

LIFE AFTER 50

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LOS ANGELES/VENTURA COUNTIES

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VOICE

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NATIVE VOICE

JOY HARJO

STORIES FROM THE KITCHEN TABLE

BY GAIL WICHERT | PHOTOS BY KAREN KUEHN



Is Joy Harjo best described as poet, as musician, or as performance artist? Yes, yes and yes. Her poems, her songs, her spoken word, they are all fiercely compelling. And fearless. And she stomp dances, too.

Blame it on her name. In Myskoke, the language of the Muscogee tribe of which Harjo is a member, her name translates to "Hadjo" which roughly means "so brave you're crazy." She describes herself as a dreamer. And a questioner. "Like everyone else, I'm looking for answers of some sort or the other," she says. She is also a wanderer and has traveled from Stockholm to Brooklyn and back again, always gathering stories. The storyteller returns to Los Angeles from March 12 through 29 to premier her one-woman show, *Wings of Night Sky, Wings of Morning Light*, for Native Voices at the Autry National Center of the American West.

Wings is the culmination of a life devoted to storytelling. Harjo has been performing on stage since high school where she was part of the school's first all-Native drama and dance troupe. "Storytelling qualities can vary," she says. It's not about sitting in a circle telling tall tales or ghost stories around a campfire. For *Wings* character Redbird Monahwee, it's about the kitchen table. From that place, Monahwee's journey begins.

LISTENING HEART

Harjo's journey began in Oklahoma in 1951. As a child she earned the first of many awards for her perfect attendance record. "I liked going to school because life at home was hard," she says. No one could have known that she would later garner countless accolades for her poetry and music. She imagined she would be a painter like her aunt, Lois Harjo Ball, and grandmother, Naomi Harjo Foster. "Many of their paintings are in the collection of the Creek Council House Museum." At 16, she left Oklahoma for New Mexico, initially to study visual arts, but tragic circumstances in 1973 transformed and expanded her into a poet. Harjo describes the transition in a 2007 segment of the *PBS NewsHour Poetry Series*. "I clearly remember the day that poetry, the spirit of poetry, came to me and looked at me and shook its head and took pity on me. It said, 'You poor thing. You don't know how to listen. Listen to me. Listen.'"

Later she heard a new kind of poetry. "It was the poetry of jazz during the mid-'80s that gave me the saxophone so I could sing my way through the mess... The horn could laugh, could cry in a direct, physical manner," she says. A few years later, she learned to play. "I started playing sax when I was 40." She listened to the horn rather than to the dire warnings of some conventional colleagues. "They told me, 'You're detracting from your gift. You're a

helps to bring the entirety of being to that kitchen table.

WE GATHER TOGETHER

"The world begins at a kitchen table." That is the first line of Harjo's original poem *Perhaps the World Ends Here*, initially published in the 1997 anthology *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, which Harjo co-edited. That book, a

up more than 30 videos and she has a sophisticated home page at www.joyharjo.net. A lyric from her song "A Postcolonial Tale" speaks to the menace of overindulging in mass-media: "Once we abandoned ourselves for television, the box that separates the dreamer from the dreaming. It was as if we were stolen, put into a bag." In her day-to-day life, Harjo admits, "Sometimes I just have to turn everything off. Technology is like a child. You have to draw boundaries."

There are benefits to technology, however, just as there are benefits to aging. "My generation has unlocked all that—it's about changing the way of thinking," she says. "When we change the way we think we change the way we are." The magic of changing a particular way of thinking applies to any generation, according to Harjo. "It's not always easy when analysis is the means of discourse and the mind is trained for speed and facility and the heart is excluded in the equation."

DOING THE WORK

Harjo fearlessly welcomes her heart into all of her equations. In fact, "This is My Heart" is her favorite song from her latest CD, *Winding through the Milky Way*, which was produced by Mitchell. Unlike the all-girl cast from *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, Harjo's musical work usually involves a diverse demographic. When asked about her sexual preferences in collaboration, Harjo says, "I like working with whoever. You talk differently around all women. It's not better or worse, it's just different."

Harjo's next work may be lighter fare. "I'm thinking about doing some comic poems about the questions people ask [about my tattoos]. Does it hurt? Does it mean anything?" She did reveal that she was over 50 when she got her first tattoo but declined to share the details regarding the timing or significance, stating only, "in my tribal way, we do it to honor something." She did say that they are real, not henna, and yes, it hurt. ♦

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poet. What are you doing?"

Really, who picks up the sax at 40? "I had to decide early on not to think about the western society mores," she says. "Being a woman adds another set of strictures. I hit walls a few times when I start thinking about age. I had to stop thinking about it. So I did." Today Harjo is an award-winning, ass-kicking saxophonist. For *Wings*, she teams with Grammy Award-winning producer Larry Mitchell, himself an ass-kicking guitarist, to create the sound that

collection of poetry, fiction, prayer and memoir from more than 80 women representing over 50 Native nations, explores what it means to be an Indian woman at the end of the 20th century.

While some of Harjo's generation might interpret technology as an enemy language, this multifaceted artist utilizes it as one more weapon in her story-telling arsenal. "If we had these things way back we would have used them," she says. A YouTube search of "Joy Harjo" brings