

“Music is a powerful vehicle for sustainable social change. The Songs of Justice can help us to better understand the truths of colonialism and how to thoughtfully move closer to reconciliation in a good way.” – Dr. Karen Benzies, Faculty of Nursing

# Removing the Blindfold:

Songs of Justice Presentation at University of Calgary

By Sara Apostoaei | Photography by Adrian Shellard

The Songs of Justice Project was featured in a live performance at the Boris Roubakine Recital Hall at the University of Calgary on March 27, 2023. Craig Ginn, musician and scholar, reflected on the legacy of Canadian colonialism and the figure of Louis Riel through select songs and videos from his album “Songs of Justice” released in August 2021.

The hour-and-a-half performance set the audience on a gradual trajectory of transformational learning, beginning with a reasoned confrontation of colonial history and ending with an invitation to reconciliation and healing. The musical journey of the evening, “set two worlds on course to collide,” cast the conquest of Colonial Man against the culture of Indigenous Peoples. The collision, effectively represented by the musical pieces *Let Justice Roll*, *Hercules*, and *I Cannot Escape*, depicted the resiliency of Indigenous peoples alongside the innumerable tragedies

they experienced.

The room ambiance reflected the general sentiment of the evening – the soft lighting invited audience members into thoughtful reflection, foreshadowing the sense of seriousness and lament. The evening began with a warm greeting and land acknowledgment from Dr. Marica Cassis, Head of the Classics and Religion Department, followed by a blessing given by Métis Elder Doreen Bergum. Her guiding words of prayer drew attention to Indigenous emblems of care and gratitude encouraging the audience mem-

“Every Canadian should experience these songs. They are an incredible artistic experience and will provide an ongoing resource for educators and learners to further explore the deeper meanings, realities and impacts of colonialism.”

– Dr. Natasha Kenny, Senior Director, Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning

Craig Ginn

bers to turn their hearts toward the Creator and the peoples of the world around them. On behalf of the Faculty of Arts, Steig Johnson, Associate Dean of Research and Infrastructure offered greetings and emphasized the Faculty’s support for Craig’s research and work. Peter McPherson, President of Métis Local 87, also brought greetings and thanked the audience for attending the presentation, sharing that he had been personally impacted by the project.

The presentation began as Craig approached the stage giving thanks to his collaborators and colleagues that made the gathering possible. His introduction of the project’s commissioned artwork, created by Blackfoot artist Kalum Teke Dan, showcased a painting of Lady Justice without a blindfold, which became a prophetic image for the night. Craig referenced Métis lawyer Jean Teillet who has critiqued Canada’s legal system for its wilful blindness to the lived experiences of Indigenous people. The audience ap-

peared teachable and contemplative, interested to learn, and willing to discard personal blindfolds that mask colonialism.

The first song performance, *Lead My People*, introduced a portrait of Louis Riel underscored with his declaration that the spirit of the Métis people would be awakened through the message of artists. The song effectively interpreted Riel’s inner journey to accept the mandate to lead the Métis people back to their homeland, situating Riel as a leader in the making as he came to embrace the Métis as “my people.” Riel, of Indigenous and European ancestry, modeled the coming together of two worlds without forcing assimilation.

The songs about Riel’s life and experiences drew heavily from Riel’s poetry and effectively cosplayed Riel’s rhetoric and thoughtful contemplations. The track’s electric guitar solo, recorded by Calgary session musician Jonathan Lagore, was set against images of Louis Riel, along with controversial news-

paper headlines defaming his name. This instrumental section in the musical arrangement created a space for the audience to wrestle with the narrative that has demonized Riel.

Signature song of the project “*Let Justice Roll*” followed next. The song was inspired by an archived CBC panel from 2019 featuring two professors and an Indigenous activist who discussed the legacy of Sir John A. Macdonald. The lyrics offer a critique of “colonial man” with reference to Macdonald who has been uncritically celebrated as a political hero. The music video depicted images of Canada’s first Prime Minister, venerated through statues, monuments, paintings, and schools that bore his name. With government promises to recognize the harm of assimilationist policies, celebrated images of Macdonald appeared as sanitized depictions incongruent with reconciliation. The performance drew attention to the dissonance between Macdonald’s political achievements and his unjust actions that stripped Indigenous peoples of their culture, and dignity, framing Macdonald as the architect of residential schools.

The presentation shifted to a conversation between Craig and grad student Monique Riel, who served as a researcher and video creator for the Songs of Justice Project, funded in part by the Rupertsland Institute. Craig thanked Monique for her critical contributions to the project. She described the commitment to using ethically sourced images, expressing gratitude to numerous contributors. These included anthropologist Dr. William Koolage, musicologist and anthropologist Dr. Georgina Melies, Library and Archives Canada, The National Film Board, and multiple members of Métis Nation of Alberta Region Three, to name a few. The music videos and the images effectively depicted the humanity and resiliency of Indigenous peoples.

The next song, *Hercules*, recounted one of the worst atrocities in Canadian history, exposing the forced relocation of the Dene people in 1956 by the Federal government.

This tragedy was devastating, decimating Manitoba’s Dene population and serving as the root cause of intergenerational trauma. Through the collision of the two worlds, the song’s demand for accountability was stern as Craig’s voice urgently pressed the question, “Who will answer”? Assuming responsibility and loyalty to the Métis people inspired Riel to defend Métis lands and rights, opposing the Canadian government through two armed resistance movements. The portrait of Riel was depicted in the song *I Cannot Escape*, reframing him as a courageous and faith-filled man. The lyrics, recalling Riel’s choice to surrender rather than elude arrest by escaping to the United States, presented a counter narrative to depictions of Riel as a fugitive-traitor and Macdonald as a patriot-hero. The song effectively depicted Riel’s sense of calling, along with his commitment to exposing injustice. The performance was stirring, the lyrics imploring the audience to reconsider the colonial narrative.

Métis scholar Yvonne Poitras Pratt, who was invited to respond to the performance, thanked Craig and Monique for sharing their gifts and embodying the living hope in Riel’s often-cited quote that “it will be the artists who will bring our spirits back.” For Dr. Pratt, the song and the selfless acts of Riel reminded the audience to speak truth to power. “The haunting lyrics we hear in *I Cannot Escape*”, she adds, “remind us, indeed implore us to question who wronged fellow Canadians – was it the condemned man who fought for liberty or was it the man who stole lands not his own and harmed innocent children? The truth in these lyrics, these questions, should, and will, haunt you.” A collaborative spirit of healing and reconciliation was celebrated in the final performance, *Walk With Me*. The song features the coalescence of Indigenous spirituality and Roman Catholicism celebrated at the Lac Ste Anne Pilgrimage. Leading into the song, Elder Doreen shared her deep connection to the Pilgrimage. She highlighted the impact of the song – “her heart was full” – when the

Monique Riel



Dr. Yvonne Poitras Pratt



Dr. Marica Cassis



Dr. Steig Johnson



Peter McPherson,  
President Local 87



Craig Ginn

Dr. Michael Hart



Elder Doreen Bergum

“The music videos were especially moving. Monique mentioned wanting to capture Indigenous individuals as humans and not tokens of tragedy, and I think this was accomplished beautifully. Your work has enormous potential to gather all of its listeners together under a shared vision and I sincerely hope you continue to develop and distribute it. We need a concert!!”

– Chantel Fortier, Master’s student University of Calgary

song was played at the July 2022 Papal Visit to Lac Ste Anne. For Elder Doreen, it is a joy to take the song everywhere she can share it. As Craig approached the stage once more, he invited the audience into a journey of mercy and hope. He recalled a personal story from his time at the Lac St Anne Pilgrimage, describing his encounter with a young man trying to overcome addiction. Craig was moved by the young man’s vulnerability and realized in a personal way that the journey of healing can be arduous for those who have experienced intergenerational trauma. The song celebrates reconciliation and invites all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to a place of hope and restoration. The presentation concluded with Dr. Michael Hart, Vice-Provost of Indigenous Engagement, voicing his heartfelt support for the project. Walking alongside Craig from the project’s outset two years earlier, he echoed the praise of the many contributors and honoured the humility and kindness behind the project. Craig added final words of gratitude, thanking Dr. Hart and Dr. Cassis for

their encouragement. He also expressed deep gratitude to his family for their support and help in recording the music.

The Songs of Justice Project informs current and historical relations between Canada and its Indigenous peoples, drawing special attention to the political and spiritual significance of Louis Riel. The music videos are available online as open-access resources for educators. In recognition of the Songs of Justice Project, Craig received the inaugural Excellence in the Arts award at the 2023 Métis Recognition Awards. He is currently working on the Animal Kinship Project, writing songs that feature the transformative impact and presence of animals. Craig is an Associate Professor and Director of the International Indigenous Studies Program at the University of Calgary.

“The evening’s presentation had a beautiful immersive tone being set by the Elder’s invocation and invitation to participate. The music and lyrics in Songs of Justice were stirring and powerful, even haunting. This project is truly a gift to Canadians to enrich our understanding of the discrimination and injustice that still need to be faced.”

– Rev. Kelly Johnson, University Campus Ministries

