

Blue Indian, old dreams

With a scarred history and shaky faith, John Trudell speaks to America

By CHRISTOPHER HEINE
Staff writer

American Indian performer John Trudell is after the same thing he wanted back when he was burning American flags in the 1970s.

Communication.
Furthermore, the former political activist will perform his expressive and educational set of spoken-word poetry with his band, Bad Dog, tonight at 8 p.m. in the University of Nebraska's student union.

"I feel the need to express my opinions," he said. "When people come in contact with my music or speaking, the real objective is to get them to think and feel."

His performance will be part of the Great Plains Music and Dance Symposium, a weeklong festival sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Center for Great Plains Studies. Bad Dog will be performing tonight with up-and-coming South Dakota-based blues act Indigenous.

Trudell, of Santee Sioux heritage, has plenty of experiences to draw from and convey in his art. Although his performances have been described as optimistic, the brunt of his most powerful experiences seem to be unfortunate, and at times tragic.

He grew up in various Omaha communities and on the Santee Indian Reservation in northeast Nebraska. Trudell said he preferred the close-knit, extended family-like atmosphere of the reservation over any other place he spent his childhood.

However, that didn't shield him from the cruelties a minority could suffer from the outside world.

"The outside was pretty racial against us," Trudell said. "The name calling by the white kids and the legal system. I remember that those things were just the way life was."

As an adult, he rose to prominence as a political activist and became chairman of the American Indian Movement in 1973.

During his following six years of leadership, demonstrations were not out of the ordinary for Trudell. For instance, he burned a U.S. flag in front of the J. Edgar Hoover building in Washington, D.C., in February 1979.

Less than 24 hours later, his wife and children were burned to death in a fire at the Shoshone Paiute Reservation in Nevada.

Grieving and dismayed, Trudell left the political arena and his position within a short time of the suspicious death of his family.

Throughout a 45-minute conversation, the poet never mentioned the tragic incident; but at one point seemed to make a mental reference to it when asked why he left activism.

"It got pretty rough for a while there," Trudell said with a hint of pain-stricken sarcasm.

Although he considers himself to be a performance artist first and foremost, it seems he is continuing his activism through music, words and art.

Trudell said no matter if his intentions with Bad Dog are artistic or political or both, "everything is about communication."

However, he seems to be enjoying his role in the last two decades more than his political one of the '70s.

"For me it's more real," he said. "I don't have to worry about toeing a party line. This is the way to communicate more clearly."

Impressively enough, Trudell's expressive talents aren't limited to poetry and music.

The poet has published two books, including

"Living In Reality" in 1981. He has also acted in films such as "Incident at Oglala" and "Thunderheart."

Longtime colleague and fellow activist Faye Brown said Trudell became a performer as if by an involuntary act.

"It just emerged from who he is," she said. "He's had to deal with some hard reality; he's really been on the front lines."

Like the image of a great, spirited-warrior that enriches American Indian history, Trudell has obviously carried on his mission of expressing his ideas bravely and successfully through his band. After all, it couldn't be easy going around knowing the F.B.I. has a 17,000-page file on his activities.

However, Trudell has been releasing cassette tapes and compact discs since the early 1980s. His early work featured native drum sounds, but has recently moved to using contemporary instru-

ments such as keyboard and electric guitar more and more.

Over the last decade, he has worked with rock 'n' roll legend Bonnie Raitt, as well as the Indigo Girls.

Furthermore, Trudell's first mainstream release, "A.K.A. Graffiti Man," was called by the venerable lyricist Bob Dylan the best album of 1985. Trudell said his new album, "Blue Indian," is getting prepared for release on a yet-to-be-named record label owned by songwriter Jackson Browne.

Recently, Trudell's band has been using an unorthodox method of making rock 'n' roll, as it performs without bass and drums. Bad Dog will perform songs from "Blue Indian" that are composed around the use of two guitars.

Brown, of the Minneapolis-based organization Honor The Earth, said she believes Trudell and Bad Dog have unique power.



Focus on the Festival
A week-long look at highlights of the Great Plains Music and Dance Festival and Symposium

Concert Preview
The Facts

What: John Trudell and the Bad Dogs with Indigenous
Where: Centennial Ballroom, Nebraska Union
When: 8 p.m. tonight
Cost: \$5 for students, \$10 general admission
The Skinny: Former political activist comes home to Nebraska with a spoken word, electric guitar performance

"A synthesis happens that you don't sort out, you just feel its power," she said. "His poetry affects the tempo of the music and it all has its own rhythm. It's magical really."

Brown said she has worked with Trudell on many activist-oriented projects. She said he has the talents as a speaker to broaden people's horizons and break things down to a universal, human level.

"Given the state of the world as we approach the new century, we need messengers like John to touch people," Brown said. "He has the ability to reach across race and gender. He's someone who can touch everyone."

Whether rich, poor, black, brown, or white, Trudell says different cultures have a lot to learn from one another. By the 53-year-old's account, his music sounds as if it is a hybrid testament to that belief.

"Sometimes we use contemporary harmonies and at other times Native harmonies," he said. "We're using the modern music to imitate the old music. We're taking the two musical identities and giving them equality, so to speak."

Trudell discussed his views about American culture to great philosophical extent; he said it was in a funk of materialism, a situation that he described as an "identity crisis."

"Generally speaking, sometimes I feel like we live in a reality that we don't know who we are any more," he said. "We don't even know the language we're speaking. It's because of this major identity crisis that society is in the condition it's in."

As the United States seems to be culturally evolving into a nation more interested in PlayStations than ancestry and spirituality, Trudell believes something is being lost.

"The terms we use, whether (Americans) are German, Dutch or Native American, Catholic or atheist, we don't know what any of those mean any more," he said.

In his music, Trudell certainly comes across as someone who understands who he is and where he is from. For instance, his monotone, spoken word vocal style and his past innovative mix of native drum sounds and electric instruments give weight to his confidence as an artist.

He sounds as if he knew what he wanted from the beginning of his career in the arts. It was what he has wanted during his activist days of the '70s.

"I came to distrust politics because I think they get in the way of communication," Trudell said. "I think through culture and art I can more effectively communicate about the reality of who we are."



MATT HANEY/DN