



A JOIK RENAISSANCE

THE MUSIC OF THE SÁMI PEOPLE, WHICH HAS BEEN AROUND FOR CENTURIES, IS EXPERIENCING A RESURGENCE THANKS TO CONTEMPORARY MUSICIANS WHO ARE BLENDING THE MELODIC CHANTING WITH MAINSTREAM GENRES LIKE POP, ROCK AND JAZZ.

BY TAYLOR HUGO

FOR THE SÁMI, the indigenous people of the Sápmi region, which spans the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, storytelling through song has been a part of their culture for centuries. Referred to as *joik*, this melodic chanting is used to describe everything from emotions and landscapes to animals and people.

“It’s a lot more than music,” explains Frode Fjellheim, a Norwegian musician, composer and joiker, as well as a professor at Nord University in Levanger, not far from Trondheim, where he lives. “It’s a way of communicating, a way of expressing feelings often combined with storytelling. If you tell a story and mention your grandmother, she would actually have a joik. If you want to tell your children

directions, there are joiks to describe the rivers, the mountains not using words—just sounds and syllables. It’s sort of an extension of the language that was used in daily life.”

As Sámi National Day approaches on February 6, learn more about the history of joik, and meet some of the musicians who are responsible for its recent resurgence.

A COMPLICATED PAST

As a predominantly oral

practice, there aren’t many written records of joik. Legend has it that the Sámi people got these chants from Arctic fairies and elves. The oldest joiks are believed to have been recorded by priests and missionaries in the 1700s and 1800s, making it one of the earliest vocal traditions in Europe.

Joiking is “characterized by a special vocal technology that utilizes nearly the whole range of the human natural vocal potential, and was originally

without instrumental accompaniment,” according to a 2018 article published in the “International Journal of Circumpolar Health” that studied the link between joik and the health of the Sámi people. “The melodies with regular rhythmic and melodic patterns could often be freely played with and improvised on” to express “anything at the joiker’s perception at the given moment. [...] According to joikers you do not joik about something, you joik the thing itself. [...] It can be a way of recalling something or someone, or of giving a musical name to something or someone.”

In the past, joik had also been used as part of healing rituals and to achieve an altered state of consciousness, which could explain why it was thought to be a form of sorcery in the early 17th century. As Christianity swept through Norway, there was mounting pressure from the Norwegian government for the Sámi people to assimilate. This meant they were banned from speaking their own language, and joiking was punishable by death until the beginning of the 18th century. By that point, the art of joiking had disappeared from much of the Sápmi region.

Growing up, Mari Boine was taught that joik was the work of the Devil. “My parents, especially, chose to believe all the lies the colonizers and their priests



Mari Boine’s music is inspired by and infused with her Sámi roots. Her music blends rhythms of jazz, folk and rock. Boine is an activist who has worked tirelessly for the recognition and preservation of the indigenous Sámi culture. mariboine.no



PHOTOS TOP TO BOTTOM BY GREGOR HOHENBERG, HEIKO JUNGE / NTB

PHOTO BY MARZENA SKUBATZ



Hailing from Tana in northern Norway, Ella Marie Hætta Isaksen combines joik and Sámi lyrics with modern pop and electronica sounds. She also performs with her band ISÁK. Follow her on Instagram @ellamarihi

Platinum-award winning music trio KEiiNO made their debut in 2019. Their sound combines dance-pop with Nordic folk and joik. keiino.com



St. Olav for her artistic diversity.

“My culture, my ancestral heritage, is my breath,” says Boine. “I am an artist, one who carries the old songs and the old wisdom, and one who carries the

told them about our musical heritage,” she says. “They accepted the demonization of the joik and, of course, were horrified when their daughter started to perform these songs.”

Nevertheless, Boine felt she had no choice but to become a musician. “The music chose me. I just had to go where it took me,” says the singer-songwriter, whose voice has become synonymous with joiking since she made her debut in the 1980s. Boine has since released 14 CDs, received numerous awards for her work and was even appointed a knight in the Royal Norwegian Order of

torch given by the ancestors with the flame that should never go out.”

ATWIST ON TRADITION

In recent years, Sámi culture and joiking have seen a revival, led by people like Boine who don’t want their heritage to disappear. The Sámi Act was officially added to the Norwegian Constitution in 1987, safeguarding the Sámi people’s language, culture and way of life. Joik is now taught in schools from kindergarten through college, celebrated at festivals, and incorporated into mainstream musical genres like jazz, rock and pop.

For example, KEiiNO—a trio that combines dance-pop with Nordic folk and joik—placed sixth while representing Norway in the 2019 Eurovision contest with their song

“Spirit in the Sky,” which also earned a Song of the Year nomination at the Norwegian Grammys. Elle Márjá Eira, from a Kautokeino-based reindeer herding family—a common profession among the Sámi—emerged from the small municipality of 3,000 to perform her electronic-joik music on a global stage, both solo and as part of the three-piece band Snoweye alongside Led Zeppelin’s John Paul Jones.

“Despite the continuous battles to maintain our languages and cultural identity, there has been a positive change in recent years. Today, it feels safe to be Sámi,” 25-year-old South Sámi musician Marja Mortensson told Visit Norway. “It’s like the [joiking] traditions are being revitalized. There is a growing awareness, especially among people in my generation.”

But this musical tradition isn’t just experiencing a resurgence in its native Scandinavia. It’s spreading to the U.S., too. If you’ve seen the 2013 Disney box-office smash “Frozen” and its 2019 sequel “Frozen II,” you’ve likely heard joiking, even if you didn’t realize it.

As Disney was working on the Hans Christian Andersen-inspired tale about Queen Elsa and her sister Princess Anna, they reached out to Fjellheim to reimagine one of his existing compositions for the film.

The resulting song, “Vuelie,” is part of the opening scene.

“I have written a lot of music for choir inspired by joik. One of these pieces got the attention of Disney when they were searching for Nordic elements in the first ‘Frozen’ movie. I made a new version for the film called ‘Vuelie,’ which is actually the South Sámi word for joik,” Fjellheim says. “It was a pleasure to work together with Disney, and it was a fantastic opportunity to spread the music to quite a broad audience.”

After the first “Frozen” movie drew some criticism for cultural appropriation, Disney signed a contract with Sámi parliament representatives ahead of the production of “Frozen II.” This agreement stated that Disney would accurately and respectfully portray

the indigenous culture, as well as produce a version of “Frozen II” in the Sámi people’s native language, called “Jiknon II.”

While today’s musicians are careful to respect the roots of joik, these types of collaborations are essential to its survival. “If a tradition should be kept alive, it must always develop in some way,” says Fjellheim. “I think that’s what’s happening today. There’s a lot of new ways of combining joik with other music. Also, traditionally, joik was used just within the family and in a very small space, but now it has also moved to the concert stages where it’s being performed and recorded. When it does survive this far, I guess it will survive for another thousand years. Time will tell.”

Elle Márjá Eira is a multi-talented artist, composer, director and producer from Kautokeino. ellemarja.com



PHOTOS: TOP TO BOTTOM BY JACK GUEZ / GETTY IMAGES; JORN KRISTENSEN

PHOTOS: TOP TO BOTTOM BY CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; JARLE FJELDSTEN



FAST FACTS ABOUT JOIK

This unique form of cultural expression for the Sámi people is not just about music.

- Joik is one of Europe’s oldest vocal traditions.
- For a long time, joik was forbidden. The Sámi Act was officially added to the Norwegian Constitution in 1987, safeguarding the Sámi people’s language, culture and way of life.
- Joik is a melodic chanting used to describe everything from emotions and landscapes to animals and people.
- Joik is about expression of spirit. There’s no one way to do it.



To listen to five Sámi joik songs from Karasjok, Norway, check out bit.ly/2VZ4evi