

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

Buffy Sainte-Marie's bold new album, *Power in the Blood*, begins where it all started more than 50 years ago, with a contemporary version of "It's My Way," the title track of her 1964 debut. Its message, about the road to self-identity and the conviction to be oneself, still resonates with the Cree singer-songwriter, activist, educator, visual artist, and winner of countless awards (Oscar, Juno, and Golden Globe, among them).

Perhaps you know Sainte-Marie from her 1960s protest anthems ("Universal Soldier"), open-hearted love songs ("Until It's Time for You to Go"), incendiary powwow rock ("Starwalker"), or the juggernaut pop hit "Up Where We Belong," which Sainte-Marie co-wrote and Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes sang for the soundtrack to *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

One of her earliest classics, "Cod'ine," a harrowing account of addiction well ahead of its time, was covered by everyone from Janis Joplin to Donovan to Courtney Love. Or maybe you remember Sainte-Marie from her five years on the television show "Sesame Street" beginning in the mid-'70s.

Whatever the case, every song and every era has revealed new and distinctive shades of an artist revered for her pioneering and chameleon ways. There was no mold from which Buffy Sainte-Marie emerged; she created her own, ripened from experiences in both her head and her heart.

Power in the Blood is a follow-up to 2008's acclaimed *Running for the Drum* and only her fourth studio release in more than 20 years. Although just because you don't hear from her for long stretches doesn't mean she's not playing. Quite the opposite. Sainte-Marie's creativity is always in motion, and her passport's always in hand, touring for lectures and performances around the world with her high-octane backing band. She records only when she feels like touring, and currently Sainte-Marie is taking center stage around the world, including North America, Europe and Australia.

Her latest record is an honest reflection of Sainte-Marie. The hallmarks of her catalog – the eclecticism and compassion she brings to each album, oblivious to genre boundaries and production trends – are in glorious bloom here. It's the Buffy you know and love, and it's geared for contemporary audiences.

Throbbing to a techno beat, the title track was originally written and performed by the British band Alabama 3, of whom she is a fan. It's safe to say Sainte-Marie makes it her own. She wrote new lyrics, turning the song inside out and reconfiguring it as a potent antiwar statement: "When that call it comes/ I will say, no no no to war."

"Sometimes people tell me, 'Oh, you're such a warrior for peace,'" Sainte-Marie says. "But I'm not a warrior at all. What I represent is new thinking about alternative conflict resolution. That's quite different from the war racket and quite possibly a real step to a safe future."

Power in the Blood also includes odes to the sanctity of life ("We Are Circling") and the splendor of Mother Nature ("Carry It On," a song so euphoric and empowering that it should be taught in schools and performed at the Olympics). Hungry for songs of substance, Sainte-Marie also found inspiration in UB40's "Sing Our Own Song," which had been closely associated with Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and put her own powwow spin on it.

"Farm in the Middle of Nowhere" is her sweet confession of what her life is like these days, with a country spirit she describes as "rockabilly Hawaiian." "Ke Sakihitin Awasis" is another love song, this one specifically for the Native culture Sainte-Marie has unflinchingly spotlighted as a humanitarian and world-renowned musician.

She revisits three of her earlier songs – “It’s My Way,” “Not the Lovin’ Kind,” and “Generation,” the latter two written during “the blacklist years” when she could get no airplay - recalling Glen Spreen and Norbert Putnam's original '70s arrangements, and giving fans an opportunity to appreciate them anew.

“To me, a good song stays relevant even though other good ones come along,” she says. “I feel like all my songs are coming from the 3-year-old I’ll always be, and the ones I keep loving are fresh to me every time I perform them.”

Recording in Toronto, Sainte-Marie enlisted three different producers, a first for her, to help shape *Power in the Blood*: Michael Wojewoda (Barenaked Ladies, Jeff Healey), Chris Birkett (Sinéad O’Connor, Bob Geldof) and Jon Levine (Melissa Etheridge, Serena Ryder). Birkett has now worked with Sainte-Marie on four albums, beginning with 1992’s *Coincidence and Likely Stories*. He recognized from the start that Sainte-Marie was a singular force.

“She pays a lot of attention to her lyrics,” Birkett says, “and when Buffy says something, she actually means something.”

Often pegged as a folk singer – particularly by past record labels that either failed or were unwilling to see how far ahead of the curve she was – Sainte-Marie never fully fit in with her ’60s contemporaries. While her peers were singing the centuries-old folk ballads she may have adored, her songs sprang from her own imagination and were effortlessly unique.

In truth, and this is often overlooked, Sainte-Marie is like an investigative journalist who prods and provokes to tell another side of a story. She tells the part of the narrative that has been conveniently left out of history books. Her songs have been a light in the dark, uncovering everything from corporate greed (“No No Keshagesh”) to violations of human rights (“My Country ’Tis of Thy People You’re Dying”) to governmental abuse of the very people it’s supposed to protect (“Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee” and it’s companion from this latest album, “The Uranium War”).

That unwavering resilience has rippled across genres and generations, even as Sainte-Marie’s profile in the United States diminished significantly when she was blacklisted in the ’70s. Recognizing the power of her songwriting and activism, the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon administrations considered her an “artist to be suppressed,” and Sainte-Marie all but disappeared from the US music industry.

Power in the Blood is a reminder that, five decades on, it is still futile to silence artists or to put Sainte-Marie in any single category. She simply doesn’t fit. Yes, she can inspire you to rise up and take action, but she can just as easily melt your heart with a tender ballad. Go back to “Until It’s Time for You to Go” and you’ll be hard-pressed to say when it was written or for whom. It’s evergreen and, like so much of Sainte-Marie’s work, it’s universal.

“I love words, I love thinking, and I recognize and value the core of a universal idea simplified into a three-minute song,” she says. “What appealed to me in folk music were the songs that have lasted for generations, but I wasn’t trying to be one of those guys. I wanted to give people something original.”