

“It’s My Way”--Buffy Sainte-Marie (1964)

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Essay by Richie Unterberger (guest post) *



Buffy Sainte-Marie

On her 1964 album “It’s My Way,” Buffy Sainte-Marie made as forceful a debut as any performer of the folk revival. Her immediately distinctive vibrato vocals would have marked her as a special talent even had she only interpreted traditional songs. There were some of those on the LP, yet most of the tracks were original compositions that tackled topics that weren’t just daring, but taboo. Besides the antiwar classic “The Universal Soldier,” her material addressed the plight of Native Americans, drug addiction, and even incest.

The arrangements on “It’s My Way” are stark. There’s bass on one track and second guitar on another, but otherwise it’s just Sainte-Marie and her acoustic guitar (and, on “Cripple Creek,” mouth bow). If anything, the record benefits from the bareness. Her voice can swoop from a romantic caress to a harrowing howl. Whatever the setting, it shimmers with the hope and resilience of a woman who’s lived what she’s singing.

A Native American with Cree ancestry, Sainte-Marie was born in Saskatchewan and adopted at a young age by a couple from the United States. Raised in New England, she became a full-time professional musician after attending the University of Massachusetts, quickly gaining attention on the folk circuit with both her voice and songwriting. In August 1963, even before she had a record out, “New York Times” critic Robert Shelton praised her “throaty sensual voice that moves with surety through a wide range of folk songs traditional or of her own composition...her vibrant way of interpreting them make Miss Sainte-Marie, at 21, one of the most promising new talents on the folk scene.

At a time when popular woman folk singers such as Joan Baez and Judy Collins had high, angelic voices, Sainte-Marie’s husky, earthier delivery set her apart. Vanguard Records, home to some of the era’s most successful folkies (most notably Baez), signed Buffy and issued “It’s My

Way” in spring 1964. While the folk revival had just peaked and would be superseded by the British Invasion and electric folk-rock, the album endures as one of the most powerful recordings of the genre, with penetrating social and personal statements that remain relevant in the next century. Taped in the Vanguard’s studio in the high-ceilinged, wooden-floored ballroom of the Manhattan Towers hotel, it’s a no-frills production, but arguably all the more powerful for its unadorned directness.

Sainte-Marie’s lyrical boldness is front and center from the first track, “Now That the Buffalo’s Gone,” a haunting lament for government seizure of Native American lands that saves the title phrase for the final line. The most famous protest song from the LP, however, shifts the focus to a global problem, and became one of the most renowned antiwar songs of all time. True to its title, “The Universal Soldier” depicts the unjust costs of war as universal, no matter what the soldier’s religion, age, nationality, or even height. It became a hit single, but not for Sainte-Marie, with both Donovan and Glen Campbell taking it into the middle of the US Top Hundred charts in late 1965.

Aside from “The Universal Soldier,” “Cod’ine” was the track from “It’s My Way” that sparked the most attention, and certainly at least as much controversy. Many songs in blues, folk, and jazz had referred to drug intake, but usually obliquely and often with coy humor. In contrast, “Cod’ine” not only names the drug, but dwells on its draining and devastating consequences, Sainte-Marie drawing out the chorus in withdrawal-level pained anguish. “Cod’ine” made a big impact on the California ‘60s rock scene, generating cover versions by Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Charlatans, the Leaves, and other bands.

At a time when so-called topical folk songs were in ascendance, Sainte-Marie was holding her own in the company of other young songwriters using music as vehicles for social commentary. If few others referred to drug use with the directness of “Cod’ine,” virtually none dealt with incest. Sainte-Marie did so in “The Incest Song,” the title alone guaranteeing scarce airplay. While it’s not the most memorable song on “It’s My Way,” no others exceed its daring.

“It’s My Way” wasn’t solely devoted to troubling or controversial subjects. “He Lived Alone in Town” unveiled her knack for penning somber, eerie ballads that could have been mistaken for ageless traditional songs. She varied the tune for “Streets of Laredo” on “The Old Man’s Lament,” where she soared into high, almost mournful near-yodels.

Although traditional songs are in the minority on “It’s My Way,” Sainte-Marie was an imaginative interpreter of those as well. “Cripple Creek” backs a good-time folk tune with nothing save the idiosyncratic twang-shake of her mouth bow, the stick-like instrument she’s pictured with on the LP’s cover. “Ananias” has a gospel feel that would do Odetta proud, and “You’re Gonna Need Somebody on Your Bond” is credible spiritual blues.

Sainte-Marie’s own compositions, however, are the true standouts on “It’s My Way.” That includes the title track, which drives the LP to a rousing conclusion with a statement of independence that summarizes the spirit of the album as a whole. Sainte-Marie might have been

the product of the folk revival, but no one else sounded like her, at a time when so many folkies were either trying to sound like older folk legends or imitate each other. No other folk star looked like her, either, and as a Native American woman, she was an important role model to minorities and other women singer-songwriters she'd influence, like Joni Mitchell.

Asked by this author in a 2001 interview what attracted listeners to her material, Sainte-Marie explained, "Our early-'60s generation had the great benefit of a network of coffee houses which attracted students. My songs--because of that special window of student-powered coffee house communication--could be about anything, and still have an audience."

She added:

As a songwriter I had the benefit of hearing real folk songs and tried to write songs that would last for generations (like an antique) and be universal in appeal. That is (typical college girl approach), I did real research and had no familiarity with the business part of the music business, so I wasn't "aiming at a market." The songs were original, unusual, well researched, and most of all true to what I was seeing around me, which rang true to student audiences and other artists across a wide range of styles.

Featuring the cream of the "more than 200 songs" Robert Shelton reported her to have written by summer 1963, "It's My Way" continues to ring true to audiences of all ages and backgrounds more than half a century later.

Richie Unterberger is the author of a dozen books on rock music including "Unknown Legends of Rock 'n' Roll," "White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day-By-Day" and "Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s." His book, "The Unreleased Beatles' Music and Film" won a 2007 Association for Recorded Sound Collections Award for Excellence. He teaches courses on rock history at several colleges in the San Francisco Bay Area.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Library of Congress.