

Montréal

Jo Frost reports from the Canadian city where immigration and indigenisation are the hot topics at its annual music conference, Mundial Montréal

There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.' Leonard Cohen fans will recognise this lyric from Montréal's much loved and lamented songwriter, the subject of a major retrospective that opened in the city in November – one year after his death.

This was one of several anniversaries taking place in Canada: 2017 marked 150 years since the country became a confederation and the city of Montréal commemorated 375 years. But not everyone was in a celebratory mood, namely the indigenous people of Canada who feel these dates ignore tens of thousands of years of indigenous history.

Another exhibition that opened in Toronto was *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, by renowned First Nations artist, Kent Monkman. It featured a series of paintings that depict what the last 150 years has meant to Canada's indigenous population. The most memorable is *The Scream*, which shows the forced removal of children from indigenous communities in an attempt to assimilate them. It's a shocking portrayal of Canada's residential schools system, which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission condemned in 2015 as a form of 'cultural genocide.'

According to the 2016 census, more than 1.67 million people in Canada identify as indigenous – that's 4.9% of the population – with more than 600 recognised First Nation communities, Inuit and Métis (mixed American-Indian and European-American).

On June 21 prime minister Trudeau announced that National Aboriginal Day would be renamed National Indigenous Peoples Day. In his speech, Trudeau said: *'Indigenous people are at the heart of Canada and the history, art, traditions and cultures of indigenous peoples have shaped our past, and continue to shape who we are today.'*

One event that has made a mission of championing diversity is the music expo, Mundial Montréal. The theme of its seventh edition in November is Immigrant Nation: "a bit of a no-brainer," co-founder Derek Andrews remarks. "We have a more progressive approach to immigration, so Immigrant Nation is a salute to that." In the programme notes, he writes *'Canada is a country of immigrants – living on indigenous land. We believe that*



ShoShona Kish speaking on a panel at Mundial Montréal in November

Kevin Miller

the arts are an important tool for helping to achieve a more inclusive society, as well as for advancing the cause for reconciliation.'

In keeping with Trudeau's shift in language, the 'Aboriginal Sounds' part of the programme is renamed 'Indigenous Sounds' and includes Quantum Tangle, a Juno award-winning duo with Anishinabe-Métis and Inuit ancestry; Amanda Rheume, a Métis singer-songwriter; and another Juno award-winner, the Peguis First Nation singer and guitarist William Prince.

"From the very beginning, Mundial has held a space for indigenous voices and has been a leader in that sense," says ShoShona Kish, singer with Digging Roots and the chair of Folk Music Canada's board. Kish is from the Ojibway Anishinabe community, and has become an influential and highly-regarded spokesperson for indigenous artists' rights. In July she headed up a concert in Ottawa called *Anishinabekwe* featuring a line-up of prominent indigenous female musicians including Tanya Tagaq. "Presenters in Canada have, historically, been very conservative, and seen presenting indigenous music as a risk," says Kish.

At Mundial the conference programme focuses on two key issues – immigration and indigenisation, with sessions including: *'Idle No More: Indigenizing the Music Industry'* and *'Immigrant Nation: Music as a Vehicle for Inclusion.'* "There was a gravity around the Idle No More hashtag when suddenly everybody started using that and it connected a whole

bunch of conversations in this viral way," Kish says. "The youth started organising these flash mob round dances in all these public spaces... it was such a peaceful and culturally-rooted way to say, 'we're here and we're raising our voices in this new way'."

Many social issues come to light during the conference sessions, such as residential schools, violence towards indigenous women and clean drinking water on reserves – all seem to contradict the impression of Canada as a liberal nation. "The international perspective of Canada is totally inaccurate," Kish responds. "It's not a reality for so many First Nations people. Our government is not making it a priority... So when we talk about reconciliation but we still can't have clean drinking water, it feels like bullshit. And the arts communities are really aware of it, because there have been all these reconciliation arts projects, where indigenous artists have been invited to hold a space for this conversation. The frustration comes that there isn't this fundamental shift happening yet."

However she isn't entirely pessimistic: "There are definitely changes. It's the time to be courageous. If we say that we believe in community and want to move forward, then let's throw down and do it! I think that music and art is one of the most powerful ways I know to create that potential and invest in it." ♦

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