

With Words and Song: An Interview with John Trudell

by Christopher Luna

Rain Taxi, Fall 2009



John Trudell, a Santee Sioux who first came into the public eye as the spokesperson for the American Indian Movement in the 1970s, was a key player in the takeover of Alcatraz Island in 1971 and the reclamation of Wounded Knee in 1973. Tragically, he paid the ultimate price for speaking out when his wife, children, and mother-in-law perished in a house fire that many believe was retribution for his anti-government activities. Trudell handled his pain by devoting his energies to poetry and songwriting. His recorded work combines his lyrics and poems with “traditional Native music” as well as rock and roll. *Lines from a Mined Mind* (Fulcrum, 2008) collects the poetry he has written and recorded since his first album, 1983’s *Tribal Voice*, to 2007’s *Madness & The Moremes*. Trudell has recently leant his voice to *Give Love Give Life*, an organization seeking to provide universal health care to women and children. We spoke via telephone earlier this year.

Christopher Luna: Was there a particular time period or album when you began to feel confident about how you were combining poetry and music?

John Trudell: I felt it with the very first album, *Tribal Voice*. I liked it. I didn’t set myself up for criticism, and I didn’t try to compete against myself. Then I got the opportunity to do electric music with Jesse Ed Davis, and we made *Graffiti*

Man. In my mind I was thinking, this may not be a perfect album, but hey, I'm gonna learn as I go along. I've never not been pleased with one of my albums. I figure because it's spoken word, there will be people who relate to it, and people who don't, so I don't worry about any of that. I've been doing it for over twenty years. I've always written because it was something I had to do, never for the glory.

Christopher Luna: Which songwriters or poets do you look to for inspiration?

John Trudell: I haven't really thought of it in terms of inspiration—I was inspired by desperation. That's why I started writing. But I was influenced by people who wrote lyrics that I could relate to: Bob Dylan and the Beatles (John Lennon, specifically), Jackson Browne, Buffy Saint-Marie, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, Leonard Cohen.

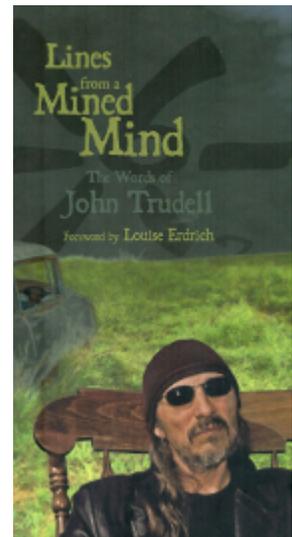
Christopher Luna: How important is the time of day or setting in which you write? Is there a time or place in which the words flow most easily for you?

John Trudell: None of that's a factor. I write when the lines come, so I can be in the middle of a crowd. I can be driving down the road, at home out somewhere in the public, and the lines come. That's what I do. It isn't like I have to create a special space and place to find my lines. Some of them find me, and then I've gotta hunt for the other ones, but I can do that in basically any environment.

Christopher Luna: Were you happy with how *Lines from a Mined Mind* turned out? How involved were you in the process of putting the book together?

John Trudell: I'm very pleased with how it turned out, from the shape and the size of the book to the way it was all laid out. I didn't have a whole lot to do with it, other than having to track down and find all those lyrics and retype them. That was a real challenge. My lyrics are scattered all over. But basically, I pretty much left it in their hands.

Christopher Luna: Many of the poems in the book are either about politics or love. Is there a particular part of the country where you feel most comfortable, or where those things might stir up for you a bit more?



John Trudell: A lot of what I write about is my observations, and the part of this country that I feel most comfortable in is the part that's in my head. But a lot of my writing is basically about observation, and things that I've seen, either through personal experiences or the experiences of people around me, or society at large. It's like there's all this energy going on in this country—a chaotic, frustrated energy. So when I write my lines it's basically got to do with my observations of that energy.

Christopher Luna: When I saw you recently in Portland, you spoke about the difference between thought and belief, an idea that you also address in a piece called "Reason to This." Could you say a few words about your take on the difference between thought and belief?

John Trudell: Everything's about energy. As human beings, we're given intelligence. This is how we make our way through this reality, how we manifest our reality clearly and coherently. We use our intelligence, our creative intelligence, because we create with intelligence. I think we live in an industrial dimensional reality where we're programmed to believe what we're told. We're programmed to believe them. We're programmed to believe what that ruling class wants us to believe. And believing isn't thinking, but we've been programmed to believe that believing is thinking.

To use our intelligence to think means we're keeping the energy active, we're thinking, we're really using the power of our intelligence in a thinking way. But when we've been programmed to believe, we're no longer thinking, because energy flows. So when you're thinking, that energy's flowing out into the universe and there's something happening. But when we're believing, we're not really thinking, because the belief has walls: "This is what I believe." So what I believe is like a box, and we're taking the energy of our thinking and putting into a box of beliefs, pretending that we're thinking. But we're really stifling our own energy. We create these mental stresses and frustrations, because we're blocking our spirit, so to speak.

Christopher Luna: Can you give us an example of how you've used this in your own life?

John Trudell: I've gone through most of my life not believing anything. Either I know or I don't know, or I think. My whole attempt has been to think my way through this reality rather than believe it. That's the only concrete example I can give you.

Christopher Luna: I am a great admirer of your activism, and I was wondering if you think

that a poet or a songwriter has a responsibility to do this, or whether you have just incorporated those things into the path that you had already embarked upon.

John Trudell: I started out as a political activist, so to speak, but I think it's the responsibility of every human being, not just those who wear the identity of poet, activist, voter, religious person... it's the responsibility of every person. Our responsibility is to use our intelligence as clearly and coherently as we possibly can. And if we use the power of our intelligence, if every individual did this, took responsibility, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now.

I don't look at it as activism. There's a sense that we're human beings and there's a way that human beings should live. And we're not living like that. So I think that it's everybody's responsibility to head in that direction. Those who will take the identity of poet or activist or any of that are no more responsible to do that than every one else.

Christopher Luna: I wanted to ask you about a poem called "My Fire." I was wondering whether there was a particular incident that inspired the attitude that you describe in the piece.

John Trudell: "You don't like my smoke, stay away from my fire"? Nothing in particular. I liked the line. It's been my attitude for a long time. I was at a music festival up in Laytonville, I think, in Southern California, and that line came into my head: "If you don't like my smoke, then stay away from my fire." A lot of these things, they're not based upon a particular incident. That line came into my head, and immediately I found a couple more lines to go along with it, then over a period of time I hunted the lines to go with that line. I write one line at a time, so I'm never really sure what it is that I'm gonna end up saying when I'm done.

Christopher Luna: What is the concept behind the new CD, *Madness & The Moremes*?

John Trudell: We had released *Bone Days* in 2001, and I wanted to make the next album but we didn't have any money—I have to raise the money to make my own CDs. So I thought, I don't have enough money to make one album, I think I'll make two! It doesn't make any difference, right? So that was madness there, on its own. The concept behind it is that the dimensional reality we're in, it truly is madness. We may accept it as normal, but I'm telling you, as human beings we're living in a reality of industrial madness. And I think that the way that we deal with it is through what I call the Moremes.

We deal with these different defense mechanisms within ourselves.

Christopher Luna: What made you decide to do a new version of “Baby Boom Che”?

John Trudell: It’s the very same version that was originally released on the eight-track cassette, back in ’85. Then it was re-released again, through Rykodisc, in 1991. But it’s the same set of lyrics. It’s the same musical version. The music for “Baby Boom Che” and “God Help and Breed You All” were both written by Jesse Ed Davis, so I included them because Jesse Ed Davis plays guitar on the album.

Christopher Luna: I like “Restless Situations” from *Heart Jump Bouquet* very much. Could you tell us what you’ve learned from the women in your life?

John Trudell: Overall, they looked out for me a whole lot better than I looked out for them. That’s what I learned about the women in my life. We’re all human beings, we’re just different genders, male and female. But we’re all human beings and we all have feelings. And we all live in this industrial meat grinder where we don’t really understand love anymore, it’s only half of a concept now. As males and females we do a lot of things against each other and to each other in the name of love that really doesn’t make any sense. And on that particular song . . . I tried to write it as a human being, but from the gender of a woman.

Christopher Luna: I think that politics and love are two of the hardest subjects to write about. We all have these feelings, and so often as a writer it’s easy to believe that there is nothing new to be said. I really like the way you’ve put it into words for us.

John Trudell: I appreciate what you’re saying, but you know, whether it’s love or politics or spirituality or any other thing, it *has* all been said. So the real deal is to not get hung up on that, you know? You can basically write about the same things over and over again—love, hate, religion, politics, class, environment—there’s about a half-dozen things that we write about in this reality. The understanding I came to was that when we write and express, we’re learning how to see. And through this process, we evolve. If what we’re seeing is coherent and makes sense, then that’s what it accomplishes.

When I first started doing this, especially with the music, I didn’t know what I was doing. I had never worked with a band. I’m not a musician. But one of the things I realized in the beginning was that I was just gonna allow myself to evolve with this, and learn as I go along. So I never worried

about whether my stuff was perfect. I wanted things to be a certain way, but I wasn't looking for recognition of perfection from other people. I said it however I could find a way to say it, and I think that's really what it's all about.

Christopher Luna: “Happy Fell Down” describes an experience that is universal. I’ve thought a lot about how a writer can get to the universal through the specific, and that’s something that you do very well. Obviously these are stories that come out of particular experiences in your own life, yet they’re situations that just about anyone can relate to.

John Trudell: That’s why I just say this stuff the way I say it. I put it out there, and for people who can relate to it, that’s who it’s for. “Happy Fell Down” was my observation of a couple whose relationship was deteriorating. I remembered how happy they were. They were some people I knew, and they were going through this thing, and that’s what put that in my head.

Christopher Luna: Everyone has had that experience of going along and everything is fine, and then suddenly it’s not.

John Trudell: Most everyone’s had it more than once!

Christopher Luna: Tell us about the work you’re doing to secure health insurance for women and children.

John Trudell: Give Love Give Life is an attitude. There should be universal health care, and in the long-term that’s what we want. Until we can get there, we want to prioritize health care for the women and children of America, because of respect. We have [a website](#), and there’s a [MySpace page](#), and we would like people to check that out and participate however they can to promote this idea. We think that maybe it should be said more often in this country.

Click here to purchase *Lines From A Mined Mind* at your local independent bookstore:



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