

ART BRIDGES TRADITIONS AND FUTURE

Artist and storyteller Art Napoleon, aka Travelling Sun, is a man of many seasons

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At age 44, Art Napoleon can hardly be called a native elder. Yet it's rare to find an aboriginal person his age with such a close connection to both the past and the present.

Also known as Travelling Sun, a well-known native storyteller, songwriter and comedian, Napoleon grew up on the Saulteau Indian reserve in northeastern B.C., about 20 kilometres north of Chetwynd.

As a child in the 1960s, he learned Cree before he spoke English. He attended a one-room school on the reserve and didn't stray so far as Chetwynd until he finished elementary school. "I remember in Grade 6 getting to go to the big city of Chetwynd – it's like 3,000 people," he said.

Napoleon spent his summers on extended hunting expeditions with his grandfather, often living in the wild for weeks at a time. It was during those trips that he learned the sacred ceremonies and songs of his people. Around the campfire at night, his grandparents who spoke no English, passed down legends and steeped the young lad in the art of storytelling.

"I grew up that way. We'd be gone for a month or more, smoking our own meat right out there sitting around the fire listening to stories..." said Napoleon. He credits his uncles, Metis-style fiddlers, as an early musical influence. Despite his early exposure to storytelling and traditional songs, Napoleon's career as a writer and performer didn't begin in earnest until the 1990's, when he took up guitar.

"I was a closet performer and songwriter before that. I told stories to kids," he said. "At first I was emulating people. Then I started writing my own songs. I don't know why; I just did."

One of his first compositions was called "Fresh Off the Reservation," about the loneliness and alienation he felt after leaving home and traveling around western Canada. "There was a lot of angst, travelling songs, then some spiritual songs, and later even some political ones," he said. "Lately I'm more into prayer songs, even though they may sound contemporary."

Napoleon produced an album and has toured the Canadian festival and powwow circuit regularly for the last decade and a half, but that's just part of what keeps him busy. Last year he wrote a First Nations version of Molson's famous "I am Canadian" beer commercial rant. CBC learned of the piece, and Napoleon ended up performing it to open the CBC Winnipeg Comedy Festival.

He is also branching out into film. A production company he started with a couple of partners recently signed a development deal with CBC for a film that will document his return to the hunting grounds of his youth in northeastern B.C. “In the old way of hunting, you go in on horseback. We want to recreate that,” he said. “Maybe it will come back as a practice. If not, it’ll at least be documented.” As a counterpoint, Napoleon plans to include some native youth on the trip to incorporate their experiences into the documentary.

Napoleon, for years in demand as a children’s storyteller at schools, is now passing on some of that knowledge to adults in the classroom. This month he’s teaching a sold-out course on prairie and woodlands chanting and drumming at the Quadra Arts Centre. In addition to singing lessons, students will learn about cultural traditions that are intertwined with the art, he said. “They’ll have to sing in Cree because I don’t sing in French,” he joked. “A lot of powwow songs are in Cree. But a Blackfoot song has to be sung in Blackfoot. If you’re going to sing their song, at least you have to sing it in their language.”

There are songs for many occasions, and it’s considered disrespectful to break those traditions, Napoleon added. “Social songs can be shared anytime, anywhere,” he explained. Sacred songs can only be used in ceremonies. As for Sundance songs, anyone who knows them is not supposed to use them for entertainment. All of them are believed to have come from the spirit world. They’re hundreds or even thousands of years old.”

Over the last few years, Napoleon has written music for the CBC, performed on radio programs including the Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour, performed for Governor General Adrienne Clarkson and toured briefly with folk legend Buffy Saint-Marie.

And then there’s the difficult second album. Napoleon heads into the studio in July with a whole new batch of songs, planning to mix Cree lyrics and rhythms with roots, folk and pop. “I incorporate a little bit of chanting. English is my second language, so I started wondering ‘how can I find a way to be myself?’ and more and more I started using the Cree language,” he said.

In the 1990’s, Napoleon served as both chief and band councilor on the Sauteau reserve in addition to holding various day jobs. But now that his kids are older, he’s ready to make the transition to full-time artist, he said. “It’s a scary path because you are leaving behind security, but I like being able to do it,” he said.

“I like being able to share a message, and I like to be an ambassador or an educator. I’m not just an entertainer. I have a message, and it helps connect people and build community.”

Written by Brennan Clarke, Victoria News