

Michael Cleveland and Flamekeeper bring bluegrass to new audiences in July 4 celebration at ENCORE

by Stephanie Manning



As has been the case throughout this season, on July 4, the ENCORE Music & Ideas Festival will once again try something new. In a celebration of American music, classical and bluegrass will share the stage at the Dodero Center for Performing Arts in Gates Mills. The 4:30 pm concert will begin with Copland's *Appalachian Spring* performed by ENCORE artists, before shifting to Michael Cleveland and his band Flamekeeper, who will deliver what is certain to be a high energy performance.

"We're gonna get up there and jam out," Cleveland said in a recent phone interview. "That's what we do." The band won't formally decide on a set list

until concert day, but the fiddler said the performance will last 30 to 45 minutes and will include songs from their records.

With six albums to their credit, Flamekeeper has a lot of music to choose from. Their most recent release, *Tall Fiddler*, won the 2020 Grammy Award for Best Bluegrass Album. Cleveland, who is blind and partially deaf, has wowed audiences with his fiery playing from a young age. He formed the group in 2006, which includes Chris Douglas on bass, Nathan Livers on mandolin, Josh Richards on guitar, and Jasiah Shrode on banjo.

The band's visit to Northeast Ohio is one of quite a few shows they have scheduled for this summer. "At the ones we've played so far, it seems like people are ready to get out and hear music, and the crowds have been really great," Cleveland said.

Because Flamekeeper usually tours at bluegrass festivals, the audience at the Dodero Center will be out of the norm. "This show is quite a bit different than what we usually

do, but we really like doing stuff like this where it's a contrast between classical and bluegrass," he said. "We like playing bluegrass for people who have maybe never heard what we do or don't necessarily know this music all that well."

For those who may be unfamiliar, bluegrass originated in America's Appalachian region in the 1940s — making Copland's *Appalachian Spring* an especially meaningful pairing. The distinctly American programming choices are inspired both by the holiday and by Teddy Roosevelt, the former president who championed environmental issues. The concert will be preceded by a panel discussion about the history of land conservation in Ohio with experts from Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

When he's not performing, Cleveland keeps himself busy with recording projects for other artists, something he started doing a few years ago. Sometimes he'll get sent a bluegrass track, but more often he's asked to play country, pop, and other genres. He said that the practice became especially important to him during the pandemic. "That's really what kept me going through all this."

Now, having live performances back makes them feel more important than ever. When I commented how it must feel great returning to the stage after so many months, his response was "You ain't kiddin, you ain't kiddin. Way too long."

He recounted a recent experience of hearing live music with a friend at the Station Inn in Nashville. "When you're in the middle of it, you don't realize how special it is to actually be able to go out, see a show, hang out with your friends, and everything else."

Looking forward to the July 4 performance, Cleveland is excited for the band to spread their music to new audiences. "The bluegrass audience, they know bluegrass, they know what to expect. Whereas when you play for people who've never heard it before, it's like this new thing. And it's really cool to be part of that."

The concert and its preceding conversation will take place at the Dodero Center for the Performing Arts, located on the Gilmour Academy campus in Gates Mills. Tickets are available [here](#).

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