

Susan Aglukark Biography

“Susan Aglukark is truly one of Canada’s most significant cultural treasures. Apart from being a beautiful singer and powerful songwriter, she provides a significant view to the culture of our northern communities. She is an inspiration to humanity.” – Deane Cameron

Aglukark Entertainment and EMI Music Canada are proud to present Susan Aglukark’s newest album, **White Sahara**, the much-anticipated follow up to 2005’s **Blood Red Earth**. Susan is one of Canada’s most unique and most honored artists. After all, how many artists can capture a broad audience singing in both English and the language of the Inuit, Inuktitut?

White Sahara features 15 songs and is a mix: part retrospective that includes her hits like “O Siem”, “Hina Na Ho” and “One Turn Deserves Another”, along with three new tracks, “Revolution Road”, “White Sahara” and “Where Do We Go From Here”.

Even though the songs represent a span of a decade of writing and performing, the CD is a cohesive work. This speaks to the clarity and artistic vision that has been with Susan Aglukark since she emerged as an independent artist performing for Inuit communities in the Northwest Territories in the early 90’s.

It has been a long six years since her last release. And, although she’s never been far from her music, this new CD is, in a sense, a re- affirmation of Aglukark’s passion for being an artist.

In 2008 after spending 2 years writing recording, promoting and touring **Blood Red Earth**, Aglukark was appointed as Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the University of Alberta. For three years she worked with the university to research and create programs to address the school drop-out issue among aboriginal students at all grade levels across Canada. She commuted from her home in the Toronto area to Alberta. Between that work, and fulfilling speaking engagements, she found herself with very limited time to devote to music.

Then, in June of 2011, Aglukark had one of those defining moments in her life: the university offered her an extension. As most artists will tell you, the lure of the steady paycheque is a powerful thing. But ... “the university position was getting in the way of the creative side.” says Aglukark. “I said to my husband, I need the job to support my habit. Art is my habit. But it wasn’t working. I was dying as an artist. It was driving me crazy not to do the art. I wish I could do both, but I can’t.”

And so she declined the offer and has returned full time to her passion—her music. But with a renewed confidence.

Walking in the tension between two worlds--- in this case the academic and social justice arenas and that of being an artist and musician --- has been a defining note in her remarkable career so far. Susan's first job was working as a linguist with the Federal Government's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in Ottawa, and studying at night to become a pilot, it was during this time that she began writing and recording her first album Arctic Rose After the one year with the Federal Gov't she took a job with the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada and at the same time releasing and touring her first album, it was this album led to her signing a deal with EMI Music Canada.

The fine boned beauty with the pure voice who wrote and performed songs in both English and Inuktitut suddenly found herself in the limelight. Her music—a timeless kind of pop music with lyrics that dealt with subject matter of real depth and humanity--- was embraced in Canada and internationally.

She was a rare and exotic presence in the mainstream music world—an Inuk woman, a modern woman, a strong woman with something important to say is sometimes very rare in the entertainment industry --- Susan embodied pure, graceful honesty and strength. As her songs climbed the charts, her stories and her candor about the struggles of the Inuit and Aboriginal communities, and her bravery as she opened up about her own anger and her struggles as a survivor of sexual abuse, captured the public imagination and won her an audience beyond that of most pop artists.

Over the next few years she released a series of CDs, a total of 6 studio albums, and became an in-demand speaker, and the accolades and awards began to pile up. She's won three Juno Awards; the first-ever Aboriginal Achievement Award in Arts and Entertainment and the Canadian Country Music Association's Vista Rising Star Award. She has an honorary DFA from the University of Lethbridge, and in 2005 she was named as an Officer of the Order of Canada. She has performed for HRH Queen Elizabeth, Nelson Mandela and a number of Canadian Prime Ministers and dignitaries, honorary law degrees from the University of Alberta and University of Calgary.

For any young artist, this would be a lot to handle. But for a young woman who was raised in the north, it was a whirlwind. “What people don't realize, not that they have to, is the beauty of what we Inuit still carry is a certain innocence. Sometimes that innocence borders on too much naiveté, and that can be a detriment. In my early career, it was for me. I had a lot of learning and catching up to do, as an artist, as an entertainer and a performer on stage, and I was learning it all even though I was suddenly as a headliner.”

Aglukark's musical success is even more interesting when you realize she didn't start her career until she was 24. “although I grow up in a very musical family our access to music was limited to church music so we had hymnals and a couple of acoustic guitars. And there was a local radio station that played old, old country music - Hank Snow and Johnny Cash and bluegrass - and that was the extent of my musical background. But of

course there was also the traditional music of the Inuit. “The Inuit have the Qilaut, the drum and throat singing.”

With no modern musical orthodoxy to draw on Aglukark was free to respond to the sounds and styles that touched or motivated or inspired her. “When I move around creatively in my music it’s because one particular album has recently affected me.” In essence it has allowed her to build a musical sound that often starts with the strength of the drum, and yet sounds completely contemporary.

But perhaps the real appeal of her music is that in an era where the most popular music is often less relevant than style or mood, her lyrics are where she lives. “The songs are driven by the stories. It’s all about the stories.”

In the case of White Sahara, aside from the hits, the rest of the songs were favorites chosen: “because they’re very strong visually and story wise. And the stories are of people back home in Nunavut, and represent traditional and non-traditional Inuit.”

The three new songs all came from a special words and music presentation she has been doing called “Nomad No Longer: Social, Spiritual, Cultural Inuit Tradition”. The presentation touches on the journey of the Inuit people over the last fifty years and how that change has affected the people. “The stories are of people back home in Nunavut and represent traditional and non-traditional Inuit. I’m singing differently now and I’m singing better. I wanted to sing an ode to these people. I want to give them the respect that is due to them because of their history and their lives”.

The Nomad material came from research Aglukark did of the Inuit people extending back to the Viking era and looks at their history from three major turning points, from the past to the present.

“I try to put myself in those shoes just for a split second. Imagine that you go out on the tundra, you’re at the camp where you grew up and you’re doing your chores picking berries or skinning, whatever your task of the day. And you see the horizon changing because these men from a culture you’ve never seen approach. That’s got to change you. You’re no longer the same Inuk person. You’re changed forever. And then they were moved from camps to permanent settlements. As recently as my mother’s generation - she grew up in furs, with caribou against her skin. And then suddenly she was having to wear skirts and learn to use forks. The effect on all of those people psychologically is what Nomad is about. And it’s not all negative. There are funny stories as well.”

“I hit a point where I had to ask ‘am I going to continue on that path and what does it mean?’ There’s been a lot of growth and change, but I am still very connected to that part of the Inuit culture. I’ve been in Ontario for 20 years now and I still feel the pull of ‘home’ every day. No matter where I’ll end up, my heart will always feel the Arctic before I feel anything else. I’m not attached to the material things that you get to attached to when you get to a certain status. I still believe in the stories and the history. We live in an incredible time and I am in a great position to share it. I have this great career where I

can share it and that's a choice I've made at this stage and it has affected my performance on stage and in general."

As much as she writes and sings about her people, the songs Susan Aglukark creates have something in them that speaks to all of us, whether it's the longing of a woman growing old for the traditional life that she was taken away from, ("Bridge of Dreams") to an gentle anthem for peace and tolerance, ("O Siem"—joy in community), Aglukark's artistic vision is ultimately a universal one.

And, as it seems with all things that she does, **White Sahara** sits in that tense divide between two eras --- the origins and history of a young artist, and the future of a mature, accomplished and open artist that she has become with renewed confidence and passion.