

Assignment 5: Toronto-Based Celebrity Profile

In A Post-Pandemic World, Jessie Reyez is the Voice We All Need

As venues once again fill with the bustling, soulful energy that only happens when live music and an audience collide, Reyez delivers the authentic edge we've all been craving.

Jessie Reyez, a Toronto-born Colombian-Canadian musician, is a true force by reason of her artistic abilities, and introspective lyrics. She also radiates conviction, unapologetically.

On September 18, 2021, she performed at Wake the Giant Music Festival in Thunder Bay, ON, her first musical appearance since the pandemic began, alongside various artists including DJ Shub (A Tribe Called Red). The annual festival is an awareness project that celebrates inclusivity of all cultures, with a particular emphasis on promoting Indigenous musicians and showcasing Indigenous culture.

Music brings people together. Oxford University Press describes it as a “powerful means of promoting trust, empathy, and stress relief”. Everyone listens, moves in unison with mutual intention and a shared purpose, just like audiences did at Wake the Giant. A well-crafted song can also serve to communicate difficult messages in a palatable way for those who are not yet socially-conscious and help spark dialogue. As Psychology Today describes it, “music is a collective experience that can overcome physical distance.”. The pandemic itself enforced social distancing, but the uncovering of unmarked Indigenous graves, Black Lives Matter, and the surge in violence against trans and non-binary folks all coincided during the same two-year period. These issues erupted to the surface, highlighting the deep-seated distance that has divided us for generations before the pandemic itself ever did. In the momentary absence of live music up until now, going forward, it may very well be a useful tool to help us build community, facilitate healing, and advance social change.

On June 19, 2020, adding to the dialogue, Reyez released the music video to her song *Intruders*. The song had originally told a story of commitment to a lover that eventually sees the protagonist hail her love as all-conquering. But the video took on a different interpretation of her lyrics. Reyez decidedly grabs your hand and brings you exactly where she wants to take you. It tells the story of colonialism and the genocide of Indigenous people, through a distinctly feminist lens. The “intruders” attempt to separate the protagonist from her land and identity – but she is not defeated, instead she vows to reclaim what is rightly hers.



The music video for Intruders tells the story of colonialism through a feminist lens. (source: YouTube)

Not only does Reyez display social awareness and infuse thought-provoking subject matter into her songs, but she also regularly transforms otherwise uneventful sets of notes into a flavourful bite, tinged

with theatrical styling and flare. Her vocal characterization alone is enough to make your auditory centre ping and ask for more like Pavlov's dog anticipated snacks.

What's more is that she writes her own songs. She effortlessly merges and moves between multiple genres like Soul, Hip Hop, Reggaeton, Pop/Rock, R&B, Rap – even ballads in her native Spanish, and effectively pairs them with a full spectrum of human emotions. She captures intimacy and tenderness in songs like *Apple Juice* and *Figures* and unapologetically delivers in-your-face truth bombs in *DEAF (Who Are You)* and *Body Count*.

She names Amy Winehouse and Bob Marley as her greatest musical influences. Listening to *Body Count*, a soulful reggaeton track featuring Normani and Kehlani, there are hints of their iconic essences resurrected and at the same time – a refreshing sound that is uniquely Reyez. In the song, she covers the topics of feminism, the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, sex-positivity, and countering slut-shaming, singing lyrics like “*But some nights I would rather make love to myself, singing to my own damn tune*” and “*We don't need no one tryna take our freedom...So, we don't care what they say, we gon' love who we wanna love*”.

In the song *Gatekeeper*, she talks about the predatory men in positions of power within the music industry, singing “*Spread your legs, open up, you could be famous, you know we're holding the dreams that you're chasing...*”. She reflects on the harrowing personal experience where her career was threatened an early end if she didn't cooperate. She accepted the risk and refused to comply. Reyez is adamant about protecting herself as a woman and an artist, “The whole reason I wanted to be a musician is because it felt like home,” she tells Elle Canada. “I don't ever want to look in the mirror and not recognize myself. If you allow yourself to be a malleable product, then the reality exists that you might fucking fail. That's what scares me the most; I'd rather bet on myself.”

In June 2020, at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement surrounding the murder of George Floyd, she was invited to participate in the CTV special newscast *Change and Action: Racism in Canada*, where she called out major record labels for their lack of diversity among employees. She spoke candidly: “I want to implore Shane Carter from Sony Music Canada, I want to implore Jeffrey Remedios at Universal Music Canada, who I know personally...If you guys are...watching this, you guys have the power right now in your hands to be pioneers and to be legitimate allies...and make fundamental change so that in 10 years our kids or your kids...doesn't have to go through the same thing that's going on right now.”

Reyez is whole-heartedly invested in social change and is also self-aware as she continues to use her celebrity platform to push forward, as she tells CBC: “...I'm an optimist, but I'm also not naive. I didn't expect things to change overnight. The things that I've seen and heard and been a part of...is triggering more conversations about it...that's where it starts.”

And as the world opens up and the live music begins to bring people together again, she tells CBC, “If you get it and you achieve this [success], don't waste your mic. Because you never know what kind of impact you might have on someone's life. You never know who's watching it.”