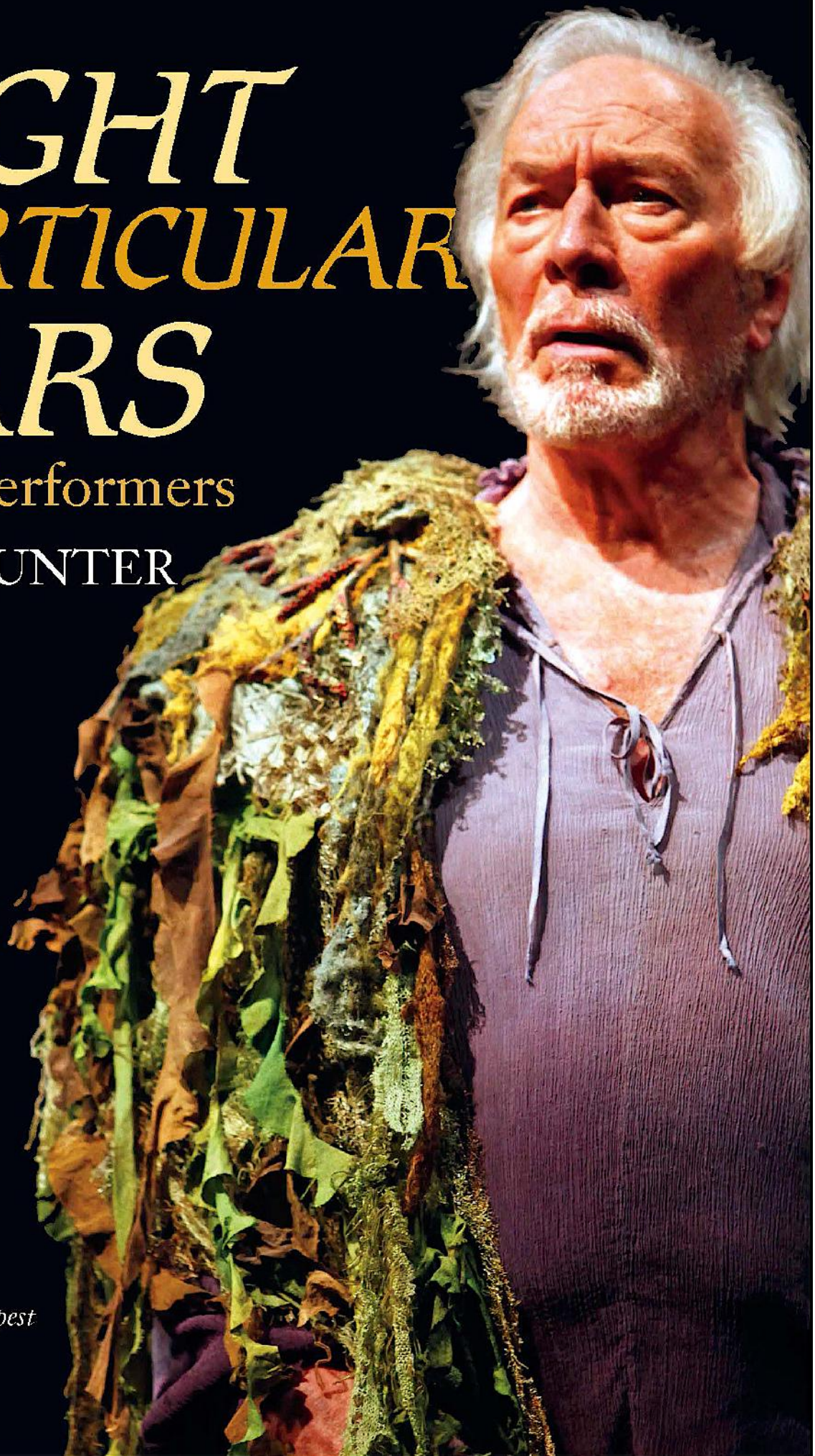


BRIGHT PARTICULAR STARS

Canadian Performers

MARTIN HUNTER

*Christopher Plummer
as Prospero in The Tempest*



Bright Particular Stars

Canadian Performers

Beatrice Lillie
Raymond Massey
Jane Mallett and Donald Harron
Gratien Gelinas
Kate Reid
Jon Vickers
Celia Franca
William Hutt
Maureen Forrester and Lois Marshall
Richard Williams
Martha Henry and Diana Leblanc
Christopher Plummer
Colleen Dewhurst
John Colicos
Teresa Stratas
Richard Monette

Buffy Sainte-Marie
James Cunningham and David Earle
Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen
R.H. Thomson
Genevieve Bujold
Rod Beattie
Jackie Burroughs
Colm Feore
Veronica Tennant
Stephen Ouimette and Tom McCamus
Seana McKenna
Albert Schultz
Louise Pitre and Brent Carver
Robert Lepage
Sarah Polley



James Cunningham as Le Spectre de la Rose



Seanna McKenna as Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire

TWENTIETH-CENTURY TROUBADOURS

Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen

In the early to mid-1960s I began to hang out with some of my students in Yorkville, which had transformed itself from a conservative residential area to a centre for the burgeoning number of hippies that had suddenly sprung up in Toronto. We visited a number of coffee houses; my favourite was The Purple Onion. One night we heard a young woman who sang folk songs, accompanying herself on the guitar. She had a high clear voice and an intense manner that immediately caught my attention. I went back and caught her act several times, and then she disappeared.

My friend John Uren had encountered Joni Anderson, as she then was, a few years earlier in Calgary, where he was running a coffee house called The Depression. She made a cold call and auditioned for him, accompanying herself on the ukulele. John, who always had an eye for the fillies on and off the race-track, was impressed by her waif-like appearance: long silky blonde hair, high cheekbones, and a generous mouth with



prominent front teeth. He was also impressed by her clear soprano voice and her skill as an accompanist. He would later crack, "Joni did more for the ukulele than even Tiny Tim." But more seriously he commented, "She was radiant, poised, confident. When Joni began singing the audience knew who was in charge. She owned the audience from the beginning."

At the time Joni was a student at the art college in Calgary. She had been born in 1943 in Fort McLeod, Alberta, where her father trained pilots for the Royal Canadian Air Force. After World War II her family moved to the town of Maidstone in Saskatchewan, where her father set up as a grocer. It was a small

primitive place on the main railway line. A major event was waiting at the window every morning to watch a train that ran outside her bedroom window. She loved the outdoors and played with the other local kids, many of whom were Aboriginals or the children of Ukrainian immigrants. At the age of eight she contracted polio, which interrupted her schooling, and she was bedridden for several months. To while away the time she sang loudly in the hospital and eventually recovered, though she would experience a recurrence of some of the symptoms many years later.

She has said that she knew in Grade 2 that she wanted to be an artist. She was not a keen student, rebelling against the conformity of the curriculum, but in that grade she excelled in a project proposed by her teacher: "I drew the best doghouse. I knew there was something I was better at than the others," she would later report in the book *Joni Mitchell: In her Own Words*, based on interviews recorded by Malka Marom. Joni took piano lessons for two years and acquired a love of Chopin, Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky, but rather than reading music she played by ear, which her teacher disparaged. "Why would you want to play like that when you can play the work of the masters." She whacked Joni on her left hand with a ruler, so she stopped taking lessons. Her mother accused her of



Young Joni Anderson leaning on her guitarcase

being a "quitter," an accusation that seems to still rankle.

She developed an interest in rock and roll and listened to Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and the Everly Brothers. In order



to hear their music she hung out in cafés that had jukeboxes. At age nine she started to smoke, which would become a life-long habit. Many of her friends were juvenile delinquents. She would later say, "Crime is very attractive when you're a teenager." Much of this early experience would be reflected in the lyrics of the songs she would later write.

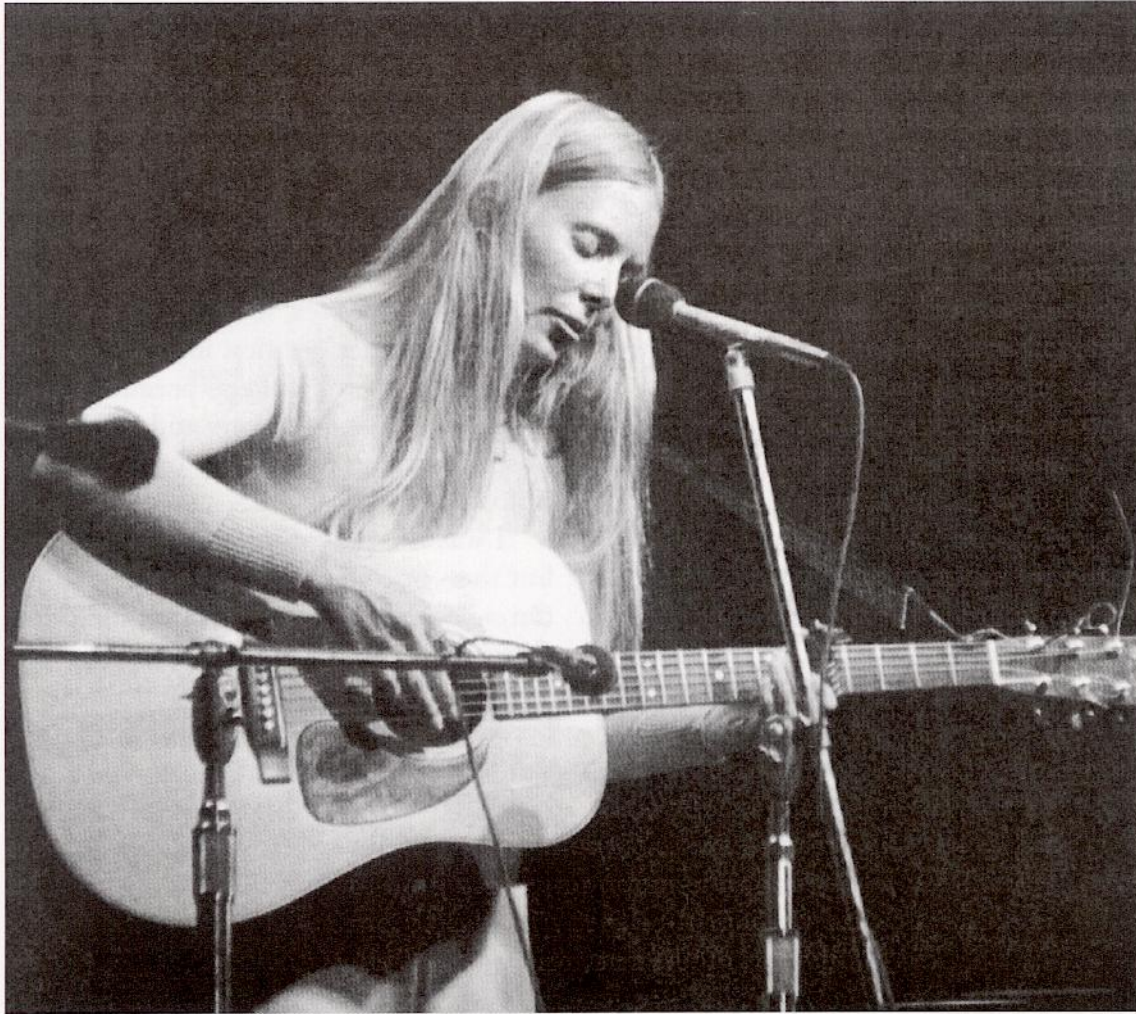
When Joni was eleven, the family moved to Saskatoon. She still found school boring, although she came under the influence of one teacher who encouraged her to write, even though she had no interest in grammatical structure and her juvenile poems were full of slang. She was a sociable teenager and loved to dance. She loved to dress up and made her own clothes. Her early interest in rock and roll waned: "It went through a really dumb vanilla period ... folk music came in to fill the hole." She began singing at parties and campfires. One of her early classmates, David Moe, remembers, "She couldn't really play the guitar but she had this amazing voice." She picked up on tunes sung by the Kingston Trio, which she sang in coffee houses and on local TV.

Her primary focus was visual art, and she would later sometimes describe herself as a "derailed painter." At art school she was an honour student. Her teachers were impressed by her skills as a draughtsman, but the current vogue was

for abstraction whereas Joni persisted in being a figurative painter. She was impressed by the work of Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Picasso in his blue period. To support herself and "buy smokes and pizzas," she sang in coffee houses in Calgary and Edmonton on the weekends, often returning late and tired to her Monday classes, for which she was chastised, in her opinion unfairly. She eventually left the college because she differed with her teachers and felt she was not getting the quality of instruction she had hoped for.

"I was the only virgin in art college, but then one weekend I was Banffed." On a holiday in the mountains she slept with a local boy, and soon after she discovered she was pregnant. In this era before the Pill and accessible abortion, she saw no solution but to have the baby. In order to keep her condition a secret from her parents and friends she moved to Toronto, where she sang in the streets and in various dives. Penniless and alone, she remorsefully gave up the baby for adoption.

She began working in the women's clothing department of Simpsons/Sears to pay the rent and continued to sing at The Purple Onion, where I had first heard her. She could not afford to pay union dues, but "It was a scab house. I was the best scab. When I couldn't sing there anymore, it closed." She later sang



Joni singing in a coffeehouse

at The HalfBeat and The Riverboat. While singing in Toronto she met the American singer Chuck Mitchell, who told her he could get her work at various clubs in the United States. He proposed and they married. "I made my own wed-

ding dress and came down the aisle in it clutching my daisies." They moved to his home city of Detroit and began to sing together in local clubs. Joni had hoped that Chuck might adopt her baby but he made it clear that he had no intention of



bringing up another man's child. Joni would later say, "It was a bad marriage. We had got together for all the wrong reasons. I felt betrayed." But they stayed together for two years, during which they performed at various local hotels and night spots.

In Toronto Joni had begun to write her own songs because she discovered that many of the tunes she was used to singing were "owned" by other singers who had a very proprietary air toward the material they performed. "Before that I had no idea I had the gift." She interspersed some of her own compositions into the sets she sang with Chuck, and she also performed for TV on the program *Let's Sing Out*.

In 1967 Joni left Chuck and moved to New York, where she began to sing in various small venues. She travelled to Boston and Philadelphia and Florida. In Toronto the American folksinger Tom Rush had heard Joni and was impressed by her appeal as a performer. He helped her meet other singers, notably Judy Collins. Soon afterward, Collins added Joni's song "Both Sides Now," to her repertoire; it became her first big hit record. Earlier Joni had met the Aboriginal Canadian folksinger Buffy Sainte-Marie at the Mariposa Festival on her first trip east. Buffy got her a gig at Mariposa and began to cover some of her songs. Joni was gradually becoming

known. Judy Collins then covered another Joni tune, "Chelsea Morning." This song, written in New York, is like so many of Joni's songs about love; it is positive and romantic, full of sunshine and optimism and contains some of the vivid images that would become one of the hallmarks of Joni's highly original lyrics: "the sun poured in like butterscotch and stuck to all my senses."

It was no doubt inevitable that Joni would meet up with another Canadian songwriter, Leonard Cohen. Cohen was the son of reasonably affluent Jews and grew up in Westmount, an upscale Anglo neighbourhood in Montreal. One of his grandfathers was a rabbi and the other founded the Canadian Jewish Congress. His name Cohen is a variation on Kohan, the name given to the men who were traditionally cantors in the synagogue and who claimed descent from the high priest Aaron. "I had a very Messianic childhood," he has said. Not surprisingly his poems and lyrics would turn out to be full of religious images, not just Jewish but Christian and even Catholic: "twenty-seven angels from the great beyond," "there's a mighty Judgment coming," "the mountain's going to shout amen," "Jesus was a sailor when He walked upon the water," "take one last look at this Sacred Heart."

As a teenager, Cohen studied the piano and played the clarinet. He taught

himself to strum the ukulele and then the guitar and formed a musical group with friends Terry Davis and Mike Doddman. At the age of 15 he discovered the poet Federico García Lorca; it was, he said, like coming upon a landscape that you thought you alone walked on. At 16, he and his friend Mort Rosengarten began driving around the city and hanging out in the dives on “la Main,” Saint-Laurent Boulevard, which divided the Anglo section of Montreal from the French quarter that was populated by the “whores, pimps, gangsters and wrestlers” that the early plays of Michel Tremblay celebrated. There he sometimes read his adolescent poetry.

He attended McGill University, where he came under the influence of poets Louis Dudek and Irving Layton, who encouraged his interest in W.B. Yeats, Walt Whitman, and Henry Miller. Before long he published his first collection of poems, *Let Us Compare Mythologies*. He did graduate work at McGill and Columbia but found it unsatisfying: “passion without flesh, love without climax.” He had begun to take acid, which started to affect his health. In order to recover and write, he went to the Greek island of Hydra with his lover Marianne Ihlen. He would later describe his process of composition by saying he was “like a bear stumbling into a beehive or a honey cache. I’m stumbling right



The Buckskin Boys (1952) Terry Davis, Mike Doddman, Leonard Cohen

into it and getting stuck, and it’s delicious and it’s horrible, and I’m in it and it’s not very graceful and it’s very awkward and it’s very painful and yet there’s



something inevitable about it.” He wrote a novel, *The Favourite Game*, and then another, *Beautiful Losers*, which he described as “a disagreeable epic of incomparable beauty.” In 1967, disappointed by his lack of success, he moved to New York and began to sing some of the songs he had composed as a teenager and in Greece in small clubs. Judy Collins covered his song “Suzanne,” which helped him gain acceptance among folk singers.



Leonard as a teenager

Joni was also beginning to sing in various venues, travelling to Boston and Philadelphia and Florida. One night when she was singing at the Gaslight South club in Coconut Grove, Dave Crosby walked in and was immediately impressed by her performance. He persuaded her to go with him to California where he lived and sang with his partners in the group Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. He had sufficient clout to persuade a record company to record a first album for Joni, which was released as *Songs for a Seagull*. Joni also entered into a two-year relationship with Graham Nash, the first of many liaisons she would pursue in the next two decades. A second album, *Clouds*, was released in 1969. Joni produced the artwork for the covers of both albums, something she would continue to do for her future recordings.

Joni has explained that she usually begins with a melody that reflects the influence of popular songs but also of the classical composers she identified with in her youth: Chopin, Ravel, and Debussy; they often contain unusual intervals and unconventional chords. As a result of polio her left hand lost some of its strength and she developed her own system of open tuning on the guitar, something that would make some of her tunes difficult for other musicians to cover. Her new album included



Joni, the lifelong smoker

several songs that had already become familiar in other artists' renditions, including "Woodstock" and "The Circle Game." It introduced "Big Yellow Taxi" with its famous opening line: "They paved paradise to put up a parking lot," apparently written in Hawaii when she was on tour and stayed in a hotel that overlooked an expanse of asphalt where there once had been palm and frangipani trees.

The most striking feature of Joni's songs was the lyrics, which combined startling images often juxtaposed with quite ordinary objects and common expressions of the day: "ice cream cas-

ties in the air," "the bed's too big, the frying pan's too wide," "songs are like tattoos." She employed many of the traditional devices of poetry: rhyme, alliteration, and assonance. In some ways her lyrics recalled the startling combinations of images favoured by the metaphysical poets Donne and Marvell, as well as the more recent verse of T.S. Eliot. The two other songwriters among Joni's contemporaries who produced similarly original and poetic lyrics were Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, but neither of them had much of a voice, whereas Joni ranged over three octaves, from a high clear soprano to deep husky

Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen



chest tones, sometimes jumping from one extreme to another, as at the end of “Big Yellow Taxi.”

Joni had met Leonard Cohen at the Newport Jazz Festival. She looked up to him, thinking he was sophisticated, whereas she told him she hadn’t read anything. “Maybe you shouldn’t read anything,” he commented, but he gave her a list of books that included Camus, the *I Ching*, Hermann Hesse, and Lorca. Reading Camus she discovered that he had lifted one of his lines from the French author, which inspired her to use one of Cohen’s lines in a song she wrote. He was annoyed and confronted her, saying “I’m glad I wrote that.” At the time he was suffering from chronic depression and was often very abrasive. She found him hard to talk to and distant: “There wasn’t much relationship other than the boudoir.” He could be deliberately enigmatic: “He’d say to me, ‘Joni, they’ll never get us.’”

Cohen’s lyrics, like Joni’s, were studied with startling images. He juxtaposed everyday expressions like “that’s how it goes,” “take me for a ride,” and “isn’t worth a dime” with original images: “the moon is swimming naked,” “love’s the only engine of survival,” “freshly cut tears,” “dead as heaven on a Saturday night,” “piece that was torn from the morning,” and “crimes against the moonlight.” His

rhymes were original and striking—“do ya” and “knew ya” matched with “Hallelujah”—or inexact, involving assonance:

I will step into the ring for you, ...
I’ll examine every inch of you
or
I’m aching for you, baby ...
I need to see you naked
or
Everybody knows the fight was fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich.

Cohen began touring in the 1970s in the United States, Europe, and Israel. Joni was touring in America and she found it a grind: second-rate motels, bad food, endless driving through bad

303



Leonard and Suzanne Elrod

weather, sleep snatched whenever it was possible. It earned her extensive radio play and her first Grammy award for best folk performance, but the strain of touring told on her temper. Spider Robinson, the mystery writer, tells of a concert he attended where Joni sang the first set, followed by Tim Hardin. As soon as Joni was finished most of the crowd headed for the exits. They made no attempt to keep silent but laughed, shouted, and lit up as Hardin began his first song. He followed with another number, and then gave up halfway through and left the stage. Joni came out and lambasted the audience: "She cursed the crowd. We were barbarians, pigs, reptile excrement.... She maligned us and our relatives and ancestors until she ran out of breath and stormed off-stage, leaving behind hundreds of baffled people ... and a handful like me, cheering even louder than we had for her songs." Joni has often spoken proudly of her Irish blood, which no doubt fuelled her invective.

After touring in America, Joni travelled to Europe, and the songs she wrote reflected her experiences there, as in this example from "California":

Went to a party down a red dirt road
There were lots of pretty people there
Reading Rolling Stone, reading Vogue.
In the same song she expresses her

homesickness, asking:

Will you take me as I am
Strung out on another man?

These songs are contained in her next album *Blue*. This collection of songs voices Joni's most intense personal feelings, her sense of loss and loneliness, but also the joy of a deeply personal relationship. She would later say, "at



California, will you take me as I am?



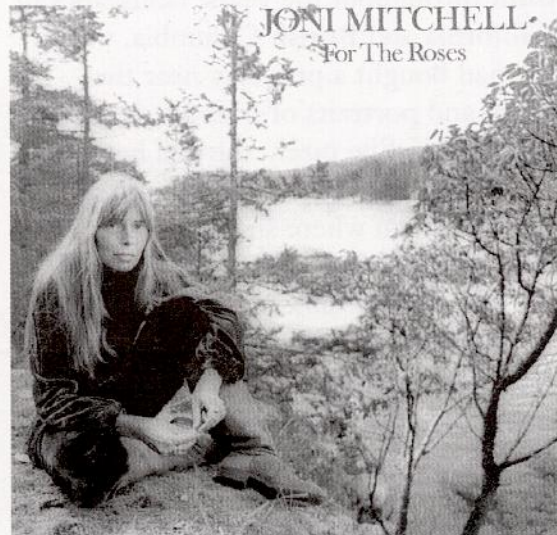
that time I had no personal defences. I felt like the cellophane wrapper on a pack of cigarettes." The openness of this album caused some of her male colleagues, particularly Kris Kristofferson, to criticize her songs for exposing herself too much. Joni's response was that films were dealing with this kind of intimacy, so why not songs? In "Little Green" she sings in veiled words about the sadness of giving up her child. But "A Case of You," the most upbeat song on the album, affirms a positive emotion:

Oh, you're in my blood like holy wine,
You taste so bitter and so sweet.
Oh, I could drink a case of you, dar-
ling
And I would still be on my feet.

In 1974 Joni released the album *Court and Spark*, working with a back-up group called The L.A. Express playing a mixture of folk/pop/jazz fusion. Joni toured with this band across the United States and Canada. The album contained the song "A Free Man in Paris," which included lines about "stoking the star-maker machinery behind the popular song," written about David Geffen, the entrepreneur who controlled Joni's record label. He apparently didn't like the song, but it proved to be a hit. Another song on that album, "Help Me," which

begins "Help me, I think I'm falling in love again. When I get that crazy feeling I know I'm in trouble again," peaked at number seven on the charts. Most of the other songs dealt with the frustration and disillusion of love affairs, although "Raised on Robbery" is a comic satire on singles bars.

In the second half of the 1970s Joni released a number of albums, including *Miles of Aisles*, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*, *Hejira*, and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Although her career as a pop singer had peaked, her albums continued to sell. She had begun experimenting with jazz rhythms and jazz musicians: Jaco Pastorius, Don Alias, Wayne Shorter, and later Pat Metheny and the bassist Larry Klein, whom she married in



For the Roses

1982, a union that lasted twelve years. She toured with Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and sang in *The Last Waltz* with The Band. She was approached by jazz great Charles Mingus and they recorded an album together, which appeared only after Mingus's death. The critics' reviews were mainly negative, but nevertheless Joni continued to experiment with jazz and started to work with synthesizers. The various managers who tried to steer her career wanted her to continue in the style of her earlier hit records, but Joni was determined to break new ground, to "try for something fresh."

In 1983 she embarked on a world tour, visiting Japan, Australia, several European countries, and ending up in the United States. She had continued to paint throughout the years, landscapes in California and British Columbia, where she had bought a property near the coast, and portraits of friends, relatives, and herself. She rarely showed her artwork in public, but she did mount a show in Japan where she sold a number of paintings. More albums followed: *Dog Eat Dog*, *Chalk Mark in a Rain Storm*, and *Night Ride Home*. She performed with Willie Nelson, Billy Idol, and especially Peter Gabriel, with whom she recorded "My Secret Place" as a duet. After 1990 she rarely performed live, although she did sing "Goodbye Blue Sky" in Roger Water's *The Wall* concert

in Berlin along with Cyndi Lauper, Bryan Adams, and Van Morrison.

In her early years as a singer Joni was not involved in political protests as much as Joan Baez and Judy Collins, but her later recordings contain a good deal of social commentary as she became increasingly disgusted with the greed and environmental degradation that took place in the 1990s. She visited the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, marched with Aboriginal leaders in protest, and wrote the song "Lakota" based on this experience, which Peter Gabriel added to his repertoire. She had always shown contempt for the bourgeois life, as seen in these lyrics from "The Last Time I Saw Richard"—

Richard got married to a figure skater
He bought her a dishwasher and a coffee percolator.

—but now her scorn became lacerating. She attacked televangelists in the song "Tax Free." As always she stood up to criticism and rather enjoyed the controversy: "The churches came after me; they attacked me, though the Episcopal Church, which I've described as the only church in America which actually uses its head, wrote me a letter of congratulation."

Cohen is one of the very few Canadian performers whose dominant



image is that of a Don Juan. The recurrence of love and sex in his songs suggests obsession. In appearance Cohen was a beautiful teenager like many Jewish boys, but as an adult he has the rather tough, hardened visage also typical of many men of his heritage. He has said he was “born in a suit”; he always appears in public well-groomed, usually wearing a tie and a hat—not for him the jeans and plaid shirts of most folk singers nor the spangled costumes and exposed flesh of many rock-and-rollers. Though a consummate performer, Cohen is not really an actor. In spite of the macho bravado of *I’m Your Man* and the dogged insistence of the refrain of “there ain’t no cure for love,” he is often self-deprecating, as he tells us: “it don’t matter how it all went wrong,” “I’m crazy for love but I’m not coming on,” “I was never any good at loving you,” “I was just a tourist



I’m Your Man – Leonard with his ladies:
Rebecca De Mornay, daughter Lorca,
manager Perla Batalla

in your bed.”

Often Cohen projects an image of himself as the streetwise cynic, as in the lyrics of in “Everybody Knows”:

Everybody knows that the dice are
loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers
crossed
Everybody knows that the war is over
Everybody knows the good guys lost
...
That’s how it goes
Everybody knows

In “The Future” and “First We Take Manhattan” he adopts a persona that borders on the psychopathic, even to interpolating into the lyrics a demonic laugh, though at least he offers some a vestige of hope with the line from “The Future,” “Love’s the only engine of survival.” Cohen sings in a baritone that is sometimes husky, sometimes resonant, but with very little range, often using the *Sprechstimme* technique borrowed from the original singers of Brecht and Weill songs. His tunes are simpler melodically than those of Mitchell. Often he is backed up by one female voice or sometimes several singing in harmony, which adds variety and texture. The arrangements are simple, with a strong rhythmic bass, sometimes overlaid by a variety of instruments: violins, piano arpeggios,

guitars, a zither or a mouthorgan, punctuated by snare drums and cymbals and more recently synthesizers. Like Mitchell, Cohen often disagreed with his producers about the back-up for his tunes, but once his work became accepted by a wider public he could insist on minimal instrumentation that enhances but does not overpower the lyrics. Different songs show the influence of different musical traditions: country, martial, klezmer, honky-tonk, flamenco, rhythm and blues. "Take This Waltz" references the Vienna of Strauss; "Democracy" evokes a parade to the strains of Sousa.

Cohen's view of the world is much less optimistic than Joni Mitchell's. They share an awareness of the seamier realities and injustices of contemporary life, but where Joni connects with and finds solace in nature, Cohen's landscape contains only the symbolic: rivers, deserts, and towers. He sees the world as fatally flawed, though not completely doomed:

There is a crack in everything,
That's how the light gets in.

But there is another side to Cohen's songs that depicts a nostalgia for times past, a desperate loneliness and a longing for lost love. This is evident in songs like "Take This Waltz," "In My Secret Life," "A Thousand Kisses Deep," and "Dance

Me to the End of Love":

Dance me to the children
Who are waiting to be born
Dance me through the curtains
That our kisses have outworn.

Throughout her career the birth of Joni's daughter remained a secret, though it was alluded to in some of her songs: "And my child's a stranger, / I bore her / But I could not raise her." These lyrics from the song "Chinese Café" did not attract much attention when they appeared, but in 1993 one of her former classmates spilled the beans in an article she sold to a tabloid. Joni's daughter Kilauren Gibb had already begun a search for her birth mother, and in 1997 they finally met. Although there were some initial conflicts, mother and daughter remain in touch and Joni enjoys being a grandmother. After the reunion Joni said she had no further interest in writing songs, although she would continue to paint. She divided her time between California and her property near Sechelt in British Columbia, where she discovered that John Uren was a neighbour. "L.A. is my workplace; B.C. is my heartbeat."

Cohen has continued to be an observant Jew, which he does not see as inconsistent with his absorption of Buddhist beliefs: "Well, for one thing, in the tradi-



tion of Zen that I've practiced, there is no prayerful worship and there is no affirmation of a deity. So theologically there is no challenge to any Jewish belief." Unlike Bob Dylan, who renounced both his Jewish name and faith, Cohen observes the Sabbath even when on tour and in Israel has recited Hebrew prayers during his concerts.

Cohen left the concert stage to take up residence at the Buddhist monastery at Mount Baldy in California, where studied under a Zen master Roshi and was eventually initiated as a monk. While he was there Cohen's daughter Lorca became suspicious that Kelley Lynch, who was handling his financial affairs, might be cheating him. Investigation proved that she had indeed been selling rights to his songs without his permission and had absconded with most of his savings. A number of lawsuits resulted in her being convicted and sent to prison.

Partly for financial reasons, Cohen decided to return to the concert stage and throughout the early years of the new century he toured extensively and released a number of albums, including *Ten New Songs*. It was evident that many of his preoccupation were the same as they had always been: love, sex, nostalgia, and the pleasures of the flesh ("a sip of wine, a cigarette"). But his depression had lifted and he faced the world with

renewed vigour and determination. He continues to tour the world: Europe, North America, New Zealand, Australia, and Israel.

His songs have been covered by many artists and bands from around the world, initially Judy Collins and James Taylor, more recently his fellow Canadians k.d.



Cohen, performing on tour

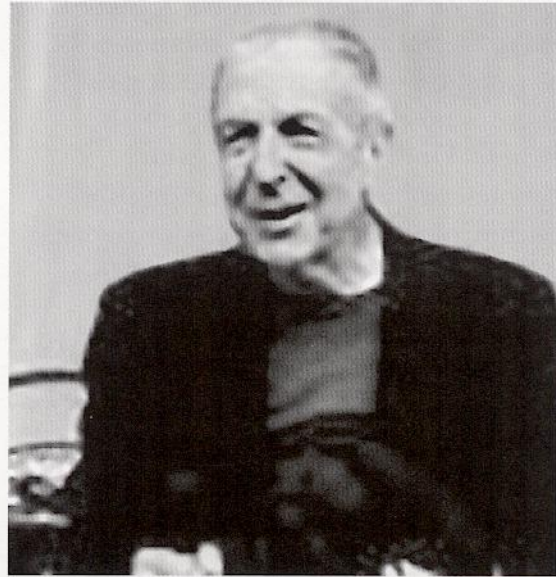
lang, Martha and Rufus Wainwright (the latter who, although a professed homosexual, fathered Lorca Cohen's daughter Chloe), and the Barenaked Ladies. His songs have also been used by filmmakers from Robert Altman to Atom Egoyan and have inspired everything from a musical revue to a work by Philip Glass. Ultimately Cohen offers a vision that celebrates "the majesty of creation." It permeates the lyric of a piece, "Hallelujah," that has been covered by more singers than almost any other contemporary song, with its bleak picture of lost love and disillusion:

I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to
fool you
Even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my tongue but
Hallelujah.

In "Tower of Song," he faces up to old age with a sort of wry acceptance:

Well my friends are gone
And my hair is grey.
I ache in the places where I used to play.

Throughout the early 2000s, Joni's health deteriorated and she was diagnosed with a mysterious disease known



My friends are gone and my hair is grey

as Morgellons Syndrome, which may be an after-effect of polio. But she continued to work on various projects. She became involved in working on a ballet mounted by the Alberta Ballet Company titled *The Fiddle and the Drum*, which choreographer Jean Grand-Maitre set to her songs. She also performed at the Saskatchewan Centennial Concert attended by Queen Elizabeth II. In 2013 she attended a special gala staged by the Luminato Festival in Toronto in honour of her seventieth birthday, during which her music was covered by Rufus Wainwright and Herbie Hancock, among others. She sat and listened, and then she stood up, her hair piled high on her head and her face set in the same

Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen



fierce determination that led her to pen such lyrics as “Songs to aging children come / Aging children, I am one.” Unexpectedly she kicked off her shoes and sang. Her voice was low and husky but it was clear she could still put a song across. She returned to the stage to recover her shoes and received an enor-

mous ovation.

Much has been written about Joni’s originality as a musician. She has influenced singers from Madonna to Prince, Annie Lennox to Courtney Love, Janet Jackson to Björk, fellow Canadians Sarah McLachlan and Alanis Morissette. She has won eight Grammy Awards and been



Joni at Luminato

made a Companion of the Order of Canada. Although not in any sense academic, she has been influenced by many artists and thinkers, from Nietzsche to Billie Holiday, W.B. Yeats to Picasso, Buddha to Miles Davis.

For me Joni's great achievement is the creation of a unique world. A world of illusion and disillusion, of images of beauty and innocence where "the painted ponies go up and down" and "we're captive on the carousel of time." A world of stars and feathers, midways and bars and dance-halls, low dives where jukeboxes play, where men drink and women dance, newspapers blow along the sidewalks and people walk by, ignoring musicians playing on a street corner. It is a world laced with humour and hurt: "thin skin, thick jokes." A world where women fall in love and are bruised or deserted by gamblers and dreamers who make them happy for a moment but can't settle down, leaving them with memories

vividly captured in images. In one of her earliest songs Joni sings "I really don't know life at all," a claim negated by the all the words she has written since.



Joni with John Uren in B.C.

NATIVE ACTIVIST

Buffy Sainte-Marie

As Yorkville transformed itself in the 1960s from a not particularly upscale residential area into a hangout for hippies, I often went to coffee houses to hear folk singers: the Riverboat or the Purple Onion. I was already tuned into folk music, beginning with English songs like “The Foggy, Foggy Dew” or “The Water Is Wide” and sea shanties like “Shenendoah” or “Haul Away, Joe.” I started out with Kathleen Ferrier but began to seek more authentic voices: Ewan MacColl for Scottish ballads, and Jean Ritchie, the Appalachian singer with her dulcimer. The more exotic the better. I started with some French-Canadian tunes and in time I would travel to faraway places in search of authentic musical experiences: Greece, Egypt, Peru, Kenya, and Indonesia. But the most exotic singer in Yorkville in that era was an Indian woman, Buffy Sainte-Marie.

I use the term “Indian” because at that time we had not yet learned to talk about “natives” or “First Nations.” In Toronto



we had virtually no first-hand experience or contact with the original inhabitants of our country. We sometimes bought beaded moccasins or woven baskets and we saw pictures of men wearing feather head-dresses and squaws with papooses strapped to their backs, but the reality of their lives was as distant as the courts of old Cathay. That would change when my wife brought a young Aboriginal girl of nine home to spend a weekend and she stayed on to live with us for a number of years. Not that she taught us anything about her culture, but we became interested and gradually realized the shocking treatment the white

man had meted out to her people.

Buffy Sainte-Marie was exotic in appearance; there was no mistaking her ethnicity, with her long, thick black hair, sparkling black eyes, and aquiline features. She dressed the part, with beaded vests and fringed outfits. Her voice was deep and vibrant, but her articulation was crisp, with no trace of an accent. She didn't come across as someone who had just left the "rez." In fact, she was born a Cree on the Piapot reserve in the Qu'Appelle valley of Saskatchewan. Orphaned as a baby, she was adopted at an early age by a couple in Massachusetts, Albert and Winifred Sainte-Marie, who had some Mi'kmaq ancestors. She finished high school and went to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, studying oriental philosophy. She was a good student and went on to do a Ph.D. in fine arts.

As a teenager she taught herself piano and guitar and began composing songs with titles like "Now That the Buffalo's Gone." She spent her holidays with her family in Maine, where she identified with the simple life of farmers and woodsmen. At the age of 23 she attended a powwow at the Piapot Cree reserve in Saskatchewan, where she still had relations, and was "adopted" by Emile Piapot, the son of the chief. Growing up she knew little about native life, but Emile and his wife taught her a great

deal about the traditions of their tribe.

She already had a career as a singer, touring alone in both Canada and the United States. As a native person she could cross the border freely, and she had both Canadian and American citizenship. Although she probably has spent more time in the United States, she told the *Ottawa Citizen* in 1993 that she considers herself a Canadian. As well as singing in Yorkville alongside Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young, she continued to perform regularly in Greenwich Village in New York at the Gaslight and Gerdes Folk City, and at folk festivals. Not long afterwards, I heard her again at Mariposa.

In 1963, she contracted a throat infection and in the course of recovering became addicted to codeine. The song she wrote after her recovery, "Cod'ine," became popular and was covered by



Buffy singing in Greenwich Village



Donovan, Janis Joplin, The Charlatans, and The Barracudas, and later by Courtney Love. At about this time she was in an airport in San Francisco where she saw wounded and bandaged soldiers being moved off a plane. She talked to them and found out they were returning from Vietnam at a time when military involvement in Asia was still not being openly acknowledged by the United States government. The song she wrote as a result of this experience, "Universal Soldier," inspired a lot of controversy. This song of protest asks who is sending these men to fight. Is it the generals or maybe the politicians? It concludes that it is ultimately all of us who send these men to war.

He's fighting for democracy,
He's fighting for the Reds,
He says it's for the peace of all....

His orders come from far away no more.
They come from him and you and me,
And brothers, can't you see
This is not the way we put an end to
war?

It was only one of many songs that Buffy would compose dealing with political and social issues.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Buffy's and Joni Mitchell's paths crossed frequently. They sang in the same Yorkville

and Greenwich Village coffee houses, though as far as I know they never sang together. They would have made a stunning duo: Joni with her silky blonde hair, Buffy with her jet black tresses; Joni's clear high soprano, Buffy's dusky vocal tones with her resonant vibrato. They had much in common as songwriters: sharp and pointed observations, melodic vocal lines. Both singers made vivid use of contemporary idioms. But while many of Buffy's songs were focused on politics, Joni's were more concerned with personal relationships. However, Buffy wrote a number of love songs: "Until It's Time For You To Go," "Darling, Don't Cry," and "Dance Me Around." Joni's images were more unusual, with surprising juxtapositions of the poetic and the vernacular, but Buffy could come up with a sharply jagged line, usually with a satiric edge:

If I had a way to reach the sky
I'd grab that crescent moon,
Wield it like a knife (from "The Big
Ones Get Away")

Laughter is the grease of growth
Support your local clown. (from
"Mongrel Pup")

Musically, Joni was more experimental, especially as time went on; her unconventional intervals and tunings were legendary. Buffy was less interested in musi-

cal exploration. Many of her recordings have fairly conventional rhythmical backup, or even in the case of "Soldier Blue," the theme song she wrote for the 1970 film of the same name, a conventional film-score accompaniment. She introduced elements in some of her recordings that were taken from native traditional dances, with a strong rhythmic percussive backup and chants that echoed the vocal elements of powwows. She even included the barking of wolves on one track.

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Buffy was more attuned to commercial media than Joni. She wrote a number of film scores, unlike Mitchell, who was told that her songs were so dramatic that they left no room for the narrative to play out. Besides "Soldier Blue," Buffy wrote a film score for *Spirit of the Wind* (1979), a docudrama about George Atla, the "winningest dog musher of all time," which was shown at Cannes in 1979. Her song "Up Where We Belong" was sung in the film *An Officer and a Gentleman* and received an Oscar for Best Song in 1982. Another song became the theme song of the CBC series *Spirit Bay*.

In 1985 she had a role in the film *Broken Rainbow*, about the ongoing land dispute between the Hopi and Navajo tribes. She appeared in the telefilm *The Broken Chain* in 1993 and provided the voice for the Cheyenne woman Kate Bighead in the 1991 TV movie *Voice of*

the Morning Star, which was based on the Battle of Little Bighorn, often referred to as Custer's Last Stand.

Buffy signed a record deal with the Vanguard label, which specialized in folk music. Her initial album *It's My Way* was released in 1964. William Ruhlmann of the All Music Guide website called it "one of the most scathing topical folk albums ever made"; its subject matter ranged from incest to drug addiction. It included "Co'dine," "The Universal Soldier," and another of Buffy's trademark songs, "Now That the Buffalo's Gone." Her second album, *Many a Mile* (1965), mixed traditional songs with Buffy Sainte-Marie originals such as "Until It's Time for You to Go." This song was never well known in Buffy's own version, but it was covered by a long list of musicians that included Elvis Presley, Cher, Neil Diamond, Barbra



Joan Baez with Bob Dylan

Buffy Sainte-Marie



Streisand, British icon Vera Lynn, and jazz vocalist Carmen McRae. Presley's version became a major hit in Europe in 1972 and helped put Buffy on a firm financial footing.

Following these initial albums, Buffy went to Nashville, where she recorded *Little Wheel Spin and Spin* and *Fire & Fleet & Candlelight*. She had always enjoyed country music, and working with country musicians she would put out another album, *I'm Gonna Be a Country Girl Again*. These albums included love songs as well as "Piney Wood Hills," a lyrical evocation of the wooded countryside she had loved as a teenager in Maine. In her next album she experi-

mented with electronic musical back-ups, although "He's an Indian Cowboy in the Rodeo" is a simple country-style tune that would gain her a big fan base among native Americans. The album *Native North American Child* contained the title satirical song, highlighting the invisibility of native Americans in the mass media:

Sing about your ebony African queen,
Sing about your lily-white Lily
Marleen.

Beauty by the bushel, but the girl of
the hour

Is your native North American prairie
flower.



With Johnny Cash

Eventually Buffy would release some 20 albums, but there was a 16-year hiatus in the 1970s when she was considered by the American government of Richard Nixon to be subversive and was placed on a White House list of performers who “deserved to be suppressed.”

Although she was known primarily as a singer, Buffy was active as an educator. She taught courses on a wide variety of subjects including song-writing, women’s studies, digital technology, and art. She began using computers in the early 1980s, both for musical composition and for the creation of visual art. She has said that she began painting at the age of three, at the same time as she discovered the keys on the piano in her parents’ home. She would continue to paint in a style that combined the figurative with the abstract, using bright colours and design elements derived from traditional native art, with its beadwork and geo-

metric patterns. Her works hang in the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, the Emily Carr Gallery in Vancouver, the American Indian Arts Museum in Sante Fe, New Mexico, and the G.O.C.A.I.A. Gallery in Tucson, Arizona. She wrote a children’s book, *Nokomis and the Magic Hat*, and eventually collaborated on an autobiography with native historian Blair Stonechild, with the same title as her first album, *It’s My Way*.

In late 1975 she had been approached by the producers of *Sesame Street* and invited to appear on the show. Instead of reciting the alphabet as she had been asked

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One of Buffy’s paintings



On Sesame Street with Big Bird

Buffy Sainte-Marie



to do, Buffy insisted she wanted to show children that “Indians still exist.” She appeared regularly on the show for the next six years, sometimes accompanied by her son Dakota Starblanket Wolfchild, whose father was her second husband Sheldon Wolfchild, whom she had married in Minnesota in 1975. She made frequent guest appearances on television, including *Pete Seeger’s Rainbow Quest*, *American Bandstand*, *Soul Train*, *The Johnny Cash Show*, and *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson.

In 1969 she had set up the Nihewan Foundation, designed among other things to support native Americans who wanted to study law. Using funds from her foundation she later instituted the Cradleboard Teaching Project, which offered resources to educators wishing to change the way Native American history was being taught in the schools, as exemplified by her son’s textbooks, which she declared were “shallow, inaccurate and not interesting.” Her interest in technology surprised observers, but she was quick to point out that the Internet can help to decentralize power in society generally and spread North American culture specifically. She told the London *Independent*, “It gives an image of Stone age to space age.... It’s natural for any indigenous community to be online, because of our desire to remain in the local community, yet be part of the global community.”

Buffy settled in Hawaii as her home base. Her first husband, Dewain Bugbee, had been a surfing instructor and introduced her to the Pacific island, where she found a place in the woods to renew and nourish her spirit when she was not performing. Here she would bring up her son and create both songs and visual images. In 1992 she recorded a new album, *Coincidence and Other Likely Stories*, which contained the song quoted earlier, “The Big Ones Get Away,” with its blistering condemnation of commercial society:

If the bad guys don’t get you, baby,
Then the good guys will.

It became a hit on the Canadian and British charts and brought her back into the musical limelight. She followed up with an album *Up Where We Belong*, which included many of her earlier hits, “Now That The Buffalo’s Gone,” “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,” and “My Country ’Tis of Thy People You’re Dying,” with its musical echo of the anthem “My Country ’Tis of Thee.” Lines such as these—

Of the genocide basic to this country’s
birth

The tribes were wiped out and the

history books censored

The white nation fattens while others
grow lean

Surprise in your eyes that we're lack-
ing in thanks

—are direct accusations about what happened when, as Buffy likes to put it, “America discovered Columbus.” Two more albums followed: *Running for the Drum* in 2008 and *Power in the Blood* in 2015.

Buffy had appeared at the National Baha’i Youth Conference in Oklahoma in 1973, and she would continue to attend Baha’i events and conferences, singing at the prelude to the World Congress and appearing in a film, *Live Unity: The Sound of the World* directed by Douglas John Cameron in 1992. Although she does not consider herself a member of the Baha’i faith, she says, “I gave a lot of support to Baha’i people in the 80s and 90s. Baha’i people, as people of all religions, is something I’m attracted to. I don’t belong to any religion. I have a huge religious faith, or spiritual faith, but I feel as though religion ... is the first thing that the racketeers exploit.... But that doesn’t turn me against religion.”

Now in her 70s, Buffy continues her work on behalf of the North American native peoples. Her efforts have borne fruit,

particularly in Canada, where the First Nations are receiving increasing media coverage and support. And many native artists are beginning to receive recognition. In our foundation in the last few years there have been at least one or two indigenous artists receiving awards every year. Buffy has been a trailblazer, and the paths she opened up will be followed by many of her people in the years to come.

She has continued to perform about 20 concerts annually, one of which was captured on her *Live at Carnegie Hall* album of 2004, and the size of the crowds she draws—a concert in Denmark was estimated at over 200,000 people—testifies to the lasting impact she has made on the musical world.



Buffy in concert