

JOHN KIM BELL: A MAN WITH A MISSION

Born on the Kahnawake Mohawk Indian Reserve near Montreal, he was a successful conductor and pianist on Broadway while still in his teens. Before age 30, he became the world's first North American Indian symphony conductor.

Then in 1984, after being featured in a Canadian documentary profiling his achievements, John Kim Bell became an instant national hero for thousands of Canadians. Inundated with requests from parents, teachers and native youth for information on how young natives might acquire training in the arts, Bell saw the need to create the Canadian Native Arts Foundation (CNAF) in 1985. Having started on a shoestring budget, Bell has already proven his business acumen — he is well on his way to turning the Toronto-based organization into a multimillion dollar foundation.

Bell, 35, is the son of Don Eagle, who played the violin before becoming a television wrestling champion in the 1950s. Bell later moved to Ohio with his mother, Beth Hamilton Bell, an American musician and actress. However, he returned each summer to spend his holidays on the Kahnawake Reserve with his father.

At university Bell worked professionally, conducting for touring companies and summer productions. In 1975 he graduated from Ohio State University where he studied piano, conducting and composition. He then went on to work on more than 30 Broadway musicals.

While conducting *A Chorus Line* in Toronto Bell was noticed by members of the Toronto Symphony. They asked Andrew Davis, Toronto Symphony music director, to audition Bell for a position with the orchestra. As things turned out, Bell was made apprentice conductor for the 1980–81 season. Since then, his musical accomplishments and the arts foundation have brought him widespread acclaim.

Bell started the CNAF with \$35 000 of his own money and a bank loan of \$85 000. Then came an aggressive campaign to generate funding for the organization from the public and corporate sectors.

The first gala benefit concert for the foundation was produced and conducted by Bell in February 1987. Not only did the show receive rave reviews, it successfully generated \$67 000 for the arts foundation.

Funds raised thus far have supported a visit by the Canadian Opera Company to Ontario reserve schools to promote appreciation of opera, a northern Canadian tour by folk singer Valdy, and an international moccasin-making competition. Last December, the foundation gave grants totalling \$48 000 to help talented native youths pursue education in fields ranging from the visual arts to dance.

Before undertaking this colossal job, Bell read every available report on native problems and issues, and studied the American method of art funding with its emphasis on corporate sponsorship. His plan is to have the founda-



John Kim Bell is the world's first North American Indian symphony conductor.

ation self-sufficient in 10 years. The three goals of CNAF are very clear in Bell's mind: to increase native awareness of artistic opportunities, to provide funding for educational programs, and to support promising native artists in career development.

Currently, the foundation has a major performance project in the works; it will be presenting the first-ever full length contemporary native ballet. *In the Land of Spirits* will make its debut at Ottawa's National Arts Centre in November. The work will draw on the talents of natives at every level of production, from the dancers and set designers to the creators of masks and costumes. Although the core of the ballet is an Ojibwa legend, it addresses issues of importance to modern native life.

Meanwhile Bell remains busy. Last December he became the first North American Indian to conduct London's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in a concert presented by the native group, Indigenous Survival International. In January, he finished composing the score for a Public Broadcasting System television mini-series, "The Trial of Standing Bear," which aired in Canada and the United States in February. Bell is also active as a spokesperson for the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program.

But Bell's most ambitious project by far remains the arts foundation. For this he has put both his personal and professional life on hold. "When we get three to five million dollars in the foundation, when things are running smoothly, then I'll happily bow out." Says Bell, "Believe me . . . I'd be happy to go back to being just a musician again."