

Performing Change on the Music Festival Stage: Indigenous Popular Music and Audience Engagement

Liz Przybylski

Abstract. Festivals have been credited with significant social effects: connecting people, developing audiences, linking emerging with established artists, even encouraging intercultural dialogue and participating in ongoing positive social change. At the same time, the concretization and commodification of Indigenous expressive culture is a risk in festivalized settings. Emerging from dialogue with Indigenous music industry professionals and musicians, this essay explores how music festivals that prioritize Indigenous leadership and attend to internally diverse audiences can strategically choose productive narratives for the groups they serve. While remote collaboration is not new, it became required during the COVID pandemic. With its focus on musician and audience development, the sākīhiwē festival in Winnipeg, Canada demonstrates some of the ways in which First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and international Indigenous musicians are reaching audiences in challenging times. Possibilities for audience curation shift online, as do the tools available for listener engagement. Musicians continue to wrestle with questions of addressing stereotypes as well as how to inspire and educate audiences in a festival atmosphere. To these concerns, performers add the manner in which they work with streaming technology, develop professional mentorship with physically distant colleagues, and create connections with online listeners. As uncertainty continues around music festivals in the near future, this essay asks how possibilities are shifting around cultural and political change through music festival performance.

The 2020 summer music festival season looked profoundly different from previous years. Many musicians and audience members continued to stay home, as organizers either cancelled events or shifted them online in an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Videos showed musicians performing from home, asking audiences to sing and clap along through the screen. Performers' audio held strange silences between songs, as no one was physically co-present to applaud. As listeners logged on from various geographies, and even listened asynchronously to livestreams that stayed up after the virtual curtain fell, the experience of togetherness through music was altered, yet it did not disappear. Since the beginning of COVID-related shutdowns, I have been engaged with online concerts and festival performances. Like everyone else, musicians are dealing with the effects of social isolation, and some have friends or family members who have become ill, and even died, due to the ongoing pandemic. My interactions are consistently finding something that may come as no surprise to musicians: during times of great uncertainty, people are turning to music making and listening. Audiences and artists alike are seeking the comfort, ability to process, and even escape, during this tumultuous reality.

This essay shares framing information about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, centering on Indigenous musicians in the U.S. and Canada. Then, I offer a brief focused background from music festival literature to answer two related questions: first, why are these performances so important, and second, how do festivals pose acute concerns for Indigenous musicians? Finally, I address questions about the uncertain future possibilities of learning through music festivals via the example of the sākīhiwē festival, which was broadcast from Winnipeg, Canada with performers across North America, during the 2020 summer festival season.

Pandemic effects on the Indigenous music industry

Paid live performances are crucial for the livelihood of many working musicians. Music festivals provide the economic benefit of compensated performance, as well as networking opportunities that can help result in future work. Due to changes in industry structure, in the U.S. and Canada, “the live music industry is now worth more than the recording industry in both countries” (Sutherland 2018: 108). Economist Alan Krueger found that the vast majority of musicians—in the U.S. and worldwide—cannot rely on streaming or album sales for any significant portion of their income (Krueger 2019). These factors make the loss of show contracts destabilizing, so many festival organizers look for ways to continue honoring contracts with artists, even when in-person performances shut down. Musicians, who have long been innovating in order to be heard, are continuing to do so, pivoting quickly to online festival performance and other emerging areas of the music economy to survive.

Indigenous peoples face additional barriers due to COVID, in terms of both health risks and economic wellbeing (Akee 2020; Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development 2020; United Nations 2020). Coronavirus infection rates on Native American reservations are four times higher than the national average in the U.S. (Rodriguez-Lonebear et. al. 2020). In Canada, Indigenous peoples are facing significant mental health challenges as a result of the pandemic (Wright 2020). First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples are also experiencing increased economic instability due to the coronavirus and are more likely to be “more vulnerable to the stresses and challenges that arise from measures to slow its [the coronavirus’s] spread, including closures of schools and businesses” (Arriagada, Hahmann, and O’Donnell 2020, 3).

Compounding these concerns, musicians report a higher-than-average concern about the pandemic (Coletto 2020).

Indigenous musicians and music industry professionals have worked for decades to gain listeners and recognition in mainstream venues (Scales 1999, Stobart et. al. 2016), and they have made tremendous inroads in the U.S. and Canada. For example, between 2008 and 2018, four winners of the flagship annual Polaris Prize have been Indigenous musicians. The Indigenous music industry is an emerging economic player. In 2018, it contributed \$78 million to

the Canadian economy (APTN 2019). However, disproportionate effects of COVID risk backsliding on health, economic, and professional gains made by Indigenous communities.

Context for festivals and Indigenous musicians' participation

Festivals have been credited with significant social effects: connecting people, developing audiences, linking emerging with established artists, even encouraging intercultural dialogue and participating in ongoing positive social change (Deventer 2015). Music festivals play social and economic roles for musicians and audiences, which has become especially important in an age of digital media (McKay 2015).

Physically distanced music making has become required during the global COVID pandemic. However, musicians have used remote collaboration previously. Often, this is a practical consideration that happens before music reaches an audience, such as when a producer shares a new beat through file transfer, allowing a rapper in a distant city to work with it immediately. It has also appeared occasionally for large-scale performances, as when Pauline Oliveros inspired a telemusicking experience for which musicians used Skype, iChat, iVisit, Google Docs, and cell phones (Borgo 2013: 323). This inspired future distanced performances that were not designed to replace the in-person. Yet, because of pandemic conditions, online music festivals have become a temporary substitute for live performance. Before elaborating further on this, it is helpful to detail the *sākihiwē* festival and Indigenous music festival performance specifically.

The *sākihiwē* festival began as Aboriginal Music Week, a festival comprised of concerts, workshops, and networking events. The Winnipeg-based festival occurs in a prominent location for the Indigenous music industry in Canada and internationally. The city, on Treaty 1 territory, is located at a cultural and geographic crossroads on the original lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples and the traditional territory of the Métis nation. The city and its vibrant and diverse urban Indigenous community is home to Indigenous broadcasters as well as international festivals that showcase Indigenous musicians. In 2018, the festival was renamed *sākihiwē*, meaning "love another" in Cree. The artist roster from *sākihiwē*, and its parent organization Aboriginal Music Manitoba, is used by broadcasters such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a go-to source for booking and airing Indigenous performers. The festival presents and supports emerging and experienced First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and international Indigenous musicians. Along with its far-reaching goals of supporting musicians and getting their music to new ears, the festival has a local focus, to "take music to less fortunate Indigenous families in Winnipeg so they can participate in the arts" (*sākihiwē* festival 2020a). The festival responds to structural inequities by expanding access to live professional popular music.

Concerns for Indigenous music festivals

Around the world, the concretization and commodification of Indigenous expressive practice is a risk in festivalized settings (Grant 2019; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Teves 2011; Harnish 2005). Scholars identify attendant concerns about co-optation. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui argues that official multiculturalism conceals ongoing forms of colonization. She describes a rural land-based stereotype of Indigenous peoples that ascribes to them “an almost theatrical display of alterity” (2012:99). In festival situations, these essentialized stereotypes of musico-ethnic difference risk being performed, naturalized, and sold. Canada is no stranger to this phenomenon. Debates about the inuksuk and Inuit throat singing being redeployed to represent Canada stretch back before the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, which used these cultural practices as branding markers.

The manner in which, and audiences for whom, Indigenous music festivals come together are impactful. Music festivals that prioritize Indigenous leadership and attend to internally diverse audiences can operate in cultural spaces where narratives are made and strategically choose more productive narratives for the groups they serve.

A self-described launchpad for Indigenous artists, *sākihiwē* creates a space in which artists sometimes choose to address stereotypes head-on, such as preconceived notions of what it means to appear Indigenous to others. At the 24 June 2020 online concert, rapper The OB explained that he identifies as urban and wears his hair short, but that he still grew up in a Cree household and feels a strong connection to the Opaskwayak Cree nation through his mother. He performed a song that responds to stereotyping, rapping frustration about “how they overlook us” in front of his camera set-up. At the same show, urban Pop artist Alexis Lynn talked about how some people say she doesn’t “look” Indigenous, as a blue-eyed, fair-skinned person, and that she appreciates being accepted by her Indigenous relatives anyway. Preconceived notions of phenotype, dress, and geographic location are just a few of many limiting beliefs that musicians call out together.

Performing urban Indigenous modernity can productively destabilize notions of rurality and past-ness that are often projected onto contemporary musicians (Goeman 2011; Przybylski 2015; Przybylski 2018, Tucker 2011). Festival director Alan Greyeyes talks about the twin goals to “educate” a general audience, and to “inspire Indigenous youth.” The first goal can be accomplished by creating a moment of encounter, in which settler or newcomer audiences can be surprised into confronting biases of which they may or may not have been aware. He explains, “when Canadians see and hear incredible music coming from Indigenous artists, I think that helps them realize that we are just as unique and gifted as their loved ones” (Greyeyes 2020). The second goal is accomplished through audience-artist interaction, as well as through

mentorship between emerging and established artists, a topic I will address in further detail in the following section.

Scholar and musician Leanne Betasamosake Simpson offers a model of how spoken and sung story acts to teach listeners, including youth. Simpson is a storyteller; her stories take forms that span intersecting mediums including verbally recounted narration, songs, short stories, poems, books, and essays. Simpson uses storytelling as action: “a decolonizing process with the power to recall, envision, and create modes of resurgence and contesting cognitive imperialisms” (Simpson 2016: 19). In festival performance, interweaving forms of storytelling are possible: artists tell stories through lyrics and non-verbal elements of the songs they create, through the stories they tell on stage, and through interactions with fellow musicians and audience members as stories unfold in real time.

Adjusting to online festival performance

The sākīhiwē festival changed in 2020 from a June in-person festival to a series of singer-songwriter roundtable concerts every Wednesday in June and July, and mentorship programming and more online concerts in August, culminating in full days of programming from 28 to 30 August. As the festival team explains, “We feel strongly that the arts have the ability to make the world a better place and the words and music of Indigenous people are needed now more than ever” (sākīhiwē festival 2020b).

sākīhiwē used Zoom for livestreamed concerts, which it shared through YouTube and Facebook Live. On each concert, three musicians, or small groups sheltering together, conducted a remote session with the festival’s technical consultant before the show broadcast. A host kept the show flowing smoothly and invited the musicians to take turns sharing songs. The hosts were Lindsay Knight, a Nehiyaw artist who has been rapping under her stage name Eekwol since the 1990s, and festival director Greyeyes. Audience members could comment live on Facebook or YouTube. Andrina Turenne, who performed on the 17 June 2020 concert, found that interaction between musicians helped fill the gap created when live shows stopped. Turenne had released a new song “When The Smoke Clears” in February of 2020, but the pandemic interrupted her usual opportunities to share new music with audiences (Turenne 2021; Turenne 2020a). “It was amazing to sit with artists and have conversations and reflections on our songs,” she explained (Turenne 2020b). Some musicians have adapted well to this round-robin performance style, making videoconferencing software feel personable in isolating times. Singer-songwriter William Prince joked with fellow musicians that he felt like they were on an episode of Hollywood Squares, turning the iconic Zoom gallery view into something almost intentional. His stage-Zoom banter enlivened a summer online concert.

Addressing inequities

Changes to festivals with the move online makes longstanding inequities stark. As long as access to reliable internet and connected devices is uneven, some listeners will consistently lose out. Greyeyes explained, “We can’t take the music to Indigenous families in Winnipeg this summer and I worry that these folks, who need the arts just as much as their Canadian counterparts, don’t have the same access to laptops, tablets, smartphones, and online content as other audiences” (Greyeyes 2020).

This division extends to artists, as well. Indigenous musicians living in remote areas face additional barriers. For example, Inuk musician Riit was unable to access the internet speeds required to participate in a livestream from her home in Nunavut, and parcel shipment speeds were also limited. Instead, for a summer 2020 show, she had to record at home, send a hard drive on a commercial plane, and have a manager pick it up at the Toronto airport. If highspeed internet were better distributed, opportunities would extend further, especially to Inuit and other remote artists. As soon as online performance becomes the prominent mechanism for hearing music, the digital divide exacerbates silences, keeping some voices from reaching many listeners.

For musicians who do make the move online, the internet is an unwelcoming space in many ways for nonwhite performers, women, and nonbinary people (Bartlett et. al. 2014; Noble 2018). Senior Artist Management Associate Vanessa Kuzina of Six Shooter Records, who works with Riit, noticed that contracts need special new clauses for online concerts. It is necessary to “ensur[e] that there is a way to moderate comments and audiences so that there isn't inappropriate behavior and bullying or sexist or racist commentary that's happening in the stream” (Kuzina 2020).

Musicians and/as audience: Indigenous music festivals into the future

Particularly when the mass of dancing bodies is physically absent, it is possible to recognize how much learning goes on between performers. Greyeyes explained, “the networking is the most important objective for a lot of Indigenous artists at a festival” (Greyeyes 2020). Indigenous performers continue to face structural barriers to funding and training support. Most Indigenous musicians in Canada are self-managed (APTN 2019); they rely on fellow performers and others in the industry as they make decisions in this changing performance scene. Musicians report significant barriers to professional development, and indicate this as a major goal. (Ibid. 59). While large-scale statistics have not been collected in the U.S., there are similarities in both barriers to professional development and desire for additional training (Cunningham 2007).

Even as music industry projections are grim, professionals are finding possibilities for some amount of financial gain and audience connection through online concerts (Hissong, Milliman, and Wang 2020). Given this reality, a summer 2020 sākīhiwē online songwriters concert is instructive: During the 22 July performance, participating singer-songwriters talked live—with each other and with the livestreaming audience—about their home studio recording setups. Sandra Sutter, Damase Elis, Alexis Lynn shared details about which microphones and interfaces they are using, and chatted about how they have approached the learning curve for being their own tech teams. As responsibilities shift from venue staff to musicians, peer learning will continue to be crucial. This extends through technical setup to contract writing, promotion, and, particularly for Indigenous popular musicians, image management. With pandemic conditions continuing, teaching and learning among musicians can help everyone prepare for an uncertain future.

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As an interdisciplinary scholar of popular music, **Liz Przybylski** specializes in hip hop practices in Canada and the United States, with a focus on Indigenous popular music. She is an Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of California, Riverside. A graduate of Bard College (BA) and Northwestern University (MA, PhD), Liz's research appears in *Ethnomusicology*, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, and *IASPM Journal*, among others. Her recent book, *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* (SAGE Publications, 2020) develops an innovative

model for hybrid on- and offline ethnography for the analysis of expressive culture. Recent and forthcoming publications analyze how sampling heritage music in Indigenous hip hop contributes to dialogues about cultural change in urban areas. Liz has also published on popular music pedagogy. She was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research with hip hop artists and music broadcasters in Winnipeg. In addition to her university teaching, Liz has taught adult and pre-college learners at the American Indian Center in Chicago and the Concordia Language Villages program of Concordia College in Bemidji. On the radio, Liz hosted the world music show “Continental Drift” on WNUR in Chicago and has conducted interviews with musicians for programs including “At the Edge of Canada: Indigenous Research” on CJUM in Winnipeg. She served as the Media Reviews Editor for the journal *American Music*. Liz served as the President of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Southern California and Hawaii Chapter and on the Society for Ethnomusicology Council. More information is available at <https://drlp.hcommons.org>.

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