



***Buffy Sainte-Marie: The Authorized Biography.*** By Andrea Warner. Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2018. 304 pp. ISBN 9781771643580.

<https://greystonebooks.com/collections/andrea-warner/products/buffy-sainte-marie>

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Cree singer, songwriter, actress, and educator Buffy Sainte-Marie has led a remarkable life. Since beginning her career nearly sixty years ago, many of her twenty-one albums—featuring mostly original songs—have pushed technological and social boundaries; and as an actress and educator, she has been a stalwart advocate for inclusion and diversity. Andrea Warner provides readers with a compelling sketch of Sainte-Marie’s extraordinary accomplishments in her book *Buffy Sainte-Marie: The Authorized Biography*. Drawing on forty hours of formal

interviews conducted in part while on the road with Sainte-Marie, Warner writes with attention to the intricate ways in which history, sociocultural shifts (some led by Sainte-Marie), and personal experiences have shaped Sainte-Marie’s music, as well as her life beyond music. Her seventeen chapters are roughly chronological, with five interludes on abuse, fame, decolonization, uncertainty, and happiness—all in Sainte-Marie’s own words. An example of the biographical genre at its finest, Warner’s book acknowledges the hardships Sainte-Marie has faced in her personal life and as an Indigenous woman in the music industry without sensationalizing her pain or turning it into a story of success against all odds.

Given the racism and misogyny deeply imbedded in the music industry, it is not surprising that Sainte-Marie’s abilities as a musician have all too often been downplayed and erased. In fact, it might come as a surprise to some that Sainte-Marie wrote the very popular song “Until It’s Time for You to Go,” covered numerous times by Elvis Presley, among other musicians, and that she co-wrote the Academy Award-winning “Up Where We Belong” (with Will Jennings and her then-partner Jack Nitzsche). She also composed “Universal Soldier” and “Cod’ine,” both covered by Donovan (Donovan Philips Leitch). Sainte-Marie is often not credited for these songs and has even been confronted over their authorship. Furthermore, as Warner points out, Leitch was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame, while Sainte-Marie has been inducted into neither. This erasure of Sainte-Marie’s authorship and artistic merit, as Warner suggests, speaks to “the inherent ‘authority’ that



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society gives to men's words, [and] the weight they carry," whereas women "apparently speak in dandelion fluff and helium balloons" (p. 68). Certainly, for a musician who has written such beloved songs, it is surprising at best that her skills as a songwriter have not been more widely recognized.

Like her songwriting abilities, Sainte-Marie's musical innovations often go unacknowledged. Her third album, *Little Wheel Spin and Spin* (1966) featured electric guitar—revolutionary for a folk musician at the time—and was a model for future cross-genre albums. It also included "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying," which called out Canada's residential school system. Fifty years later, we have only just begun addressing the horrific abuse and genocide facilitated by these schools. With the release of *Illuminations* in 1969, Sainte-Marie became the first person to record an album completely in quadrophonic sound. In 1992, following a hiatus from the music business, she recorded *Coincidence and Likely Stories*, becoming the first person to release an album made entirely over the internet. In addition to innovations at the intersection of music and technology, Sainte-Marie promoted Indigenous musics in a way that no one was doing at the time; indeed, her music demonstrated the enduring modernity of Indigenous musical practices. This is notable in "Starwalker" (first recorded in 1976) and "Darling Don't Cry" (1996) which are both groundbreaking for their sampling of powwow singing. Many now consider her to be a trailblazer at the forefront of the contemporary Indigenous musical renaissance.

While Sainte-Marie's work has often addressed inequities, she does not position herself as a disrupter who went up against a racist and misogynistic system. As she points out, she just aims to present the facts. When she wrote songs such as "Now That the Buffalo's Gone," she offended people with her message about genocide and colonialism, but she was simply "being accurate" and had been very careful to fact check (p. 97). Sainte-Marie's humility is refreshing but should not be read as an indication that her work lacks impact. The five years (1976–1981) she spent as an actor on *Sesame Street* gave Indigenous children a role model at a time when there was little to no room for Indigenous people in popular culture, and her work on the television series *The Virginian* (1968) ensured more realistic and comprehensive representation of Indigenous people on television. To this day she is considered at the vanguard of Indigenous music, a role model to contemporary Indigenous artists and a musical messenger for Indigenous and Settler peoples alike. Her approach to social change, in her own words, centres on "offering an alternative" rather than "winning a fight" (p. 101). It is an activism that offers content rather than (just) critique.

*Buffy Sainte-Marie* is a must-read book for anyone who wants to better understand settler-colonialism in North America and the way in which it impacts both individuals and broader social structures. Given Sainte-Marie's musical achievements, it is also essential reading for anyone interested in folk and popular musics within North America. Despite addressing challenging and even painful issues, it is ultimately a poignant portrayal of a woman who has used compassion, grace, resilience, and fierceness as a formidable force against racism and misogyny.