

CD Review

Nordic Woman

Deeyah⁺ (Norway) Reprinted with Permission

In my mouth the words are melting, from my lips the tones are gliding, from my tongue they wish to hasten; When my willing teeth are parted, when my ready mouth is opened, songs of ancient wit and wisdom, hasten from me not unwilling.



Introduction

So begins the ancient Finnish text, the *Kalevala*, depicting not just the ancient wisdom of folksong, but the physical pleasure of singing, the overwhelming urge to express oneself. From ancient times, women of the Nordic countries have expressed their thoughts, desires and emotions, and told their histories through song.

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Having been born and raised in Oslo, Norway, it is a source of deep personal pleasure that the first release on my new label *Fuuse Mousiqi* should be Nordic Woman. This album is the first step in my Woman music series; a union of a global journey through traditional music forms as expressed through women's voices, and an exploration of women's experiences and circumstances in our world today – and the barriers and challenges they continue to face.

My own values have been formed around the commitment to progressive social justice which underpins the unique identity of Nordic states; my firm support for universal human rights has been informed through living in a society rooted in these principles. Growing up surrounded by these values has instilled a profound and sustaining belief in the prospect of a better world for women, whose voices may be unheard or silenced, and who continue to experience discrimination on a global scale.

Like most daughters of immigrant families, my personal identity springs from a dual heritage, with intense feelings of love, respect and connectedness towards both cultures, and gratitude for the perspectives this fusion has given me. The face of the 'Nordic woman' is becoming increasingly diverse, and will continue to do so, as women from various backgrounds introduce rich new facets into our collective identity. It is my profound hope that the extension of the principles of inclusion and individual human rights will remain at the heart of the full expression of progressive Nordic values - in order that women of all racial, cultural or ethnic identities can fulfill their yearning for self-expression, equality of opportunity, protection and human dignity and rights.

This anthology forms a tribute to the region of my birth, and an expression of my profound appreciation for Nordic societies, and to those women who have played such strong role in shaping their unique form. My life, as both artist and activist, has been inspired by Nordic women's successes in gaining an unparalleled status in society and culture within some of the most equitable societies in the contemporary world.

The inspiration and purpose behind *Fuuse Mousiqi* is to explore the intersections of self-expression and activism, realizing that every act of self-expression has a political and universal dimension; that whether raised in speech or song, our voices are the source of our power.

Folksong has a profound power to embody and transmit hidden histories, including women's histories, rooted in the soil; vocalizing the experiences and the identities of people often distant from the sources of political and economic power. Tradition may be restrictive, operating as a means for confining the aspirations of the disadvantaged, but traditions also contain shadow histories of resistance and subversion against established power. Moving into our shared future, while we must by necessity break with some traditions, the powerful voices

of our foremothers cannot be forgotten. Their experiences and their struggles are part of our history, their hopes and dreams make our present possible, and their strength, wisdom and sacrifices will resonate into our future.

Traditional music speaks to the deepest levels of cultural belonging, reaching to the very heart and soul of the identity and experience of a people. Women, often considered the carriers of culture, have long transmitted their ancestral wisdoms through folksong and folklore, by the fire, in the fields or in the village square, while sheltering from the bitter winters, working on the land, cradling their infants with tender lullabies, or participating in the collective festivities of rural life. Women continue to carry that culture into the modern era, continuing to sing new life into folk traditions and ancient melodies; infusing them with contemporary styles and realities, rooted in common identities in the soil and unique history of the Nordic peoples.

The strength, passion, clarity and power of women's voices raised in traditional forms of song is as relevant today as it was a thousand years ago, in bringing women's histories and experiences forward, in celebrating their creativity, their pleasure and their overwhelming urge to express their experiences, identities and aspirations. Nordic folk traditions are rich and varied, from the raw beauty of the human voice and the rhythms of language, to the rich resonances of the dulcimer and the glorious flow of the violin, creating music by turns haunting, joyous and truthful. It is with pride, humility and a deep sense of gratitude and admiration, that I introduce the voices and music of contemporary Nordic women.

~ Deeyah

Foundation

Nordic legends feature women of extraordinary strength, wisdom and valour. The Nordic mythos features several female deities characterized by their power, such as the völva, shamanic oracles consulted by kings and explorers and even the chief patriarch of the Norse pantheon, Odin. Frøya, a major deity, is the goddess of sexuality, fertility and beauty. The three Norns or Weird Sisters weave the destinies of every human being; and the influence of such primordial female archetypes is woven into the fabric of Nordic identity.

Women were represented in the martial period of Nordic history, from the shieldmaidens, as ferocious a warrior as any man; or the heroic Blenda, leading an army entirely composed of women from Varend, to rout the oncoming Danish army from Småland. Yet the history of Nordic women is not merely one of warfare, but also of the delicate art of peace. From Queen Margaret, who initially united the Scandinavian countries, to female politicians in the current age such as Marianne Heiberg, working towards reconciliation in the Middle East, women have not only fought on the battlefields but operated at the highest political levels in the quest for a peaceful world. Nordic women were among the first to be included in the suffrage and have commanded secular power as politicians at the highest levels, such as Gro Harlem Brundtland, Tarja Halonen and Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, the world's first elected female president, and as party leaders, such as Berit Ås,

with increasing political participation by women of minority backgrounds. Nordic societies benefit from the presence of women's voices in all fields of human endeavor: as scientists, politicians, artists, musicians, actors and writers. Nordic lands have also been hospitable to dispossessed women: Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), a Jewish refugee from the Holocaust, and Nobel-winning poet, reclaimed her voice within the acceptance of the Swedish literary community; initially rendered physically mute through the trauma of Nazi persecution, she was able to create stunning, and painful poetry in which the metaphors of song and voice are prominent. For many contemporary women fleeing persecution on the basis of their identity within Nordic countries, the liberties and values of Nordic society provide a fecund space for self-expression. Women, regardless of their origins, are adding new and brilliant threads into the ancestral tapestry of Nordic history, and combining their voices in a diverse and beautiful interfusion.

Nordic countries are inclusive and egalitarian, with a great respect for human rights and dignity, having the highest Gender Indices of equality, being the most supportive societies for mothers and children, the lowest income inequality and the highest quality of life. It is perhaps no coincidence that these countries with the highest levels of female social involvement, allowing women greater ability to fulfill their potential, are among the most prosperous in the world.

While the region may be viewed, with some justification, as the pinnacle of achievement in women's status, there remain challenges to a complete expression of equality. Although efforts to restructure the traditional family, through shifting the paradigm of the distant, breadwinning father and nurturing, caregiving mother to a dual parenting/dual income model, this ideal remains unrealized. The employment sector remains divided by gender, with women overwhelmingly working in the public sector, while men command higher wages in the private sector. Males continue to predominate in positions of power in the Church, military and business, and to some degree within academia and cultural life. The issue of violence against women, including sexual violence, has not been thoroughly addressed in Nordic states, and in some respects its European neighbors are in advance of Nordic countries in instituting developed and integrated systems to deal with violence against women and their children. Additionally, immigrant women are disproportionately dependent upon social welfare and less likely to be in employment, despite high educational achievement within this group; violence against women may not be addressed through systems which still fail to recognize the divergent experiences of women from different cultures.

Women's voices, and women's experiences, remain crucial to the continued progression towards full equality. The creative potential of all women, their speech and their song, their dreams and their desires, will be key to enabling the Nordic countries to fulfill the shining promise of a more equal and harmonious society.