

*"Politics is like religion. It's invented to divide people.  
Music brings people and ideas together."* SAMIAN

# Samian isn't a politician, but he is political

Algonquin rapper  
mixes hip hop with  
aboriginal music

BRENDAN KELLY  
THE GAZETTE

When we met, it was the day after the election, and Samian immediately made it clear that he wasn't too pleased by the concept of a majority Conservative government.

The Algonquin rapper from the Pikogan reserve in Abitibi-Témiscamingue is, it turns out, not a big Stephen Harper fan. He'd performed at a benefit show for a youth centre on election night at Place des Arts, and arrived home in Lachine just in time to see the leaders on TV.

"What's cool is that I caught all of the leaders' speeches ... and I fell asleep during Harper's," Samian said in a chat over coffee at Café du nouveau monde. "Really boring. I'm happy for the NDP; I voted NDP. But I'm extremely disappointed by the Conservative majority, *mais bon* ... I'm disappointed by Canada's politics. I think it's dangerous that a guy like that has a majority. For the First Nations, for arts and culture. I think culture can showcase our identity much better than the politics can. And that's why I make music and am not a politician: to bring people together, not to divide them."

Samian - who performs at Club Soda on May 12 - may not be in politics, but his music is unabashedly political. His second album, *Face à la musique*, which was released almost a year ago, features a striking image on the cover - it's a close-up of the bottom half of a wrinkled, aged face with the mouth zippered shut. And when you hear the very first lines

of the opening track, *People invincible*, it's not hard to figure out that the artwork is an angry nod to the lack of a voice for aboriginal culture.

In a hard-hitting rap that blends Eminem's rage with Loco Locass's Québécois street French, Samian blasts: "*Notre réalité et les mensonges dont on nous incruste.*" He raps that he's going to make noise for "*ma nation.*"

"*S'ils nous traitent de sauvages, on s'en fout, on est des guerriers.*"

It's powerful stuff, propelled by a hip-hop backbeat blended with hints of traditional aboriginal music. Like other political songwriters, from Joe Strummer to Bob Marley to Pete Seeger, Samian realizes you can't just bash your listener over the head with a clumsy political slogan.

"It's *engagé*, but it's still music," said Samian, whose real name is Samuel Tremblay. "Sure, I'm fighting for something in my songs, but I think you can deliver a message better via music than in politics. Politics is like religion. It's invented to divide people. Music brings people and ideas together."

Samian started writing poetry as a teenager, and his poems eventually turned into raps, but he began to think about doing this more seriously only when he hooked up with the folks from *Wapikoni* mobile, a travelling studio that criss-crosses Quebec to enable young aboriginal artists to record music and make movies. He made his first recording with *Wapikoni* about seven years ago. He was 19, and it was a pivotal moment.

"It literally saved my life," said Samian. "It put me on the right path. I'd just gotten out of prison, and I'd come back to Abitibi. It's because of that project that I'm able to make a living with my art today."

Samian listened to U.S. rap as a teen, but he says his real inspiration comes from his community, from his family.

"What inspired me was my grandmother, my great-grandmother. The stories



DAVE SEBASTIAN THE GAZETTE

"I think you can deliver a message better via music than in politics," says Samian, who nonetheless recognizes the need for more than slogans in his songs.

my grandmother told about my culture. I don't think my music sounds like American rap. I call it *'le rap de réserve.'*"

*Face à la musique* is even more in-your-face *engagé* than Samian's debut, *Face à soi-même*, and way more eclectic as well. It veers from hip hop to roots-reggae to crunching hard-rock rap, and there are lyrics in French, English, Innu, Algonquin, Spanish and Wolof.

He also collaborates with

a slew of artists on the disc, including Innu hip-hop artist Shaut; Peru-born, Montreal-based singer-songwriter Sola; and popular Innu duo Kash-tin, the latter performing with Samian on a rethink of their fine tune *Tshinanu*.

There's even a shout-out to the Steppenwolf classic *Born to Be Wild*.

"I like sharing music. I like all kinds of musical styles. There's reggae, rap, slam.

You can be inspired by everything."

**Samian performs May 12 at 8 p.m. at Club Soda, 1225 St. Laurent Blvd., with Loco Locass, Shaut, Dramatik and Koriass. Tickets cost \$15, on sale at Club Soda, by phone at 514-286-1010 and at [clubsoda.ca](http://clubsoda.ca).**

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