

North's familiarity keeps artists humble, says Elisapie



Inuk singer-songwriter Elisapie was the headliner on the second night of Kuujuaq's Aqqik Jam Music Festival Aug. 10. (Photo by Cedric Gallant, special to Nunatsiq News)

Inuk singer-songwriter reflects on Aqqik Jam's role in her career and on Inuit music scene

Cedric Gallant
Special to Nunatsiq News

After a slick introduction from her band, singer Elisapie made her entrance onstage to cheers from the Aqqik Jam crowd, the Kuujuaq music festival near and dear to her heart.

The crowd was fully immersed in her Aug. 10 performance at the Forum, the village's hockey arena. She was the headliner on the second night of the four-day festival that returned this year after two years of COVID-19 postponements.

"We are celebrating this festival that has been going on for well over 20 years," she said.

The day after her show — right after checking out of the Kuujuaq Inn — she visited the hotel's restaurant carrying a coffee and a bag of Honeycomb cereal meant for her panik.

In an interview, she explained her relationship with Aqqik Jam.

The festival was influential on her early career. Her first memory of it is from the 1990s, when her dad travelled from Salluit to Kuujuaq by boat for it.

At the time, Kuujuaq was considered a "big town, a bit like down

south," she recalls.

Elisapie — full name Elisapie Isaac, but she performs under her first name only — asked her mother if she could go, only to be told, "You are too young, you are a teenager and there is a bar there."

She said she "hated her for the whole summer, because Blue Rodeo was playing, and I was a big Blue Rodeo fan!"

"I always tell this story, because two years ago Blue Rodeo invited me to sing with them at the Montreal International Jazz Festival. It was such a beautiful moment."

Her first performance at Aqqik Jam was during her early years as a singer-songwriter. It was a meaningful moment for her.

"Oh, my Lord, I was probably somewhere between 18 and 19," she says. "I was really shy, and I was at a really dark space at the time, and I was so not in my place."

Still in her formative years, her identity as an artist was not clearly defined yet.

"I would almost be excusing myself on stage, I was still trying to find my art," she says.

Even though her first

performance was far from her best, playing at Aqqik Jam was already a huge deal.

"There were always local musicians in Nunavik," she says, and "Aqqik Jam was an opportunity for them to be heard. It's super-important here, it's like Osheaga of the North," comparing it to the independent music festival in Montreal.

Aqqik Jam is also a time where artists from all over Inuit Nunangat meet.

"It gives us a chance to hang out," Elisapie says.

"I may be a more established artist, but I am still a kid when I see Tim and The Band play" — one of her favourite childhood bands. "In the North, you can't be a star. There is familiarity here that will always keep you humble."

Yet that familiarity is where another type of performance shines best. It's about bringing the storytelling that is meaningful to the audience.

Nunavimmiut realities might not resonate with a southern crowd as much as they do up North.

Elisapie took her Kuujuaq crowd on a journey, trying "to put images to the words they cannot express."

As the storyteller, she says, "it becomes a responsibility to do exactly that."

From her formative

years to self-discovery, she wanted "to break free" as a young artist. In 1999, she moved from Salluit to Montreal, a life-altering change that opened her perspectives as an artist.

"I needed it. I was craving it," she says. "I felt like at the age of 22, I had a lot of experience up North already, and I needed to be where I could be free to do what I want to do."

In Montreal, she found a place for artistic freedom, where she could be "free to do what I want, express strange ideas, a place that I could feel free to express anything I want."

Montreal turned out to be more than just an artistic epiphany, but also the place where her career would skyrocket.

"I got to be at the right place at the right time," she says. "Sometimes life will give you signals, and if you are attentive enough, you care enough, and you are ready to risk enough, it will take you to places."

In a little café in Montreal, she met Alain Auger, who later became her counterpart in the duo Taima (the 2005 album won a Juno award as best Aboriginal recording), and documentary filmmaker Hugo LaTulippe.

after meeting her musical teammate she soon toured around Europe and America.

Next, after meeting the filmmaker LaTulippe, she would direct a documentary for the National Film Board.

"My filmmaking career and my music career, all in one place," Elisapie says. "They were my signals, and from that point on it never stopped."

That was a start to achieving her childhood dream.

"I just want to be the best of what I can be," she says. "I was a very sensitive kid, and my way of coping was to invent a world. And I really respect that little girl's dream."

Yet again, a balance must be made because that artistic world brought her artistic self, a performer, enjoying the crowds and being on the stage, "and I feel very comfortable in that environment."

On the flip side, she's naturally quite the opposite.

"Personally, and emotionally, I am a very private person," Elisapie says.

She believes she's found that balance, "a nice équilibre," which has helped her to push herself to her limits.

"Having made peace between myself, and Elisapie the artist, they

go well together now," she says.

That strong internal foundation is her best defence against the anxiety.

What makes it better, she says, is to have a team that will listen to you, that will respect your terms.

"When I am ignoring them for a few days, they know, and I will eventually tell them that it is getting overwhelming, they immediately back off."

Balancing her identity and making sure she is well-surrounded explains why she says that "right now, I love my life."

Her 2019 album, *The Ballad of the Runaway Girl*, was nominated for a Juno for Indigenous music album of the year.

The leading edge of her craft and innovations will be on full display in her upcoming album.

"It's finished, and next year when the album comes out we want to have projections," she says.

"I am working with filmmakers in Salluit right now," all to produce video content that will be symbiotic to her music.

"The images will allow me to really understand the music, and to further develop the storytelling, a really exciting project!"

She adds: "I think it will move a lot of people here, because it is not about me, but about the North."