

Keith Secola: Breaking Barriers Through Music



Keith Secola (Ojibwa) is a multi award-winning musician and producer. Active on the music scene since the 1970s, Secola has finely honed his talents on guitar and Native flute, as well as his skills in composition and production. His recordings have reached a multitude of listeners, with his famous song *NDN Kars* – the most requested song on Native radio – hailed as the contemporary Native American anthem. The seven-time Grammy winner is currently at work on a yet-to-be-titled rock opera and plans to perform excerpts from it this August at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Secola's interest in music came early in his life. As a boy, he soaked up the sounds of the traditional Native music that was performed at powwows and other gatherings. He also tuned in such artists as Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley and John Lennon as they chimed their modern sounds over the airwaves. "Those kinds of songs interested me," said Secola. "I always say that my influences are the Bobs – Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Bob Young, Bob Guthrie, Bob Lennon. I mean, of course, Neil Young, Woody Guthrie and John Lennon."

In grade school Secola took part in school music programs, selecting as his instrument the slide trombone. He played the

brass instrument in both grade school and in high school, participating in his high school's marching band. Though he didn't realize it at the time, Secola's study of the trombone was a prelude to the musical career ahead of him. "It really is a bass instrument by nature," he said. "It's in the bass clef and when you play trombone in an orchestra, most of the notes are similar to those of a bass guitar in a rock band."

Though he didn't formally study it at the time, Secola was also exposed to the guitar at an early age. "We would always have rummage-sale guitars in the house, you know?" he said. "They were maybe missing two strings, or maybe only had five strings. Those would always be around. I think one time we even had a mandolin with seven strings." Secola would dabble with the impaired instruments, learning that several notes could come out of the same string with the right finger placement.

At the age of 12, Secola formed his first band, which was comprised of siblings and friends. "There were kids jumping on the bed, other kids shining a flashlight in my face," he recalled. "Those are the first times when I realized that music was a calling." By the time he was 17, Secola had already subconsciously decided to pursue a career in music. He was working at a job painting houses and accidentally cut his wrist while working around some windows. "I remember going into the clinic and saying, 'Man! Now I'm not going to be able to play the guitar!' You know, I hadn't even started to study the guitar yet. I think it was then that I knew."

For Secola music is a calling, a way of life. "I think if someone had told me when I was 18, 'Keith, when you get into your fifties you're going to have musical success, more than ever in your life,' I still would have done it," he said. "Even given the wait, I wouldn't have quit." To Secola, music is more than just a hobby or an interest that can be set down and picked up later. "Sometimes life dictates circumstances where you have to be like a wildflower and lay dormant for a while – have a family, raise kids, or whatever. But music is always there."

Secola joined his first professional band in the late 1970s. It was called The Schwartz Brothers, a collection of college students who were attending a junior college near the Iron Range in Minnesota, about 20 miles from where Bob Dylan grew up. "I think my first professional band was actually a very unprofessional band," said Secola. "But by the standards of getting paid, I guess we qualified as a professional band." The band wrote and performed original compositions as well as a catalog of cover tunes. After about six weeks of rehearsal, they played their first gig. "We had a very good singer and a great guitar player so we kind of just followed them and did the gig. For the first time I realized I could

make money playing music like this.”

Having mastered the guitar, Secola began to study the Native flute in the late 1980s. “I learned that all Natives should play the flute in some form,” he said. “You don’t have to be commercial or a Nammy or Grammy winner. You can play it on your own. Then you can realize the power of music, the power it has in everyday life.” For Secola, music is healing. When you play, you become an instrument of a divine nature, a vessel through which music travels. “The spirit of music is very delicate and very humble. It leaves the room as soon as the ego shows up.”

Secola began recording in the 1980s. He was playing with a Native band, the Sand Creek Band, from Ethete, Wyoming and they managed to scrape together enough money to buy some studio time. The band recorded three demos, among them the immensely popular track *NDN Kars*. “That song started getting air time right away,” said Secola. “We gave it to a friend in South Dakota who took it to a radio station. By the time he was driving down the driveway, they already had it on the air.” The song resonated with Native audiences and is today considered the Native American anthem. Later bands, such as U2 and Nirvana, even performed the song in their shows.

His success through the 80s and 90s notwithstanding, Secola didn’t submit any of his recordings to be considered by the Native American Music Awards until his album *Fingermonkey* was released in 2000. “NAMA was a young organization,” he said. “And I was just out of the loop a little bit, not worrying about those kinds of things. Then after a while I realized that these are important organizations to be a part of.” *Fingermonkey* took home Best Independent Recording (2000). “Even today if you listen to that album it rocks, you know? And it has many of the musicians I’m still playing with.”

To date Secola has won a total of seven Nammys – Best Instrumental Recording (2001), Best Blues Recording (2002), Best Producer (2003), Artist of the Year (2006), Best Folk/Country Recording (2006), and Best Linguistic Recording (2007). “I like the fact that my last Nammy was for a language CD,” he said. “I did the album with one of my elders from back home, Karen Drift.” The album, titled *Anishinabemoin* (speaking our language), is a learning tool that features the voices of Drift and her granddaughter, Larissa, speaking words, phrases and short stories in both the Anishinabe language and in English to the accompaniment by Secola’s compositions. “There’s not a lot that differentiates the Native American, so retaining our language is really important.”

Secola’s latest project is a rock opera, an all Native American song revue on which he has been working for the past several years. “It’s about a lot of things, about the loss

of virtues and the misbalance of the natural world,” he said. “They’re songs for marginal creatures, which could be the environmentally endangered species, species of the animal kingdom, and of the Native kingdom, as well.” Secola has recorded 17 of the songs already and plans to premier a few excerpts at the Kennedy Center this August.

Secola wants his listeners to grasp a metaphysical understanding from his music. “I think we can touch individuals so that they bring their own meaning to the songs,” he said. “I think in that way we are acting as shamanic healers in a sense. Making people sing and dance, just like our healers do.” Secola strives to break down the “fourth wall” between himself and his audience, to connect with them and share the simple joys of life. “Over the years I’ve been able to touch people with that aspect of live performance. I think we take live performances to another level.” ♣

For more information about Keith Secola, visit www.secola.com.



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