



**"Stay calm  
and decolonize."**

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

PHOTO BY MATT BARNES

# Tradition reimagined

*Whether it's a social movement or a song, Buffy Sainte-Marie is still doing it her way*

**BY SUE ZALOKAR**  
STAFF WRITER

With the release of her debut album, "It's My Way!," in 1964, Buffy Sainte-Marie was named Billboard Magazine's best new artist. It was the same year the United States was "invaded" by the Beatles and was in the midst of the Vietnam War.

Soon after, with political songs like "Universal Soldier," "Now That the Buffalo's Gone" and "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying," Sainte-Marie was blacklisted by the Johnson and Nixon administrations in a campaign to suppress the work of certain musicians. It didn't faze her one bit. In fact, she didn't even notice.

Born on the Piapot Cree First Nation reserve in the Qu'Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan, Sainte-Marie was raised by adoptive parents in Massachusetts. As an adult, she was adopted again, this time by the youngest son of Chief Piapot, a Piapot Cree. She has been an iconic activist for the rights of America's indigenous people for more than 50 years. In the 1970s, Sainte-Marie bared her breast, promoting breastfeeding and the idea that "Indians still exist" to generations of Americans, native and non-native alike.

Sainte-Marie has received numerous awards and degrees, both academic and honorary, and her music has been covered

by just about everybody — Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, Donovan, Courtney Love, Barbra Streisand, the Indigo Girls and more. She won an Oscar for co-writing the 1982 hit "Up Where We Belong," the theme for the movie "An Officer and a Gentleman."

Most recently, Sainte-Marie is taking action to address the ongoing housing situation in the reserves of Manitoba, a project she calls "Green Indians." Sainte-Marie's idea ties together her understanding of the land and people, her interest in traditional ways, NASA, Habitat for Humanity and some of the poorest people in Manitoba, aboriginal people living on reserves.

She wants to reimagine traditional structures for modern-day indigenous people and envisions a kind of mixture of the Idle No More movement and Habitat for Humanity — a grass-roots movement to build modern, sustainable homes with a nod to traditional native-style homes. The project is just gathering steam but could be a simple solution to a long-standing problem: housing.

A self-proclaimed country girl, and one with a seemingly endless amount of creativity and passion for love and life, Sainte-Marie long has sent a message of peace. Her first album in six years was released in May, and she talked to me from her Hawaii home about "Power in the Blood."

**Sue Zalokar:** "It's My Way" was the title song for your first album in 1964. It opens the new album and has inspired generations of people to carve out their own paths in this world. What is the importance of this song to you?

**Buffy Sainte-Marie:** It seems like you've got it. Some people who have never heard it before, they will get it mixed up with Frank Sinatra's "My Way." He puts the emphasis on "my," but no. For me, it's about it's my path. I was really hoping to inspire other people to the uniqueness that you find. So, thank you.

**S.Z.:** Does it ever "get old" playing songs you wrote 50 years ago?

**B.S.M.:** Not really, not the good ones. The other ones I don't play because I'm not that crazy about them or they just don't stand the test of time ... or they were cute for the moment. You know, like a joke that you can only tell so many times? Some songs, you kind of forget about 'em. But others ...

I'm of the opinion that good songs stay good. We live in a world where corporations need us to throw things away. Whatever we already bought, we are supposed to throw that away and buy something new. But when it comes to art ... I mean the Mona Lisa doesn't stop being good. And

Tchaikovsky is as good as he ever was. And you listen to Bob Dylan's albums from the '60s, and they are still great. They are still ahead of their time.

Art just doesn't follow the rules of merchandising.

**S.Z.:** You were vibrant then, and you are vibrant now. You seemingly have an endless well of creativity to tap into. Where does your creative inspiration come from?

**B.S.M.:** Kid, I don't know. I'm just the same as I was when I was a little kid. Kids are all creative. If you want a clue to me, just look at any group of little kids who go to the beach. They are all creative. Everyone is. It's just that some of us get to hold onto it. I'm really the same kid I was back then.

There are a lot of natural things that the corporations are not pushing, and so sometimes people might forget about those things. But they don't go away. I'm always telling adults in my audience, if you went to the beach when you were 5, you would have made sand castles and you would have used your imagination and made drama, created characters in your head, you would have made up songs and stories, and you can still do that, if you want to. But we are told that we should get serious and go work on somebody's plantation and start shoveling coins into their bank account.

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