

Sandra Sutter's *Cluster Stars* album plays with a purpose

By Mia Parker
Community Reporter

Sandra Sutter is no stranger to the concept of finding one's identity. As the recipient of numerous awards, the Calgary-based singer and songwriter is familiar with the journey of embracing culture and heritage in a way that contributes to a sense of self-understanding.

Sandra was adopted as an infant into a non-Indigenous family, and never fully learned of her Indigenous ancestry until adulthood. This, however, didn't stop her from embracing typically Indigenous values — many that would later contribute to an award-winning album.

"In my life journey, even as a young child, I've always felt a deep connection to the land," Sandra says. She says this connection has always felt like it was part of who she was.

Growing up, Sandra had many encounters that hinted at her heritage. These included remarks from children at school, the way her skin reacted to the sun, and even when she played with reflections in the mirror until seeing what she describes as the profile of an Indigenous man — perhaps an ancestor.

When Sandra decided to search for her birth family, she discovered her Indigenous roots.

"I have been learning about Indigenous culture for much longer than I have been able to affirm that my roots are with the Metis people and further back with the Cree people of Canada," she says.

Sandra has always been deeply invested in music.

"My dad brought home a piano when I was seven years old, so I got exposed to music fairly young," she says. "I took lessons right until my late teens and I also played the saxophone in the school band. I just felt really drawn to music and I felt like that piano was my best friend."

She has also been singing since she was a young girl. "I just loved to sing and express that way, and I always felt at home on stage with music happening."

Sandra was surprised to find out that her birth mother played piano and sang and played in a band, and that her birth father played the saxophone.

Given her history with music as well as her dabbling in songwriting since she was 12, it was no surprise that Sandra began composing on a large scale later in life.

Sandra's decision to produce her *Cluster Stars* album came in part as a result of a spiritual encounter she had one day just before meeting for coffee with Piikani Nation elders Reg Crowshoe and Rose Crow Shoe.

"I looked at the sky and there was this amazing multi-coloured cloud that was the profile of an Indigenous man with a full headdress on," says Sandra. "When I got to meet Reg and Rose, I told them this story, and Rose said, 'Oh Sandra, that cloud was just for you. Now you need to put your music into an album.' So that's why *Cluster Stars* was formed."

The focus of Sandra's album is reconciliation and one of the most compelling pieces for that notion is "Indian in the Child."

"It is really one of the centrepieces of the album because reconciliation is about, in large part, the impact of residential schools on Indigenous people," she says.

"In the year that the genesis of 'Indian in the Child' was created, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had been touring across Canada gathering stories of residential school survivors and I went to a couple of hearings," says Sandra.

"It was very difficult to hear those stories of survivors. How traumatic to listen to, how traumatic they must have been to experience, to retell, but how important to let go of the story that perhaps defined some people and their lives, in a large part through the shame that didn't belong to them but they were forced to experience."

Sandra explains that her encounter with one of the survivors speaking at the events largely influenced the way the song "Indian in the Child" was created.

"His name was Vincent Yellow Old Woman, and he was the chief of Siksika Nation."

The two met for lunch and, knowing that she was a songwriter, Vincent asked Sandra to write a song for him.

"He said, 'Could you make sure that it has these six words in it and ends on a positive note?' and the six words were 'kill the Indian in the child,'" Sandra says. "And I had just written those six words in my portfolio to write a song about since [those words were] the mandate of the federal government in residential schools."

When Sandra set out to write the song based

on Chief Vincent's story, she had the help of Jim Peace of Pincher Creek.

"When you think about reconciliation, it's really important that you include both the perspective from an Indigenous person and the perspective from a non-Indigenous person," Sandra says.

Jim recalls the experience of helping Sandra tackle this song, and how moving he found the story, especially the way they could end on a positive note.

"Of all the songs we wrote, that was a pretty powerful and emotional song," he says.

"I learned a lot, and what I brought to the table was questions. Just like anybody else at that time — we didn't know. We've heard about residential schools but we never got an idea of how serious it was and the generational impact that they had on the community," says Jim.

The first time "Indian in the Child" was performed, it was a last-minute addition to that day's track list for Prairie JuSTuS, a band both Sandra and Jim were a part of. Rather than it being sung, Sandra performed it as spoken-word poetry with music from the band as a background.

"It has a different impact," she says. "People relate to it in a different way than a song where sometimes you can't even recognize the lyrics of."

The song "Indian in the Child" had a strong effect on the crowd, and Sandra recalls the first performance ending with the crowd crying and clapping.

Sandra's ability to use her music to advocate for justice is one of the factors that makes her work so unique. By making her album about reconciliation, Sandra was able to lift voices such as Chief Vincent's, and send a message to the world about the injustices against Indigenous Peoples.

"I do really think there needs to be solutions and actions that address those injustices by the perpetrators in the institutions," she says.

Aside from advocacy, Sandra also uses her music as an opportunity to help others heal, a concept she herself has spent a lot of time pondering.

"The only way for residential school survivors like Chief Vincent to be able to heal is through forgiveness. How do you forgive someone who has committed atrocities against your people for generations?" she says, adding that she herself doesn't really know the answer.

"How do we as western society recognize that the result of intergenerational trauma, the result of the colonization that saw communities without children for generations, and that saw the children coming back from abusive situations and continuing that cycle within their own communities where it is totally not natural in the way of life of Indigenous people?"

"How do you forgive those things and move forward? And how do you speak about atrocities that happened to you as an individual when you've been taught that the way of life of your people is shameful by the institutions that inflicted the shameful atrocities against you?"

Despite her unanswered questions, Sandra always emphasizes the importance of sharing one's story as a means to reconcile, and reflects that concept in her songwriting.

"For him to become a leader of the people in his community, and to share the knowledge and wisdom that he had and to demonstrate through his lifestyle that there is a way to heal, that is hope to people who are struggling, and it lets the people who are finding their own way find more strength," says Sandra.

"It took 150 years for us to get to this place that we're in Canadian society, and it will take many many more years to heal — together. I believe in this work that we do together. We are all related, we are all family," she says.

"I would want to encourage everyone to remember that anger is the result of fear, and the behaviours that people exhibit towards one another that are destructive are, in my opinion, based on fear that we have of the things that have happened in that past, that they might continue, so let's make better choices and love one another."

"That's really the message that I hear from the elders, is to forgive, to love, to speak the truth. There can be no reconciliation without truth, so we must seek to understand what the truth is of what happened in Canada before we can move forward — together."

To hear a performance of Sandra's word song dedicated to those who survived and those who perished at residential schools, visit bit.ly/38t35CA. You can also learn more about Sandra and the *Cluster Stars* album at www.sandrasutter.com.

Indian in the Child

By Sandra Sutter and Jim Peace

Six years old on his first day of school,
and emotions are running high
Mom and dad are left home alone,
as he bids his parents goodbye
The shiny white building in a far away place
holds promise and a yet unknown fear
The footsteps this young boy will take on his own,
should have been taken with family near

The weather here is changing,
and dark clouds are closing in
The boy can't withstand them for long,
they remind him his skin is sin
They are sinister like the weather
and like a storm that brews within
They wash away childlike innocence
trying to kill the Indian in him

They tried to kill the Indian,
kill the Indian in the child
They thought he was a savage,
thought he was untameable and wild
They could not see the Creator's plan for him
was the same for you and me
We are meant to walk with each other,
on the good red road of beauty

Kill the Indian in the child they said
to be sure those teachers tried
No language, no family, no culture,
every night he cried

A forced haircut and a cruel bath,
bleaching brown skin into white
Though they tried to kill the Indian,
the Indian survived

Their methods were born of ignorance,
along the way the road got twisted
The boy could not do a single thing right,
no matter how hard he listened
The lessons that he learned were not about
writing, literature or math
What will it take before graduation
for him to discover a welcoming path

They tried to kill the Indian,
kill the Indian in the child
They thought he was a savage,
thought he was untameable and wild
They could not see the Creator's plan for him
was the same for you and me
We are meant to walk together,
on the good red road of beauty

Oh Canada you failed your people,
where did you go wrong
Underneath that national anthem,
you were not true, free or strong
You built a railroad to unite this nation
and sent your beautiful children to jail
They were beaten, starved and tortured,
and their future was derailed

You get nine years for rape and drug deals,
nine years for a major crime
Or nine years in residential school
to kill the Indian in the child
Generations have been affected
and had to remember how to pray
To rediscover a sacred culture
and find forgiveness along the way
For years he spent nights searching
for a love he couldn't find
In the walls within his prison,
in the eyes that had gone blind
As he found the path to forgiveness,
he could leave the pain behind
The grace he knew would save him
was in his heart and not his mind

Once punished for sins like laughing,
jailed in chicken coops by powers that were
We are walking again on the good red road,
and creating a new future
We thank the Creator for giving us life
and reminding us every day
That the enemy who destroyed us once
is now the friend with whom we pray

The Indian in that child
is the chief of his people today
He is leading his community,
showing them grace along the way
They walk towards a new future,
in this country we all share
So that his six-year-old grandchild,
will have no reason to be scared

They tried to kill the Indian,
kill the Indian in the child
They thought he was a savage,
thought he was untameable and wild
They could not see the Creator's plan for him
was the same for you and me
We are meant to walk together,
on the good red road of beauty

Thank you Creator,
for the grace that allowed the People to survive
You can never kill the Indian, the Indian in the child

Thank you Creator,
for the grace that allowed the People to survive
You can never kill the Indian, the Indian in the child