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**W**HEN I STARTED out in the sixties there weren't many women writing music, but Buffy Sainte-Marie was an exception to the rule. Whenever Buffy came through town I went down to the coffee house to hear her play. Her songs were so smart, so well-crafted, and her performances were stunning. She was different from the stereotypical music industry old boys' club. When I moved to Toronto to pursue music, I stopped at the Mariposa Folk Festival on the way to see Buffy perform. A year later, I played that same festival, so you could say I followed in Buffy's footsteps.

Buffy really helped me at the beginning: before I was well-known, she performed songs I wrote, bringing them to a wider audience, and she played my tape for anyone who would listen. Over the years since, Buffy and I have maintained a long-distance mutual respect. We have ties to Saskatchewan, but we share more than just a home: we both write songs with emotion, songs with a message. And to this day, we both walk our own path.

I've watched Buffy's long career with admiration, and I'm honored to write this foreword to her authorized biography. Buffy Sainte-Marie is one of folk music's unsung heroes, and her inspirational life is a story that deserves to be read.

JONI MITCHELL, JUNE 2018

# **PROLOGUE**

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IT'S ALMOST MIDNIGHT in Woodstock, New York. Less than an hour ago, a line of about 150 people stretched the length of the theater's foyer and bar, fans clutching everything from old vinyl and CDs to posters literally just torn off the wall, all waiting for their moment of communion with Buffy Sainte-Marie.

She's spent her whole life hearing compliments from people about how much they loved her set at Woodstock back in the day. It makes her laugh every time. Tonight is actually Buffy Sainte-Marie's first-ever Woodstock performance. She was never at the famous counterculture music festival that became one of the defining moments of the sixties. In fact, Sainte-Marie, the woman who wrote "Universal Soldier," one of the most provocative and relevant protest anthems of the twentieth century, was never even *invited* to Woodstock.

It wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last, that Sainte-Marie wasn't asked to the party. During her years in show business, she has lived simultaneously in the spotlight alongside musical giants such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and also very much at fame's outer limits on the edges and precipices of the music industry. Although she wasn't always in the headlines, Sainte-Marie has been creating, challenging, and questioning

during a career that has spanned more than fifty years. While history books and museums and governments and pop culture seemed intent on erasing Indigenous people, she persisted, and she's spent decades amplifying Indigenous voices, experiences, and resistance.

Through it all, she's been blacklisted by two American presidential administrations, and she's taken long breaks, some accidental and some chosen. She's lived most of her life way up in the mountains of Hawai'i, intentionally tucked away on a little farm. She's as intensely private about her family and personal relationships as she is about her home, which is a self-created paradise with space for her studio. She spends a lot of time with her animals and in the garden, with dirt on her skin and neck-deep in nature. When she leaves home to go out on tour, she misses her cat; appropriately, the first new friend she makes here in Woodstock is a black-and-white kitty.

Short tours are Sainte-Marie's preference. Long stretches on the road away from her home are too hard; she needs time to recharge, rest, and be out of the spotlight. The Woodstock stop is the second on a quick, three-day, East-Coast tour. Sainte-Marie has some connections to the venue, the historic and rustic Bearsville Theater, the brainchild of famed entrepreneur and music manager Albert Grossman, whose clients included Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, The Band, and many more—and who is apparently buried out back. He founded a recording studio in this space in 1969; the theater was an extension of his dream, but he died suddenly in 1986 before he could make it a reality. Sally Grossman, Albert's wife, established the theater in 1989.

Sally has an enormous bouquet of flowers delivered to Sainte-Marie's green room, and when she stops in to say hello, the two women embrace, though Sainte-Marie says she never

knew Sally very well. In many ways, Albert and Sally Grossman were at the center of “the scene,” but Sainte-Marie never was.

In part, this was by her own design. She’s a self-described hermit and Goody Two-Shoes. Some people think she’s a snob, but she’s an artist with a mission quite different from the one pursued by musicians chasing the rock ’n’ roll trifecta of money, fame, and sex. She sees the worst parts of show business as the manifestation of greed and an abuse of power—an extension of entrepreneurial colonialism, a system that reinforces a hierarchy of bullies. Sainte-Marie uses the words “bullying,” “racketeering,” and “colonialism” almost interchangeably, since each thrives on hierarchy and fear, power and control, competition and toxic machismo.

The upside of show business for Buffy Sainte-Marie? Plane tickets. They have opened up the world to her in ways she could only dream of as a child. Those plane tickets have signified freedom and learning to Sainte-Marie ever since the release of her groundbreaking 1964 debut album, *It’s My Way!* There was no life map or blueprint for a Cree woman adopted out of Canada and raised by a mostly white family in Massachusetts. She was a self-taught, musical wunderkind brandishing a mouth bow and finding her voice in the stylings of French chanteuse Édith Piaf and flamenco artist Carmen Amaya. She pursued an education intending to be a philosopher in India or a teacher on a reserve. She never planned to become a famous singer-songwriter at the age of twenty-three, or even to be playing shows more than fifty years later.

She believes in the power and intrinsic value of music—and it’s evident not just in the way she reflects light onstage, but in how she shares her gifts and how those gifts are received. The audience members cheer at the opening chords of their favorite songs—they know all the words—are raucous and rowdy when

they're ready to rise up, and reverent in the softer moments. She might be more famous in Canada than the U.S., but even the American venue managers offer up the same observation every night: the lineup to meet Sainte-Marie and her band after the show is the longest they've ever seen.

Her fans are young and old, and they're not just looking for autographs (though they definitely want them). They're carrying their truest selves into this moment. Every Sainte-Marie record is a soundtrack to some revelation; her songs were their anthems, mirrors, and life-preservers, containing the tenderness of new love, a personal discovery or reckoning, their celebrations and losses, and moments of resistance and courage.

It's a steady stream of gratitude and affection, in both tentative and effusive displays, by people who have grown up with her, were shaped by the bend of a lyric or found solace in the curve of a melody. At one show, there's even a woman whose name is also Buffy. She has come with her mother and stood in line for almost an hour to meet her namesake face-to-face. Others are new fans, called to action by her 2016 Juno Award- and 2015 Polaris Music Prize-winning album *Power in the Blood* and let loose into a back catalog of fifty-plus years of music that's richer, deeper, and more daring than that of many of her peers.

As the line dwindles, a Lakota woman in full regalia emerges. She carries a large, folded piece of fabric that looks like a blanket. A man brings out a small video camera. The Lakota woman is a Water Defender who has traveled all the way from Standing Rock, South Dakota, to Sainte-Marie's concert. The Lakota Water Defender makes a short speech to the forty or so people who remain, fans and venue staff, about resistance and what's happening in America, and shares her experiences on the front lines. She's also brought the original Lakota flag dating from the

1876 Lakota and Cheyenne defeat of General Custer, and she asks Sainte-Marie to conduct a special flag ceremony with her.

The energy in the room is charged with solemnity as well as a fierce rush of emotion. It's the heaviness of the history—how unrelentingly cyclical and unchanging it seems that Indigenous people must still fight so hard for their land rights and human rights. It's the living history of this Lakota woman who's still resisting, advocating not just for her people, the environment, and the land, but for everyone's futures. After the Water Defender speaks, Sainte-Marie offers up a few words, heartfelt and powerful. Then they bow their heads to one another and offer prayers. Time seems to slow down. The two women embrace.

The unexpected act of solidarity, protest, and ceremony is an overwhelming experience, eye-opening and educational and emotional, but also a little surreal. Everyone in the room seems to catch each other's gaze at the same time, sharing the unspoken words between witnesses: *Did I really just see that? Did that really just happen?*

"That was nice, wasn't it?" Sainte-Marie says afterwards, once almost everyone else has left. She's not downplaying the significance of the experience; this is her humility at work, a grounded and low-key combination of wonder, gratitude, and delight with the world.

It's after midnight, her first time in Woodstock, and she's just held a 140-year-old flag in her hands from a time when Indigenous people defeated their colonizers. It might feel surreal to everyone else in the place, but it's a pretty regular night in the life of Buffy Sainte-Marie.

## INTERLUDE

### **Buffy Sainte-Marie on surviving abuse**

I think that talent and our natural talents, our hunches, our intuitions, they're really very important survival tools. We ignore them to our detriment; we've been so talked out of them, we've been disempowered. Not deliberately. I'm not talking about, "Ooh, the evils of colonialism. They want to tie our hands." No, I'm talking about how our moms sent us to first grade and hid our crayons and wouldn't let us play the piano anymore. Now that didn't happen to me, but if it had, I wouldn't be talking to you today. [Laughs] I would have died.

Buy your kids some toy drums, a little xylophone, a cheap ukulele to play with like toys. Buy your kids nice paper for their drawings, encourage them, buy them some nice little art supplies. Not so that you can make a product that will impress Auntie Sue or make a living but because it's fun and because the kid gets to express herself and make something that she felt like making that day. Our whole lives are happening now. They're not happening when you're twenty-one and have to get a job, they're happening now. We're not taught to treasure the gifts of nature that we're born with. Instead we squash them and we become bean counters and I think we smother our children's talents. It's the lucky ones who get to hang onto it because it's nourishing for your whole life.



## INTERLUDE

### **Buffy Sainte-Marie on uncertainty**

Discrepancies are something that I've lived with since I was very little. I had an undeniable, irrefutable view of what the world said was so, and it was fine. I was fine with it. But I learned early on that what was "absolutely" true was not necessarily true for me. And I think it's always drawn me to loners and to people who are creative. Think of the creative process of songwriting. On Tuesday the song doesn't exist. You cannot prove that it exists. But on Wednesday, all of a sudden, something exists that didn't exist yesterday. A lot of things that have happened to me are not true on Tuesday but by Wednesday, the world is different. And this is a huge concept for me. It reinforces my sense of health and well-being and sanity because of the way my life has been with airplane tickets and my non-9-to-5, five-days-a-week, weekends off—I don't live that kind of life. I have a different life and I just became comfortable eventually with, you know what, it's okay not to know because the future hasn't happened yet.

## INTERLUDE

### **Buffy Sainte-Marie on happiness**

I'm not a recluse just to hide from the spotlight. I mean, there's some of that. I get tired of airplanes, working, lights, camera, action, concerts, long drives. But for the most part, it's the opposite. I live in the country very privately because it's so wonderful; not because the alternative is so horrible. I like living with animals. That's where my happiness is. Yesterday I had my nose to my kitty, we were lying down, having a nap together. And she was looking at me and I was looking at her and we were cuddling. I was thinking, *this is heaven, this really is where I live*. One of my goats died last month, she was old, and I was there with her day after day as she was getting ready to die. I didn't know if we were going to be able to save her or not. But just being with an animal throughout their lives, you love them. They become your friends. It's a different kind of beauty.

## INTERLUDE

### **Buffy Sainte-Marie on decolonization**

Racketeers will use misogyny, race, youth, age, anything that they can get their hands on, any of the great “isms.” Racketeers will exploit all of those things on their way to the bank because that is their goal, that’s their way, that’s their dogma. Exploit. Take as much as you can get and give the least you can. We can scream back at them and mention things like racism and sexism, but what’s wrong is the basic colonial mentality—the pecking order. The pecking order comes from the barnyard. It is important in the pack, in the flock, and in the herd, but it’s not human nature; it’s a choice. There are many, many other ways for human beings to live that most people have never observed. That’s where inter-community comes in. A lot of us already have decolonized without hatred, without enmity, but with empathy and compassion. Colonialism is obsolete. It should have gone away a long time ago. It doesn’t hurt anybody to decolonize. And it doesn’t cost nearly as much as maintaining it.