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# Convergence

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## The Sonic West



# Joy Har



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**A native poet and musician reflects on the healing of self and the restoration of the Earth**

**David Burton**



*Thirty years ago my journey as a poet was raw and fresh. I liked nothing more than dancing half the night, then staying up and writing in the transition hours between dark and dawn. Like dancing, I didn't think about poetry; I was poetry. Poetry was the wild spin of rhythm and spirit, decked out in cowboy boots and drenched with sweat.*

—From Joy Harjo's introduction to the new edition of  
*She Had Some Horses*

**This page and previous spread:** Joy Harjo and Larry Mitchell under a New Mexico sky. Photos by Karen Kuehn.

Joy Harjo's 30-some-odd-year journey as an artist has taken her from her Creek and Cherokee roots in Oklahoma, through studies at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, the University of New Mexico, and the University of Iowa (where she earned an MFA at its prestigious creative writing program), to numerous publications and recordings, and performances of music and poetry around the world.

An award-winning writer and accomplished jazz saxophonist, she recently turned her attention to theater, crafting a one-woman play that combines storytelling with character-driven narrative, music, and song. Structured as a healing ceremony, *Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light* will be given its world premiere this March as the latest production of Native Voices at the Autry.

Storytelling and improvised conversation have long played a role in Harjo's performance life, so it wasn't altogether surprising for her to move into the realm of theater. "In the last few years," she says thoughtfully, "I began to see how I could combine everything I had been working on into a larger piece, to consolidate all the elements into a fuller and deeper arc." Making further sense of it, she reminisces, "Theater is one of my first loves. It was one of the first places my soul could let loose. I used to create theater with my friends as a child and put on shows for our families. I especially delighted in reshaping what I had heard from hiding under the kitchen table."

That kitchen table lives today, providing a principal design component as well as a metaphor for her play. Located center stage, the table morphs from scene to scene: at times a bed, at other times a bar counter, a bier, an altar, and yes, a hiding place. It is the place where people eat and commune, argue, and sustain life. It is the cog around which all action flows, a symbol and vehicle for discovery, fear, heartbreak, and renewal. Early on, the main character tells us, "It was at the kitchen table I was forbidden to sing when I was fourteen," before describing how her mother's boyfriend callously broke all of her record albums. But later, the table becomes a car hood upon which young women and men pound out a beat and howl like coyotes, asserting their sexuality, expressing long-held pain, reclaiming personal identity, and connecting to earth and nature in primal, animal song.

*Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light* follows the life of Redbird Monahwee, daughter of a philandering father and a mother who, in raising a family, gave up dreams of becoming a singer. When the father abandons them all, Redbird and her siblings suffer a procession of her mother's boyfriends—a gentle bull rider the exception, controlling bullies the norm. At one point Redbird determines that "hell isn't a demon the churches have invented with all their talk; it's a world without love, a world with all the fathers on the run."

There was a time, Redbird tells us, when she used to "fly to the moon." Soaring with joy and visions of the possible, there she would meet her Spirit Helper, a guide to finding direction, to understanding the path of her life. When her music is taken away, and as other indignities are inflicted, Redbird loses her ability to fly. This loss of flight reflects the powerlessness and angst of teenage years, to be sure, but it also suggests separation

both from personal dreams and the rhythms of the earth, all further echoing the enforced separation in her life from music and song.

Her Spirit Helper does not abandon her, however, and strives to assist Redbird in finding her way again. The play tracks Redbird through Indian boarding school, then to a relationship with Sonny, a sweet-smiling man with uncomfortable connections to a felon. Despite vows to the contrary, Redbird repeats with Sonny the unhappy dynamic of her parents' marriage and her mother's submission to a self-absorbed keeper of women. Redbird has two children with Sonny, and through the family's early years, she is exercised by acts of survival. How will the bills get paid? What will we eat? Is there any future with a man who is becoming increasingly distant and domineering?

Music returns in the form of a song given to Redbird years before by her mother. The song has power but comes with a caveat: its medicine can only be effective once. When Redbird decides to take the kids and escape from Sonny, she invokes her mother's song. It is here, as well as in other places in the play, where music surpasses entertainment, communication, and message and takes on its greatest role, that of ritual. The daily and ongoing ritual of music, Harjo seems to say, keeps us connected to our souls, and to the earth itself. There is a rhythm, a pitch, a cadence to life on Earth that is best found in and expressed through song.

Stories are another vehicle for making deeper connections to creation, life, and the eternal. Take the one told at the beginning of *Wings*: "In a world long before this one, there was enough for everyone until somebody got out of line." The tale is of Rabbit, a trickster in Creek tradition. Bored and lonely, Rabbit creates a man out of clay and proceeds to teach him how to steal, cheat, and essentially satisfy his desires without regard for others. The clay man's appetite for acquisition eventually becomes insatiable. Soon he is on a path to hoarding all the earth's resources and controlling all social interaction.

The wanting infected the earth.

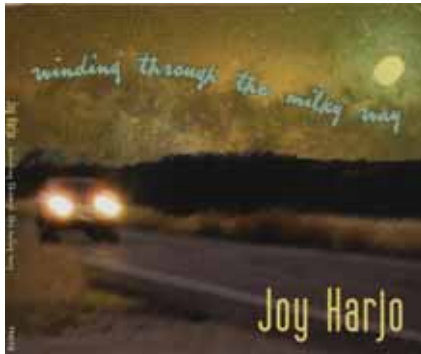
We lost track of the purpose and reason for life.

We began to forget our songs, we forgot our stories; we could no longer see or hear our ancestors, or talk with each other across the kitchen table. . . .

Rabbit's trick had backfired.

Toward the end of the play, these themes reappear. Fueled by anger, regret, worry, and alcohol, Redbird recklessly drives a car through the night. She is trying to make sense of the pieces of her life when she is presented with the specter of oblivion. A crash, followed by deathly silence. ►

Tickets to *Wings of Night Sky*, *Wings of Morning Light* may be purchased by calling TicketWeb at 1.866.468.3399 or visiting [www.TicketWeb.com](http://www.TicketWeb.com). To avoid service charges, you may also purchase tickets in person at the Autry's Visitor Services Desk in Griffith Park during regular museum hours or by telephoning 323.667.2000, ext. 354, for the Native Voices box-office line.



**Top:** Harjo's latest CD, produced by Larry Mitchell, who is also her music collaborator on *Wings*. Many of the songs on the album are featured in the play.

**Bottom:** Joy Harjo with her beloved sax. Photo by Paul Abdoo.

And then an awakening. It is the calming, reasoned voice of Redbird's Spirit Helper through which we hear the story of a people lost and then found.

We were cold and hungry. We had destroyed the world we had been given for inspiration, for life. We had destroyed the earth. . . .

And now we had no place to live since we didn't know how to live with each other.

Then, somewhere in eternity, one of the stumbling ones took

pity on another and gave up their blanket, their only protection against the cold.

A spark of kindness made a light.

It made a hole in the darkness.

Through this hole, the people climb out of the abyss. Their healing—as does Redbird's—comes through recognition that all are connected to one another. It comes with an embrace for “the spiral of contradictions: the love, the hate, the fear, the tears.” It comes with acceptance, both of who one is and of all that has occurred in one's life. In healing is found a new spirit of compassion, self-effacement, and generosity. The personal is the political. The social is dependent on the behavior of individuals. An act of one is a reflection of all. In a final gifting ritual involving neighbors, food, and the telling of stories, Redbird understands that earth and humanity are one and the same, that the earth was given for all to share. “We make one large story, all of us.” We find our music and are compelled, even obligated, to sing it.

The healing ceremony that is *Wings* suggests a path for all humanity, but it is firmly rooted in Harjo's own past, and it is clearly a road to her own healing. When asked what role traditional ways have played in her life, she recalls early experiences. “As a child, the ritual of the night-and-day cycle sustained me. I often marked sunrise and sunset in my own way, despite chaos between my parents and in the house. My parents attempted to make their lives into a modern life, to move away from what they had learned, to move away from what they thought of as backwards. It was my generation who embraced and immersed ourselves in our traditional cultures. We found wisdom and depth in what our relatives had denied for the purpose of survival.” For Harjo, healing is not only defined by acceptance and empathy, but by reclamation. “Healing,” she says, “is allowing expression of that which informs your true knowing. Too often we bend into unrecognizable shapes, to please, to survive, to get by. Healing is untangling.”

The parable of Rabbit and the clay man has the feel of a traditional story, as does the closing tale of a people restored from darkness. While they may be informed by her Creek heritage, these are fully Harjo's creations, something further underscored by the eclectic, ethereal, jazz-infused sound with which her music envelops them. The palette of Harjo's music includes

rock and country and rhythm-and-blues, Native drum and flute, chanting and breath, foot-stomping and hand-clapping. It often has a pulse of beat poetry. And, of course, there is the ubiquitous saxophone, inspired by her grandmother, who played, and in large part by Harjo's love of John Coltrane. "Coltrane is the bible of saxophone. He is saxophone soul. His sax sound is a road to God."

The music has also been pushed and molded by her collaborator Larry Mitchell, the New Mexico-based, Grammy award-winning record producer. "Larry is a monster guitar player," Harjo eagerly says. "He produced my recent album, *Winding Through the Milky Way*. Many of the songs are in the play. We work together intuitively, something I appreciate." In exploring a new theatricality in her work, as is the case with *Wings*, there is also a sense of performance artist Laurie Anderson in what Harjo is doing—an intimacy and poignancy to the music, stories ripe with oblique imagery and unexpected angles to meaning, a delight in a modern idiom yet an appreciation and searching for archetypal roots. Urban, intellectual avant-garde meets the physical, earthy West of Indian Country.

So what is the process Harjo has gone through to have *Wings* fully realized on stage? It started through a connection at the Ford Foundation, which in turn led to the Public Theater in New York. Oskar Eustis, the Public's artistic director and a veteran producer of Native theater festivals, explains: "Betsy Richards, who I worked with on the first Native festivals I produced at Trinity Rep [in Providence, Rhode Island] and who now funds the Public's Native Theater Festival via her position at the Ford Foundation, had recently seen *Joy*. When *Joy* told Betsy that she wanted to work on a piece for the theater, Betsy told us. Since *Joy* is such an amazing talent as a poet and musician, we were naturally thrilled. We met with her the next time she came to New York and offered her a slot in our 2007 festival."

Eustis recruited stage director Lisa Peterson to work with Harjo on *Wings* and ultimately present a reading of it. Numerous phone conversations took place in the months leading up to the festival, with Harjo rewriting material and sharing new drafts with the development team. "Once everyone was in town," Eustis adds, "Lisa and *Joy* worked on the piece together for three nights, with *Joy* still actively writing and rewriting. Then they added in *Joy*'s band the day of the reading. The piece grew tremendously between the first draft we saw and when *Joy* performed it. And the audience's enthusiasm was thrilling. The show created a real buzz both during the festival and after."

Native Voices at the Autry's producing artistic director Randy Reinholz and producing executive director Jean Bruce Scott were part of that audience. "My first response watching the reading," Reinholz says, "was that I felt as if I were flying." A long-time admirer of Harjo's music and poetry, Reinholz had always seen the theatrical potential in her work. "*Joy*'s songs are poetic stories that deeply intersect my basic definition of theater—a broad intersection of art forms, an intimate act, to investigate the inherent paradoxes and celebrate the beauty of the human condition."

It didn't take long for Reinholz and Scott to invite Harjo to California to further develop *Wings* at Native Voice's at the Autry's 2008 Playwrights Retreat in San Diego. Reinholz, who is Choctaw, took on directing responsibilities and brought in Shirley Fishman, director of play development at the La Jolla Playhouse, to dramaturg. Of working with a writer who is new to playwriting, Fishman observes, "*Joy* has an innate sense of when she writes too much, explains too much, or doesn't explain enough. She's been wonderful to work with—incredibly intuitive." As a consequence of the retreat experience in San Diego, Native Voices determined to produce the play as part of its 2008/2009 season.

Despite the power and energy of Harjo's writing, producing a one-person play is not without its challenges. "Length of show is always a concern when working with a solo piece," ponders Reinholz. "On one hand, the story needs to be complete; yet one person can only hold a modern audience's attention for finite periods of time." The integration of music and musicians on stage, he goes on, significantly expands the art form. "They function in part like a Greek chorus, and suggest as well guardians of the old way."

Reinholz spent a week in Albuquerque last November developing staging ideas and working on the script and music with Harjo and Mitchell. In January, Reinholz, Scott, and Mitchell traveled to Harjo's home in Oahu to continue work on the project. "Among Larry's many gifts," Reinholz says, "is that he reaches into the story with the music and transports the action in amazing and unusual ways. I think the wide range of sounds he creates lifts *Wings* to the point of flight." Of working with Harjo the performer, he comments, "*Joy* has an amazing ability to listen to feedback and know what works and what doesn't connect yet. Dylan Thomas was a poet who was genius in reading his own work so that a listener could hear innuendo and subtlety that another reader may not have the sensitivity to communicate. *Joy* is such a performer."

At the end of February, Harjo and the production team regroup in San Diego for three weeks of rehearsals before opening at the Autry on March 12. Reinholz hopes *Wings* will convey for a broad audience the heart of a healing ceremony. The play ends with Harjo coming off the stage and walking amongst the crowd, offering small gifts, bits of food, and poems. "*Joy*'s ceremony," says Reinholz, "excites an audience—like a roller coaster with significant drops and climbs—but *Joy*'s ride ends with a sense of largeness and bounty that gives such great meaning to the journey." Reflecting on major themes that inform the work, Fishman offers, "Redemption for what wasn't done, forgiveness for what was, and liberation from the web of past pain are at the core of *Joy*'s story." ■

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