

# Song of Transformation

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

First Nations Englishes display continuity in discourse structuring, even when the speaker is monolingual in English. This article documents this cultural and discursive continuity through the analysis of a young Seneca songwriter's performance of an original non-traditional song, written and sung in English. The analysis highlights key features of traditional Iroquoian discourse as they appear in the song text, and ties those discursive strategies to the social and political context of the performance venue, the songwriter's family and the Six Nations community. This multilevel ethnomusicological analysis explores issues of genre and style as they relate to identity and resistance in the context of a Canadian First Nation.

# SONG OF TRANSFORMATION

## Performing Iroquoian Identity Through Non-Traditional Song

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*Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom, 'cause all I ever know,  
redemption songs.  
(Bob Marley)*

A multileveled analysis of a song created and sung by a young man from the Six Nations community explores issues of identity and resistance among First Nations people in southwestern Ontario. Song and lyric together index larger social and political concerns of First Nations people in Canada in their struggle to assert an identity little understood by the matrix culture of predominantly Euro-Canadians. Although the musical structure of the song is not considered traditional Iroquoian and the lyrics are in English, subtle stylistic features are found which mark this as uniquely Iroquoian in nature.

As Feld notes, "Music has a fundamentally social life. It is made to be engaged — practically and intellectually, individually and communally — as a symbolic entity. By 'engaged' I mean socially interpreted as meaningfully structured, produced, performed, and displayed by historically situated actors" (Keil and Feld 1994: 77). On the afternoon of 8 August 1992, twenty-three year old Sam Hess<sup>1</sup> of the Seneca Nation dropped by his mother and stepfather's home on his

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1. It is with Sam Hess' permission that I present his song and my analysis. Theresa McCarthy of the Seneca Nation was then a graduate student working on a SSHRC grant involved in a cross-cultural study of Englishes spoken by First Nations peoples in southwestern Ontario. I am very grateful for her outstanding contributions in data collection on the Six Nations Reserve during the summer of 1992. I also wish to thank George Fulford, David Kanatawa'kon Maracle and Allan McDougall for their extremely helpful discussions on different aspects of the article.

way to perform on the local radio station. When Sam arrived, he found his cousin, Theresa McCarthy, taping stories about life in residential school. In his relatively brief visit, Sam chatted a bit and then played one song at the request of his mother. That song, written for and about his mother, is the basis of the following analysis of the symbolic structuring of a non-traditional song in English that builds out of an Iroquoian discourse tradition. Following Dunaway, this analysis examines "...the performance as a communicative event, in terms of the cultural rules of communication which surround it — what is communicated (content), to whom (audience), and at what places and times (context)" (1987: 50).

### Performance Context: Sam's Song

In the forty minutes prior to Sam's arrival at his mother's house, Theresa had been listening to and taping her mother's cousin and cousin's husband talking about their lives in residential school, the former Mohawk Institute, located outside Brantford, Ontario near the Six Nations Reserve. These stories were presented with both humour and great sadness. The bewilderment about the way these elders had been treated in the school lingers palpably in their stories. The husband relived his confusion and disbelief at being twice accused of disobedience for not washing dirt from his neck, and his reaction to his ultimate punishment for not removing what he realized later was a birthmark. As he said to Theresa:

I washed a second time and you **can't** wash that away.  
 I guess if that were so... a whole **lot** of things would... be washed away.  
 Even that idea... **stuck** to me... even...to now.  
 ... At the time, I just... thought: Why? Why me?

This elder recited story after story of false accusations and unjust punishments and further stories of separation and loss. He recounted a particularly poignant narrative of how he, an extremely lonely young student, had befriended a dog while working on the farm adjacent to the school grounds and how hurt he had been when the dog was shot by authorities for no apparent reason other than to break up this bond between the child and the dog.

When Sam Hess entered the house where the stories were being told, he was on his way to perform some of his songs at CKRZ, the local

Six Nations FM radio station. When he found his cousin Theresa operating a tape recorder, Sam asked her several times what kind of information she wanted. For a few minutes after he arrived, Sam attended to the desultory talk of his relatives as they interwove earlier themes of residential school life with humorous stories of relatives at the annual family reunion, including a story about the uncle who had stood on a picnic table, in drag, singing a rousing rendition of “Dancin’ in the Streets.” This juxtapositioning of themes sacred and profane seemed to put Sam at ease. It was in this context that his mother asked Sam to sing the song that he had written for her, a residential school victim whose life had been devastated by her experiences in the “mush house”, a common nickname for the Mohawk Institute. Sam’s mother made her request:

- Mother: Yeah. Do that one song. Sing that one song you sang there. Just speed it up a bit. That one you sang on the radio one day.  
 Sam: I haven’t played in a while.  
 Mother: I know. [...]  
 Sam: Hmmm Hmm [jokingly clearing his throat]  
 Mother: (laughs)  
 Sam: [I’ll] Sing a song I wrote about my mother.  
 Theresa: ‘kay.  
 Mother: I’ve got my Kleenex all ready  
 Theresa: (laughs)  
 Sam: I wrote this song when I was a young man (laughs). You got a pick.  
 Theresa: Do you write a lot of songs?  
 Sam: Yeah.  
 [very faintly in the background] A whole album.

[Sam begins singing]

*It’s been a long time since I said I love you.  
 But you know in your heart that I do.  
 I may be far away and don’t keep in touch.  
 But, that’s my way of saying I love you so very much.  
 For the longest time I’ve held a grudge against you,  
 because of the way I was raised and treated.  
 Hate and fear surrounded my soul,  
 but now I found a way to defeat it.*

*No I didn't understand when I was a young man,  
 how hard it was to be alone on your porch.  
 You gave me life,  
 you gave me strength,  
 but most of all you gave me heart.  
 I remember the bad times,  
 but I remember the good,  
 and I wish I could go back in time.  
 To be with you as much as I could  
 and say, "Mama, I'm proud to call you mine."  
 No, I didn't understand when I was a young man,  
 how hard it was to raise us on your own.  
 But time has passed  
 and we're grown at last  
 and with our love, you'll never be alone.  
 With our love, you'll never be alone.*

After Sam finished his song, his mother reiterated her initial evaluation, highlighted above: "I like that, yeah. First time I heard it, I just cried." In her request for Sam to sing this particular song, Sam's *mother* created a connection between residential schools and the resulting disruption of family and community life on the reserve.<sup>2</sup> The song brought together multiple threads of the prior conversation — the stories of life in the "mush house", familial relations and family reunions, and subversive, but expert and entertaining public music performance.

### Genre and Style: Using Country Music as an Emotive Platform

The song's genre and style index key features of Iroquoian public ceremonial discourse framed within an established, but "non-traditional",<sup>3</sup> musical form performed by contemporary youths in both Iroquoian and Algonquian communities.<sup>4</sup> Questions of genre and style

2. Forced attendance at residential schools has been linked repeatedly with resulting disruptions in family relations and parenting skills in succeeding generations. This link is not only made by researchers, but also by many First Nations individuals and communities and has become part of the discourse of the healing process inherent in many current court cases against the practice of forcing First Nations children to attend such institutions.
3. The term "traditional" typically is used to refer to actions and activities considered to have origins within the Aboriginal community. In addition, those things "traditional" are considered to have a long history in that same community. Because I argue that the specific form of the "non-traditional"

have often been separated,<sup>5</sup> with the result that “More often than not, stylistics defines itself as a stylistics of ‘private craftsmanship’ and ignores the social life of discourse outside the artist’s study, discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages, of social groups, generations and epochs” (Bakhtin [1935-37] 1981: 259). In this case, genre and style are difficult to separate, but both give insights into the community marked by shared interpretive repertoires. Both genre and style are meaningfully structured and performed within a specific historical context.

The musical genre of Sam’s song may be roughly classified as a cross between country and western and folk music, diverging from both most notably in the extreme manner in which the musical phrasing is subordinated to lyrical structure. That is, the structuring of the lyrics drives the melodic line. Extra beats may be added to accommodate a longer textual line.<sup>6</sup> Despite the primacy of the text, the musical platform remains extremely important as a framework for evoking an emotional ballad. Sam’s use of a very slow-paced country and western melodic

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song addressed here displays features that are unique to and arise out of Iroquoian society, the popular use of the “non-traditional” may be somewhat misleading. In addition, in Euro-American societies, country and western music is considered to have “traditional” origins. The question comes down to: traditional for whom and in what context?

4. My first exposure to this musical form was listening to a community radio station in a remote fly-in community in northwestern Ontario. In that case, a young Ojibwe man, whose first and primary language was Severn Ojibwe, simultaneously composed and sang English lyrics to a country-and-western style tune. His songs were very similar in style to Sam’s, especially in the slow-pacing of the tempo and the subordination of melodic line to lyrical line. Rhyme, however, was not a device used by the Ojibwe singer, as rhyme in the Ojibwe language is a function of morphology rather than phonological play (see Valentine 1995: 113). Other genres that have become more common among younger people in First Nations communities across Canada include rap and hip hop.
5. “The separation of style and language from the question of genre has been largely responsible for a situation in which only individual and period-bound overtones of a style are the privileged subjects of study, while its basic social tone is ignored” (Bakhtin [1935-37] 1981: 259).
6. According to David Kanatawa’kon Maracle, songs sung in Iroquoian languages, in the Longhouse and especially in the centuries-old (Christian) hymn singing tradition, are often marked by the fluid relationship between text and tune. A single “song” (as defined by song lyrics) may be sung to multiple tunes and, conversely, a single tune may be used for many different song texts. This allows singers considerable room for lyrical and musical innovation in all contexts.

structure, accompanied by chords strummed on the guitar, immediately marked this song as one where the audience was to focus on emotional turmoil. In this context, the genre of country and western music immediately provided a key or a frame for the audience: they were ready with their Kleenexes.

The expression of emotion is a key feature of most musical performance. The connection between emotion and performance has been addressed in many ways (see Jakobson 1960<sup>7</sup>). In Sam's song, the musical genre, the lyrics and the style of play combine to mark his performance as one where emotion is primary. Feld and Keil capture both the depth and immediacy of the connections between musical form, performance and emotion in their discussion:

S. F[eld]: ... feelings are embodied, formed, and performed through form, performed into feelings that are enacted... It isn't the fixity of musical process that's the key here; it's the staging of song performance as an arena for the aesthetics of emotional display, confirmation, and circulation.

C. K[eil]: It's an old cliché that music in some way codes the language of emotions" (Keil and Feld 1994: 166).

There are marked differences in lyrical content between songs performed by Iroquoian and Ojibwe singers: Iroquoian songs publicly display emotions, which appear to be evoked by external factors as opposed to the Ojibwe forms where the emotions expressed are internally-generated.<sup>8</sup> While apparently subordinated to the text, the country and western melodic style adds immediately recognizable interpretation cues: this song anticipates an emotional response. According to Fox, the prototypical country song emerges "in the interstices of two competing, yet interdependent, cultural

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7. Jakobson's "emotive function" proposed for texts is easily overlaid onto musical form: "The so-called emotive or 'expressive' function, focused on the addresser, aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about. It tends to produce an impression of a certain emotion ..." (1960: 354).
  8. The northern Ojibwe emotion-laden lyrics take the form "I feel this way and that is why I act in this way", where the Iroquoian texts follow more closely the form "I feel this way because of X". The similarities and differences between Iroquoian and Algonquian non-traditional songs are fascinating but need to be addressed in another paper.

metanarratives... Loss and Desire” (1992: 54).<sup>9</sup> While surface features of Sam’s song may appear to fit that mold, analysis will show that this song is one of redemption and transformation.

### **Structure of the Song: Building on Established Discourses**

Feld’s discussion of communication as “... interactive, residing in dialectic relations between form and content, stream and information, code and message, culture and behavior, production and reception, construction and interpretation” (Keil and Feld 1994: 78) foregrounds the importance of multiple aspects of a communicative event. As Feld continues, “[c]ommunication is neither the idea nor the action but the process of intersection whereby objects and events are, through the work of social actors, rendered meaningful or not.” The social actors in this event extend well beyond the singer/songwriter and those present during the performance to include the historically-situated community with its shared constellations of “form and content, stream and information, code and message, culture and behavior, production and reception, construction and interpretation.” The categorization or interpretation of music and lyrics is both culturally grounded and emergent: in a word, dialogic.<sup>10</sup> In this case, we need to demonstrate some of those dialogic and discursive practices that underpin Sam’s performance.

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9. The focus of Fox’s analysis was widely-played, commercially-successful songs. He continues: “These metanarratives are powerful and diffuse cultural ‘stories’ which make sense of and reproduce social and psychological experience in capitalist society. They organize and produce, and are in turn reproduced by, country music’s textual narratives, performance conventions, and its contexts of production and consumption” (Fox 1992: 54). While I would argue that Sam’s song does not fit this schema well, the stories related by the relatives prior to Sam’s arrival do appear to fit Fox’s metanarratives quite nicely.
  10. See Bakhtin (1981). Fabbri addresses the difficulties of categorization of musical traditions and forms with these tensions at the forefront: “But since [musical categories] are chiefly cultural categories one must consider not only the agreement — constantly subjected to re-negotiation — within the community that agrees to recognize a given category, but also the dialectic function of the ideology, understood (see Eco 1975) as a hierarchy of codes... One must resign oneself to the fact that, when dealing with cultural categories, we cannot talk of a privileged, objective and scientific point of view. Categories are the object and at the same time the engine of confrontation: everybody is involved while nobody can simply be an onlooker” (2001: htm#6).



In contemporary Iroquoian society, elders still maintain the privileged position of having the right to speak in public. Only after one has matured and has come to know the language, ritual and ceremonies of one's Nation does one earn the right to an individual public voice within the community. Younger people's voices join those of the chorus in ritual and ceremony. They may also be heard as a *part* of a traditional singing group. Here again, their voices are communal, not solo. However, in non-traditional song performance, a young person is permitted an individual public voice. Sam's words cloaked in song uniquely index his place between multiple worlds: between age and youth, between knowledge and ignorance, between love and fear, between the traditional and the contemporary, between Native society and that of mainstream Euro-Canada. The textual structuring richly indexes dialogical relationships which connect Sam's multiple worlds. The structuring of this song written and performed in English by a monolingual English speaker using a non-traditional musical style can only be fully appreciated by an understanding of traditional Iroquoian ceremonial performances.

In Iroquoian ceremonial discourse, the most important elements typically occur in ultimate position. That is, as outlined by Foster (1974), when recounting the ritual Thanksgiving Address, one's declarations of thanks begins in the realm of the earth: commencing with humans, things under the ground, and things located on the earth; moving to the realm of the sky including the winds, the thunderers, the moon, sun and stars; and ultimately concluding with thanks given to things beyond the sky: to the prophets, to Handsome Lake, and finally with thanks given to the Creator. This exquisite performance of one's place in and on Turtle Island reinforces, and indeed, maintains one's position in the universe.

Sam's song, though considered non-traditional in both lyrical and musical content, retains key features of oral ritual. In this song, the message builds up to and concludes with a doublet of the most important line: *With our love, you'll never be alone*. The final line, like the final thanks given in the Thanksgiving Address, is the ultimate tribute Sam could give to a mother whose life was extremely difficult.

#### *Performative Act*

Another structuring device found in this song is a performative act which is doubly marked by the use of direct discourse.

I wish I could go back in time.  
 To be with you as much as I could  
 and say, "Mama, I'm proud to call you mine."

The performative act is found in the statement where Sam not only wishes he could say, "Mama, I'm proud to call you mine" but actually *does* it, publicly, in his performance. In his comparison of short and long versions of performances of Cayuga ceremonial speeches, Foster determined that:

The performative utterance is the climax, the *raison d'être* for all else that has been said in the section, the point to which all else leads. Take it away and the section would have little or no ritual significance; include it and it is even possible to omit much of the rest of what is said and keep the basic intent... (1974: 139-40)

In further examination of structuring devices found in this song, we discover highly artistic crafting of the lyrics which are easily missed by speakers of standard Euro-Canadian English. In Jakobson's discussion of linguistics and poetics, he noted that "[i]n poetry not only the phonological sequence but in the same way any sequence of semantic units strives to build an equation. Similarity superimposed on contiguity imparts to poetry its throughgoing [sic] symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic essence..." (1960: 370). When we examine such sequences of "similarity superimposed on contiguity" in this song, we discover multiple layers of symbolic organization that work together to create its dynamic and transformative core.

One of the most fascinating structures is found in an examination of conjunctions. If we take only those lines in which the coordinate conjunction "and" is used, we find an exquisite summary of a problem and its ultimate solution. These sentences provide the narrative underpinnings of the lyrical structuring. If we extract just these lines, we have a precise summary of Sam's "story."

#### *Coordinating conjunctions*

I may be far away *and* don't keep in touch.  
 because of the way I was raised *and* treated.  
 Hate *and* fear surrounded my soul,  
*and* I wish I could go back in time.  
 To be with you as much as I could *and* say, "Mama, I'm proud to  
 call you mine."

*and* we're grown at last  
*and* with our love you'll never be alone.

This eloquent statement of problem and resolution in this summary is the essence of healing in First Nations communities.

*Adversative Conjunctions: The Key to Transformation*

If we examine Sam's use of the adversative conjunction, "but," we find an equally remarkable performance of uniquely Iroquoian discourse. Labov (1972) writes of the rhetorical device of using adversatives in Black Vernacular English in the form, "not X but Y", as a means of presenting an alternative which is discounted and unrealized. This use of the adversative conjunction "but" is consistent with standard North American English usage. In Sam's lyrics, the adversative conjunction is better understood as a redemptive conjunction (with deference to Bob Marley's use of the term). That is, each initial statement is emotionally negative, but the clause following "but" accomplishes a positive transformation. By attending to both components of the adversative construction, we have an insight into the essential emotional dynamic of the piece.

- |   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| 1. It's been a long time since I said, "I love you,"                | <i>negative statement</i> |
| 2. <i>But</i> you know in your heart that I do.                     | <i>transformation</i>     |
| 3. I may be far away and don't keep in touch,                       | <i>negative statement</i> |
| 4. <i>But</i> , that's my way of saying<br>I love you so very much. | <i>transformation</i>     |
| 7. Hate and fear surrounded my soul,                                | <i>negative statement</i> |
| 8. <i>But</i> now I found a way to defeat it.                       | <i>transformation</i>     |
| 11. You gave me life,   | <i>negative statement</i> |
| 12. You gave me strength,   | <i>negative statement</i> |
| 13. <i>But</i> most of all, you gave me heart. <sup>11</sup>        | <i>transformation</i>     |
| 14. I remember the bad times,                                       | <i>negative statement</i> |
| 15. <i>But</i> I remember the good,                                 | <i>transformation</i>     |

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11. Lines 11-13 appear to be an exception. However, see discussion of lines 11-13 under Parallelism.

19. No, I didn't understand when I was a young man,  
 20. how hard it was to raise us on your own. *negative statement*

21. *But* time has passed *transformation*  
 22. And we're grown at last.

In these lines, Sam was not denying the problems of his childhood; rather, he uncovered the redemptive elements, choosing to resolve his family's pain through an acknowledgement of the past. He voiced the problems, made them public, and in so doing, opened the pathway for healing.

### *Parallelism*

A final area where a "sequence of semantic units strives to build an equation", is in those lines where phrases, lines and (mini-)stanzas are repeated *verbatim* through the song. Some of those parallelisms are very immediate, as in lines 11-13, where "you gave me X" was repeated three times. The parallelism of these lines builds to the final (redemptive) repetition "but most of all you gave me heart". In this text, we find that life is associated with pain and strength with suffering, but heart is associated with love. Using parallel structures in these three short clauses doubly highlights the transformation of the third one.

11. *You gave me* life,  
 12. *you gave me* strength,  
 13. but most of all *you gave me* heart.

When addressing parallelisms, the variations are made all the more salient by the structural similarities. In the next two lines of the song, we find Sam remembering the bad times, "but" remembering the good as well. Again, the tight parallelism coupled with the use of the transformative conjunction "but" highlight the importance of both parts of the equation.

14. *I remember* the bad times,  
 15. but *I remember* the good,

In lines 9-10 and 19-20, we find a parallelism across a larger unit. In this case, Sam used a two line mini-stanza to reinforce his growing understanding of his mother's actions.

9. *No I didn't understand when I was a young man,*  
 10.       *how hard it was to be alone on your porch.*

19. *No, I didn't understand when I was a young man,*  
 20.       *how hard it was to raise us on your own.*

In this case, the variations, “be alone on your porch” and “raise us on your own” show another type of parallelism. Instead, using a strict repetition of lines 9-10, in lines 19-20, Sam used a doublet where the variations were essentially paraphrastic. To “be alone on the porch” is a metaphor for social separation from the surrounding community, another way to express that his mother had “raised us on [her] own”. In both lines 10 and 20, Sam focused on his growing empathy for his mother’s loneliness and isolation when Sam and his sibling(s) were young. This is explicitly noted in the final lines of the song, 23-24, where the remedy is presented:

23.       *and with our love, you'll never be alone.*  
 24. With our love, you'll never be *alone*.

Here the two tokens of “alone” in lines 23 and 24 are parallel to the “alone” (and “on your own”) of line 10 (and 20). Except for the initial conjunction “and” in line 23, lines 23-24 form a perfect repetition, and the fitting culmination of the sentiments within the text.

## Conclusion

In order to interpret Sam’s song “as meaningfully structured, produced, performed and displayed”, those outside his interpretive community need to be taught multiple aspects of what people in that community would or could hear when listening to the song. Life in residential schools caused devastating and lasting effects on social life of the Aboriginal families on reserves. These effects carry on for generations, well beyond the lives of those who were sent to the schools. Only in understanding the depth of the difficulties faced by survivors of residential schools, and the effects on family relationships, does this song make sense. The social context extended far beyond the performance venue, well beyond the performer and audience at Sam’s mother’s house, and well beyond the performer and audience of the radio station. The history of the Six Nations community, the history of the Seneca Nation, the history of Sam’s family, and the history of Sam’s song itself were all implicated.

Another area to be understood is why did Sam use a country and western musical platform? One answer is that it is a recognized vehicle for performances of sadness and anger, although more typically framed in metanarratives of desire and loss (Fox 1991). Another is that in this community, younger people may perform country music solo; this musical style is open to any who would use it. Country music is an alternative to more “traditional” forms where the right to perform is often based on a combination of age, ritual training, clan relationships and gender.

Finally, although presented in English, the text is a finely crafted piece of Iroquoian discourse, with layers of meaning built upon and out of traditional Iroquoian discursive strategies, such as Sam’s traditional Iroquoian use of the performative act, coordinating and adversative conjunctions, and parallelism. Sam’s use of these strategies demonstrates the incredible integrity of those devices in structuring thought, text, lyric, across generations, across genres and across languages. Sam’s song was not translated from Seneca or any other Iroquoian language; it was an original song text, written “when I was a young man”, reported the then 23-year-old. The text itself illustrates how, despite the residential school system which robbed the children of their Aboriginal languages and parenting skills, the heart of the Iroquoian society continues. As the examination of the song text reveals, Sam’s song was a song of healing, but healing is often a discourse of private pain transformed into public outcry. Sam’s performance was simultaneously a song of pain, a song of transformation, a song of healing, a song of resistance, a song of redemption and, ultimately, a song of love.

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