

# CHART ATTACK



## UNCHARTED: Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq talks Animism, Pixies and #Sealfies

Tanya Tagaq merges traditional sounds with activism and experimentalism in a way that's turning heads

Kelly Korducki | May 29, 2014

***Uncharted*** is Chart Attack's showcase of independent Canadian artists we think you should hear. This week, experimental Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq talks about the pressure of being taken as a cultural ambassador while straying from tradition, colonialism, Pixies and #sealfies.

\* \* \*

[Tanya Tagaq](#) is a big laughter. If you're at all familiar with the intensity of her creative output and high-profile activist streak, that might come as a surprise.

In late March, the avant-garde visual artist and throat singer drew heat for publicly supporting the Inuit seal hunt on Twitter, posting a "[#sealfie](#)" — that is, [a photo](#) of her infant daughter beside a dead seal near her hometown of Cambridge Bay (Ikaluktuutiak), Nunavut — prompting one tweeter to [allegedly put forth an online petition](#) demanding the baby be removed from her custody. Tagaq stood her ground. "It's just complete harassment," she [told CBC News](#). "It's not OK."

Her new album, *Animism* ([Six Shooter](#)), is equally forceful: an undulating aural exercise where vocals alternate between guttural percussive pulses and urging melodic lines, backed by violinist [Jesse Zubot](#)'s sweeping arrangements. It's rewarding—and indeed, [Björk](#) and the [Kronos Quartet](#) count themselves

among Tagaq's fans and collaborators—but it isn't for the faint of heart. Yet, Tagaq is full of laughs.

"Sometimes my tone of voice doesn't come across well in quotes, because I could be giggling something but someone will take it seriously!" says Tagaq over the phone from her home in Brandon, Manitoba on the afternoon *Animism* has been released into the world, and just hours after [her feature interview with Jian Ghomeshi for CBC's Q](#) has been nationally broadcast.

The day prior, podcast host [Ryan McMahon](#) had posted a quote from a recent interview with Tagaq: "My people [the Inuk] are badasses. Shut up about the Arctic Vortex unless you've felt it in 24-hour darkness." And while Tagaq will stand by her words, she is quick to point out they weren't said with a straight face. Tagaq means business, but her tack is humane.

\* \* \*

**You're a self-taught throat singer and you perform solo, which is unusual [typically throat singing is passed on between women, and performed in woman-woman duos as a sort of contest]. What made you decide to take on this tradition by teaching yourself, and how long did it take you to figure out to do?**

**Tanya Tagaq:** I was messing around with it for years. I never had the intention of making it a career. It was just something that happened, like to doodle with artwork. I never thought, "Oh, I'm going to be a painter." It was just something I did for enjoyment. So it took a couple years of doing that before it ever made it on stage.

**Were people surprised to learn that you were taking this style on, by yourself?**

People are still mad! Some people are still angry. But there's nothing wrong with living in the now, as humans. There's nothing wrong with being, quote-unquote, "modern." What I'm doing departs from the tradition, and I understand that people are really holding onto traditions and trying to preserve what can be preserved as a fallout of colonialism. So I have a respect for traditionalists as well. Just because somebody insults me or doesn't like me doesn't mean I don't like them back. I understand where they're coming from. But of course, I understand where I'm coming from more. So. *[Laughs.]*

**At the same time, [similarly to](#) artists like [A Tribe Called Red](#), you're introducing this modern take on an old tradition to a whole gigantic new audience. Do you ever feel pressured by the sense that you're being placed into the role of cultural ambassador?**

“ I don't feel like a cultural ambassador. I'm just someone who's doing something, and hopefully that brings other people to check out the tradition of it.

I don't really feel that way. Maybe I would if I was doing more traditional stuff, then I'd feel way more like an ambassador. I'm okay with being the weirdo I am. I don't feel the pressure to speak for anyone but myself. When I feel strongly about things, like the sealfie movement, I'll voice my opinions. But I don't feel like a cultural ambassador. I'm just someone who's doing something, and hopefully that brings other people to check out the tradition of it.

**You're really passionate about the sealfie movement.**

Yes, I am, for a myriad of reasons. We don't get a tonne of money from the natural resources that are

being extracted from Nunavut, but we do have one resource and that's seals. We eat them and we always have and there are plenty of them, but for some reason there's a level of discrimination happening that one of the smallest minorities on the planet isn't allowed to reap the benefits from their own resources. It just seems like there's a lot of oppression happening from too many sides.

It's ridiculous to expect us not to hunt, but it's also a little sad that Canada as a whole can't enjoy having a seal steak or can't be proud wearing seal skins because of all these bans brought about by propaganda. It would help our economy a lot to be able to sell the fur as well as the meat. There are people that are still eating that to live.

There are all these outsiders, the people against the sealfie, and they don't live there or know the animals. They don't understand that we're living with them on the land, and they're telling us not to hunt? I really wish I could take every single one of them and put them up there in the middle of winter in an igloo with a seal. I bet you the seal would eat them! *[Laughs.]*

**That unmitigated relationship with nature is something that most people who encounter your music probably haven't experienced.**

Absolutely. It's a real pity to meet people who haven't been in touch with the land at all. From my perspective it's really sad, because it's beautiful up there. That earth that we're destroying, it's really beautiful and peaceful and you can be okay with yourself and everything that's going on when you're out on the land. It's the biggest reason I make music, as a kind of commentary on today's society.

**Why did you go with *Animism* as the title and theme of this album?**

“ Animism is the belief that it's not only humans that possess a spiritual entity but everything around us. And I've felt that often. The earth is a grid; we're just part of it.

It was the closest thing I could find to be comparative to the “old traditions” or old religions, before Christianity came. Talking about how there is a deep connection that exists between what we are and what animals are and what the earth is. We're all part of this existence that's happening, and the disconnect that has allowed us to destroy the earth so much. I want to plug back into that in as many ways as possible.

Animism is the belief that it's not only humans that possess a spiritual entity but everything

around us. And I've felt that often. The earth is a grid; we're just part of it. If we plug back into ourselves, it seems to work out in the best possible ways. If you follow your gut instincts and try to really look at any situation you're in for what it is, and peel back layers of what you're supposed to think and what you're supposed to be, you can guide yourself through life in a positive way.

**There seems to be a temptation to use words like “animal” or “primal” to describe your sound.**

They're more feelings than sounds to me. I can't really describe what I'm making because I'm not sure of the ingredients myself. It's like if you had to describe, in a perfect way, what it was like seeing your baby for the first time after it was born. You could use all these words to try to describe it, but there are no words for it because that feeling is so overwhelming. That's kind of how I feel about it.

**You cover the [Pixies](#)' song “[Caribou](#)” in your new album, which you've also just performed on Q. I think many people might actually internalize for the first time, through your version, that the song's about...well, caribou.**

That's the thing. I'd just left home when I heard that song, and I just couldn't fucking believe that someone was singing about caribou. I mean, I'd spent my youth desperate to get out of my home. And now that I've travelled around so much, I'm so thankful that I was from such a brilliantly isolated way of upbringing. I'm so happy to be from there, and I'm so happy that considering how big this earth is I got a chance to be born and raised in a place that is so connected to how life is. But I always thought I was from this lame, small place when I was a teenager. When I heard someone singing about caribou I was so ecstatic. That's carried with me for many, many years.