

Celebrating Native American Culture Through Film and Fashion



Leah Chiappinon May 31, 2023

“Indigenous Fashion and Film” will be the focus of an educational afternoon at LTV Studios on Saturday, June 10, when filmmaker and LTV videographer and editor Ginew Benton and fashion designer Kayla Lookinghorse join forces to showcase

Lookinghorse’s exclusive designs and Benton’s film “The Dim,” and present a Native American Short Film Festival.

Both Lookinghorse and Benton are Native American and Benton, who had previously made documentaries about Lookinghorse’s work, said the idea for the June 10 celebration of Indigenous fashion and film came from LTV Executive Director Michael Clark, who is featured in “The Dim.” When Benton held a test screening of his film recently at Southampton Cultural Center, Clark mentioned to him that LTV previously had hosted a film festival. He then had the thought to combine the film festival with the fashion show.

“He’s been very supportive of our initiative and LTV is inclusive of the Native population,” Benton said.

The goal of the event, Benton added, is to introduce modern Native American art to the East End community.

“On the East End, I think the general public is quite used to seeing the Native population in a past setting, like doing our powwow and our traditional dancing and singing and such,” said Benton. “But I don’t think that there’s much [of] being able to experience our modern culture in the here and now and thinking about the future and the direction that our art and culture is going.”

Lookinghorse concurred, noting in a phone interview that she thinks the event will be instrumental in helping to share an Indigenous perspective both in fashion and film.

In terms of her work, Lookinghorse has taken her Hunkpapa/Itazipco Lakota heritage and woven it into her unique fashion designs. Her aesthetic is based on her family, and her signature design of three horizontal lines represents the past, present and future. In January 2022, she created the Lookinghorse X Lonewolf collaboration, which focuses on unity.

When creating her collection, she traveled to fashion shows up and down the East Coast, and in collaboration with models and actresses, realized there is a lack of Indigenous fashion designers working in the industry.

“We don’t have many Indigenous makers and designers like myself really trying to help share their narratives and share our story,” she said. “There’s a lot that hasn’t been told from our perspective ... a lot of people might not know the difference between an authentic design, like one by an actual Native American, and then those designs that are taken from an Indigenous design.”

Lookinghorse is part of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, which is located in Fort Yates, North Dakota, and whose members came out in strong opposition to the Dakota Access pipeline. Lookinghorse looks to incorporate this activism into her designs. Some pieces talk about #MMIW, which stands for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. Other pieces incorporate the phrase “Still Here,” an inspiring message about overcoming obstacles in the community. Lookinghorse’s husband is Shinnecock and he practices the Algonquin ways.

“When it comes to fashion, we utilize a lot of the elements that we find,” she said. For this show at LTV, she has brought in a lot of wampum, an honorific symbol of unity. They show up on some couture jackets, along with ready to wear pieces that have the wampum printed on them.

Several members of the Shinnecock Nation are taking part in the LTV fashion show as models, and several helped Lookinghorse with the couture pieces.

“It takes hundreds of hours of beading,” she said of many of her pieces.

For Benton, a native of Minneapolis and a member of the Ojibwe tribe, capturing the spirit and energy of Indigenous people through his films is a priority. Benton moved to Long Island when he was 8 years old, after his mother married a Shinnecock man. It’s always been ingrained in Benton to share his culture with the wider community, he said.

“I’ve been what we call a cultural enrichment specialist, meaning somebody who’s brought up traditionally to hold all the teachings and the songs and the dances and be able to teach the next generation,” he said.

That connection is a valuable asset when creating films, as Benton is granted access to document what happens on reservations. His connection with the tribe also gives him valuable networking opportunities.

“I’ve raised a lot of these kids culturally, so now people in their 20s and so on, they’re doing good things, and in their 30s, they hold high positions ... and they did their best to help me and they believe in my work,” he said.

Indigenous tribes are typically very private, but as a filmmaker, because of the relationship Benton has with the Native American community, they let him in. Through the “Red Land,” Benton’s own television series on LTV, he covers the Native American community. When a whale washed ashore, or when the high school basketball team, with several students from the territory, won a championship, Benton came to film both.

Benton described his new film project “The Dim,” which will be screened at the June 10 event, as a Native American psychological thriller, featuring a love triangle, with an inter-dimensional object.

He added that the team at LTV has been extremely supportive in the making of the film. Friends, family and the staff at LTV all pitched in to be a part of the cast and crew. Though filming started last year, when fall came and schedules got busy, the crew took a hiatus, waiting until after winter to start filming again.

Filming is still in progress leading up to the June 10 event.

“We’re very independent and on a low budget,” Benton explained.

“An Educational Afternoon of Indigenous Film & Fashion,” hosted by Kayla Lookinghorse and Ginew Benton, takes place from noon to 7 p.m. on Saturday, June 10, at LTV Studios, 75 Industrial Road, Wainscott. Admission is free and no tickets are necessary.

The event kicks off with a market at noon featuring Native American vendors who will sell wampum jewelry, arts, photography and paintings. A reception and mocktail bar opens at 2 p.m. with a reception featuring a DJ, Native American dancers, panel speakers and a discussion, followed at 3 p.m. by the Native American Short Film Festival. The Native American Fashion Show, featuring the designs of Kayla Lookinghorse, begins at 5 p.m. followed at 5:30 p.m. by the world premiere screening of “The Dim,” Ginew Benton’s first feature film.