

Question and Answer Summary

Our Voices, Our Stories: Music and Language Revitalization Panel

with Sabina Dennis, Kalilah Rampanen and Lisa Deptuck

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Question for Hasaatuk - How does taking traditional Indigenous storytelling structures and adapting them into contemporary acoustic/blues "Stories" effectively break through the trauma and noise of mainstream politics to create genuine empathy and mobilize action for the protection of Indigenous lands?

The way I've used it—and want to explore more—is by using our traditional stories. We were oral historians, and for thousands of years, music has been a way to tell these stories through our Potlatches. That's my way of reconnecting with those stories. Bringing them into a contemporary space of music is my way of expanding and reaching more people.

I've had the opportunity to travel around the world and speak about issues. I was doing a lot of work on climate change advocacy for Indigenous peoples, taking me to COP for example. Music feels like a universal language that everyone speaks, so it makes sense as a way to connect with people who haven't heard these stories or histories.

Music has always been my tool to share these messages. It's also helped me in my learnings, and a way to process a lot of these heavy things. Music is medicine. When I feel down, I put on some sad songs. It's always been used that way. I've tried to invite people into my world, and that's how I share these stories. Thank you for the question.

Question for Sabina: How do you find that "Music"—specifically live performance—serves as the most effective tool for "Cultural Mobilization," creating a space where the Dakelh language and traditional "Stories" can be safely reclaimed and shared?

I'm finding the more times we gather, the more I go to festivals or play live or anything, I'm finding that the most important thing missing in these spaces is us being able to

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communicate with each other. Yes, as the artists, we do get to communicate to the audience, and they do communicate back with their response. But I feel it's important that we recognize that we all need that level of communication, to be seen and heard. It's a lot easier for a musician to be seen and heard. Everyone needs some level of acknowledgement that their opinions are respected.

We have to get together more often culturally to address everything that we're up against in these times. We really do need musicians to be a part of those cultural gatherings. Music draws large crowds, so it's always been a real important tool in being the voice of the people. To me, it's only natural that it's that way as Indigenous as well because we have so many rights that we're trying to evoke in people again that they've forgotten about but are still there. As musicians, we want to take that platform mentality that's above and bring it back down to Earth. Then all of us can take turns revolving in the center and learning from each other. The great leaders have always been there, and they've always been the spokespeople of our Nations. In a way, musicians are that of these times.

It is a big responsibility, and it's something that I take very seriously. As a performer, I feel like I'm there as an advocate, not only for our Dakelhne but for all people and definitely for all the animals, the earth, and the basic morality of our being and our initial contact with the great Creator. We were given these laws to protect our spirits.

I'm thankful that somebody would ask a question about what real effect we can have upon a society as musicians—of unifying, of making great changes that are needed. Enlisting morality into the people again, just with the teachings. Even hearing them again, like Kalilah was saying, some people have never even been introduced to these concepts ever. But there's something we learned at two, and we take it for granted sometimes when people are ignorant. We're almost mean to them in a way. We have to realize that it's up to us to make that change and educate people through our music and whatever platforms, means or tools that we have available and work best.

People want to learn from us because there are huge gaps in culture, in sacred knowledge. It's been taken away from many cultures, and they are coming to us for those teachings and reflections so that they can help themselves heal. It's really quite beautiful. If we become willing to share those teachings in a healthy way that doesn't hurt them. If you give somebody too much at once, like any medicine, it could be

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detrimental. So in this gentle way of teaching and knowing, we're sharing our songs and our music. None of us can share everything that we want to share. If we were all healed and totally knew that our songs wouldn't traumatize somebody, I'm sure we could talk to them straight up about the issues. But we have to face a reality that our music is going to be absorbed by people who haven't even seen these concepts or heard of them before.

So there's all this writing, these techniques that go into it, layers of faces and masks and challenges that we face as artists of what content we're putting out. It's quite complicated, but I think that's what makes it like a puzzle, and creativity is a part. It's like that figuring-out brain that we have, that continuous want to do better, and that continuous need to find solutions because we're creatives, on all levels, every single human. Thank you for your question, whoever that was, and thank you all for being present with us. Like Kalilah and Lisa said, although we cannot see you here, we feel your presence, and it is appreciated. Your questions, even though I may have strayed off the topic and went way up to space with it, I do appreciate that, and it makes me think, and it gives me something to be hopeful of because there are some really thoughtful people out there, and putting some really good questions out is proof of that. I really appreciate that. Mussi.

Question for Lisa - When you sing or speak the Sm'alg yax language you learned from your late mentor, Huhuułk, does that act not only revitalize the language but also simultaneously heal and strengthen your personal "voice" and connection to your Ancestors?

Absolutely. Learning Sm'alg yax helped me find my voice, and every single day it helps me stand strong in who I am, in my values and in our adaawx. It helps me conduct myself in a good way. I truly believe that in my life there was before Sm'alg yax and there was after. I always felt Sm'alg yax—it was my grandmother's first language. She would give little tidbits here and there. My mom passed along what she could, what she learned from my grandma. I always had those teachings with me, and I always had the sounds. I always just had it in my body, in my spirit, but I didn't quite understand who I was, and Sm'alg yax really guided me to that.

When we were able to go up to my territory about a year after I started learning Sm'alg yax, I felt so overwhelmed with the feeling of spirit, the feeling of belonging, the

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feeling of my ancestors. I've been able to connect with my grandmother, who passed shortly before my Sm'algayax journey started, through Sm'algayax. It helped me in grieving my mentor, and it helps me through so many hard things in my life. It has very much helped me strengthen my relationship with myself, my ancestors, and my community. I've built so many relationships that are invaluable to me after learning Sm'algayax.

Q: Are there any artists that you would love to collaborate with that you haven't yet?

Kalilah: I would love to collaborate with Sabina. That would be awesome. I always enjoy watching you perform live. Over the years, being a musician has allowed me to meet a lot of amazing artists. I would love to collaborate with everyone. I also think of Gamksimoon, the Ts'msyen artist—he's awesome. That kind of rock blues vibe. Every time I see them, I'm like, when are we going to collab? I'm in awe of so many amazing Indigenous artists. Those are the ones that come to mind for sure.

Lisa: Of course, I would love to collaborate with both of you. The other people that come to mind: a friend named Nikki E who is a rapper here in Lekwungen Territory. We recently threw a fundraiser show for her, and she pulled her friend up on stage, who goes by Savage Lee, and they just brought the house down. It was incredible. I would love to continue to work alongside Nikki E and Savage Lee. I have so many wonderful friends that I work alongside already, and I feel so inspired by them. They continue to introduce me to new people, and I'm always super stoked to meet new people creating music on Lekwungen Territory.

Sabina: I love collaborating with any artists I can. Sometimes the music styles need practice to get there. I often don't have time or space to do that because I'm in an isolated area. If I could find people in the area to do that with, that would be so cool—to have a core group of people who physically get together. I've done a bit of work with my sisters; I travel with them, and they'll come perform with me. We do a bit of practicing, but not a lot of regimented work like writing songs together. That would be really interesting.

I proposed to the Prince George Orchestra that they back up some of my songs because I hear some of them in an orchestral setting. They would be supported beautifully by that. They expressed some interest, and I'm curious to see if that would ever happen.

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That type of collaboration would evoke a certain amount of emotion in some of the songs I've written. Maybe even metal mixed with orchestra would be really cool, like Beethoven's Fifth. Maybe we'll collaborate—me and Beethoven someday! But really, I doubt I'll get to collaborate much until maybe later. As of now, I will collaborate with anyone who wants to collaborate. But sometimes I don't have time, so I miss opportunities. People have offered, and I've said yes, but we never did it. It's really about who's there and who wants to put that time in. It doesn't matter who—it matters more who's ready and available.

Q: How does language affect the way you write? Do you find yourself writing in different ways or about different ideas depending on what language you're using?

Kalilah: I've found it's actually helped my songwriting process a lot. It's nice too because sometimes I can talk about more personal things, maybe, because not many people know Nuu-chah-nulth. It feels like a little secret for me. So, I feel like it's been a lot different of a process. I remember writing fully English songs and being frustrated that they didn't come out right in the way I wanted to speak it, but I think our Indigenous languages are so poetic already. The way we naturally spoke was in such a poetic way of describing different things—it wasn't just how they visually look, it's how they feel or what they sound like. It's been an easy process to translate that into music.

I've enjoyed it, and it's fun finding the music to match because it's such a guttural language. I remember my late mentor Julia, the language teacher, would say, "You know you're speaking Nuu-chah-nulth right when you're spitting." So you have to push for that. It's such a strong language with lots of back throat sounds, so it's been fun to try to match the music or even push myself to say, "This one's going to be a slow jam with those Nuu-chah-nulth sounds." It's been fun, and I've enjoyed the process of doing it language first and building around that.

Lisa: I have some thoughts as well on that question. I have not written in Sm'algayx, but when you were speaking about the flow of your language, Kalilah, that really resonated and inspired me because I often hear people say how beautiful Sm'algayx sounds, and it sounds like a song. Someone I met once said that their word for our people in their language was "the people with the beautiful language." That really struck me, and I feel that every single time I speak something—I feel like I'm kind of singing. So I'm really inspired by what you said about matching that song of your language to the music. I've

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not written in Sm'alg yax, but I feel like after this, I'm going to open that world up. I feel so inspired.

Sabina: In writing the Dakelh songs, it really has helped me connect to what I'm saying and really get fluent. It's a really important tool of learning, and writing your own songs can really help too. I'm a teacher of Dakelh language and culture at the elementary schools here, and I use song a lot to teach them Dakelh. It helps with the rhythm, like learning the word "ittaki," which is one. It's hard, but when I sing it to them, they learn quickly. The reason I like to utilize that technique is because it really puts it in your mind and solidifies it. Imagery works really well in learning Dakelh as well. Movies with Dakelh or Indigenous languages could really provide a great platform for learning for everyone. It's really awesome.

Lisa: I was part of a little sing-song Sm'alg yax children's group when I first started learning, and I would join in and learn the songs. It really does help you learn the language fast—very fast. It was kind of crazy, and you just find yourself singing it around the house. It's really powerful.

Q: What is the cost to create the videos?

Kalilah: That all depends. For mine, I got a grant with Creative BC to do the video, which I believe is a \$10,000 grant. They do it every year. There are so many grant opportunities, especially for Indigenous artists. I know First Peoples is very big in supporting Indigenous arts and music. It helped that I have a family with a film background because we already had a lot of the equipment. My brother had it for his production company. There are tons of grants to look out for specifically for Indigenous artists. They really help a lot because it's not cheap, so we take whatever we can get.

Sabina: It could be expensive, but when you're doing all your own production and a lot of the filming, and just being careful, you could make quite a good-quality film if you have, like Kalilah said, the equipment already. It could cost a lot or very little depending on your skill level at editing or if you have friends who want to help. You just have to reach out to people in the industry. Grants are really important. Once you get a small grant, sometimes you can find somebody willing to piece together a really great first video. Maybe it's not your perfect video, but there are people who will work for less and can produce good-quality work. If you don't have funding, don't give up. There are ways to acquire or borrow a good-quality camera, then look for an editor, someone willing to

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piece it together, and someone to master it so it can be played on every streaming platform. There are a few steps, and it might take time, but try to get that funding. If not, don't give up.

Find people who are good with writing grants. If you're not good at that, there are people hired to help artists. There are resources available, and I think First Peoples is probably the most incredible resource I've found as far as the grant process being legible and respectful without being too intrusive. It defines your project ideas and gives you that baseline of what you're doing, then sets you on a trajectory to get it done. I recommend grant writing for sure.

Kalilah: Another thing—the quality of cameras we have on our iPhones now is crazy. I've seen a lot of homemade videos made with just your friends, and those can have such a beautiful outcome because they're natural and you're comfortable with your crew and your people. It could be a really cool thing to make. There's a lot of funding available, but if you have your iPhone or a little camera, that's a great way to create.

Lisa: Utilizing what's already around you, what you already have, and connecting with community is huge.