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Greenland's Biggest Band, in an Uneasy Spotlight

Amid an international dispute, some listeners have discovered the pop-rock group Nanook.

By CHRISTIAN KRITICOS

Life on the road is tough for any touring band, but in Greenland, logistics are particularly difficult. "You can't take a tour bus because there are no roads between towns," the guitarist Christian Elsner explained in a recent interview.

Since 2008, he's played alongside his brother Frederik in the rock band Nanook. "We've toured by boat, plane and helicopter," he said. "When we tour in the villages, we have to go by snowmobile or dog sled. You can get stuck for a week sometimes because of snowstorms."

Though they perform entirely in Greenlandic, the brothers spoke in English via a video call from the country's capital, Nuuk. They displayed typical Nordic nonchalance when talking about their band's success, which includes an international following and a loyal audience for their music videos online. Nanook is often called Greenland's biggest rock band, and this month it noticed a further boost in engagement in the wake of President Trump's threats to annex the territory.

"Naturally, I guess we pop up on social

media," Christian said. "It's been pretty crazy, actually. We're not used to this attention."

Trump's headline-dominating international dispute comes as the band is in the middle of recording sessions for its latest project, an acoustic album reinterpreting older Nanook songs alongside fresh material. As the quintet's songwriters, Christian and Frederik have found the crisis seeping into their new music. "It gives us inspiration to write more songs — not only about the threats, but about our feelings," Frederik said. "There are some lyrics that are quite suitable for the situation. They're not angry songs. Mostly, we hope to calm people down. They are so stressed and so frightened."

The new LP, which the band hopes to release by March, will be Nanook's sixth studio album. Growing up in the tiny town of Nanortalik in southern Greenland, the brothers' musical origins were much humbler. Frederik remembered playing his first concert at the local town hall, having been introduced to classic rock like Jimi Hendrix and Pink Floyd by his father. The brothers also drew inspiration from Greenlandic rock, including Sumé, a 1970s band that firmly rebelled against the European culture imposed by Danish rule. When Nanook was offered a European record contract, it

was likewise pressured to abandon its mother tongue, but following the example of Sumé, the group refused.

"We couldn't imagine writing and singing in English," Frederik said. "We think in Greenlandic when we write lyrics. We sing from the heart when we sing in Greenlandic."

With only around 55,000 Greenlandic speakers worldwide, most of Nanook's fans cannot understand what they are singing about. But the brothers believe much of their meaning is expressed through the sound. Their poppy tracks often combine fingerpicked guitar with distant, echoey vocals, creating an aural atmosphere reminiscent of the desolate ice sheet blanketing their country.

"It has this Nordic sound," Christian said. "I think the melancholic mood is what is most recognizable in our songs." One of Nanook's sonic signatures is contrast, with tracks like "Pileritooq" ("The Passionate One") and "Aarnuaq" ("Talisman") counterbalancing their mournfulness with chiming, hooky choruses. "It's because we're from Greenland and there are a lot of contrasts here," Christian explained. "It's so beautiful, but we have many social issues at the same time."

The band explores those issues in its music videos, which have tackled Greenland's

From left, Mads Ron, Christian Elsner, Frederik Elsner, Andreas Otte and Martin Zinck of Nanook.

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OF THE BAND NANOOK

suicide rate (among the highest in the world) and global warming. These clips are often shot on location in remote areas of Greenland, showcasing the five band members rocking out amid incredible icescapes.

"It takes a lot of effort to make these cinematic videos," Christian said. "It's crazy expensive to travel in Greenland. The logistics are like ten times harder than other countries." Filming can be perilous too. During one shoot, Frederik fell through the ice and had to be pulled up by Christian before the ocean currents dragged him under. "It's worth the effort," Christian said of these challenging productions. "It means a lot to us, and we can see it means a lot to the people who watch them."

The band's new video is a more modest affair. It simply features the two brothers performing in the studio with their acoustic guitars, as a defiant Greenlandic flag is gradually imposed over the frame. But despite their Nordic stoicism, the brothers revealed that the annexation threats are having a real impact on them and their community. "Many people are quite scared," Christian said. "I get the feeling myself sometimes because it's so uncertain what's going on. It's a mix of anger and fear."

"I think we speak for many people here," he added. "We don't want to be an American state. We don't want to become Americans. We want to be Greenland."