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BUFFY

SAINTE-MARIE

THE VOICE OF A GENERATION

NATIVE DOLLS

A RICH HISTORY + 5 NOTABLE ARTISTS



BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

VOICE OF A GENERATION

BY J POET

Buffy Sainte-Marie amazed and delighted long time fans in 1982 when she won an Oscar, Grammy and Golden Globe for “Up Where We Belong,” a song she wrote for the movie *An Officer and a Gentleman*. To some, it appeared to be the triumphant return of an artist who was one of the most outspoken and genre breaking singer-songwriters of the '60s folk boom, but Sainte-Marie never really went away. “I stopped recording in 1976 to be a mother, study experimental music and make digital paintings, but I never stopped performing or writing songs,” Sainte-Marie says from her home in Hawaii.

“Ever since I was a little girl I heard music playing in my head,” Sainte-Marie continues. “I thought everybody did. It was a shock to discover that this was not true. I was always a musician. I remember playing piano when I was three. It became my substitute for the Barbie dolls that interested other kids. I was a recluse in love with animals, art, dance, writing and music, although school music classes were some of my most hated moments.”

Sainte-Marie (Cree) was born on the Piapot Reserve, Saskatchewan, Canada and adopted by a part Indian family in New England. “I was raised in a small town where there was only one Native American person--the mailman, Leonard Bayrd (Narragansett), who was a great and wonderful influence on me as a little girl. Because I could already play naturally, my mother took me to a music teacher at about age six. He advised her not to force me into piano lessons unless I begged for them, and I never did.”

There was still the matter of the music Sainte-Marie was always hearing in her head. When she was 16, she picked up guitar and started writing songs like “Universal Soldier,” “Now That the Buffalo’s Gone” and “My Country ‘Tis of Thy People You’re Dying.” But in college, she never thought about being a professional performer, despite the fact she’d been singing her songs in packed off-campus coffee houses for three years. “I’d graduated from the University of

Massachusetts with a degree in Oriental Philosophy and a minor in education, and thought I’d be going to India to continue studying.” One night, she tried her luck singing at an open mike in Greenwich Village and the enthusiastic response changed the course of her life. Looking back, she notes, “I’d never have had the courage to step onto a stage, except that there was nobody else to sing those songs. I overcame my shyness by concentrating on what the song was saying, instead of myself.”

Her unique singing style, marked by a natural vibrato that will sound familiar to those who have heard Northern style pow wow singing, made her vocals sound otherworldly to some listeners. “I loved Edith Piaf,” Sainte-Marie explains. “She had a passionate natural vibrato. I also listened to (Gypsy flamenco singer) Carmen Amaya and singers from India who used quartertones and overtones. Those influences made some of my songs sound weird to American audiences.”

INSTANT GLOBAL STAR

Still, there was no denying the power of Sainte-Marie’s songs; Vanguard Records signed her and released *It’s My Way!* in 1964. It included “Now That the Buffalo’s Gone” and “Universal Soldier.” The latter became a huge anti-war anthem and Donovan’s second hit single. Sainte-Marie set aside her graduate degree studies and went on the road to play her music, sharing stages with Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and Joan Baez. “I traveled alone with my guitar, feeling lonely, misunderstood, exploited, disconnected, yet also special and happy. My gender, Indian-ness and my own naiveté led to misunderstandings with the men who controlled show business. They wanted Pocahontas in fringe and I gave them activism and hot love songs, and they didn’t know what to do with me. On the other hand, I was successful in achieving the real goals I had: to travel and learn, to spend time with lots of Indigenous people, and to participate in making the social changes that were necessary. I was one of the few Native

Left: Buffy Sainte-Marie performing on the Santa Fe Plaza, August 2008.



From left: Buffy and Grover on *Sesame Street*, late-1970s (photo by Children’s Television Workshop); Buffy performing in Los Angeles (photo by Emerson & Lowe) mid-1970s; Buffy with her Academy Award in 1982; Buffy performing in the early 1960s at a grassroots pow wow on the Piapot Reserve, Saskatchewan (photo by Albert Angus); Poster image for the American Indian Movement, 1960s (photo by Bob Gordon).

American people who had the luxury of travel. If I had a concert in Paris, I’d go spend time with Saami people in the Scandinavian Arctic, or with Gypsies in Spain.

“During the Kennedy administration, I was invited to Washington D.C. by Sargent Shriver’s Upward Bound program and met other activist-minded Indians for the first time. I participated in Rupert Costo’s First Colloquium of American Indian Scholars; it was a real revelation. I worked with American Indian Movement founders Dennis Banks, Eddie Benton Benai, Russell Means and Clyde and Vernon Bellcourt. Although they were unenlightened about women and elders, they spectacularly educated urban Indians about their legal and civil rights. John Trudell became a friend and helped me support the Alcatraz occupation.”

At the same time she was a highly visible Native activist, Sainte-Marie was also making groundbreaking music. Her 1965 album, *Many A Mile* included “Until It’s Time for You To Go,” a tune covered countless times by everyone from Elvis to Barbara Streisand. *Fire & Fleet & Candlelight* veered from folk to baroque pop; *I’m Gonna Be a Country Girl Again* was a country album made in Nashville at the invitation of Chet Atkins; and 1969’s *Illuminations* was the first totally electronic quadraphonic vocal album ever released and one of the first records to use synthesizers. “We used Michael Tchaikovsky’s Bouccla synthesizer to create futuristic effects solely from the sounds of my voice and guitar. Because I always played the mouth bow (a tonal one-stringed instrument that uses the mouth as a resonator), I was familiar with overtones and harmonics. I knew the sounds we were making on that album would confuse the average piano teacher, but I never thought about holding back or being conservative.” Although misunderstood at the time, *Illuminations* was a revelation to art and electronic music students of the time, and is hailed today for its inventive use of electronic instruments. “But, it was beyond folk music fans of the 1960s, and the only place I could continue to develop that direction was in movie scoring, which I did throughout the late Sixties. It prepared me for the fun of digital art and music and I’m grateful for the head start.”

Because of her stance on Native rights, Sainte-Marie was considered “an artist to be repressed” by Lyndon Johnson. She also made

Nixon’s Enemy List. In 1976, she decided to stop recording and concentrate on raising her son, studying electronic music and doing her artwork, although she stayed in the public eye with her appearances on the children’s television hit show *Sesame Street* for five years. “I asked the producers if I could develop some Native American programming. On my first show, we went to Taos Pueblo in a pickup truck with Big Bird and a bunch of kids. Big Bird said, ‘I’m nervous ‘cause I hear there are Indians around here.’ The kids jumped up, danced around me, laughed, and said ‘We’re Indian--I’m Navajo, I’m Taos, I’m Hopi.’” But, the producers never stereotyped me because I was Indian, and I taught Big Bird about breast-feeding, did shows centered on sibling rivalry, and Hawaii’s multi-cultural society.”

LAUNCHES EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

Sainte-Marie also put a lot of her time, money and energy into the Nihewan Foundation, which she started in 1968 to help Indians get into college and fund people interested in Native American studies, regardless of their ethnic background. “When I first started traveling around the United States and the world, I realized Indian people didn’t know how to get into college and apply for grants and scholarships. I had more money than I needed, so I started an organization to support college bound students, prepare younger students for future college enrollment and promote a more accurate understanding of the roles of Native peoples in the global community. Two of our first recipients went on to become presidents of tribal colleges.

“In the 80s, I expanded Nihewan to include K through 12 education with The Cradleboard Teaching Project, which still is functioning. In the 1990s, with the help of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, we created a core curriculum from a Native American perspective and still offer it free on our website (www.cradleboard.org) to any school that wants it. In most schools, they only study Indians in relation to Columbus Day, Thanksgiving and Halloween costumes. We offer science through Native American eyes, social studies and geography from within Indian cultures. In the ‘90s, we started teacher education. I do presentations at teacher’s colleges and curriculum conferences, but most of it is free online.”

discography

It's My Way!

(1964, Vanguard)

Her amazing debut album that included the fiery "Now That the Buffalo's Gone," one of the first counter-culture drug songs "Cod'ine," and "Universal Soldier."

Many a Mile

(1965, Vanguard)

Includes "Until It's Time for You To Go," one of her greatest hits and widely covered by other artists, as well as "Groundhog," a traditional folk tune accompanied by Native American mouth bow.

I'm Gonna Be a Country Girl Again

(1968, Vanguard)

A country rock album made in Nashville with famous studio musicians including Floyd Cramer on piano, Buddy Harmon on drums and harmonies by The Jordanaires, Elvis Presley's long time back up group.

Illuminations

(1969, Vanguard)

Her most avant-garde album that used early synthesizers on a track she co-wrote with Leonard Cohen, "God Is Alive, Magic Is Afoot."

Coincidence and Likely Stories

(1993, EMI Canada; 1993, Chrysalis US)

An album that blended folk, pop and electronica, including "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee," addressing Indian issues, corporate greed and political corruption.

Up Where We Belong

(1996, EMI)

Sainte-Marie's first recording of her Academy Award winning song, new arrangements of some most-requested favorites and a few new tunes.

Buffy Sainte-Marie: The Mid-1970s Recordings

2008, ACE Records

A two CD set (31 original songs) compilation, this includes most of the great songs from three albums: *Buffy*, *Changing Woman* and *Sweet America*. These three pivotal albums were lost to the public during the AIM activist years and only recently re-released on CDs.

Running for the Drum

2008, EMI Canada

Available in U.S. (as of November 2008)
only at www.buffysainte-marie.com

www.buffysainte-marie.com



Buffy in front of her own work in progress. Photo by Denise Grant.

In addition to her work with the foundation, her songwriting and appearing on *Sesame Street*, Sainte-Marie was also experimenting with digital art in the early 1980s. "I started doing black and white paintings on a Mac 128k computer, eventually moving to a color monitor with Photoshop and Pixel Paint. Digital art feeds on the same enthusiasm and creativity as music. There's an ebb and flow of color, similar to the ebb and flow of music. The potential to use 16 million colors is hard to resist." Sainte-Marie's images are huge (eight feet high) eye-dazzling montages that combine traditional painting with photos and digital painting techniques to produce Native themed images that can be small or larger than life. "I'm not a techie, so the tools don't matter. I can make music on pots and pans, by clapping my hands or singing. I can paint on a rock or canvas or manipulate images on a computer." Sainte-Marie's paintings have been exhibited at the Emily Carr College of Fine Art in Vancouver and the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. The Tucson Museum has "Hands: the Coming of the Digital Age" in its collection. Her paintings can be viewed online at www.creative-native.com/bsmartshow.html. (Continued on page 44)



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BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

NEW RELEASES

In 1993, Sainte-Marie plunged back into the world of music with *Coincidence and Likely Stories*, an ambitious album that combined her love of pop, electronic and protest music. *Up Where We Belong* (1996) included her rendition of her Grammy and Oscar award-winning song and re-workings of some of her hits. And, she's just finished production on *Running for the Drum*, her first collection of all new material in 15 years.

"I've been working on this one for almost two years, but some of the verses and samples I'm using originated many years ago. My nephew, traditional singer Rodney Obey, did lots of recording at powwows in western Canada. I wrote songs that included some of these samples a long time ago, but it was too early for record companies to understand the use of traditional music in dance/pop songs. For this album, I re-created some of them from old cassette tapes. My co-producer, Chris Birkett, who also co-produced *Coincidence and Likely Stories* and *Up Where We Belong*, immediately understood what I was doing."

The songs on *Running for the Drum* include "No No Keshagesh," a fiery protest dance song set to a driving powwow beat; "America the Beautiful," a striking new arrangement of the familiar song that includes a nod to the country's Native peoples; "To the Ends of the World," an old fashioned R&B love song; "Cho Cho Fire," a dance/rock song that uses a sample from the Black Lodge Singers; and "When I Had You," a torch song drenched with smoky, late night piano bar melancholy. "The music is my usual whiplash collection of many styles--pop, protest, country, rock, dance-remix, rockabilly and big love songs," Sainte-Marie says proudly. "We've been performing the new songs in Washington, D.C., New York City and all over Canada and getting a great reaction."

Befitting her huge stature among living American Indian figures, her life story has been portrayed in a 60-minute television special, titled *Buffy Sainte-Marie: A MultiMedia Life*, airing on Bravo Canada and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network in Canada over the past two years. **NP**

Veteran music journalist j. poet lives in San Francisco with his long time partner. He loves hot music, spicy food and tropical climates. He writes for many magazines-including this magazine's music department--newspapers and websites, and continues to be astonished by the ever evolving sounds produced by his fellow humans.



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