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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Robbie Robertson: Farewell and Godspeed

By David Frew
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Robbie, age 6, at the Brantford Reservation

The last two trips that my wife Mary Ann and I made out west to see kids and grandkids coincided with the deaths of legendary Canadian musical artists. The

first was Gordon Lightfoot, Ontario singer and guitar player who passed away a few months ago. Gordon's death left a hole in my heart but not as big as the one that was created when Robbie Robertson died a few weeks ago. For me, Robbie will always be associated with Port Dover since he played there as a young boy of only 14 with the Ronnie Hawkins Band at the Summer Garden Dance Hall.

Robertson grew up on the Brantford Indian Reservation, a place that has welcomed me on several occasions as I did research for writing projects. Robbie split time between Brantford, where his mother lived, and Toronto, where he stayed with his father. His ethnic identity is unique among North America artists: Native North American and Jewish.

A self-taught guitarist, Robertson pushed his way into the Ronnie Hawkins Band at age 14 and revolutionized it with his songwriting and instrumental prowess. When Hawkins decided to withdraw from regular playing and most of his backup band left Ontario to return to the American South, Robbie helped organize a replacement group, which was called "The Band." Later, Robbie and The Band became Bob Dylan's backup group when the legendary American folk singer decided to "go electric."



Robbie Robertson during his days with The Band

Robertson made the decision to stop touring in 1976, a life change that was probably lifesaving. By the time he decided that he was through with rock and roll touring, he had become a friend of Martin Scorsese, who decided to make a musical, documentary film to celebrate The Band's final concert. That documentary, "The Last Waltz," is widely regarded as a musical and a filmmaking masterpiece. The 1976 concert in San Francisco attracted a huge stage filled with Canadian, American, and other musical luminaries who gathered to celebrate the "life work" of Robbie Robertson and The Band. Familiar Canadian names, including Joannie Mitchell, Neil Young, and Ronnie Hawkins, were on stage with musicians Ringo Star, Bob Dylan, Emmy Lou Harris, Van Morrison, Muddy Waters, Mavis Staples, and guitar master Eric Clapton.



The Last Waltz

The Last Waltz was far from the end of Robbie's body of work. Between 1978 and 2023, Robertson and Martin Scorsese collaborated on 12 film projects. Scorsese trusted Robertson, who was never a formally trained musician, to create the film scores for his most influential films. Scorsese is quoted as having said he and Robertson would discuss the "gestalt" of each film score, after which Robertson would create something that did not sound like a typical movie soundtrack – the precise objective that both men were seeking.



The Woodland Centre at Brantford's Six Nations of the Grand River

If you were to ask Robbie Robertson to choose his most important work, however, he might nominate his contributions to the Brantford Reserve, where he grew up with his mother listening to native elders who were storytellers. In his autobiography, he suggests that it was the spiritual storytelling of Iroquois elders that inspired his songwriting. Robertson was instrumental in the creation of the Woodland Cultural Centre, which was built on the campus of the old (terrible) mission school. He continued to contribute to programs at the Six Nations of the

Grand River Reserve in Bradford, hoping to inspire young native artists to grow in a variety of disciplines. Thanks to the support of Robertson and others, the center has grown and thrived. After Robertson's death, his family asked that contributions be sent to the Woodland Centre.



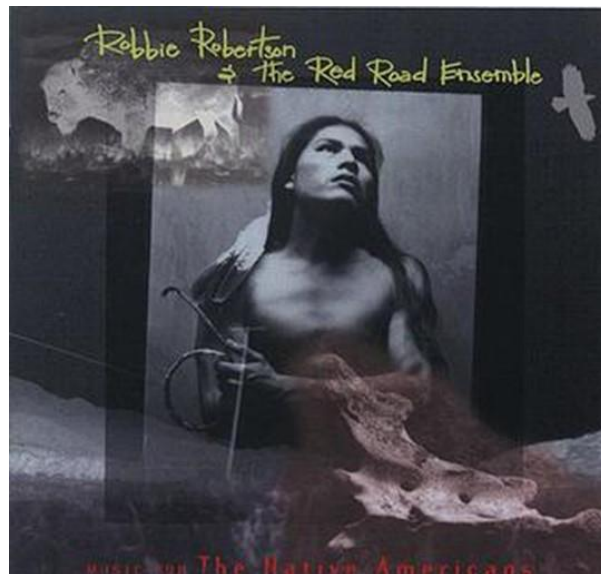
An exhibit at the Woodland Cultural Centre



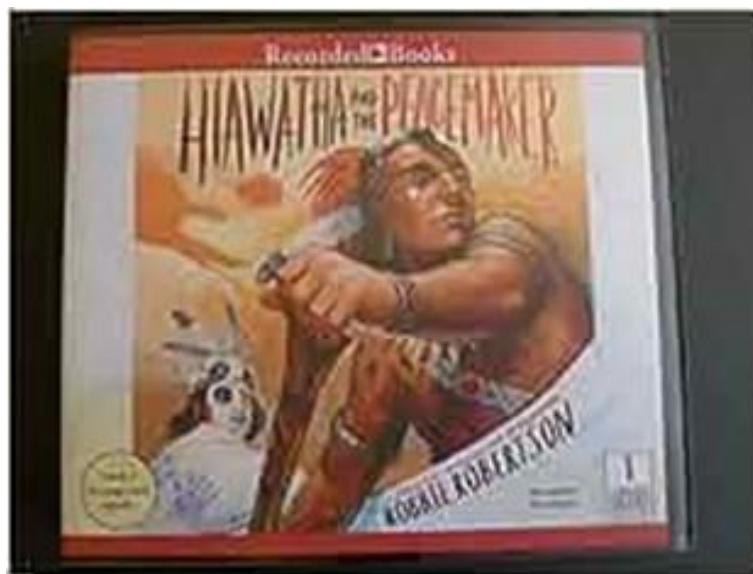
Exhibit opening at the Woodland Cultural Centre

Many of the last decades of Robertson's career were dedicated to his native roots. Among his personal productions of writing, music, art and other projects that he sponsored and or produced were with young native artists. There also were dozens of recordings and several books. One of his personal favorites was the

powerful religious story of Hiawatha & The Great Peacemaker, which was told repeatedly by elders at the reservation when he was growing up.



Robertson's acclaimed "Music for Native Americans" album



Hiawatha and the Great Peacemaker

I will always associate Robbie Robertson with Port Dover, our neighbors to the north and my adopted second home. When I sit on the town pier on quiet evenings, sorting through memories of my times there, I imagine a 14-year-old

native boy with a guitar playing at the Summer Garden. Eventually, like Robbie Robertson, we all depart this Earth, but shadow memories continue.

Summer Garden Farewell

*“The night is chill, the ballroom deserted
The sound of dancing feet is gone
The sound of music has faded away
There is no sound of voices, they have disappeared
There is no laughter
Farewell, dear old lady Summer Garden.
There are tears I cannot hide, so I smile and say as the flames die
Smoke gets in my eyes...”*

Don “Pop” Ivey, who owned and operated the Summer Garden where Robbie and his friends played as the house band, wrote this sad 1979 testimonial to the place after it burned down.



The Summer Garden on the beach at Port Dover



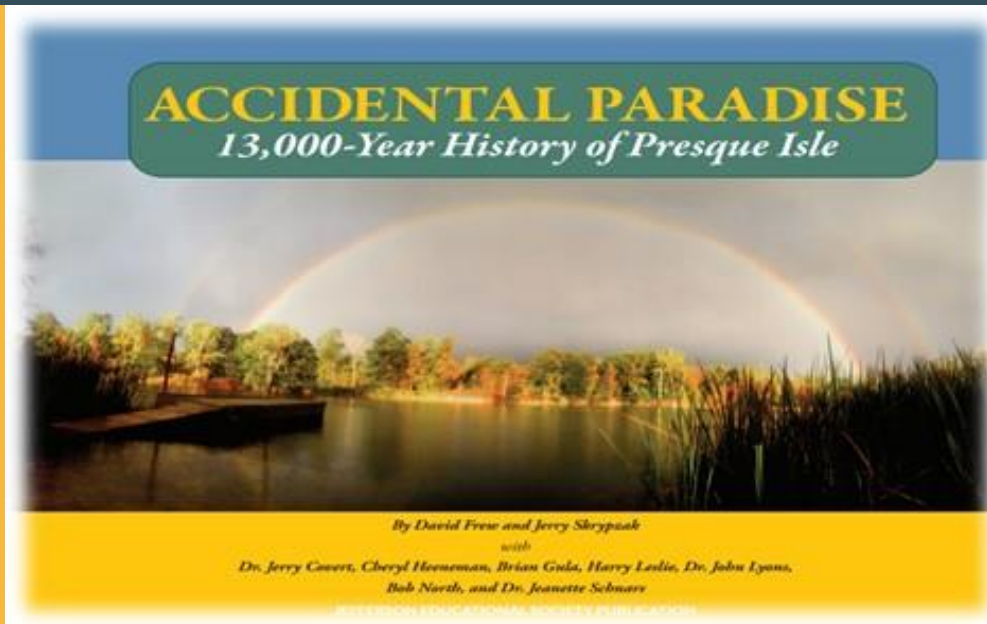
Robbie Robertson, at center stage left, plays a white, solid body guitar. Pop Ivey is at left in a white suit.

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For more information, send an email to aperino@TRECF.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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