



SHUT UP ABOUT THE "FUCK PETA" CONTROVERSY, TANYA TAGAQ PUTS ON THE BEST LIVE SHOW I'VE EVER SEEN

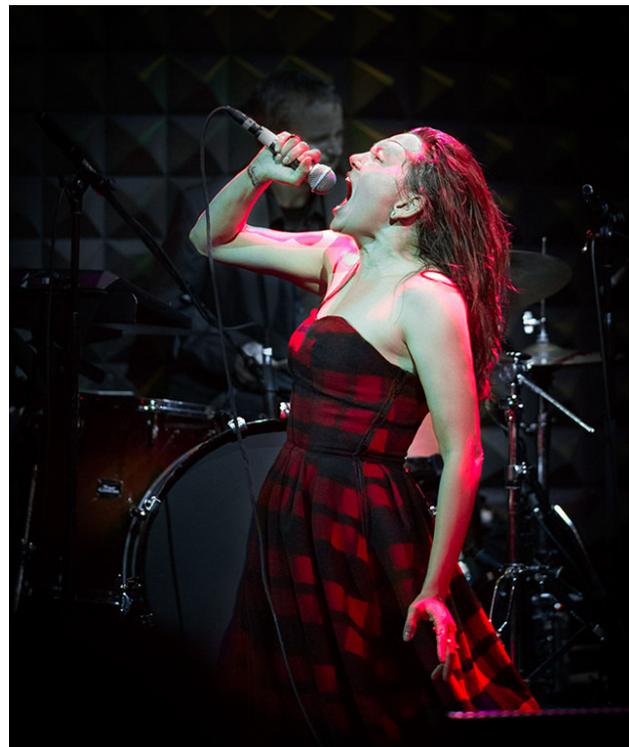
By Kim Kelly | January 15, 2015

Tanya Tagaq, a Nunavut-born Inuk (indigenous Canadian) throat singer, made waves in 2014 when she swept through the ceremony for Canada's prestigious Polaris Prize like an avenging war goddess after her album *Animism* won the top prize. While the win shocked people more familiar with high-profile Canadian acts like Drake and Arcade Fire, it was a reasonable choice. *Animism* is a wonderfully avantgarde album that flits between genres like an Artic tern, encompassing EDM, pop, neoclassical, and Tagaq's own modified, one-of-a-kind approach to throat singing that embraces the duality of purposefully animalistic growls and soulful trills. It's more consciously political than her earlier work, too, echoing Tagaq's own strong views—views which she has no problem sharing, as was made apparent at this year's Polaris Prize gala.

Little of the conversation around Tagaq from the night of the awards on has been about her music. She's long been a vocal supporter of Inuit seal hunting, and her acceptance speech caused controversy after she mentioned the issue in no uncertain terms. After she delivered a [standing ovation-worthy performance](#) in front of a huge screen filled with the names of 1,200 of Canada's missing and murdered indigenous women, Tagaq castigated PETA during a fiery acceptance speech. Her pro-seal hunting stance shocked many, but her impassioned defense of the practice came from a place of [experience](#) ([as she told Vice](#), "they're taking food out of peoples' mouths"). Indigenous seal-hunting is an [issue](#) from Canada to the Faroe Islands to the shores of Japan, but the media balked when faced with a popular musician who'd taken on the practice's preservation as her [raison d'être](#). Among other offenders, the AV Club's coverage of the kerfuffle was disturbingly tone-deaf at best: "[Drake and Arcade Fire lost the Polaris Music Prize to a seal-eating throat singer.](#)"

Tagaq was understandably unimpressed by the reaction, [noting](#), "It's important to take everybody's opinion if we're going to move forward as a human race. It's not okay that I had a scroll of missing and murdered women, and people are losing their minds over seal. It's not okay." She added in a piece she wrote for Noisey sister site [Munchies](#), "We should be being heralded as one of the last cultures that are living in harmony with the Earth, instead of being vilified by isolated groups of people who are out to make a buck off a cute seal face."

The Nunavut native had also made headlines earlier that year for posting a now-infamous ["sealfie" photo](#) of her baby daughter lying next to a freshly slain seal; her posting the photo itself should've been a non-event, but the ensuing wrath of animal rights activists and social media keyboard warriors plagued Tagaq for months. Clearly, she's no stranger to controversy, and her tough-as-nails reputation has been



hard-won but well earned. She juggles motherhood, activism, a [thriving musical career](#) that includes [collaborations](#) with Björk and Mike Patton as well as two Juno awards alongside her shiny new Polaris. Thanks to all the uproar surrounding her politics, her music sometimes gets lost in the shuffle, which is a crying shame. I was dead set on going to one of her two NYC shows to see just what she had to offer onstage, and am so very, very thankful that I did.

On January 12, I attended her sold-out concert at Joe's Pub, which is one hundred percent ritzier than you'd expect a place called "Joe's Pub" to be. The Sirius Quartet opened the show; I showed up in time to catch them absolutely shredding a cover of "Eleanor Rigby" and a closing medley, and was dazzled by their dexterity. Given the intensity of Tagaq's performances and the singer's own affinity for [heavy metal](#) (not to mention the fact that a few Canadian heshers had turned me on to her in the first place), I had thought the gig would feature more of a rock'n'roll crowd, but everyone there seemed quite proper and be-scarfed and classy. I'd half expected to be seeing Tagaq tearing up a basement or smoky club, not a beautifully appointed concert hall, but none of that mattered once the lights went dim and the lady herself bounded out onto the small, low stage.



Crackling with energy, she immediately launched into a friendly greeting, scandalizing the gentlemen sitting at the front by gesturing at the hem of her plaid dress and firing off a flippant "I apologize for my ass!" She kept her introduction short but potent, touching upon the seal hunt, the origins of throat singing (and its repression by Christian colonials), a few childhood memories of bunking off school in subzero temperatures, and colonialism's impact on Inuk life in Nunavut before she began her performance. Joined by drummer Jean Martin and violinist Jesse Zubot (who also produced *Animism*), Tagaq took a deep breath then launched into her set, beginning with "Uja."

Her wholly unique throat singing technique perverts the art forms' traditional beginnings (wherein two women sing directly into one another's mouths), instead incorporating circular breathing into a self-made chorus of shrieks, growls, grunts, moans, pants, giggles, trills, howls, and sweetly sang whispers. The strings murmured and screamed, and the drums rumbled in the background, artfully supporting her percolating voice. The recurring juxtaposition of Tagaq's high, feminine clean vocals with the concurrent deep, growling vocalizations lent her an air of possession—the demon clawing its way out of a throat coated with honey.

There's an incredible physicality to her performance, even outside of her vocal gymnastics and measured breathing. Barefoot, she clutches the microphone like a weapon, hurling herself about the stage, clawing at the air, reaching for the heavens, baring her teeth, folding down over her knees. It's modern dance meets modern art, narrated by an ancient voice. It's impossible to watch and not feel oneself completely drawn in, and even harder to tear one's eyes away. Tagaq exudes an elemental kind of power as she taps into humanity's most naked emotions and forces them into the spotlight. At one point, she began to growl/sing the words "Manifest destiny," a chilling phrase to all who know of its bloodstained history. Rhythmically, hypnotically, she drilled the words into our consciousness, forcing us to confront them; a few people in the audience set up a cheer, one that petered out quickly under the withering glares of their peers. A Tanya Tagaq show is not the time for audience participation; rather, it's a time to shut up, listen, and reflect on the sights and sounds that you've been lucky enough to receive.

Nearly an hour later, she stopped. She thanked us, grinning, and scampered off stage. The rest of us blinked, shell-shocked; what had just happened? Oh, yeah—the best musical performance any of us had ever seen.