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Inuk Diva Tanya Tagaq in Concert: Nanook of the North, Luminato, June 10, 2014

By Andrew Timar | June 23, 2014

Inuk diva Tanya Tagaq's music has recently figured prominently in Toronto media outlets. Senior reviewer Robert Everett-Green's insightful May 30, 2014 *Globe and Mail* article was titled "Primal scream: Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq is like no one you've ever heard, anywhere."

Ben Rayner, *The Star's* pop music critic, went even further in his rave review of Tagaq's just-launched album *Animism*, advocating that it "may be the finest, fiercest, most original Canadian album of 2014" (June 7, 2014). Other journalists added their own superlatives to the reception chorus. While this may appear to be a rare instance of Canadian hyperbole, I happen to agree.

Is she a sound sculptor, as she claims, or a sonic "weather system" as proposed by Everett-Green? I wanted to judge for myself and an ideal opportunity approached: Tanya Tagaq and band's June 10 Luminato concert presentation of their soundtrack to the 1922 Robert J. Flaherty film *Nanook of the North*. In preparation I arranged to interview Tagaq and her violinist and *Animism* producer Jesse Zubot earlier that same short-sleeved-shirt afternoon. They asked to meet at a downtown Toronto seafood restaurant.

Bivalves so fresh—"that they're still alive" exclaimed Tagaq—were waiting on the table, iced, as I sat down to chat. One of the things I learned was that oysters remind Tagaq of the fresh whiff and the salty tang of the ocean. Perhaps what came to her mind was the Arctic Ocean site of *Iqaluktuttiaq* (Cambridge Bay) which in the *Inuinnaqtun* language means "good fishing place." Even though she now calls Brandon, Manitoba home, that small town in Nunavut on the south coast of Victoria Island where she grew up remains close to her heart and music.

The atmosphere at the table was far from nostalgic and relaxed, however. Tagaq's drummer and creative musical collaborator Jean Martin had suddenly been admitted to Toronto's Mt. Sinai Hospital for an undiagnosed ailment. Martin's knowledge of the soundtrack, partly prepared by Canadian composer Derek Charke, but realised anew at each screening by the Tagaq-Zubot-Martin trio, is intimate, difficult to transfer. Yet doing without the percussive dimensions of the soundtrack entirely was unfeasible: gone would be the drum set's texture, propulsive energy, metric frame and rhythmic drive. When I left the interview it was still unclear what course of action the group would take.

Belying the cliffhanger afternoon, at Pecaut Square that evening all went smoothly at the *Nanook of the North* screening. Skilled violinist Jesse Zubot deftly triggered the prerecorded music and sound effects. He was gamely assisted by two drummers new to the film soundtrack, covering for the hospitalized Martin.

Tagaq, in front of the screen in a short glinting silver sequin dress and bare feet, claimed the central spotlight. She kept up a continuous flow of incredibly intense vocalism for the better part of an hour, richly modulated in tonal quality, texture and melodic invention. Throughout, her signature self-taught solo vocal style, derived as she tells it from cassettes of traditional Inuit women's duo throat games her mother sent her at art school, dominated the sonic and emotional space.

The loose storyline of Flaherty's film was informed by his colonially loaded sympathy for the Inuit lifestyle. With a sure grasp of that colonial discourse Tagaq, armed with her firsthand knowledge of the film's depicted activities and emotions, and judiciously employing her native *Inuinnaqtun* words and phrases, relived and reinvented the film's narrative and imagery. In her richly textured performance she confronted some of the screen's staged artifice and its racialized comments, as well as re-contextualizing the experience for the 21st-century urban Toronto audience.

I certainly wasn't the only one swept away by the depiction of a long-gone Inuit lifestyle reflected on the screen and underscored by Tagaq and company's emotionally gripping, contemporary sonic landscape.