

INSPIRATION FOR ALL CANADIANS

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The year 2017 marks the 150th anniversary of Confederation in Canada. This is the year to celebrate our country’s history and the accomplishments of our people. Black History Month gives us a special opportunity to celebrate and pay tribute to black Canadians who have helped shape Canada over the past 150 years and who have done so much to pave the way for future generations. There are numerous black Canadians who, through perseverance, dedication and leadership have made a lasting impact on our country and serve as role models for young people today.

This essay is about a black Canadian who was a remarkable jazz musician and person. As a musician he was known for his speed, dexterity, unique style and ability to improvise. He rose to fame in the late 1940’s and received eight Grammys, several Lifetime Achievement Awards, fifteen honorary degrees, as well as numerous other awards. His achievements and contributions were made at a time when racial tensions were high and opportunities for black people did not come easily. He played a role in shaping Canada’s history through his music and his fight for racial equity and is quoted as saying “the music field was the first to break down racial barriers, because in order to play together, you have to love the people you are playing with, and if you have any racial inhibitions, you wouldn’t be able to do that.”

I was first introduced to Oscar Peterson in grade nine. I was required to conduct research on famous Canadians for a social studies assignment. I also became the keyboard player for my high school’s jazz band. I had always been passionate about all types of music and had taken piano lessons for years but I was finding the leap from classical piano to jazz a challenge. Because of my interest in music, I decided to research famous Canadian musicians for the social studies project. During my research, I discovered Oscar Peterson. He was also originally trained in classical music and had made the switch to jazz. I took the time to listen to his music. I loved it and was inspired. His piano playing is absolutely unbelievable and full of emotion.

As I learned about his story, I realized how amazing he truly was and how much of an inspiration he was, not only as a musician but as a person. He grew up in a poor neighborhood in Montreal and with the help of his sister (his first piano teacher), the support of his family, and determination and drive he became an accomplished pianist. Similar to many black Canadians, Oscar Peterson faced numerous challenges along his path to success due to racism. With incredible courage, he persevered through adversity, fought for equal rights, and accomplished so much despite many roadblocks that were meant to prevent black people from succeeding.

Music is a powerful median and can be used to reach people, tell a story, and connect with their emotions. It often leaves a lasting impression. In 1962 Oscar Peterson composed *Hymn to Freedom*. The song was embraced by people around the world as an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement. The lyrics are just as meaningful today as they were over fifty years ago. :

*When every heart joins every heart and together yearns for liberty,
That’s when we’ll be free.
When every hand joins every hand and together moulds our destiny,
That’s when we’ll be free.
Any hour any day, the time soon will come when men will live in dignity,
That’s when we’ll be free.
When every man joins in our song and together singing harmony,
That’s when we’ll be free.*

I think young people can learn a lot from Oscar Peterson’s life and the way he led it. He became a successful jazz musician in a time where there were huge racial divides and prejudice against black people. Instead of letting that get to him, he strived to be the best musician he could be, pushing boundaries all the way. He is an inspiration and can teach people about following their dreams, acceptance and staying true to one’s self. Oscar Peterson believed that everyone should have the same chances in life. He didn’t let personal challenges and racism get in the way of his passion. He worked hard to achieve his goals and gave back to his community by strongly advocating for racial equality. I believe Oscar Peterson is truly a role model for young Canadians; past, present and future.



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