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Hill shares Umatilla culture through music in Norway

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Fred Hill, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, spent several weeks this fall performing and sharing tribal culture in Norway as part of a cross-cultural music project titled I Was Here. COURTESY PHOTOS

MISSION — Fred Hill, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR), spent several weeks this fall performing and sharing tribal culture in Norway as part of a cross-cultural music project titled I Was Here.

Hill first connected with Norwegian musicians Nils Nygaard and Martine Kraft in 2014, when the pair performed at the annual Tamkaliks Celebration in Wallowa after being invited to the United States by a mutual friend.

"They liked it here and wanted to come back," Hill said. "But the only way they could return was through an invitation that included a cultural collaboration."

Hill sent the duo a CD of original songs titled Songs of My Heart. They later incorporated Hill's music into their performances, blending his drumming and vocals with Kraft's Hardanger fiddle and Nygaard's guitar.

The collaboration grew into a long-term friendship and ultimately led to Hill's invitation to join the I Was Here production in Norway.

Hill traveled to Norway twice in 2025, first in August for rehearsals and again from Sept. 18 to Oct. 9 for a full tour.

The group performed at area schools near the town of Jøvik, where Hill appeared in traditional regalia and shared stories of his upbringing, tribal history, and the Umatilla language.

"I would share how I was raised by a non-English-speaking grandmother and how our people are still striving to preserve our language," Hill said. He also described the students' reactions to his performances.

"Some of them would be laughing and giggling at first, but many were just amazed. They'd ask if we always dressed that way or if they could touch my hat."

During each performance, Hill's segment included a question-and-answer session with students. Nygaard and Kraft translated between Norwegian and English, helping students understand Umatilla history, treaty rights, and powwow traditions.

Hill said one of the highlights was performing "Fred's Song," a piece written in his honor that incorporated his powwow-style drumming.

"They created a beat and I came in with my own rendition," he said. "It was quite an honor to be included."

In addition to the performances, Hill was welcomed by his hosts' families, who shared traditional Norwegian meals, including lamb, seafood chowder and local desserts.

He also visited cultural landmarks such as the Lillehammer Olympic site and an underground hockey arena built into a mountain.

Before returning home, Hill presented his hosts with a CTUIR tribal flag and hopes to pursue an official friendship proclamation between the tribe and the I Was Here production.

"I just wanted to share our culture in a good way," he said. "This was a lifetime experience."

The I Was Here team plans to release a recorded album, I Was Here II, in 2026, featuring Hill's contributions.

The group's current music, including Fred's Song, is available on Spotify under I Was Here.



