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indigenous

Mato Nanji And Indigenous Celebrate The Past And Look To The Future With Their New Album

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Mato Nanji literally started his music career at the bottom.

As teenagers in the 1990s, Nanji — along with two siblings and a cousin — launched the blues-rock band Indigenous in his parents' basement. The family lived in the Wagner-Marty area, and Mato said relatives still reside on the Yankton Sioux reservation.

The original group consisted of guitarist, vocalist and songwriter Mato; his bassist brother Pte, drummer sister Wanbdi and percussionist cousin Horse. They launched their career in the late 1990s.

During the next decade, the band soared to national acclaim, winning Native American Music Awards and touring the U.S. and overseas. The band's music is also featured on the FX television series "Sons Of Anarchy."

Mato still remains with the band, while the other members left to pursue different musical interests. Mato has been joined by his wife, Leah, and has recruited other members to give the band a new look.

"It was a tough decision to keep the band going," Mato said this week in a phone interview from Sioux Falls. "I could have done solo things, or I could have dropped the name 'Indigenous.' But people recognize the band and its name. And there are a lot of memories. For me, it's also a lot of meaning about who I am and what I do. This keeps it all connected."

Indigenous — whose name reflects the original members' American Indian heritage — performs June 4 at Wiley's Tavern in Sioux Falls. The engagement, which starts at 10 p.m., doubles as a CD release party for "Acoustic Sessions" and a preview for the upcoming national tour. The group also hopes to have its DVD ready to coincide with the CD.

The new album features acoustic versions of 11 of the group's previous songs, including "Now That



trails

You're Gone," "Things We Do," "Little Time," "Fool Me Again" and "Should I Stay?"

"The album won't come out until four days after we perform in Sioux Falls, but we will have CDs available at the release party," Nanji said. "We are also beginning the national tour. We will perform in Seattle, California and Utah, then close that leg of the tour and come back to the Midwest. We will take a break and then start the East Coast. This (tour) will be ongoing until the end of the year."

The CD could be considered "The Best Of Indigenous," Nanji said, as the CD spotlights what he considers the best of the band's career. The CD features the trademark acoustic sound, while the show features a mix of electric and acoustic, he said.

"It's what people know as Indigenous," he said. "The audience has developed a taste for the version that's been done, but I think this (CD) is another take on the old music."

The band debuted with "Things We Do" in 1998. Their other work includes "Chasing the Sun" and "Broken Lands."

Nanji said he sees the upcoming CD and tour as an opportunity to look back and also look forward. "For me, it's a celebration of the past 10 years. It's what we did going back to 1998," he said. "We have a couple songs from each record, all the way up to 2008. It's 10 years of making music."

While Indigenous looks forward to its national tour, Nanji said he enjoys playing his home area — including Yankton. "We would love to come back to Yankton. I think it's been a long time since we played there," he said.

RESERVATION ROOTS

Nanji credits his parents, Beverly and the late Greg Zepher, with supporting the family's musical career. Nanji said he was influenced musically by his father, who lived in Yankton at one time and performed with the band "Vanishing Americans," which toured several states.

"Dad ended up doing his last show in California before they decided to quit in the 1970s," Nanji said. "I didn't see him perform live, but I have heard some tapes of him singing. It's awesome. It's really inspiring for me to hear that."

Greg Zepher never pushed his children into music, Nanji said, adding he likewise doesn't pressure his own children into a musical career.

Those beginning basement practice sessions in the 1990s seemed natural, Nanji said.

"That was where my dad had his guitar and amps, in the basement. That's where we got interested and started on our own," he said. "My dad said, 'I'm not telling you what to do, but you can try this out.' It's just something that interested me and that I picked up. A couple of years later, my mom and dad talked that maybe we should become a band."

The suggestion of a touring band surprised the siblings for a couple of reasons, Nanji said.

"My brother and sister were really, really young. I was 16 or 17, my sister was 14 or 15, and my brother was 12 or 13," he said. "As far as forming the band, we never really said we wanted to sit down and play together."

Indigenous hooked up with a Nebraska booking

agency and began playing dates in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota.

"My dad and mom would take us to our concerts when we started because we were too young to drive," Nanji said with a chuckle. "Our first big concert, I was 18 by then. We worked hard to get on the BB King Blues Festival in the late 1990s. Right after 1998, we were able to get on the tour."

The band is excited to have worked with the Monterey International Agency, Nanji said. "They book a lot of Jonny Lang and Los Lobos," he said, noting Indigenous stands in good company.

FAMILY INFLUENCE

Greg Zepher died in 1999 and never saw his children and nephew reach their national success. However, Nanji credited his father with providing a positive example and an appreciation for different music.

"My dad was always into the blues and rock and different types of music, from Santana to Cream. That's what he was listening to in the 1980s, more BB King," Nanji said. "He grew up having record collections with all that music. He was into that kind of listening rather than what else was going on in the 1980s. We didn't listen to Boy George or that kind of pop stuff."

Nanji said he carries those musical preferences to this day.

"I guess I was unique," he said. "Even now, when I go back to the reservation, I listen to a lot

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Indigenous' new album, "The Acoustic Sessions" will feature acoustic versions of old favorites. It will be released in June.

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