

Juno winner Leela Gilday brings powerful, personal music to Aurora Cultural Centre



Musician Leela Gilday didn't spend lockdown quietly at home in the Northwest Territories.

While some people took to social media to post pictures of their lovingly-tended sourdough starters and the resulting loaves, the singer-songwriter took the opportunity to embark on a very personal journey: reclaiming the Dene language of her forebears.

The result was the Juno-winning album *North Star Calling*, the songs from which Ms. Gilday and her band will bring to the Aurora Armoury on Thursday, April 7, in a concert hosted by the Aurora Cultural Centre.

"I am absolutely filled with excitement," says Gilday on embarking on a tour after not being able to perform before in-person audiences for the past two years. "It has been a while since I had my band back and played an indoor venue other than my own living room, so this is a big step for me to head back on the road. I feel a bit anxious but that feeling has been superseded by the feeling of anticipation and excitement to actually get to perform before live audiences and have that beautiful musical exchange."

Hers is a unique voice being brought to Aurora by the Cultural Centre.

As a Dene, Gilday is focused on creating an authentic experience in her own voice which reflects her roots in the north.

"Part of the journey of [reclaiming my language] has been for me to write songs," she says. "I have always used phrases in the past, but being a Dene language learner, it wasn't within my power to embark on telling full stories. I have written and will be performing a selection of songs that are in my language and I have written those with collaborators who are fluent in the language, so it is not just me with my rudimentary Dene putting things together."

"I am a person from the north, I am a woman really conveying authentic experiences in my own voice. It has been a very powerful way to reach people, not only to introduce people to new perspectives, but that journey of self-discovery and cultural reclamation, that journey of resilience and courage and overcoming fear and obstacles, of oppression, and, of course, all the things that have been revealed to the mainstream public eye in the last 15 or 20 years with residential schools."

"When I sing in my language, it is kind of a powerful shortcut to those experiences."

Through her work, Gilday is reclaiming a language she never spoke as a child. Although her mother didn't speak English until the age of 10, it wasn't a language that was ever found in the home. Receiving such positive feedback from family members as she not

only embarked on this journey but embraced the creative inspiration it provided, has been nothing short of validation.

[Feedback from community members] probably means more than just somebody who is witnessing this journey for the first time, she explains. It does take courage to reclaim your language, it is very emotionally-fraught, and it is a very powerful thing, but you also put yourself out there. To have positive feedback from family members and community members who are fluent, I can't tell you how important it is to me.

There is a whole worldview imbedded in the actual words. Writing a song [in the Dene language] is not second nature to me, it takes me a while to understand how to convey things and it is interesting how it has shifted my storytelling capabilities and my perspective. I feel as though I can say a lot more and convey a lot more emotions and experiences through very short sentences. It has really been an amazing journey.

To be a part of the journey and be transported by the music to what the Cultural Centre describes as the rugged landscapes and vibrant culture that shaped Ms. Gilday, tickets for the April 7 concert are on sale now. For tickets and further information, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca.

Showtime is 7.30 p.m.

By Brock Weir
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