

# Northern star

Armed with a recent Juno win, Buffy Sainte-Marie is ready to blaze Canada's trails again with a new tour

BY ELIO IANNACCI

**YOU WON'T CATCH** Buffy Sainte-Marie doing a farewell tour anytime soon. The fabulously fit, 68-year-old singer-songwriter is experiencing another surge in her career. Fresh from nabbing a Juno for Aboriginal Album of the Year (for her latest disc, *Running for the Drum*), Sainte-Marie is booked to perform across Canada, Europe and the U.S. for the rest of 2009.

When she's not wowing audiences on-stage, Sainte-Marie creates art and supervises for Cradleboard, her acclaimed First Nations teaching project. In the midst of her manic schedule, Sainte-Marie took some time for a conversation with *Prime Time*.

**Prime Time:** Although many associate you with folk music, bloggers are hailing you as a pioneer of electronic music.

**Buffy Sainte-Marie:** Well, let me just say that it's nice to be recognized as not just some folk singer. In the '60s, people expected me to be one because I had long hair, a guitar and a high soprano voice. They immediately thought I should be the next Joan Baez.

It's funny, though—people aren't as afraid of the word digital now, but when I recorded the album *Coincidence & Likely Stories* in 1996 from my little studio in Hawaii, it was the first time someone used the Internet for exchanging music files. I sent them over to my producer in London, England, and it was unheard of that a musician would have the audacity to use a comput-

er! People thought it was somehow a threat to the guitar or the human voice. Now, most people work this way.

**PT:** How have your audiences changed through the years?

**BSM:** If we go all the way back to 1962, when I first came up, it was just a heaven-blessed window of time when diversity was very popular. Then that window shut around 1968. I saw the Beatniks turn into hippies, then some hippies turned into yuppies, and then some of the younger folks turned into hipsters. Most people aren't going to come to see me unless they already know what I do. I'm a gourmet item—not some teen idol—so nobody is going coming to see me because I'm the latest sales object sponsored by a company. I've never had that kind of backing, so I don't know what that might be like but it must be awful.

**PT:** Have you ever felt like you compromised your work to sell records?

**BSM:** Oh no, I have always been a one-man band so there's nobody telling me what I should do. I started taking music seriously at the piano at age 3. Nobody taught me how to play, and when they took me to a piano teacher, he said, "Don't make her take lessons unless she begs for them." I never did. I even tour whenever I feel like it and not when the record company wants me to. It's the freest forum for an artist, so no corporation should be involved.

**PT:** When artists such as yourself and Eartha Kitt spoke out against the Vietnam War, there

were many repercussions. How do you feel you were treated?

**BSM:** People would never believe that President Lyndon Johnson—who was a Democrat—was putting out letters on White House stationery saying that my music [and] Eartha's deserved to be suppressed, but we were both blacklisted and couldn't get any air play. Recently, I found out it wasn't only Johnson; it was Richard Nixon's camp as well. For years people in the U.S. never heard any of my songs on the radio.

**PT:** Did it affect your success?

**BSM:** Yes and no. But I was making a fortune in Europe and Asia and I was doing well in Canada and having a great life. I just figured that the pace had changed in the U.S. [that they weren't playing] my records anymore because they'd moved on to somebody else. I never expected to be censored for speaking my mind.

**PT:** Tina Turner just finished her second farewell tour. Any thoughts?

**BSM:** For certain people like Tina and Aretha [Franklin], it doesn't matter if they retire or leave this planet altogether—they'll still always be here. I think when you're an original, you have a different modus operandi—you just operate and think differently and you still want to perform. I certainly won't stop what I am doing.

**PT:** Has fame ever been a crutch for you?

**BSM:** No. I've known for a very long time that I was never going to be Madonna. If I were Madonna or Michael Jackson and had to hide in a hotel room somewhere because [I'm] so famous, I wouldn't have nearly as cool or interesting a life. I get to sing in places in Canada that city people probably aren't even aware of.

**PT:** How differently are male singers treated compared to their female counterparts?

**BSM:** When I first appeared in Greenwich Village, there were some comments in the newspapers about me because I was saying the things that I was saying and I was a woman. Bob Dylan was saying the answer was blowing in the wind while I was saying, "No, it isn't!" I was singing "Universal Soldier," which is a lot more serious and critical. The song essentially says [that] the end of war is up to us as individuals. Some publications only saw this Native American woman singer-songwriter as just a novelty.

**PT:** Was it difficult to stay optimistic and keep making music when misogyny would rear its ugly head?

**BSM:** No. I'm a positive person and I really believe in the world and in what I can do to help.



Buffy Sainte-Marie shines at the 2009 Junos

## The best of Buffy

A play-by-play of Sainte-Marie's 45-year-plus career

**1941:** Buffy Sainte-Marie is born on the Piapot Cree Indian reserve in the Qu'Appelle Valley in Saskatchewan. Orphaned at a few months old, later adopted and raised in Maine and Massachusetts.

**1962:** Sainte-Marie starts playing in Greenwich Village coffee houses, gathers up a following and meets Bob Dylan.

**1964:** Her debut album—*It's My Way!*—is released. It includes a song inspired by the Vietnam War, "Universal Soldier." The same year, *Billboard* magazine names her Best New Artist.

**1965:** She releases her sophomore album—*Many a Mile*—which features "Until It's Time for You to Go," a ballad that gets covered by the likes of Elvis Presley, Petula Clark, Neil Diamond, Barbra Streisand, Nancy Sinatra and Cher.

**1976:** She appears as a regular on *Sesame Street* for five-and-a-half years.

Her first son, Dakota Starblanket Wolfchild, co-stars with her (and is breastfed in one episode).

**1982:** Having co-written the song "Up Where We Belong" for the film *An Officer and a Gentleman*, Sainte-Marie shares the Academy Award for Best Original Song.

**1984:** She begins making music and art with a Macintosh Apple computer.

**1992:** After taking a long hiatus from the music industry, she releases the album *Coincidence & Likely Stories*, which includes the hit "Fallen Angel."

**1993:** Sainte-Marie is chosen by the United Nations to proclaim the International Year of Indigenous Peoples. She co-stars in a TV movie, *The Broken Chain*, with a pre-Bond Pierce Brosnan.

**1995:** She is inducted into the Juno Hall of Fame.

**1996:** She launches the Cradleboard Teaching Project, an online-assisted curriculum aimed at educating classrooms worldwide on Native American culture.

**1997:** She wins a Gemini for her TV special *Buffy Sainte-Marie: Up Where We Belong*.

**1999:** She receives a star on Canada's Walk of Fame.

**2004:** Kanye West samples her song "Lazarus" for the blatantly homophobic song "Dead or Alive" by rapper Cam'ron.

**2008:** Sainte-Marie releases her first album in 16 years, *Running for the Drum*, which subsequently wins Aboriginal Album of the Year at the 2009 Junos.

**2009:** CBC Radio listeners select "Universal Soldier" as one of the top 49 Canadian songs that best define the country's image for U.S. President Barack Obama. *E.I.*

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