy who froze to death while trying to escape from the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School and return to his home in Ogoki Post on the Marten Falls Reserve. Watching the audience react to the hard truths bombarding them from the stage that night and feeling them hit home within myself, I could feel the winds of change blowing through the concert hall.

Employing his power as an artist and a celebrity, Downie added more than a few pages to Canadian history books that night.

Because of this bold dive into the realm of activism, no longer could this horrific chapter in our country's past go unnoticed.

This is what it means to ?stand on guard for thee.?

Last week, I had the opportunity to participate in a forum with Mississauga's longest serving mayor, ?Hurricane? Hazel McCallion. Dropping one gold nugget of wisdom after another during her keynote address, there was one gem that really stood out. For me, her words exemplified the message between the lines in all of Neil and Gord's artful activism. Sharing a few words on what she believes it means to be a Canadian, she spoke of the merits of volunteerism and community activism; and how throughout our history they have defined Canada. Before leaving the podium, McCallion proved her point by letting the audience know that the future of Canada and the world is in their hands.

?It's up to you ? each and every one of you to make a difference,? she said with a grin.

?Don't fear the future, don't fear your future, don't fear the future of our country. Do something about it and shape it, shape your life, shape your community and shape your country.?