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# MUSIC OF THE INUPIAQ

By Kate Kroko

## **What does Inupiaq music sound like?**

Consider the following videos.

Listen and watch for regional and stylistic differences in the music.

# Dance Songs from Point Hope

What types of instruments do you see in the video?

Describe some of the body movements you see the dancers make.

INTERACTIVE 1.1 Performance at Alaska Federation of Natives Convention, 2013

Performers: Point Hope Dancers



Video by Poolhalljunkyofalask  
Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wINonfze3qM>

INTERACTIVE 1.2 Performance at Point Hope Kivgiq, 1988

Performers: Point Hope Dancers



Video by Inupiat History Language & Culture [IHL Media]  
Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IHUX7GXIEA>

# Dance Songs from King Island

Describe some of the sounds you hear in the music.

What are some of the animals that the dancers are portraying?

INTERACTIVE 1.3 Performance of the Raven Dance at King Island, 1987

Performers: King Island Dancers



Video by Jake99762  
Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHqju02mYrl>

INTERACTIVE 1.4 Excerpt from a performance at Kivgiq 2013 in Barrow, Alaska

Performers: King Island and Little Diomedede Dancers



Video by Meredith Beck  
Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlxYH\\_ViZFA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlxYH_ViZFA)

# Dance Songs from Barrow

What do you hear in the rhythm of the dance?

Describe some of the changes you hear happening in the rhythm.

INTERACTIVE 1.5 Performance of the Loon Dance at Barrow Kivgiq, 2011

Performers: Barrow Dancers



Video by Unaliin0611  
Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9N6lm-03c>

INTERACTIVE 1.6 Performance of the Whaling Dance at Barrow Kivgiq, 2011

Performers: Barrow Dancers



Video by Unaliin0611  
Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gytQknz6m4>

**Now that you have watched the videos,  
consider the following:**

What do you think these dances might be used for?

# Some Characteristics of Traditional Inupiaq Dance Music

## Rhythm, Pitch, and Vocal Style

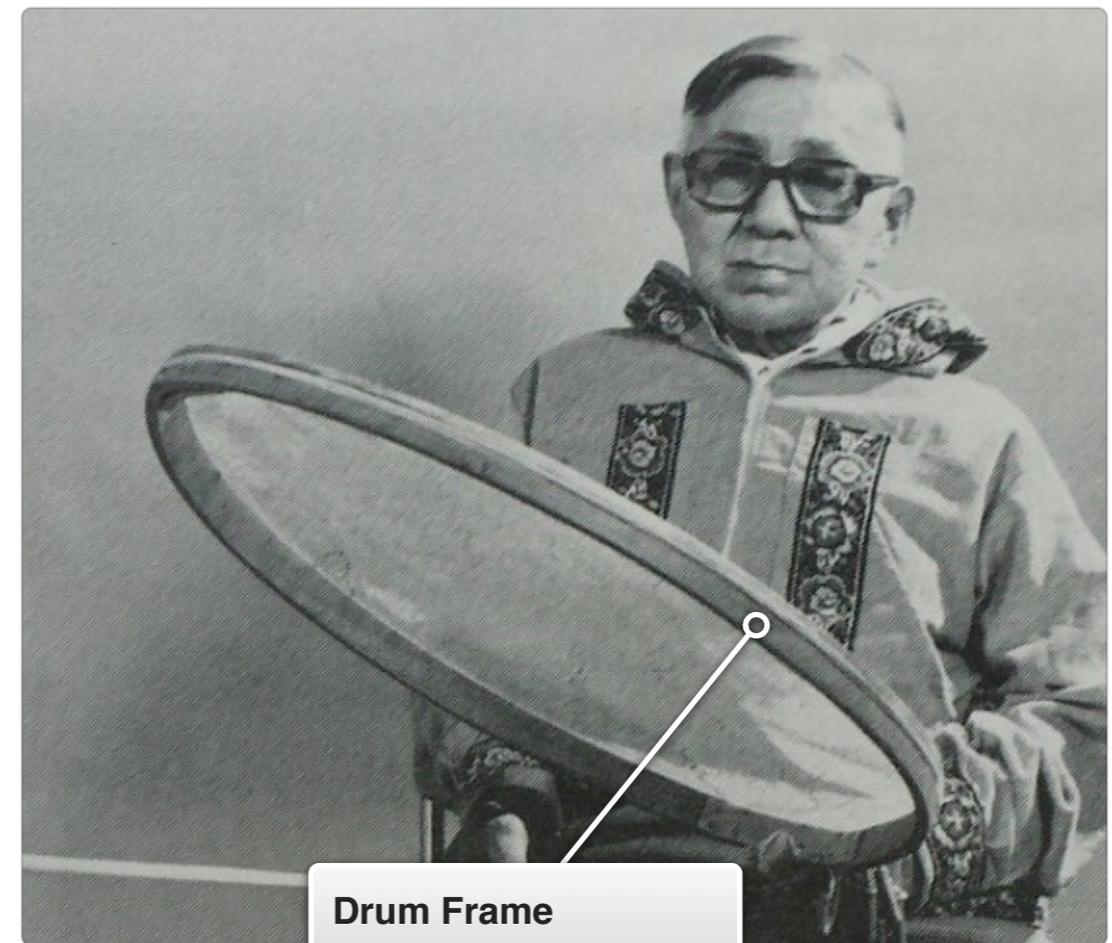
Traditional Inupiaq dance music is a communal event. Voices and drums are the main instruments, and music is traditionally performed in a large ensemble. Most songs are accompanied by a driving, accented drum beat. Songs are traditionally short and full of energy, sung in two verses. The second verse is usually a more impassioned iteration of the first verse, featuring fast tempo, louder drumming, and

## Drum Construction and Playing Technique

The traditional Inupiaq drum is called a *suayaq* or a *kilaun* (the name varies by region) (ECHO, 2008). This type of drum is a large frame drum, which is a flat, skin-covered drum with a very thin frame, much like a tambourine. The drum is held in the hand with a handle and played with a thin drumstick. Drum heads are traditionally made from whale liver, caribou stomach, or walrus

## INTERACTIVE 1.7 Anatomy of a *Suayaq* Drum

Inupiat drummer David Frankson pictured below  
Image from *Inupiat Dance Songs* by Tupou Pulu



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# Exploring Inupiaq Dance

## Types of Dances

Dances can be categorized into two types: "common dances" and "fixed dances" (ECHO, 2008). In common dances, there are no set movements, so they can be danced freestyle with any movements the dancer wishes. Common dances are invitational and can be danced by anyone who wishes to join in the festivities. Fixed dances have set movements, which have specific meaning and are unique to that particular dance. These motions must be adhered to and can only be danced by someone who has learned the movements (Pulu, 1979). Fixed dances have different meanings, styles, and stories they tell, and they vary by region, often telling stories



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## Types of Dance Motions

Inupiaq dances often tell stories, honor animals or people, or depict scenes from daily life. Mimetic dances imitate the behaviors and movements of animals such as ravens, eagles, wolves, walruses, loons, and whales. Each Inupiaq region has special dances to honor these animals. Dancers also use pantomime to depict subsistence activities such as boating, scanning for prey, catching fish, harpooning whales, spearing seals and walruses, skinning animals, and sewing hides to make clothing (Johnston, 1976).

### Women's Dances and Men's Dances

Women and men perform different dance types and motions based on gender. Women perform a dance called the bench dance, in which they sit on benches and move only using their hands and arms while the men sit on the floor in front of them and play the drums. In another type of dance, women stand with their feet close together and move their arms, hands, and bodies in a rhythmic swaying

### Purposes of Dances

Music and dancing serves many purposes, both spiritual and secular for the Inupiaq. Dancing is a way to build community and maintain social relationships through the long northern winter, and it brings people together from far-flung communities across the tundra. It is an important way to break the monotony of the long dark season. Performance is also a way to honor the animals who sacrifice themselves to the



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### GALLERY 1.1 Dance Mittens

Image from *Inupiaq Dance Songs* by Tupou Pulu



Today, dance groups wear uniforms to identify where they are from, however, in ancient times, dancers would have worn traditional parkas and pants. All dancers wear fancy mukluks and special dance mittens. (Pulu, 1979)



# A Deeper Look at Point Hope Style

In Point Hope-style singing and dancing, there are two main types of dance songs, the *sayuun* and the *atuutipiat*, which correspond with the fixed dance and the common dance mentioned earlier. The *sayuun* is a fixed dance, in which the vocalists sing meaningful words, i.e. words that are fixed and remain the same for each performance. In the *sayuun*, dancers perform a fixed set of movements, which means that only dancers who know the movements may perform the dance. The *atuutipiat* is a common dance, in which the vocalists sing vocables instead of meaningful words. Vocables are word-like vocal utterances, which have no specific meaning. When performing an *atuutipiat*, dancers can freely choose to dance with any movements they desire (Pulu, 1979).

## GALLERY 1.2 The Little Diomedé Sayuun

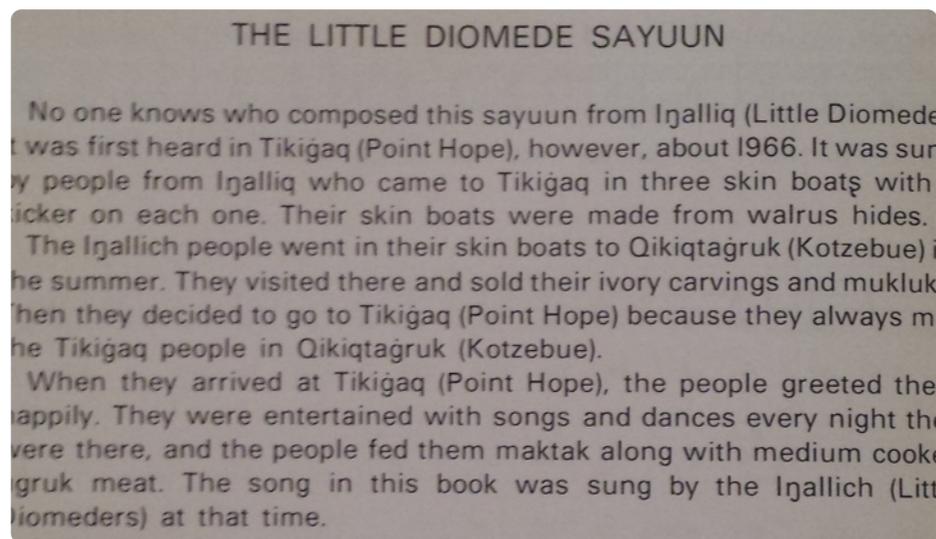
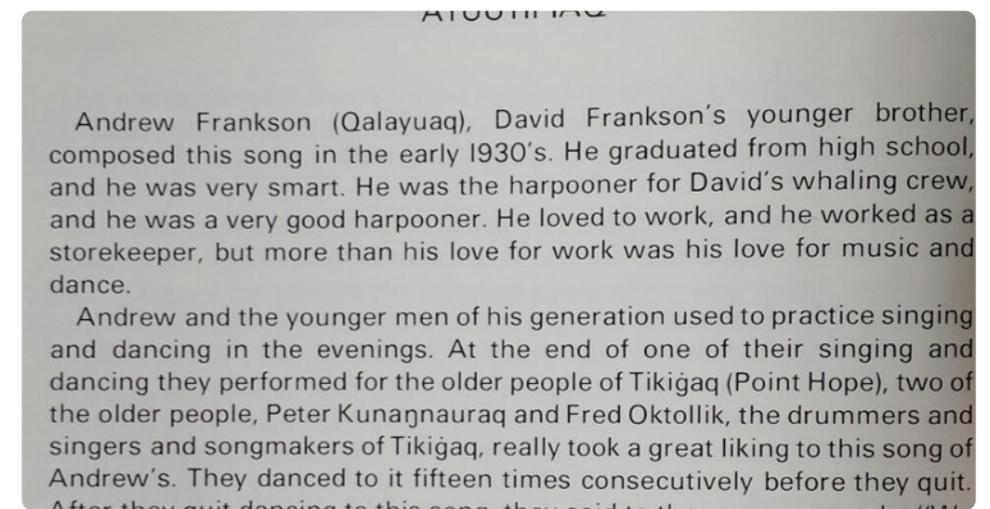


Image from *Inupiat Dance Songs* by Tupou Pulu



## GALLERY 1.3 Atuutipiat Music and Dance



The brief history Andrew Frankson's composition. Click for fullscreen.

Image from *Inupiat Dance Songs* by Tupou Pulu



# Kivgiq and Nalukataq

Dance songs play a central role in the Inupiaq festivals of Kivgiq and Nalukataq. Both Kivgiq and Nalukataq are major seasonal festivals, which bring people together from far and wide across the arctic. Kivgiq is celebrated in the dead of winter when the arctic experiences days of 24-hour darkness, and it serves to bring people together from neighboring villages for the purpose of gift-giving, trade, community-building, and strengthening relationships (Fair, 2000). In modern times, dance songs at Kivgiq serve to build the communal spirit, showcase the talents of each village, and aid in the presentation of gifts from one village to another. In ancient times, dance songs were used for ceremonial purposes to honor the Great Eagle Spirit (SLAM, 2016).

IMAGE 1.1 Blanket Toss



Nalukataq, the Inupiat blanket toss. Photo by Bill Hess

Photo taken by Bill Hess  
Image from *Another Culture/Another World* by  
Father Michael Oleksa

For a detailed lesson plan on elements of Inupiaq music, follow this link:

<http://uasmatt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Inupiaq-Music-Lesson-Plan-final-version.pdf>

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