

# the power of song

FORTY-FIVE YEARS INTO HER CAREER, BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE IS STILL A CHANGING WOMAN.

BY CHRISTOPHER HOLLOW



**B**uffy Sainte-Marie's superb songwriting made her famous. She's penned a fistful of standards that have inspired a wide-spectrum of musicians - from Barbra Streisand to Neko Case, Glen Campbell to Galaxie 500, Quicksilver Messenger Service to Françoise Hardy.

But it's her eccentric voice that makes her such a compelling artist. It's thrilling the way she throws that heavy vibrato around on albums like the 1969 cult-classic *Illuminations* and 1975's *Changing Woman*.

Sainte-Marie calls in from Hawaii, and such is her enthusiasm, it sounds like she's about to materialise through the phone.

Maybe it's because she's got a new album in the can, maybe it's because she's set to play in Australia. Maybe it's just because ...

**I've just been watching a Sesame Street clip of you singing 'Cripple Creek' with a mouth bow. Do people still lose their shit when you pull out a mouth bow?** [Laughing] Yeah, they do, they like it, it's very unusual. In fact, I have a new album coming out in May and I use mouth bow on two or three of the songs.

**It's all over a song I love - 'Dyed, Dead, Red' from the Performance soundtrack. Oh, wow, where do you come from? That's a good, obscure find. Now I know who I'm talking to. Isn't that a great album? I love it.**

**'Moonshot' is my favourite Buffy song. Great lyric and string arrangement. Do you still have an emotional connection to that song?** I do. I really like that song, some songs just really touch me when nobody has heard them but me. I hardly ever play it. But thank you for mentioning that one.

**What do we have to do to make sure you play it in Australia?** [Laughing] When I'm there I probably will not be playing it, because the band doesn't know it. When I'm making up a set, it's usually a combination of whatever is on our latest album, plus the standards that people normally request. We'll be doing things like 'Universal Soldier', which is a protest song. 'Up Where We Belong', which won me an Academy Award. 'Until It's Time For You to Go', which has been recorded by everybody and his sister, and a whole lot of new things that you haven't heard before. But, I'd like to do 'Moonshot', that's a real good idea. The problem is we don't do a real long concert. If we did, I could indulge myself.

**Who's been the most surprising person to cover one of your songs?** I'm constantly surprised by people who have recorded my songs. For instance Cam'ron, Courtney Love, Janis Joplin, although I didn't find out about it 'til long after she had passed [Joplin did 'Cod'ine'].

**What's the weirdest place you've heard one of your songs?** I'll tell you one, I had a person tell me they'd gotten married and their song had been 'Until It's Time For You to Go'. They got divorced and then they got married again and their song was 'Up Where We Belong'. That was kinda strange.

**What's the cover that's made you the most money?** Probably Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes - they had a Number One worldwide hit with 'Up Where We Belong', so it's hard to top that. But, for longevity, I think the biggest one is 'Until It's Time For You to Go'. It's been recorded by a lot of people - Elvis Presley, Barbra Streisand, people whose lives are very different to mine, and what a compliment that is to have somebody who's music is real different, comes from a different genre, different lifestyle, to have the song mean enough to them to like it and learn it, teach the band, bring it on the road and give it to their audience. It's a never-ending thrill for a songwriter.

**What's the cover that you hold closest to your heart?** Chet Atkins did 'Until It's Time For You to Go' on television on *Austin City Limits*. Oh god, it was really something. I was an Elvis fan, but I really wish he'd recorded that song when he was 19 instead of when he and Priscilla were getting married. There's been some classical versions too. Some people have done nice versions of 'Universal Soldier' and 'Cod'ine', Quicksilver Messenger Service I think it was. I don't know, there's too many.

**There must've been a time when you couldn't walk the streets without hearing someone doing a version of 'Cod'ine'. That became a standard very quickly.** I don't know, I think it kinda stayed underground, that one. I mean Donovan had a hit with it. He played the heck out of it. But I think it stayed underground, and with a certain hippie-liberal attitude just because of the subject matter. It's just so clearly about real addiction. I don't think it got a lot of play, I mean some people didn't want to hear about any drugs.

**Another favourite is 'He's A Keeper Of The Fire' from Illu-**


**minations. Do you still have a connection with that song?** Gosh, not really. *Illuminations* kinda got me kicked out of folk music, nobody liked it. People like Joan Baez and Judy Collins, who were my colleagues in the '60s, were not very experimental. When I came out with *Illuminations*, it was very unusual for people to be doing multi-tracking and electronics and shattering their guitar and vocal sounds. People just didn't get it. There wasn't anywhere to go with that kind of electronic music, except movie scoring. But, the people who became fans of Brian Eno, Paul Beaver and Morton Subotnick - art students and electronic music nerds - they just loved it. With 'Keeper Of The Fire' somebody told me that Jeff Buckley was a big fan of that song and the album, so that'd be nice to imagine.

**I'm sure both Jeff and Tim Buckley were fans of that album. They throw their voices around in a similar way to what you do.** Yeah. And I guess Annie Lennox too. Do you know a song called 'Mongrel Pup'? I can't remember which album it's on [1975's *Changing Woman*]. Again, it's very experimental. I was really into computers. I started using computers in the '70s with a Fairlight. I was all by myself in doing it, it was a private passion for a long time, but then music has always been like that for me. It's always been kinda private, I've never been associated with any of the big labels, or any of the big managers. I've always been on the peripheral of all that. I've never become Madonna or Michael Jackson, I've never had to hide out in the penthouse and I think that's good.

**How can we get you to play 'He's A Keeper Of The Fire' when you're in Australia?** That's never gonna happen, buy the record [laughing]. But you're a real music aficionado - on the new album I re-wrote and recorded Alabama 3's 'Power

In The Blood' as a peace song and it's just huge, I'm really happy with it. We're not supposed to be talking about the new album, but because you know so much about so many different genres, I couldn't help myself [laughing].

**What's one criticism of your music that you accept?** Someone once told me I was a gourmet item. Either you like me or you hate me, and I can go along with that. Someone asked me the other day about different audiences in the world, but for me, it's audiences in ten different parts of the theatre. Some people will come because they want to hear songs that they've heard done by Willie Nelson, or they'll come to hear the love songs, or they wanna hear the hip stuff, or the very un-hip stuff. Some people say, "Oh, she's going to sing that Indian stuff and I can't wait," and others, "Oh my God, I hope she doesn't sing that Indian stuff."

**'Take My Hand For A While' - a lot of people with quite different political allegiances than you have done that song.** Oh, I love that song. I wish we could talk more, I'd like to meet you, you're talking about all the right songs that nobody else even notices. You know who recorded a great version was Françoise Hardy on *If You Listen*. She did that and 'Until It's Time For You to Go', and they're both so beautiful. Glen Campbell did it, George Hamilton IV. Some of my songs have been recorded by very politically conservative people. I think it's just the nature of my writing. Some of it is universal themes and others are quite unique. There's something in there for everybody. It's not all escargot. 

*Buffy Sainte-Marie performs at WOMAdelaide, Port Fairy Folk Festival, and Brunswick Music Festival in March.*