

# Former Rock Musician Now Brings 'Native Praise' to Indian Communities

**Jonathan Maracle, a Mohawk from Canada, is breaking musical ground with his Christian recordings**

Jonathan Maracle used to gyrate his hips and strut across concert stages singing the AC/DC song "Highway to Hell." Hooked on drugs and alcohol, he almost permanently ruined his voice during the early 1980s by screaming his lyrics while high on cocaine.

But one night Maracle remembered something his evangelist father told him: "Son, when your back is against the wall, call on Jesus."

That's exactly what he did in 1985. After losing a record deal in Los Angeles, Maracle considered suicide but instead prayed and gave his heart to Christ. Two weeks later he reconciled with his parents and eventually began a unique ministry that is touching hundreds of Native people in the United States, Canada and beyond.

"Native people have been given a gospel tainted by man's opinions," Maracle said. "It's my job to change that."

Maracle sings for Jesus today, but his music doesn't fit in the typical contemporary Christian mold. He uses Native drums, flutes and rattles as well as guitars, and his colorful beads, feathers and fringed shirts complement his Mohawk hairstyle. Some of his songs are in Native languages and include piercing yelps and war cries.

Maracle's message is pure gospel—yet the popularity of his band, Broken Walls, is growing as more Native people hear about its new sound. Based in Tyendinaga Territory in Ontario, near Toronto, Broken Walls has performed in churches, schools and other venues on dozens of reservations, including among the Onondaga, Navajo, Salish, Mi'kmaq, Apache, Kiowa, Ojibwa and Iroquois tribes.

What makes Maracle's music so unique is that he is not afraid to blend the gospel with the rich cultural heritage of Native life.

"There's nothing that reaches a Native person more than for them to know that God loves them the way they are," he said, noting that in the past many white missionaries told Indians they had to get rid of their Native clothing and jewelry in order to be Christians. This stripped Native people of their dignity, he maintained.

"Native people have been given such a bad example of the church of Jesus Christ that they call it a white man's religion," he added.

Maracle, 49, has big shoes to fill as an evangelist. His father, Andrew Maracle, who died in 1999, was a pioneer in Native ministry for the Assemblies of God. His brother, Ross, started the National Native Bible College in Ontario. Their cousin, John Maracle, is active in Native evangelism as well.

But Jonathan Maracle's decision to embrace Native culture and musical styles has set him apart from his family and stirred controversy within the Native Christian community. Some Native

church leaders don't allow drums or other instruments to be used in worship—a position that upsets Maracle.

“Some folks won't allow a Native drum in a church, but they will allow a set of Japanese drums with the name ‘Yamaha’ on them,” he said during a recent concert in North Dakota. “So ‘Buddhist’ drums are OK?”

Some critics have even accused Maracle of syncretism—claiming that he mixes Christianity with paganism. But Maracle stands his ground and says there is nothing inherently evil about feathers, wooden flutes or the large drum he beats during concerts with two other musicians, Kris DeLorenzi and Jeremy Radawiec.

“The drum transcends words,” said Radawiec, 22, who is part Cree. “A Native person is deeply touched by the drum because it touches their core identity.”

The drum is so important, in fact, that Broken Walls released a new recording in October that contains only drum solos. Besides 2004 Broken Walls Drum: Created to Worship, Maracle has released five other recordings and sells them on his Web site, .

Drums are especially effective when Maracle brings a Native dance team with him. Dressed in colorful tribal outfits, the dancers lift their hands and praise Jesus while using typical Native movements. Such performances attract unchurched Native people and sometimes result in conversions.

At one church on a Hopi reservation in Arizona, 50 people made professions of faith in Christ at a Broken Walls concert.

Maracle also regularly takes his message to Pikangikum, a remote Native village in Ontario that has the highest per capita suicide rate in the world.

“I can’t stand to see the funerals of all these Native young people who have killed themselves,” said Maracle, lamenting the fact that reservations have chronic problems with alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide. “They are precious people who haven’t been given a chance.”

Maracle intends to give them that chance. And when they give their lives to Christ he will not force them to renounce their ethnic identity.

**J. Lee Grady in Devil’s Lake, N.D.**