



Meet NAGWETCH

Nagwetch is a Canadian singer and songwriter from Gaspésia who has been creating music since he was a child growing up in Quebec. In the end of the 1990s, he settled in Finland where he has been since working hard to create music that reaches into his Wabanaki and Metis roots while stirring the senses of his audience. His project and concept band is called Wabanag. Nominated in 2005 as a finalist for the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards for his album ULODI (Well-Being/Happiness), we met him recently for the release of his new opus BEMIA (2013).

Can you tell us a bit about your background?

I was born in the Gaspésie village of Chandler, Quebec and grew up in Cree and Mi'kmaq territories before moving with my family to Montreal. Family friends included Quebec's legends Gilles Vignault, Felix Leclerc, and Pauline Julien. As a result, I was at an early age exposed to music and songwriting. At the beginning of the 1970s, our family moved to Europe and France. At 16 I had already a small repertoire of French songs, and at 18

I had my first band. I learned my craft all over working with various artists and busking on the streets of European cities.

From where did come your interest in Native American music?

I'm from Quebec. Here, in the XVIth and XVIIth century men of European descent, mostly French, started to mix with First Nations as part of a policy of colonization and assimilation. Such marriages gave birth to the Métis, a new people with various communities across New France. Most of them adopted the language, lifestyle and traditions of the local tribes and were involved in the fur trade as trappers, interpreters, etc. In Quebec, even today many people could claim to be of Metis or First Nation ancestry. In my youth, very few were doing it because it was seen as evil and considered politically sensitive. Since Canada Government has recognized some rights to the Metis, various communities have started to claim their rights. This is happening not exclusively in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, where by the end of the XIXth century the Metis formed the majority of the population, and developed a unique political and legal structure. Being a Metis is still a hot issue in Canada even though Métis peoples are recognized as one of Canada's aboriginal peoples under the *Constitution Act* of 1982, along with First Nations and Inuit peoples. In my family, we have always been aware of our roots. My brother Riel is named after a Metis leader who was (and still is) considered the Champion of the Metis in Manitoba and the Red River area. While living in Europe, I found enough peace to explore this part of my roots. Then, in the middle of the 1990s, Robbie

Robbertson came on tour with his Native American Red Road Ensemble, including no less than Buffy Sainte Marie, John Trudell, Walela, Kashtin, and Ulali. It came as a revelation and boosted my motivation.

What happened?

By making some research I discovered that most of my Canadian ancestors were from an area made up of most of present-day Maine in the United States, and New Brunswick, mainland Nova Scotia, Cape Breton Island, Prince Edward Island and some of Quebec south of the St. Lawrence River in Canada. This area was for a long time the homeland of the Wabanaki, a small hope of First Nations including the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot. I asked my father to teach me some rudiments of Mi'kmaq language and I started collecting Wabanaki songs. Not much had been left of our traditional heritage, unfortunately. However, our nations had resisted and were still alive. They had kept the spirit high and were busy healing themselves from the wounds of history. This was very supportive in my attempt to collect material from which to get inspiration for my musical project. I also visited the Wabanaki country several times, as well as my grandmother who told me stories of our family. It was a kind of spiritual journey. From those efforts, Wabanag was born.

Is there anything else you want to tell us about your experience with Native American/Canadian Aboriginal music?

I'm not an expert on the subject. Researching those traditions is very challenging. One reason is that much of Native American

music has been erased from history. It happened with all indigenous traditions of the world. Among Native people, music has always been related to spirituality and social life, in the noble sense of the terms. Unfortunately, as you know, colonial powers have put much effort into destroying both the roots of our spirituality and our sense of commonality. Another reason is that our people are of oral tradition, which means there is little written material available. There is also the fact that, while many various and complex languages are associated with the culture of my native ancestors, it was really hard to find native speakers 20 or 30 years ago. A fourth reason is that our people have been displaced all over North America - sometimes entire communities, and sometimes entire generations (i.e boarding school program). This is a whole experience people do not easily share with outsiders. Our recent history is full of painful memories.

How did you manage with your project then?

I'm a singer, songwriter, and musician. Creating music for Wabanag was first a personal journey. I did not aim at making Native American or Canadian Aboriginal music. I wanted to use music to express my Wabanaki roots, and put the Wabanaki on the mental map of my close circle of friends. In the beginning, I collected various data, and I studied what was available. Musically the composition process was oriented to blues music which has strong roots in both red and black music. Blues is also the expression of a special feeling that fits very well Wabanag's music style. Our first album came as an EP. Each song has intense and high energy. We called it "Indian Rock". Ulodi was more experimental with a clear focus on vocal harmonies and

the use of organic instruments like stones, musical bows, wooden flutes, rattles, etc. You can say it is a “world music album”. The sound is very contemporary, however. Bemia, the new album is built on the experience of the previous albums.

Do you think you succeeded in your purpose?

I think that my audience is better placed to answer this question. I have been honest when creating Wabanag’s repertoire. The reward is that I have a very loyal fan base in Finland. The fact that both CAMA (The Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards) and NAMA (The Native American Music Awards) eventually gave me a nomination, talks by itself too. In both cases it came as a surprise. My friends almost forced me to apply. There was no plan and even no category where to insert Ulodi. We suggested the creation of a category for the artists of our diaspora - something that had never been considered before. This was a great result, and not only for me and Wabanag but for others. Anyway, I have never been aiming at becoming Robbie Robertson (laughing). My struggle, if there is any one, is for the recognition of cultural diversity. This means that I also have a serious problem with music formats. People tend easily to put you in a box. For me, music is only music – a way to organize sounds and tones and put them in a form that produces an effect. And it can take many different forms. While loving blues, I’m not attached to any specific genre. In the past I collaborated with African artists and one of my teachers was from Peking Opera schools. I’m currently started a cooperation with a folk metal artist.

What do you think of the emergence of aboriginal music in Canada?

Canadian aboriginal music encompasses many various genres – both traditional and contemporary. When we speak about contemporary music, for what I know – here again, I’m not an expert – there seems to be a real endeavor, from bringing hip-hop and poetry to city halls to creating teen-friendly traditional music (throat singing, etc.). We are perhaps slowly recovering from a time where all things related to indigenous culture were seen as evil. My experience tells me there is a potential audience in Europe for Canadian Aboriginal and Native American music. I'm confident that more efforts will be put to promote it in this part of the world in the near future. I’m ready to help building connections and building bridges.

You have developed your musical project Wabanag in Finland. What about Canada?

I’m an artist and not a promoter. This might be the main reason. There is also the fact that while being Canadian I spent most of my life in Europe where I have a family. My daughters are living here. The so called discovery of the Americas started here. These are enough good reasons. Then, promoting music and selling albums or live gigs are full-time jobs. Music is only a part of my life. For the moment, I prefer to spend time in other activities than being home-jailed at a computer (laughing). But there is a time for everything. Maybe one day I’ll put more time into promoting my music also in Canada. But it is not a priority. I’m happy that there is nowadays a brand for Canadian Aboriginal music. People in Canada have made a great job.

New talents are being discovered and there is much more room for creativity and cultural diversity.

Interview by Eric E. van Monckhoven, [Music4You](#)