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Tanya Tagaq Grabs The World By The Throat

By Mary Dickie | February 2014

Watching Tanya Tagaq perform is more than just an auditory and visual experience: it's physical. As the Nunavut-born, Manitoba-based throat singer moves around a stage, she unleashes something fierce and powerful that comes from deep within her body, yet seems positively unearthly. She mostly improvises her performances, tapping into traditional Inuit throat singing—growling, cooing, howling, and manipulating her breath into frenetic rhythms—but adapting it to create a hybrid that sounds simultaneously animal and alien, ancient and modern. It's visceral, earthy, and unabashedly sexual, frightening, mesmerizing, and exhilarating.

The effect she has on audiences has sparked avid interest around the world in her work and has led to many creative collaborations, starting with Björk and including the Kronos Quartet, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, Mike Patton, Matthew Barney, and Buck 65, among others. She has provided soundtracks for several films, including Robert J. Flaherty's renowned and controversial 1922 documentary *Nanook of the North*. And now she's getting ready to release her third solo album (still untitled at press time) and preparing for a string of live performances in 2014, including her third appearance at Carnegie Hall.

"It kind of blows my mind," says the soft-spoken Tagaq, over a plate of oysters at a Toronto restaurant. "Never in a million years did I think I'd be doing this. I've been so fortunate, especially in the people who want to work with me." Indeed, though she can clearly entrance an audience on her own, it's collaborating with others that really ignites Tagaq's music. Working with a DJ, a string quartet, a band, an orchestra, even a film, she feeds off the electrical charge of the connection, improvising with others the way a school of fish moves together in the water. But she has to move freely.

"Nobody I've worked with has ever given me any direction," she notes. "I'm happy for that, because I don't take it well! I have massive authority issues."

Still, Tagaq tends to let her collaborators come to her. "I'm no good at soliciting myself," she says. "I just hope that through different venues I can find the currents I need to be swimming in, so I can find the right people to collaborate with. Because collaborations open up a new pattern of thinking, and a whole new flavour to the places I can go with my voice. You can't just do it by yourself, you have to be pushed into new areas."

That's a bit ironic, given that Tagaq does solo throat singing. The traditional Inuit technique involves two women playing off each other, using rhythmic breathing and animalistic sounds, and working together so closely that they often use each other's mouth cavities as resonators. It's a vocal game, a competition not unlike a B-boy hip-hop battle; and, in fact, Tagaq sees a logical connection there. "There's an interesting



thing happening in Nunavut—Inuit kids are starting to rhyme and beatbox,” she says. “The origins of hip-hop were in the slums, and the whole gangster thing is attributed to the social problems that occur there. And that’s the lifestyle they’re living in Nunavut in a lot of ways. It’s violent, it’s beautiful because it’s real, but it’s a hard way to live. There’s a lot of poverty. I find that it’s from these kinds of areas that music has arisen, because when you’re in the thick of it, you have to express it.”



Although she was raised in the Arctic village of Cambridge Bay, Tagaq did not grow up listening to throat singing, which had been banned by the Catholic church along with the local language, Inuinnaqtun. “Cambridge Bay was heavily affected by residential schools,” she says. “Not a lot of people spoke, or still speak, Inuinnaqtun, and there was no throat singing. Now, people are starting to use their Inuk names again, but back in the day that wasn’t where it was at. People thought it was cool to be white. And I can kind of understand it; that’s how colonialism works.” So Tagaq listened to blues, reggae, rock, and pop. “My parents had a record player, and I grew up with Jimi Hendrix, Leonard Cohen, the Doors, the Beatles, Bob Marley—very eclectic tastes for the time in Nunavut. My father loved music, and it was a big part of my life, not that I was ever trained or anything. There was no pressure around it. It was just there.”

Tagaq, who still doesn’t read music, instead focused on painting, and after going to high school in Yellowknife, headed to Halifax to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Surprisingly, that was where she first heard throat singing.

“My mom sent me tapes with throat singing on them,” she recalls. “The second I heard it, I was just so drawn to it. And I could do it right away. For me, it starts around the collarbone. With all the breath work, it’s a conglomeration between flapping your epiglottis and using your nasal cavities along with the deep growling sound. You can either make deep sounds going in and out or higher sounds going in and out, or any combination. It’s like sculpting, but with sound.”

Perhaps because she had no one to sing with, Tagaq adapted the form to her solo style. “I’ve developed a way of throat singing where I make my own songs and sing with myself over layers,” she explains. “Learning to put those pieces together as if I were singing with someone else is a challenge that I’m happy to have overcome. It’s what I base a lot of my songs on, and someday I hope other throat singers will sing them.”

Although throat singing came naturally, Tagaq spent a long time practising in the shower, never around people. “It was just something I enjoyed by myself,” she says. “It was never my intention for it to become a career. But I was at a festival showing my paintings, and one of the musical acts didn’t show up. We’d spent the night before drinking around the fire, and I’d done some throat singing. The festival director asked me if I could do it on stage, so I did. Björk’s friends happened to be in the audience recording it, and I was whisked off to her world tour. And it was amazing.”

That was the *Vespertine* tour in 2001, which led to Tagaq contributing to Björk’s 2004 album *Medulla*; Björk returned the favour by appearing on Tagaq’s debut, *Sinaa*, in 2005. And then the Kronos Quartet came calling. “I was living in London, and I did a gig at a pub,” Tagaq recalls. The performance was recorded for *fRoots* magazine and included on a CD that was heard by Kronos Quartet’s David Harrington. “David said he listened to my singing fifteen times straight, on an airplane, and decided to get hold of me,” Tagaq marvels.

Harrington remembers it as more like twenty-five times. “Somewhere over Greenland, her voice magically appeared,” he says, during a phone conversation. “What a thrilling, shocking, life-affirming moment! Not only did she sound like many more than one person, but her voice was a centre-of-the-earth, solar-plexus kind of musical experience for me. By the time I got home, I knew we had to work together.”

Her resulting collaboration with the Kronos Quartet, *Nunavut*, marked a turning point for Tagaq, as she learned to move away from pure improvisation and work with the group’s more structured method of creating music. First, the quartet recorded Tagaq singing, and created a compositional structure from her sounds. Then they improvised with her on top of that. For Tagaq, it was a whole new way of working. “It was like reining in a wild horse and going, ‘OK, now run in this direction. Use that energy in this way,’” she explains. “And I forced them out of their comfort zone by making them improvise.” Interestingly, the process involved Tagaq thinking of colours and interpreting them. “That was David’s idea,” she says. “We

discussed the colours in relation to Nunavut, the seasons, and what was happening. It was through his genius that we were able to concoct this way I could be part of their program while still improvising.”

For Harrington, Tagaq was more than a collaborator; she helped alter the way he thinks about music. “I remember saying I loved everything she put into her notes,” he recounts. “There was a silence, and then she asked, ‘What is a note?’ And I suddenly realized that I did not really know what a note was, even though for years I had thought I did. So Tanya has been instrumental in helping Kronos continue to ask, ‘What is a musical experience? What are notes?’”

Even though she is one of the most captivating performers I’ve ever heard, Tanya carries no ego-trip baggage. She has a pure, fun approach to performance, and she loves to ride the collective wave made by the audience. I can’t wait to perform with her again. Her voice takes us to a primal, sensual, magical aspect of being human—and there is no one like her.”

Tagaq and Kronos worked together again in 2008, on Derek Charke’s *Tundra Songs*, and she collaborated with Charke on his *13 Inuit Throat Song Games* (for voice and string orchestra), as well as the soundtrack to the 1922 film *Nanook of the North*. Charke, who says he was “blown away” when he first heard Tagaq sing, explains how they worked. “I created the soundscape, using sounds I recorded in the North, of dogs and birds and the wind, but there’s a form and a shape. Tanya went to the studio first and improvised to the film. She sent me those improvisations, and I took them as a guideline for the way she would navigate through the score. I manipulated some of her sounds as well. But nothing was written down for her—the soundscape sounds the same, but she improvises on top.”

And her performance is different at every screening. “A lot different,” she says. “Sometimes I zone out and don’t look at it and just go with the flow, and sometimes I respond directly to the visuals, which is exciting. That film is, like, ‘Look at these happy Eskimos!’ So it’s fun to freak on it.”

Tagaq released two albums after *Sinaa*, 2008’s *Auk/Blood*, which was nominated for two Junos and won a Canadian Aboriginal Music Award, and 2011’s *Anuraaqutug*—a live recording of her performance at the 2010 Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville. It seems she has poured everything she’s learned into her new album, which features more experiments with structure, more vocal styles and some surprises. “I feel like every project’s another step forward,” she says. “It’s a growth process, or what’s the point? I’m getting more into singing—not just throat singing—because I realized at some point that I could. I’ve always relied on throat singing, which is my comfort zone. But it’s good to push yourself out of the comfort zone sometimes.”

Visual art also provides creative expression, but the two artforms never overlap. “They’re not related in any way,” Tagaq says. “I haven’t been satisfied with painting for a long time, because I haven’t had a place to do oil painting. I’ve only been able to work in acrylics, which isn’t my forte. With acrylics it’s more intellectual, and less of a happy mistake.”

When I ask about her inspirations, Tagaq lists them: “Going home helps. Food is huge. Breakups are great. Watching the news is good. For the creative juices, it’s good to be upset about things, and also to love things.” That leads to the subject of her two daughters, aged ten and two, the younger of whom had a direct influence on her mother’s recent creative work. “Being pregnant and having my baby brought a lot of different ideas,” Tagaq says. “I have ten or fifteen more song ideas, a book idea, writing ideas, a film idea, video ideas, and I’m painting a lot. There are periods of rest, and periods where you kind of burst forth. It’s like when a sponge gets dry and you put it in the water and let it soak, and then you have to squeeze it out. I have been soaking for a while!”

Last summer Tagaq went into the studio with her band, multi-instrumentalist Jesse Zubot and percussionist Jean Martin, and squeezed it out, improvising most of the new (as-yet-untitled) album. “It’s fun, because we get to go to different places,” she says. “I think about my daughters sometimes, and other times I think about something really agitating—the darkest part of humanity. It depends on the melody, and what I want to say. I find there’s so much to say in the world. That’s why I do throat singing, because I want people to be able to relate to the human condition. Everyone’s afraid to die; everyone has their inner battle with their thoughts. The innermost self is beautiful but cruel, because nature itself is unforgiving, and we’re trying to live in this constructed society that doesn’t adhere to the rules of nature. I’m sick of the pretense. That’s generally what I’m talking about in my music—trying to tear down the pretense. ‘Cause it’s boring.”

The new songs set Tagaq’s vocals—delicate, soaring, whimpering, growling—against strings, horns, thumping percussion and, on one track, the voice of Belgian opera singer Anna Pardo Canedo, all coming together to create a fascinating, gut-wrenching, genre-bending experience. Sometimes she imitates birds or animals; elsewhere she wails with pain or grunts with pleasure. The hypnotic “Rabbit,” created with her younger daughter in mind, has gentle sounds and ominous horns. The nine-minute “Tulugak” builds slowly toward a triumphant, smashing finish. Tagaq even reached into indie rock by recording a cover of

the Pixies' "Caribou" (from their 1987 album *Come On Pilgrim*) and bringing it into the Inuit fold. "The first time I heard that, I thought, 'Holy fuck! They're singing about caribou!' I couldn't believe it!" she says. "I love the Pixies, and I love that song. And in the chorus I sing *dukdu*, which is *caribou* in Inuinnaqtun."

In many ways, the track—both rock song and improvisation—represents the latest chapter in the evolution of Tagaq's work. "It's fragmenting," she says. "It's going deeper into improvisation, and part of it is going into this more structured area. It's becoming more multifaceted. I'm excited about maybe writing a pop song some day, because I enjoyed the whole idea of lyrics and chorus. But there's just so much to do—there's an unlimited palette of what you can create."

Tagaq and Kronos' studio recording of Derek Charke's *Tundra Songs* will be included on an album by the ensemble, tentatively slated for release in 2015, and yet to be titled. "It's totally different from my album," she says of the recording. "It's kind of a loose improvisation around Derek's composition." At the 2014 Spring for Music Festival at Carnegie Hall, Tagaq will deliver the New York première performance of Charke's *13 Inuit Throat Song Games* as part of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's concert program of new Canadian compositions. Tagaq may also collaborate on a project with the Winnipeg Ballet. "That's exciting, because I like the physicality, the movement of the dance along with the voice," she says. In the future, she'd like to collaborate with Tom Waits, Yoko Ono and, she says, maybe some Cuban musicians—"anybody whose music seems really alive."

But few people's music seems quite as alive as Tagaq's. When she's performing, she seems to go to a different plane, taking listeners with her. "It feels like I'm a filter," she says. "The audience is giving me this massive amount of energy, and I'm siphoning it through my throat and giving it back. So it's like a circle. We go somewhere together. I like being in that altered state onstage—it's this really pure state of being. I get to live in the exact moment. It's like when you're giving birth, eating a great meal, having an orgasm. People look for it in different ways—when they're on drugs, or drunk.

"There are times when you can shut yourself off so that you're enjoying your life at that moment. I think that's kind of what I'm trying to portray in my concerts, this awakening of the true self, of foregoing the ego as much as possible, and that means releasing yourself of physical and spiritual and intellectual confinements. And sometimes I'm actually able to let go of my body, which is really lovely."