



The doorway to my heart and soul

Description

Personal reviews of Westmount Park's 2017 Words and Music

Written and compiled by **Wanda Potrykus**

“Congratulations... You put your heart and soul into organizing this event and it showed! Your passionate efforts to share and keep alive in the written and spoken word form, the songs and indigenous traditions nourished my soul.”

– Indu Rekha Krishnamurthy

Westmount Park's latest edition of **Words and Music** did not fail to enthrall, entertain and edify the large number of residents, visitors, and friends and family of the performers, who all came out to enjoy a sensational non-stop two hours of words, music, poetry and stories (if all the emails and personal comments that came pouring in for the last 24 hours are anything to go by). Seemingly there was literally something for everyone along with a number of (very welcome) surprises for the organizer and MC.

To some it was the reprise of the *Ode to the Climbing Tree* from the 2010 Poetry in the Park that paid tribute to Mother Nature and her part in the regeneration of the two black willow trees by the lagoon, a scant seven years after the demise of Westmount Park's beloved Climbing Tree, the trunk of which is still present and lying prone on the ground, providing a natural seating place for concert goers.

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MC Wanda Potrykus – Image: Patricia Dumais

To others it was the wonderful song of blessing that officially ‘opened’ the (proverbial) door to the event as sung by three representatives of three generations (grandmother, son and grand-daughter) of the **Patton family** of the Wolf Clan from Kahnawake.

Although people of European descent call the residents of Kahnawake and other local reserves ‘Mohawk’, it is a name many do not like and which we learnt was incorrectly applied to them, and in fact first referred to the Narraganset, an Algonquin tribe from Rhode Island, but incorrectly utilized by the English, versus the French who called them *les Agniers* (an archaic French word no longer in use).

‘Although people of European descent call the residents of Kahnawake and other local reserves ‘Mohawk’, it is a name many do not like and which we learnt was incorrectly applied to them...’

Meanwhile, they refer to themselves as *Kanien’kehá:ka* or the “People of the Flint”. They are part of the collective grouping of the *Haudenosaunee* or the “People of the Longhouse” that includes the five (later six) nations most commonly but incorrectly referred to as the Iroquois Confederacy. Among themselves they much prefer the nomenclature Haudenosaunee rather than Iroquois, which is yet another name like Mohawk that was assigned to them.



“Congratulations on putting together such a great event! And where did you find those spectacular Inuit throat singers and Mohawk drummers-singers or should I say “People of the Longhouse”? I was up under the trees on the opposite site of the pond, but I’m sure they were heard for miles. And your introductions to them and their responses were so interesting.”

– Heather Black

Longhouse Faithkeeper **Niioie:ren Patton**, resplendent in her wonderful Wolf cape (shawl) and beaded wolf embossed hairpiece “Simply made my day,” said **Wanda Potrykus**, organizer and MC for the afternoon, “since I had been informed only at 10:30 am that morning that Ka’nahsohon Deer, our invited guest, could not arrive in time, and although he did let me know he had sent out a request to others to see if they could step in and help, I was not truly expecting anyone to actually jump in a car and make their way to Westmount Park on such short notice... and then to be so pleasantly surprised, by an email announcing not one last-minute replacement but three magnificent, wonderfully warm people, who honestly I had not imagined would actually materialize... but they did.”



The Patton family – Image: Virginia Elliott

Niioie:ren told us the story of how when sitting one time with her mother in hospital while conversing in English, her mother (who, in fact, had recently passed away, and the whole family was still in mourning, which made it especially poignant that they had responded to the last minute request to come share with us in Westmount Park as promptly as they did) encouraged her and her siblings to set to and learn the *Kanien’kehá* language and how proud she was that her grand-daughter had spoken their ‘own’ language before learning English or French. A true opening of doors indeed on the path to the reclamation of their traditional language.

‘Niioie:ren told us the story of how... her mother ... encouraged her and her siblings to set to and learn the *Kanien’kehá* language and how proud she was that her grand-daughter had spoken their ‘own’



language before learning English or French.'

She also explained to us the history of why the Kanien'kehá:ka (not Mohawks) are known as the "Keepers of the Eastern Door" since their task was to protect against incursions from warring tribes from the east (later the Europeans also came from that direction). She helped illustrate her tale by indicating the symbols across the back of her son's shirt explaining they came from the Hiawatha Wampum belt, which is read from right to left.

"The belt is comprised of thirty eight rows, with a great tree as the heart in the center, on either side there are two squares, all are connected with the heart by white rows of wampum. The belt is the emblem of unity among the Five Nations. The first square on the left represents the Mohawk Nation, Keeper of the Eastern Door. The inner square on the left, nearest the heart represents the Oneida Nation. The white tree in the middle represents the Onondaga Nation. This tree also means that the heart of the Five Nations is single in its loyalty to the Great Law of Peace. The Great Peace is lodged in the heart, meaning that the Haudenosaunee council fire burns at Onondaga, which serves as the capitol of the Haudenosaunee. It also means that the authority is given to advance the cause of peace. The inner square to the right of the heart represents the Cayuga Nation. The last square, the one furthest to the right represents the Seneca Nation, known as the Keeper of the Western Door. The two lines extending from each side of the squares of the belt, from the Mohawk and Seneca Nations, represent a path of peace that other Nations are welcome to travel, to take shelter beneath the Great Tree of Peace, and join the Confederacy."



Drum with Six Nations motif – Image: Virginia Elliott

Later the Tuscarora Nation did just that and the original Five Nation Confederacy became the Six Nation Confederacy in existence today.

In addition, she took the time to thank MC Wanda Potrykus for her correctness in referring to the Kanien'kehá:ka as being part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and not the Iroquois Confederacy, explaining that the Mohawk and Iroquois nomenclatures were assigned to them by the English and French as well as the Basque fishermen and were not their choice saying "the old names are best".



“Such a tender, loving moment”

It was an especially significant day too for 10 year-old **Karonhiakwas Patton** (Nioie:ren’s grand-daughter), and our youngest Words and Music participant to date, who sang and accompanied her father and grandmother using a traditional Haudenosaunee shaker, as it was only her second time singing in public before a non-indigenous audience. At the ending of the blessing song, she also sang one part solo, encouraged on gently by her grandmother.

“Such a tender, loving moment” some of the audience members commented afterwards.



Karonhiakwas Patton singing – Image: Virginia Elliott

Shakers (a type of rattle) represent rainwater and are sometimes also called “tears of the Ancestors”. During a Haudenosaunee ceremony, one never awakes the Ancestors with a drum, which is too loud a sound as they might be sleeping, so they are woken up gently to the sound of the shaker. Seemingly a very fitting instrument for a young person to play.

Meanwhile, **Tiohatehkwen Patton** (Nioie:ren’s son and Karonhiakwas’ father) blew the audience away with his strong, beautiful, booming voice (no need for the microphone there) while he accompanied himself on a small hand-held water drum or *Kana’tsio:wi*. Traditionally created from wood and covered over with damped animal hide, held tight by a ring, it has a plug in the side for adding water, so as to maintain an accurate pitch. It is usually about four to five inches in diameter making it easy to hold while playing. This type of water drum is unique to the Haudenosaunee and usually played exclusively by men.

Music is one of the essential parts of the Haudenosaunee culture. It is a way to celebrate, to give thanks, to express joy, passion and as a way to speak to the Creator. Their music is rhythmic and consists mostly of drumming, shakers, rattles and sticks as well as lively singing. Instruments are used as singing or voice aids rather than as an



end in themselves. It was a fabulous start to the event.

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In a small aside, it turns out Tiohatehkwen also sings and plays in a Heavy Metal band called Blood Drive. When I suggested he perhaps apply next summer for Westmount's Summer Concerts in the Park series, he just laughed and said: "Not sure if most of your usual audience would be up for that amount of noise", to which I replied: "We'll never know until we try!"

"The throat singing... it was mesmerizing. I loved it. It was my favourite part."
– Louise Charbonneau



Tanya Evanson and Nina Segalowitz throat singing – Image: Patricia Dumais

To yet others, their special moment in the event was the electrifying demonstration of Inuit throat singing... made all the more magical because featured performer **Nina Segalowitz** spontaneously invited up on stage to join her, a friend from the audience, the accomplished Antiguan-Canadian poet, writer, performer and workshop leader **Tanya Evanson**, encouraging her to come sing with her in the traditional two-person art and singing 'game'.

Tanya later explained throat singing was easier for her to learn and to practice since she has been extensively trained in the Sufi singing tradition (as well being a classically trained whirling dervish!?), which enabled her to adapt to the Inuit version of the art form more easily than many others probably could.

"Just wanted to let you know, how much I enjoyed... Words and Music. I can appreciate the effort behind putting this kind of event together. What I found most interesting was the throat singing, I had never experienced it live. And amazing that the same performer also could sing the Dene song!"
– Uta Chaudhury



Nina Segalowitz – Image: Patricia Dumais

Initially engaged to sing solo, as Nina explained, her usual and long-time partner for throat singing had moved to Norway, leaving her bereft, which is why she was delighted to spy Tanya in the audience and called upon her to come up and help her ‘play the game’.

She then proceeded to sandwich between the two songs from her two different indigenous traditions, an extremely moving poem she had written about her mother. Nina had grown up without knowing her birth mother as she had been ‘stolen’ as an infant from a hospital in Nunavut, part of the Federal government’s “60s Scoop” initiative and adopted into a non-indigenous Jewish-Filipino family in Montreal, so she never actually knew her mother, who had died before she went looking, as an adult, for her birth heritage.

“I appreciated the ‘accessible’ nature of the poetry, music and stories presented. I found the event very intimate and personal and therefore all the more powerful. I was quite literally brought to tears... but I did manage to speak to the storyteller (Elma Moses)... and let her know tearfully how moved I was and thank her for coming! Please pass the word to all performers that their message was heard and appreciated.”
– Suzanne Sweetman

Elma Moses Eeyou Istchee (Cree) storyteller was up next on the stage under the big maple tree. Seated on a chair she informed us she was “far from well” and so had chosen to read two story-poems instead of the longer story featuring Coyote (not a traditional character in Cree stories but ‘borrowed’ from Western Canadian Indigenous stories to demonstrate “how First Nations people come and go upon the land”) that she had first wished to share with the audience. “Some of these stories date from the Ice age when North America was partially covered with glaciers and when the animals were still Giants and the trees and animals talked and the humans and animals spoke the same language and could understand each other,” Elma explained.

Crying

I hear children crying
At night is when the voices get strong
I hear children crying for their moms,



Dads, aunties, uncles, kuukum, juumshum
Like thunderous rain, they cry
At the full night sun like howling wolf, they cry
– Elma D. Moses, 2008



Elma Moses – image: Virginia Elliott

Her story-poems, such as *Crying* were translated from Cree (although they still contained a number of words in Cree, *Niiblin, Pi-mii*, “I’ll offer you pi-mii, Good rich kakuush-e-pimii”, which she later translated for us) and featured various traditional characters such as Muskrat with his love of ‘grease’, especially bear grease, and Walleye, Trout and the theft of Niiblin by Father to try and stop his son from crying for his grandfather Addush. It turned out that Niiblin meant summer and was the time the child stopped crying because once Niiblin was there he was home from residential school.

“Well, we’re still here,” retorts Minnie, “and still telling our stories.”
– Elma Moses

Happily, by the close of the concert, Elma was feeling somewhat better after her tentative beginning and remarked that an afternoon in the park sharing songs, words and music had been exactly what had been needed to refresh her body and mind. So much so that she got up again on the stage as the event was being ushered out by the lady drummers of BearHeart Medicine Drum and, as they drummed the event to a close, she incorporated what she had wanted to add to her presentation into their final performance. Many more of her stories and explanations can be found online in her 2012 McGill doctoral thesis entitled *Dancing with Chikapesh*.



“What a wonderful way to end our Summer Concert Series! While I was not able to stay for the entire performance... I did get to see the amazing demonstration of throat singing with Nina and Tanya, listen to the stories and hear the drummers too. The sound was so good that I could hear the beating of the drums as I made my way through the park all the way to St. Catherine Street and Melville.”

– Donna Lach

The female five-person Métis drumming circle of **BearHeart Medicine Drum**, called the audiences' attention to the start and to the end of the event. They acted as the metaphorical door openers, so to speak, as well as the bookends. They sang and drummed and even at one point had the audience joining in and singing, along with them, the simple, power-laced words to their song. Their melodious, powerful thrumming beats also signalled the passage through the doorway from the indigenous portion of the event to the segment showcasing representatives of the 'settler' or the somewhat newer residents of Turtle Island (when compared to the many thousand year history of the First Nations and the Inuit indigenous peoples).

“I, for one, was very moved emotionally. Did I hear a “thunder clap”! I really felt the strong connection to nature this culture has and it filled me with a great peace. Thank you for putting heart and soul into a wonderful contribution to healing Canada’s wounds and celebrating it’s fundamental belief of inclusion and openness. I was literally moved to tears...”

– Suzanne Sweetman



BearHeart Medicine Drum – Image: Patricia Dumais



‘The female five-person Métis drumming circle of BearHeart Medicine Drum, called the audiences’ attention to the start and to the end of the event.’

BearHeart Medicine Drum also felt moved by the happenings at the event and were also inspired by its location beside the lagoon with the background sound of the falling water, so much so that they added in an ad hoc song to their performance repertoire. As **Catherine Rose**, their facilitator, explained: “In the Native American indigenous tradition, women are considered the guardians of water. We carry our children in water, water is life. So, we decided just now that we really wanted to perform the Water Song; however, it is not sung with a drum accompaniment, it is sung using Striking or Rhythm Sticks, which are usually specially crafted for the task, but we don’t have any of those with us, so we’ve opted to improvise using our drumsticks. It somehow just feels right to perform this song at this time.” And they did.

Unlike the drumming circle, which occurs sitting down around the “Big Drum” or “Tambour-Mère”, the Water Song is performed standing up and at each verse the singers turn in unison in the direction of each of the four cardinal points in turn: south, west, north, east while keeping the rhythm by tapping their sticks together. Tiohatehkwen Patton (rather fortuitously being a somewhat tall person) kindly assisted by holding the microphone above their heads, so the audience could get the true value from the combination of the voices and the less powerful but melodic sound the striking sticks made. It was very moving stuff indeed.

“And the truth will set us free – Oh, to be 16 again, such passion!”
– Louise Charbonneau



Leah Annia Plante-Wiener – Image: Emma Hason



The final part of the concert featured the young Westmount poet **Leah Annia Plante-Wiener** demonstrating a remarkable grasp of the power and emotion of words and their performance in her poem entitled *On Heartbreak*. Such poise and passion in one so young.

Then, it was the turn of a performing duo of Bajan-Canadian poets: **Jason 'Blackbird' Selman** with his trusty trumpet that soulfully sounded through the park as only horn music can do and who performed in tandem with his wife **Deanna (D'Na) Smith** resplendent in an African Ankara print inspired head wrap and a black eyelet patterned dress. So simple, yet visually stunning. After playing and then performing his own poetry, he accompanied Deanna, underscoring and emphasizing her powerful melding and play of words with the subdued but plaintive sound of the trumpet. Goosebumps all round!

"I may never know exactly where my roots come from on the Continent, so because of that and in spite of that, I claim my origin in all of it."

– Deanna Smith

Finally, MC Wanda Potrykus closed out the poetry side of the event with a call to "step up and take responsibility" in this our 150th anniversary year for the shoddy treatment of Canada's Indigenous Peoples with her poem *Canada 150+ is more than just*, which is reproduced below.

All in all, the doorway to our hearts and souls was successfully breached in this magical, serendipitous afternoon of words, song and music by the lagoon in Westmount Park.

Audience member, and cellist Gisella Werner summed up her experience of the afternoon in this way:

"I would be remiss not to tell you what a wonder-full sunny Sunday (!) afternoon I have had yesterday in a park with a very special ambiance, Westmount Park..."

"The First Nations artists' presentations touched me deeply, as well as the stunning couple Deanna and Jason 'Blackbird' with their finely tuned and chosen words and music! Deanna sees herself as a "speech-language pathologist", and her texts invited us to look beyond the surface of her words... Jason, a fine musician and poet did not need emphasis or a strong dramatic voice to give us a living image and sound of what animates his creativity..."

"I also think back to the three "Keepers of the Eastern Door", three generations, who brought up facts and memories from native peoples' history I have ignored so far... And what deep emotions were stirred by Elma Moses' and Nina Segalowitz' tragic life events and history: the first, a gifted storyteller, and the second, an amazing throat singer..."

"Dear Wanda, let me tell you again how much I enjoyed YOUR 'compositions', especially what at the end I understood as an invitation, a 'hymn' that looked beyond the tiny 150 years of Canadian history and claimed what may be called solidarity and friendship with our native sisters and brothers, from whom we can learn so much about caring for 'Mother Earth'... Sorry, I can't help thinking of Beethoven's "Hymn to Joy", that amazing musical monument at the end of his last symphony... thank you so much... it was simply marvellous."

Dear Gisella... I can't even attempt to top that text, so I won't even try.



Jason 'Blackbird' Selman and Deanna (D'Na) Smith
Image: Virginia Elliott

Endnote: A nice touch to the end of afternoon was a pot-luck tea following the concert where lemonade and all sorts of sweet and savoury goodies were offered to the performers, their friends and families and also those audience members attracted by the sight of all that sweetness. Blueberry bannock, lemon squares and dream cake disappeared in a flash... humus, pita, banana bread and delicious cheese straws and a selection of mouth-watering cookies quickly followed. Soon, only the box of Bear Paws molasses cookies were left... guess a few more children were needed to snack on those.

“Thanks so very much for creating such a powerful and memorable event. For 2 hours I sat spellbound by the power of words that came from the very soul of each performer. The pride they all expressed in who they had become using poetry or the beat of the drum to tell their story touched me deeply.”

“For many cultures the sharing of food is very significant. Your idea of serving refreshments afterwards was a nice way to thank the performers and a gentle way to wind down a simply wonderful afternoon. Can't wait to find out what you have in store for us at next year's Words and Music.”

– Andrea Rossaert Klein

Thus, Westmount's annual series of Sunday concerts in the park came to a close for the 2017 season. A big heartfelt thank you goes to Westmount Community Events department and the City of Westmount. Same time next year? We certainly hope so!



An appreciative crowd – Image: Patricia Dumais

Canada 150+ is more than just

Canada 150 plus, what's the fuss
Over adding a tiny plus sign?
It's quite benign... but...
Get real, it's not such a big deal

Why does the logo of our national anniversary
Need to be redefined?
Isn't our logo simply okay,
just the way it was designed?

I say NO... picking a day 150 years ago
and saying our country's history started here
Is quite absurd, sheer lunacy
Don't you agree?
We weren't the first here
Our country was already occupied

We invaded, downgraded the occupants
Said we were superior, made them feel inferior
Cried foul when they protested
pressed on with our vision of the world
Hurled slurs and nasty epithets and worse

Cursed them and thus ourselves,
Tried to assimilate and annihilate,
And bait and trap, demean and beat into submission
Listen, I've had enough of all this guff
Time to step up and take responsibility

You see, their history on the land
Far outstrips ours by thousands of years



~~We have naught to sneer about or doubt~~
The truth is this, listen up...

The original inhabitants had the right approach
They shared, and in return, we ensnared them
With the written word, we heard but didn't listen,
We need to stop... refocus, find a common vision
Come together, cross the divide
Stop hiding behind words and laws and walls

Oh the gall of it, do stop nit picking,
Spitting on our indigenous peoples is not cool
And we are fools for even trying it,
The truth is now out, stop doubting it
It's the time for reconciliation, nation to nation
Let's refashion this great land into something
We can all be proud of and shout out loud about...

Let's stand side by side instead of face to face,
The fact is... we're all part of the human race, let's act like it
The indigenous people, they first welcomed us
Let's find reasons to make them proud of us and we of them
Adding a plus sign is but a tiny token of respect...
Let us just reflect on that.

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Wanda Potrykus

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Feature image: BearHeart Medicine Drum by Patricia Dumais



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