

# Older Than America

## RESISTING THE PREDATOR

Look at us, look at us we are of earth and water  
 Look at them, it is the same  
 Look at us, we are suffering all these years  
 Look at them, they are connected  
 Look at us, we are in pain  
 Look at them, surprised at our anger  
 Look at us, we are struggling to survive  
 Look at them, expecting sorrow being denied

Look at us, we are the ones called pagan  
 Look at them, on their arrival  
 Look at us, we are called subversive  
 Look at them, descending from name callers  
 Look at us, we wept sadly in the long darkness  
 Look at them, hiding in technologic light  
 Look at us, we buried the generations  
 Look at them, they invented the body count

Look at us, we are older than America  
 Look at them, chasing a Fountain of Youth  
 Look at us, we are embracing earth  
 Look at them, clutching today  
 Look at us, we are living in the generations  
 Look at them, existing in jobs and death

Look at us, we have escaped many times  
 Look at them, they cannot remember  
 Look at us, we are healing  
 Look at them, their medicine is patented  
 Look at us, we are trying  
 Look at them, what are they doing  
 Look at us, we are children of earth  
 Look at them, who are they?

from *Tribal Voice*

*A Santee Dakota from Nebraska and a Vietnam veteran, John Trudell was chair of the "Indians of All Tribes" occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 and, from 1973-1979, held the post of national chair of the American Indian Movement. He began to write poetry in 1979, after a politically motivated arson killed his wife, their three children and his mother-in-law in their Nevada home. Poetry and music now constitute his primary means of expression.*

*Trudell has produced and released four cassette tapes. The first, Tribal Voice, combines his poetry with traditional Indian music. The second and third, AKA Graffiti Man and Heart Jump Bouquet, were made in collaboration with legendary guitarist Jesse Ed Davis (who passed away in 1988). The Trudell/Davis "talking rock" combination gathered the praise of many high profile fans, including Bob Dylan, who declared AKA Graffiti Man "the best album of 1985" in a Rolling Stone magazine interview. Trudell's fourth release, But This Isn't El Salvador, is somewhat a mix of Tribal Voice and Graffiti Man in that it combines the Indian drum with rock 'n roll. The live performances of the Graffiti Man band now focus on that style.*

*John Trudell was interviewed in Minneapolis by Faye Brown and Dale Kakkak.*



◀The Graffiti Man Band, with John Trudell (third from left). PHOTO: JONNIE FALLEY

**Faye Brown/Dale Kakkak:** You began writing in 1979, writing words down on paper. How did this evolve into producing music?

**John Trudell:** I started writing poetry in '79 but prior to that, I used to write a lot of statements for press releases and political things. When I started writing poetry, I was spending a lot of time around musicians and it wasn't a conscientious effort on my part. I just started writing poetry. It turned out that I was in this world of musicians and I was spending a lot of time with Jackson (Browne) and so maybe after a couple of years I just got the notion to put poetry to music. I thought it would work and that's what turned into my first release, *Tribal Voice*.

Can you talk about what you were trying to do with *Tribal Voice*?

What I wanted to do is to take poetry and put it with the oldest musical form being the drums and the chants. If that worked, then I wanted to take the poetry and put it with the newest musical forms: synthesizers and drum machines. But first it started with *Tribal Voice*. I did *Tribal Voice* with the drum, the oldest musical form. Part of what was in my mind was to take and mix what I consider to be natural elements and see what could be created by mixing natural elements with the technological aspects of society. The words, the lyrics, the poems, that's very natural, as is the natural element of the drum, and the harmonies, the chants, and then the energy that it takes, the coordination that it takes to put that together. I was looking at it as four natural elements and to see if it would sustain a value when it's mixed with the recording industry, with technical things, and so that was what *Tribal Voice* was all about. It was drawing on the

human energy, not the technological energy. We used the technological energy as a means to reproduce and distribute, but drew the core of it from the human energy. That was the same idea with *AKA Graffiti Man*. Once again, we built on the human energy and used the technological aspects for other purposes. But we had more instrumentation because we were using the newest forms of music. With *Graffiti Man*, we came to make art, Jesse and I. Our agreement was that we would make art, that was our goal.

*AKA Graffiti Man* was your first collaboration with Jesse Ed Davis... Can you talk a little about your relationship with him and how that came about?

My mind drifts a lot about my time with Jesse, but I know that what I wanted to do when I met Jesse was to put the spoken word with the newest musical forms, make the electric music. The various people I talked to and asked to help me, they didn't understand. They didn't connect and I spent two years looking, almost two and half years. I met Jesse in Long Beach, on May 1, 1985 and one of the very first things he said to me was "I can make music for your words." So we clicked. I just thought well, alright, and so that was on May Day. By the end of June, we were in studio recording *Graffiti Man*. But, originally, there's a song on there called "Lavenders Blues," which is the original name of that album. Jesse wanted it to be *Graffiti Man* because he thought it was a stronger reflection of the whole. So I called it "Lavenders Blues" and then Jesse would go "also known as *Graffiti Man*." In the end when we released the album, that's where *AKA Graffiti Man* actually came from.

I spent a lot of years doing a lot of different things, and I would say that out of my political experiences and all of the effects that that's had – from the relationships I've had with people and the people I've known – that brief period of time I had with Jesse was probably more compact. In three years, we wrote 22 or 23 songs together. It's some of Jesse's best stuff. Jesse extended me a lot of help, I mean he helped me in a lot of ways that can't be articulated. Jesse and I believed in each other. We had some different ways but we believed in each other. That's what made it work for us. In our own way, we both went to the last doorway and we opened that sucker, we saw what was back there and we handled it in our own ways but it affected both of us. I mean it affected us in a way that we can never be unaffected. It gave us a bond. He had his experiences, whatever they were and however they came about in the predator world, he had them, and I had mine. When I think back at some things, and I look at the consciousness and the things we were trying to do for the indigenous people and the affects that we were trying to have on the world, in some ways Jesse showed me a way that was maybe a lot more real than a lot of other things.

What way was that?

He showed me that it's through art, that's what he showed me. I mean he showed me by participating with me.

That art is a way to develop consciousness and create change.

Well, that's one way, yes, that's one of the results of it. But to me, we can be who we really are through art. We can be honest about who we are, we can be truthful

through art and culture. I don't mean that you have to be confessional all the time. I mean you can be a truthful person. You don't have to hide your life, or your beliefs, or a lot of things that people have to hide. Jesse showed me that in a lot of ways, and it wasn't just from the music. Jesse showed me that by him saying this, by him being who he was. His art gave him that freedom, whether people agreed or disagreed with whatever his life was all about, it gave him that freedom. I can imagine what the experience would have been for Jesse, his brilliance: it was magic what he could do with the guitar. I mean it was something that was in his DNA. Jesse was in the music industry when it was all peace and love, through the late 60s and through the 70s, and received recognition from other musical peers. But I imagine it had to be really hard to be an Indian trying to make it through that world. There were those who romanticized the Indians so that it's hard to be real there and there are those who want to exploit it so it's hard to be real there. I could imagine what that could be like. My feeling is, in his own way, by being an artist, he had a very real political experience. So, when we ended up meeting, we both had our political experiences. I mean he had his and I had mine, and this was our way of expressing the result of the experience. To me, that's what made the connection really happen.

So then you did a second recording with him?

We recorded one called *Heart Jump Bouquet*. We never really released it. I mean if people order it through the mail, they can get it one at a time, but we never distributed it wholesale because it doesn't have a real cover on it. What I mean by the real cover is it doesn't have the credits listed as to who the artists are.

But you're planning to release it?

Yes, the plan is to release it this year some time.

Can you talk about the music on that tape in relation to *Graffiti Man*?

Well, *Heart Jump Bouquet* is more musically developed because *Graffiti Man* is basically drum machines, electric guitar, synthesizer base. *Graffiti Man* is conceptually an acknowledgement to the Baby Boom Generation, whereas *Heart Jump Bouquet* conceptually is an acknowledgement to women. On *Heart Jump* we have saxophones and harmonicas and pianos and background vocals. It's more musically developed because that was the next progression and we're really pleased with it. We have a song in there "Poetic Motion," where Darryl Hannah does some of the lyrics for us and it's really cool.

And then you did another one with Quilt Man?

Last rush in Babylon  
Voices catching up, Voices catching up  
Watch out child, Watch out child  
Babylon falling down, falling down

Society a broken promise  
Edonomies wars citizen whores  
Political pimps leaving us flat on our backs  
Trading today, waiting for the promised land

Roles playing roles  
Covering everyday's fear  
Going off to work  
Having the job work on us

In the eyes of God building the bomb  
Loving thyself, hating thyself  
and the illusion

Last rush in Babylon  
Voices catching up, Voices catching up  
Watch out child, Watch out child  
Babylon falling down, falling down

Caligula laughs loudly through time  
Twisting love to get at the sexes  
Classes material consume  
Designer worlds create electric impulses  
Turning down life  
The real goodbye  
See it in our face  
See it every place

Last rush in Babylon  
Voices catching up, Voices catching up  
Watch out child, Watch out child  
Babylon falling down, falling down

from *Tribal Voice*

I did another one with Quilt Man, *But This Isn't El Salvador*, conceptually it was just something I had to say. There are three songs on there where we made the first blending of *Tribal Voice* and *Graffiti Man* because Jesse does guitar tracks on three of the songs. It was the first blending, it was the first mix. With what I do now with live performance and the new things that I'm working on and recording now, the drum is more a part of the band. What's actually happening is *Tribal Voice* and *Graffiti Man* are merging into one which was the intention all along.

And have you some albums in the works?

I'm writing now with Mark Shark. Mark has his own band out in California but when we had the band with Jesse, Mark was the rhythm guitar player. Mark and I are writing now and it's as good as the material that Jesse and I worked on. We're recording one album, *Fables and Other Realities*, and we have another album called *Blue Indians* that, at some point, we want to record because we've got all the songs for it.

You've been producing tapes and distributing them through the Peace Company, which is basically your company?

Right.

And what is that, what is the Peace Company and why is it called the Peace Company? What does it do?

It's the idea of peace. I think peace as a word is an incantation and when you go back in to healing processes, natural healing processes, the healer makes an incantation to go with the ceremony. What an incantation is are the words that must be said before there can be a healing, they must be said; there'll be no healing if these words aren't said. So I figured that before there can be a healing, generally speaking, I think that peace might be the incantation, that it might be one of the words that is the incantation. What I don't know is how many times it has to be said. By going with the Peace Company, the word gets used in relation to everything we're doing, because we know that word peace is used. What we use the Peace Company for at this point is to distribute me and Jesse's work, me and Quilt's and shortly, me and Mark's, but to distribute our work and always attempt to maintain some clear consciousness about the environment and our relationship to the earth.

So some of the shows you're doing now are peace and earth shows?

Yeah, that's one of the things we're working on, peace with earth...

Can you talk about that concept?

It goes back again to peace being the incantation so we're placing it now with earth because we also need to start consciously and conscientiously re-identifying our relationship to the earth even if it's done in subconscious ways. We need to start re-identifying, I mean as individuals, not just as a society. The society can't re-identify if the individuals don't. We're using that kind of an idea, peace with earth. What we would ideally like to be doing is events. Maybe they're concerts or maybe they're something else, but where you draw the community together around that ideal of peace with earth.

You've been a political activist most of your life. Do you now define yourself as a poet?

No, I don't define myself as a poet. I'm a result of all my experiences. I may be following some kind of direction I wasn't following before, but I have a certain consciousness and no matter what my path is, my consciousness doesn't get erased, my sense of right and wrong or justice and injustice, none of that gets erased. No, I'm not an activist, but I'm active; I'm not a poet but I write poems, I'm not an entertainer but I perform. Why I can do some of these things or how it comes about is way beyond me, I have no idea. I'm just another human being trying to make it through the predator world and I can't take credit for anything more than that.

Sometimes I look around and I look back and I see when we were all politically active and all this stuff was going on and I look around now and I see the survivors, but we're not as many as I thought we would be. I know that whatever I do, there are some things that I do that will maybe get me more recognition than the other survivors. But, in reality, I'm no more than one of the survivors too.

Despite all the changes we've been through within our own lifetime, the swim up the river never changed for me. What changed is only what people can see. And the whole swim up river has got to do with this: no surrender. In the course of swimming up this river, sometimes we got to retreat, sometimes we have to find silence, sometimes we have to just become invisible. But the whole thing is no surrender. I feel if that were a part of our consciousness, we wouldn't beat ourselves up for a lot of mistakes we made. We would just continue, just remember that: no surrender. I think it's crucial.

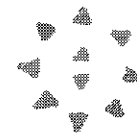
Everything goes in a flow. We talk about resistance and we talk about protest and we talk about a lot of things which are actually physical realities that we must do in some shape or form at this time. But what is important is the flow. You put a rock in the middle of the river and the rock will resist and the river will wear the rock down. You give it time enough and the water will wear it down. I'm thinking in terms of resistance - resist the predator, which is the right thing to do. But, yet, I got to think about what this really means because if I'm the rock in the river, even-

tually the river will wear me down. If I'm resisting the predator the way the rock resists the water, then the predator is going to get me down. We must not allow ourselves to be absorbed and destroyed by the predator; there's something we must do to prevent that from happening. But we have tried the protest and the confrontation and the resistance in the form that has been defined for us by the predator's definition and the predator wears us down and we become tricked into thinking something else and 100 years passes and we are much less than we were before.

My feeling is that if we could identify more peacefully with earth as individuals, develop a better conscious understanding with earth, then we will be going with the flow of life that emanates from earth and then maybe we become the water and the predator becomes the rock. But it's got to do with the mind. We are of the creative mind. We are of the creative mind and we can create a solution to the problem. But we can't fight our way to a solution and there are certain things we just can't do, for the time being, historically the way

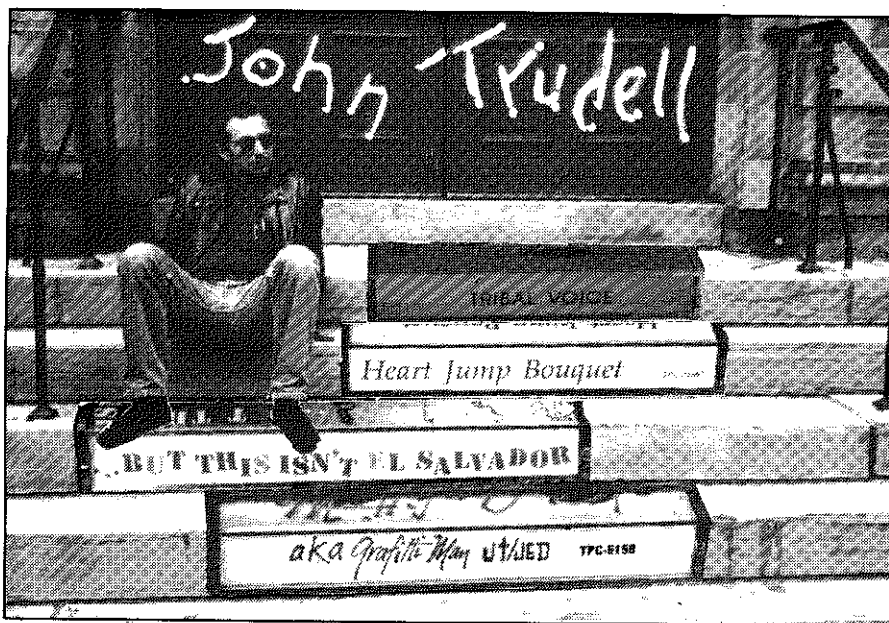
everything is. Yes, the fight might go on, but there's got to be some kind of evolving to a different form where we rely on the thought and the creative mind, which is the door to me. Our spirit communicates with our physical body through our creative mind and when we reach an understanding about that, then it makes our power stronger. We have to deal with the mundaneness of the predator world on an everyday basis, whether that mundaneness is sheer boredom from opulence, or whether that mundaneness is from having to hustle and scheme and everything you have to do to survive on the street, or whether that mundaneness is going off to that corporate office. We all have to deal with those things but that doesn't mean that the other part of us - our creative mind - can't be active. ♦

To order any of Trudell's works, contact the Peace Company, 1929 S. 15th St., Minneapolis, MN 55454. All tapes are \$10 each. For bulk order or booking information, call the Peace Company, at (612)333-6482.



*"He's probably the most charismatic speaker I've ever heard."*

—Bonnie Raitt



*"The best album of the year." "Extremely eloquent."*

— Bob Dylan (1986)

— F.B.I. memo

Available now, all four tapes for only \$30.00

## The Peace Company Collection

Tribal Voice	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$10.00	AKA Grafitti Man	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$10.00
But This Isn't El Salvador (with Quiltman)	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$10.00	Heart Jump Bouquet (with Jesse Ed Davis)	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$10.00

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Joane Cardinal-Schubert  
**Portrait of a Great Chief – Crowfoot**  
conté and oil on rag paper  
19 inches x 26 inches  
1975

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