

## Alanis Obomsawin

Unquestionably one of the most acclaimed Indigenous documentary filmmakers in the world, Alanis Obomsawin joined the National Film Board of Canada as a consultant in 1967 and created an extraordinary body of work. She reached a monumental achievement in 2018 by completing 51 documentaries within 51 years —including her landmark 1993 documentary *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. Alanis has received numerous international honours and in 2019 was named a Companion of the Order of Canada—its highest distinction.

But few people are aware that Alanis has also made an incredible contribution to Canada's music history.

She was born in 1932, on Abenaki territory in New Hampshire, to a hunting guide father and a mother with traditional healing knowledge. She spent the first year of her childhood in Odanak, Quebec, northeast of Montreal, before experiencing her first encounters with racism as the only First Nations child in the nearby school. Motivated by the lack of respect she experienced growing up, she became a storyteller, artist, educator and a prominent figure who brought about empowerment and inspiration for other Indigenous people.

In the early '60s she became a fixture within the folk music scene, including the Yorkville cafés in Toronto where she'd cross paths with other iconic singers like Leonard Cohen and Buffy Sainte-Marie. Alanis was known for her powerful storytelling, sharing traditional songs that were intertwined with her own compositions, inspired by her language, culture and history.

But Alanis didn't set out to become a music star. She once said, "I started to sing for very serious reasons. It was to tell stories to children." "The history in the classrooms was horrifying. Because it was designed in such a hateful way toward our people, I felt I needed to do something. The children needed to hear a different story."

And she certainly wasted no time in meeting those goals. Following a concert invitation to New York City's Town Hall in 1960, Alanis set out on a month-long, 64-stop tour of First Nation communities and residential schools, and even performed in prisons. By 1966 she was already being profiled on Canadian national television for her activism efforts.

Her first performance at the Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto turned into a nine-year gig lasting until the 1970s, and she appeared for several years on the Canadian version of *Sesame Street*.

It wasn't until 1984 that Alanis stepped into a recording studio, co-producing an album with the CBC that she called *Bush Lady*. The album explores her peoples' past from the 1700's through the 1950s, describing the exploitation of Indigenous women by non-Indigenous settler culture, the theft of Abenaki land, and the destruction of Indigenous communities. It dynamically intertwines her voice – from very sweet and delicate to haunting and heavy; singing in English, French and Waban-Aki - with a hand-drum, flute, oboe, violin and cello. It showcases a creative vision that was far ahead of its time. It ends with hope and inspiration from her ancestors.

When it was completed, Alanis wasn't satisfied with the production, particularly the title track, and had the album shelved until 1988. That year she managed to gain control of the master tapes and released her own revised mix on a limited basis, selling it on consignment to Montreal record shops. But she became frustrated marketing the record on her own and boxed up her remaining copies, where they sat

for decades gathering dust. For years *Bush Lady* was out of print and highly sought after by record collectors; I was lucky enough myself to find a prized copy.

Obomsawin gave her first concert in decades when she sang *Bush Lady* in its entirety at Le Guess Who? Festival in the Netherlands in 2017, receiving a standing ovation from the crowd. In 2018 *Bush Lady* was re-released on vinyl, as well as CD and online by Montreal-based Constellation Records, marking the album's 30th anniversary.

Alanis also performed the album in 2018 as part of the POP Montreal music festival. She told the *Gazette* after the concert, "What I sing about is not easy. I feel every word. I'm always worried I might cry."

Alanis has been widely recognized for her achievements. In addition to the Order of Canada, she is the recipient of a Governor General's Award, a National Aboriginal Achievement Award, and more than half a dozen honorary degrees.

Since she was a young woman, Alanis utilized the arts as an activist, rallying new assertions about the Indigenous consciousness; forging paths that never existed - for better understanding, for political rights, for deconstructing oppressive colonial history. Alanis was and still is one of those voices.

"My main interest all my life has been education," she says, "because that's where you develop yourself, where you learn to hate, or to love."

I'm David McLeod, curator of Speak Up! Click on more of my Curator's Comments to learn about other artists, like Alanis Obomsawin, whose music is a force for change. Miigwetch