

Nova Scotia

From a sweat lodge to the classroom: The journey of the Mi'kmaq Honour Song

The spiritual song by George Paul is now taught in elementary schools across Nova Scotia

[Emma Smith](#) · CBC News ·

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Mi'kmaq drums were distributed to all Nova Scotia elementary school classrooms so students can learn the Honour Song. (Communications Nova Scotia)

Songwriter George Paul pinpoints the origin of his most well-known spiritual song to a gathering of Indigenous communities back in 1980.

He was in Regina watching representatives from different First Nations singing and dancing when it struck him that the Mi'kmaq didn't have a song.

That longing for something to share among his people planted the seed of the *Honour Song* that came to Paul while he was taking part in a sweat lodge ceremony years later.

"That's what our people need to bring back together, to honour who we are, the people who we are, which brings about respect and dignity and identity for the people. It's very important," said Paul, who's from Metepenagiag First Nation in New Brunswick.

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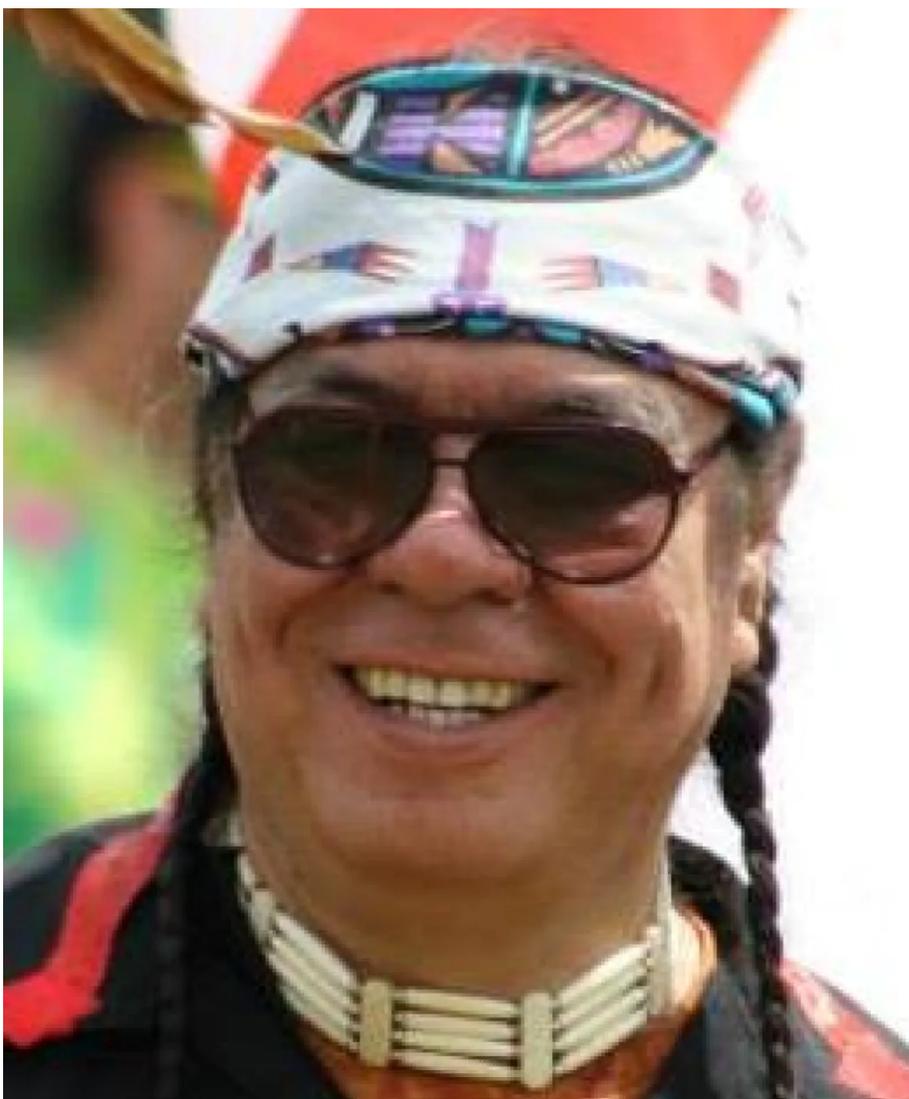
Maritimes, that song has become the national anthem of the Mi'kmaq, and is now being used to teach elementary school students about Mi'kmaq culture and traditions.

Last year, every elementary school music class in the province was given a Mi'kmaq hand drum so teachers could share the song with students.

Honour and respect

The *Honour Song* is simple, said Paul, but it communicates the emotions he felt while watching that gathering in Regina so many years ago.

The lyrics in English translate to: "Let us greatly respect our being L'nu. My



George Paul, winner of an East Coast Music Award, is from Metepenagiag First Nation in New Brunswick. (George Paul/Facebook)

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events and family gatherings, and means different things to different people, according to Garrett Gloade.

He's the drum keeper and senior heritage interpreter at the Millbrook Cultural and Heritage Centre just outside Truro, N.S., and remembers the first time he sang the song at a powwow in Ottawa.

"When you sing the song, it does something to you that's unexplainable," he said. "You know, when you sing the song you think of your past loved ones ... When I first sang it, I actually bawled my eyes out."

Learn the words, know the story

Now that non-Indigenous people are learning the song in schools, Gloade said there are some simple ways people can show respect.

He wants people to be open-minded, to take the time to learn the Mi'kmaq words and understand the meaning of the song. While in some contexts it's OK to record the song, Gloade said it's best to ask permission.

"We're coming to a new era now where being Indigenous is more widely accepted," he said. "You got to remember too that there's still a lot of hurt, and stuff that was felt throughout the years and it's something that isn't just going to go away overnight."

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Jaime Battiste, the treaty education lead for Nova Scotia, said teachers were taught the proper protocol during professional development days led by Mi'kmaq educator Jude Gerrard. He covered everything from the significance of the drum to caring for it properly.

Belinda Fraser, one of the music teachers who received a Mi'kmaq hand drum in her classroom last year, said she regularly incorporates the *Honour Song* into her lessons.

- [Treaty Day marks 'tremendously improved' relations between First Nations and province](#)

During Mi'kmaq History Month in October, for example, she said the song begins each day.

"The kids automatically now walk into a circle, and we stand and it's just like the singing of *O Canada*. We stand and respect and sing the song," said Fraser.

The song has a spirit

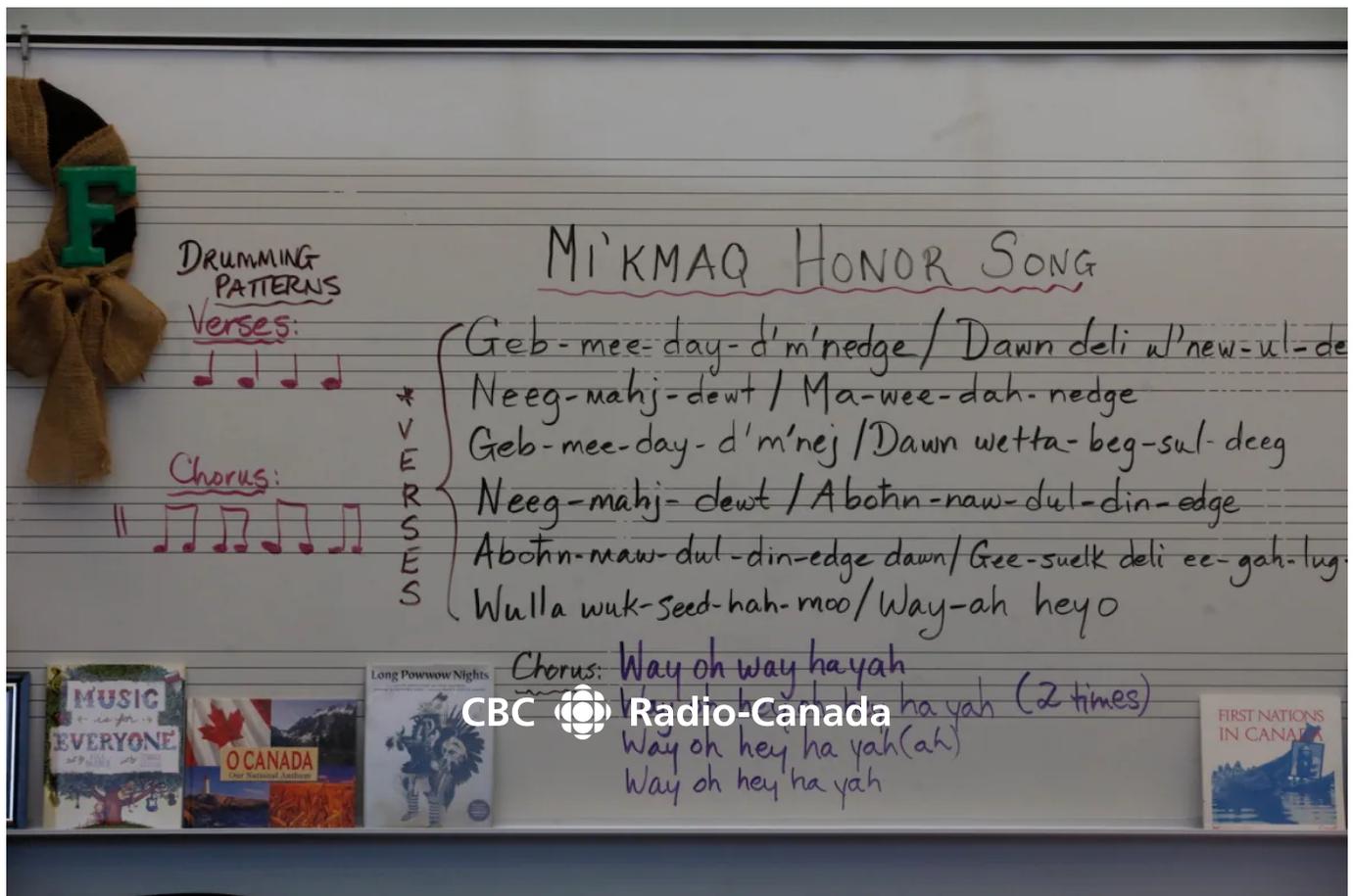
Over the years, Paul said he's met many people who have shared what the song means to them.

One story in particular has stuck with him.

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George Paul first recorded the Honour song in 1991, and it has since been shared countless times. (Communications Nova Scotia)

He recalls a mother from Indian Island, N.B., whose eight-year-old son had epilepsy and only slept through the night when he listened to the *Honour Song*.

"That experience that they had with that song had merit for me, that that song has power and it has a spirit and it's helping people," he said.

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