

# TRUDELL

DISCUSSION GUIDE

BY HEATHER RAE



Native American activist and poet John Trudell fuses his radical politics with music, writing and art. Combining images and archival footage with interviews and performances, this biography reveals the philosophy and motivations behind Trudell's work and its relationship to contemporary Indian history.





## FROM THE FILMMAKER

This documentary was thirteen years in the making and in many ways is the culmination of a life's work. From a young age, John Trudell's words have resonated deeply with me and if I never make another documentary of this kind, I will know I've helped deliver something to the world that may mark a place for John and his message.

During the years we worked on this film there were many good people who helped make it happen and some that were there almost the entire time, such as cinematographer Gilbert Salas. I think the images were so important in weaving this story visually because John is a poet and his language evokes thoughts and pictures. I can only hope the visual landscape of the piece honors John's oratory.

During our travels while making the film, we encountered so many young and old, Native and non-Native, that held John in a place of reverence. His spirit has held up the spirit of a Nation collectively, whether he realizes it or not. His words have permeated our consciousness and transcended generations. There is a moment in the film when Native actor Gary Farmer refers to Trudell as "our [Native people's] Socrates..." I think this is so relevant because we all need representatives--as communities, as Nations, as individuals.

I also think we need documentation of leaders such as John and the movement they spurred in this country during an era when things were changing radically. Many Native youth these days are not aware of the work that was done by Trudell's generation and what an important effect it has had on policy making, legal protection of land and energy resources, interpretation of treaties and the tribal educational system. One of my strongest wishes for the film is that the subsequent generations will have a context for the contemporary Native People's movement and a point of reference for leaders such as John Trudell, understanding their significance in history.

—Heather Rae



## THE FILM

Shot over the course of 12 years, *TRUDELL* documents the life and work of acclaimed Native American activist and poet John Trudell. The film artistically weaves archival footage and contemporary interviews together with Trudell's own words and music to portray the passionate, painful and multidimensional journey from individual to leader to artist.

Trudell's potent narration and poetry permeate the film, prompting viewers to examine belief systems and acknowledge the importance of the spirit. Forged by an extraordinary life lived out in heart of the land and its people, Trudell's searing analysis of contemporary society challenges even as it inspires.

## People Who Appear in *Trudell*

### FAMILY

Fencia "Lou" Ordonez, John's first wife  
 Tina Manning, John's second wife  
 Winona Manning, Tina's sister  
 Yolanda Manning, Tina's cousin  
 Lindsey Manning, Tina's cousin

### ACTORS/MUSICIANS/ACTIVISTS

Jackson Browne  
 Robert Redford  
 Wilma Mankiller, Former Chief, Cherokee Nation  
 Bruce Ellison, Defense Attorney  
 Lori Pourier, Executive Director, First Peoples Fund  
 Kris Kristofferson  
 Bonnie Raitt  
 Gary Farmer  
 Quiltman



## TIMELINE

### 1946

John Trudell is born in Omaha, Nebraska, and raised on the Santee Sioux reservation.

### 1963–1969

Trudell serves in the U.S. Navy, including service in Vietnam.

### 1969–1971

Indians of all tribes occupy Alcatraz; Trudell becomes a spokesperson for the group.

### 1970s

Trudell serves as chair of and national spokesperson for the American Indian Movement (AIM); his work earns him an FBI file that is more than 17,000 pages long, one of the longest in FBI history.

### 1972

Native Americans from 250 tribes participate in the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan; when officials in Washington refuse to see the group, they occupy the Bureau of Indian Affairs building.

### 1973

The occupation at Wounded Knee begins.

### 1975

A firefight at Oglala results in the death of one Indian and two FBI agents. Two of three defendants tried for the deaths of the agents are acquitted. The third, Leonard Peltier, is not permitted to claim self-defense and is still in jail today.

### 1979

Trudell burns an American flag on the steps of FBI headquarters; within hours, his pregnant wife, three children and mother-in-law are killed in a suspicious fire in their home on their Nevada reservation.

### 1983

With the help of Jackson Browne, Trudell begins putting his words to music; his discography now includes 11 CDs.



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

### General

- Were there things in the film that "spoke truth" to you? What resonated? Were there things in the film that disturbed you? How might you transform what disturbs you into action?
- If you could ask John Trudell a question, what would you ask? Why?

### Politics, Rights and Indigenous Peoples

- What responsibility does the U.S. government have to Native Americans? How might you help ensure that the government is meeting its responsibilities?
- Trudell says that all he did was "talk," yet the FBI described him as "extremely dangerous." What do you think they saw as the danger? In your view, is a person like Trudell a threat to the United States? Why or why not?
- What is the role of dissent in a democracy? Given what you see in the film, how has the U.S. government dealt with dissent? Has the government's use of the FBI strengthened or weakened democracy?
- In your view, was AIM a "terrorist organization"? When, if ever, does a group that has experienced oppression or discrimination have a right to fight back? Which tactics are acceptable and which cross the line into "terrorism"?
- Trudell says that asking him to celebrate Columbus Day is like asking Americans to celebrate Osama bin Laden Day. What does Columbus Day celebrate? How might Columbus Day observances be transformed to recognize Native perspectives?
- Assess the impact of the United States' policy of Manifest Destiny. Who has benefited from this policy and who has been hurt by it? Are there ways in which Manifest Destiny is reflected in current policy or practice? If so, how?
- Trudell argues that the genocide against Native Americans continues today, that discrimination, prejudice, poverty, alcoholism and environmental destruction of tribal lands are akin to the bullets and diseased blankets used in previous centuries. Do you agree that the current situation parallels past treatment? Does genocide continue? If so, who should be held responsible?
- Trudell challenges society to live up to its own ideals of "independence," "freedom," "individual liberty" and "all men are created equal." In your view, what has prevented these ideals from being translated into reality for every American? What might you do to make them a reality?

- How is the treatment of indigenous peoples similar to and different from the experiences of other groups that have been the target of discrimination? What are the links between the experiences of Native Americans and other oppressed groups?
- In your view, what sustains Trudell, even in the face of adversity? What nurtures you and those around you? What kinds of things might you do to nurture people who struggle for justice?

### Relating to the Land

- Trudell talks about "honoring" the earth. If you were to honor the earth, what would you be doing (or not doing)?
- Trudell critiques Christianity, judging God by the way His followers treat the land. What is your assessment of his critique? What does your religion or belief system teach about humanity's relationship to the earth, and what actions have accompanied those teachings?
- According to Trudell, "One does not sell the earth." Do you agree? How might one reconcile Trudell's approach to the earth with an economy based on private property rights?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as individuals and as a group. If you need help getting started, you might begin your list with these suggestions:

- Write your own poem describing your relationship to the land, your people and/or your government. Find a way to share your poem with your family, friends, colleagues or community.
- Find out the tribal history of the area in which you live. Work with schools to find out what they teach about that history. Join with tribal members and school officials to strategize about how to most effectively integrate the history and culture of indigenous peoples into your district's curriculum.
- Brainstorm ways that you might "heal" the land in your own neighborhood or community. Arrange for a special day to help people start or finish an item from your list that they choose.
- Work with local indigenous peoples to plan a Columbus Day observance that includes a teach-in on tribal experiences in your region.
- Find additional venues for a screening and discussion of *TRUDELL*.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [itvs.org](http://itvs.org), the website of Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

Before you leave this event, commit to pursuing one item from the brainstorm list.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY AND ACTION

### To Start

[www.JohnTrudell.com](http://www.JohnTrudell.com) and [www.trudellthefilm.com](http://www.trudellthefilm.com) – Visit these websites for more information about John Trudell's life and work as well as to purchase copies of the film and Trudell's music.

### Native Americans

[www.aimovement.org](http://www.aimovement.org) – The website of the American Indian

Movement (AIM) describes the current work of the organization that Trudell chaired in the 1970s.

[www.narf.org](http://www.narf.org) – The Native American Rights Fund website includes hundreds of documents related to legal cases involving tribal sovereignty, land rights, treaties and more as part of its Native American Law Library.

[www.sacredland.org](http://www.sacredland.org) – The website of the Earth Island Institute provides a variety of resources designed to deepen public understanding of places sacred to indigenous cultures and environmental justice.

<http://www.doi.gov/bureau-indian-affairs.html> – The U.S. Department of Interior website includes links to government sites and resources related to Native Americans.

<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/teach/native.htm> and [www.ericdigests.org/1996-4/native.htm](http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-4/native.htm) – These websites contain suggestions for teaching about Native Americans and countering stereotypes.

AN INDEPENDENT LENS PREMIERE, TRUDELL WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS ON APRIL 11, 2006 AT 10:00 PM. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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*ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of Emmy Award-winning PBS series Independent Lens to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.itvs.org/outreach](http://www.itvs.org/outreach).*