

Stepping Stones



FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT MUSIC AND DANCE

Planning your learning journey

How does a deep understanding of First Nation, Métis and Inuit music and dance support the journey of [reconciliation](#)¹?



YUET CHAN

Bronson LaChance, Teen Traditional Powwow Dancer

FIRST STEPS



First Nations, Métis and Inuit music and dance embody cultural identity. For example, “First Nations people had songs for grieving, for birth, for joy, for prayer and for so many other significant ceremonies and events. No ceremony, feast or event could function without the prayers, dances and songs of the First Nations people. Singers, drummers and ceremonial people are treated with respect and honour for their gift of song.”² The First Nations, Métis and Inuit spirit and intent of music and dance is at the heart of music and dance.

First Nations music and dance were outlawed by the [Indian Act](#)³ as a tool of forced assimilation and cultural destruction. As a result, First Nations, Métis and Inuit music and dance went underground for many years. During the dark times of cultural persecution and banishment, the Métis jig remained, due to its European origins and Inuit forms of music and dance were marginalized.





“My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.”

—Louis Riel, July 4, 1885

Despite policies of forced assimilation, music and dance were sustained, continued to be practiced and are being revitalized everywhere. Today the beauty of music and dance is celebrated during many community and public events across Turtle Island.⁴ The following are brief explanations of some components of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit music and dance.

POWWOW

[Powwows](#)⁵ bring many First Nations together across many communities during the summer months, and even within the winter months too. Powwows reinforce social bonds, spiritual beliefs, celebration and common cultural heritage. Dance competitions, special dance demonstrations, initiations, and feasts take place during a powwow. On the last day, the host nation or powwow committee shows gratitude to its visitors by conducting a [giveaway](#).^{6,7}

Drum groups, where singers sit in a circle and sing using a [big drum](#),⁸ are integral to the powwow. A host drum group leads, and other drum groups also participate, rotating songs for the dances. The drumbeat honours the heartbeat of our mothers. Songs are unique to each dance style and have been passed down for generations. Competitive and noncompetitive dances and songs are shared at powwows today. **Honour songs**⁹ show respect and are shared at a variety of events and ceremonies in addition to powwows.

The visual landscape of a powwow is an energizing array of moving bright colours. “[Regalia](#)¹⁰ is unique and sacred to each dancer. It should, therefore, not be confused with or likened to a ‘play’ costume. Powwow clothing and accessories are created with great care and attention and hold deep meaning and spiritual significance to the dancer.”¹¹

The [Grand Entry](#)¹² formally begins a powwow, with all spectators showing respect by standing and removing hats. An eagle staff is carried in with the sounds of the drums followed by dignitaries such as chiefs, veterans, flag-bearers and then the dancers. Intertribal dances at powwows are open invitations for all to dance, whether you are a dancer or a non-Indigenous spectator.

Interpretations of each dance at a powwow may vary across Turtle Island. Dance styles are divided into male and female age categories although accepting [two-spirit](#)¹³ dancers within either gender category is common.

Male categories include the following:

- **Grass Dance**, which features movements and regalia that resemble grass swaying in the wind; some believe this dance is done to prepare the grounds for the powwow;
- **Traditional**, which evokes a warrior and protector;
- **Fancy**, which is energetic and colourful; and
- **Prairie Chicken**, which mirrors the mating dance of a prairie chicken.

Female categories include the following:

- **Traditional**, which is grounded in wisdom, grace, dignity and respect;
- **Fancy Shawl**, which personifies beauty and freedom; and
- **Jingle**, a healing dance.

The **Hoop Dance** is reflective of the circle of life and our connection with the natural world.

ROUND DANCE

The **Round Dance**¹⁴ is done as a memorial or to celebrate. A pipe ceremony and feast begin the event, followed by hand drum songs and dances. Participants join hands and form a circle to dance in a clockwise direction around the hand drummers. The hosts of the round dance end the evening with a giveaway to honour the intent of the dance and offer thanks to those in attendance.¹⁵ A round dance can also occur during social events and powwows.

INUIT DRUM DANCING AND SONGS

Inuit drum dancing and songs¹⁶ tell stories, mimic nature and celebrate events such as the first successful hunt of a young boy or the birth of a child. The [Inuit drum](#)¹⁷ is made from caribou skin and is played by hitting the rim of the drum rather than the skin. Drumming is most often accompanied by dancing in such ways as the polar bear style, inspired by the movements of a polar bear in play, in which the drum is held low with the drummer dancing around it. The drum also accompanies certain kinds of songs called *ayaya*.

[Inuit throat singing](#)¹⁸ is traditionally performed by two or four women who stand face to face. One person sets the rhythm with throat sounds while the other follows. Back and forth throat song sounds replicating the sounds of nature, such as a flock of geese or the Qamuti gliding on ice, continue until one breaks the rhythm by laughing¹⁹.

MÉTIS JIGGING AND MUSIC

Métis jigging and music²⁰ are a blend of First Nations' and Scottish, Celtic, Irish and French dance forms. The jig is accompanied by the fiddle, which is a unique style rooted in Celtic/Irish/Scottish violin sounds that are combined with vigorous Indigenous rhythms. Spoons are often played and combined with foot tapping, which can be correlated with the rhythm of drum beats.²¹

Métis jigging²² is an exuberant and celebratory form of dance. A basic step of one, two, one, kick is interwoven into all jigs and used to bridge various fancy step changes. Dancers often compete with one another for the fastest, most complicated footwork.²³

The **Red River Jig** is the most celebrated Métis dance, and its name reflects the Red River area, which is the historic home for many Métis in Canada. Other jig styles include the **sash dance**, **rabbit dance**, **duck dance**, **reel of eight**, **drops of brandy**, **reel of four** and the **broom dance**. Métis jigging and music inspire fun, laughter and an upbeat social atmosphere reflective of the Métis culture, which has been shaped by adversity and resilience.²⁴

NEXT STEPS



It is important to understand the history of music and dance in connection with cultural identity and resilience of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. Seeking out events, and opportunities, or inviting guests to perform is one aspect of appreciating and celebrating Indigenous culture while learning the history, stories or teachings that go along with songs and dances. All of this contributes to deeper levels of understanding and relationship building. Powwows, round dances, jigging contests and other events are largely welcoming to guests. Respecting protocols when participating and attending as a spectator is important. Refer to the [Elder Protocol Stepping Stones](#)²⁵ when seeking knowledge from Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Having knowledge of Indigenous music and dance history as well as current practices will support teachers as they work with students and families towards reconciliation.



YUET CHAN

Judy Gatto and Gary Lee perform at Prince Charles School Fiddle Program.

Continuing your Learning Journey

a) Why is it important to go beyond a surface-level understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit music and dance?

b) How can attending an event, or inviting guests to an event, that features and teaches about First Nation, Metis or Inuit music and dance be considered an act of reconciliation?

NOTES

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Editor's Note: All websites cited in the Notes were active at the time of publication.



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For additional resources and information on Walking Together, visit www.teachers.ab.ca.

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EDUCATION FOR RECONCILIATION

