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Joanne Shenandoah: She Sings

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

At the September 2019 Saratoga Native American Festival in Congress Park in Saratoga Springs, New York, our featured performer was Joanne Shenandoah. When she took the stage in the historic Canfield Casino, accompanied by her sister Diane, it was a special moment on a special day—a moment of return and continuance. Until a century ago, Congress Park had been the home for decades of Native American encampments every summer. And as she performed, her songs of healing and of caring for the Earth and all its people reminded everyone in the audience that our Native people are part of the present day and not just remnants of a broken past.

Born in 1957 on the Oneida Reservation in Iroquois Territory, Syracuse, New York, Joanne Shenandoah began to gain national recognition in 1989, when Canyon Records released her first album *Joanne Shenandoah*. That collection, which contained such memorable cuts as “We Are the Iroquois,” set the stage for one of the most acclaimed and remarkable careers of any singer-songwriter of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

“We are proud, we are strong/ we have held on to our culture for so long/Though times have changed, we remain the same/ we listen to our elders, they know the way,” she stated in that ballad, which described the writer herself, as much as it did the enduring Haudenosaunee Nations and their resilient traditions.

It is not just her words, often combining the Oneida language and English, that made Joanne’s compositions so unforgettable. What she did from the start was to blend traditional Native rhythms and philosophy with modern instrumentation; her intelligent lyrics and melodic voice stitching it all together like an Iroquois quilt. Further, as she grew as an artist, her work focused more and more on such issues as peace, justice, and environmental

awareness, which have long been integral parts of the Iroquois worldview.

The recognition—or perhaps prediction—of her gift among her own people came early. As a child, she was given the Wolf Clan name of *Tekalina kbwa*, or “She Sings” at the Oneida longhouse, a name she would truly honor and live up to in the decades that followed. As she put it in an interview for *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine* (CSQM): “...the elders know what they are

doing. In the Iroquois way, singing—listening to and performing music—is a healing force, an integral part of our society.”

Few musicians have been more prolific and as recognized as Joanne. Over her long career, she has performed at Woodstock ’94 and the White House, Carnegie Hall and the Parliament of World Religions. She’s released over 24 solo albums, won a Grammy, and received more Native American Music Awards (“Nammys”) than any



Joanne Shenandoah. Photo by Jane Feldman, courtesy of Joanne Shenandoah.

other Native musician. Listing all her recognitions—including an Honorary Doctorate from Syracuse University and being invited to perform a song of her own composition at the Vatican in 2012, during the canonization of Kateri Tekewkwitha, the Mohawk saint—would take up more space than this entire essay. Acclaimed as a humanitarian, working as an advocate for peace and Earth justice, while performing for audiences all over the world, she has received multiple awards and praise for her work to promote universal understanding. She was also recently honored with the Atlas Award for her work with the climate change movement, both in the United States and around the world.

How did she find herself on this path, walking with such strength between indigenous and non-Native cultures, promoting the most positive aspects of both worlds? It was a result of both her own unique gifts and her Oneida heritage.

It was not from a conservatory, but from her family, that she learned the many traditional Haudenosaunee songs and musical styles, accompanied by drum and rattle, that would flow into her writing. Further, that family was part of a long line of tradition bearers who navigated Western culture while remaining true to their indigenous roots.

Her father Clifford Shenandoah encouraged her as a performer from her earliest years. He was a jazz guitarist who played with Duke Ellington.

“Ever since I was a little girl,” she said in that same *CSQM* interview, “my dad always had me on stage. My family is very culturally oriented, so we always gave presentations in schools.”

Her father, it’s important to note, was a direct descendant of the 18th-century Iroquois leader John Skenandoa. An elected “Pine Tree Chief” among the Oneida, John Skenandoa worked for peace between nations. He formed alliances first with the British, and then, with the new American nation. Embracing both Christianity and his traditions, he was equally revered in the Native, European, and American worlds. George Washington gave him a Peace Medal

before he helped establish the Oneida Academy, now Hamilton College.

The name of “Skenandoa,” was derived from the Oneida word for the antler of a deer—who is a leader of animals. The antlers are considered antennae and worn on the top of an Iroquois “Kustoweh” or Chieftain’s hat, enabling the wearers to sense danger. John Skenandoa was known for his endurance and physical strength. Near the end of his life, in a famous speech, he was recorded as saying:

I am an aged hemlock. I am dead at the top. The winds of a hundred winters have whistled through my branches. Why my Jesus keeps me here so long, I cannot conceive. Pray ye to him, that I may have patience to endure till my time may come.

Upon his death in 1816—said to be when he was 110 years of age—he was buried at his request next to his great friend, the missionary Samuel Kirkland.

Like her many times great-grandfather, Joanne would devote her life—through her music—to those same causes of peace and understanding amongst nations.

It was not just from her father’s side, though, that a legacy of creativity and cultural ambassadorship was passed down. Among the Iroquois nations, your clan is that of your mother. Joanne’s mother Maisie was a clan mother of the Wolf Clan. In her own way, she was as notable as that famous paternal ancestor and honored by the National Organization of Women (NOW). Those belonging to a particular clan are said to be not just connected to, but also inspired by the ancestral animal totem, and no one epitomized the traditional drive and energy of the Wolf Clan more than Joanne’s mother.

A deeply respected tradition bearer, Maisie was also a singer—in Oneida. Gospel music was her great love, and with her sister Liz Robert, Maisie released a critically acclaimed album of gospel songs in the Oneida language several years before her passing. The two sisters’ version of “Rock of Ages,” (which also included Joanne) was released on the Smithsonian Folkways

collection *Beautiful Beyond* in 2004. Maisie was also an organizer of such major events as the Hunter Mountain Powwow that drew Native and non-Native people together in an atmosphere of learning and celebration.

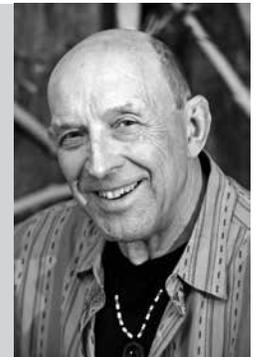
Despite a recent life-threatening illness, Joanne Shenandoah continues to speak through her music, from the culture that nurtured her and for the world as a whole, expressing the indigenous worldview of peace, combined with ecological sustainability. It is a view that has never been more needed.

Joanne’s husband, Doug George-Kanentiio (who will be the subject of a future essay), is a prolific writer and member of the Mohawk Nation and a founding board member of the Hiawatha Institute for Indigenous Knowledge—a nonprofit higher learning educational facility based on Iroquois principles, which operates in partnership with Syracuse University.

When I asked Joanne what she wished to say about herself and her work, the answer she gave me seemed the best way to close this essay:

I feel extremely honored to carve a path for Iroquois music by blending traditional songs and instruments with my voice into stories, which bring forth profound messages of peace. This, of course, would not be possible without the inspiration of our ancestors. I ask them to use me as a voice to help bring the messages of peace and hope and healing to our Earth and humankind. ▼

Joseph Bruchac is a writer, musician, and traditional Native storyteller whose work often reflects his American Indian (Abenaki) ancestry and the Adirondack Region of northern New York where he lives in the house he was raised in by his grandparents. He is the author of over 120 books for young readers and adults, including the award-winning volume *OUR STORIES REMEMBER, American Indian History, Culture and Values through Storytelling*. Photo by Eric Jenks.



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