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# Music as Medicine: Life and Lyrics of Frank Waln

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BY TATÉ WALKER (MNICONJOU LAKOTA)





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There was a time when Frank Waln wanted to be a doctor. He earned a Gates Millennium Scholarship out of high school, which took him off the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota to Omaha's Creighton University. There, he studied pre-med for two years before realizing his therapies were of a more harmonious variety.

Four years later and Waln (Sicangu Lakota)—armed with legions of dedicated fans, awards and accolades, and a newly acquired bachelor's degree in audio art and acoustics from Columbia College Chicago—will drop his first self-produced, full-length rap/hip-hop album this fall. The 24-year-old artist made a name for himself in the past couple of years as an independent musician, indigenous activist, and all-around nice guy after using social media to release several hit songs, including "Oil 4 Blood," "AbOriginal" and "Born on the Rez," which function as anthems of hope and healing to those fighting against appropriation, oil pipelines and racism.

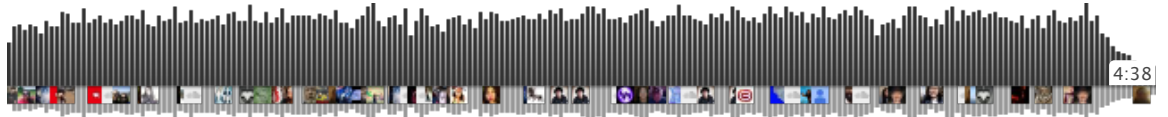
"I remember when I went home for a year on a break from Creighton," Waln says from his home-away-from-home in Chicago. "I was in the gas station and ran into an elder from back home. He asked what I was doing and I said: 'Yeah, I left Creighton. I don't want to be a doctor anymore. I want to do music.' And he said, way back then: 'Sometimes, music is the best medicine.' I feel the same way now."

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Frank Waln  
Frank Waln - "Born On the Rez"

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Waln sort of stumbled upon rap music when he was in sixth grade. He and his mother, Mary Waln (Sicangu Lakota) would often take walks near the family ranch in He Dog, South Dakota. One evening, the setting sun glinted off a discarded CD off the side of the road where they were walking, and Waln went to investigate.

"He said, 'Mom look!' And I'm just like, 'What are you picking that up for?' Because I'm thinking it's probably not any good. I'm thinking it's not going to work. And besides, we didn't even have a CD player," recalls Mary Waln of her son's discovery of Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP*. "It's all scratched up, but he takes it home and sure enough found a CD player and it worked. That was the first time he heard rap and got into it."

For Waln, the raw emotion he heard coming from the speakers cut to his core. "Oh my god, it blew my mind. He was telling my story. He was poor, having trouble with his parents... He was using music to get out the frustration and anger inside him."

Before Eminem, the music in Waln's life was limited to country songs his rodeo family played on the radio, and traditional Native music, including the flag and honor songs he sang every day as part of a drum group in fifth grade. After discovering the Detroit rapper, Waln talked his mother into buying him Nas' *Stillmatic*, and it was then, around age 14, Waln knew rap and hip-hop would be a part of his life forever.

Still, academics and his responsibilities on the family ranch—at one time a major player in the rodeo scene, although Waln admits to never jumping on a bucking beast—made up Waln's priorities in high school. Though Waln graduated valedictorian of his class, his scores alone couldn't get him into an Ivy League school—an irony he points out since now he's asked to perform at Ivy League institutions—and the Gates scholarship became his ticket off the reservation.

"All this tells you how flawed the education system is," Waln says. "It isn't built for us [Natives]. I can be valedictorian at my school on the rez, but not stack up to kids from white schools. And to get a 'good' college education we have to leave our friends and families and community to go someplace that has no idea where we're coming from. I always tell kids to use it, use Western education to your advantage, but don't let it disconnect you from your community and your people."

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Promoting education, including Native cultural and spiritual learning, to his fans is just one of the many issues Waln advocates. Waln's appeal is found in his emotionally honest lyrics about growing up on a poor reservation, experiencing domestic violence when he was a young boy and hitting rock bottom as a teenager. But what sets him apart from the often dark depths of hard-core rap are his messages of triumph in overcoming obstacles life puts in front of him, which resonate with Native audiences, especially young people, according to Theresa Chiklak (Yupik), who helped bring Waln to Bethel, Alaska, earlier this year.

"People telling him he won't make it. You know, we get a lot of that here," Chiklak says. "And Frank is proof that we all can. He kept going—didn't listen to those people who said he can't."

Waln attributes his perseverance to his mother, someone he pays homage to often in his music. On one of Waln's most popular older songs, "My Stone," he croons about his mother's strength, but also the pain associated with her leaving an abusive relationship when he was still very young but just old enough to remember the start of life with relatives on the He Dog Ranch. Experiences like this, in addition to dealing with the isolation of both reservation and urban life, allow Waln to connect with Native youth on a level inaccessible to most mainstream artists.

"Suicide is really bad on our reservations," Waln says. "I understand those feelings. I was suicidal at one point. I didn't really talk about how I was feeling, and was trying to deal with [family] stuff ... the hopelessness that goes along with living on the rez, going away to school and realizing I was poor for the first time, realizing how ignorant the world was about us."

The Native suicide rate is more than double the national average, according to the Aspen Institute's Center for Native American Youth, and among Native teenagers, it can be 10 times higher the national average on some reservations—higher than any other demographic.

"I hit rock bottom my sophomore year at Creighton, and I thought, 'Why am I even here?'" Waln recalls. "Two things saved me: Pouring myself into music, and turning back to ceremony."

About a year ago, the elders of his community gave him his Lakota name, Oyate Teca Obmani (Walks With Young People).

"Today I still struggle, but music and spirituality pull me out of that. I don't talk about this a lot outside of Indian Country. But I feel like it's my responsibility to talk about some of these issues—domestic violence, the environment, suicide, media representation of Natives. I have a platform now, and I have the responsibility to use it to try to help solve some of these problems. If we as Natives don't talk about this, who will?"

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Waln's new album tackles these issues head-on. The mellow energy of "Wild West" takes listeners through some of the issues that plague reservation living, including poverty and absentee parents, but also talks of the importance of family. In "2 Live & Die on the Plains," Waln hooks his audience immediately with catchy lyrics that speak directly to young Native people and the hopelessness they might be feeling. With "Runaway," Waln changes form using darker, electric sounds and narrative to describe the emotional difficulties living in an unfamiliar urban area among non-Natives and his tendency to isolate himself from others when faced with problems.

As he continues to tweak and blend the album's rap, hip-hop, electric, rock and Native sounds up to its release, evidence of a stronger, more confident artist emerges with each new track. "I want my sound to be authentic and true to the space it's born out of, to be a true representation of my home and my community and myself, to tell my own story in the most authentic way possible," Waln says.

While he often collaborates with others, Waln writes, records, edits, produces and releases his own content, and says he is unwilling to give away creative control to a label or production team. He relies exclusively on word-of-mouth and social media like Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud and Instagram to market his music. The strategy seems to have worked: The video for "AbOriginal" has around 40,000 views on YouTube, and his 2014 schedule is booked with more than 30 performances across the U.S. and Canada.

If his previous music is any indication, Waln's new album is sure to deliver. His music, performances, and advocacy thus far have earned him dozens of honors, including the 2014 Mayor's Award for Civic Engagement from Columbia College Chicago; a shoutout from PolicyMic.com as one of "7 First Nation Rappers Crushing Stereotypes of Indigenous People Through Music" in 2014 for his "Oil 4 Blood." The song also earned him a well-reviewed performance at the Cowboy and Indian Alliance's "Reject and Protect" demonstrations against the Keystone XL pipeline in Washington in April; and several best song and artist awards from Rockwired Radio Music Awards and the Native American Music Awards.

Waln hopes his labors lead to systemic, positive change for Natives, and that his success one day earns him the privilege of going back home to Rosebud and He Dog not only to help youth and other artists succeed but to do so without having to leave their communities.

"I want to bring the opportunities I've had home," Waln says of his end game. "There are many more kids back home on the rez who are smarter than I am, more creative, who deserve these opportunities more than I did. It's not enough to set a good example. I want to see real change."

He can achieve this, Waln believes, through his music.

"Now that I'm learning the science of music – the vibrations and energy absorbed by the body and brain – and the more I'm performing and travel, I recognize how very compartmentalized the Western world is we live in," Waln says. "We're told a hospital goes here, a school goes there, art can be made over there. But for indigenous people, it's holistic. Everything should be done in harmony, like music, all together. I might not be healing as a doctor, but

maybe I can do some healing through my music.”

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