Vocabulary

*Before reading, translate these words.*

Founded

Recognition

Juno Awards

AKA

Lyrics

Identity

Casual

Pick up on

Native (people)

Indigenous

First Nations

Legacy

Genocide

Fund

Residential

biography

Gord Downie was born on February 6th, 1964 in Amherstview, Ontario. His birth name was Gordon Edgar Downie. He was the lead singer for the Canadian band, The Tragically hip. He also had a solo career while also singing for the band. He is considered one of the most influential and popular artists in Canadian music history.

The Tragically Hip was founded in 1984. Downie formed the group with Rob Baker, Gord Sinclair, Janny Fay and Davis Manning. In 1986, Manning left the group and Paul Langlois joined. The band produced 13 studio albums, one live album and over 50 singles in their 33-year career.

The Tragically Hip (AKA The Hip) were a very successful and popular band in Canada. They did not receive as much recognition internationally but won many awards in Canada. The BBC labeled them the most Canadian band in the world. They received 16 Juno awards in their existence. Nine of their thirteen albums reached #1 on Canadian rock charts. Their music focused on Canadian content including geography, history, culture, and hockey. It is, perhaps, their Canadian content that put the band in the hearts of Canadians.

As the lead singer of the band, Downie is known for is writing ability. The lyrics of his songs often challenged Canaian identity. If he saw an injustice in Canada, Downie was not afraid to write about it. He criticized a town for being “English-Only”, the criminal justice system for a wrongful conviction, and numerous politicians. However, his lyrics were deep. A casual listener would not pick up on the things they sang about.

One thing that Downie was very critical of was the treatment of indigenous people in Canada. By 2012, he was an activist for the treatment of native Canadians. In particular, Gordie brought the issue of residential schools to a larger audience. Those schools were used to remove native culture and make the First Nations people more “Canadian”. They have a legacy of torture and cultural genocide. It was a dark secret that most Canadian wanted to ignore. Downie’s effort to give indigenous people a voice. Now, Canada even has a national holiday called National Day of Truth and Reconciliation to remember the children who died in those school as well as the survivors.

Downie’s last solo album was titled “Secret Path” and followed the life and death of a boy named Chanie Wenjack. The boy escaped the residential school system in 1966 but died trying to find his way home. This story is not uncommon from residential schools. Downie also helped to set up the Chanie Wenjack Fund to raise money for indigenous people. The fund gives money to projects that are working to further indigenous rights.

Gord Downie is a great example of an artist who used his fame to help others. He died in 2017, but his memory lives on. His work for indigenous people will be remembered. He also left behind a charity to help native people in Canada.

Questions

1. Where was Gord Downie born?
2. What was his band’s name?
3. What kind of music did they play?
4. Was the band famous outside of Canada?
5. How many Juno Awards did they win?
6. What was the problem with “residential schools” in Canada? Research and learn more.
7. What issues do indigenous people face in Canada?
8. What is Downie remembered for?