

## The Wisdom in the North

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**An interview with Sámi singer Mari Boine**



*Photo: Flickr / Jan Sverre Samuelsen ([CC BY 2.0](#))*

*Mari Boine with her drum at a Haugesund concert in 2017. In shamanistic cultures, the drumbeat is very connected to the heart.*

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When I first heard about Sámi singer Mari Boine, I had been playing her music on the Scandinavian Hour radio show ([www.1150kknw.com/show/scandinavian-hour](http://www.1150kknw.com/show/scandinavian-hour)), struggling to properly introduce her songs to listeners. What was she singing about?

A review of past interviews and articles revealed that Boine is an outspoken advocate of Sámi culture, both in her lyrics and what she talks about between song sets in her concerts. And I discovered she has expanded her message to promote the rights of all indigenous people, not just the Sámi.

Boine grew up and lives in the northernmost part of Norway known as Finnmark, which is now recognized as part of the traditional lands of the Sámi (known as Sápmi). In the past, however, Sámi culture was heavily repressed, and the Sámi were viewed as lesser, primitive people.

This history is strikingly similar to how we've treated Native Americans in the United States, let alone for other indigenous peoples around the world. I wanted to learn more, especially what has driven Mari Boine to become such a prominent proponent of indigenous rights.

To my good fortune, I was granted the rare opportunity to talk to Boine directly by Skype a few weeks before her concert in Seattle. This is what we discussed, edited for brevity.

***Eric Stavney: I play your music on a radio station, but the titles are in Sámi, so I don't know what they are about. What should I tell people in preparation for your songs? How can I help them appreciate your music, what they're hearing?***

*Mari Boine: First, what I would tell them is to forget that the music is just talking to your head: it's talking to the rest of you. I can't tell people how to feel. I say, open your heart and feel.*

*Next, I tell them what I wrote about [Mari reads her lyrics in English before or after her songs in concert]. I go all over the world, and people don't know what I'm singing [they don't understand Sámi]. But there are many levels to my songs. You can feel it, like you do with classical music. It's deeper than what you can get from any translation of my lyrics. I say switch off the head.*

***ES: Yes, I've heard you say that that the universal connection to your music may come from the drum you use; it's like the human heartbeat.***

*MB: My culture was traditionally a shamanistic culture. We all were close to nature once; the first religion was shamanism or animalism. Indigenous people also used drums. The drumbeat is very connected to the heart. People who hear my songs say, "Why do we feel that even though we don't understand Sámi, it still talks to us?" It's because we are all human beings; the shamanistic beat is close to the heartbeat. My culture is very old, but everyone's culture is old.*

***ES: You've said you grew up in a strict Lutheran household, couldn't yoik and had to learn Norwegian, but somehow you escaped that?***

*MB: I started with music as a therapy. I was shy, brainwashed not to hear my language, religion, and the old stories. We were to be assimilated, to be civilized. When I was 20, I wanted to leave Sámi land and become Norwegian and European.*

*But [when I was enrolled] at teacher's training college, I heard my people's history and story, and I realized what had happened. Something spoke to me, and songs came out like medicine, and made me stronger. So I've been doing this for 25 to 30 years. I wanted to be something else, the strong indigenous woman that I am today.*

***ES: I've heard people say you perform like a shaman. In what ways is your music shamanistic?***

*MB: The tradition was that there were shamans or spiritual leaders, or several, who always watched the children to see which ones had special abilities and taught them over [the course of] many years to become a shaman. Some of my fans, they want to call me a shaman. I'm not a shaman. I have big respect for those who are shamans. I know this music has a connection to a shamanistic beat. It has healing powers. It comes through me.*

***ES: Some musicians I know feel they want to communicate a message in their music or on stage, but this has the potential to turn people off. How do you deliver your message in your concerts while not alienating your audience?***

*MB: When I started... people said, I love your voice, but do you have to mix politics and uncomfortable stories? And I said, "We have to start dealing with our own backyard. Scandinavians are known for*

*following human rights [abuse] all over the world. But, hello! You have [this in] your own backyard, I'm sorry to tell you."*

*In the beginning, many couldn't deal with [the politics] but I see it's been [a] growing [interest]. It's unpleasant, of course. In order for the world to go forward, we have to start talking about this. And this is happening all over the world.*

*I want to spread our people's history, share the shamanistic gift. I want to be proud of our own heritage and to share it. I don't need to ask anybody, "Am I allowed to have my own heritage?" When I stopped asking for permission, then I became free—and proud.*

*We should all be sure this doesn't disappear, because it's connected to nature, Mother Nature. If we poison nature, there is a connection—this is a valuable heritage, not only for human beings but also nature."*

***ES: I've heard there are environmental challenges these days up in Sámiland, such as companies that want to mine there.***

*MB: Yes, mining companies and windmill parks are taking more and more of the land and the reindeer. The old way of living is threatened. Now the Norwegian government has allowed open mining in Repparfjord, one of the richest salmon fjords: to allow them to dump tons of toxic waste where we are all fighting to get rid of chemicals!*

*I don't think people see what they are doing to nature. One day they will have to face it, and I hope they will really break down and cry [she laughs, sadly]. In order not to lose our culture, there are some things we cannot lose, and one of these is how we use the land and the resources. Please spread our music and story.*

A few weeks later, I attended her concert and was uplifted by her soaring, soulful, and mystical singing. Boine talked briefly between songs about her own upbringing, and recited the lyrics in English before singing them in Sámi. Boine finished by suggesting we listen to the wisdom of indigenous people, especially by living sustainably and in concert with the environment.

In an era of global warming, receding ice sheets, rising sea levels, unrestricted mining and gas and oil drilling, this sounds like wisdom worth heeding.

*To learn more about Sámi singer Mari Boine, visit her website at [www.mariboine.no](http://www.mariboine.no).*



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