



Lyrical Uprising

Frank Waln uses music to empower Indigenous communities

by Amanda Bahe

Crowds of Lakota gather, blockading roads along their homelands in the northern Plains of the U.S. On the front lines: a 92-year-old Lakota grandmother, fiercely protesting a proposed extension of the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

Part of the pipeline would rip through the Ogallala **Aquifer**, the U.S.'s largest source of fresh water that is situated just beneath Lakota lands, in order to pump oil from Canada to refineries as far south as Texas.

Aquifer: a body of semi-permeable rock and sediment where water is contained or transmitted

Sicangu Lakota citizen Frank Waln, a student at Columbia College in Chicago at the time, watched via social media as more and more of his people joined the grandmother in an effort to keep trucks carrying sections of the pipeline out.

“It hit me hard. I couldn’t do anything because I was in school and away from it all,” he remembers. “So, I just wrote a song about it.”

The song, a reflection of the unified resistance of his people, was titled “Oil 4 Blood.”

Waln has since graduated from Columbia College, earning a bachelor’s degree in audio art and acoustics, released his first full-length album, *Born Ready*, and is currently working on a follow-up.

With lines like “Keystone XL you smell like an atrocity/To my home and my ancestors I am loyal/Build that pipeline and I’m burning down your oil,” Waln’s music adds a personal element to issues often dehumanized by politics.

“That feeling of frustration. That feeling of desperation. You can convey that through any type of art, but I do it through music,” he says. “Music can really make you feel what I feel. Make you feel what my people feel when we know that [these issues are] endangering us.”

In MTV’s *Rebel Music* series, Waln is seen rubbing elbows with the likes of Daryl Hannah and Willie Nelson, but he hasn’t let fame go to his head. Waln understands the importance of his work and remains grateful for the connections he has made because of it. The powerful storytelling of his music has afforded him the opportunity to educate and motivate Native American youth.

Using his newfound celebrity as a catalyst for positive change in Indigenous communities, he travels the country speaking to youth about important issues.

Last November, the UA-based Native Student Outreach Access and Resiliency (SOAR) program invited Waln and his touring partners, the

Sampson Brothers, to speak and perform at the second annual UA Native American College Day. Native SOAR utilizes mentoring to broaden the conversation about college and organized the college day event.

Find Native SOAR eligibility requirements and upcoming events on page 26!

College Day encouraged Native youth and their families to begin thinking about the college application process and incorporated the element of mentorship in the process.

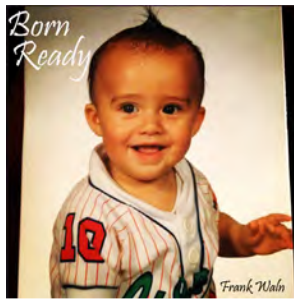
Waln, a college recipient of the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship, served as the day’s master mentor, delivering a keynote speech to a ballroom of more than 250 students and their families.

Waln grew up on the Rosebud Sioux reservation in South Dakota and left after high school to pursue a college education, encountering setbacks along the way. He encouraged students to remain resilient in attaining a college degree and to use their education to further benefit their communities.

“He has a positive message,” said UA doctoral candidate and Native SOAR program leader Amanda Tachine. “His [words] really instills college as an avenue to take and he has a balanced approach so you leave feeling good.”

Hoop dancer Lumhe Sampson, a member of the Indigenous dance group Dancing Earth, joined Waln for the college day speech and an evening performance, and also accompanied Waln to the

People’s Climate March in New York in September. “For us to be out there with thousands of our brothers, the 400 plus others that were marching, and the hundreds of thousands more that witnessed it, we are bringing awareness to the



Born Ready album cover // Source: <http://frankwaln47.bandcamp.com/album/born-ready-ep>



Native SOAR students and faculty pose with Frank Waln and the Sampson Brothers at UA College Day. // Photo courtesy: Amanda Cheromiah

issue[s],” Sampson said of being included in the Indigenous delegation.

Waln and Sampson performed for the thousands in attendance who marched, chanted, sang, and held signs as they shed light on lesser known environmental issues affecting communities across the nation.

“We’re all in this together – we need each other to organize and get together,” Waln said, emphasizing the need for raising awareness about environmental issues plaguing Indigenous communities.

Four years ago, as the Lakota people began their own efforts to raise awareness about the new pipeline cutting through their community, the media gave them little attention. The Lakota people have since lined the route of the proposed pipeline with teepees for people who live there using prayer to peacefully protest Keystone.

For them, the question is not if the pipeline will rupture, but when.

“It’s going to mess up our water,” Waln says, critical of the adverse effects it will have on the environment that the Lakota have protected for generations.

Keystone is now an emerging national headline as Congress pushes to get the pipeline approved. In

February, President Obama rejected congressional legislation to construct the pipeline, echoing the same environmental concerns as Waln and his community.

Congress failed to override the president’s veto in March but the Keystone fight is far from over. Those opposed to the pipeline are urging Obama to reject it outright, while those in favor are trying to find other ways to get the bill approved.

Waln remembers the words of the Lakota grandmother leading the fight all those years ago.

“Grandchild, you’re Lakota. Stand up for your rights,” Waln recalls. “All we have is our families, communities, and our land. I’m 92 years old and I’m out here on the front lines. When I die, who’s going to take over?”

Grandmother’s message is what inspired Waln to take action, using music as his weapon. Her tenacity is what, he hopes, he is conveying to Native youth as he urges them to begin acting on issues affecting their communities.

“If you see a problem or something that needs to be done, go do it,” he says. “Pay attention to what’s going on at home. Stay connected to your community, to the land. Most every Indigenous culture – our cultures – are the caretakers of the land.”



*A map showing the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline.
// Sources: “Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the Keystone XL Project”; United States Department of State Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, January 2014*

WHAT IS THE KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE?

There is already a pipeline in place from Canada to the Midwest U.S. and down to Texas.

Keystone XL would extend upon the existing pipeline, reaching all the way to the Gulf Coast. The pipeline would be financed by private companies (not paid for by the public) and could carry more than 800,000 barrels of oil per day.

There are many different opinions about the project. People concerned about the environment argue that it will further contribute to destruction and create negative climate impacts. Others argue that the pipeline is going to create more jobs and bring in more money – things they think will benefit the U.S.

Most energy policy experts say there is a balance between the sides.

Indigenous people, however, are concerned about the impact the pipeline will have environmentally, socially, and economically, on their sovereign homelands.