

## Iskwe

Tansi, Boozhoo, Hello and Welcome to The National Music Centre' Speak Up! Exhibition, celebrating the voices of Indigenous music trailblazers past, present and future.

iskwē is known for her bold and adventurous sound, a combination of moody electronic textures, beat styles like trip-hop, and alternative rock influences.

Her mesmerizing live performances have gained a large following, particularly due to her voice: it shifts effortlessly between powerful and delicate, intense and emotional. Her live shows feature choreographed dancers, costume changes, visual projections, soundscapes, and powwow singers.

Originally from Winnipeg, Manitoba, iskwē has lived in Los Angeles, New York City, Toronto, and is currently based in Hamilton, Ontario. Her full traditional name is Waseskwan Iskew— which translates to “blue sky woman” in Cree. iskwē is of Cree, Dene, Métis and Irish descent, and is greatly inspired by her Indigenous heritage. Her politically-charged second album, 2017's, *The Fight Within*, includes songs “Will I See” and “Nobody Knows”, about Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and “Soldier,” which addresses environmental protection. Her song “Healers” opens with the line “This one is written for my people. They're still hurting.”

The album cemented her place in the music industry. It was nominated for a 2017 JUNO Award and was long-listed for a Polaris Music Prize. iskwe herself was the recipient of a 2017 REVEAL Indigenous Arts Award and 2017 West Coast Music Award for Electronic/Dance Artist of the Year.

Iskwe has used her platform to amplify Indigenous causes. About the hashtag “#AmINext’,” a social-media campaign initiated by Inuit social-justice activist Holly Jarrett, she expressed, “These are really heavy stories—and at the end of shows, more and more, I have people, mostly women, that will come up and share stories of their loved ones that haven't come home, or that will never be coming home.”

She rejuvenates her creative spirit with traditional ceremonies like the sun-dance and community activities and events; rejuvenation that is needed, she says, “As we try to get rid of this problem—the problem of us being viewed as disposable.” What's not widely known is that virtually every one of iskwē's songs is mixed with traditional Indigenous sounds or styles, showcasing the beauty of Indigenous culture.

During her 2018 Canada Day appearance on Parliament Hill, she performed “The Unforgotten”, a song that pays tribute to the resilience of Indigenous Peoples. She also performed “Nobody Knows”, a song written to honour Tina Fontaine, who was 15 when her body was found in Winnipeg's Red River, as well as the more than 1200 other missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada.

That year she also received a SOCAN Songwriting Prize nomination for the song "Healers". And her third album, *acākosīk*, released in late 2019, was a JUNO Award nominee for Adult Alternative Album of the Year at the 2020 JUNO Awards.

With a reputation for being outspoken, informed, and patient, she recognizes that non-Indigenous adults were taught very little about Indigenous peoples and that it's important for Indigenous voices and non-Indigenous voices to speak and work together.

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