

Speaking freely



By Nate Smelle

A few weeks ago, Canada's 'Queen of rhythm and blues' singer-songwriter, producer, actress and artist/activist Jilly Black used the power of a single word - that word being 'on' - to ignite an absolutely necessary national conversation about truth and reconciliation. To ensure her message rang out loud and clear from coast to coast to coast, Black simply changed the lyrics of the Canadian national anthem during her performance at the 2023 NBA All-Star Game from 'our home and native land' to 'our home on native land.' Sadly but expectedly, Black received hate mail from a small group of usual suspects online in response to her simple yet powerfully factual amendment to our national anthem. More positively, her decision to accurately alter the song that officially became our national anthem on July 1, 1980 provoked a greater number of Canadians to rally behind her. Now, as a result of stating the truth, many Indigenous leaders are even calling for the lyrical fine-tuning to be permanent. Artists using their creativity to raise awareness and inspire the world to change for the better is nothing new. Throughout the late 1700s, artist Jacques-Louis David used his talent to inspire change by depicting the events of the French Revolution as they unfolded. Spanish artist Pablo Picasso's famous anti-war painting, *Guernica* - created in response to the bombing of Guernica on April 26, 1937 by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy at the request of the Spanish nationalists - was exhibited repeatedly on tour and used to raise funds for Spanish war relief; and, bring worldwide attention to the Spanish Civil War. On Dec. 15, 1969, artists John Lennon and Yoko Ono delivered a clearly pro-peace 'Happy Christmas' message to millions of people around the world, utilizing a collection of bold billboards on display publicly in 12 major cities including Toronto, New York, and Tokyo. Like Black's more accurate rendition of the Canadian national anthem at the recent NBA All-Star Game in Utah, John and Yoko's message was simple and direct in declaring: 'War is over! If you want it.' Throughout his entire career Canadian singer-songwriter and artist/activist Neil Young has used his music as a tool to raise awareness about issues including but not limited to social justice, corporate tyranny, Indigenous/human rights, environmental

destruction, and the dangers of disinformation. The Tragically Hip's guitarist Paul Langlois recently came under fire from several self-identifying 'free speech advocates' on the far-right for calling out the Conservative Party of Canada's latest leader Pierre Poilievre for using the iconic Canadian band's music at a political event in Hamilton. Although it turned out in the end that the event's venue was indeed licensed to play The Hip's music, Langlois made it clear through his opposition that The Hip's quintessentially Canadian music was a bad fit with Poilievre's Trumpian-style of divide and fail to conquer politics. When Langlois and Black each stood up for what they believe in, they did so knowing that they could speak freely without ending up in jail, or even worse, in front of a firing squad. In some countries, even today, these artists' simple act of speaking out would not be met with such tolerance. By exercising their right to express themselves, Black and Langlois also shone a light on the faux 'freedom fighters' who only defend free speech when the words being spoken fit their personal political agenda. Why is it that the individuals who rush to defend fake news and hate speech under the guise of protecting our right to free speech are the same people who tell artists such as Jully Black, Paul Langlois, and Neil Young to shut up and stick to making music? Anyone paying attention knows the answer to this question; but it is still worth asking if we plan to 'Rockin' in the free world.?