The Sounds of a Culture

Inuit have lived in Nunavut for thousands of years. Long ago, in order to survive the harsh climate and unforgiving environments, hunting, sewing, and other traditional skills were a vital part of life for Inuit. Far from just “surviving,” Inuit culture was rich with joyous recreational activities, such as sports, games, art, and music. Since time immemorial, Inuit have used songs and music to express their feelings, to share stories, to entertain, and to have fun together.

Over the last few centuries, however, Inuit have experienced a complete overhaul in their way of life. Due of these massive changes, many Inuit face daunting challenges – economic, cultural, psychological, and spiritual. Inuit culture and language are at risk of being lost and the life potential of Inuit youth is in danger. Entire communities are suffering due to inter-generational trauma, and much healing is needed throughout the territory.

Despite a difficult transition period from the traditional to a Globalised way of life, the Inuit tradition of music is still very much alive and thriving. Throat-singing and drum-dancing have given way to square dancing and folk music, which in turn have given way to pop music, hip-hop, and EDM (electronic dance music). The sense of community and joyful celebration created by music remains firmly intact. And according to a handful of young, local artists and entrepreneurs, it creates hope for a wonderful opportunity of empowerment and healing.
**Linking Artistic Expression to Wellness**

Nunavut Hitmakerz is an initiative specifically designed to engage, inspire, and empower Nunavummiut youth by promoting life and career development opportunities through the arts. The project gives them the tools and know-how needed to express themselves through musical performance, collaborative song-writing, music production, and multimedia. The project promotes confidence and self-esteem in individuals and communities, while strengthening and celebrating Inuit culture, traditions, language and food (a large feast is held with country food). The project also seeks to provide marketable skills training in order to expand community capacity, and bring more skills, wealth, and overall quality of life to the communities to which it travels.

Artistic expression and positive role modelling are effective methods of intervention, proven to help end cycles of poverty, crime, and violence. If young people are pursuing creative passion and expressing it effectively, they’ll be much more likely to stay in school, stay out of trouble, and feel happier in their lives. Self-expression brings self-esteem, which leads to a more productive individual and in turn, a healthier community. Traditionally, Inuit living on the land would often seek comfort from life’s challenges by singing songs, throat-singing, or performing in drum circles. Science can now validate the healing effects of performing such activities, making artistic expression more relevant than ever.

**Nunavut Hitmakerz 2016**

In August 2016, the team visited its first three Nunavut communities: Clyde River, Pond Inlet, and Qikiqtarjuaq. Positive role modelling by the instructors played a central role in all aspects of the tour – artistic performances, curriculum development, personal storytelling, workshop delivery, and interpersonal interactions outside of workshops. This behaviour showed the youth new ways of thinking and behaving, modelling alternative ways of dealing with life challenges.

In each community, the visit began with a free concert by Kelly Fraser – a well-known Inuk pop singer, best known for her Inuktitut rendition of “Diamonds” by Rihanna. After each concert, Kelly spent hours signing autographs for fans. Using Kelly’s “star power” was an important method for getting the youth’s attention, getting them interested and engaged in the material of the workshops.

In the following three days, workshops were held, focusing on songwriting, music-production, and “careers in media and the arts.” The program also hosted community events, including concerts, movie nights, talent shows, and even a community feast. All the events were free for the public to attend. At the end of each community visit, a mobile music studio was donated to a local arts organization in the community.

All workshops and community events were presented in Inuktitut and all songs were collaboratively written, using the respective community’s local Inuktitut dialect. This often lead to group discussions about the nature of Inuktitut and language education. The youth often mentioned that writing and recording professional music in their native language made them feel proud of their culture. Many of the participants, both young and old, described the process of songwriting in their dialect as “empowering.”

The team was warmly welcomed into each community, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. In several of the communities, Hitmakerz was the first musical act to visit the community in decades. In these three communities, 196 people actively participated in the workshops, and another 1,250 people attended other events.

Feedback was solicited from workshop participants through surveys and informal discussions.

The average workshop participants ranged from 3 to 51 years of age (the average was 14). More than 95% of participants thought the workshops were fun, useful, and wanted to see more, similar workshops in their community. The reactions on social media expressed how the workshops helped to improve the mood of many participants. The most popular aspects of the project were the workshops in songwriting and music production, as well as the catering and feast.

**Logistics, Funding, and the Future**

Hitmakerz is the Iqaluit-based company responsible for the tour. The company was founded in 2016 by Thor Simonsen, a music producer and entrepreneur from Iqaluit, along with Kelly Fraser, a musician and political activist from Sanikiluaq. Hitmakerz worked with local community organizations (hamlets, schools, nonprofits, Inuit organizations, etc.) to manage every aspect of the project – curriculum development, funding, logistics, instruction, and finally, reporting.

In 2016, for the first phase of the program, funding was provided by the Government of Nunavut’s Department of Culture and Heritage and the Qikiqtani Inuit Association.

Despite a successful tour, as well as dozens of support letters from the hamlets, finding money to fund Nunavut Hitmakerz has not been easy. Since the first tour in 2016, Thor Simonsen and the team have worked full time on the project, writing and submitting funding proposals to various government agencies (federal and territorial governments, as well as Inuit organizations), private companies, and the communities themselves.
With partial funding secured in the spring of 2017, more tours have been planned for various communities – the dates and locations will be announced soon. However, more funding is still needed if Nunavut Hitmakerz are to have positive impact on all the potential artists in Nunavut.

In future iterations of the project, more emphasis will be placed on creating a segue from music and the arts into life skills, mentorship, tracking the long-term progress of students, and making the project financially sustainable.

Youth engagement and technical abilities present viable methods of income, and Hitmakerz wants to ensure that educational and work opportunities are made available to as many Nunavummiut as possible.

Eventually, the team hopes to travel to every community in Nunavut, developing and cultivating a generation of “hitmakerz” – Nunavummiut youth with the confidence and ability to clearly express themselves, artistically and otherwise.  

Kelly Fraser, who teaches songwriting, is a well-known Inuk singer, activist, and motivational speaker from Sanikiluaq, Nunavut. Her music has 300,000+ hits on social media and she has performed countless concerts across Canada, especially in Nunavut and Nunavik. Kelly rose to fame with the release of her Inuktitut version of Rihanna’s song “Diamonds.” Kelly has recently released her much-anticipated sophomore album, Sedna.

Learn more about Kelly at www.kellyfrasermusic.com

Thor Simonsen, who teaches music production and “Career in Media and the Arts,” is a Danish-Canadian author, artist, designer, music producer, and media consultant. Originally from the Faroe Islands, Simonsen spent his childhood and teenage years in Iqaluit, Nunavut, where he is currently based. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from the Danish School of Media and Journalism in Copenhagen, Denmark. To learn more about his work, visit www.thorsimonsen.com

If you are interested in learning more about Nunavut Hitmakerz please visit the project’s Facebook page at www.facebook.com/nuhitmakerz