

Buffy's catalogues spells success

Up where she belongs - classic songs with many cover versions

By Ralph Gowling

Buffy Sainte-Marie is an international superstar performer, an anti-war and rights icon, and a leading songwriter who has given the world classics like 'Up Where We Belong' and 'Until It's Time For You To Go'.

The list of artists who have covered her songs is a true accolade to her gift to write numbers that so vividly and movingly bring into focus how we can all be touched by subjects like love, war, rights, religion and mysticism.

Elvis Presley, Barbra Streisand, Neil Diamond, Roberta Flack, Donovan, Françoise Hardy, Cher, Joe Cocker and Bobby Darin are just a few of the virtual who's who of the music business who have tapped into her rich catalogue.

For someone who has achieved so much - she also wrote one of the greatest peace anthems 'Universal Soldier' - Buffy shows no signs of letting up and still has ambitions to fulfill.

"Yes I do! I wake up in the morning feeling like somebody shot me out of a slingshot! Somehow I've got a lot of energy," Buffy told *The Beat* by telephone from her home in Hawaii where she has lived for more than 40 years.

Her home underlines how she likes to shun the trappings of stardom and stay close to her Canadian Indian roots.

"I live on a goat farm in the mountains, I'm raising 27 goats and two horses and a kitty cat. Plus I'm on the road with a rock 'n' roll band. Then I've got my home studio, so I can work on my music which I'm doing constantly. If you don't see me, I'm at my busiest."

The interview was prompted by the re-issue in two CD packages of both her best-known songs and a large number of rarely heard numbers from a period when she says the US administrations of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon kept her from getting airplay.

Buffy says it was only years later that she found out the FBI and CIA had had her under surveillance because of her anti-war and rights campaigning.

The Up Where We Belong CD draws its title from the track of the same name, which Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes covered and had huge hits with.

The track which Buffy co-wrote with Jack Nitzsche and Will Jennings, also featured in the film *An Officer And A Gentleman* and earned her an Academy Award for Best Original Song in 1982.

"This CD is basically a collection of all the songs that people ask for at concerts.

"There is obviously 'Up Where We Belong' and songs like 'Universal Soldier', 'Until It's Time For You To Go' which is my songwriter's simpler version, 'Cripple Creek', 'Now That The Buffalo's Gone', and 'Soldier Blue'."

The Pathfinder: Buried Treasures CD gathers together songs from three albums in the 70s when she virtually disappeared from the airwaves.

"I didn't know it then but I was going through a whole blacklisting thing, so I think a lot of people haven't heard these songs.

"There are 33 songs on the CD that cover all kinds of stuff - from rock 'n' roll to love songs, some country music, some blues, and things that sound like folk songs.

"I think it's a great mix of songs and I'm sure people will find a few surprises in there too.

"I believe a lot of people lost track of me in the 1960s and then picked up on me again in the 90s, so there was a whole middle bit missing.

"This was a period when I could get no airplay in the US. There were political administrations who preferred that people should not speak out about certain issues, like native American rights or civil rights or the war in Vietnam.

"I wasn't really aware at the time of the political connection. I just figured out that it's over for me - just like other artists after they've had some hits."

Buffy's lyrics are always beautifully crafted to conjure up a picture or convey a message, probably none better than in 'Universal Soldier'.

Does the message of 'Universal Soldier' still hold true to today's world - nearly half a century after she wrote it?

"I think it does. I wish it didn't, I really wish it didn't. My inspiration for the song came from seeing the wounded soldiers coming back from Vietnam and just that, as a young person, we were being told that there was no war in Vietnam.

"The political administration at the time was saying: 'You hippies are crazy, there is no war in Vietnam'."

"But for the first time in my life I was confronted by the sight of soldiers - you know medics wheeling their friends round in wheelchairs and things."

"So I got to thinking about who is responsible for war and these wounded guys."

"I got to thinking about career military officers, but then I thought wait a minute who is it who actually decides to start the war, makes the phone call, presses the button or whatever they do.



"I concluded it was politicians, but when you ask who is it who elects the politicians, it turns out it is all of us. So the song really is about individual responsibility for war, not just the Vietnam War but all wars.

"We're all complicit in it unless we do something about it. I wrote 'Universal Soldier' in the early 1960s but now as proud as I am of my generation for having stopped that war and put Lyndon Johnson out of business, I look around North America and we have five major heavy-funded colleges of war but none for alternative conflict resolution and peace.

"We have not one similar college of that seriousness and that kind of funding, so how is a young person supposed to learn about alternative conflict resolution. We are not really supporting it."

"So in a way the idea behind 'Universal Soldier' is all of us who do nothing are responsible for the world we have. You're right - we haven't changed a whole lot."

Elvis Presley was a big influence on Buffy.

"Oh absolutely. When I was 13 I was supposed to be ironing down in the basement, but actually I was listening to the radio and I was just a huge fan of early rock 'n' roll - Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and The Comets.

"I used to go to the Alan Freed rock 'n' roll shows - Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis were all up on the stage in the same show, The Platters and so on."

"There was such a ripe and raw youthful gush of talent. Young talented people on stage. It just totally blew my mind. The Alan Freed rock 'n' roll shows and the radio introduced me to the fact that young people can make music of our own that has nothing to do with our parents.

"I think that is when I got a

sneak of my own uniqueness and what I could do."

Buffy says she loves performing live and hopes to return to Britain in the not too distant future after a series of a highly successful UK concerts at major and prestigious venues in January.

"Oh, they were just great. Then we went to Europe where we also had a wonderful reception.

"I've got a small band with me - three native American guys from Winnipeg, Canada. They're all from different reservations. They are all rockers and it's beautiful to work with them because they are all in their late 30s.

"They've grown up in the environment in which my songs take place, whether they're love songs or about native American issues and so on. It's just a thrill to travel with them and I've really been enjoying it."

It is hard to imagine that Buffy is approaching 70 when you see this timeless beautiful woman with the trademark long black hair who remains so passionate about her music.

Her voice is as haunting and expressive as ever and she plans to carry on performing live whenever she can.

"I hope so and I love it. It's such a wonderful life and incredible privilege just being an artist at all and for people to come and listen to your music. It's always fun.

"In England this last time it was wonderful to see that there were a lot of young fans in the audiences. I don't know how they've got wind of my music, but it was so great to see them.

"There are people in all generations that I've touched or been touched by in my musical life, so it was really exciting for me.

"Nothing beats being out there on stage and feeling that warmth of appreciation from an audience for the music you've written and performed."