

K'NAAN: A CANADIAN SINGS FOR THE WORLD

Introduction



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Focus

A product of the mean streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, and the gang life of a tough neighbourhood in Toronto, K'naan has produced some of the most emotionally charged music of his generation. Now soccer's World Cup has adopted his song "Wavin' Flag" as their anthem. This *News in Review* story looks at K'naan's rise to stardom as well as his personal and musical roots.

Did you know . . .

The name K'naan means traveller. This is rather appropriate in light of his 140 000 km tour with the World Cup.

You can't call K'naan a rising star; you have to call him a major star. His song "Wavin' Flag" was the biggest hit in the world in the spring of 2010. The World Cup selected "Wavin' Flag" as the anthem for the 2010 premier soccer tournament, sending K'naan on an eight-month, 83-country, five-continent tour where his international reputation was elevated to new heights.

As well, he teamed up with legendary Canadian music producer Bob Ezrin to lay down a reworked version of "Wavin' Flag" to raise money for the people of earthquake-ravaged Haiti. More than 50 Canadian musicians calling themselves Young Artists for Haiti gathered at The Warehouse Studio in Vancouver and recorded the track. The song was released as a digital single and debuted in first place on the Canadian Hot 100 list—only the third song ever to do so—with the proceeds going to charities working in Haiti.

And in April 2010, the Canadian music industry honoured the Somali-Canadian artist with two Juno awards—one for Songwriter of the Year and one for Artist of the Year.

But don't think that K'naan is a one-hit wonder. In 2005 his debut album, *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*, garnered decent sales numbers and excellent reviews—netting K'naan his first Juno for Rap

Recording of the Year. His second album, *Troubadour*, was also greeted with critical acclaim and outstanding record sales. Now K'naan is pretty much an international household name.

K'naan's music is born out of a traumatic childhood. Growing up in Mogadishu, Somalia, he was exposed to a great deal of violence. In one interview, reflecting on the murder of his first girlfriend, K'naan commented that killing was so common in his hometown that he never thought to ask who killed her. Surrounded by violence, K'naan and his family fled Somalia in 1991, on the last commercial flight out of the country. He eventually settled in a Toronto neighbourhood called "Little Mogadishu" by locals because of the high population of expatriate Somalis.

K'naan led a troubled existence in Toronto. Between the age of 13 and 18 he was arrested 15 times and went to jail for several long stretches. Finally, he came to the realization that music and poetry—two pursuits he had embraced his whole life—were his ticket to sanity. He has been able to capture his experience and pain and express it through his music. His lyrics hit emotional chords that few performers have been able to reach. And the world has taken notice.

To Consider

1. Why is K'naan's success so impressive? Is it because he has become so famous? Because of his opportunity to amass great wealth? Or for some other reason?
2. Do you think that since K'naan was able to turn his life around and leave crime behind him that other young men should be able to do the same?
3. What else do you need to know about K'naan to decide why he's been able to overcome so many obstacles?

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Video Review

Definition

A *cathartic* moment involves the release of unwanted emotions. As a result, a person feels a sense of relief—as if the cathartic moment has taken away a heavy burden.

Pre-viewing Activity

In the video you are about to watch, CBC reporter Adrienne Arsenault says that each song K'naan performs is personal and cathartic. Think of your favourite song. Why do you love the song? Is it the music or the lyrics or both? Is the song personal and cathartic or does it describe something—like an emotion—that you too have experienced? Record your responses in the space provided and then compare your answers with those of one or two classmates.

Viewing Questions

As you watch the video respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. a) Where is K'naan from?

b) Describe some of the hardships K'naan encountered early in his life.

2. What prestigious sporting event selected "Wavin' Flag" as its anthem?

3. Why does K'naan say he's "relieved" his life has turned out the way it has?

4. What happened to K'naan's first girlfriend?

5. Where did K'naan settle when he came to Canada? What was his life like growing up as a teenager in Canada?

6. What effect did the deaths of eight of his friends have on K'naan?

7. Why did K'naan go to prison?

8. Describe the efforts K'naan will have to make to promote the World Cup through the celebration mix of "Wavin' Flag"?

9. a) How did some of K'naan's fans react to Coca Cola's sponsorship of "Wavin' Flag" and the World Cup tour?

b) How did K'naan react to their concerns?

10. How many different versions of "Wavin' Flag" have been produced?_____

11. a) What is the name of the Spanish heartthrob who performed a duet with K'naan on the World Cup tour?

b) Why is it important for K'naan to team up with other performers on the World Cup tour?

12. What does K'naan think of the dance moves promoters have been teaching World Cup tour audiences?

13. Which two Juno awards did he win in April 2010?

Post-viewing Questions

1. In the video, K'naan's "Wavin' Flag" is described as "a song born out of melancholy." Melancholy is a feeling of sadness. While K'naan believes the song is positive and hopeful, how do you think the hardship of his early life allowed him to write such an optimistic song? Do you know of any other performers who sing songs born out of sadness? Why are these songs so powerful?

2. Does the video do a good job of capturing the charisma of K'naan? Give reasons for your opinion.

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Who is K'naan?

Did you know . . .
K'naan's second album is called *Troubadour*. A troubadour is a folk singer.

Quote

"God protected me in so many different circumstances and instances. The biggest protection I ever received was not that I didn't get shot, but that I didn't shoot anyone. I didn't kill anyone." — K'naan ("K'NAAN: MC, singer and songwriter," *Contemporary Canadian Biographies*, March 2009)

Further Research

To get an idea of K'naan's devotion to his mother, listen to the song "Take a Minute" on the *Troubadour* album.

Is he a Somali or a Canadian? Is he a lyricist or a troubadour? Is he an artist or a philosopher? Does he sing rap or hip hop? Well he is probably all of these things, but more than anything K'naan would probably consider himself to be a poet.

His Family

K'naan is the product of a family that values art and poetry. His grandfather Haji Mohamed was a revered Somali poet, and his aunt Magool was one of the most famous singers in Somalia. In this family of accomplished artistry, Keinan Abdi Warsame—K'naan's given name—emerged as an artist in his own right.

It was K'naan's grandfather who recognized that his grandson had a gift when he first saw a poem K'naan had written about how much he missed his father. K'naan's dad, Abdi Mohamed, had immigrated to the United States when K'naan was very young. He settled in New York, earning money driving a cab and sending the proceeds home to his wife. He also sent cassette tapes home for the kids to listen to—some of which were hip hop albums. K'naan consumed the music, memorizing the songs even though he didn't understand any of the words. At the same time he fostered an appreciation of the beauty of language and the power of poetry.

Life in Somalia

K'naan's hometown is Mogadishu, Somalia, which he calls "the hardest place on Earth" in his song "Dreamer." Over the course of his childhood, Somalia descended into chaos and extreme violence. Somali dictator Siad Barre lost his grip on power, and local warlords took over. Mogadishu became

riddled with crime, corruption, and murder. K'naan's neighbourhood earned the nickname "the river of blood."

K'naan fired his first gun when he was eight and witnessed the murder of three of his friends when he was 11. He also remembers walking by his school one day with his cousin and picking up an object shaped like a potato. Not knowing what it was, he threw it toward the school building. The ensuing explosion confirmed that K'naan had been handling a grenade. While half the school fell to the ground, K'naan was thankful that no one was injured.

By the time he was 13, K'naan's mother, Marian, realized that Somalia was about to implode. Normally an optimistic woman—who according to K'naan fostered a "home of eloquent people who talked of dreams"—Marian was not about to deny the reality of what appeared to be an emerging civil war. She made daily trips to the U.S. embassy to try to get travel papers to reunite her family with her husband in New York. Day after day embassy officials denied her requests until finally a sympathetic embassy staffer acquiesced and granted her the necessary visas. The embassy closed that same day and Marian, K'naan, and his older brother and little sister caught the last commercial flight out of Mogadishu before civil war engulfed the nation.

Life in Canada

K'naan's family spent a short period of time in New York City's Harlem neighbourhood before moving to Toronto. They settled in "Little Mogadishu," in a Toronto suburb. K'naan initially felt isolated because of the language barrier, but his love of the

spoken word and the nuances of speech allowed him to learn English relatively quickly. Once he grasped the language, he began writing poetry in English as well as Somali.

From the age of 13 to 18, K'naan ran with a tough crowd of fellow Somalis. He was arrested 15 times, mostly on weapons and assault charges, often spending months at a time in jail. Eventually he had revelation: "I was an ambitious kid. I wasn't going to spend my life running from cops and living in these bad neighbourhoods. I didn't leave Somalia to make another Somalia for myself in Canada" ("K'NAAN: MC, singer and songwriter." *Contemporary Canadian Biographies*. March 2009).

With that he took to the road and toured the United States, England, and Switzerland. When he got back to Canada, he started recording songs and writing poems, posting them on Somali Web sites. His reputation grew, and eventually he drew the attention of Sol Guy of Direct Current Media. Guy worked hard to promote K'naan and eventually got him an invitation to read his poem "Must we die?" at the 50th anniversary of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva. K'naan read his poem to the assembled diplomats and then delivered them a stern rebuke for their failure to help Somalia. In the audience that evening was African superstar Youssou N'Dour who was so impressed with K'naan that he invited him to collaborate on his album *Building Bridges*. K'naan toured with Youssou N'Dour in 2001 before heading back to Toronto.

For the next few years, K'naan drifted into obscurity. He kept writing poems and songs but failed to capitalize on the momentum he had built with Youssou N'Dour. Everything changed one night when he worked on a song called "Soobax"—a song aimed at the Somali

warlords who had devastated his native land. K'naan worked all night recording the track and, in the morning, called his aunt Magool to say that he had come upon a sound that he thought was his own. Within the year he travelled back to Somalia with friends to record a music video for "Soobax" and formed a music partnership with Jarvis Church, an accomplished producer and lead singer of The Philosopher Kings. Church worked with K'naan to produce the 2005 album *The Dusty Foot Philosopher*. The album received great reviews and eventual sales of over 20 000 copies.

People liked what they were hearing. K'naan's sound was a kind of hip hop with an African backbeat. His lyrics spoke of social justice and the need to question the fundamental premises of life. For the next few years, K'naan toured, eventually securing an invitation to the prestigious LIVE 8 concert. Then, in 2006, he won a Juno for Rap Recording of the Year as well as a BBC world music award.

Canadian and International Success

Drawing on the success of his first album, K'naan went to Kingston, Jamaica, to record his follow-up album, *Troubadour*, with Stephen and Damian Marley, the sons of legendary reggae star Bob Marley. He even recorded the album in Bob Marley's studio. *Troubadour* was greeted with critical acclaim and excellent record sales—sales that continued to grow over the course of 2009.

By the beginning of 2010, K'naan was an international star—"Wavin' Flag" had been adopted as the anthem for the June 2010 World Cup. Young Artists for Haiti recorded a remix of the song to help the victims of Haiti's earthquake. And the Canadian music industry honoured him with two more Junos—one for Artist of

the Year and one for Songwriter of the Year.

From the dire straits of Mogadishu to the top of the musical world, K'naan's

rise has been a compelling one. And people are eager to see what the hip hop star has in store for us next.

Follow-up

1. What influence do you think K'naan's family had on him as a musician and poet?
2. How did K'naan's mother manage to save his family?
3. Name three people who helped K'naan get his career on track. Why were these people so important in K'naan's emergence as a hip hop artist?
4. How many Junos has K'naan won? Name the Juno categories that he won in.
5. What were some of the obstacles he had to overcome to reach his current level of success?

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A Brief History of Hip Hop

Focus for Reading

Music is not a static form. It has evolved over hundreds of years. New artists adapt or “steal” elements of earlier music and artists that they love. In this way, music continues to change and grow, and new genres are established. As you read the following information, think about the way that hip hop has evolved from earlier forms of music.

What is Hip Hop?

While K’naan’s music is often thought of as independent of a particular genre, many music analysts claim that his music is more hip hop than anything else. Hip hop music is a blend of disc jockeying (DJing), b-boying (dancing; also called breakin’), rapping (also called emceeing or MCing) and graffiti art (also called tagging or muralism).

The Roots of Hip Hop

While hip hop is a relatively recent phenomenon, some claim that the true roots of the genre go back to ancient Africa. Over the millennia, African cultures have placed a high value on poetry delivered through the oral tradition. This poetry has emerged in a number of different media and, according to some hip hop historians, without the African love of poetry, the creativity of hip hop never would have come to fruition. Others point to the evolution of African-American music over the course of the 20th century as the catalyst that led to the emergence of hip hop.

Whatever angle the historians choose to take, there seems to be one point of consensus: hip hop was born on the turntables of Bronx DJ Kool Herc in the early 1970s. Kool Herc had immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1960s, settling in the Bronx suburb of New York City. Kool Herc would DJ local block parties and introduce those in attendance to something called Jamaican dub music. This type of music involved playing the

same record on two turntables, with the DJ mixing the musical breaks together—in effect extending the instrumental parts of the song. The extended breaks left space for Kool Herc or other MCs to rap a message to those gathered at the block party. The message could be improvised or scripted.

These early block parties led to a surge in creativity. Kool Herc noted that his Bronx audiences didn’t much care for his reggae dubs so he started using blues, soul, and funk songs. People loved it. Eventually other DJs started copying Kool Herc, and New York became the birthplace of hip hop music. For the rest of the 1970s, hip hop evolved in all four of the categories listed above. Eventually drum machines and synthesizers were added to the mix, and the raps became more musical as well as more popular. By 1979, hip hop made the mainstream with the Sugarhill Gang’s song “Rapper’s Delight” and Fatback Band’s “King Tim III” from the album *Personality Jock*.

The Evolution of Hip Hop

The commercial success of “Rapper’s Delight” opened the doors for a slew of performers. Hip hop acts like Run DMC, LL Cool J, and the Beastie Boys made the genre a force to be reckoned with. These acts paved the way for the likes of Public Enemy, NWA, Dr. Dre—whose album *The Chronic* is regarded as one of the best hip hop albums of all time—MC Hammer, and the Wu-Tang Clan.

Eventually artists like Jay-Z and Nas were able to establish themselves as hip hop superstars, while gangsta rappers Notorious BIG and Tupac Shakur were the inspiration behind the rivalry between East Coast and West Coast hip hop. From a tiny suburb of New York City to the world, hip hop had reached its pinnacle.

By the late 1990s, hip hop record sales seemed to be dwindling, but along came Eminem to put the genre back on top. Following the success of *Slim Shady* in 1999, his album *The Marshall Mathers LP* became the fastest selling album of all

time, with over 10 million copies sold.

Today, hip hop is dominated by Kanye West, 50 Cent, and Nelly. Canada's Drake and K'naan are stars on the rise. One has to wonder if Kool Herc could have imagined the many genres that hip hop would evolve into as today's hip hopsters have created musical styles like alternative hip hop, crunk, and snap music as well as glitch hop and wonky music. More than anything, the history of hip hop shows that creativity in music is never stagnant; there is always some new artist pushing the musical genre into other dimensions.

Analysis

1. There have been many turning points in the evolution of hip hop. What do you believe was the most significant turning point for the genre?
2. Do you think that rap music is distinct from hip hop music? If so, in what way?
3. Do you enjoy hip hop music? Why or why not?
4. Are there any stereotypes associated with hip hop, or with people who are fans of hip hop? Explain your answer.

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K'naan the Poet

To Consider

With a partner, discuss the following questions:

1. When you think about “poetry” what images enter your mind? Do you think of poems you’ve studied out of books in school? Do you picture confusing language or confusing rules of language?
2. Many people may have a negative image of poetry. It’s interesting, though, that many musicians and songwriters consider themselves to be poets. And most people love music. Who are some of your favourite musicians? Would you consider any of them to be poets? Why or why not?

You can learn a lot about K’naan by listening to his lyrics. K’naan prides himself on being a poet, and many of his poems have been born out of the violence and despair of Somalia. The trauma of his childhood in Mogadishu—“the most dangerous city in this universe,” as he exclaims in “If Rap Gets Jealous”—is what feeds his songwriting. He clearly loves Africa and is sad about the chaos that consumes the country of his birth. In “Soobax” he sings: “Mogadishu used to be a place where the world would come to see.” But that world was destroyed by the warlords, who introduced their brand of chaos to the city. Because of this, K’naan sings: “Somalia needs all the gunmen out the door” in his song “T.I.A.”—which stands for “This is Africa.”

Despite leaving Mogadishu as a 13-year-old boy, it is his attachment and love for his homeland that informs his musical message. He laments the tragedy of it all. In the song “Somalia” he wonders:

*So what you know 'bout the pirates
terrorize the ocean.*

*To never know a simple day without a
big commotion.*

*It can't be healthy just to live with such
steep emotion.*

*And when I try and sleep, I see coffins
closin'.*

This verse asks the listener to cut Somalia some slack. Why wouldn't piracy on the seas off the horn of Africa emerge when no significant effort has been made by the international community to help the failed state form a sustainable government. Indeed, modern Somalia has never known a day without “commotion.” Tragically, all K’naan can see when he goes to sleep is “coffins closin'”—a vivid image that demonstrates the world’s choice to abandon Somalia.

While K’naan’s songs are filled with references to Somalia, you won’t hear any songs about Rexdale—the suburban Toronto neighbourhood he settled in when his family moved to Canada. He is the first to admit that life in North America is far from perfect, but, in the end, life in Canada is filled with opportunity. He wonders why North American rap spends so much time posing as hardcore. K’naan’s response came in his song “What’s Hardcore?” where he says:

*We begin our day by the way of the gun,
Rocket propelled grenades blow you
away if you front,*

*We got no police, ambulances or fire
fighters,*

*We start riots by burning car tires,
They looting, and everybody starting
shooting*

When he moves into the chorus he asks: “So what’s hardcore? Really, are you hardcore? Hmm.” In other words, Mogadishu is the real hardcore. Everyone else is just posing.

Despite the violence of his childhood, K’naan’s lyrics have a corresponding message of hope. In “People Like Me” he sings: “Heaven, is there a chance that you could come down and open doors to hurtin’ people like me”—a lyrical message that sounds like a prayer. In “Fatima” K’naan tells the story of how his first girlfriend was shot dead on the streets of Mogadishu. The song is an ode to his friend, but instead of sinking into the injustice of her murder, K’naan breaks from singing and speaks the words:

*Now I just want to make it clear,
I don’t want you to shed a tear.
Because this here, it’s a celebration,
We’re not mourning, We’re
celebrating.
The song is a celebration of the life of
Fatima.*

Overall, there is a depth to K’naan’s music that establishes him as an important and influential artist. He has the ability to mix pain with hope. In

“Wavin’ Flag,” before he moves into the familiar chorus, he sings:

*So we struggling, fighting to eat and
We wondering when we’ll be free,
So we patiently wait, for that fateful
day,
It’s not far away, so for now we say*

K’naan is telling his listeners that peace is inevitable. He encourages people to avoid the trappings of despair and fly as free as a waving flag. Finally, in “Take a Minute” K’naan reveals his musical secret when he sings:

*. . . I take inspiration from the most
heinous of situations*

*Creating medication out my own
tribulations*

*Dear Africa, you helped me write this
By showing me to give is priceless*

Art is a gift that an artist courageously shares with the world. Artist puts themselves at risk of rejection and criticism. They reveal the secrets of their souls and encourage people to participate in their revealed consciousness. K’naan is no exception to this artistic reality. Out of the trauma of Somalia, he has emerged as a serious artist with a powerful voice.

Activity

Listen to your favourite album. Make careful note of the words that the artist sings and the melodies that drive the songs forward. Pick three songs and analyze them in a manner similar to what has been demonstrated above.

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Activity: Write an Album Review

This is your chance to write about something you care about. Most people feel strongly about music, and this is your chance to give those feelings a voice. Pick an album—any album, by any artist—and write a review of the compilation of tunes.

How to Write an Album Review

- Listen to the album several times.
- Gather background information on the artist and any interesting facts about the recording of the album.
- State at the beginning of the review whether or not you like the album.
- Provide specific reasons for your opinion, referring to specific tracks in your review.
- Tell your reader how the album compares with previous recordings and what this album might do for the career of the artist.
- The last sentence in your review should summarize your opinion.
- The length of your review should be between 300 and 500 words.

Sample Review

The following album review may be useful as a guideline to your own review.

Album: *Troubadour* • Artist: K'naan • Released: 2009

Now that K'naan's World Cup tour and the Young Artists for Haiti have "Wavin' Flag" stuck in every man, woman, and child's head, it is time to see if K'naan is worthy of the acclaim that people seem so readily willing to give him. All you have to do is listen to K'naan's second album, *Troubadour*, once and you'll realize there is more to the young artist than "Wavin' Flag."

K'naan recorded *Troubadour* at Bob Marley's Tuff Gong Studios in 2008. He joined forces with Stephen and Damian Marley while laying down the album's 14 tracks. K'naan and the Marley brothers also worked on collaborations with rappers Chubb Rock, Chali 2na, Metallica's Kirk Hammett, and Maroon 5's Adam Levine. The result is an album that is musically rich and vocally diverse.

While "Wavin' Flag" has been the most successful track on the album, there are many other songs that prove that K'naan is an artist who continues to push the bounds of creativity. Collaborative track highlights include "I Come Prepared" that sees Damian Marley bust into a mesmerizing Jamaican rap. On "If Rap Gets Jealous" K'naan is willing to push his brand of hip hop into the rock world. Incidentally, Hammett's guitar work is predictably stellar.

However, it's when K'naan raps and sings on his own that we get a full appreciation of his artistry. "Fatima" is a haunting tribute to K'naan's first girlfriend. The 13-year-old girl was shot dead on the streets of Mogadishu. The song's message tugs on the emotional arteries of even the most callous of hearts. The songs "Dreamer" and "People Like Me" are also lyrical and musical highlights on this very impressive album. If people were wondering if the Somali-born artist would be able to follow *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* with equally diverse and compelling songs, one run through *Troubadour* will put any doubts to rest.