



Tanya Tagaq Defies Definition (Among Many Other Things)

By Suzy Exposito | January 23, 2015



The Polaris Music Prize Winner and Inuit throat singer reinterprets long-standing cultural traditions for a rapidly changing world

Some people may have first heard of Inuit throat singer [Tanya Tagaq](#) when [she featured in Björk's 2004 album, *Medúlla*](#). Others may remember when [she won a Polaris Music Prize](#) for her 2014 album, *Animism*. And many recall her [recent internet beef with vegetarian stronghold PETA](#) over her advocacy for seal hunting — one of the few means of survival in her home territory of Nunavut, Northern Canada. But if anyone at her latest New York show expected a quiet evening with Tanya Tagaq, they were in for something much more... explosive. Sporting a red plaid asymmetrical dress, the singer greeted patrons of Joe's Pub, an upscale Manhattan venue, the best way she knew how.

"Hi everyone," she said dryly, "fellow meat sacks." Audience members chuckled over their cocktails and salads, their smiles uneasy against the candlelight. "Inuit throat singing is traditionally done between two Inuit women, facing each other," she explained. "In precolonial times, they would sing directly mouth-to-mouth but... You know how Christianity is. Today you just get me."

She promptly cleared her throat. "Sorry to everyone who's eating," she said, "I'm going to disturb you."

Within minutes she sank to her hands and feet, the agony palpable in every inhale as she panted rapidly into the microphone. Comprised of a drummer and electric violinist, her backing band would spend the next hour hacking out a hair-raising, improvised medley of experimental jazz, electronica and metal. Stretching her arms outward and clawing desperately into the air, Tagaq alternated between earthy, guttural moans and the serene warbling of a child; addling the audience with joy, terror and heaps of sexual and postcolonial tension.

"Manifest. Destiny," she began to chant, gasping for air in sync with the drums. Cheers emerged from the

back of the room; did they cheer for the devastating impact of Western expansion, displacing thousands of indigenous nations since the 19th century? Or because she finally sang something they could understand? Another audience member half-jokingly wondered aloud if she would cough up a demon by the end of her set, baring strong parallels to European settlers' accounts of their first contact with Indigenous people. As with the Christian missionaries who [once banned throat singing in Inuit communities](#), it seemed only logical to this person that something foreign and discomforting could be a byproduct of demonic possession.

On the phone, Tagaq is much more placid than her stage presence would let on. "I'm gonna make another coffee," she says breathily. "I'm too mellow today. Usually, I got a lot more piss and vinegar in me." Once the coffee's brewed, we discuss sex, caribou, and her new album *Animism*, released this week in the United States.

Do you come down to New York often?

Yes, I love New York. I never feel like I get enough of it when I go there — I always go straight to the East Village, nowhere else. I should live there for a year so I can soak it all up and get sick of it.

It is overwhelming, even for people who live here. Where are you living now?

I live in Manitoba. But I was raised in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, in a little town of 1,500 people. There wasn't even a high school there, so I went to residential school in Yellowknife. There are no roads to the south so everything is flown in. That's how it's \$16 for a bunch of grapes.

Which is why you're very vocal about issues like food and environmental justice. It seems very isolated over there.

You could walk across town in 10 minutes, then the rest of it is complete wilderness. I spent all my time in the wild. As a teenager I could kill and skin a caribou, toss it over my shoulder and bring it home. When you're that close to nature, you get a different perspective. When traveling, I keep relearning how to be a person in a city and dealing with people who didn't grow up connected to the earth. Going camping is scary for them. But if you left people from [Nunavut] in the middle of Manhattan, they'd have a panic attack! I like building bridges between those two extremes, the city and the wild. It's fascinating.

Your latest album really does build that bridge between nature and technology. Music is often very indicative of its time, down to the year it was made, because of the sound or the production, or what the musicians are wearing. But *Animism* seems to transcend time, in that it's hard to place when and where it was made. People can't decide whether it's of the future or the past because of this melding of electronic, orchestral and raw vocal elements.

I recorded *Animism* in multiple cities; I recorded with musicians in Vancouver, Winnipeg and Spain. Then we mixed it all at L'Université Laval in Quebec. It's kind of from everywhere. I don't worry about structured things, like a bar or a chorus. If you prefer your songs to sound like a McDonald's hamburger then do it, I don't give a shit. But the important thing is trying not to control the process. You can't control death, you can't control life. I always want the heart to be improvisation. I go into the studio with 10 words on a paper and some people I like. Then I just go from there. Except for the song "Caribou," we had to know what we were doing!

Yes, because it's a Pixies cover! Why did you decide to include it?

I first heard The Pixies in a dorm room in Yellowknife. I freaked out. I was like, "What? They're singing about caribou! How do they know about caribou?!" It's all about that bridging process. I wanted to think about how a song changes when an Indigenous woman from Nunavut sings it almost 30 years later. Sometimes it makes more sense than the original.

Yes, context can definitely change with the person! Even the very sense of time and place varies with a person.

In Nunavut, there are times when it gets so dark we can't tell what time it is; you get to know your habitat by instinct. I was thrilled when I first moved to Halifax in college, which was a big city for me back then. It's so small now that I've been to other places. I first visited New York on a class trip and first thing I did was buy a latex dress and went to an S&M club. I left the club with two gay men I had just met, and my classmates freaked out. But in my gut I could tell how wonderful and kind these people were and how I was in no danger. And we got something to eat, I went home, and I never saw those guys again. What happened to me in New York is like what would happen if I dropped you in Nunavut and you just knew where to go fishing.

I think city people have a similar kind of intuition; but we call it street smarts. It's like we know our habitat by other people, or *who* we share it with.

I notice that: like how sometimes, city people will be afraid of people who are of lower economic demographics. It's bullshit. I grew up in a small town where it didn't matter what your job was or how

much money you make. It's about whether you're an awesome person. We can sense those things.

I love traveling and studying the social structures of different places. Through my years of traveling, it's apparent to me that there are incredible people everywhere. But humans have managed to fuck up every system possible. We've lost our way spiritually, environmentally, physically. And no matter how much humans try to tear themselves away from nature, what happens in nature recurs in modern society. Take caribou, for instance. On average one male caribou impregnates seven female caribou. You see the same patterns in humans, but it's mediated by things like commitment, marriage, religion, *shame*. Humans really put a stick in all the gears of progress, except for a very narrow technological window. Society is like a Rubik's Cube getting passed around; it's stressful. On stage, I let go of all that intellectually plagues me!

Absolutely. Your live music seems to function as an epic, cathartic release.

Right. I get on stage with no preconceived notion of what's going to happen. It could be one of those shows where things are really soft and sweet, and it could turn into something insane and super sexual. I love losing control.

You seem very in control, though!

Well in [my performance], I like to push the bounds on what is socially accepted as feminine. Women seem to enjoy it; it's usually women who come up to me after the show. But men don't see it in that light, which is okay; I like being *monstrous* with my sexuality. I know that vulnerability is not very attractive to people. These days, almost every woman I know has body issues and wants to lose 10 pounds. I'm lucky that I grew up in a place where women don't worry about being skinny. We have to be strong in order to serve a purpose. The sexiest thing is knowing your body and being comfortable with it.

There is power in knowing that your body can create a person, that your body can kill an animal and haul it away on your shoulder, that your body can feed a family. In many ways, technological progress that has left us all disembodied. You have to feel that you're outside of your body to keep scrutinizing its appearance.

Focusing on how you look everyday seems *exhausting*. Think of all the energy you could expend on developing your mind or your physical ability. How can you even enjoy yourself, how can you enjoy sex if you're so worried about your belly hanging out? You're not there to put on a show, you're there to get off! When I'm on stage, it's like a big release, I don't think about performing at all. It just happens, like I'm sitting in a car and watching the landscape pass by.

When did you figure out that music was something you wanted to pursue professionally?

I took singing more seriously after recording with Björk. But I was completely self-taught. I've always been kind of a freak; my dad would play Pink Floyd records and I'd just writhe on the floor, throw shit around to the music. But later on I picked up traditional throat singing. I was an art history teacher and painter when Björk called me away.

Do you still find the time to make art while pursuing music?

I try not to keep my expression stuck in the medium, or else it gets stuck, period. Music alone even bores me sometimes; my music is very much about the sound, but it's also about where it's coming from. Leaving home and going on tour showed me how small the world really is. It's hard to see the impact of big things like climate change if you're stuck in one town or city. The earth seems so big to you, so you think it can take it. Sometimes I wonder: how are we going to maintain our existence on this planet? But also, I'm worried about the existence of people on this planet, like all the missing and murdered indigenous women. I worry that my two daughters are four times more likely to be murdered than any other group in Canada. It's alarming! I feel like I have to point these things out in my music, in my art. You gotta do what you can to improve things. Otherwise, what the hell are you here for?

Tanya Tagaq will be touring throughout the US and the UK, including a performance at the 2015 Bonnaroo Festival. Animism is now available on iTunes.