

Hip-hop artist Wendego uses music to combat mental health issues and Indigenous oppression

COLIN BURROWES

Wendego is the hip-hop alter ego of Grey-Bruce heavy metal vocalist Raymond King. After spending a large portion of his youth and young adult years in prison, King plans to use Wendego to help combat mental health stigma, and Indigenous oppression.

Sober from heroin since 2011, he hopes to inspire those who are struggling through their addictions, and recovery.

"I see a lot of rappers nowadays and they are talking about guns, they are talking about drugs and they are talking about all this crap that glorifies criminal activity, glorifies addiction and I've seen that - I've been down that road," he said. "I was addicted to heroin. I did time in prison and it's not pretty."

King's approach to Wendego has garnered mixed reviews but he intends to talk candidly about his experiences.

"I can bring something real to the table," he said. "I've been diagnosed with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). I didn't know I had PTSD until I went to treatment that was forced by a judge when I was on my last sentence."

The awareness that he suffers from PTSD has allowed King the opportunity to start learning how to work through it.

"For instance, my song 'Save Me,' I wrote when I was struggling with these reoccurring dreams that I was in prison," he said. "I would wake up and I was ready to fight. I was on edge all the time. I was having trouble at home. A lot of suicidal ideation - I was thinking about suicide all the time even though I didn't want to commit suicide."

The visuals were always there in his mind, so he worked these themes into the song. King recorded the video for the song with the help of Dave Chevalier from Wiretone Records, a record label that prides itself on releasing music handcrafted in Grey and Bruce counties.

"We planned this whole shoot ... I walked down this long, long corridor and there was this rope hanging at the other end and in the video, I hung myself," he said. "I had a roofer's harness on and I legit hung from this thing. Something about putting your head through that rope, even though it wasn't real and I wasn't kicking the bucket ... but after that, I just slept like a baby. I don't know what it was about it."

Writing and performing as Wendego has been cathartic for King. "It's helping me work through it," he said. "It's almost like a step-by-step thing. I'm learning a bunch about myself doing this." The opportunity for a collaboration he was very excited about came King's way earlier this year and he jumped at the chance. About 10 years ago, King recalled seeing a video by Hellnback.

"I saw his music video and, in the song, he said, 'all my native people stand up' and you don't hear that in popular culture," he said. "You don't get to hear that. You don't see native people in the eye of the public, at least back then. It was inspiring."

Recently King noticed Hellnback released a new album and David Strickland produced it.

He messaged Strickland and asked if it was Hellnback from Team Rezofficial. When he con-



Colin Burrowes Photo

Raymond King is using his real-life experiences with addiction, mental health issues and time in prison to write hip-hop songs that he hopes will help people struggling through their addictions, recovery and indigenous oppression in Canada.

firmed it was the same rapper who inspired him when he was younger, he decided to ask Hellnback to collaborate and the result is Wendego's latest release, "Trudeau."

"I listened to this guy when I was a kid...this is cool," said King. "We put a lot of energy into it."

The song calls out Justin Trudeau and the Canadian government on incomplete promises made to Indigenous peoples. It touches on topics such as missing and murdered Indigenous women, 1492 Land Back Lane and the over-representation of Indigenous peoples in the penal.

The single received a boost in popularity when Strickland, a renowned Indigenous hip hop producer, added it to one of his Indigenous Voices playlists on Apple Music.

Always learning

Since the age of 23, King said he has been learning to do things better.

"I haven't been in trouble with the law," he said. "I have dabbled here and there with drugs but I haven't full out relapsed... Music has become my addiction really. When you've heard it in your head and to hear it with your ears...that's a high you can't link to a drug."

King may describe making music as an addiction but he says it with pride in his voice. But when he speaks of his drug addiction there is no pride.

"There is nothing classy about addiction," he said. "It's bad. I've had a friend die every single month for the past year and it's cold. You get to a point where you are cold. People are dying and you are getting mad at them. It's not cool. It sucks."

Growing up

King is First Nations from Wasauksing Territory, but he also has relations in Neyaashiinigmiing (Cape Croker) near Wiarton.

"My grandma is from Cape, my grandpa is from Wasauksing and they are opposite ends of Georgian Bay - it's kind of cool," he said. "I'm Ojibwe. I was born in Owen Sound."

Most of his childhood was spent in Bruce County until he ran away at the age of 15.

"I went through a lot of abuse

when I was a kid," said King. "My mom's first husband wasn't a very nice guy to me, so I grew up kind of pissed off at the world. I took off and I ended up living on the streets until I was 23, in and out of prison...I never really had my own life. I was always in the system."

He estimates all the prison stints he did were added up it would total nearly seven years of his youth. King said most of his offences were minor.

"This is something I'm trying to address with Wendego," he said. "There is a lot of systematic oppression against Indigenous people in the court systems. When I was an addict and an alcoholic and I'd get arrested for doing something stupid while drinking, like getting into a fight or public intoxication, I'd be charged or put on probation. I was never off probation until I was almost 27. I was on probation from the first offence when I was 15-years-old living on the streets...then I got two years of probation when I got out (after my last sentence) in 2013."

'Indigenization' of Canadian prisons

The Correctional Investigator of Canada, Dr. Ivan Zinger, issued a news release on Jan. 21, 2020, supporting information indicating that the number and proportion of Indigenous individuals under federal sentence has reached new historic highs, surpassing 30 per cent.

While accounting for less than five per cent of the general population, the number of federally sentenced Indigenous people has been steadily increasing for decades.

More recently, custody rates for Indigenous people have accelerated, despite an overall decline in the inmate population. In fact, from April 2010 until January 2020, the Indigenous inmate population increased by 43.4 per cent (or 1,265), whereas the non-Indigenous incarcerated population declined over the same period by 13.7 per cent (or 1,549). The rising numbers of Indigenous people behind bars offsets declines in other groups, giving the impression that the system is operating at a normal or steady-state. Zinger noted nothing could be farther

from the truth.

The Correctional Investigator suggested that surpassing the 30 per cent mark indicated a deepening "Indigenization" of Canada's correctional system. Zinger referred to these trends as "disturbing and entrenched imbalances," noting that the numbers are even more troubling for Indigenous women, who now account for 42 per cent of the women inmate population in Canada. The Correctional Investigator drew attention to the fact that federal corrections seem impervious to change and unresponsive to the needs, histories and social realities behind high rates of Indigenous offending.

"On this trajectory, the pace is now set for Indigenous people to comprise 33 per cent of the total federal inmate population (by 2023)," said Zinger. "Over the longer term, and for the better part of three decades now, despite findings of Royal Commissions and National Inquiries, the intervention of the courts, promises and commitments of previous and current political leaders, no government of any stripe has managed to reverse the trend of Indigenous over-representation in Canadian jails and prisons. The Indigenization of Canada's prison population is nothing short of a national travesty."

Drawing on personal experience King said the Indigenous population in prisons is astounding.

"That's how you oppress a people - keep them in jail," he said. "The Black population down in the United States, drug offences and the three-strike rule. Frigging guys are getting locked up for their whole lives for having weed. That's craziness."

Getting better

King said he has been doing well since his last sentence ended in 2013.

"I've been good," he said. "I've run into the police a couple of times but never in a bad sense. They have all treated me well... most of the (police) are new, which is nice. I don't have to deal with the discrimination. The younger guys don't seem to discriminate as much."

Growing up, King heard a lot about residential schools from elders.

"When you are in jail almost all the fellas, they had experience there...and the Truth and Reconciliation people came in when they were interviewing all the survivors...but I wasn't there, I didn't experience it," he said.

When asked if the abuse he suffered as a child could stem from the intergenerational trauma caused by residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, he said he couldn't be sure.

"My mom was always really good to me," said King. "She never beat me. She never did anything like that but she picked some (crappy) men who were assholes to me, and that's where a lot of the abuse stemmed from."

King speaks fondly of his mother who he described as a tough woman.

"Her dad went to a residential school and she went through a lot of abuse," he said. "It's not my place to say what she went through, but she left the reserve when she was young - when she was 15 or 16 she ran away from home - and if it wasn't for her leaving the reserve that intergenerational trauma would probably have been somewhere in there... I don't know how it works. I wasn't at the residential schools but when I watch videos of what they say - it hurts...it's f*cked up. It's not supposed to happen. It's a tough one to get around."

Without glorifying it, King said some positives came out of his time in prison.

"It's not too bad," he said. "You have to make the best of everything."

He rattled off a long list of prisons he has served time at Central North Correctional Centre in Penetanguishene, Maplehurst Correctional Complex, Owen Sound and Walkerton jails before they closed and the Samia Jail. The list started at the Bluewater Detention Centre when he was 15 and ended at the Ontario Correctional Institute (OCI) in Brampton when he was 23.

"There are guards that are good though," said King. "My caseworker when I was in OCI, he was a good dude. He was Métis from out east. He served overseas and he was a military guy - really stern. I think he was a lot of the reason I've turned myself around. He helped me with my treatment."

OCI is a rehabilitation centre for drug addicts.

"There was a whole treatment regimen there and it seems to work," he said. "I haven't been back. I learned a lot there that helped me figure out who I was."

King's PTSD diagnosis is another thing he lists as a positive thing to come out of his prison experiences.

"That's something I was going through life without knowing," said King. "It has kept me from going off the handle a lot of the time - something from my past would incite a fight that didn't even need to happen. That's a big reason I kept ending up in jail - undiagnosed mental health."

Treatment that started in prison has helped him turn his life around.

"I went through a rehab prevention program," said King. "I got to figure out who I was and I think that helped me to find music and find something to substitute the drugs."

Wendego's music is available on all major streaming platforms and social media.