

# The Just Word Podcast

## Transcript of Episode 19 – Truth, Reconciliation, Forgiveness & The Business of Music

**Guest: Susan Aglukark**

**Pat Bolland 00:00**

Susan, welcome to the podcast.

**Susan Aglukark 00:02**

Thank you.

**Pat Bolland 00:03**

I want to talk about the business of music. But I suspect that your experience of that is closely interwoven with your experience in life. For example, you went to a residential school, and your breakout song was based on that. Tell me that story.

**Susan Aglukark 00:18**

Yeah, so residential school, at the time that this gen, our generation, was attending it, was not the environment we hear of our parents' and grandparents' generations ... Inuit, First Nations, several generations further back, it was still traumatic in terms of leaving home to finish high school, you know. So we were 15 and 16, when we had to leave our respective communities and go to an entirely different region for grade 10, grade 11, and grade 12. Some didn't go home for those three years, some of us were fortunate enough to get home for the Christmas holidays for a couple of weeks. And then for the summer, we stayed in a residential school. And, you know, for the most part, it was not a terrible thing because it was a different time for us, in terms of leaving family culture, and things familiar to us, and that we would have had to leave to finish high school was the trauma. Traumas are different now in our northern communities. And we can talk further about that. And this is what forgiveness is all about. But for sure, leaving home to finish high school presented a lot of major learning curves socially and as students and so it was it was a different kind of trauma for us.

**Pat Bolland 01:57**

Okay, so then bring us up to forgiveness. It's obviously a reflection on the current crisis ... that involving residential schools. Right.

**Susan Aglukark 02:05**

Right. Absolutely. So as most fans know, my singing and songwriting career was a series of happenstance ... right place right time, incredible opportunities and 30 years of these of these happenstances. It was launched with an album called Arctic Rose. And Arctic Rose was one of my first songwriting, collaborating projects. And it was written specifically about a dear friend of mine who, a month after graduation committed suicide. And we didn't see the signs, we don't, we didn't know what signs to watch for. So we didn't see the signs, we didn't realize that there was there was that much going on with our friend. And so fast forward now 30 years later, not much has changed in our environments. In terms of how do we, ... we can recognize sounds now, we we've learned a lot about

what to do in that area. And a lot of us carry generational traumas, when we recognize it for what it is. So the collective work now is, as artists, is turning what we've learned, how we've learned to deal with our respective traumas, into art, whether that be songwriting, and all the other forms of art practiced. For me songwriting, all of my albums, I've recorded 10, "Forgiveness" is a kind of a practice project for virtual releases. I've never done just online iTunes releases, and this is what we're trying as a kind of pivot to the pandemic crisis. And also, going into the pandemic as artists, and I think I can speak for a lot of artists, we went into a panic mode. I, this is my livelihood being affected here, I've just cancelled a year and a half of work. How do we recover that, so "Forgiveness" became this kind of a writing exercise. Combined with other art forms, and I do a lot of painting, I do a lot of other art. So last summer, in the summer of 2020, I found myself in this new space as an artist, songwriter, performer. And as a healing person. I've gotten well enough, as a traumatized indigenous, to turn it into art. And so "Forgiveness" was written last summer, and recorded, and it touches on what I call correcting the narrative. And what that means is we all have ... indigenous, non-indigenous, we all have a duty to correct the narrative and what that means is my generation and the previous generation, my parents generation, were told one story for so long that we believe that story. I grew up thinking, I don't want to be associated with a broken people and I realized, wait that's a terrible way to look at my own ancestors and why do I look at them because that's the narrative I had been told. So if I'm being told this and this is my family what is the non-indigenous hearing? And how do we correct that and it begins with each individual person. So my own work and my own art for the last 30 years has been recovering those stories and turning it into songs "Forgiveness" is specifically about my personal story and how I've come to peel back layers and okay this is what this is, I forgive this. This is what this is, I forgive this. And those are my behaviors that I created or formed or thought was normal when I was the victim which I no longer am

**Pat Bolland** 06:07

Okay, but you talk about anger and emptiness in the same breath as forgiveness - forgive who?

**Susan Aglukark** 06:16

Myself. The person I was becoming and became. For those who are familiar with the story, they will understand this. I left home to leave. I left home after winning a court case at home. The environment at home are such that - what does winning really mean? Nothing changes in our communities, in the system, in my case in the justice system, and so I went to court, took my abuser to court. We won the case. He got less time than it took to get the conviction so now my life in that community has completely changed. How do I live normally in that community, in that environment? I had to leave. But a lot of things happened leading up to that. A lot of things since. And so the forgiveness piece is all about all of that. But truly healing and recovering begins with forgiving yourself and the things I did or became as a result of that trauma.

**Pat Bolland** 07:24

Wow ... okay, we said we talked about the business side of things, so you then went into the business of music if you will, and you went with a record label, EMI I believe it was originally, and how are you treated there

**Susan Aglukark** 07:40

I have always been very fortunate that all of my relationships, from the very beginning of the career, I had I had a great first producer, I had a great first manager, I had a great first agency, a great first label. There were, like any new relationship, things to learn, things to teach, things to step away from. In hindsight there were moments of subtle racism. Again, correcting the narrative, there's, it's a complicated relationship and so there were those subtle moments that I recognized 'No wait, did you just really say that about my own people?' Or did I just contribute to that conversation ... all of these things. So for the most part, I've always been very, very fortunate in those relationships I've always had really good relations with most people in the industry

**Pat Bolland** 08:34

Okay then why make the switch to become an independent artist?

**Susan Aglukark** 08:38

Because I was with EMI for 10 years and shortly after the release of the follow-up album ... so our major hit album was "This Child" - the major debut album - and now none of us in that team could really be prepared for its success. We didn't expect the success of it. We didn't we didn't know that "O Siem" "Hina Na Ho", all these singles from that first album, we're going to be as as successful as they were. I certainly wasn't. My first manager wasn't. So of course now that raises the bar. Now we have to follow-up with another hit album, which of course I went back to the studio thinking I I don't even know how to write for radio. I don't even know how to be an artist. I don't know how to be a celebrity. I didn't leave to pursue celebrity or to be a singer-songwriter. I left to leave. And three, four years later, I have a hit song across the country. There was a major learning curve. We went into the follow up album, "Unsung Heroes". The label had one expectation and I was fighting for 'wait, can I slow down and catch up here I've got a lot of catching up to do'. And catching up not just the business side of celebrity and the career, but myself as an artist. And so we did "Unsung Heroes", we did another album after "Unsung Heroes" and in the time between "This Child" and the third major label album, the industry in the world had changed. And we've gone from radio, to Much Music, to music videos, to there was this whole new thing called social media that was being introduced. And so now we have to learn this as well. And how quickly it has changed and taken over, I just couldn't catch up. My label couldn't catch up. We didn't know what to expect in the late 1990s, early 2000s. We didn't know how to pivot to that. And so my follow-up album, "Unsung Heroes" kind of fell along the wayside, it was time to go back to the drawing board. What do I do? What do I do, and so I just decided, after three albums with a major label that it was time to, I don't know, I didn't know what to do, but it was time to leave the label. And again, go back to the drawing board, I don't know if I can, if I can do this in the new music industry world, I didn't know what to anticipate. So I just decided to go back and just take a step back. And then my husband and I decided we want to be independent artists, let's give it a try. Because I knew then that I loved singing, I knew them that I am an artist, and I want to keep doing this. So we just decided let's go and let's be independent artists and see what happens.

**Pat Bolland** 11:27

Wow, what's been the most difficult aspect then becoming a independent performer and artist? Is it the creativity? Is it the time-management or what?

**Susan Aglukark** 11:40

Um ... making a living?

**Pat Bolland** 11:44

That's true of everybody.

**Susan Aglukark** 11:47

Um, I guess it's a combination of all of all of that, you know, finding a balance, learning to carve out quality time to continue the pursuit of your craft, ie as a songwriter, I have to always carve out time to be writing all the time. But also, being very intentional, in terms of running your business, like, we run the business Monday to Friday, nine to five. And then sometimes you're you're touring for 2,3,4,5,6 weeks, so you're running the business during the day, and then you're performing in the evenings and often on the weekends. So you have to be ready to be hustling all the time. So you kind of have to learn and put that hat on. And really, as independent artists, what it came down to, for my husband and I, because it is a part of a true partnership, is living within your means. And that's the nature of independent artists. We are all business, we all run a business, we're self-employed. And learning to live within your means. If, and I do, I love my job. And I mean, 30 years I've been able to do this. But we've had to balance it between those three things,

**Pat Bolland** 13:10

And made it all more difficult by the pandemic, your touring is taken right off the table. Right? You said that earlier?

**Susan Aglukark** 13:17

Absolutely. As soon as the pandemic shut the doors last February, we lost everything that year, in terms of contracts. We still haven't, we're not going to recover what we've lost is the reality. So what, you know, the business of the arts is going to be the last to go into full-on functioning again. And that's at least another year. So for artists with a large international profile, you can recover pretty quickly. I don't have an international profile, a lot of us don't. So as independent artists, I'm already learning that venues in Canada are booked a year in advance from here on. We're not going to get venues to do concerts in if you're an independent artist and booking tours on your own. You've got another year before - and you have to book now and take the risk now. So there's all these factors. So yeah, the pandemic has changed everything, everything for us, not just when do we get back to work, but we have to get used to virtual performing, which frankly, art is all about ... is a tactile thing, whether we're touching something or we're communicating through music and song and eye contact, human connection, that's a big part of of sharing our art. That's changed, everything's changed.

**Pat Bolland** 14:35

So then why come up with "Forgiveness" in the middle of, ostensibly the middle of, the pandemic, if you don't anticipate you're going to get the venues in a year's time. Is it to maintain that contact with your audience or was it to get the message out?

**Susan Aglukark** 14:50

It's both. It's both. The truth be told Pat, I haven't made a living off my songwriting in over 20 years. So What we've been doing in terms of releasing new music isn't just to say, 'Hey, I'm still here and I'm still

performing'. What I started with the "Arctic Rose" album, I want to ask an indigenous person who has been very, very fortunate to stay on a path successfully. But also a path that has been my healer. I want to keep sharing that. There are followers out there who are following this and I keep sharing, I just want to keep sharing the steps This is what I've learned. And this is what is the other thing I've learned and as a songwriter, it's shared through song

**Pat Bolland** 15:38

You mentioned "Arctic Rose" you also have the Arctic Rose Foundation. How does that compliment your work as an artist or as a business?

**Susan Aglukark** 15:51

So the early years of my career were spent in a state I call 'ilira' ... ilira is Inuktitut for emotional fear. I-L-I-R-A is how you spell it. And that's the root word. And what that means is part of correcting the narrative i deferred, always, to the ones I thought knew more. Versus engaging completely in the career, versus engaging in myself as an artist. I spent a lot of those early years saying what do you think I should do? How should I do that? What should I wear? How do I write this? Is this correct? Is this okay? Can I go this way? Can I go that way? Can I get on the bus ... you get on the bus first? I never really owned it for several years, those early years. And so when I knew I wanted this, when I knew I want to be a singer-songwriter. I love singing. I love songwriting. I love the art, I want to do this. Of course, the question is, what am I so afraid of. And when I understood that it was fear, this became the goal. I'm going to just ... I'm just going to do and I'm going to figure this out, and I'm going to do it. And over the years, it's turned into this, finally, this place it almost seven, eight years ago where I was like, I'm okay, I'm okay, I love this. And the Foundation is is all about those micro moments, and turning them into lessons that become emotional intelligence development in our communities, the partner communities we work with. I find I understand why we struggle with learning, for example, in institutions. Institutions represent this stigma of colonization. So .. and when we're in this environment, this institution, whether it's a school or a store, in our communities, we go in there immediately deferring to the person who started the business, and it's almost always a white person. And there's this, there's this kind of 'ilira' - I'm not afraid of you. For example, if you and I had met 10 years ago, in a grocery store, I would have avoided you because you have the look of somebody who, because just by virtue, and this is not intended to be insulting at all, by virtue of the fact that you are clearly Qallunaat, which is a white person, not derogatory, I would have said, Oh, he looks really smart. He looks really educated. And probably,

**Pat Bolland** 18:29

I'm not, I fooled you right there.

**Susan Aglukark** 18:34

But the point there being, I would have felt this 'ilira' right away, emotionally deferring to 'Oh, he looks like that. So I'm going to avoid that person'. And so we have to peel back these layers and understand the effects of colonization, as part of reconciliation, in order to really, truly heal. And I was able to do this because of my career. I mean, who else can say that? My career choice has been my healer. Without the art and the writing and the songwriting and performing, I wouldn't be who I am today. And so I share that now through the Arctic Rose Foundation, so they're all connected.

**Pat Bolland 19:13**

Okay, but when you go in, do you provide counseling and and empowerment to the youth that you're working with? Or are you giving them more specific opportunities?

**Susan Aglukark 19:25**

So it's not a counseling service - Yep. So we don't provide therapy. As you and as I know, therapy ... as people would know therapy. What we do is provide an outlet through expression. So it's arts-expression therapy. And what we do is, I have for example, right now we've got five Inuit artists on deck. Once the programs are running, and they run from - they coincide with the school year - so they will start in September and end in May the programs and after school program. We deploy our artists to a northern community where we have a program running for a week a month. And what the artist does is they share their art. And like me, this is the art that healed me, I'm going to share a beading project, for example, a painting project, I'm going to share a dance piece. So it's expressive arts as a way to share basic mental-health tools. So the artists are deployed once a month. But it's a daily after-school program in a specific space designated as the Arctic Rose room. So what we're covering off there are a couple of things that are used often don't have access to which is a consistent space. So if we tell them the Arctic rose room is open Monday to Friday, 335 every day at this space, they know now Oh, I have a space that I can go to that is consistently for me. And somebody's always going to be there. For me, that's huge in our communities. And then we trade high school students to do the job of managing that space. So we're providing a high school student with an income. They're trained to run the space in that in that Arctic rose room. And then we're also providing supplemental income for indigenous artists who want art to be their career. And as we've already discussed, this, this is a hard thing to do is to make your art your your, your primary source of income, greater challenge for artists from the north, so we deploy them to the north once a week and they're paid during that time. So they're getting supplemental income. The com-workers, the youth-workers are trained in what I call cultural cognisance. And it's the process I've developed. What that means is they're trained to hold space in that room. And they are uniquely qualified, because they grew up in that environment. So what that means is your your participants come to the room, you sit there, and your job is just simply to understand that this family and that family and those families, well, here's what's going on with them. But here, don't worry about it. All those, all that, is not allowed in this space. And you you are safe here emotionally, physically, culturally, and spiritually. Here, we are going to do arts expression, and all of that stuff stays outside. And so they're uniquely qualified to know all these things in our environments. And so they're trained to, you will be the manager of this room, and you will be the mentor, and we will support you. But your job is to be in the space - culturally, cognitively holding that space and culture meaning culture of crisis, not traditional culture.

**Pat Bolland 23:12**

All of this Susan takes time, obviously, money, obviously. So where are you getting your support? Are you getting it from the local communities? Are you getting it from government? Are you getting it from charitable contributions, where?

**Susan Aglukark 23:27**

Right now, charitable contributions and government - we successfully won a \$550,000 grant from the Arctic Inspiration Prize in February of 2020. So last year. And we've been getting annual grants from the federal government for going-on three full years now. So right now that's what's funding. We are in three communities. Rankin Inlet is our pilot community in Nunavut, Cambridge Bay also in Nunavut. We are also an Arctic Bay, which is on the Baffin Island. We are currently working to launch in northern Manitoba, there's a reserve in northern Manitoba that has declared a suicide crisis for a couple of years now. So we're working to raise funds to launch there. Our mandate covers northern children and youth. So that's First Nations, Inuit or Metis northern communities. So we're able to access provincial government funding as well because we launched in their respective provinces. So right now, it's private contributions, its prizes like the Arctic Inspiration Prize and federal and provincial government funding.

**Pat Bolland** 24:46

Susan, it sounds to me like you have a rosy future as an inspiration to many youth across this whole country, not just in northern Canada. Thank you so much for your time to explain the business aspects. Not only of your music but of your foundation.

**Susan Aglukark** 25:02

Thank you.

**Pat Bolland** 25:03

Okay, thanks Susan. Bye-bye. Susan Aglukark