

NINA MOINI: Later this week, two iconic Indigenous artists will make a three-day tour of northern Minnesota. Keith Secola is a renowned Anishinaabe songwriter and member of the Native Music Hall of Fame. Gary Farmer is a Cayuga actor known for roles including Nobody in the 1995 movie *Dead Man*, and Uncle Brownie in the hit TV show *Reservation Dogs*. He also has a band, Gary and the Troublemakers.

Together, these artists are bringing contemporary Native blues, rock, and traditional sounds to Virginia, Bemidji, and Grand Rapids, Minnesota, starting this Thursday, and they'll meet up with some other local acts along the way. The Ancestral Fires Music Tour will finish Sunday with a stop in south Minneapolis. Gary Farmer and Keith Secola join me now to talk about it. Thank you both so much for being with us again.

KEITH SECOLA: Thank you.

GARY FARMER: Yeah, thank you.

NINA MOINI: I'd love to start with you, Gary. How did you two first meet and then end up doing this tour together?

GARY FARMER: You know, I used to produce music and produce tours. I used to organize contemporary Native American music. I founded a national radio system in Canada and also some local on-rez radio stations. So I was always studying music and all the players in our history of Indigenous music, and of course, Keith was up there. And we became friends early in my life, I suppose-- somewhere in the '80s, I'm thinking. I remember his song "NDN Kars." He really wanted to have it in this film, *Powwow Highway*, which we made in 1987. I mean, that didn't work out, but Keith and I have been associated for 40 years, almost, yeah.

NINA MOINI: Keith, what is that like, to work with somebody for that long? Does that just get better over time as you learn even more and create more together?

KEITH SECOLA: I think it does. You know, you become more aware of the person and more conscious. We just have fun together. We have a lot of laughs on the cognitive level, with touring in Indian Country, and you collect the stories. It's like a songwriter-- I always say you write maybe two or three good songs each decade. You live long enough, like they say, Diablo ain't so smart, he just lives so long. And so that's the story.

NINA MOINI: Well, I'm glad to hear that you're both laughing together, still, all the time. That definitely helps. Keith, last year you released an album as part of Rangers, a group of songwriters rooted in northern Minnesota. And it seems like you play just about every instrument on the album, which is called *Ranger*. Can you tell us about that project and what it means to you?

KEITH SECOLA: I used to have a band in the early '80s from the Iron Range and we played all over. And we had a great female vocalist, Sharon Rowbottom, and a great guitarist, Dan Boyer. We had some sacred clowns in the band, which I was one of them, and we would attract crowds and people would come, and we started writing original music and mixing in with covers and things.

I had this opportunity to produce music through KBFT, the Nett Lake radio, and the station manager, George Strong, asked if I would produce an album of our old band. And so we went in last spring, two sessions, and recorded almost 13 songs, nine of which-- 10 of which made it on the album. It was just a pleasure.

There's nine different songwriters on the collection, on the album. It's called *Ranger*. And the band is called Rangers, and so it's a Minnesota treasure, I think, now, to be able to come back all these years with musicians. And it was fun. We respected each other's songs and I had the pleasure of playing these instruments. I'm not saying I'm really fluent at them, but I play them well enough to play the part.

A lot of musicians say the song is more important than the parts, and that was the approach to it-- the song, and what does the song need? And so I came up with these parts that were melodic or copacetic with the general chord progression and the vocalization. And I love writing lyrics, too, and so I helped a lot with people farming different lyrical stanzas and things like that. I said, well, maybe you should change this word or use this word. It was a real labor of love.

NINA MOINI: I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall in those recording sessions. It sounds like they were just really positive and electric and almost sort of magical. Gary, you're also known for your acting career, also known, obviously, for your music career. How do these forms of artistry or these crafts influence the other for you?

GARY FARMER: You know, I'm a working actor, always have been, 50 years now. And I gotta stay in shape, and music keeps me elevated, keeps me thinking. I'm a writer of music as well, have for many years, and I have a wonderful collection of new songs. And I'm expressing those on this tour and helping develop them and playing with the Rangers, both with Keith and the band.

I have my own guitar player with me, Jaime Bird Yellowhorse from the Navajo and Pueblo peoples down in New Mexico, and we're up here with Keith doing a tour. And I'll be presenting my latest work, and I hope to be an album in the future, and having fun. I got a top 10 single up on the Indigenous Music Countdown, which is a countdown for Indigenous artists in North America-- well, it doesn't include Mexico much, but mostly the States and Canada. So I'm holding my own.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, both of you, your work has reached a far and wide. Keith, you've made music for TV, movies. You were up for an award this year for a new version of your famous song, "NDN Kars." Can you tell me about what that song means to you and what it was like to revisit?

[KEITH SECOLA, "NDN KARS"]

KEITH SECOLA: (SINGING) Riding in my Indian car

Well, I started spelling the word Indian with the letters N-D-N and it caught on. I see all kinds of people using it now. It's a different feeling when you influence contemporary culture, and that song certainly did. I gave it to the universe, and let people cover it and play it and put their interpretations of it. It just makes you feel part of it. We used to ask the Creator to be in our hearts, and now we ask for us to be in the heart of creation.

And that's the same thing as songwriting, to be in the heart of creation, to be part of the spoke, part of the wheel. And that song, people interpret it and I see all the time, people will post things with little funny things from the songs. And one of the key lines in the song is, "I got a sticker says Indian power, I stuck it on my bumper, that's what holds my car together."

(SINGING) I stuck it on my bumper

That's what holds my car together

We're on a circuit of an Indian dream

We don't get old, we just get younger

I think that's the universal thing that makes it belong to all of us, to have ownership in the song. And when you write songs, you metaphysically write yourself out of the song. People will say, well, is he writing about my sister's car? Or, that's my uncle's car he's writing about. And so you learn that little trick along the way, to write yourself out of the song but give it to such a metaphoric symbol that people can relate to and call their own.

NINA MOINI: That's beautiful. Talking about people being able to relate to work and make it their own, and even see themselves in the artists and in the crafts that are around them, Gary, the show *Reservation Dogs* had a lot of success, sparked a lot of conversation as well, about Native representation and inclusion, particularly in Hollywood. Do you think the progress it represented has continued?

GARY FARMER: Well, [CHUCKLES] that's a challenging question, because the whole business of making television and films is changing because of the political situation. They're capturing us and sending us off to who knows where, and it's a challenging time. So if we can keep alive, continuing to tell stories like Sterlin and Chris Eyre and all the young filmmakers around them, and writers and creatives, we'll be OK. My effort is to create our own Indigenous network, but just thinking of the challenge of that, trying to go up against the FCC. So there's so many challenges for us to continue to tell stories in the American system. It's closing down as we speak, so it's a challenging question.

NINA MOINI: Keith, do you think that on the Ancestral Fires Music Tour, are you wanting to bring people together in the realities of what people are facing right now but still representing joy and history and hopefully the future? What are you most looking forward to?

KEITH SECOLA: Well, I think we're conducting a modern ritual based on that ceremonial thing of bringing people together for healing, song and dance. And so we're mystical shamans in that sense of conducting a modern ritual and bringing people together, making them feel happy. Woody Guthrie was all about that through the troubled times, traveling America, bringing America, the songs and the people and the power in that.

And we just want to bring love and joy, celebrate the family, grandchildren, children, brothers and sisters-- everybody's welcome. No one's turned away, and so the tribe and the little herd of buffalo is growing and growing. And it's because of that, it's so inclusive that people belong to it. And that's what we want to bring is the belongingness of music, and the joy of music. If you entertain people you can't forget to entertain yourself, and that's what we're doing.

NINA MOINI: And Gary, what are you most looking forward to?

GARY FARMER: You know, I just love playing my own music and seeing the reaction to it. I'm putting together a new album for myself. Be my eighth album in the career of making music. And I'm just real proud of that, working both sides of the camera, as it were, and continue to create. That's what I do, and I'm just happy at best executing it. So I'm having a lot of fun with Keith.

And it's great to expose my new music to an audience, and just to see if it's working. I have my own band back at home. We play a lot locally there in New Mexico. And I also have a band on my own rez, on Six Nations, Ontario. We get together, too. We're doing some Eastern seaboard work this coming spring and summer. And so I'll just keep creating until the sun goes down.

NINA MOINI: Gary, Keith, thank you so much, both of you, for stopping by *Minnesota Now*. Really appreciate your time.

KEITH SECOLA: Appreciate you.

GARY FARMER: You're welcome.

KEITH SECOLA: Thank you very much, and happy Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: Keith Secola is an award-winning Anishinaabe songwriter and musician, and Gary Farmer is a well-known Cayuga actor. They're traveling through northern Minnesota Thursday through Saturday on the Ancestral Fire Music Tour, and on Sunday they'll be at Icehouse south Minneapolis.