

TORONTO STAR

Tanya Tagaq's spirit of the North

Tanya Tagaq just released what may be the finest, fiercest, most original Canadian album of 2014. Better yet, you can hear her live (and free) at Luminato.



By Ben Rayner, Pop Music Critic | June 7, 2014

To witness [Tanya Tagaq](#) perform live is to experience a species of primal/visceral/guttural channeling-cum-exorcism that would outwardly seem to have no business being duplicated in the studio.

Here we are now, though, presented with what might very well prove to be the finest, fiercest and most flabbergastingly original Canadian album of 2014 in the form of the boundary-blasting Inuk [throat singer's latest recording](#), *Animism*.

Such a thing shouldn't be. Yet it is. Somehow, Tagaq and a coterie of supremely talented collaborators — West Coast *avant*-violinist/producer Jesse Zubot, Toronto jazz percussionist *nonpareil* Jean Martin and electronics whiz Michael Red — have throttled her visionary take on an Inuit musical tradition that should, by its nature, be completely obscure to popular tastes into a 21st-century context where it treads just this side of, well, populism.

We're not talking Top-40 material here, no. But damned if *Animism* doesn't stunningly animate Tagaq's chosen discipline in vividly contemporary terms, a nexus of jazz, experimental electronica and the increasingly vague idea of "aboriginal" music that mainstream-tickling artists such as A Tribe Called Red and Tagaq are working very hard to explode. The album is as sure a bet as any to top this year's Polaris Music Prize short and long lists as they're unveiled over the weeks ahead.

In lesser hands, in any case, there's no way that *Animism* should be able to approximate the unguarded, bloody-throated physicality of what Tagaq regularly delivers on stage in recorded form.

"Bah" to that, says Tagaq.

"If I had the time in the studio, I'd probably have 500 records out by now," says the Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, native and current Brandon, Man., resident after a recent, jaw-droppingly physical gallery performance hosted by her new label, Six Shooter Records, to debut *Animism* before an invited group of awed Toronto tastemakers.

"I love going into the studio. It is difficult to bridge the gap between live shows and the recordings because the recordings become very intimate — you've got your headphones on and it's silence except for what you want to hear. . . .

"During the live shows, I almost feel like it's not me doing it. I just scoop up all of the energy from the audience. Each individual will, and thoughts and personalities, I just gather all of that up like a big ball and I shove that ball, that energetic ball, into my stomach and it travels out my stomach and out my throat and then I give it back to the audience, and that changes the audience's energy so I have a different ball to shove back into my tummy. It's just this circle that goes around. The gig depends on the audience. It's only my energy coming out in the booth."

What happens in the booth is, as Tagaq puts it, generally "a free-form sh-- show." Her ability to translate the otherworldly grunts, growls and exhalations of the Inuit throat-singing discipline into coherent recorded form — indeed, into an altogether *new* form that might be described as post-throat-singing — depends entirely, she says, on a "non-stop trust game" with her fluid accompanists, on the knowledge that she can throw Zubot, Martin, Red *et al* "a ball and you're not afraid that they're gonna drop it."

"The boys I work with are so articulate musically that we're just constantly throwing a ball back and forth between each other and changing leaders and changing followers and changing streams and all the time crossing the streams. We'll go into the studio and just improvise for a couple of hours," she says. "If the right sound climate exists, I will execute the idea in that space. Magic has to be occurring for magic to happen, basically."

Tagaq is no stranger to collaboration — she got her first major break when audible influence Björk enlisted her to add vocal girth to the *a cappella* album *Medulla* in 2004. On Tuesday, in a free show at the Luminato Festival, she will revive the soundtrack to Robert Flaherty's seminal (if controversial-in-hindsight) 1922 [silent-film documentary](#) *Nanook of the North*, which she cooked up with composer Derek Cherte, Zubot and Martin.



Tagaq says the *Nanook* performance — which debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival two years ago — is a "sneaky little imp" that has "grown into this creature" that allows her free rein to explore the themes of anti-colonialism and Inuit self-actualization tacitly implied — along with a spirit of aggressively, sex-positive feminism — in much of her music.

"It's a great film and Robert Flaherty obviously had a deep affection for the Inuit people and the land and stuff," she says, laughing at the assumption she should deride the film as far more evil and colonialist. "Well, it is (sensitive) on a lot of levels in that you can see how people existed. But it is evil and colonial at the same time. I have such mixed emotions about the film. There are so many parts of it where I just want to tear it apart for feeding into the stereotypes that surround being Inuk, but at the same time I feel such reverence for my ancestors being able to survive totally unassisted. It's such a mixed bag, right?"

"What happens when I'm singing to the film is I get to say all the things I want to say to the film at certain times. The times when the film is kitschy and 'Look at all cute, little, happy, simple Eskimos,' if anybody in the audience dares laugh, I get to rip their faces off. I get to interact at that level. And I've had that happen before. There are a couple of points in the film where the audience will giggle and I'll basically scream at them. It's like a slap on the wrist. Not a slap on the wrist, me-to-them, but a slap on the wrist, society-to-society. In a really fun way."