

Interview with Saali from Saali and The Ravenhearts

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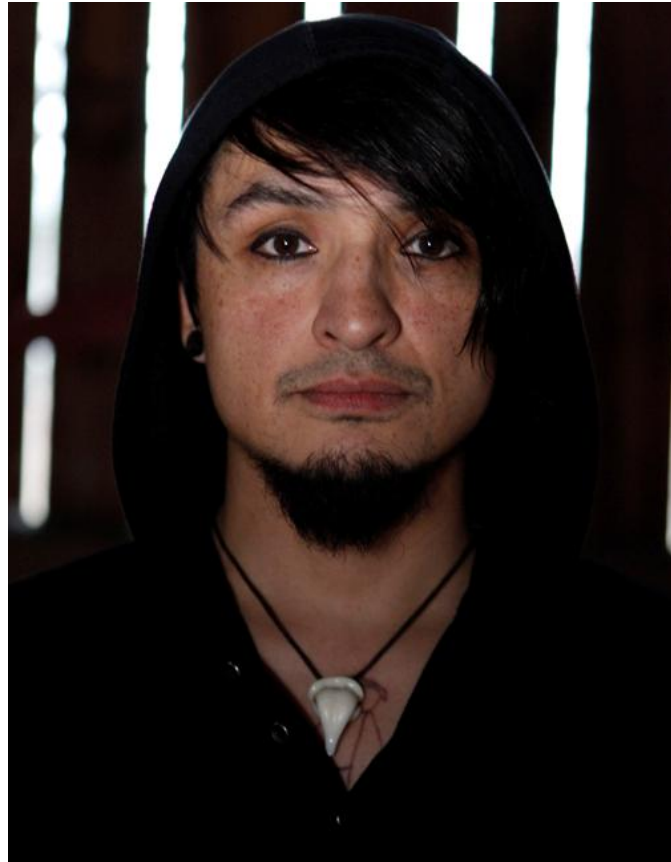


Figure 1: Charles "Saali" Keelan.

Saali and The Ravenhearts, led by Inuk singer-songwriter Charles "Saali" Keelan, perform original music in both English and Inuktitut. Based in Montreal, Saali and The Ravenhearts are recording their first album this winter.

Saali, a multi-instrumentalist, was born in Iqaluit, Nunavut, but grew up in Quaataq, Quebec, a small village of 350 people. He released his first album, *Chucky*, in 2006. His second album, *?*, was nominated Best Rock Album of the Year at the 2012 Aboriginal People's Choice Music Awards.

I met Saali in September 2014 in Toronto, and conducted this interview via e-mail throughout October. Interviews were conducted over e-mail and private messages through Facebook, as this was the most convenient form of communication.

My intention for this interview was to provide some insight into the life and creative process of an Inuit singer-songwriter. Therefore, all answers given by Saali are in their original context, in order to

maintain his voice and direct words. Minor editorial changes (spelling and grammar) were made, and any ambiguous wording has been edited, with Saali's permission.

Saali acknowledges, "Yes, my grammar and spelling ain't the best, and I know. I even skip words when I write. I write like how I sing sometimes, just with images and story lines and a few words that stick out in between."

Raj Singh: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Charles "Saali" Keelan: I was born in Iqaluit, Nunavut, but at the time it was still N.W.T. Our village, Killiniq (Port Burwell), was an island that I come from, that got closed down by the government in 1978. Its location is at the top, between Labrador (which my bloodline comes from – Jararuses, my mother's maiden name) and the province of Quebec. But all the islands belonged to N.W.T., so they took

care of us. And when it got closed down, we got moved and scattered across the Ungava Bay, and we ended up in Quaqtq. Beautiful place, much like Killiniq, great people there. That was where most of my upbringing was.

RS: Did you always know that you were going to be a musician?

CSK: As a kid (around age 7), I would play outside in Quaqtq and sing Buddy Holly songs, and you know how kids are. Everyone started calling me “Buddy Holly”, teasing me about it. So that was the end of my musical career, ha ha. But I started playing guitar when I was 23 and soon after realized I could sing as well as play, and that’s where it started.

RS: Did you grow up singing and playing instruments?

CSK: I started on drums, actually, at around 22. I ... couldn’t really write or express what I could hear from that, so I tried something else that was close and handy. The guitar.

RS: What influences your music?

CSK: My writing seems to depend on what I am thinking about, either in the moment or something I have been thinking about for a while. I listen to my surroundings and mostly look over the horizon to feel what the song is saying, what does the music feel like it’s saying. It feels as though it is passing by up in the air, or through my feet. If you don’t capture a song, someone else does, and you are left with a blank page.

So, the land, what you hear in the silent breeze. Going hunting or just being out on the land is what I long for, and it stays with me. Growing up with my grandfather or uncles and any hunters bringing me hunting is also a big influence. The gifts the land fills you with. The music speaks for itself, just listen. Interpret what you hear. Everything is alive. It is healing to a point where you can grow and move forward. Knowing what is happening around you. Being aware, educating yourself.

RS: You mentioned the land and family, but are you drawn to any other element that influences you?

CSK: I like to look out into the horizon, into the open. Growing up and being near the sea along the shorelines or riding the tundra always brought some sort of hum. That is what mostly speaks to me, the loudness of the calm and silent world. Everything is alive, look closely and how everything grows. Like trees, which are the most fascinating for me, growing straight out of the ground as it holds onto the earth deep underground. And what they have brought to us humans.

RS: What other types of music and musicians influence you?

CSK: I have listened to many, many kinds of music, and still do. It’s an interesting world of music out there. The band that really got me back into music and feeling alive and staying alive is a band called Tool.

Aenima saved my life.

I put the album in a CD player when I was about 19. A friend had given me the album, and I was going to kill myself that night. I ended up sitting in my room with a rope, and played it, and started listening to everything. Lyrics and all. The sun came up, [the CD player] had looped the album all night. Then my mom opened the door in the morning with a smile on her face. Magic!

RS: I’ve seen you perform, and it seems like you’re at home onstage. What is it about being a musician and performing that makes you feel at home?

CSK: Performing and sharing songs and trying to convey what you are saying and feeling in a song is a different world. For me, this is very recent, how I am now on stage. And the reason for that is because I started really believing in myself and I just let go. No one will do you, so go out and be you. How you will bring a song, how you will sing it. And what helps most is having great musicians behind me so that I can be free on stage.

RS: I’ve also seen you rehearse and perform with your shoes off – why is this important to you? Does it connect you to where you are?

CSK: It depends on the place, but the past summer, I have gone barefoot a lot wherever it may be, in a plane. Out on the land. Near a fire. The more I felt good about everything, the more I wanted to feel the earth.

RS: You talked about hunting with your family and longing for that; do you ever express this longing and memories of hunting in the past in your music?

CSK: Yes, it’s there, especially in one of my songs called “Qannilirtuq” (“It’s Snowing”), thinking of a place near Quaqtq called “Nuvuk” that the hunters go to for whales in the springtime ... but it really is mostly all across the sea edge ... when the snowflakes are big and coming down slowly, you see families and children harvesting the meat. It’s a beautiful thing to see.

RS: Do you ever expect your audience to pick up on what you are trying to depict in your music? Should we be able to hear the land in your music?

CSK: Everyone has their own interpretation of song. A moment where you go into the song, and reach a

happy peaceful place. Or intensity of a song. When you feel it onstage, you just hope your energy can reach out and give the audience a piece of your world and how you see things. It's been good in some of our last performances, with the kind of reception we get ... I don't think anyone really knows how to react or what to say about it. Most seem to be surprised.

RS: Is composing different for you living in Montreal than it would be if you were closer to where you grew up?

CSK: Composing for me works pretty much anywhere; mornings are good for that. Fresh. And being alone is important. When I compose, only within the last couple years have I really let go, I stopped trying to sound a certain way, or like the bands I idolize ... and just let it go. What is the music trying to say. What does it feel like, just listening closely and being open and free to say whatever you want in a song. It doesn't matter what others will think. It's like sometimes ... an energy or something ... is passing by in the air or rumbling at the soles of your feet and it's up to you to translate that into song. If you don't capture a song, someone else does, and you are left with a blank page. At times I would have an idea and not bring it, then you hear it in someone else's song ...

RS: What's the difference between composing songs in Inuktitut versus composing songs in English?

CSK: The music usually dictates what direction I will take ... but sometimes, I have poetry written laying around and it will find its way into the music. You dissect it and fit it in too so it flows. Inuktitut is trickier.

RS: When you sing in Inuktitut, are you singing songs that are well known or are you composing them?

CSK: I write all the songs.

RS: Why is singing in Inuktitut important to you?

CSK: Sometimes it just comes out in Inuktitut; before I would translate a song and change it into Inuktitut or English.

But the ones that relate most to the North or where the soul of the song comes from is just better expressed in Inuktitut.

RS: Does it matter to you that your audience may not understand what you're singing about when you sing in Inuktitut?

CSK: No, I don't let that get in the way. They are there to see you and listen to you. And I have had many people already come up to me and express what they felt even when they didn't understand what

I was singing about. When you are strong and confident and your delivery is there, people can feel that.

RS: Do you ever feel the need to express your heritage or identity through your music?

CSK: When you are confident in yourself, whoever you are, wherever you come from, I think that will always be expressed in whatever you are doing.

RS: Do you feel a responsibility to your community?

CSK: Responsibility? Not really, but you want to show that you can do whatever you want and be what you want. You want to bring hope and love to home. Respect what it gave you. No matter what it is, or whatever has happened. You must always grow. Educate yourself. Love yourself and know who you are and know where you come from. It's a tough world. If you can give just one person some strength through music, that means so much.

RS: Do you feel pressure from your family, community, or yourself to remain true to your heritage and not stray too far from Inuit culture?

CSK: No. I am who I am and who I choose to be. Everyone has their own opinions on how you should be or how you should carry yourself. I'm just being myself. When you really think about it, everyone has their own lives to live. To survive. And everyone likes to say a little here and there, but it's not like you are on their minds constantly. I have my wonderfully talented and beautiful children. This is all I know, music, and I want them to be proud. It's been a long and frustrating couple years. A lot of hard times. But I haven't just given up on it. And I know I can do this. You always want the best for your children, and that's what drives you. You can't just stop and give up. You have to fight, no matter what, to keep going. They see me, and my daughter got to watch me this summer. She listens to my music, and she loved it all. And my son, he's his own man, they both are strong as individuals. There [have] been many days of having to be patient for all who are close to me.

RS: Your second solo album was nominated for Best Rock Album of the Year at the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Choice Music Awards; how does this make you feel?

CSK: What I have done in previous projects or even this one ... nominations or recognition ... success, or anything, for that matter ... if you do it well, and it's what you want, and you carry yourself being humble along the way, what you deserve will come. If the music is there and you put your work into it and you know it's good and strong, you can't go wrong. Everyone just wants to feel alive and excited and happy.

If you are successful doing music, congrats, 'cause it is a really hard industry to have any kind of success.

RS: How has your community reacted to your success?

CSK: Reaction? That is yet to be seen. You hear things. That's about it. It has been an interesting year.

RS: What made you decide to be in a band versus being a solo musician?

CSK: I knew the songs would be where they need to be with a full band. I could hear it, the songs are already good on their own. It took a while to get what I wanted, and the energy is there now.

RS: Saali and The Ravenhearts seems to have great chemistry. How did you meet your bandmates? How long have you been together?

CSK: The lineup in the band has been together with the new rhythm section for about six months now, Marcel Desormeaux and Jayme Tartaglia. They bring such good energy. And the keys, Denis (I call him "the professor"), that dude has been putting his heart and professionalism into this band, he came out of retirement for this project. That says a lot. And speaks only when it is really required. Johnny Vegas on guitar brought these guys in. Little by little, only when I have grown and understood more how things work for music and this industry ... when they know I am ready, they bring more and more of themselves to the project. I am very lucky to have these guys with me. And they all love the project and the songs.

RS: Do you and your bandmates have day jobs?

CSK: All the guys in the band do, but this is all I have.

RS: How did you come up with "Saali and The Ravenhearts"?

CSK: The album is not done yet, so I am not too sure about having "The Ravenhearts" name stick. But ravens are fascinating, and it seemed to find its way in. A previous drummer I worked with suggested "The Ravenhearts" when we were brainstorming. I still like it, though. I love hearts and I love ravens. It just might be "Saali".

RS: What's the biggest difference for you between being a solo act vs. being in a band and working with four other musicians?

CSK: I did the solo thing already. And to bring what I could hear in my head with a band is a much better feeling, more power. But the songs are already good on their own, so it is tricky getting what you need. Not overplaying, not overdoing. Listen and feel it

out, have fun with it, is what I tell the guys. And you can see them enjoy themselves ... I'm always open to ideas, so it's very freeing.

RS: How has your creative process changed now that you're in a band, when compared to being a solo singer-songwriter?

CSK: Chemistry. You can't be worried on stage if your bandmate is able and will be on the same level. No drama. When the right energy is there and everyone is on the same page, you can feel that in the music.

RS: How do you all manage to maintain a music career, a widening fan base (that are eagerly awaiting an album) and daily life?

CSK: Not much you can do, except keep at 'er.

RS: What are your future goals? As Saali and as Saali and The Ravenhearts?

CSK: Whatever the future holds. Just spread your wings and go where the warmth is ... where you don't need to overexert yourself.

RS: You've recorded an album as Saali and The Ravenhearts, but have yet to release it; what can we expect to hear?

CSK: The release of the album is very soon ... the music is there. Listen. Just listen. The music speaks for itself.

RS: Can you describe the growth of this album? How have you grown as an individual from your previous album to this one? How has your music changed?

CSK: It has helped me become who I am now, what I knew I could bring, the message in the songs will be heard and understood. It's letting go, moving forward and sometimes floating in air. Music.

RS: If there was one thing you could say to people [who] haven't heard your music, what would you say?

CSK: Wander.

RS: If there was one thing you could say to your fans, what would that be?

CSK: Dream.

RS: If you could tell people one thing about Inuit culture and music, what would it be?

CSK: Humanize.

Listen to Saali at www.soundcloud.com/saali-music or www.youtube.com/user/Killinik