

Breath-taking spell of Buffy

South China Morning Post

BY DEE GIBNEY

Buffy Sainte-Marie is more than a performer. She is a spell cast over the audience. Never have normally sedate Lee Theatre audiences responded with such thunderous applause and uncharacteristic clamours for more as they did last night.

As Sainte-Marie flashed that magic smile and unleashed the power of her insistent vibrato, the audience fell in love. Ballads gave way to classical protest songs (*Universal Soldier* which became the anthem of the peace movement in the sixties); lyrical melodies morphed into tribal rhythms.

Familiar favorites, *Circle Game*, *Soldier Blue*, were interspersed with her classical touch on the piano and juxtaposed with twanging from her distinctive mouth bow, mesmerizing sounds of another time.

She is a multi-gifted artist: singer, songwriter, composer, musician, painter, university lecturer and international social activist – and all coalesce in her music. The songs are of love and war, religion and peace, protest and the plight of the indigenous peoples of North America.

There is power in her music. She was blacklisted by the U.S. government during the Lyndon Johnson years, her songs not allowed airplay at a time when the U.S. was denying the war in Vietnam.

One night on the way to play a gig in Toronto's Yorkville, she became stranded in the San Francisco airport and witnessed wounded young soldiers returning home from the war. On the flight to Toronto the lyrics for *Universal Soldier* began to take shape. Troubled by what she saw, she began to ponder who was responsible for this. "*The orders come from far away no more. They come from him and you and me and brother can't you see this is not the way to put an end to war.*"

Sainte-Marie was born on the Cree First Nations Reserve in the Qu'Appelle Valley in Saskatchewan. Orphaned, she was adopted by an American couple from Massachusetts and lived her early life in the U.S. Immersed in the sixties folk music scene in the coffee houses of New York's Greenwich Village and Toronto's Yorkville she was part of an emerging generation of remarkable folk performers including Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and Neil Diamond.

By the age of 24 she was touring Asia, North America, Europe and Australia winning awards and accolades wherever she went. Her songs have been recorded by everyone from Elvis Presley, Neil Diamond and Janis Joplin to Barbra Streisand and Cher.

Sainte-Marie's performance is Zen like in its simplicity. There is no fanfare. No dramatic flood of lights. No introduction. She simply walks on to the stage, picks up her guitar – and suddenly we are transported by sounds that guitars are not supposed to make, the raw fury of injustices done her people for generations.

Lazarus begins as a low wavering melody that suddenly lashes out like the crack of a whip followed by nothing but the rhythmic stamping of her feet and that incomparable voice. Hands slap her thighs in defiance as she leans forward, lips curled, muscles tense. It's more than a performance. It's an instinctive pulsating force.

The song finishes followed by sustained applause. Then that smile again – and an almost child-like delight in her audience's appreciation – melts every heart in the room.

"I'll be your lady, but I can't be your everything," she sings.

Then suddenly the spell is broken. The night comes to an end Buffy leaves the stage. A roaring standing ovation and shouts for more rock the theatre. She's back on stage, smiling. One more song – *Till it's time for you to Go*.

Then she is gone. And emptiness fills the theatre.