

Seventh Fire

Tansi, Boozhoo, Hello and Welcome to The National Music Centre' Speak Up! Exhibition, celebrating the voices of Indigenous music trailblazers, past, present & future.

Seventh Fire was formed in Ottawa in 1989. The group's name comes from an Algonquin Prophecy held by Elder William Commanda of the Algonquin Nation of Kitigan Zibi, located just north of Ottawa. It tells the tale that all humanity will either figure out how to be part of our Earth's healing, or be swallowed whole as the earth heals itself.

Seventh Fire believed their politics, brand of music and energy matched the name.

Principal founder, Allen Deleary, Anishinabek, fused pow wow with influences ranging from Frank Zappa to Motown, and genres like rap, reggae, rock and performance art. He often applied satirical lyrics with searing insight into the historical and political realities of Indigenous people. Allen also published poetry, and cites nine years as a mid-level federal bureaucrat, largely at the Department of Indian Affairs, as being instrumental for his lyrical content. Dissatisfied by the non-recognition of Indigenous rights, he pursued art and music.

Seventh Fire turned heads, releasing two albums while the movie *Dances with Wolves* was in theatres and the Oka Crisis was taking place in Quebec. Their first album, *Well, What Does It Take*, was released on cassette in 1990. It was anchored by a drum machine and sequencer, programmed with live instruments and overdubbed with spoken word. Their second album, *The Cheque Is In The Mail* was released in 1991. It made its national debut on Much Music with a music video of the same name. Their socio-politically charged sound brought as many as 7-9 band members onstage to join their cause.

Seventh Fire's repertoire spoke to multiple issues and realities – the Indian Act, addiction, mental illness, loss of traditional lands and identity. The subject matter was usually juxtaposed with upbeat, danceable music, which brought about unity at their live shows.

Both campus radio and music videos were integral to the band's popularity. They toured widely, and opened for the legendary activist/poet/actor John Trudell in Ojai, California. They also played Ann Arbor, Michigan, Washington, DC, and many major cities across Canada. They shared the stage with icons Buffy Sainte-Marie, Kashtin and Susan Aglukark, and headlined the Indigenous festival, 3 Fires, in Wiky, Ontario.

The media was very interested in Seventh Fire's music and messages; both CBC National News and Japanese MTV reported on the band. They were pioneers of a genre that incorporated spoken word and had no musical boundaries, a genre that also inspired.

Seventh Fire also worked in the studio with Dissidenten, a German rock band from the late '80s known for their unique mix of Middle Eastern, African and East Indian music. Seventh Fire was hailed as being part of the "World Beat" movement.

Early on, Seventh Fire recognized that their music was a vehicle to amplify their messages and the representation of Indigenous art. They prided themselves on not being “safe, stereotypical Indians”. To make a statement, they revved upwards of 180 beats per minute in "Days of Anger".

In 1996, Seventh Fire disbanded.

However, former guitarist Peter DiGangi created new versions of Seventh Fire music in 2002, and in early 2019 Noel Habel released a new interpretation of "The Cheque Is In The Mail", showing the single's continued relevance today.

Seventh Fire were far ahead of their time. Their highly original music was made during a period when the mainstream had little to no knowledge of the realities Indigenous people were living.

I'm David McLeod, curator of Speak Up! Click on more of my Curator's Comments to learn about other artists, like Seventh Fire, whose music is a force for change. Miigwetch