

Native rapper comes to town

By Amanda Siestroom

In the darkened Willamina gymnasium, the fog machine surrounded the crowd in wisps of smoke. Last month Litefoot and the Red Ryders performed at Willamina Middle School for community members and Native youth from the Grand Ronde Tribe, Siletz Tribe, and Chemawa Indian School.

Born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Litefoot is an urban Indian working on reservations around the nation. The excited crowd showed him they were some of his biggest fans.

Producing his own record label, his Red Ryders rap group, a movie career, and a clothing line, Litefoot is an entrepreneur. Between songs he raps to the dancing crowd, *"make an example, everyone will follow, put down the bottle, never take a swallow. Times have changed, the land is strange, and all our people are bound in chains. The path of righteousness is real narrow. Your words your bow, your pen your arrow."*

A dedicated performer, Litefoot's pro-Native philosophy sets him apart. Speaking clear, he tells the audience, young and old, "Smoking and drinking is not part of who we are as a people. Ask yourself one question: 'Where is my relationship with the Creator?' Young and old alike, they all listened to his message.

Having turned down movie deals to focus on his music, Litefoot has brought together young Native artists from Vancouver, BC, New Mexico and Minnesota. One of his rappers, RDS1, just joined the Red Ryders two weeks ago from the Navajo Nation in New Mexico. He says his family is concerned but they are supportive of his new traveling schedule and that working with Litefoot is really inspirational. Litefoot says, "One thing I try not to do with new artists is to inhibit them too much. I try not to dominate too much. I just try to make real for them the ability to reach out and touch whatever the Creator has for them. I still struggle with that, I don't have that, someone to do that for me."

But it hasn't slowed him down, he sees each setback as information for his battle plan. When a well-known record label wanted to sign him with

"...make an example, everyone will follow, put down the bottle, never take a swallow."

~ Litefoot

the requirement that he didn't talk about being Native, he walked away and started his own record label, *Red Vinyl Records*. Since that time he has not only created a career for himself, independent of the popular multimedia industry, he has supported Native artists who are just coming up.

"Things are getting ready to change for me," he says to the crowd, "I just did a song with Coolio. Right now I'm ready to go to the next level. I promised I wouldn't do that until I felt I'd taken care of Indian Country. I'm ten years deep now. It takes a Native to help a Native, and we're covering all the bases."

The Grand Ronde Tribe, hosting Litefoot and the Red Ryders, drew a diverse crowd, with a group from the Chemawa Indian School in Salem and a group from the Siletz Tribe.

With a slow steady rap, he sings, *"Will unborn children prosper from what you did? Did you turn a spark into a fire? Or encourage another Native Leader to retire? When they put you in the ground and you're dead, will unborn children prosper from this life you lead?"*

Litefoot is creating a documentary of his Red Ryders Tour 1999. Greg Pierre, who is filming, hopes to edit the film after the tour. "I'd never been out of British Columbia before Litefoot asked me to come along. I quit my job, postponed my class and came along. Who knows, maybe this will lead me somewhere else," said Pierre.

Litefoot's commitment to pro-Native work extends down into the fine details of the shows, where he had insisted on hiring an all Native security team which consisted partially of members from Grand Ronde's drum group Eagle Beak. Litefoot met his wife while attending the National Indian Education Conference.

Litefoot said, "the Creator put me here to do things, I said I would. A lot of these things have nothing to do with me. My wife, for example, she was given to me by the Creator. I look at her as a gift, she is one-hundred percent the person for me. Let me tell you, you don't have to get very many gifts for it to make it all worth while because the gifts are priceless and unimaginable."



Litefoot, the 1998 Native American Rap Artist of the Year, is popular among Native youth. He is also the star of the films: *The Indian in the Cupboard*, *Mortal Kombat II*, and *Annihilation*.

Carmen, his wife, and their seven month-old son, Quannah, watch Litefoot perform for the energetic crowd. "I've never seen a harder worker," she said of her husband. "He won't stop until it's perfect. The powwow he put on in Washkie, Wyoming, he prepared for three months, and there was a turnout of 14,000 people. He's just a busy man. I was going to go into Native law, because I wanted to help Native people, but I'm doing that with him. It's not hard to share him with everyone because I understand what he does, I'm for the kids too. Indians are on the low end of everything, we need pride, through his music he gets to the kids."

Litefoot speaks straight to the crowd, "if you don't know your culture too much, look to the Creator. You just start praying, in the shower, on the way to school, anywhere you are. We are different. It is just who you are, it is yours, because you say please and everything will be taken care of for you. It is so simple, just go do it. Ya'll hear me? Who's proud to be Indian out there? Who's proud?"

Arms high and voices raised, the crowd let Litefoot know they heard him. With a philosophy of taking care of the small things and letting the big things take care of themselves, he has formed for himself an

empire of his own talent and left himself creative control over the future. Rising up out of the Tulsa atmosphere of prejudice that shaped his voice, Litefoot says, "I used to get it about being Chinese, because they didn't know what I was. Kids used to spit their food at me. I feel a lot of responsibility. That's the motivation behind my songs. It's always about connecting back. I feel a personal obligation to fight on. My struggle is to construct it so the words are food."

With a persistence to his fans, and an accessibility rare to stardom, Litefoot won't leave a show until he has signed every autograph and addressed every concern. Families tell him stories of their lives and admire his baby. And Litefoot's famous smile does not waver. In his own words, *"Is there an ultimate plan for my demand, a crutch so my nation can stand. Do I have the words to educate the youth or am I a fabricated hero, the burden of proof. Then powerful thought came to me. The spirit of Crazy Horse ran through me. I spoke his word, the vision was unblurred. Powerful people pointed their fingers — absurd. I cured here to the fullest, fight with your mind, resist and we can do this. No drugs, no gangs and no arrest. I had my vision, now I begin my quest..."*



Litefoot poses with fans.

Above: Kimberly Roybal (left) and Leah Pratt.

Photo at right: (from left to right) Tara Leno, Lisa Leno, Lacy Leno, and Brandy Leno.

Photos by Lisa Leno



A note from Lisa Leno, youth education coordinator

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