



Wakefield's Kate Weekes' new album discusses the Rideau Canal's impact on environment and Indigenous communities. She wrote it after a 200-kilometre canoe trip along the Rideau Canal with a dozen other musicians. Photo: Stephen Fuller

Redefining her Rideau roots

heritage value of the Rideau Canal, its ecological history and the impacts of canal construction on local Indigenous communities.

She says 24 lock stations were built along the canal to help settlers more easily transport goods inland and each of the stations needed at least one dam to divert water away from the canal. The water instead pooled in marshes or plains that settlers saw as poor agricultural space. Bazely says this process flooded more land than the canal made accessible.

"The ecological devastation is well-documented," Bazely says. "We have a piece of river north of Kingston Mills, which is where the first locks are, and it's referred to as the River Styx. If you know your Greek mythology, the River Styx is where you cross to the underworld. Perhaps, also, it's a play on words where you've got all the dead trees. You've got a river of sticks."

Most of these environmental changes are not visible from the canal, Bazely says. Many of the settlers who built the locks didn't see the extent of the damage for years and the floods created new environments over the centuries, but Weekes says she had to keep an eye out for "dead-headed trees" under the water while paddling through River Styx. Its story even inspired a track called 'River Styx'.

Weekes also used her album to reflect on the fact Indigenous Peoples were displaced from their lands. Her home town of Smiths Falls used to speak more highly of colonialism, celebrating the town's settlement heritage with fireworks on an annual Settler's Day.

These celebrations are less

likely to happen today, she adds, because Canada is beginning to acknowledge the deep wounds settlers inflicted on Indigenous communities.

"I knew I wanted to connect with the watershed that I grew up in," Weekes says. "But as I started planning, it became apparent to me that my perspective on the Rideau was shaped by my settler heritage."

For a time, the locks were beneficial to Indigenous communities, says Bazely. Soldiers who guarded the locks were ordered to give Indigenous Peoples free passage along the length of the canal, likely because the resources they transported were beneficial to settlers.

"Indigenous transportation along the Rideau waterway might have actually increased once the canal was built. It made it easier for them to transport big loads on the canoes," Bazely says.

But this free passage didn't last long. Chuck Commanda, a master canoe crafter from the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation, says the 1876 Indian Act that barred Indigenous Peoples from lands and forced them onto reserves stopped them from canoeing regularly.

"If we go a little step further, they allowed free access as long as (Indigenous People) were useful to the English or the French. Once their usefulness was worn up, that's when a lot of these new laws came into existence that limited our access to our hunting grounds," Commanda says. "We weren't able to travel with the food anymore."

Weekes says she hopes the album will spark more

conversations among listeners.

Some songs, such as the opening track, 'Trace a Constellation', contrast an upbeat melody with heavy topics like war, propaganda and genocide – a conscious decision the singer-songwriter says she made to keep people's attention while addressing dark but important ideas.

Weekes adds that she can't bear all the weight of responsibility but she wants to play her part by learning more about the country's history and inspiring others to do the same. In this goal, Commanda offered an Algonquin perspective during her show at Ottawa's Red Bird Café on Nov. 9.

Commanda says this kind of work is a step in the right direction for reparations. He says similar initiatives such as land acknowledgements and the 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have seen more public acceptance, especially now that people are learning about the history of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. But more can still be done to help Indigenous communities directly.

"It's useful in the sense that people now are actually aware of the place they call home," he says. "There's still a lot of poverty living on the reserves. I haven't lived on my reserve in 30 years because I didn't want to fall under that blanket anymore. It was hard to succeed in life."

'Rideau Roots' is out now. Her next shows are Nov. 15 at Old Church Theatre in Trenton, Ont. and on Nov. 16 at Burdock Brewery & Music Hall in Toronto.

Wakefield musician launches new album after canoe trek

BY ZENITH WOLFE
Contributing Writer

A Wakefielder's new album connects the musician to the watershed she grew up in and challenges what she knew about the land she calls home.

Musician Kate Weekes released her new album 'Rideau Roots' on Oct. 27 – the culmination of a 200-kilometre paddling trip and songwriting retreat along the Rideau Canal.

Weekes, who plays banjo and guitar, grew up in Smiths Falls, Ont., and moved to the Yukon to work as a canoe guide for more than a decade. When she came back to the Capital during the pandemic, she decided to guide around a dozen musicians on a paddling trip through the Rideau Canal, with regular songwriting

breaks over their 11-day trek from May 15 to 26 in 2022.

Weekes says the paddling trip changed her perspective on how humans impacted the canal's environment. While camping overnight at Kingston Mills, she and her paddling group were constantly awakened by passing trains. The next day they spent hours passing by private property before they found a small stretch of land where they could stop and eat lunch.

"It's the kind of thing that I probably wouldn't notice if I wasn't on the water trying to find somewhere to get off of it. One of the songs on my album ended up being called 'Nowhere to Land' inspired by that," Weekes says.

Sue Bazely is an archaeologist who wrote her PhD at Queen's University about the

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