

## **“Prayers in a Song”**

by Tall Paul

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### **Meet Tall Paul!**

from Great Lakes Native Culture & Language | The Ways | PBS Wisconsin Education

In “Prayers in a Song,” Minneapolis based hip hop artist Tall Paul (Paul Wenell Jr.) raps about his struggle to learn his indigenous language, Anishinaabemowin, and his journey toward a deeper understanding of his Native identity. Speaking of the harsh realities of growing up in a poor urban landscape, Tall Paul raps in both English and Anishinaabemowin.

Tall Paul is an enrolled member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, in Northern Minnesota. Tall Paul, however, grew up in Minneapolis. He says in his rap, “I feel the latent effects of assimilation / inner city Native, raised by bright lights skyscrapers.” For many young American Indians, especially those not raised on a reservation, there is a tension between their inner-city upbringing and a desire to learn their Native language and customs.

From the early days of European contact, Native people endured destruction of language and culture due to removal from their lands, relocation, and forced assimilation. As late as the 1950s, Native children were removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools where they were forced to learn English and stop speaking their language and practicing traditional ways. After the relocation program was abolished in the 1970s, some Native people moved back to the reservations.

Today, two-thirds of all American Indians live in cities. In Minneapolis, where Tall Paul is based, American Indians comprise 2 percent of the population, as compared to 1.1 percent in Minnesota as a whole (2010 U.S. Census). Like Native people in other urban areas, American Indians in Minneapolis face issues of higher poverty rates than the general population, less accessibility to health care, and a staggering educational achievement gap. As few as one in five American Indian students graduates from high school.

For the past two decades, Native language revitalization has become important in American Indian education across the United States and Canada. Tall Paul says he was inspired to write the lyrics to this song after attending Ojibwe language classes as a student at the University of Minnesota.

In recording “Prayers in a Song,” Tall Paul reflects on his personal experience. His music speaks to both the challenges he’s faced growing up in an urban environment and the benefits of the spiritual support and resources of his extended family and community.

Tall Paul works for the Division of Indian Work in a community-led initiative to close the achievement gap for American Indian students. Paul shares his education and experience with students at the Anishinaabe Academy, a K-8 Minneapolis public school. He records and performs with the group Point of Contact, continuing to explore the complexities of language and culture in relation to his own identity.

## 8 Questions for Tall Paul

from Digital Drum website

### Why hip hop?

“Hip hop is pretty much all I was ever exposed to as a kid. I always enjoyed listening to it, and one day I just felt like writing a rap.”

### What’s your favorite thing about the music biz?

“That it provides me with a means to make a living doing what I love to do most.”

### What role do your Indigenous roots play in your day-to-day life in general, and your music in particular?

“They play a large role in my life... because the youth program I work for is Native-specific, not to mention the school I work in is too. It often plays a part in my spiritual life as well. In terms of music, it’s always been a part of my identity, so naturally I speak on my Indigenous identity... whenever I’m feeling like it. It’s just a part of who I am and sometimes it comes out in my lyrics.”

### Do you consider yourself an activist? How does your platform as a musician/artist play into that?

“I do some things that you might say an activist would do, but I just consider that me being me. I’ve rapped a lot about socially conscious topics, and it enables me to be a voice that speaks on important matters, with the intent of raising awareness and educating others.”

### Hip hop has a reputation for its focus on drinking, drugs, violence, sexism, etc. How do you reconcile the genre’s history and reputation with positive messages you’re trying to spread through your music?

“First off, I’d say most genres of music speak on those things. Second, I’d say that reputation is largely pushed and perpetuated by corporations, major labels, and Top-40 radio stations. The music business makes it lucrative to speak on those things, so a lot of people do it just to make money, and not even necessarily because they actually live the life they rap about. I think hip hop takes the hit because it’s largely undertaken by people of color, and we all know this country’s history with intentional undercover racism.”

### As a musician, how do you define success?

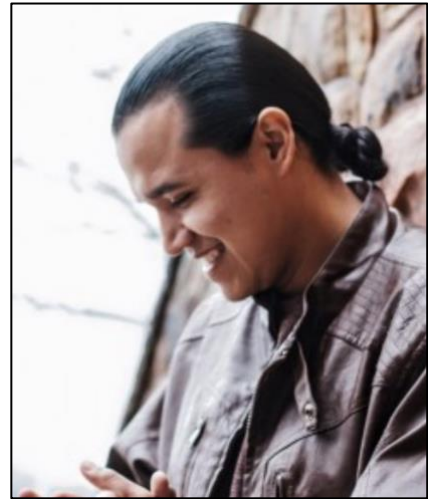
“Making music exactly as I see fit and being happy with my product, as well as being able to support myself financially with it. Knowing that I’ve made a positive impact on the lives of others, however big or small, that’s always a great feeling.”

### What has been your biggest challenge or struggle to date, either musically or personally?

“Figuring out my place in this world and what my true purpose is, that’s been extremely difficult for a long time. I’ve finally arrived at the answer to that, but it’s been a long and hard road and it requires a lot of work and maintenance.”

### There’s a ton of MCs out there. What makes Tall Paul different?

“I spit from my own personal experience and in my own style. When you do that, it’s not really possible for anyone to sound like you.”



## “Prayers in a Song” by Tall Paul

Watch Tall Paul’s music video at least two times: <https://youtu.be/BIQJCINQDBo> (4:00)

### Verse 1

I feel the latent effects of assimilation  
inner city native raised by bright lights, sky scrapers,  
born with dim prospects, little peace in living  
as a child, hot headed about the fact I wasn't wild  
like they called my ancestors, imagined what it'd be  
to live nomadic off the land and free,  
instead I was full of heat like a furnace cause I wasn't furnished  
with language and traditional ways of my peeps,  
yeah I used to feel like I wasn't truly indigenous,  
now I say miigwech gichi-manidoo  
for showing me my true roots, definitely native,  
take responsibility for being educated,  
my people and customs originating from early phases  
of history its, deeper than frybread  
and contest pow-wows, tears shed in the sweat lodge,  
prayers go out to all those I've wronged  
and who have wronged me gotta treat 'em like family

### Chorus

Gichi-manido wiidookawishin ji-mashkawiziyaan  
*(Great Spirit help me to be strong)*  
Mii dash bami'idiziyaan  
*(So that I can help myself)*  
Miizhishinaam zaagi'iiwewin  
*(Show us all love)*  
Ganoozh ishinaam, bizindaw ishinaam  
*(talk to us, hear us)*  
Mii-wenji nagamoyaan  
*(That is why I am singing)*  
Nimishomis wiidookawishinaam ji-aabajitooyaang anishinaabe izhitwaawin  
*(Grandfather help us to use the Native ways)*  
mii-ji-bi-gikendamaan keyaa anishinaabe bimaadiziwin  
*(so that we'll know how to live the Native way/the good life)*

### 2nd Verse

becoming aware of a heart beats fragility  
so I, pray for my creators will and humility,  
it seems my prayer's weak I can't speak, not a linguist,  
does he hear my english when I vent I fear the answer  
to the question, this is symbolic of anguish

I feel regarding language and the obligation of revitalizing  
something sacred, failure to carry through is disgracing  
a nation, my first tongue's in need of a face lift but,  
deciphering conjugation's like trying to find  
my way through a maze in the matrix, complex  
hard to start without an end aside from being fluent,  
I gotta push the limit if I'm gonna keep pursuing,  
so I, use it in a way that relates to my life and vocab,  
bring some entertainment to it spit it on a track,  
and I take it out the class, can't let what I lack  
become a self-defeating habit that'll make me want to quit

## **Chorus**

### **3rd Verse**

it's farfetched but grandfather please help me learn it,  
help me assist in keeping it from burning,  
don't let me quit and flee from working for a worthy purpose,  
enlighten me and help me comprehend effects of my service,  
I need a spark in my desire from something higher  
prior to negative reminders killing my stride,  
sometimes I'm the type that likes getting results  
overnight, without sweating or stressing overnight,  
so I pray...

*(not included in the video)*

*creator give me strength, then I can move on,  
creator show us love, so it can spread around,  
communicate with us, from above, hear me now,  
my prayers in a song I speak 'em out loud,  
grandfather help us to revitalize the language and ways  
so we walk the red road that you paved,  
communicate with us from above hear me now,  
my prayers in a song I speak 'em out loud*

### **4th Verse**

creator give me strength, so I can move on,  
creator show us love, so it can spread around,  
communicate with us, from above, hear me now,  
my prayers in a song I speak 'em out loud,  
grandfather help us to revitalize  
the language and ways so we walk the red road  
that you paved, communicate with us from above  
hear me now, my prayers in a song I speak 'em out loud

**I can explain how music is influenced by the context in which it was created**

After you have listened to “Prayers in a Song,” think aloud with a partner or small group to answer these questions. Bring your ideas to a class discussion.

1. What are some of the big ideas Tall Paul raps about in “Prayers in a Song”?

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- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you think people of other cultures experience similar things, or are these unique to Paul’s life? Explain.

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Think about *your* roots.

3. Do you encounter any daily reminders of your culture? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Is there a language some of your relatives speak that you don’t? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Is it always easy to embrace your roots, or do you struggle with it? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. Is there something you’d like to learn about your roots? \_\_\_\_\_

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