

Intuitive Collaboration: an interview with Tanya Tagaq

Conducted by Laurie Brown, CBC Radio 2 (The Signal)

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LB: My name is Laurie Brown and I am the host of The Signal on CBC Radio. And this is Tanya Tagaq, who is going to be performing in this spot tonight at 8:00 at the Guelph Jazz Festival. And I hope you're all going to be here.

I've been playing Tanya's music on the show ever since the show started, and I am a huge fan, and I am insanely curious about this woman and how she thinks about her work, how she feels about her work, and how she can put words to what it is that she does—which is a hard thing for an artist to do sometimes is to talk about the art that they do. How do you feel about talking about what it is you do? This could be a very short interview with an opening question like that.

TT: If I had words, I'd sing in words. That's why I don't usually use words because I think I'm trying to get down to where before people were messing around with too many words. You know what I mean? When we were just feeling things, and intuition. Like when you know somebody's lying even though they're saying they're not. That kind of feeling. Or when you feel like something's going to happen. Or when you know you're going to be friends with somebody when you just met them. This kind of feeling is more along the lines of where the singing comes from. So it's difficult to put it in so many words.

LB: Those kind of intuitive feelings, I remember having loads of them as a kid, and having them taken away from me, actually, by my parents a lot of the time. You know, I would just have an immediate reaction to someone and I didn't like that person, and they'd tell me, "Don't be silly. Be polite. You don't know this person. You can't have those feelings." I think a lot of us are taught not to listen to those intuitive feelings as we grow up.

TT: Poor you.

LB: Are there situations where you wish you didn't have to listen to those intuitions?

TT: [shakes her head "no"] It keeps me safe.

LB: There's this thing people think of as a fearless artist, that people can be fearless as an artist. Do you think that that's true?

TT: I don't know. I'm scared of everything.

LB: Exactly. But does it feel right when you do things that scare you?

TT: It depends what it is [laughs]. Getting on a stage is not scary. Like, you guys aren't scary, audiences aren't scary unless I meet them and I can feel something off of them. What am I scared of? I'm not scared of showing myself. I'm not scared of being myself. And I guess those are hurdles for some people. I was really scared of hornets, so my friend had a farm and I raked up his peaches, and that really helped. And I was afraid of heights, so I did the paragliding thing off Whistler Mountain, and I'll never do it again. What am I scared of? I'm scared of being hurt. I'm scared of—the same as everybody—scared of dying. We're all afraid of different things, and I think we just have to respect our fears and then confront the ones that mess with our heads, right? Like if you're scared of rejection and it causes you to hurt other people, then confront that fear. But if you're scared of sharks, don't go swim with them, you know? It's just logic, right?

LB: How do you prepare yourself to go on stage?

TT: I think it depends, it depends [on] how I'm feeling. Like I'm really fragile right now, so I don't need to do anything. I like to put on clothes and makeup and stuff so I feel a little bit more detached.

LB: That fragile feeling is what you want to feel when you're stepping on stage?

TT: It depends. Like sometimes I'm mad and that's great. It's just whatever I'm feeling that day, you know? Right now I'm a soft-shell egg. It's a kind of a time in my life where everything is up in arms, and nothing makes sense right now. And it makes for great music. Like when I'm strong, and when I'm healthy, I'll just do tequila shots before I go on. But right now I'm fragile so I respect that, and know that that'll come out anyway, whatever I'm feeling. I guess it just varies from gig to gig.

LB: And have you been on the road all summer long now.

TT: Yah.

LB: So tell me about your summer. Where have you been?

TT: Well, I just did the States: New York, L.A., San Fran. I just did a gig in Portugal. And I'm really jet-lagged, which makes for good gigs because you're kind of dreaming anyway, you know? And my memory... I think I'm kind of like a cold fish because I travel too much. I'll remember the last few weeks and then it just turns into a blur [laughs]. Yah, that's kind of what I've been up to.

LB: This evening's performance with Jesse Zubot and Jean Martin... Now, you've never played with Jean Martin before. Can you tell us a little bit about what you think is going to happen tonight?

TT: I don't want to think about it. I just want to do it, you know? I don't even know what he likes, like what kind of... he could be a heavy metal guy. I don't know. And that's exciting

because Jesse is so astounding that I'm certain that he would never recommend somebody that was subpar anyway. So I have complete and utter confidence about it.

LB: The collaboration on the last record, *Auk*, that you and Jesse have together, is really something special. Can you talk about that collaboration, and what that's been for you?

TT: Well, I met Jesse—when was it?—2003. I was 205 pounds pregnant with my kid on a tour bus all over Europe. I remember the bus doing this [moves her whole body in circles], and I could feel myself sloshing around. And in Italy going, “I need pizza.” It was a weird time, and we toured together for a few weeks. His humor kept me buoyant, and he's just fiercely intelligent, and neurotic, and talented. And we saw each other here and there after that, and I always just really liked him as a person, and I think when I'm doing music that's one of the huge deciding factors. I could never, ever make music with somebody that I didn't like. Never. I don't like it. If I don't like the person, if I'm not comfortable with the person, I would never share with them because music, it's so intimate. And I don't like spending time with people I don't like either. When you meet so many people you have to really protect yourself because you never know what someone's intentions are. And with him, there's never been a singular doubt in my mind. I've always wanted to see him more. I've always been sad to say bye to him. He's so amazingly talented. And we never talk about what we're going to do, never. He came in to do the record, and I was just like, “Yah, do whatever you want.” And I did whatever I wanted and it made that, you know?

LB: The neat thing about watching you collaborate with someone, unlike other artists that collaborate together, is [that] you're looking straight into their eyes a lot of the time. There's this intense eye contact that's going on. Does that freak some musicians out?

TT: No. It freaks people out though. We're not people [laughs]. That came out so wrong.

Yah, it's rare, I've kind of learned. I don't know if it's just because of where I was born, but I've had to teach myself to look around a bit when I'm talking to someone because people will always get a little freaked out by it. You start seeing more and more of someone when you're looking at them, and people get freaked out by that. But with music it's different because you're in a different dimension. And, yah, I look at them sometimes. But Jesse he's playing; he can't really look at me. Or I just close my eyes and go in my own place. But it doesn't freak anybody out. I don't think so.

LB: I saw a great—it was on t.v., actually, last week—it was a concert you were doing, and you were doing this song with a harmonica player. You were right together like this, like he was throat singing with the harmonica, and you were back and forth, and back and forth.

TT: Oh, C. R. Avery. Yah.

LB: And it reached such a fever pitch that he just fell over backwards on the ground and that was it. You've talked about getting, going to the edge. Do you go over the edge sometimes?

TT: Yah.

LB: What's that like?

TT: I want to go there more. But I don't think anyone wants to pay to see it [laughs].

LB: Yah, but I want to know what it feels like.

TT: Well, everybody knows that feeling. Everybody's gone there. Everybody's done things in a panic, or in a moment of intense pleasure, or a moment of anger, when you lose control of everything. And I kind of like that feeling.

LB: When you worked with the Kronos Quartet, it was really interesting for me to find out that you actually found a way where you were both on new ground, you were both kind of not working in the same way. They didn't have music for the first time, they didn't have notes, and you were trying to fit into some kind of a structure. Can you explain how it is you ended up working together musically?

TT: Yah, absolutely. That's because David Harrington is a genius. And he was trying to find a common denominator because I can't read music and I don't even know what a note is and they've been so structured. He popped up, awake at three in the morning and thought, "Colour. We'll use colour." He coloured all these little squares and handed them out to us, and we just decided which colours. All there was on the stands was this row of colours and we decided what order they were going to be. And we each did exactly what the colour meant to us, or what we felt, and we discussed that and then we moved forward.

And then our new project we're doing was written by Derek Charke. And he's so amazing. They have music and I have a certain structure. Like I know when to start and when to stop. And then I also read an Inuit legend in the middle of it. So, in a sense, I'm more structured, and in a sense we're both more comfortable. We did a lot of practicing, which taught me that practicing can sometimes be really good [laughs]. So they've taught me a lot. Fantastic people.

LB: I was watching a video about that, and you said in the end that they really... they made you a better musician, working with them.

TT: Yah, absolutely.

LB: Is that what you get? You know, for someone who has such an original sound, and an original vision, I think, to her work, I'm amazed to hear you say that collaboration is so important to you, that it just couldn't work without collaboration.

TT: When I'm alone, like I have this stage, right, of sound? And then when someone else comes in they bring that much more floor space, and I can run around in it. And depending on the people, it could be like a football field that I feel comfortable maneuvering in. I guess that's a strange analogy but that's kind of how I feel. Or we could start going in a whole different direction. I find collaborating with people allows me the freedom to, the freedom and the comfort to go in places that I would be too insecure to go to by myself. Like if I stood up here by myself I most likely would be so conscious of the sounds I'm making, and thinking about the next sound I'm going to make, or the next series, and I could go deep, but not the same as with

musicians because I can start listening to what their doing and forget what I'm doing. Like even after the concert, people would be like, "You were doing this bit." And I'm like, "I don't know." So I can focus on them, and never mind me, and I go somewhere else.

LB: Well, then how did you actually get the nerve to just step in front and do this on your own at the very beginning? It takes a certain, "I think this is me. This is what I can do." It had to take an awful lot of courage to just know that this was right, and to be able to go for it. Or were you hauled up on stage?

TT: Yah, I originally have my BFA, which I like to call my Bachelor of Fuck All. [audience laughs]. I don't know if you can say that on the radio.

LB: We've all got BFAs [audience laughs].

TT: Yah, yah, yah. I got accepted into this great northern arts festival in Inuvik. And I was there with my paintings. I had paintings all up. And we went out—it was a 24-hour sun—and I went out and got really drunk with the executive director the night before. I'd been singing in the shower for a long time, and singing away. Everyone was singing and whatever, so I got up and sang for them. The next day a band of theirs canceled, and they had this whole night planned, and she said, "Tanya, I know you don't do this but would you go up on the stage, and we'll just throw a few musicians up there. Just for this little bit of time. Just to fill it in." And I thought, yah why not? Like, "I'll do it. What's gonna happen? What's the worst-case scenario? They're gonna throw tomatoes at me? It'll be okay." And people liked it. And I liked it. It just went forward from there.

LB: I would think at this point in your career [that] you're getting a lot of people asking you to come and be on their projects. And how do you feel about that now? How do you feel about doing that?

TT: I have to know them. Really. Or have to meet with them. Or have to really enjoy what they're doing. There [are] a lot of people that will ask and I'll listen to the stuff or I won't. I have a five-year-old. I spend a lot of time trying not to look at screens. I don't like really spending a lot of time watching t.v., or spending a lot of time on the computer. A lot of it is over the internet, and I really don't have time to go through everything, or listen to everything. So, I think as time goes on I'll sift through things. But when I don't like things, I'm not scared to say, "I can't. I'm sorry. It's great, but it doesn't go together." And when I love things, I love things. But also, I'm really isolated in my own little world, and for my next album I have no idea who's gonna come my way. You know, what I'm going to do. So we'll just see.

LB: How is the idea of recording compared to live performance for you? Is it a different beast?

TT: That's one of the biggest challenges because the audience makes the concert. It's the feeling that I get from the audience. It's like I'm a conduit. I'll feel the reaction in the room and it will come through me. Sometimes if the audience is really into it I can go nuts, and then sometimes if they're really cold, then I'll just stand there and make noises. And if they're feeling it, I'll feel it, and it's a conversation, almost, between us. And I love the idea of everyone in the room having

the same kind of emotion. I love that. It's so great. Even if there was a fire and we all had to run out, and kind of be like, "Oh, we're all scared." I don't know, maybe it's something in my nature, feeling in touch with people. But when I'm alone in the studio, you don't have people. So the CDs and live shows are so different. And the only thing I can do is start recording all the live shows and cutting and pasting and sifting through everything to make the underlying background of things, and [then] write songs to go on top. I just thought that now, and I think I'll maybe do that for a couple songs and see if it works.

LB: I was talking to Rich Terfry, who's Buck 65, who worked with you on your last record. And I said, "Buck, you did a fantastic job on Tanya's record." And he said, "She brought it out of me. It's all her. She did that for me."

TT: He's so sweet. I met him fifteen years ago in Halifax. So he's a dear friend of mine. And I didn't realize he was going through such a hard time. Me and my little girl went to his house in Toronto, and he didn't know I was going through such a hard time either. And we watched a lot of Spiderman with my kid. And he played all this stuff, and I just picked a couple of melodies and songs that he had made. And he let me pick, which is really, really respectful of him because those are his and he asked me what I wanted. I said, "I want one that's really heartfelt, and one that's really horny." So he did those things. And it was really sweet. When I heard the words to "Gentle" it was all about how he was having a hard time, and how I was there for him and I didn't realize I was there for him, and he didn't realize he was there for me. With [my] baby, with my baby there. So, it's sweet. Yah, nice. Real, like our friendship. I don't know what he was thinking with the horny one because we don't go there [laughs]. But it was effective.

LB: But that's something that's very prevalent, particularly in your live show. There is a huge sexual energy to what is going on on stage. How aware are you of that?

TT: I find it so funny. That's the last thing on my mind. And people are like, "Oh, it sounds like sex. Well, what do you do in bed?" [audience laughs]. Well, what do you do in bed? I don't know if I want to know.

It's not on my mind but I'm a very almost hedonistic, very tactile person. I don't care if making dinner takes five hours. I want it, and I want it that way. A hot bath, the bath salts, the smell of my kid, the smell of my lover. It's like I'm a dog, like I'm living moment-to-moment, right? And sex is a huge part of my life. I'm thirty-four, and I almost hope it goes away soon. But it's just part of me, and it's a part of me when I'm sitting on the couch watching t.v., and it's a part of me when I'm on stage. But I'm not thinking about anything when I'm performing. So if it comes out like that, it's coming from a very honest place.

And also, I find it really funny because when I come out of a show I often feel like I've expressed crazy amounts of anger, and crazy amounts of sorrow, and crazy amounts of joy. And I think everyone's just dirty-minded. All they think about is the sex part. Well, you're not mad, or sad, or anything else? I don't know. It's hard to explain.

LB: I remember talking to Yo-Yo Ma once, and he was talking about the ultimate performance, and the place that he gets to, like that perfect spot when he's performing when everything is just right. And he finally remembered, he said, "You know what it's like, and your going to bed, and you get into bed, and that moment where you're just in and out of consciousness and

unconsciousness, where your mind is just kind of flying right before you fall asleep?” He said, “That’s what the perfect performance is like for me.” Does that make any sense to you?

TT: I want to meet him. I’ve wanted to meet him for a while. So, hopefully that manifests itself.

No. I guess it’s that. It’s the same. I ran a marathon once, or half marathon, which was probably one of the stupidest things I ever did because it’s complete agony. [laughs] And after kilometer twenty-three it’s like that. It’s like giving birth, if you’re in serious physical pain and you’re not thinking about anything, or you’re having an orgasm and you can’t think of anything else. For me it’s that. That’s when it’s perfect, when you’re not thinking about anything. Because we’re forever in our heads, putting every scenario together, and worrying about the past, and worrying about the future, and worrying about how many sugars you’re going to take in your coffee, or anything. What’s this person doing? What’s this person doing? I feel like blalalalalala. And sometimes I’ll lay there, and I’ll get insomnia from thinking about every little thing that could possibly happen, not even realizing for a second that it doesn’t even matter because you don’t have any control of anything but your own actions. And you don’t have anything other than yourself. And if you can’t relax into that then it’s just walls, right? So my ultimate is when everything is down. And I guess it’s along the same lines as that “almost sleeping,” but just when I’m there and not there at the same time.

LB: Mm hmm.

TT: You know?

LB: You seem very connected to cellos, as a matter of fact. You perform a lot with cello players. Is there something about that instrument that inspires you?

TT: I like strings because we’re strings [touches her throat]. And we’re drums [pats her upper chest]. And we’re strings, you know? Those things always attract me. But I’m interested in going towards horns, or pianos. I work a lot with electronics, but only in the extreme contradiction where one has used electronics to become very natural, and very organic. I do like strings a lot, but I feel like I’m addicted to them. I’d like to work with the triangle for a year, or something [laughs]. Just get away from them. At the same time, it’s my comfort zone.

LB: Do you feel pressure to perform up north, to be back there a lot, to be “the throat singer”?

TT: That is so hilarious. I’ve never, ever performed at home. I performed once in Ikaluktuutiak [sp?], and I don’t even live there. And I’d love to tour Nunavut. Love to. But when I’m home I don’t talk about what I do to anyone. No one knows what I do. No one knows what, why, how, what’s going on, because why on earth? I don’t like listening to how to fix cars. I don’t give a shit. Like why would I talk to them about Prague? I want to just go fishing and party when I’m home. I’m just Rick Gillis’s daughter when I’m there. I have a different life when I’m away from home.

LB: That’s a nice thing, isn’t it?

TT: It's okay. Parts of it are good and parts of it are bad. It's nice because I don't have anyone asking me about music. Because after a while, no matter what you do, it becomes your job, so when you're out eating dinner you don't want to talk about your job to someone who doesn't do the same job. Like someone that doesn't do music at all. Someone who does accounting sometimes will ask me about music. Well, do you want to do my taxes right now? So it's nice to not have to talk about it. But at the same time people are like, "When are you going to get a real job?"

LB: Still? Still?

TT: Oh, yah. Because people don't know, right? It's really sweet, and awesome. I love going home for that. I love it.

LB: Well, thank you. Thank you for speaking with me because now I know a little bit more about the way you work, and it's pretty fascinating. And I can't wait for the concert tonight. I bet most people will be here for that concert tonight. Tanya Tagaq Gillis [audience claps].

TT: Thank you.

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