

THE MAGAZINE OF THE ALASKA HUMANITIES FORUM

SPRING 2019

FORUM

Behind the Scenes of *WE UP*
Climate Change and the Human Condition
"Home" as Memories
Two Decades of Sister School Exchange

FORUM



Kim Jacobsen, a.k.a. KimOJax, a hip-hop artist from Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland, is one of the subjects of the film *WE UP: Indigenous Hip-Hop of the Circumpolar North*. See page 20. Photo by Michael Conti

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SCENES BEHIND THE SCENES

GRANT REPORT

Stories from the production of the Forum-supported film
WE UP: Indigenous Hip-Hop of the Circumpolar North

By Priscilla Naunġaġiaq Hensley

1 TREES UPON TREES



Photo by Bárð Grape

THERE ARE A LOT OF TREES between Manndalen, Norway and Aanaar/Inari, Finland. We made the drive in the summers of 2017 and 2018, traversing the distance from Riddu Riddu, an indigenous people’s music festival in northern Norway, to Aanaar/Inari, a Sámi village in northern Finland with a high concentration of rappers.

Along the way, we shot the passing forests out the window of our car whenever the light seemed right. All this “B-roll” of trees led to the opening sequence of the film, which is set to throat singing by Canadian Inuit Alexia Galloway-Alainga, one of the performers in the Circumpolar Hip-Hop Collab, a live collaboration of indigenous hip-hop artists from Canada, Alaska, Greenland, Norway, and Finland that closed the main stage at Riddu Riddu last July.

One shot that didn’t make it into the opening was a man with a rifle we spotted taking aim into a herd of reindeer from the side of a two-lane road in 2017. We presumed he was a poacher. Several times he put the stock of his rifle to his shoulder, but in the end he didn’t take the shot (it might have been the camera that dissuaded him).

ABOUT WE UP

WE UP: Indigenous Hip-Hop of the Circumpolar North is a feature-length documentary film produced by the Anchorage Museum. *WE UP* profiles Northern indigenous hip-hop artists while exploring shared themes in their work, such as the challenges of decolonization, pride in self and culture, deconstruction of stereotypes, celebration of endangered Native languages, and spiritual connections to Northern homelands.

The Alaska Humanities Forum was an early supporter of the project with a \$1,250 mini-grant in 2017 for cinematography at Nuuk Nordisk, a youth culture festival in Nuuk, Greenland. The Forum then awarded *WE UP* a \$10,000 general grant in 2018 for editing, sound design, and additional cinematography in Fairbanks and Dot Lake.

We’re also grateful for support from Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc.; The CIRI Foundation; The Surdna Foundation; and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

— Priscilla Naunġaġiaq Hensley,
co-director of *WE UP: Indigenous Hip-Hop of the Circumpolar North*



2 THE “WILD BUNCH” OPENING

Photo by Bárd Grape

THE MUSIC VIDEO-STYLE SCENE at the beginning of the film was inspired by the iconic “Long Walk” from director Sam Peckinpah’s 1969 Western *The Wild Bunch*, right down to the crunch of gravel beneath their feet. It features the three artists local to Aanaar/Inari, a Sámi village in northern Finland—Ailu Valle, Mikkal Morottaja (AMOC), and a transplant from Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland, Aqqalu Berthelsen (Uyarakq)—and a song they built for the Circumpolar Collab at Riddu Riddu.

We filmed it across two evenings, quite late. The street’s residents were equally irritated and curious. On the second night, after the ninth or so take, one elderly woman opened a window to call out a question in Northern Sámi. Ailu Valle translated: “She wants to know, ‘What is it that you are searching for?’”

A good question for any filmmaker.

WE UP screened at the Skábmagovat Indigenous People’s Film Festival in January 2019. Seeing this intro come up on a big screen in their beautiful Sajos cultural center felt both gently perfect and delightfully thrilling. At this point it’s hard to imagine what this film would have been without those particular artists and their community.



Photo by Priscilla Naungagiq Hensley

“WHAT IS IT
THAT YOU ARE
SEARCHING FOR?”



Photo by Michael Conti

LOOK CLOSELY and you'll see a plastic band on the right wrist of Athabascan rapper Julian Lillie, a.k.a. Bishop Slice, throughout his screen time in *WE UP*. Not long after our crew landed in Fairbanks the day before summer solstice last June, Bishop called to say he'd be a couple hours late for a scheduled interview—because his daughter had just been born, a few weeks earlier than expected. That's a hospital wristband he's wearing. Bishop's grandmother founded the village of Dot Lake, which is about 60 miles west of Delta Junction. It was so important to him that he take us to visit Dot Lake that we proceeded with the planned road trip, despite his newly becoming a father. Midnight on the solstice found us filming with Bishop at his grandmother's fish camp on the Tanana River, where he delivered a powerful a cappella version of his track "Bibles and Bullets," sitting among friends in the camp's smokehouse.

WE UP / SCREENINGS

World premiere, December 2018
Anchorage International Film Festival

Norwegian premiere, January 2019
Tromsø International Film Festival

Finnish premiere, January 2019
Skábmagovat Indigenous People's Film Festival

Screenings at Eklutna
and Kenai/Soldotna, Alaska

Upcoming:

Canadian premiere at South Indian
Lake, Ontario

Screenings at Riddu Riđđu in 2019

THE VERY FIRST INTERVIEW and performance we filmed for *WE UP* was in June 2017 with Tlingit breakdancer Bri McMillen, a.k.a. B-Girl SnapOne, at her friend's dance studio in downtown Anchorage. Bri danced until she was shaking with fatigue, at one point colliding with the camera while executing a spin. In one section of the interview that didn't make it into the final cut of the film, she pointed out the close similarity of "the stab," a foundational breakdancing move, and the One Arm Reach, a competitive event at the World Eskimo Indian Olympics, and Native Youth Olympics. "That's why I like breakdancing," she said. "It really shows how everyone in the world is related based on similar moves and movements that we come up with."



4 WE'RE ALL RELATED

Photo by Jeff Cunningham

WE FILMED an interview and performance with Allison Warden (AKU-MATU) late one night in June 2017 in the top floor gallery of the Anchorage Museum, where she'd recently had a two-month installation and performance piece called "Unipkaagusiksuguvik." As part of that piece Warden had developed a slideshow of altered historical images. Our concept was to film her rapping with the slideshow as a backdrop, but we struggled to find the right frame, until we tried standing Allison on a bench in the center of the gallery. Sometimes the simplest fixes work best.

5 SETTING UP THE SHOT



Photo by Jeff Cunningham

ÁNNA-KATRI HELANDER describes herself in the film as a dancer and “hip-hop-headed artist.” We first met Helander when she was Riddu Riddu’s Young Artist of the Year in 2017. The following summer, she was back with a hip-hop-based theatrical dance piece, “Aindás,” (“still here” in her Sámi language), and an outdoor installation protesting governmental infringement upon Sámi hunting rights.

We filmed the interview with Helander at the home of a Sámi elder who lives near the Riddu Riddu festival site. This was arranged by Norwegian cinematographer Bård Grape—who we met by chance during our first visit to Riddu after we rented a cabin on his family’s farm through Airbnb. Sometimes in filmmaking, you make your own luck, and as luck had it, our Airbnb host not only turned out to be a veteran cinematographer, but also possessed deep knowledge about the area. It seemed like Bard knew everyone in Manndalen. He was the perfect addition to our team in 2018.

The house where we filmed Ánna-Katri was owned by a Sámi woman who told us stories of Nazi occupation during World War II while serving us tea and cookies. Earlier that day Bård insisted we forego the festival food stands for what he termed “real food.” This turned out to be bowls of reindeer soup made by a Sámi woman who sets up a lavvu (traditional tent) each year. It was just like tuttu soup at home, and we enjoyed a quiet sit while it was prepared.

“WE’RE STILL HERE AND NOT HAVING IT ANYMORE.”

- ÁNNA-KATRI HELANDER



Photo by David Holthouse

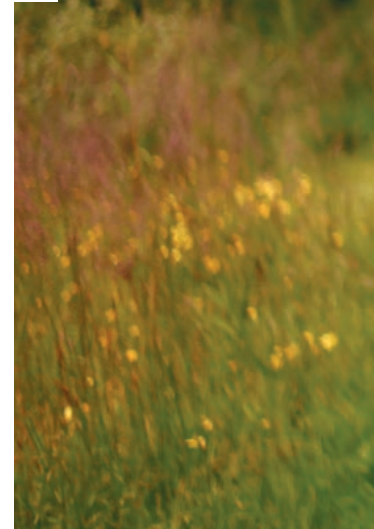


Photo by Bård Grape

7 CONNECTIVE THREAD

IN HER JUNE 2017 interview with us, Allison Warden pines for a northern, indigenous hip-hop concert. Fast forward to July 2018 and she’s walking around the festival grounds at Riddu Riddu with Kim Jacobsen, a.k.a. KimOJax, a “hip-hopper” from Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland. It’s the night before they perform with the Circumpolar Hip Hop Collab. It was really something to see the artists bond, create, and perform on a tight schedule.

As Allison said that night, “We were already on the same wavelength.” And KimOJax marveled at their impending performance on “this big-ass stage!”



8 TEACHING MOMENTS

FINALLY, ONE THING we learned is not to offer to put mosquito repellent on a Sámi rapper's hat. There will be scorn. ■



Photo by Priscilla Naungagiaoq Hensley