



Buffy Sainte-Marie

An Unsung Hero for Far Too Long

Buffy Sainte-Marie: A Multimedia Life

DIRECTED BY
JOAN PROWSE
CineFocus Canada and
Paquin Entertainment
Canada, 2006

Review by

COLLEEN SIMARD

While the film shows

Buffy Sainte-Marie speaking to a crowd gathered at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, her voiceover gives a small hint to her innovative way of thinking.

“If we are made in the image of the Creator, what does that mean?” she asks. “It means that we are creative.”

And it’s true. Buffy Sainte-Marie is about more than just folk songs, buckskin and feathers. The recently released documentary, *Buffy Sainte-Marie: A Multimedia Life*, is veritable proof of that.

The film — a co-production between CineFocus Canada and Paquin Entertainment — takes a look at Sainte-Marie’s life, not just as a singer, but an Academy Award-winning songwriter, Native rights and anti-war activist, multimedia artist and educator.

It’s an engaging biography that’s well shot, researched, edited and paced. Those familiar with Buffy’s career, which spans decades, won’t be disappointed with the archival performance clips scattered throughout the film.

Praised by a variety of stars — from Bill Cosby to

Randy Bachman — Buffy stays true to her roots. She’s very humble, considering her contributions to music, art and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. Some of her early songs — like “Until It’s Time For You To Go” — have been recorded by the likes of Janis Joplin, Roberta Flack, Sonny and Cher, Neil Diamond, Barbra Streisand and Elvis Presley. And who knew that Sainte-Marie helped singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell get her big career break?

The film also touches on Buffy being blacklisted in the seventies for her ties to both the Native American Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement. She recounts one memorable experience of being invited onto Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show*, only upon the agreement that she

not talk about Native American rights. She turned down the invitation. She learned a decade later that radio stations were paid not to play her music, and many of her records just disappeared, never making it onto record-store shelves.

In many ways Buffy is still ahead of her time. She founded the Cradleboard Teaching Project designed to incorporate Native American culture into Aboriginal communities and mainstream classrooms around the world. She also embraced new technology in the eighties, and has incorporated it into her visual art.

The film briefly delves into her adoption from the Piapot reserve in Saskatchewan, as well as her upbringing in Maine and Massachusetts. She says there was a “predator” in her home, but overall her childhood was positive. Still, it’s apparent there was also pain growing up caused by disconnection from her Cree identity. It’s something many Aboriginal people can relate to, myself included.

Buffy would later reconnect with her family and visit her home reserve many times. She learned about traditional Cree ceremonies and teachings — often reflected in her songs over the years.

Buffy Sainte-Marie: A Multimedia Life would be a wonderful addition to any classroom studying Native Studies or Canadian History. Aboriginal youth in particular, though perhaps unfamiliar with Buffy’s music, would enjoy seeing an Aboriginal role model of such a high calibre. ♣