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Make Shift Happen

Submitted by Denise Duncan

Rhonda Head is a talented Mezzo Soprano Independent Musician who spent her youth playing in the woods of Mameek. She is a proud Cree woman from Opaskwayak Cree Nation, Treaty Territory 5, who has built a circle of friends in the International Music Industry. She knew early in her childhood years of her desire to explore her options, friendships, experiences and discover more of the world. Rhonda goes to church with her parents and siblings and feels the presence of a higher power but is not a supporter of the Church. She loves singing the beautiful Cree hymns and feels the presence of the spirit world when she sings them in Cree. This has a huge influence in her music and leads to the creation of the” Nikumoon” album. Many people think that because of her Cree accent that she will not be able to sing. She has proven all her critics wrong. In 2017, Rhonda exceeds all limiting perceptions capturing the attention of the Indigenous Music Awards and Global Music awards. Since 2010 she has written her stories, recorded, and submitted them to the Music International world. As a result, she has won 5 international awards for her creative works. Most recently, she received the Bronze Medal for her song”500 Years” expressing injustices towards Indigenous People over the last 500 years. The song is hauntingly beautiful with the lyrics unfolding the truths of past.

As a child she experiences the parenting of residential school survivors. Although she always had food on her table, she and her siblings spent most of the day outdoors; a freedom that she thought was normal when it was due to the lack of parenting skills from her mother and father. As a young girl she experienced low self-esteem, but always had a determination which directs her towards self-actualization. Through her personal life choices and much hard work she has made her dreams come true. She has become a mezzo soprano opera singer, born in a small northern community of The Pas, from Opaskwayak Cree Nation, who at the age of 16 years told her mother that she would be moving to Winnipeg to live with her sister. Early on, she recognized the need to find a place for herself in the world. She started by leaving her home community and enrolled at the University of Winnipeg Collegiate to complete her high school education. After Graduation, she continues to fulfill her childhood dream which is fashion merchandising. The Toronto Academy of Merchandizing and Design offered this training. Rhonda applied, is accepted, and learns and experiences the business side of fashion. While in school Rhonda began investigating in a hobby in acting, singing or dance which she thinks may suit her better. From the age of 8, Rhonda loved playing the piano and looked forward to a career in singing, music or acting. Her path once again changes directions.

 She is unsure of how to proceed but wants to find a music teacher to help her. At the time, the phone book is the place to search out contacts. She opens the Toronto phone book only to discover that there is an inch or more of pages of music instructors to choose from. She closes her eyes and puts her hand on a name. Luckily, this person lives close to her neighborhood. She rides the streetcar to her lessons where an Italian man, Nicolino Steiner teaches her to sing classical music. She immediately impresses her music teacher who invites her into his home and speaks to her about the anatomy of the voice. Rhonda feels his kindness from day one and is encouraged to go forward with the lessons. He tells Rhonda that if you have a nose and can breathe you can sing. Rhonda practices with him for two years and Nicolino encourages her to audition at the Toronto Opera House. She does not believe that she has enough talent, thinking to herself that this is a ridiculous request, so politely declines.

After two years, she decides to return to OCN and continues her music studies with the late Mr. Chen, a music teacher at Joe A Ross School. Eventually Rhonda moves back to Winnipeg and trains under Margo Harding. She is inspired by this singing teacher who becomes a good friend and mentor. Margo is an incredible influence on Rhonda as she practices non-judgmental beliefs and truly respects Rhonda’s singing ability. Rhonda is a natural for singing classical, indigenous and opera music. It suits her and makes her feel complete.

Rhonda’s singing career and life experiences have not always been easy. She meets an unexpected health challenge in 1982. Rhonda quickly switches her focus to her health. It begins when she notices that she cannot hear in her right ear. She visits the Audiologist for a hearing test. The diagnosis is not good news. Rhonda is told that she has a large brain tumor (acoustic neuroma brain tumor) at the age of 22 years old. She follows her instincts and asks to be referred to Dr. Michael West who is one of the best ENT neurosurgeons in Canada. Her encounter with Dr. West is the right one, he was exceptional. He is caring, considerate, and highly skilled, but Rhonda recalls the entire experience as frightening. She goes through the surgery and spends the next year recovering with painful side effects. Since the operation she has completely lost her hearing in her right ear, experiences some facial paralysis and partial memory loss. This means that Rhonda has difficulty memorizing a song. She spends three months going over lyrics to remember a song. The medical interruption does not stop Rhonda from continuing to sing and share her music. She goes on to create 4 albums: Kayas in 2010, Nikumoon in 2013, Nisahkihitan in 2017 and Akihtasona in 2019.

 At the age of 30, she meets a man, elopes, and is fully involved in the marriage for six months. After experiencing violence in the marriage, she chooses to divorce and today she laughs saying that she is happily divorced. During the time of her marriage, she is once again diagnosed with the bad news of the brain tumor returning, this time larger. She vows never to have the surgery again and searches the internet for alternative therapy for a cure. She discovers Gamma Knife treatment which is a non-invasive treatment available in LA Joalla California. Unfortunately, this treatment was not available in Canada at the time, so she is forced to lobby to secure the funds to pay for her treatment. She finds a funder and travels to the United States with a friend to receive the treatment. Prior to leaving, she finds a black smooth rock and sends her own personal prayers into it. She asks her family and friends to pray into the rock, using it for support during her treatments. After 13 treatments sessions, Rhonda went home and waited to be told in a few months that the tumor has shrunk. With time the tumor is now black and is dead. Today she continues to be monitored but no longer worries. She also continues her singing career after recovering from a second battle with a brain tumor.

In 2010, she records her first album which is called “Kayas” translating to “A long time ago” in the Cree language. She records this album in five different languages: Italian, French, Latin, English, and Cree. She submits her music to the Native American Music Awards and wins for best world recording.

The late Gerri Atwell a well-recognized artist and friend out of Winnipeg congratulated her on her accomplishments. He tells her that this is unusual for a first-time artist submitting to win this coveted award. Although Gerri is in the spirit world, he was a big influence in highlighting indigenous artists. Rhonda receives the Native American Music award and a whole new world involving the music industry opens for her.

In 2013, “Nikumun” which means “To sing in Cree” is recorded. Rhonda records traditional Cree hymns through research from wakes and funerals that she attends. She listens to the hymns sung by the congregation the loudest and she literally feels their spirit in the room. She submits this album and receives the most nominations for her work.

“Kisahkihtin” is her most recent creation, which means “I Love You” in the Cree language. Rhonda used to think that she could not write her own music, but with this album she was inspired by the melodies of the landscape on Opaskwayak Cree Nation. She pushed through the fears and she created her own songs. Rhonda will be re-releasing Kisahkihitin I Love You with the Prague Orchestra on November 24, 2020.

This is just the beginning for Rhonda Head. She has overcome her childhood of parents because of Residential Schools, she has recognized the importance of education to attain skills and confidence. Rhonda was never afraid to seek out others to help her become better as a singer, songwriter, and musician. She has made decisions to move away from home, move back, and reach out at an international level. She has surrounded herself with people who can teach her, and they display mutual respect. She has overcome not once, but twice, the fear of a life-threatening diagnosis, plus sought out treatment from highly skilled and respected physicians and treatment centers in North America. She has also written her own autobiography, Mezzo Soprano – Memoirs of a Rez Girl. She experiences deafness in her right ear, some facial paralysis, and some memory loss. She continues to sing, record, write, and be an inspiration to her community at a local level and globally.

 You can find her music on YouTube, Spotify, and iTunes. Rhonda has a presence on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. You can also find her in our community, having lunch with her friends or performing with her accomplished artist friends in the community.

Thank you, Rhonda Head, for sharing your music, your story, and a little piece of your life journey to Make Shift Happen. We hope that others find inspiration through the sharing of your personal hardships, struggles, and determination to find your true path.