

Native Joy for Real

JOY HARJO

Mekko Productions, Inc., Audio CD (poetry & music), 48½ min., \$15.00;
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It's been a while since Joy Harjo's last CD of spoken-word and music, *Letter From the End of the Twentieth Century* in 1997. In the years immediately following its release, when she was working stateside with an all-Native band that went by the name of Poetic Justice, she made trips with her sax in tow across the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East gathering momentum and an expanded fan base. More recently, Joy Harjo has been living on the island of Oahu in Hawai'i, and has completely remade her audio oeuvre and her band from the ground up. With an ever-changing nom de guerre ("The Real Revolution Is Love" was one) and new personnel, she has been honing both her vocal and her saxophone skills while kicking her arranging style up a notch with regard to the poems she is now putting to music. Hawai'i must be good for her muse as well as her ear for music. Maybe it is being surrounded by all that water, as everything in the new CD feels more liquid, fluid, and sounds more active—Dick Dale's surging surf as opposed to Yeats' "lake water lapping." After much anticipation and a long wait, we finally have her new CD, *Native Joy for Real*.

In *Native Joy*, Harjo has given us not only the surprise of a new singing voice (the result of several years of diligent work), but a sax sound that creeps ever closer to that of Coltrane and the high standards she has set for herself. In the liner notes to the CD booklet, Harjo creates the context for this project.

Mvto to all the sounds and spirits from different corners of this world: from the stomp grounds of my mother's mother, and my father's mother, from the first round dances I heard at Indian school to the heartbreak blues and rock that gave voice to our yearnings, to the wailing of prayers for love in the streets, bars, waterfronts, temples, fields ... And there at the edge of it all is my grandmother Naomi Harjo as a girl blowing sax, as she did at the turn of the century in Indian Territory. Now add that to your images of Indians, women and American music.

Now that the historical past of American music has been set straight, what about the future? What Joy Harjo is doing on this CD is the future. At least the future of poetry—which outside of academia is moving more and more in the direction of its bardic/oral roots, giving rise to live performance, discs in the back of books, and audio projects. The literary tide is going out on the era of the dominant poetics of the "ivory tower" and the printed page.

This CD begins, for me, with the third track, "Fear Song," one of her signature pieces and one that appeared on the *Letter From the End of the Twentieth Century* CD (the only poem to carry over from the first CD). It appears here with what one would have to call a "makeover," in that it now has an upscale sound featuring a hip-hop arrangement that sets the tone and tempo for the rest of the 48½-minute recording. In this poem/song there is a new depth of instrumentation and voice for Harjo and the band. She has kicked it up, and it swings!

"Hold Up" has a chorus that announces, "Humans were created by mistake," a foreboding message and a not-so-subtle reference to the current state of affairs in the world today. While musing on this theme, musically we get some great Hendrix-like guitar work from new band member Harry Orlove, a perfect parallel to Harjo's voice.

In "The Woman Hanging From the 13th Floor," we are "set free" by the liberating overtones that are overtures to a wonderful Mickey Spillane dime-store detective novel. And, here, for the first time, we are treated to the assertive Suzanne Vega-like singing voice of Joy Harjo. Yes, reminiscent of Suzanne Vega, only this is one who wants to rock!

I love the mix and mastering of bass, drum, voice, and guitar in "This Is My Heart"—with its beat that runs alongside multi-dimensional lyrics that state: "This is my heart. It is a good heart ... This is my soul. It is a good soul ... This is my song. It is a good song." And it is (a good song).

The thoughtful yet disturbing message of "Reality Show" ("What are we doing in this mess of forgetfulness?") is only surpassed by the use of a Dineh (Navajo) chorus that begins and ends the piece with a chant that evokes "the beautiful" that is within and around us. This mix of song and spoken lyrics is laid out on a taut rope that Harjo walks with unfaltering balance.

"Eagle Song," another of her signature pieces (from *In Mad Love and War*), is given a new treatment. Here, she takes on vocals, sax, and percussion herself, while being backed by a full band. Again, the point/counterpoint use of Native and English lyrics is effective, reminiscent of what Irish poet Gearoid Mac Lochlainn is doing these days in Belfast with his macaronic blending of Irish and English.

"Morning Song," a song of reassurance designed primarily for children, seeks to convince them of the dependability of beauty in our lives and in nature. In this piece, the unlikely mix of keyboards and drum serves to complement Harjo's singing voice as well as to underpin a lovely and very liquid sax solo. Now that she is an accomplished saxophonist, her licks are more sparingly mature as well as more organically musical.

The final cut on this CD is the kicker: "The Down-To-There and Up-To-Here Round Dance" uses the whole band plus additional backup singers (including singer Charlie Hill) and drummers to create a complementary yet contrasting, male/female vocal ceiling that hangs, cloudlike, just above a rich chorus that leads into something of a jazz-fusion jam. This is, perhaps, Joy Harjo's strongest poetry-and-music piece to date. If the rest of this recording is in "real" time, then "Round Dance" is performed at the speed of light.

Whereas *Letter From the End of the Twentieth Century* rode into town with a textual posse that served as its strength of ammunition, *Native Joy for Real* shoots musically from the hip with both barrels blazing. With a double shot of heart, beauty, freedom, peace, and grace that blends traditional Native rhythms and singing with jazz, rock, blues, and hip-hop, Harjo has hit the bull's-eye with her latest offering. With a new singing voice, new band, liberated arranging attitude, and new sax licks, *Native Joy for Real* puts her right at the top of the heap of the best contemporary American poetry-and-music artists (John Trudell, Laurie

Anderson, Patti Smith ...). In fact, in *Native Joy* she goes over the top, breaching the surface of the music mainstream. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to see her onstage this year at the Native American Music Awards. Any doubt about Joy Harjo's talents or staying power should be put to rest. She's for real.

This Is My Heart

*This is my heart. It is a good heart.
Weaves a membrane of mist and fire.
When we make love in the flower world
my heart is close enough to sing to yours
in a language too clumsy, for human words.*

*This is my head. It is a good head.
But it whirrs inside with a swarm
of worries.
What is the source of this mystery.
Why can't I see it right here, right now as
real as these hands hammering
the world together?*

*This is my soul. It is a good soul.
It tells me, "come here forgetful one."
And we sit together.
We cook a little something to eat,
then a sip of something sweet, for memory.*

*This is my song. It is a good song.
It walked forever the border of fire
and water
climbed ribs of desire to sing to you.
Its new wings quiver with vulnerability.
Come lie next to me. Put your head here.
My heart is close enough to sing.*

—From *A Map to the Next World* (Norton, 1992) ■

REVIEWER: **Thomas Rain Crowe** is a poet, translator, and editor of the Celtic language anthology *Writing the Wind: A Celtic Resurgence* (The New Celtic Poetry). His Walden-like memoir, *Zoro's Field: My Life in the Appalachian Woods*, will be published this spring by the University of Georgia Press.