

Walking Through the Fire highlights Truth & Reconciliation through collaboration



Collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to light a path forward together was one of the 94 Calls to Action in the final report of the National Truth & Reconciliation Commission.

While Indigenous leaders give all levels of government a failing grade in truly addressing the Calls to Action, action achieved unspooled at Aurora Town Square on Thursday evening as it played host to Walking Through the Fire, an album and film produced by the Sultans of String and more than a dozen Indigenous collaborators.

Walking Through the Fire brings diverse Indigenous voices ? First Nations, Inuit and Métis ? together in a musical collaboration that explores many of the toughest issues in the way of Truth & Reconciliation, including Residential Schools, Indigenous-Crown relations, repercussions of the Indian Act, and much more.

The film, the brainchild of Sultans violinist Chris McKhool, features artists Marc Meriläinen (Nadjiwan (Ojibwe)); Crystal Shawanda (Ojibwe Potawatomi); Raven Kanataktak (Anishinaabe Algonquin /Onkwehón:we Mohawk); Leela Gilday (Dene); Leanne Taneton (Dene); Northern Cree (Cree); Shannon Thunderbird & Kate Dickson (Ts'msyen); Dr. Duke Redbird (Chippewa/Anishinaabe); The North Sound (w/ Forrest Eaglespeaker ? Blackfoot); Kendra Tagoona & Tracy Sarazin (Inuit); Don Ross (Mi'kmaw) and M.J. Dandeneau (Métis); and the Métis Fiddler Quartet.

It was presented by McKhool, joined by Thunderbird and Dickson, in the ATS Performance Hall on June 5 to coincide with National Indigenous History Month and while the music resonated with the more than 70 audience members, it also raised tough questions and tough responses from the trio.

?Out of the fire comes a few ways of being, of thinking, of seeing,? said Thunderbird in reference to questions on Ontario's controversial Bill 5 and ongoing wildfires in the Prairies. ?When you look at the fire as a bit of a metaphor, there's always new growth, and even with the devastation that is going on in the Prairies, there will be new growth that comes out of that, as horrifying as it is to watch right now. But fire is powerful and when I looked at Walking Through the Fire? I have been on a fire walk all my life, coming through many things. There's warmth and there's goodness about fire, but there's also great, deep knowledge about it.?

For McKhool, the spark that resulted in Walking Through the Fire was stoked by Dr. Duke Redbird, who questioned how the Sultans would follow up their Refugee Project, which shone a light on new immigrants.

?Nobody says no to Duke Redbird,? joked Thunderbird.

"It was about two years of writing and connecting with Indigenous artists and the whole recording process," McKhool continued. "Then, we only ever thought it was going to be a CD. We thought, okay, we're going to make a beautiful piece of art ? it's going to be a statement and people can learn from it, but we never imagined that it would actually turn into a live show [and film] but that really caught fire and we spent the last two years doing it.

"I'll just say from my point of view, because I grew up in the Ontario school system, I thought I knew a lot. Through this experience, I realized I knew nothing about the actual Indigenous experience, that everything I was taught in school was a lie."

A lot was accomplished in a comparatively short period of time with the project, both personally and professionally, but, the presenters agreed, the same can't be said regarding the 94 Calls to Action in the last decade since they were published.

"It's a complete failure," said Thunderbird. "This is the tenth anniversary of the release of the Commission Report and the 94 Calls to Action, and to this date, 13 Calls to Action have been completed out of 94, and they were the simple ones, actually."

"When I am asked to do a land acknowledgement, I refuse," she continued. "What am I acknowledging? That it was okay for the Crown to take the land? Really? What Kate (Dickson) and I do is what's called a Land Statement in which we explain our relationship with the land, with the environment, and how that is the bedrock of our spirituality and our cultures."

Dickson noted it's important to "feel what you feel."

"There's that old phrase of knowing sets you free," she said. "I'm not sure how that sets you free, however you have to just know about everything, no matter how awful it might be, no matter how unpleasant it makes you feel, because being unsettled spurs you to action?. We need help to find our way. We're refusing to give up. We will never give up, and regardless of who they think are the fathers of this country, we will not go away. But because you're now looking at the collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, which is a partnership now, we can give you solace, we can give you philosophy that goes back to help your soul, and you can help us with the politics. How does that work for you?"

"The fact that you sit here, and the fact that you listen to us, the fact you're taking it in, and the fact that there is a communal sympathy here in the room means absolutely everything. It means everything to us."

For more on The Sultans of String and Walking Through the Fire, visit sultansofstring.com/2023/08/walkingthroughthefire.

By Brock Weir