

Sage, Dreamer, Musician, Poet, Legend

In a career extended for more than 35 years, Don Freed has become Canada's "everyman" songwriter and traveling bard. Continually searching the quiet corners of the country looking for a tune or a word or for a good story he has animated the people he has encountered into creating their own music. Far past the reaches of pop culture, in places where people live close to the earth, in communities where language itself is defined by nature, Don has become a student learning the words of every small village and a teacher showing children how to take those words and turn them into songs about their place in the sun.

As a storyteller and musical wizard, Don Freed often pays tribute to his early musical heroes. The lives of bandits, vagrants, immigrants, villains, farmers, hoboes, railroaders, heroes, workers, pioneers and warriors come alive in his telling of the tales. Visions of Woody Guthrie, Marty Robbins, Wade Hemsworth, Sons of The Pioneers, Wilf Carter, Dave Van Ronk, Leadbelly come all come whizzing through his songs. When you hear a song by Don Freed, you know you are hearing a real song.

Freed is a special person. A songwriter's songwriter much respected by his peers, a standard bearer for everybody that has a story, a conduit between the humdrum and the magical.

Embellishing every song is a clever turn of phrase, an addictive worldview that only Don Freed's dashing wit can contemplate. There is barely a melody untouched in his arsenal, his voice a servant to the fire within. His deceptive vocal range can rouse an audience of all ages to sing along, reuniting with a voice that echoes their own. He is a documenter of cultures vast and sometimes hidden. Don revels as the counter-hero in the present day world of corporate sorcerers and evangelists. Perfectly poised on the edge of the cliff with his weathered guitar, the lucky are treated to the songs of Don Freed the poet.

More Information

Don Freed was born in New Westminster, BC, 1949, and raised in Saskatoon. He began writing at age seven and performing original songs in coffeehouses in 1966.

Don was given a part in the film "Johnny Cash: The Man, His World and His Music" in 1968 in Nashville for which he received a glowing review in the New York Times (Jan 24, 1970). He lived in New York between 1970 and 1972 and did an album (never released) at Electric Lady Land Studios for Capitol Records. During this period Don was signed to a personal management and recording contract with a New York firm who, at the time, also managed Van Morrison.

He returned to Canada and, for 30 years, performed in clubs and festivals, living in different cities throughout North America.

In 1993 Don, a Métis with family roots in the Red River Settlement, began conducting song-writing workshops with Native elementary school children in Northern Saskatchewan. "It seemed that any time you heard about Northern youth there was always tragedy attached to the stories," he says, "so, I've got them to express themselves and their cultures and brought out a positive story." That "positive story" was seen by the entire country when a C.B.C. documentary was produced on his work with First Nation's youth. It was aired on C.B.C. Newsworld, September 10, 2001, and was the subject of a lengthy feature article by Larry LeBlanc in Billboard Magazine, August 12, 2000, p.1.

Don has been a Writer In Residence in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan from 1994 to 1996, and he has produced six projects of songs written with elementary students:

2001 “Our Very own Songs,” Northern Saskatchewan communities. Double CD and website www.ourveryownsongs.ca. Nominee Best Children’s Recording, Prairie Music Awards

2000 “Mystery Boyz,” with inmates of a young offenders’ facility, North Battleford, SK

1999 “Borderlands,” Southern Saskatchewan communities

1998 “Inner City Harmony: A Class Act,” Saskatoon, SK

1996 “Singing About The Métis,” Prince Albert, SK

1993 “Young Northern Voices,” Northern Saskatchewan communities

Don Freed has performed at all of Canada’s major folk music festivals and has been featured on many radio and television programs. He has toured with such diverse performers as Lightnin’ Hopkins and Jane Siberry, was the first to hire Colin James as a recording side man, and co-wrote “Crazy Cries of Love” with Joni Mitchell on her “Taming the Tiger” CD.

Highlights

- 1999 - The Gabriel Dumont Institute in Saskatoon produced an illustrated children’s book written by Don and students from Cumberland House, SK, entitled “Sasquatch Exterminator.” A CD of the same name accompanies the book. Both the book and CD are being widely used for Aboriginal language development and retention with adult and children learners.
- 1999 - Saskatchewan Social Services contracted Don to work with young offenders for one month on site at the North Battleford Youth Centre. “Mystery Boyz” features ten songs written by incarcerated youth during that project.
- 1999 - Don produced a show for the Northern Saskatchewan International Children’s Festival that featured the young singers from two of Saskatoon’s Community Schools, Cumberland House, SK, and St. Louis, SK.
- 1998 - Don initiated the Inner City Harmony Project, a series of song-writing workshops with nine Saskatoon Community Schools resulting in the recording “A Class Act”.
- 1997 - Don produced the “Métis Historical and Cultural Pageant” in St. Louis, SK, with Grade 1 – 12 from St. Louis School. During the month spent there (January), teachers in this small Saskatchewan town made a decision to cancel hockey to facilitate rehearsals (and no one complained)!
- 1996 - “Singing About the Métis” was produced on cassette and CD. The songs of Métis history and culture were written with Prince Albert, SK, elementary students with whom Don worked during his residency.
- 1994 to 1996 – Don was Writer-in-Residence in Prince Albert, SK, for 18 months. During this time, Don initiated the production of St. Michael School’s student musical, “The West Flat Can” where students looked at various social problems arising from growing up in the West Flat.

- 1993 - Freed recorded “Young Northern Voices,” songs written in workshops with children in the Northern Lights School Division, SK. These songs were performed at the 1993 World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education in Woolongong, Australia.
- 1990 - The lyric to Dons’ song, “Mr. Ford and the Petty Thieves” was included in the ACCELERATE Destinations, Prentice-Hall High School curriculum.

All of the albums recorded with children have been produced by Don and have proven to significantly increase self-esteem in children who have few opportunities to participate in the arts.

The year 2001 saw Don culminate eight years of conducting song writing workshops by producing “Our Very Own Songs,” a double CD of original songs representing the youth of 28 communities in northern Saskatchewan. A website and songbook were also part of this project (www.ourveryownsongs.ca). Don reports with delight that children not yet born when many of these songs were written can now sing them by heart. Over a vast area the songs have been absorbed by a new generation.

In February, 2003, Don was contracted by the Edmonton Folk Music Festival to conduct two weeks of song writing workshops in an Edmonton, inner city Community School.

In the summer of 2003 Don was invited to perform at the Regina, Edmonton and Winnipeg Folk Festivals. Legendary songwriter Tom Paxton had high praise for Don’s work with children as he asked him back stage specific questions on how he goes about his work.

The fall of 2003 found Don in Deline, Tulita, and Yellowknife, NWT, conducting workshops on behalf of the NWT Literacy Council. The Council is now planning to have Don take on a bigger, more comprehensive project related to creating songs with Aboriginal students. As well, Don is also working on a musical comedy about a true incident in the Red River settlement in 1836. Historically known as the ‘James Dickson Filibuster,’ the play “Song of Secundo” is being developed in the comedia del arte style with award winning Aboriginal playwright Ian Ross and well-known Manitoba actor/director Chris Sigurdson.

In October 2004, Don completed a two week tour of Yukon communities as part of Culture Quest, New Music by First Nations Artists also featuring rap group Slangblossom and Dene roots performer Leela Gilday.

Don participated in a concert celebrating Metis culture recorded by the CBC in Winnipeg and broadcast nationally on Nov. 12, 2004.

Don was a featured performer at 2005 Festival Du Voyageur, Winnipeg, MB, and has just completed recording his first ‘CD’, ‘The Valley of Green and Blue – A Metis Saga’ to be released Sept. 2005. Included in this CD will be the song When This Valley, considered by many to be the Metis National Anthem. It will be recorded by a live Metis choir in the church at the National Historical Site at Batoche on June 21, 2005. A documentary of this live event is also in the works.