Northern Lights Episode 12
Contemporary Arctic Music – Part 2 (ft. Aasiva)

Produced, edited and narrated by: Vickie Rochon, UArctic

Interviewee: Aasiva, singer and songwriter

Introduced by: Sarah Mackie

Sarah Mackie
Hello everyone and welcome to Northern Lights, the Harvard Arctic Initiative Student Podcast. In the second episode of a miniseries on the music scene in Iqaluit, Nunavut, Vickie Rochon talks to Inuk singer & songwriter Aasiva, from Pagnirtung, Nunavut, as she shares on throat singing, Inuit culture & musical talent and using music as a coping mechanism.

Vickie Rochon is a Circumpolar Studies student at Trent University in Canada, part of the UArctic network. She has significant experience as an expedition guide in both the Arctic and the Antarctic.

This is Vickie Rochon with Part 2 of Contemporary Arctic Music.

Vickie Rochon
Music. We all consume music in one way or another. Music is a facet of human life that is so imbedded in our everyday we often take it for granted. But what does it tell about ourselves? How does our cultural background and life contexts shape the way we consume, make or are introduced to music? And what better way to get to know another culture than by diving into its music scene?

In the first episode of this micro series, we took a quick peek at Iqaluit’s vibrant music scene. In the second episode, we will dive even further into northern music by taking a closer look at the Inuit culture itself. To achieve that, we will be discussing with a young Inuk woman who was nominated at the 2019 Indigenous Music Awards for Best New Artist and Best Folk Album.
Alongside composing albums, she also led her own initiative to support music workshops for youth in remote communities of Nunavut.

She is cheerful, she is lovely and absolutely passionate about music. She shared about her hometown, some history behind throatsinging, the power of music as a coping mechanism and many more details. This is for you Inuk singer and songwriter, Aasiva.

Musical interlude:
…
(Instrumental)
…

Vickie Rochon
Hello Coleen!

Aasiva
Hello!

Vickie Rochon
Thanks for being here with us today. May I ask you where you are joining us from?

Aasiva
I'm calling you from the capital of Nunavut. Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada.

Vickie Rochon
Oh, from Iqaluit! I thought you were located in… Pang, Pagnirtung? Is that how you say it?

Aasiva
Huh, yeah… We actually pronounce it as Pagnirtuq, but on the map it’s written as Pagnirtung. I was actually born here in Iqaluit but I was raised in Pang.

Vickie Rochon
Right, I see. Can you tell us a bit more about Pang?

**Aasiva**

So… Pagnirtuq is located in a fjord. We are on the South East Coast of Baffin Island, we have a population of about fifteen-hundred people. We’re surrounded by beautiful, beautiful mountains and we actually have a National Park nearby called Auyuittuq National Park…, and in the summertime…, absolutely gorgeous! We get, huh, twenty-four-hour daylight so, we’re able to huh, go out hiking and hunting and fishing and all that fun stuff! And in the wintertime, huh we…, don't see the sun actually because of the mountains but…, we do receive a few hours of daylight but other than that it's usually a lot of darkness throughout the winter.

**Vickie Rochon**

So, Coleen, is Aasiva only in artist name or do you normally go by Aasiva in your everyday? Should I…, should I be calling you Aasiva instead?

**Aasiva**

My middle name is actually Aasiva. It means spider in Inuktitut. I am named after my great-grandmother, Aasiva Koloalik, yeah that's where my name comes from.

**Vickie Rochon**

All right. Aasiva it is. So, she composer her first self-titled album just about three years ago, which features a unique indie folk style brought up by Inuktitut lyrics, ukulele melodies and throat singing. She's also just about to release a second album, of which we may expect a more electro-pop style and new musical collaborations. At the time this episode was recorded, however, album number two wasn’t yet a part of the discussion.

Do you write and compose all these songs by yourself?

**Aasiva**

Yeah, huh, all of the songs that I've written are…, all written by me! (laugh)
Vickie Rochon

And so…, how were you introduced to music in the first place?

Aasiva

Thankfully, I had the privilege and the opportunity to receive fiddle workshops…, huh we had teachers from…, mainly Nova Scotia come up to Pagnirtuq and deliver fiddle workshops twice a year so…, I was really lucky to have that. I was actually heading home for the day after school with my best friend and huh…., we saw a sign up sheet on the gymnasium door and we figured: “Why not! Sounds like it could be something interesting, something new to try out!” And after the first couple workshops I just completely fell in love…, and just stuck with it. Composing came later when I picked up the Ukulele.

Vickie Rochon

And that was when you were studying at Nunavut Sivuniksavut? Is that correct?

Aasiva

No, that, huh…., that's correct and, you said it right! (laugh) awesome!

Vickie Rochon

In this college based out of Ottawa, she attended the Inuit Studies program where she learned about subjects like; Nunavut land claim agreements, intergovernmental affairs, Inuit language and history and last, but not least…

Aasiva

We had a music room at our college and…, every break time I would go in to the music room to…, let off a little bit of steam or…., use music to help, kind of, let me think about what I had just learned. So, I looked around the room and…., I realized that they were two instruments in there that I didn't know how to play which was; the bass guitar and the ukulele so…., I chose the bass guitar… Just kidding! (laugh)

Vickie Rochon
And seemingly this turned out to be a very transformational time in her life.

**Aasiva**
I would say that music has helped me express myself and…, that sometimes I just didn't have space to talk about my feelings or…, what I was experiencing at the time so… Starting with the fiddle I would play certain tunes depending on how I'm feeling and, eventually, when I started picking up the ukulele, I started vocalizing how I was feeling and also what I was experiencing at the time so…

Musical Interlude:
...

Qallunaat Nunaganniit
...

**Aasiva**
As an example, one of my songs called Qallunaat Nunaganniit, the very first song I wrote was about homesickness and…, having to cope so that I can finish my studies but…, we're also having a great time because we're all together. But the undertone is just coping with homesickness. So, yeah, music has been a great coping mechanism for myself and also a great tool for…, self expression.

Musical Interlude:
...

Ullumik sapiliqpunga
Angirraqsituinarama
...

**Vickie Rochon**
How easy is it to mix up Inuktitut, English, ukulele and throat singing all at once?

**Aasiva**
I find Inuktitut on its own is very musical, huh, so I didn’t…, it came very naturally when I picked up the ukulele. I play quite a few instruments but I found, huh, when I pick up the ukulele that it complemented my voice more than any other instrument I picked up so far.

**Vickie Rochon**
And throat singing being very reasoning, she explained, it was quite easy to add it to any beat or any melody. So, turns out, her main challenge was…:

**Aasiva**
I just kept thinking that a lot of the music that we listen to is in English and…, how can you make something original when everything is in English? So., that was the hard part for me. (laugh)

Would you say that Inuktitut it is still largely used in Nunavut?

**Aasiva**
I would say that it depends on which community that you're visiting but…, I would say our island, as a whole, it's very strong in Inuktitut but, Inuktitut is…, is declining. Huh, it's hard to compete with media and the workplace and…, our curriculum is mostly all in English so it's hard to compete when you have English, kind of, thrown at you all the time.

Musical Interlude:
…
(Throat singing)
…

**Vickie Rochon**
And of course, I wanted to hear more about throat singing, so I asked! And here’s what she answered…:

**Aasiva**
So…, because of colonization, throat singing was something that was almost non existent. It was actually forbidden in many of our communities by the ministry. And…, thankfully there were a few Inuit that have kept that hidden so they would throat sing to their children, they would kind of…, keep the skill but they wouldn't necessarily, perform that in front of people.

**Vickie Rochon**
And thank God they did! ‘Cause throat singing is much more than just a singing style… You ready? Hear out what’s next…

**Aasiva**
From my understanding…, our ancestors, while their husbands were out hunting, women would stay back in the camp and, throat singing could be considered as a form of past time, also considered as a friendly competition, of some sorts…., but it was also used to…, put babies to sleep. Women have a garment called an Amauti so it's a garment that has a little pouch on the back so that your babies can remain comfortable with you… And when you throat sing, you can feel the vibrations on your back, huh, so that helps…., put them to sleep.

**Vickie Rochon**
That’s so cool!

**Aasiva**
Yeah! (laugh) And throat singing could be something that could help keep you warm in the cold…., when your throat singing you're using a lot of different components, you're using your diaphragm, huh, your throat and your nasal passages so when you’re…, throat singing you’re, kind of, working all of that at the same time and it, kinda, helps keep you warm a little bit.

**Vickie Rochon**
OK. Legit survival skill! So throat singing; not only a super fun pastime and really cool cultural trait, it's also a strategy for calming babies and keeping warm in the bitter cold of the coastal tundra. Isn't this…, the cleverest adaptation you've heard of?
So I imagine only…, only the women practice it right?

**Aasiva**
I couldn't say for sure if it's just women that would throat sing. Nowadays you see men starting to throat sing too and it's pretty cool actually!

**Vickie Rochon**
She told me about a gentleman named Nelson Tagoona from Baker Lake, northern Manitoba, who performs something he calls: Throat boxing.

**Aasiva**
So he throat sings and he beatboxes as well. That's pretty neat, very modern!

Musical Interlude:
…
Instrumental
…

**Vickie Rochon**
Do you have a favorite song amongst I ones you’ve written?

**Aasiva**
That’s a good question! Huh, I,, I’d say maybe Play in the Snow is definitely one of my top favorites.

Musical Interlude:
…
Hey qanuippi? Qanuinngitunnga
Qaujiniarasutuinnaqqunga
Qanuikkuvi aniiriaqtulaurlu
…
Aasiva

I wrote that song to help remind myself that when I am going through a difficult time, huh, just to go outside, enjoy to land a little bit, get some fresh air... I find that really helps to ground myself but also..., gets me a breather to kind of think about and process what I'm experiencing at the moment... And it's also a reminder for others to..., do that as well 'cause..., the land is quite healing.

Musical Interlude:

...

Let’s go play in the snow

...

Aasiva

And this song’s called Nijjausijarnniq Inuusirivara..., the title on the album is called I Love Music (laugh). That one's a little bit more of a silly story but..., I used to work as a front desk agent at a hotel here in Iqaluit and I'd work a lot of evening shifts so..., when all of my tasks were done, I’d pick up my ukulele and start practicing because I wanted to become..., like a performing artist at some point, so this was my way of getting used to singing in front of people. So, one night I just kind of sat down and I started playing chords trying to think of..., a song that I could write. So, I would just play a chord and go: “I love music. Gosh, I love music!” and I would just go on and eventually it became a freestyle sort of...

Musical Interlude:

...

Damn I love music, and music loves me back
Damn I love music, and music loves me...

...

Aasiva
That's…, how I wrote the song. Singing, being a little bit silly and it actually turned into a song called I Love Music. But the Inuktitut title it’s actually; music is my life.

Musical Interlude:

…

Ingiliraigamalli, akausivakkama
(Throatsinging)
Ayaya ayaya ayaya

…

**Vickie Rochon**

When I asked her about her musical influences, she answered by naming a series of Inuit artists I had hardly ever heard of. Yes. This is how prolific the Arctic music scene is up there.

**Aasiva**

Inuit are so talented and so musical! Like, every single community I go, I always meet an incredible artist and…., they always have so much talent, and skills that they can bring up, but a lot of them just aren't recorded and shared with the world so I think that's something that might…., set me apart from everyone is that I…., had the opportunity to be able to record my music and then release it to the world.

Musical Interlude:

…

Ayaya ayaya ayaya

…

**Vickie Rochon**

Before I let her go, I want to hear about Project Ukcray. This personal initiative of hers would bring her to go and host music workshops in the remote communities of North Baffin Island, introducing kids to the basics of ukulele and leaving few instruments behind for each community to use and enjoy.
How did you come up with the Ukcray project?

**Aasiva**
I wanted to be able to give the opportunity to youth the same way that I’ve had opportunities when I was in high school. That’s something that I really…, wanted to do, I wanted to give this opportunity to my fellow Inuit, so, huhtm…, by the time I had completed Nunavut Sivuniksavut, I really wanted to follow that dream. So, it took about two years, huh, getting rejected by funding agencies but, finally…, one organization had believed in my dream so…, I, had enough funding to be able to go to three communities, on North Baffin, and I was there for approximately four days. I just wanted to, kind of, emphasize how…, music can be used as a coping mechanism and a tool for self-expression and also…, Music is fun! Huh, you can make a lot of friends like that, it’s very social…., huh, you can create a career out of it, you could travel and I just wanted to…, show them that, they can do that too…!

Musical Interlude:

…

Sanngijuqpaaluumma
(Throat singing)

**Vickie Rochon**
This is what concludes Contemporary Arctic Music episodes. A huge thank you to Aasiva for her time and for opening up a door on her musical world and her culture. All the music included in this episode are songs from Aasiva’s self-title album and can be found on most music streaming platforms.

Sanngijuqpaaluumma
Sanngijuqpaaluumma
Sanngijuqpaaluumma

**Sarah Mackie**
Today’s episode was written and produced by Vickie Rochon.

We would like to thank Aasiva for her time and for allowing us to use her music.

This podcast was created as part of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Arctic Initiative Podcast Project, led by Dr Sarah Mackie.