



JOY HARJO

insomnia &
seven steps
to grace

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Produced by esperanza spalding
Co-produced by Joy Harjo

DEDICATION

In honor of the
poet Jayne Cortez

In honor of jazz
saxophonists
Jim Pepper &
Wayne Shorter

In honor of my
mother Wynema
Jewell Baker Foster

1
insomnia &
seven steps
to grace 6:11

2
rabbit is up
to tricks 4:22

3
i pray for my
enemies 2:00

4
fear redux 4:14

5
without 4:15

6
mahk jchi 3:09

7
instinct 1:59

8
my guy
featuring
esperanza
spalding 2:17

9
perhaps
the world
ends here 1:41
(Spoken by Joy Harjo)

10
stomp all night
6:11

11
i am a prayer
featuring
ganayva 6:55

12
in the beautiful
perfume &
stink of the
world 4:32

13
goodbye
pork pie hat 3:09

All songs Joy Harjo/Mekko Productions, Inc (ASCAP)—Matthew Stevens/Budde Music—Justin Tyson/Justin Tyson Publishing (ASCAP)—esperanza spalding/Due Hope Music/Kobalt (ASCAP) unless otherwise noted. **Track 6:** Pura Fe Antonia Crescioni–Jennifer Elizabeth Kreisberg–Carmen Caballero Moreno/Corn Beans & Squash (ASCAP)—Joy Harjo/Mekko Productions, Inc (ASCAP)—Matthew Stevens/Budde Music—Justin Tyson/Justin Tyson Publishing (ASCAP)—esperanza spalding/Due Hope Music/Kobalt (ASCAP). *Inspired by the traditional Lakota flute song from the Plains, found on the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings release "Heartbeat: Voices of First Nations Women" (SFW40415)*

Track 8: Wynema Jewel Foster–Joy Harjo/Mekko Productions, Inc (ASCAP)—Matthew Stevens/Budde Music—Justin Tyson/Justin Tyson Publishing (ASCAP)—esperanza spalding/Due Hope Music/Kobalt (ASCAP) **Track 11:** Joy Harjo/Mekko Productions, Inc (ASCAP)—Matthew Stevens/Budde Music—Justin Tyson/Justin Tyson Publishing (ASCAP)—esperanza spalding/Due Hope Music/Kobalt (ASCAP) —Ganavya Doraiswamy/Manners McDade Music Publishing Ltd. (ASCAP) **Track 13:** Charles Mingus/Spirit One Music Crescendo/Kobalt Music Publishing (BMI)—Additional words by Joy Harjo/Mekko Productions, Inc (ASCAP)

JOY HARJO

Every project has a spirit. With impetus it is born into consciousness, given direction, and continues until it is fulfilled. Some creations have deep roots in classical traditions and are tethered to timelessness. Others are born insistently of a time, with an intent to bring awareness and change. This musical project has found its footing during a time of thick-layered turmoil throughout our communities, our families, this country, globally, and this body we call “Earth,” in English, or “Ekvnvcakv” in Mvskoke. We are in the midst of profound change as we continue circling within spirals of cycles of transformation. We will be nearly

unrecognizable to generations following us when we emerge from the next opening. Still, those generations will look to us to understand who they are, to understand their cultural genealogy. They will look to our arts, to music, to poetry, to how we acted when confronted with injustice. This album is an offering.

Poets are truth-tellers and emerge from every culture to speak what often can't be spoken. Musicians are also poets of the unseen as they translate beauty from unseen worlds into form. We make shapes of transformation together.

The initial inspiration for me to put music and poetry together was my mother, who wrote songs on her Underwood typewriter, which had its home on the kitchen table. When she wasn't cooking, serving food, cleaning, tending to children and husband, she wrote songs. She was a housewife in the early '50s when she began writing, inspired by the poetry she heard in the two-room schoolhouse that she attended in rural Arkansas and the music she heard in Tulsa dance halls and on the radio. Her favorite poets were William Blake and Alfred Lord Tennyson. Her favorite singers included Hank Williams, Patsy Cline,

and Nat King Cole. She thrilled on the dance floor to the local and national country swing bands that called Tulsa their headquarters, and many of them wound up at our house for late night jamming and partying. One of my favorite moments in my early life was hearing her sing with Leon McAuliffe and his band at a community barbecue in Decatur, Arkansas. I seem to remember they sang one of her original songs, but I am not perfectly sure. My



best childhood memories are in her kitchen, dancing with her to early rock and roll and country swing. I remember her singing “I Found My Thrill on Blueberry Hill” along with Fats Domino as we danced. It was an international hit in 1956. And everyone was dancing “The Twist” by Chubby Checker in 1958 at one of my parents’ parties.

The parties at my parents’ small post-war house just off Admiral Blvd. in Tulsa between Sheridan and Memorial was the place to be. Joe’s Bar, owned by my parents’ friends, was just down the road. We spent many afternoons there, my

mother visiting her friends and playing shuffleboard, and me filling the jukebox with dimes and quarters given to me by the customers. I kept the music going, and I knew the words and melodies to all the songs.

Somewhere in all of this is a memory that is sparked with magic. I am standing in the backseat of my dad’s black Cadillac (a car he bought with Indian oil money) as he drove us somewhere. It was hot and sticky. My eyes barely saw over the seat. (This was the time before seatbelts.) The radio was on. When I heard Miles Davis’s trumpet I leaped without question into the music

and followed the sound of his horn into a place I now call “Transcendence.” I didn’t know the words “jazz” or “trumpet,” but I didn’t need them. The music found a place within me to take root and beget a hunger for what jazzy, cool blues offered.

My mother’s music ended when her marriage to my father ended, when she married a man who was jealous of her and anything to do with her music.

While I was formulating this album, thinking about which tunes to include, my sister found a copy of one of my mother’s tunes that I had never seen or heard called “My Guy.” It was

not on any of the demos she had recorded. I have included it in the album, sung exquisitely by esperanza spalding. I’ve also included an image of my mother’s original typewritten lyrics.

In those times of the 1950s and early ‘60s, the radio was the primary source of music, as were Sunday variety shows, such as the *Ed Sullivan Show*, highlighting current bands and acts. Sullivan’s introduction of the Beatles in 1964 marked a major shift in American music and signaled what became known as the British Invasion. Around that time, I received a transistor radio, which I played

at night when I was supposed to be sleeping. I listened in the dark under the covers. At night you could hear signals far beyond the local stations, especially KOMA from Oklahoma City. I caught the sound of all the British bands, and also the Black music that was beginning to be heard all over the country, including the Black musicians who had influenced those British bands, like B.B. King, Little Richard, and Ray Charles.

One summer my mother allowed me to visit my cousin Mary in Joplin. Her father was a hard-core member of the Pentecostal church, which he attended every night. I had never visited

a Pentecostal church. My uncle would set up his guitar and play along with the piano player and anyone else who felt moved by the spirit to join in. He told me to bring my clarinet. I could read music, so I played alongside him. The music inspired the preacher, the preacher inspired the congregation, and the congregation fell out one by one, as they were taken over and began speaking in tongues. I played along during the excitement, my ears and eyes wide open in this foreign land of Christian worship. Then I would sneak out with my cousin and



sit in the car and listen to rock.

In the later '60s, I left home for Indian school and attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, when it was a Bureau of Indian Affairs high school with a post-graduate program. In any coming-of-age moment, music makes an aural weave on which to place meaning. We were the generation that would begin the collective stand for Native rights and sovereignty. We were about justice and uplifting cultural practices. We listened to Bob Dylan and other protest singers, Motown, Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, and when we danced in the campus

canteen we also listened to and danced to rancherías and other southwestern music. Cream was one of my favorite bands, as was The Yardbirds. We also listened to and danced to Round Dance and Plains powwow music. There was some kind of music happening in every corner of that campus. One Cree student, Alfred Youngman, taught me the lyrics and melodies to folk standards; I hung out with Stephen Dixon, a Choctaw from Mississippi, while he played honkytonk piano. Then, one afternoon, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band came to campus to give a concert. I had never heard anything like them; I especially

enjoyed the improvisation and how no one who could hear them could stop moving. My friend Belinda Gonzalez and I often danced on stage with a student band that played R&B, rock, and acid rock tunes. One of their standards was “Knock on Wood,” the original version released in 1966. I also wrote songs for them that we never got around to arranging and playing. The Hopi artist Dan Namingha who was part of that band told me recently that we should have performed those songs.

It wasn’t until I was a student at the University of New Mexico majoring in Studio Art that I

began writing poetry, inspired by the surge in Natives writing poetry in the early ’70s. I read, listened to, and met writers and poets like Leslie Silko, Simon Ortiz, and James Welch. I studied African poets writing in English to get an idea what other Indigenous poets outside of this country might sound like, especially those whose predominant traditional methods of poetry were expressed in song and oratory, like our Mvskoke poetry. That’s when I found Okot p’Bitek and Amos Tutuola. Our Mvskoke people produced poets who also wrote in English, like Alexander Posey, a journalist who wrote in the late 1800s

into the first decade of the 1900s. Posey was very politically aware, and his generation was also struggling to maintain cultural sovereignty. They were wrestling with the effects of the Dawes Act, a major land grab of Native lands. We were in lands promised to us when we were illegally forced out of our homelands, yet they were being stolen, and we continue to fight to maintain our sovereignty.

In 1978 or 1979, I was invited to New York City by Ishmael Reed, the novelist and thought-leader who founded the Before Columbus Foundation, to read and record with other multicultural American poets.

Reed was part of the cultural vanguard who questioned the absence of African American, American Indian, Asian, Chicano and Hispanic, women, Irish, and other “ethnic” and marginalized writers in American literature. This became the multicultural literary movement, a formation that loosely parallels the emergence of jazz fusion, which combined jazz improvisation, rhythms, and other elements with rock, funk, and other styles. (Consider that the roots of jazz are from Africa, and include southern Indigenous nations, musical influences, and European contributions.) What was then called “ethnic literature” reshaped and

continues to redefine American literature, just as the many cultural musical infusions continue to create and revise established forms of music.

From that gathering came a Folkways album, *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry: Before Columbus Foundation*, released in 1980. It was at that time that I first heard the poet Jayne Cortez, and I was mesmerized by her performance. I remember the poem “For the Poets,” which embodied a kind of call-and-response between the poet and the ancestors of her poems, between the poet and the warrior heroes of justice. Her

lyrical structures fit precisely within West African forms of oratory. Her poetry and performance made a meeting place of all that had gone before me in my music and poetry influences. It was all there: the music in the poetry, the presence of Native, African, and Black American voices, post-colonial yearnings, and the standing up in the poetry-song making. Cortez was an inspiration, a crucial part of the origin story for my poetry and music journey.

It was either during that trip or a subsequent trip to NYC that I heard Jayne perform with her band, the Firespitters,

which featured her son Denardo Coleman on drums. What I heard inspired me to explore what might happen if I combined all those influences of rock, blues, funk, reggae, jazz, Native music, and my poetry.

The last time I saw Jayne was in NYC in the Village Vanguard, where we met to hear and visit with the Mvskoke/Kaw jazz saxophonist Jim Pepper. When I began learning saxophone, I looked for Jim and found him in NYC. We became friends,

and we’d listen to music when I’d come through. I’d soak up his stories, his knowledge; then we’d go visit the music store row that included stores like Manny’s in the Theater District. (That neighborhood of music

stores is no longer there, and I mourn it every time I visit NYC.) What Jim did was to incorporate jazz with the Mvskoke stomp dance and Kaw traditional music of his upbringing and cultural background. He did so at the urging of trumpeter Don Cherry, who was also part Native as his mother was of Choctaw descent. By the time Jim



passed in 1992, his innovations in composition and playing had become part of the foundation of Native jazz music. Jayne and I kept in touch in the years following until she passed in 2012. I dedicate this album to her, also to Jim, who was like a brother to me.

It was while visiting Sandra Cisneros in Chicago when I was a graduate student in the Iowa Writer's Workshop that I heard the Argentinian saxophone player Gato Barbieri blasting through the home Sandra shared with her six brothers. I could hear Spain and South American Native presence in his horn. I began listening to

saxophone players like Lester Young, Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, and others. The writer Kambon Obayani, who was also a writing student at Iowa, introduced me to many excellent classic jazz albums. He also played saxophone.

After graduate school and in the late '80s I lived briefly in Denver, Colorado, immersed in the jazz music scene as a listener and teaching poetry and Native literature at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Denver was a major stop for some of the best bands and singers in the country. Tina Turner blew open a huge arena with her funky, rock, soulful

self. Next to her, my favorite—and the most influential for me at that time—was the jazz fusion group Weather Report. Their funky, boppy, intelligent sounds lived daily in my ears. I couldn't get enough of them. By then Jaco Pastorius was no longer in the band. I can hear their influence in this album, especially in the songs "Rabbit Is Up to Tricks" and "Without."

Towards the end of my Denver time, I borrowed a tenor saxophone and asked my friend, the jazz saxophone player Laura Newman, to write out the G blues scale for me. That's where I started. I had quit the school band in junior high because

the band director refused to let girls play saxophone. Now, over twenty years later, I decided to buy my own horn. I bought a King Super tenor and began practicing, against the advice of those who were promoting my poetry. They were alarmed and advised that the attention to saxophone playing would diminish the attention to my poetry. The saxophone historically was seen as an instrument of distraction, even as an instrument to incite war, according to the sentiment of French newspapers after the Belgian inventor Adolphe Sax patented it in 1846. Sax's reputation never recovered. They could not imagine how

such a horn could fit in an orchestra: it was too loud and made raucous sounds. And yet you often hear it in the movies when it kicks off the romance scenes with a sweet sound like a human voice that has discovered earthy joy.

The saxophone is so human. Its tendency is to be rowdy, edgy, talk too loud, bump into people, say the wrong words at the wrong time. But then, you take a breath, all the way from the center of the earth, and blow. All that heartache is forgiven. All that love we humans carry makes a sweet, deep sound and we fly a little.

Around that time Laura Newman and Kimberly McCord, a music educator, started up a big band for non-professional players in Denver. I sat second chair tenor. I couldn't always keep up in the big band, but being in the middle of the music taught me about blending and how every player carries rhythm, not just the rhythm section. Many of our big band arrangements were by Toshiko Akiyoshi, and my favorite was Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia."

Somewhere in the mid-'80s during all of this I heard Gil Scott-Heron at the Line Camp, a small club off the highway

between Santa Fe and Pojoaque in New Mexico that hosted a variety of major acts. Scott-Heron was a singer, spoken word, and jazz swagger. He was cool and yet pointedly political. I can still feel his music running through my bones, as he made the leap for me between Jayne Cortez and the Santee spoken artist and activist John Trudell, who was performing around the country at political rallies at that time.

In the mid-1980s, the Kiowa/Comanche/Mvskoke rock guitarist, singer, and songwriter Jesse Ed Davis pulled together a band and composed music to back John Trudell, a band they

called Grafitti Man ("Graffiti" was initially misspelled but stayed that way). Their initial album, AKA *Grafitti Man*, contained songs that first appeared on cassettes Trudell made in the 1980s and early 1990s. Their music was rock and blues with Trudell's spoken word lyrics. I know that my band Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice played with the Grafitti Band, but just don't remember where or when. They were in my ears during that time. (Doug Miller and I co-curated a show highlighting the career of Jesse Ed Davis, *Natural Anthem*, in 2024 at the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa.)

Trudell and Davis's collaboration became a national and even international sensation especially with activist communities. They came to the attention of Bob Dylan, who called their album the best of the year. This put them on the musical map. Davis's arrangements and backing gave the words of Trudell momentum and lift. During the late '80s, Trudell reached out to me when I was in Los Angeles for a poetry reading and took me to Davis's recording studio in a garage in Culver City where I recorded some voice with John, with Davis's direction. Davis was humble and funny in

the same way as Native guys at home. I don't consider Trudell a crucial influence in my musical endeavors; I was more jazz directed. When he and Davis were happening, I had been hanging out with jazz musicians in Denver, and some of them were on my first recording, a poetry music album produced by Watershed Foundation out of Washington DC in 1985, *Furious Light*. I was joined by Miguel Espinoza on guitar, Chris Hewitt and Dana Marsh on piano, and Laura Newman on saxophone. I hadn't taken up saxophone yet.

When I left Denver for a teaching job in Tucson, I became friends with guitar

player/singer/songwriter Keith Stoutenburg, whom I met through his wife Robyn, a photographer who had been hired to photograph me for an article for the *Tucson Weekly*. Keith is technically the first person with whom I ever performed live. We made a quasi-two-person band. We started jamming and played a few gigs including the Tucson Poetry Festival, where we were joined by Michael Davis, the bass player, composer, and performer of the Detroit band MC5. Soon after we began performing together, I returned to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to teach at the University of

New Mexico, and I started my first full band, with all-Native players, called Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice. Three of the musicians were also attorneys—hence the “poetic justice” moniker.

My first songwriting attempt was “For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars, for We Remember the Story and Must Tell It Again So We May All Live.” Performed at KUNM studios with attorney/drummer Susan Williams, Dakota, that song was in honor of a young Mi'kmaq warrior who was killed for her activism. Susan's

brother John Williams, who had been running reggae bands out in Arizona, performing primarily for Native communities. I moved back to New Mexico, motivated by the idea of putting music to my poetry. We brought on William Johnson from Isleta Pueblo on lead guitar. And as the band developed, we added a rhythm guitarist. We had several guitarists during the life of the band, including Kyle Nichols, the son of Nichelle Nichols who played Uhura on *Star Trek*. What we were doing was unique because our music was reggae-based with Soca and other Caribbean forms, along with my spoken word poetry and saxophone and

other jazz, rock, and Native elements. We added Hopi Pima artist Frankie Poocha on keyboard and vocals. He brought the distinctive Native voicing we were looking to add in the music. Our songs were political and danceable.

I essentially learned to play saxophone on stage with Poetic Justice, and when in different parts of the country I would look up horn players for lessons and/or conversation. I met up with jazz saxophonist Jerry Bergonzi in Boston for a lesson. He and I also had a common interest



in astrology. And during the few years I lived and worked in Tucson, I briefly studied with the brilliant classical saxophonist Elizabeth Erwin at the University of Arizona and took a few lessons from the then young, up-and-coming jazz saxophonist Tony Malaby.

My band Poetic Justice began to gain quite a following after we recorded our first and only album, *Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century*. What reviews we garnered praised it, with the Tower Records publication calling it the “best dub poetry album in North America.” I was also influenced by Linton Kwesi Johnson, the

dub poet from Jamaica whom I had an opportunity to hear in Amsterdam during the same visit in the late '80s when I met Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek. Johnson's poetry naturally embodied reggae beats in the lines. Moved by the beat in Johnson's phrasing and language, we were practically dancing at his reading as he performed solo without a band. Reggae was like jazz in that it rose up from the people, people of the earth, to speak against oppression. It's important to acknowledge Bob Marley here, for his potent, compassionate spirit. Reggae was also highly influenced by soul music and funk.

We had a good run with Joy Harjo and Poetic Justice, but the band broke up when I moved out of state and John took what we'd started and began the popular reggae band, Native Roots, headed by Santa Ana Pueblo musical artist Shkeme Garcia. (John Williams and I have been talking about producing a new Poetic Justice album, a collection of Native political statements to uplift the people in these times.)

I subsequently made many moves and recorded a couple of projects, including my first solo album, *Native Joy for Real*, at Sonora Recorders in Los Angeles in 2005. The most

notable song on that album was "The Had-It-Up-To-Here Round Dance." A wild take on round dance, it was a unique spoken word/comedy/Native music/disco fusion featuring the Oneida comedian Charlie Hill in a kind of comedic take of fours. It was also unlike anything else on the album, a project which was an eclectic mix of spoken word with sung poems like "Grace" and "The Woman Hanging from the 13th Floor." Most of the tunes were driven by hip-hop rhythms.

I returned to New Mexico and began a musical partnership with rock guitarist and producer Larry Mitchell, who calls himself

a "guitar texturalist." He is known both for his outstanding guitar technique and for the layering of sounds into moody stacks to shape a song. He won a Grammy for producing, engineering, and performing on "Totemic Flute Chants" by artist Johnny Whitehorse, who was also known as Robert Mirabal, from Taos Pueblo. He has produced records for many other Native artists and produced two of my albums: *Winding Through the Milky Way*, a solo album which was recognized with several music awards, and *Red Dreams, a Trail Beyond Tears*, a Native flute album.

This album, *Insomnia & Seven Steps to Grace*, begins the next chapter in musical imagination. I eventually returned home, as we all do one way or the other. (I did literally return home in the early winter of 2011.) Home took me back to the memory of hearing Miles as I stood behind my father in his polished Cadillac, following how the midnight sound of his trumpet makes a distinct path to the South, to home. It takes me back to an early book by the poet June Jordan, *Things That I Do in the Dark*, which reverberates through the emotional field of this album. Her poem from that collection "These Poems" says it: "These

poems/ they are things that I do/ in the dark/ reaching for you/ whoever you are/ and are you ready?"

The roots of an art like music travel deep in the ancestral field, whether the familial or the genealogical field, and are embedded with an urgency to live and search for lifegiving elements, wherever they can be found.

When I came home, I returned to the Muscogee Nation Reservation, home to where stomp dance is as ubiquitous as country swing, where Jesse Ed Davis played guitar for Conway Twitty and danced southern Plains; home to

rocking out at Teen Town, to the Motown tunes inundating the airwaves, to Leon Russell and his bluesy country rock; to the jazz bassist Oscar Pettiford, to the Jazz Hall of Fame where I met and performed with local jazz and blues musicians; to the friendship of Selby Minner, who taught me blues bass and ran the Blues Hall of Fame in the Black town of Rentiesville and taught many the power of love in the blues; to the ongoing powwow circles; to my family. I returned home to the earth of the music.

After my return I recorded my solo album *I Pray for My Enemies* in Port Townsend,

Washington, and here in Tulsa at the Archer Building while I was a Tulsa Artist Fellow. My heart made a stand in the standout song on that album, "An American Sunrise." The album, co-produced by Barrett Martin, featured appearances by the rock guitarists who mark an age of shift, including Peter Buck of R.E.M., Rich Robinson of the Black Crowes, Mike McCready of Pearl Jam, and Krist Novoselic of Nirvana. There would be no rock without the music born from the southern soup mixed at Congo Square in New Orleans. I circled back to home, to Tulsa, where I will always hear that trumpeter on the radio as my dad drove us

to the lake where we'd swim and fish, then later eat the fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and gravy that my mother had cooked that morning, and sliced fresh tomatoes from someone's garden. At night over the fire, we'd eat the fish we caught. And there would be music, always music. My parents were crazy good dancers. My mother would be singing.

All of this joy despite the gravity beneath the laughing, lapping waters of the lakes and rivers in my childhood and all throughout this country because in the story was the Trail of Tears, the laws of anti-miscegenation, Jim



Crow, missing and murdered Native women, the backlash against Native, women, LGBTQ folks, children, artists, and truth tellers, and the disregard for the rights of the Earth and all of Earth's beings.

During these times many of us despair about the effect any of us can have on the evil actions of others, as if we are in a pit, battling, and nothing of our efforts matters. But then I feel how the quiver of a vibration of love can make a rhythm, and the rhythm can catch hold, and it can find its way in voices,

music, actions, sounds, color, and light, and then there we are together, making coherence.

Because of what keeps us up at night, the bad dreams, the good ones, the tenderness, the beauty, the sweetest love, the heartache, the struggle: this album.

In 2017 I was honored to be appointed an Art of Change Ford Fellow along with others, including esperanza spalding. I had long admired the artistry of spalding, her precise magic in bass, voice, and connection, and

hesitated to speak to her because I was in such awe; then there we were, as if we already knew each other. (We have Elizabeth Alexander to thank for this connection.) I had a different project I spoke with her about, and she had a project, too, and now here we are together in this creative endeavor. We came together at the incomparable Church Studio in Tulsa, with the skilled and brilliant recording engineers Gary Laney and Mike Prado, and a hospitable staff. With us was the outstanding and inventive guitarist Matthew Stephens and the thoughtful, brilliant drummer/rhythm keeper and maker Justin Tyson. esperanza was armed with basses and her voice, and I came in loaded with saxophones, flutes, poetry, and songs, and together (with the help of my husband Owen Sapulpa) we called on the creative forces who surround and inspire us. Then the four of us were set loose and turned up the music.

This is what happened.

We offer it humbly, with gratitude.

"Insomnia and the Seven Steps to Grace." *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: Poems*. W.W. Norton, 1994; "Rabbit Is Up to Tricks." *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2015; "This Morning I Pray for My Enemies." *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2015; Harjo, Joy. "How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001". W.W. Norton & Co, 2002; "Without." *Weaving Sundown in a Scarlet Light: Fifty Poems for Fifty Years*.

W.W. Norton & Company, 2022; "Instinct." *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales*. W.W. Norton, 2000; "Perhaps the World Ends Here." *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: Poems*. W.W. Norton, 1994; "Stomp All Night" *POET WARRIOR: A Memoir*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2021; "I Am a Prayer," print edition of the November 20, 2023 issue *The New Yorker*; "In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World." *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales*. W.W. Norton, 2000.



TRACK NOTES

1 insomnia & seven steps to grace

Joy Harjo, voice; esperanza spalding, bass, voice; Matthew Stevens, guitar; Justin Tyson, drums

“Insomnia & Seven Steps to Grace” is the doorway to the unfolding of the album experience. Together all the musicians are the mood makers as we travel into the realms that lift above and below us in the before-sleep, to lead our spirit into the mythical space of dream-story making. Each shift slides into another layer of awareness. Justin, the rhythm keeper, is the heartbeat of the corporeal, and we are suspended in potential. Matthew is the magician on

the guitar. In our family, we are related to the panther. We need fresh dreaming to navigate what we are going to encounter. esperanza is a hundred voices, a thousand or more, and through her they are one.

2 rabbit is up to tricks

Joy Harjo, poem voice, alto saxophone, percussion; esperanza spalding, voice, percussion; Matthew Stevens, guitar, background vocals, percussion; Justin Tyson, drums, background vocals, percussion

The lyrics are my version of a Mvskoke origin story, when a world had been destroyed, a world much like the one we are

in now: when people forgot who they were, their purpose, and did not take care of what they were given to make a life together with all life forms. They were given instructions yet again, as they climbed up into the next world, full of hope and all the tools they needed for a good life. This poem-song is a warning about how we can be fooled by braggart tricksters who want everything for themselves and lose this world again. Those who wield great power can forget that the power doesn't belong to them: It is given to be shared. I have previous recordings of this song-poem, but this particular version is needed to fit right here in this ongoing story.

I am thankful for the ancestry of Weather Report, which emerges here especially in esperanza's bass playing.

3 i pray for my enemies

Joy Harjo, poem voice, Native flute, alto saxophone; Matthew Stevens, guitar, effects; esperanza spalding, bass; Justin Tyson, drums; esperanza spalding, Joy Harjo, Matthew Stephens, Justin Tyson, voices

I pray for my enemies: then, prayer. What is prayer but a poem, a song, an outcry to the most benevolent and all-knowing Creator of this immense story within which we exist. Prayer can be a gratitude, large or small, for a

life lost then recovered from what appears or appeared to be death; an arm around a grandchild, an entreaty for health, safety, or for what is needed for oneself or for someone else. Prayers can work backwards and forwards. They can reach back and lift up from tragedy or move forward into the generations to give life and knowledge. Our most dangerous enemies are the ones who know us best, the ones we love who once loved us. Their betrayals and hurt are the most damaging, yet within the story, if redeemed or transformed, all are lifted and transformed. To pray for one's enemies then, essentially, is also to pray for oneself. We live in

the principle of duality. There can be no one without the other, as the Rastafarians have called it/us/we: the “I”. Perhaps even a calling out of fear is a prayer. Or even, all actions, all words, all music is a prayer. I cannot listen to or think about the jazz saxophonist John Coltrane without thinking of prayer. His songs were supplications for knowledge, were gratitude prayers, were cries for relief from the heavy stories here that sometimes overtake us.



The marching song that forms the basis of “I Pray for My Enemies” is “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again,” a Civil War

song sung by both the Union and Confederate armies. The origin could have been a children’s song. The songwriter, Irish American bandleader Patrick Gilmore, admits that in the early days of the war he heard a “waif” singing the tune in an alley and he “took a fancy to it” and wrote the song. The song eventually became a children’s song: “The ants go marching one by one, hurrah, hurrah. The ants go marching one by one, hurrah, hurrah. The ants go marching one by one, the little one stops to suck his thumb, and they all go marching down to the ground, to get out of the rain, Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom. . . .” It’s a progressive song, and in the next verse the

ants go marching two by two, to a marching beat. The Civil War, which was anything but civil, marked the culmination of a division between those who were proponents of slavery and those who professed to believe in equality for all peoples. We are in such a war right now, only it is being fought on the internet, over the airwaves, by political parties, set off by the backlash at the election of our first Black president.

We are marching within, toward, and because of cultural chaos. The Native flute mimics the military band fife or piccolo sound.

4 fear redux

Joy Harjo, voice; esperanza spalding, voice, bass, synthesizer; Matthew Stevens, guitar, effects; Justin Tyson, drums

“Fear Redux” is the remake of a poem-song that first appeared on my debut album *Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century*. The poem-song appeared again in my subsequent albums *Native Joy for Real*, *She Had Some Horses*, and *I Pray for My Enemies*. It was created for moving through times that challenge and even break us. The original song was primarily percussion and voice. It reappears here because the fear quotient now moving through the collective is

raging. In order to dismantle, reinvigorate, or transform structure you must confront the obstacles that remain with yourselves, your communities, or you will contribute to the downfall of your family, community, your country or planet. It is important to address fear directly, because if unacknowledged it can overtake an individual, a culture. If you call out fear, then you can see it for what it is, and it is up to you whether you make it immense in your imagination or reduce it to a trembling leaf in your hand. Fear is energy. You can use it for impetus, for self-knowledge, for going beyond.

In this version, the voice in the recording is pushed beyond fear. The rhythm section, which is the heart, beats faster and faster, just as the heart pounds when one is overcome by fear. It builds as the lyrics grow in intensity. Then there is a moment of confrontation when the voice stands despite trembling, despite the overwhelm. The rhythm pulls back to tenderness. The heart has gained breath. It speaks. Then the rhythm builds again in power as reclamation. Fear then becomes an ally.

5 without

Joy Harjo, poetry, voice, soprano saxophone; esperanza spalding, bass, voice; Matthew Stevens, guitar; Justin Tyson, drums

For the first time in our lives, we have become acutely aware that everyone in this global community Earth is one. We have collectively dealt with a killer pandemic that raged, killed, and in its wake left long-term disability and grief. In our Mvskoke community we lost many of our culture bearers. The poem *Without* was my first attempt at a tribute for a beloved brother-in-law who died of Covid. His pastor said God would save them, and therefore they needed

no precautions. He was one of several members of his congregation who died from Covid. Studies now show that the rhythms of speaking and singing continue even in the bones.

This song lands at the doorway of the memory of Wayne Shorter. *Mvto*.

6 mahk jchi

Joy Harjo, voice, Native flute; esperanza spalding, bass, voice; Matthew Stevens, guitar, voice; Justin Tyson, drums, voice

The origin of this song lies with the efforts of Robbie Robertson. He compiled and composed music for the Turner Network

series, *The Native Americans*, for which I was narrator. The accompanying album, titled *Music for the Native Americans*, was released in 1993. “Mahk Jchi” was the theme song.

Jennifer Kreisberg, one of the singers in what Robertson called the “Red Road Ensemble,” told me, “Robertson brought a couple of wax cylinder recordings, if I remember correctly. One was labeled ‘Plains Flute Song.’ There was also another one. Ulali fleshed out songs from them. The first part of the song is from the flute piece. Pura Fe arranged the second part. They called North Carolina for a translation of language in the song. The language was in Tutelo from

North Carolina. Lawrence Dunmore translated and gave some of the lyrics.”

We recognize this origin story. The flute in our version doesn’t initiate the melody; rather it is the voice(s) of spalding, then Matt and Justin beautifully cascade the melody, then my flute wanders in and out, then the sweet brushwork of Tyson. Everyone cascades into that beauty that was intended a century or two ago.

7 instinct

Joy Harjo, poem voice;
Matthew Stevens, guitar,
effects; esperanza
spalding, bass; Justin
Tyson, drums



“Instinct” was a surprise, just as the micro-poem was a surprise when it happened in a moment caught by an image. In the song we turned it over, as if turning over a rock, to see what was under it, and there we were, walking through time, getting ready for the next part of the story.

8 my guy featuring esperanza spalding

esperanza spalding, voice; Joy
Harjo, alto saxophone; Matthew
Stevens, guitar

“My Guy” was one of the best gifts from my sister unearthing my mother’s typewritten songs. I have copies of other lyrics

of hers—most are written on envelopes and dime store letter notepads—but this was one I had never seen. “My Guy” is among her best. I was excited to add it to the album to honor my mother. She carried a gift that she never fulfilled because she had to raise four children, essentially alone. My mother would be so honored and thrilled to hear how esperanza makes vocal art of her songwriting art. What a pairing!

9 perhaps the world ends here

Joy Harjo, poem voice

“Perhaps the World Ends Here” is included in the middle,

because imagine everyone from every community together, sharing food, music, dance, stories, and everyone with a place at the table.

10 stomp all night

Joy Harjo, voice, alto saxophone; Matthew Stevens, guitar, voice; esperanza spalding, bass, voice; Justin Tyson, drums, voice; esperanza spalding, Matthew Stephens, Justin Tyson, Julian B. Watson, voices

The song “Stomp All Night” includes a big nod to funk. I love funk. One of the earliest concerts I attended was James Brown in Albuquerque. We danced in the aisles, and into the street, to home, and are still

dancing. Brown’s music is the result of hardcore, unbearable pain in the struggle for justice to be seen as human, and how joy lifts us up because it is the other side of the seesaw of the story of living. That story is ongoing, and damned if it doesn’t seem to be getting any better. This story is not pretty, and some of it will never make sense. It’s raucous and even ridiculously absurd. Yet we are here still singing and using the pain to make art. This is how I wanted the song “Stomp All Night” to exist, with all this wildness, with all that love and connection we find when we are out in our tribal lands in the middle of the night singing, dancing, eating, and honoring

this circle we make with the stars, earth, the sun, and each other.

11 i am a prayer featuring ganayva

Joy Harjo, voice, soprano saxophone; Ganavya, voice and ukulele; esperanza spalding, bass, voice; Matthew Stevens, guitar; Justin Tyson, drums, percussion

In the middle of all the stories of cruelty by despots and their armies, when I despaired as we all despaired, I wrote the poem “I Am a Prayer.” I was thinking of Gaza, Congo, the Amazon, my goddaughter in Tel Aviv, the Trail of Tears, Breonna Taylor, my daughter’s passing, the wholesale killing of Native

women, all of it. I used to listen to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan for hours. He sang mostly Qawwali-style music, Sufi devotional music. His voice opened portals. Also a master of Hindustani music, he is known as one of the greatest singers in the world along with Umm Kulthum, an Egyptian singer who lived in my ears through the ’90s. In 1997 I was in India, collaborating on a musical, poetry, and dance show, “Map to the Next World,” with classical dancer Anita Ratnam, who was trained in Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, and Mohiniattam, the classical dances of Kerala, when we got the news that Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan had died. I mourned his passing with the rest of the

world and thought it was proper that I heard the news while in India. When I first wrote the poem “I Am a Prayer,” I sent it to esperanza. She shared it with a singer she often collaborates with, Ganavya Doraiswamy. This is Doraiswamy’s incredible, soulful rendition of the poem. We are reminded that all that is spoken and enacted can be interpreted as a kind of prayer.



12 in the beautiful perfume & stink of the world

Joy Harjo and esperanza spalding, poem voices; Matthew Stevens, guitar, effects; esperanza spalding, background voices, bullroarer; Justin Tyson, drums, percussion, bullroarer

“In the Beautiful Perfume & Stink of the World” was inspired after I returned from a trip to Alexandria and Cairo, Egypt. In Cairo, I felt home. The poem closes out my book, *A Map to the Next World*. That book was a continued exploration in orality, a call-and-response form that was embodied by the overall shape of the book, through a longer poem sequence, and

then finally, in this poem. In this earthly realm, dark follows light, sky borders earth, silence gives form to sound. I was thinking about this that time I traveled down the Nile in a felucca at night, with a comet, a celestial boat, overhead. In this song, esperanza joins me in the call-and-response. The sound of a bullroarer replicates the presence of those who enter from other dangerous and/or sacred realms.

13 goodbye pork pie hat

Joy Harjo, poetry voice, alto saxophone; esperanza spalding, bass, voice; Matthew Stevens, guitar; Justin Tyson, drums

And finally, the closing of this album is the Charles Mingus standard “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat.” This song is an elegy for one of my favorite saxophone players, Lester Young, who was known for wearing pork pie hats. He busted down his store-bought hats to his particular signature shape. “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” was composed as an instrumental piece. Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Joni Mitchell created lyrics. I added my own here, with esperanza on bass and me on saxophone, echoing Mingus and Young. We are in appreciation of our musical ancestors who continue to resound into the future in our musical bones.

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MY GUY

Ive got a guy his name is slim he has them
all beat when it comes to men he always takes
me out when the light are dim.

When it come to jass he can't be beat you
should see the way he moves his feet thats my
slim we always go out when the lights are dim.

Just play a good jass tune if you want to
see a guy that can rock and roll he has music
in his sole thats my slim who takes me out when
the light are dim.

So dim the lights we are going out to night
to a little jass place we know and dance all
night to a good band that can play when it comes
to rock and roll.