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BUZZ || EVER ACTIVIST



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

The calendar says Buffy Sainte-Marie is 65 but the Pacific islander looks half that.

Buffy's full life, blacklist sorrow

The lady doth protest too much, decided LBJ minions. 'It broke my heart.' **By Greg Quill**

Regrets? Not really . . . I don't do things I don't like doing, and I have a very full life."

But the glint in Buffy Sainte-Marie's eye suggests otherwise, and her answer to the final question about making the documentary *Buffy Sainte-Marie: A Multimedia Life* — airing Tuesday on Bravo! at 8 p.m. — rings hollow.

The documentary by Toronto filmmaker Joan Prowse fully examines, within the limits of an hour, the life of the 65-year-old Saskatchewan-born, U.S.-raised Native American singer, artist, teacher, social activist and inductee to both the Canadian Music and Canadian Songwriters Halls of Fame.

It's an affectionate portrait from her birth in the Piapot Cree reserve in the Qu'Appelle valley, through her string of popular protest songs in the 1960s and '70s ("The Universal Solder," "Up Where We Belong," "Now That The Buffalo's Gone" and more, recorded by Elvis, Barbra Streisand, Cher, Janis Joplin and Joe Cocker among others) and her years on TV's *Sesame Street*.

The film visits the Pacific island ranch where Sainte-Marie has lived for four decades, creating music and computer-generated digital art, painting and nurturing her Cradleboard Teaching Project, an Internet-based educational system that imparts alternative versions of "official" history, geography, social studies and spirituality to American Indian children.

What's missing? What's to regret?

"I only wish I could have been more effective in the U.S.," says Sainte-Marie in the Toronto office of her Canadian agent Gilles Paquin. "It would have been nice to succeed as a musician at the level of someone like Sting, or to get taken on by some big-time manager, like Dylan and Joan Baez were."

Instead, for the sin of speaking her mind in topical songs and speeches about the Vietnam war and native rights, Sainte-Marie found herself shut out of the mainstream just as she was peaking, her concerts and TV spots cancelled and her recordings mysteriously absent from record stores.

"I was blacklisted," she says. "And so were Eartha Kitt and Taj Mahal, and quite a few others who were speaking out against the war and civil rights abuses, and didn't have a high enough profile or skilled management."

She has seen the FBI files — censored with "the fattest black marker you've

ever seen" — that chronicle the Lyndon B. Johnson administration's deliberate campaign in the late 1960s and early '70s to dampen U.S. radio play and distribution of her recordings.

She was in the dark "till 10 or 12 years later, when I was professionally dead. At first I was flattered, in a way, to learn so much effort had gone into crushing this . . . mosquito. Seeing those files also helped me make sense of a lot of mysteries. I thought I was just a victim of a natural decline in popularity.

"It broke my heart to know that someone had worked so hard to make sure my medicine didn't get to where it was needed. Ever since, my career has been on the periphery of show business. I've never had a proper tour.

"In the long run, it didn't make me less effective (except) in America. When I was young, hanging out in New York clubs, I never thought my career would last more than six months anyway."

A trained educator with a second major in Oriental Studies, Sainte-Marie is presented in *A Multimedia Life* as a restless creative soul who has never observed traditional artistic boundaries.

"I knew about Buffy's work in music and in promoting aboriginal traditions, but I had no idea when I started working on this film about her pioneering work in computer technology, art and formal teaching," said the director Prowse.

"It impressed me that she always seems to be in on the beginning of important cultural shifts — the songwriter movement, the application of computers in art and music, education via the Internet. She was sending music files to her record producer in London in the mid-1980s via modems.

"Her computer-generated art, which no one took seriously 20 years ago, is now in some of the world's major galleries. And she spends most of her spare time writing curriculum for Cradleboard, and setting up guidelines for teachers. She never stops, except to feed the livestock on her farm. Nothing's an obstacle to her. Creativity is problem solving."

On a personal level, Sainte-Marie looks half her age, and shares an active life on her secret island with a shaggy blond, muscular local in his 30s.

"I work out, I don't drink . . . I'm almost a complete vegetarian," she confided. "Just don't ask me about psychedelics . . ."