

Remembering a Man Who Walks Among the Stars

By Nate Smelle

When I first heard the news that Gord Downie had succumbed to his illness it felt as if I had lost a close friend. Having never held a conversation or even shaken hands with him, I could not comprehend why such a feeling of profound sadness had washed over me. It wasn't until after I took a deep dive into Downie and The Tragically Hip's music catalogue over the next couple of days that it occurred to me why the news of his passing seemed to hit so hard.

Listening my way through my music collection, I noticed how every mix tape I had carefully composed to enhance a road trip featured a heavy helping of The Hip. When cassette players were replaced by CDs, tracks from Phantom Power and Downie's Coke Machine Glow album began slipping into the mix. I remembered sitting around bonfires with friends, and how Gord's voice would be there in the background setting the tone for the evening. I remembered how the stories he was singing would often provoke conversation; and how quickly sing-alongs would spontaneously ignite anytime someone began strumming a Hip song while around those fires. The more I thought about it, the more obvious the reason for this sadness became. In one way or another, Downie and his bandmates had been travelling alongside me, providing the soundtrack for many of my most memorable life experiences since the early '90s.

Whether singing about Fiddler's Green, Three Pistols or Blackflies, Downie's lyrics always painted a hauntingly accurate portrait of our country's history and the Canadian dream. Like the best philosopher-singer-songwriters, his words compel those who hear them to ask questions. How many of us would have taken the time to learn the stories of Bashin' Bill Barilko, Gus the Polar Bear, Tom Thomson, David Milgaard or Chanie Wenjack if it weren't for Downie? While his music and captivating presence on stage are reason enough alone for Downie's memory to endure, it is the legacy of compassion he left behind in his last creation ? Secret Path ? that has left the biggest mark.

Downie's Secret Path album, graphic novel and film tell the tragic story of Chanie Wenjack ? a 12-year-old boy who froze to death, while trying to escape the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School and return home to his family in Ogoki Post on the Marten Falls First Nation. From the early 1880s until 1996, some 150,000 Indigenous children across the country were taken from their families by the federal government and shipped off to residential schools. Chanie was one of more than 20,000 children reported to have died at the hands of the residential school system. Using the full power of his voice, Downie shone a light on this dark chapter in Canadian history.

In December 2016, Downie was honoured for his work with Indigenous communities in a ceremony held at the Assembly of First Nations winter gathering. During this ceremony, elders bestowed him with the name Wicapi Omani, which is Lakota for Man Who Walks Among the Stars. Moved to tears by the honour, Downie expressed his gratitude and explained how he would be celebrating Canada 150.

?In a few days, a couple weeks, there's 150 years that Canada wants to celebrate. I will personally then celebrate the birth of our country, celebrate the next 150 years. It will take 150 years, or seven generations, to heal the wound of the residential school. To become a country and truly call ourselves Canada, it means we must become one. We must walk down a path of reconciliation from now on, together and forever. This is the first day of forever, the greatest day of my life, the greatest day of all our lives.?

Through his art, activism, love of life, family and community, Downie embodied this spirit of togetherness. Travelling north to the Marten Falls First Nation while creating Secret Path, he carried this spirit with him. While there an intimate bond with the Wenjack family and the people of the community was formed. These relationships have since spawned another act of reconciliation ? the Downie/Wenjack Fund. Dedicated to cross-cultural education which supports healing and recovery, the mission of the DWF is to promote, fund, and inspire grassroots, community-based ?ReconciliACTIONS? across Canada. The organization is also working to fill gaps in the current education system by providing educators with teaching resources focused on Indigenous history and culture. A variety of lesson plans for students of all ages can be downloaded for free at www.downiewenjack.ca.

By educating youth about the history of colonialization in Canada, the residential school system and the story of Chanie Wenjack, the DWF is ensuring that the legacies of Chanie and Gord will continue to nurture positive and compassionate change for generations to come. Only with the opportunity to face these hard truths, can the next generation continue moving forward along the path of reconciliation. Seeing the end in sight, Downie put every ounce of energy he had left into planting the seeds of reconciliation. The best and only real way to honour his legacy is to make sure these seeds continue to grow.