

Preserving Language Through Music and Film

Behind the Scenes: Siijuu Jaadas *Cool Ladies* - Haida Language Rap Duo

By Julia Weder, May 2022

Intro: Here is a brief guide on how I approach making music videos with Haida Elder and language teacher Jiixa (Gladys Vandal), involving the Xaayda kil (Haida language, Skidegate dialect).

Quick context on the people involved: Jiixa is like a nanaay (grandmother) to me. Despite being an adopted member of her clan, Skidegate Gidins Naa 'Uuwans XaaydaGa, it is not my place as a settler to claim a sense of ownership of the language. This language project was intended to support Jiixa in her own language-sharing and creative visions. As a resident of Haida Gwaii and someone committed to advancing Haida sovereignty and respecting Haida law on these lands, I see learning the Haida language as an important part of this lifelong commitment. I carry this gratitude and privilege with me throughout these creative projects with Jiixa. And gee, we have a lot of fun.

STEP 1: Reflect on your place, responsibilities, and the nuances of your proposed project.

What is your positionality within the community or folks you are engaged with? What are the proper protocols to follow when engaging with the Haida language (or any Indigenous language or cultural practice)? What are you doing to ensure you are moving beyond “good intentions” and practicing real self-awareness? What is your knowledge on the topic, and what kind of authority do you have on it? What is the quality of the relationships you have built? Who has control over what is shared, and how? Who benefits from (or is harmed by) the work?

STEP 2: Think of a theme or subject for your music video.

We thought of handy phrases that families on Haida Gwaii might use in everyday life - eg. around the house, in the kitchen, on a trip. We wanted to mix these in with expressions of love and friendship, as well as prayers and wise phrases from Haida Elders that have been preserved. We chose themes like “Food and Friendship”, “Traveling to the City”, and “Remembering Lost Children”.

STEP 3: Have fun and experiment with film

We didn't take ourselves too seriously at all when making these rap songs. At spontaneous moments - say, after a meal while sitting on the couch - I'd take out my iPhone and ask if Jiixa wanted to record snippets of video for our next rap song. “Sure!”, she'd smile. We didn't worry

about miming lyrics or anything in these snippets - we just grooved our heads or hips to an imaginary beat, maybe wearing a pair of sunglasses or a hat that was lying around.

STEP 4: Work on the lyrics.

Jiixa wrote the lyrics for each of our songs, sometimes getting inspiration from Haida language books produced by the group of Elders involved in the Skidegate Haida Immersion Program. I would write down phrases or words that she'd speak out, and repeat them back to her until she was happy with the flow and content. Sometimes Jiixa wanted me to speak/sing the lyrics. Once we had the lyrics written, we'd audio-record ourselves on the Voice Recording app on our phones.

STEP 5: Work on the music.

In GarageBand (free on Apple devices), I made simple beats from the computer-keyboard within the software (you can choose from a whole range of instrument sounds). I'd make a simple tune over top of a bassy beat, then I'd adjust the tempo of the music until it roughly matched the tempo of our speech / singing / lyrics.

STEP 6: Edit

This is a fairly time-consuming process but lots of fun. I used free software (iMovie) on my Macbook to edit together the audio clips, video clips, and music. First I exported the song and lyrics from Garageband, and imported it into iMovie. Then I imported all the video clips and matched them up with the lyrics and music. We added intro and closing slides with our names and everyone who helped out with the project.

STEP 7: Add subtitles / captions

It's good practice to include captions in any video, regardless of language, so that it's accessible to non-hearing folks. Since our videos are in Haida, and the goal was to help people become more familiar with the language and pick up new words and phrases, we'd spell out Haida captions in large font and English underneath, in smaller font.

STEP 8: Share with the community!

We share our videos on Facebook and Youtube, and invite our friends and community to give it a watch. We hope that these videos help motivate others to tell stories and use the Haida language in their own creative ways.