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## FREE

BY JOHN SEABROOK

“How come they never show an indigenous person using the Internet?” Tanya Tagaq remarked on a recent Sunday visit to the Museum of the American Indian, at Bowling Green. “We’re not only in the past. We’re here right now.”

Tagaq, who is thirty-nine and has jet-black hair and a girlish face, had removed her sealskin boots and was sitting barefoot on the floor of the Diker Pavilion, a large oval space on the museum’s ground level. A couple of mothers were browsing the exhibition cases while, nearer Tagaq, their young children mimicked the traditional Indian dances that were being projected on the curving wall of the room.

“They should put me in one of those cases,” Tagaq said. “I’d be like—” and she flipped the bird with both hands, grinning mischievously.

Tagaq is an Inuit throat singer, and she was in the city for a performance at Joe’s Pub: a jaw-dropping forty-five minutes of guttural heaves, juddering howls, and murderous shrieks—Inuit folk meets Karen Finley. The show was as remarkable for its fearless lack of inhibition as for Tagaq’s technical skill and her mastery of tradition. In her work, which includes collaborations with Björk and the Kronos Quartet, Tagaq uses breath and, more recently, vocalized shrieks and moans. She is known throughout Canada (her home is in Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories), and she won the 2014 Polaris Prize for album of the year, beating out Drake and Arcade Fire. The album, “Animism,” has just been released Stateside—her first U.S. record.



Tagaq's mother was born and raised in an igloo on Baffin Island, in Nunavut Territory, but Tagaq, whose father is British and Polish, grew up in a house, in Cambridge Bay. She didn't hear throat singing until her mother gave her a cassette of two Inuit women doing it in the traditional manner, as a duet. "I heard the land in the voices," she explained. She began to imitate the sounds, performing both parts. "It became my form of self-acceptance," she went on. "I never had any designs on being a professional singer. It was just something I did—for years, in the shower, and in my room alone."

In 2003, while attending a midnight-sun arts festival in Nunavut, Tagaq was drinking around a campfire with the festival's director. "And I said, 'Check this shit out,' and I started throat singing. And the next day the main act couldn't come, and the festival director said, 'Would you be comfortable just going up and jamming?' And I was like—*yeah*." At Joe's Pub, she looked more comfortable than many in the audience. "To be honest, it's hard to make me feel uncomfortable," she admitted.

Friends of Björk's happened to be attending the festival, and a couple of weeks later Tagaq got a call from the artist's manager, who wanted to fly her to New York to work with Björk. On arriving in the city for the first time, "I was so touched at the accomplishments of humanity," Tagaq said. "And to this day I get touched. I see someone behind the counter where I'm buying my water, and I'm like, 'You're fucking *awesome*!'"

Björk took Tagaq on tour with her. "It was wonderful," Tagaq said. "But I didn't know the world yet. I got pregnant from a man I met onstage and moved to the Basque country, and when my baby was four months old Björk flew me to the Canary Islands to record 'Medúlla,' " Björk's sixth album.

In recent years, Tagaq has become more political, speaking out on a range of Inuit social ills engendered by colonialism and racism. At some shows, she projects the names of twelve hundred indigenous women missing or murdered since 1980 as she sings. "My daughters are four times more likely to be murdered than any other racial demographic in Canada," she said at the museum. "So how do I change this, how do I help? That's what I'm projecting my voice for."

Tagaq has no formal music training, and she said that the Kronos Quartet's leader, David Harrington, "made me promise never to learn my notes. 'Millions of people know all that stuff,' he told me. 'You're completely free. Don't let it shackle you.' " She added, "Our whole society is based on control. I want to live like I'm free."

Being free includes wearing seal, an important Inuit resource. "The people are being denied our natural resource because Paul McCartney thinks seals are cute? Fuck right off!" Then: "Sorry!" she said to a little boy who was staring at her. The kid's mom shooed him away. Indians in cases are safer. ♦