

# OUTSIDE



# POKED

## THROAT-SINGER TANYA TAGAQ IS AN INDEPENDENT MUSICAL POWERHOUSE WITH A PASSION FOR INUIT PEOPLE AND THEIR RIGHTS

BY CINDY FILIPINKO

**T**anya Tagaq and her music are genre-defying. But, then again, that's what makes them both so great. Tagaq is great because she's talented, real, warm, funny and not above using a few well-placed curses for emphasis when needed.

The fact that her music is great was recognized in September, when her latest album, *Animus*, won the Polaris Music Prize. For the Inuit throat-singer, winning the Polaris wasn't as much mind-blowing as it was validating.

"I feel a little less like a crazy person now," she laughs. "I was starting to feel like I was marching to my own beat a little too much."

Tagaq, arguably the world's best-known throat-singer (throat-singing is common to many cultures), admits that the musical form and what she has done with it have always made her feel like an outsider, both traditionally and within the music scene. For example, throat-singing is normally done as an exchange between two women, but Tagaq makes it a one-woman show. Tagaq's decision to go solo wasn't a creative one but rather a pragmatic decision: She simply did not have a partner to sing with.

"My music is such a departure from the traditional, and it's also a huge departure from the five-minute song with bridges and stops and putting things together, things you've done previously," says Tagaq from her home in Brandon, Manitoba. "My singing is really based in improvisation and freedom from choruses and licks—it's about feeling connected."

It was that feeling of connection and tradition that motivated the 37-year-old one-time college instructor to pursue throat-singing. Introduced to throat-singing while attending high school in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, she later developed her solo form while studying visual arts at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax.

And, while she fell in love with the sound and continued to teach herself the finer aspects of this ancient singing form, she never considered that it could become a career.



Ten years after she released her first album, the critically acclaimed *Sinaa*, the career she never expected has taken her around the world and onto some of its most coveted stages. She has collaborated with artists such as Björk and the Kronos Quartet. Others are lining up to work with her, and a U.S. release of *Animism* and an Eastern U.S. tour are planned for early 2015. Tagaq is busy. It's a fun and exciting time, but she is clearly grounded, often using her position to get across messages about women's safety (the album is dedicated to the country's missing and murdered Aboriginal women), environmental sustainability and equality. Winning the Polaris Music Prize helped to bring her voice to a larger audience, and at the awards ceremony she delivered an acceptance speech like no other.

The Polaris Music Prize, founded in 2006, is an award given annually to the best full-length Canadian album, based on artistic merit and regardless of genre. It comes with a \$30,000 prize and the affirmation that the award is juried by industry professionals across the country. This year, Tagaq's incredible third album, *Animus*, was up against projects by well-known artists such as Arcade Fire, Drake and Mac DeMarco.

The night Tanya Tagaq took to the stage at the Polaris event was notable. Her performance of the visceral "Uja," with its dizzying vocal ladders and primal growls and grunts, was delivered with astounding intensity and brought the evening's only standing ovation. But there was something else that caught everyone's attention: the simple two-word coda to her acceptance speech, which was "Fuck PETA."

Born and raised in Cambridge Bay, a community of 1,500 that is separated from the rest of Nunavut by the Arctic Ocean, Tagaq is a passionate proponent of Inuit hunting, including the East Coast seal hunt. She says she's tired of people who don't live the Inuit experience speaking against something that doesn't affect their lives.

"People are freaking out about killing seals when millions of cows are being killed every day, and those same people are running around eating at McDonald's and wearing leather. There are poor people in the North and on the East Coast that can't survive off their natural resources because a lot of people have been brainwashed into thinking that seals are cute. It's ridiculous," states Tagaq.

PETA stands for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Tagaq believes PETA is responsible for generating a lot of hostility towards the seal hunt. The organization stated in response that it is not opposed to Inuit hunting but to the "East Coast commercial slaughter, which is run by white people."

Tagaq points out that not only is seal a traditional food source and the seal hunt of cultural significance but it's also a necessity; food costs in the North are astronomical, in part due to the cost of air transport. She believes

that for most privileged Canadians living in the South food is affordable and the variety is plentiful. She also believes that those who support local and organic food sourcing should be open to other ways of looking at natural and sustainable food.

In May, Canada lost its bid to have a European Union ban on its seal products overturned. The World Trade Organization upheld an EU decision linking the seal trade ban to moral objections against the seal hunt.

"Hearing people talk about eating locally and sustainably makes me mad, because these are the same people who can't see how it [a seal ban] affects the harmony we live with in nature," says Tagaq. "There's an opportunity to raise the quality of life for people who have been through a really tough time over the last couple hundred of years because of colonization."

She pauses.

"So if you're going to be lefty and politically correct, you should be wearing as much seal as you can," she laughs. "And eating it—it's delicious."

Last spring, with a new Twitter account, Tagaq incited the ire of many by posting a "sealfie," a picture of her baby next to a dead seal. She took the picture in response to people who claimed she didn't care about animals or animal rights. To the contrary, Tagaq stated at the time, "They are us. We are them."

"The reason I put my baby there is because they are both flesh. People are disgusted by that idea. They can't relate to it because they buy their boneless chicken breasts at the store. They're happy to eat it, but they could never kill a chicken. People need to know their food source."

One of the people she's making sure knows about the politics of food sourcing is her 11-year-old daughter, Naia, who splits her time between Manitoba, her father's home in Spain and her grandmother's hometown in Nunavut.

"They grow everything in the Basque region," adds Tagaq. "Naia has an awesome connection to food. Hopefully this will help her make healthier choices in her life, because she's aware of those choices."

In conversation it's apparent that Tagaq strives to live the ideal of seeing nature and humans in harmony, the primary theme that resonates throughout *Animism*.

"We keep forgetting our way and aren't appreciating our time on this earth," reflects Tagaq. "People are going through so much, and it's not supposed to be this way. I have a body memory, a feeling of remembering in a pocket in the back of my brain about a time when people were okay with themselves and lived in harmony with the earth."

Tagaq has just come off a leg of environmentalist David Suzuki's Blue Dot tour in support of his bid to have Canada recognize people's right to live in a healthy

environment. Her passion for healing the earth and its inhabitants is well-fuelled.

“I don’t understand how people are walking around so unaware and complacent. Why is everyone on antidepressants? It’s all the same root—disconnection—and it’s going to take a Canada-wide movement to fix it,” she says.

Tagaq lets loose a soft chuckle, offering the idea that she’s an optimist because she listened to too much John Lennon as a teenager. Her optimism extends to the idea of self-determination for the Inuit people, a process she believes will happen in stages.

“First of all, get rid of the seal ban so we can support ourselves with our natural resources. We need social implementation governed by ourselves and a better judicial system that’s run more like our honour systems.... All of this stuff is internal. Externally, a mass education effort has to happen.”

She continues, saying that most people don’t realize that “their ingrained, multi-generational opinion of

indigenous people was implemented by the government [in order] to take the land unscrupulously in the first place. We had to be considered inhuman, and lower, for them to be able to do what they did. We need that way of thinking to stop. It’s unfair, and I will talk about that forever.” Asked about political aspirations, she laughs. It’s a question she’s been asked a lot.

“I thought about it, and I thought, who the hell is gonna vote for this grunting bitch? I’m way too outspoken, and I’m way too weird.”

A committed social critic since she was a teen, Tagaq recalls getting into conflict with her some of high school peers over her pro-gay stance.

“People were not happy—even the ones who were gay when they were drunk,” Tagaq explains. “Even as a kid, I thought, if two people are loving each other—who cares? I care about people hitting each other.”

Tagaq is five years into a relationship with a man she describes as “pretty amazing.” She is happy that her audience is growing and that she’s found a platform for her convictions. Through her growing success and recognition, she says she has managed to stay centred.

“I’m no better than anyone because I sing in front of a microphone,” she explains. “People start thinking their job makes them important, and it doesn’t work,”

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she says. “If you’re going to be equal with other people, nature, and the land, and be part of a universe, you can’t think you’re better than anyone else. In Cambridge Bay, it didn’t matter how much money you made, or what you looked like—you were either a jerk or you weren’t—and I am so thankful I was raised there.”

As an artist, Tanya Tagaq is exploring the boundaries of music in ways she never imagined, and she is using her candid and honest Inuit voice to further public discussions on important cultural and political issues. “I’ve always been this way,” she says. “The difference is that now people are listening.” ❁

