

## Joy Harjo

Inspired by the creative women in her life, Joy became a writer, musician, activist, and the first Native American U.S. Poet Laureate.

### Chapter 01 - Introduction

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**Announcer:** U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and is an enrolled member of the Muscogee Creek Nation. She is the daughter of a Creek father and Cherokee-French mother. Her father was a sheet-metal worker from a famous Creek family. His great-grandfather was a Native American leader in the Red Stick War against President Andrew Jackson in the 1800s. Harjo's mother was a waitress of mixed Cherokee, Irish, and French descent. Growing up, Harjo was surrounded by artists and musicians, but she did not know any poets. Her mother wrote songs, her grandmother played saxophone, and her aunt was an artist. These influential women inspired Harjo to explore her creative side. Harjo recalls that the very first poem she wrote was in eighth grade. However, Harjo did not start to write professionally until later in life. She became a writer, academic, musician and Native American activist whose poems featured Indian symbolism and history. Her poems also deal with social and personal issues, notably feminism and with music, particularly Jazz.

In 2019, Harjo was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and became the first Native American United States Poet Laureate from the Library of Congress. She has also written several film scripts, television plays, and released five albums of original music. In 2009, she won a NAMMY (Native American Music Award) for Best Female Artist of the Year.

Listen to Joy tell her story about her early years in Tulsa and the teachers who impacted her life. A presentation of the oral history website [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).

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**Chapter 02 - 6:20****Family of Leaders**

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**John Erling:** Today's date is November 5, 2020. My name is John Ehrling. Joy, would you state your full name please?

**Joy Harjo:** It's Joy Harjo or Joy Harjo Sapulpa.

**JE:** Sapulpa:

**JH:** Uh huh.

**JE:** Interesting.

**JH:** Yeah I'm married. It's my married name.

**JE:** Does it have anything to do with the town of Sapulpa?

**JH:** Uh huh. My husband's grandfather was the founder of that. They named the town after him.

**JE:** Oh. We could do a whole story on that!

**JH:** Uh huh.

**JE:** Your date of birth?

**JH:** May 9, 1951.

**JE:** So that makes your present age?

**JH:** Just add it up! It's 69.

**JE:** 69. When I'm in this oral history business, it kind of gives me a little more confidence to ask a woman her age.

**JH:** Yeah, I never felt like it was anybody's business and people would always ask and I would say, "How important is it to the story?" At this point, I don't care.

**JE:** Exactly, right. I'm in our office of [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Where are you for this recording?

**JH:** I'm in Tulsa at my apartment near the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame.

**JE:** And obviously this is where you live?

**JH:** Uh huh.

**JE:** I'm asking right now about COVID, how has it affected people. It has affected me because I'm interviewing people by phone now. How has it affected you and maybe the Muscogee Creek Nation?

**JH:** Well there is a lot of it going on in the Nation because a lot of people have kept up with, you know, their church, and a lot of the ceremonial grounds kept going. We held off because of the COVID for safety. So there has been a lot of COVID going around. I try to stay in, although since March, I had a schedule where I was booked to be on the road almost every week all the way through the fall. With COVID, all of those gigs got either canceled, postponed or rescheduled as virtual events. But I have been out three times,

you know, out of town. We just got back from Phoenix for a socially distanced event. Otherwise, I am mostly staying here in the apartment and I have a studio over on Archer and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. So mostly I am here or I go there or we have some land south of Glenpool we are going to build on and now and then I get out there. But it's kind of the state that artists live in anyway except, you know, I miss seeing family and I miss seeing everyone.

During this time, we have released our Norton anthology. I am one of several editors. It's called *When the Light of the World is Subdued, Our Songs Came Through*. It is doing really well. It is already in its second printing. Oprah just picked it for a book club selection. Then I just finished, along with a team at the Library of Congress and Lafortune Library Center, another anthology called *Living Nations, Living Words* that highlights contemporary Native American poets and that also has an accompanying story map that will be up online. So I have worked on that during this pandemic and finished a memoir, *Poet Warrior: A Call for Love and Justice*, that will be out September from Norton and just finished tracks for a new music album with Derek Martin and that will be out probably this spring.

**JE:** You have been really busy. Where were you born?

**JH:** Tulsa.

**JE:** Your mother's maiden name and a little bit about her background.

**JH:** Wynema Jewell Baker was her maiden name. She was born in Decatur, Arkansas, you know, right near the border of Oklahoma/Arkansas. Her dad was Desmond Baker. I don't know too much about his people. Her mother was Leona Mae Baker. Her maiden name was Evans. Her mother's name was Lena Evans. My mother always said they were Cherokee and had an aunt and she said when she went to the funeral, they were all full bloods there—her aunt and her mother's sister. So I found out that my mother's mother died in childbirth. I found a marriage certificate to her husband, Tom Christian. I guess he would be my great-grandfather. He turned out to be enrolled as a Chickasaw citizen. I have the copy of their marriage certificate in the Cherokee Nation. It's just that my mother is not enrolled and her mother wasn't but she said they were Cherokee. So I have been tracking that down and that is how I found out. She had said both sides were native but I have not been able to exactly pinpoint yet.

**JE:** Your father's name?

**JH:** Allen W. Foster Jr.

**JE:** Of what descent was he and where did he grow up?

**JH:** Muscogee Creek, his mother. He grew up in Okmulgee. There is a house there, a 21-room house. That is where the college is now there in Okmulgee. There was oil money on his mom's side. They came from a lot of leaders. My great-grandfather, who I am still close to

spiritually, is Henry Marcy Harjo. His wife, or my great-grandmother, is Katie Monahwee. I guess her grandfather was Monahwee who fought Andrew Jackson. We are related on that side to Osceola distantly, a distant uncle. My great-grandfather, Henry Marcy Harjo, was principal chief and interim principal chief and quite accomplished. That's what I know about his side.

**JE:** How much of the Muscogee Creek traditions were taught to you as child?

**JH:** You know, we grew up in Tulsa, which there has been concern that it is the Muscogee Creek Nation reservation in an urban community with a lot of Creeks, Seminoles, Cherokees in the neighborhood. But I didn't grow up like at the ceremonial grounds, although I am a member and I have participated now for many, many years and family members are a part of it. So I didn't grow up in the middle of the ceremonial ground tradition, nor did I grow up in the language but I grew up knowing I was Creek and being recognized as Creek from day one.

### Chapter 3 - 4:15

#### Tracing Talents

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**John Erling:** Can you trace your many talents--poetry, music, writing--in your family heritage and how do you believe that was handed down to you?

**Joy Harjo:** Oh yeah. I mean the music through my mother. She used to write songs. One of her songs, Ernie Fields, a famous band leader and composer and so on, made an instrumental arrangement of one of her songs. I don't know which one that was. And she was a singer but, you know, had four children and then had to go to work and so that all kind of went by the wayside, but she was very talented.

My grandfather, her father, I know he used to play harmonica, which I can play. I picked up...I can play it.

Then it turns out my grandmother, Naomi Harjo, played saxophone. I didn't know that. I started playing saxophone when I was about 40. My uncle, John Jacobs, said "you know, we might have your grandmother's saxophone around here", but we never found it. I didn't know that when I picked up a sax. They were all artists on my father's side, and my children and grandchildren are all really good artists.

My grandmother and my Aunt Lois Harjo, who I was very close to because my grandmother passed of TB when she was fairly young and my dad was young, she was an artist. I have a painting that she did of Osceola here in my home and I have a painting by my Aunt Lois who used to go to New Mexico a lot. She was the one who taught me a lot. I was very, very close to her.

**JE:** Any artistic talent that you have now, how early did it come to you?

**JH:** I was always drawing from day one. I was always drawing and painting. The music thing...I loved music in school and then I guess when I was about 15 or 16, because of my stepfather, I stopped all of it and didn't pick it up until much later.

**JE:** Because of your stepfather, you dropped it?

**JH:** Uh huh, oh yeah. He forbid me to sing in the house. Usually I didn't sing when he was there anyway. There was no music because he was so oppressive that when he came home, everything stopped, everything got quiet.

**JE:** How long a gap was that in there that you couldn't perform at home?

**JH:** Well, then I went to Indian school and that saved my life. I went to the Institute of American Indian Art when I was 16 and finished high school there. I loved it there. There was the Institute of American Indian Arts and there was the Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Santa Fe. It was the first time in school that I felt really like I had a place, was comfortable and I loved being there. When you sent in your application, you had to send in your art, whatever it was that you were doing, and I sent in drawings. I used to draw quite a bit and that is how I got accepted was based on my art. My second semester there, I was looking at my schedule and my best friend was taking drama. I said I would never get on a stage and then I wound up in one of the first all native drama and dance troops and we got to go on tour up in the Pacific northwest. That was a highlight of my life. Then I turned out to be pregnant and I came back to Oklahoma. My son was born at W.W. Hastings Hospital in Tahlequah. We were back here for a while and then moved back to Santa Fe for a while. Then I wound up going to school at the University of New Mexico.

**JE:** Back to elementary, what schools did you go to here in Tulsa?

**JH:** I went to Burbank Elementary until I think it was about fourth grade. Definitely fifth grade, I was in Billy Mitchell. It was right before they put I-244 through there. It was right before they did all of that. Then Andrew Jackson Elementary off of Pine and Harvard area. Those were all the elementary schools. I think I went one year to Andrew Jackson. Then for junior high, it was called junior high then, I went to Cleveland Junior High which I think is no longer there. I went one year at Will Rogers and then I went to New Mexico.

## Chapter 4 - 2:21

### Pre-Med

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**John Erling:** You obviously went on to the University of New Mexico. You started in pre-med, was interested in that. You changed your major to art, but why with all of this talent did you start in pre-med?

**Joy Harjo:** Because I got a job when I was in Santa Fe. I was actually working in a gas station pumping gas. My then husband, my son's father, always said he was looking for a job but he would never find them. We drove up in this car; it was an early 1950s. I don't know, the trunk lid was always falling off into the street. But we drove up and there was a job at a gas station and a guy who was running it looked at him and then looked over at me and hired me, so I went to work. Later when I left to go take an eight-week program as a nursing assistant, when I left he said I was the best employee he ever had. After that, he said he was going to hire women. But I went to this eight-week program at the St. Vincent's Hospital for nursing assistants and I loved the work so much, I decided to go to pre-med. But after a semester in pre-med, when I was in classes I had no preparation for like chemistry and so on because most of my high school hours had been in the arts or just basic English and so on. I was in advanced English at Will Rogers; they put me in the advanced English class. But I went back into the arts. I have always been interested in the healing arts and I still am. But I went back into doing art again. Then it was somewhere in my third or fourth year, about the third year as an art major, I was working for my BSA. I was within like six hours of a BSA in studio art degree and I got into poetry and then I changed my major.

**JE:** And then on to a master of fine arts in creative writing from the University of Iowa in '78 and also took classes in film making at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe, so you're well educated for sure. I am sure that all that education as you look back on it helped refine your many talents.

**JH:** Yeah they helped even if I might have fought against some of it, but yes it did contribute.

**JE:** Right.

## Chapter 5 - 5:50

### U.S. Poet Laureate

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**John Erling:** You're known as a poet, musician, playwright and author. You were named the United States Poet Laureate in 2019, making you the first Native American poet laureate in the history of that position. So what does that mean and what are the responsibilities that go with that. Let me just add too, you were appointed to another one-year term in this year 2020.

**Joy Harjo:** Yes, well it was certainly a surprise, the position is. Well it is an incredible honor; you know, it is really an incredible honor. I feel like I am holding it especially on behalf of Native poets and the history is like, how would I say it, by naming me into this position, I think it honors Natives. I mean the position is a doorway for indigenous peoples in this

country. For me, one thing that has been really important about it is it makes a doorway for indigenous people and highlights Native poets in this country. The position, the way I see it, is I'm basically an ambassador of poetry, which is what I have been doing for years. I have been traveling about, performing, speaking and writing for years—over 40 years, probably about 45. I was trying to figure it out the other day. About 45 years I have been traveling about. I have probably been to nearly every Native community in the country and Native communities around the world. Then I have been in every state performing and this has been going on for a long time. So in a way, I am doing what I have always done but it is certainly on a much more elevated level to have that title to go with it.

**JE:** Right.

**JH:** I am using it as an opportunity, of course, to highlight native poets. My project, which will be unveiled--that word doesn't quite work--in a couple of weeks is a story map that will be at the Library of Congress site that will highlight contemporary native American poets. I was in a meeting the hour before this interview with that staff and it was incredible. We have 47 contemporary native poets highlighted on a map of North America. It is so beautifully done—you can hear the poet read the poems and have statements about plays. So that has been a project. It was also picked up by Norton and the poems will appear in an anthology in May published by Norton. So we have been working away on that. I think I have about three or four more pieces to do and I will finish them in the next couple of days and then most of my work on that project will be done. Well, that part of it because then there is going to be teachers' resources and I will be part of working with communities in some way for that project.

**JE:** You are a fan of oral history and so am I. That is what my series is on the oral history website. You use Native American oral history in your literature readings, musical performances. Explain your thoughts and why you are a fan of oral history.

**JH:** If you think about how history is imparted to us in a society, a lot of it has been through books and who writes books and who publishes them. It brings up another whole question of who has authority and who is telling the story. If you go to the people and people may not agree. You know you can have several people or even two, three or four people at an event and they all might see something different. They might tell the story differently but they are all viable, you know, living stories.

I guess an example would be my Aunt Lois Harjo. There is a history of Muscogee Creek people and I can read about my grandfather or great-grandfather or great-great-great-grandfather. I think I am the sixth generation. My Aunt Lois would have been the fourth generation. So she knew stories about the Trail of Tears; she knew stories about monopoly and about the family that really gave a lot more color and meaning to the stories than what you could read and what little you could find in books. And a lot of it is wrong. I mean, I found out that there is a lot...it is irritating...I have gone on that ancestry.com and

somebody went on there and changed the spelling. Suddenly I could not find Monahwee; some people say “mon-ah-wee”, some say “mon-ah-wa”. But suddenly, my Monahwee relatives all disappeared. Then I discovered that somebody from Alabama who doesn’t know anything about the family or history went through and misspelled everything. It’s like they kind of erased the story and then if you go into different sites or textbooks, they’ll say that he died in Alabama or that he died on the trail. Well, that’s just not so. I have a map. There are oral histories that have been recorded in a book of—what is the man’s name—it’s about all these different immigration trails. With my book of poetry, *American Sunrise*, I included a map that shows the trail that he was on was a Fish Pond Nico or the head of the fish pond ground and their families, where they started in Talladega, Alabama, and then they wound up, a lot of them, were let off at Fort Gibson at the fort there. I also know where he is buried. It is not marked. A lot of people don’t know where that grave is, but I have been there, and it is not marked with a plaque at all but with seven cedar trees. But you won’t find that. I though well maybe we should put something there but, in a way, I think he kind of wanted it that way.

## Chapter 6 - 6:08

### She Had Some Horses

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**John Erling:** You have written many poems. I have two of them here I would like for you to talk about. The horse is an important animal in Native American culture. You have used that as a symbol in *She Had Some Horses*. I was looking at it and, in fact, I have it in front of me here. In the first section, for those who haven’t read, you know of course, you started every single line with “she had horses”. Who? Talk to us about the symbolism and how it expressed some of the hardship you went through and some of the values you have.

**Joy Harjo:** Yes. You know poems in a way have their own lives. I can look at it now and see some of the, you know, impulse and what pulled it all together. Monahwee was a horse person, as are some of my family members on that side. He was known for his skill with horses. My Aunt Lois told me that he could even get somewhere quicker than his warrior friends because he could bend time, but he was very skilled with horses.

Another story that I told when I went to the University of Tennessee for an interview to be hired, I told them—and this was another story you won’t find in a history book—that he used to steal horses. Well, it wasn’t really stealing because the people were on the land illegally, but they ran all up and down that Tennessee River Valley. You know the Tennessee River is sort of like I-40 now; it is a major highway. So I told them that story; they hired me anyway.

I have a cousin who was quite a horse woman and barrel raced in Okemah, Oklahoma. I was living in New Mexico when I wrote that poem. My kids were young, and my daughter's father used to make up a little song for her about horses. Then there were these Navajo horse songs that I have always liked, you know horse songs for horses for riding them for traveling. So all of those pieces kind of went into the inspiration for that poem.

I also realized that right before I wrote the poem, it was when I was traveling down from Albuquerque to Las Cruces to help sew up the binding from my first little book called *The Chapbook*, which is a small book of poems, not a full-sized book of poems, that was being published by Puerto Del Sol Press. I went down to help sew the covers. I even did the art for the front of the cover and did a few pieces of art inside. It was coming back, I think, from there I was in my car and I felt—I can even tell you on a map where I was—suddenly it was like a vision. I hate to say vision because it sounds so hokey. But there was a horse; I just felt and saw a horse that I had known at some point, you know, in a dream. It was a very emotional moment and I realized later that it was probably when that horse poem started forming somewhere, you know somewhere in the place that poems start forming themselves.

**JE:** This is a rather long poem. How long did it take you to write this?

**JH:** You know when I was younger, I would not get up. If I started a poem, I wouldn't stop until I was done with it. I would like tweak it. But all of the ones that I wrote around that time, I might sit with it but I wouldn't stop until I got the whole thing down. That one came fairly quickly. I must have been working on it somewhere, you know, with all those pieces I was telling you...those inspirational moments I was telling you about. So then I just wrote it out but then I revised it extensively. Even from the first one, you know, I have revised it some and then I perform it. I performed it; I have a song, "She Has Some Horses", which is very recognizable. People love that song. It is kind of reggae tune. Really that poem kind of started my career, or at least visibility of the poet. There had been no poem quite like that.

**JE:** This name I am going to say to you is a name that I have interviewed for Voices of Oklahoma and when I say the name of the symbol, you will know who I am talking about. He uses the symbol "the bear". Who am I talking about?

**JH:** Oh, N. Scott Momaday.

**JE:** Right. He wrote an introduction for your book, *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Thoughts Came Through*. It was interesting to note that you have that friendship with Scott Momaday and share some of the same writings in a way.

**JH:** Well, of course, once you are a part of Indian country, you know, and he won the Pulitzer Prize, we all knew about that. We are all very proud of him. Then when I was a student, I guess I probably first heard about him as a student at the University of New Mexico when I took, I think, Geary Hobson who is now a professor emeritus at University of

Oklahoma. He was teaching when I was a student there and I took classes from him. It wasn't a Native—I probably took one of the first Native literature classes in the country; one summer—I took classes one summer. It was taught by somebody who was not Native and probably knew next to nothing about Native people. But, Paula Gunn Allen and I were in that class. I think that's kind of funny. But when Geary taught, he is part Chickasaw/ Cherokee from Arkansas; I think that is where he is from. Anyway, I probably learned about his writing from a class of his and read *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. I taught both of those books so many times. But I met him when I was a grad student at the University of Iowa. He came through and performed and I think that is where I first met him in person.

## Chapter 7 - 4:47

### Put Down That Bag of Potato Chips

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**John Erling:** Another poem that I would like to talk a bit about, “For Calling the Spirit Back”, and let me say something about it. Some people can hear poetry and say, “oh okay, here’s another poem”, and maybe they’re lost from the get-go or what have you. But this poem caught my attention because you grab the attention of anybody who is listening whether they like poetry or not, because you begin like this: “Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that bottle of pop. Turn off that cell phone, computer and remote control. Open the door and close it behind you”. Now who wouldn’t say, “Oh, this is a poem. I’m going to listen to this”!

**Joy Harjo:** (laughs)

**JE:** And it’s a poem about your personal experiences, right?

**JH:** That poem is kind of ritual poem. It’s not necessarily about...I think a lot of people think poems and they are all about the person’s personal experiences. But it isn’t necessarily so. I mean you have to certainly know about something, I suppose, when you write. But, you know, it’s just like you had asked me that and I didn’t answer that quite was that she had some horses. You know, it’s like, you don’t always know exactly what it means. It’s just that you’re following a sound sense. But the poem “For Calling the Spirit Back” is a kind of ritual in the way that all poems are rituals. You have a title that brings people in. There is an intent in the poem and you follow it. You know, it’s art and you’re using language and all the ways that you can use language and content to make a structure and to make something that might have an impact or that changes you. If you’re an artist, you don’t really know what you’re doing. You’re going towards something and it’s larger than you. So

when that poem started out, my intent was to make a poem to call the spirit back from all of the sideway roads of addiction and ways that we get lost from who we really are. That was the intent of the poem.

**JE:** Do you write every day? Is there a time of day you write? Do you just get up every morning at 7 and then start writing, or what are your mechanics?

**JH:** No I'm not one of those kind of people. Obviously, I am pretty disciplined. You know? I do all of these projects and I do a lot of public service stuff. Like the poet laureateship is public service essentially. But I think it's important to...I do write something every day. I don't sit down and write a poem every day, although it is good practice. I mean, there is the practice of being human. There are things we get up and do every day. There is the practice of being an artist. So it's important to keep that going and part of that practice is writing; part of it is listening...a big part of it is listening, and you can do that in any way. You can do it from reading. You can do it listening to poetry or looking at art, appreciating art, studying, even other disciplines. All that is involved in the art of poetry. But yes, I am always usually writing something. I wrote some notes this morning. I have been reading different things. I write notes.

I got to listen to my daughter read a poem this morning on a radio station; you know, a poem that is taking Indian country because of the CNN exit poll that listed Natives as "something else". I don't know if you saw that.

**JE:** No.

**JH:** It was horrible. It said: Exit poll for CNN, white so many percent/large like 64%, blacks, then they said Latinos, and then they said "something else". Can you believe that? Something else. And then Asian.

**JE:** Wow.

**JH:** Yeah, so we are being called "something else". It is horrible. It's sort of dumbing down. So that's all over; it's ablaze. She wrote a beautiful poem about "something else".

**JE:** Your daughter's name?

**JH:** Her name is Rainy Dawn Ortiz.

**JE:** You write about her in your memoir, *Crazy Brave*. Isn't that true?

**JH:** Probably, and my son too. And then I have a stepdaughter...well I have several stepchildren. But yes, her and my son, Phil. I wrote a poem; towards the end there was a poem in there for her.

**JE:** And that was a difficult story to tell about your daughter and the journey which we don't have time to get into, but that story is interesting in the book, *Crazy Brave*.

**JH:** I think that's one of the best written parts in there is that little section.

**JE:** Yeah. Difficult time for you.

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**Chapter 8 - 2:48****Tattoos**

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**John Erling:** I was noticing on YouTube that you were doing an interview and I couldn't help but notice you have interesting tattoos on your hand and arm. They look beautiful. Are there special meanings? How did you come to having tattoos?

**Joy Harjo:** Well, you know, the Muscogee Creek people, we tattooed extensively before Christianity took hold. If you look at an image that my great-grandfather, Monahwee, he is in one of the McKenney & Hall prints. You can see part of his face is tattooed. Women tattooed too. So I lived in Hawaii for almost 12 years, mostly hung out with the Hawaiians there and with friends, Keone Nunez, who helped bring back Hawaiian tattoo art. He was taught actually by a Samoan man who was a major tattoo artist. He did my first tattoo and the last one I had.

The one on my hand I got when I went to Tahiti. I love that island, the Pacific Islands. I always have since I was a little kid. I got to go to Tahiti which was a dream and decided to get a tattoo there. I kept seeing them on both hands, but after I only did one hand, I thought that's enough! Yeah, it is so intense. But there are stories in it. I told them why I wanted it, because there is whole reason and a ceremony I did before going in. So in that design is part of my story.

**JE:** Part of your heritage and you probably had to tell these young people you weren't part of the craze that is on now. This goes way, way back.

**JH:** Yeah it goes way back. And yet, I think it is something people have always done. You just let people loose without law, you know people. It's natural; body art is kind of a natural thing. You just have to be careful. As I told at Indian school, we would find things to do on the weekend. One weekend, all of us young Indian girls were taken in by the image of summer blonde on the hair color so we decided to buy boxes of summer blonde and do our hair and we thought we would look like casually blonde. We all came out with peroxide hair. Another weekend, somebody started tattooing, you know, with ink and a pen. People were putting their boyfriend's initials on and I said, you know that's going to be with you your whole life. I'm glad I didn't tattoo anything then. I thought about it and I said oh there is nothing I want to tattoo on myself forever.

**JE:** You had wisdom at an early age, didn't you?!

**JH:** Oh sometimes and sometimes not.

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**Chapter 9 - 8:05**  
**Influential Teachers**

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**John Erling:** How about teachers in your life that you could name one or two that say yes, I can tell you about someone who influenced me?

**Joy Harjo:** Well my whole memoir, the next memoir *Poet Warrior: A Call for Love and Justice*, is really about teachers and teaching. It's different from *Crazy Brave*. I mean it's my voice, but it is a whole different stance about being at a different age and looking over teachers and even moments that have taught me. One of my most profound teachers was the Pacific Ocean in Hawaii. I didn't write about that necessarily, though, and about the Pacific and racing canoes out there. But I have had some really good teachers. Some of them I didn't necessarily get along with.

One of the first art teachers I remember was at Burbank Elementary School, I guess when I was there. That was when we had arts in school and I loved it. I always remember her name, Mrs. Wasteere, and she was very severe, not intended as a rhyme. People were a little intimidated and frightened of her but I really appreciated her because she was a good art teacher and she kept the class together. There was so much time wasted in class, you know, dealing with discipline; I noted as a kid. I used to think why don't you just give me the book, you know, like the English book or the book on math or whatever we were reading, and just let me take it home and I can have all of this finished. I can get all of these assignments done and have them back within a week or two if I could take them home. I always felt there was just so much time wasted with discipline or having to go back over things.

At Indian school, I had a couple of teachers, Roland Mineholz who was our drama teacher; we are still friends. I saw him not too long ago. I went up to record the foundation tracks of my next music album that will be out this spring. It was the first time we had seen people. We were all socially distanced and everything going up there. I am still friends with him. He too was somebody who...there we were at Indian school; he really got us into shape, all of these Indian kids, most of us with really no training in theater. He whipped us into shape so that we became a drama company that people were coming out from New York to see. Jose Limon, that major dancer in New York City, came out to see what we were doing because we were using Native forms, contemporary modern dance, and we were doing something very unique and different. But he whipped us into shape. And that's what I like. There was an integrity, just like I could still recognize integrity in second grade, you know, with Mrs. Wasteere as the art teacher. There was an integrity about it, just like my first poetry teacher at UNM and we are still friends. In fact, I owe him an email.

And there are many more. There are many, many more. I have had mentors. I have worked with American poet, Audre Lord; Adrienne Rich. I wrote the poem "By The Way"

for her; you know, a major American poet who is a mentor. A lot of teachers and a lot of teachers I only know through their poetry.

**JE:** It's amazing that you refer to all of these teachers but the first one you mention is from elementary. People who are listening to this, and elementary teachers, should take heart from that. They probably think oh well, when they get to be 60-some years old, they'll never remember this. But in your case, you did.

**JH:** Oh yeah. I think they are probably the most important and people forget that. There has been such a devaluation of women and what's considered women's roles which goes along with children. That is the most crucial. I mean, if we all go back to our childhood, a day is forever. Everything has an impact, an utter impact. And those teachers, I remember all of them—Miss Pallasard; I remember the kindergarten teacher.

There was another teacher too, this was in junior high, who had a major impact who taught physics. Junior high was seventh, eighth and ninth grades. It was ninth grade and I was a good artist. My stuff was always in the hallways. I even did a portrait of John Kennedy that was in the hallway. It was really good too. I remember when we got our schedules, you had to get permission to get into advanced art. I was so looking forward to being in that class for three years and that was one of my goals. Then I get my schedule and it's not on there. I was so upset and they said well you have to go to the class you're scheduled and then get them to sign off and then you can change it. Well I went to this physics class and I was so enthralled that I stayed. He was such a good teacher. I have written his name down before and I can remember it. I know he is long gone or I would find him and thank him. Yes, he made physics...I mean we learned how to get to the moon, what we would need, about rockets. We learned about weather, all kinds of things that I felt were useful. He was a good teacher and I stayed. It was my dream of being in advanced art and it was my favorite thing. I loved art and music classes. And there I stayed in that class.

I had a sixth grade teacher who I could tell that she saw me as a human being. There was something about her presence that I was going through all kinds of stuff. It was sixth grade, but I knew that I could walk in there and I felt somewhat safe, even though she sent me home once because I was wearing red short shorts. She said you gotta go home and change, which I did. It didn't make me mad at her. I mean, I knew the rules.

When I was going to school in Tulsa back in the '50s and into the '60s, I was the first girl in the school in fourth grade to wear boys' clothes, to wear jeans. You know now everybody does, but I was the first girl in that school to wear jeans. I think that must have been fourth grade. I was at Billy Mitchell. I remember what it was—we went to get school clothes and I remember it was fourth grade. I would get cold in the winter. We would have these little dresses on and there would be sleet storms and I would have to walk to school.

And I would like to roughhouse. I would usually play with the boys just because I would get bored and want to go run around. So I told my mother, and I was pretty stubborn...I told her I want what my brothers are wearing. To her credit, she let me do it. I guess she knew that I would have held fast. She didn't want to deal with me. But I think about it now, I had on boys' jeans, even boys' shirts. These were much more comfortable and they were made better. They didn't make girls' clothes as good. I went into my school and I didn't even feel weird about it. I just walked in. I was so happy. Maybe that's why, because I could sit any way I wanted, I could get on the monkey bars, I could do things and I didn't have to worry about my dress.

**JE:** Did your classmates look upon you as, "Ooooooh, you're weird, why are you wearing those boys' clothes"?

**JH:** If at all I think I started something, like I was the first girl to wear bellbottoms too in junior high. Yeah, it's just that I think what it was, it was my attitude. I mean I had long bleached hair and all but I am sure that if I had looked more male, I would have really gotten hassled because that's how people are. It shouldn't be that way; you should leave people alone. But too it was that I was just so happy. There was a dress code. You were supposed to wear dresses but from that moment on, I got to wear pants.

**JE:** (laughs)

**JH:** Back in junior high, they made us wear dresses so I started getting creative in how I would make my outfits.

**JE:** (laughs)

## Chapter 10 - 2:55

### Tulsa Artist Fellowship

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**John Erling:** What role did the Tulsa Artist Fellowship play in your recent career?

**Joy Harjo:** Oh that's great. Coming back to Tulsa, I was teaching at University of Tennessee Knoxville and I had a chair of excellence. It was the best place I had taught and great students and they just treated me really well. But I had to come home. I needed to come home to be in my community. Then the Tulsa Artist Fellowship, I applied and got one. What has been great about that is it has given us a place to live. We are right down here in the Brady Arts District, which is cool.

My favorite place in town is the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame. They know me and I know them. I have rehearsed there. I recorded a show for Oklahoma Music Roots program

with three jazz musicians and they let us rehearse there. Then I just finished recording a horn and flute track. They said you guys can come over here and record but Tulsa Artist Fellowship...they're great. They have resources and they let us use the store front as the guitar house moved. I guess they have other stores in town and they closed the one on Archer. So we recorded in that store. I think starting today on that store front is one of my new songs called "Stomp All Night". All of the lyrics are written on the store front. So I am going over there tomorrow to be photographed in front of it. But they have been great. I mean, the program...everywhere I go, even virtually—I have traveled a lot virtually, I have done a lot of performances virtually in the last month—people are asking about that program. It has caused international attention to what Tulsa Artist Fellowship is doing in Tulsa.

**JE:** So it would be quite a unique program then in the nation, is that true?

**JH:** Yes, and that is what I was telling them. I said you know, I feel lucky in that I was at IAIA, Institute of American Indian Arts, in the hay day where the whole contemporary Native art began. It was a huge moment in Native art. I was there in that moment in that time when I first got in this program and I see it. I said and now here I am, I have come back home and I am once again in a program that is ground breaking and is major. This is going to have major repercussions when it comes to the arts in this country and arts in a community; our community fosters arts, in Tulsa in particular, in Oklahoma, and in a somewhat urban setting. I say somewhat because I have lived in Honolulu and all over to huge urban areas and I still think of Tulsa not necessarily as so urban but like a large town.

## Chapter 11 - 3:50

### Good Advice

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**John Erling:** About your music, do you have five CD's or maybe more?

**Joy Harjo:** Well I have a new one coming out in the spring called "I Pray for My Inner Me" and right now we have two guest guitarists, Mike McCready of Pearl Jam is going to play on it and so is Peter Buck of REM.

**JE:** Wow.

**JH:** That will be out. I do voice, I sing, I speak and play sax and flutes. I had one track with Native flute. I may have played soprano sax over that. I don't know if I kept any of the Native flute track, but I played soprano and alto sax on it. So that will be out probably this spring. That is something I have got to get on.

**JE:** Of all the people I have interviewed, I have never interviewed somebody who has so many different talents. It just oozes out of you. You probably don't take it for granted but you

step back and say wow, am I fortunate, all of the different things you can do. You are a public speaker; I know you speak out on social issues. All of these things coming from you. What a charmed, artistic life you are living.

**JH:** Well it comes through. I feel I have a lot of deep spiritual help and a lot of inspiration too...a lot of inspiration, arts and poetry and people; you know, community.

**JE:** We have a lot of young people who listen to these interviews. You must have some advice to either would-be poets, music people or just general in life. What kind of advice do you impart to the young coming up?

**JH:** I think it's some advice that was given to me probably when I was in my 30s and then it reiterated at one point. It was from a Native woman from New Mexico and I remember her looking at me and saying just be yourself. When I heard that, it was like well, yeah, yeah, I know how to do that. But on the other hand, I mean it's like the whole jeans thing, being the first girl to wear jeans in public school in Tulsa. When you be yourself, it is not always that easy. Sometimes you come up against rules. It can be difficult to be the only person doing what you're doing. You know when I started writing poetry, people didn't always know where to put me, but I followed what was given to me to do. It didn't always make sense to me. When I said I was going to be a poet, it surprised me. It's a mystery that I became a poet, but I knew something in me as I began that even though common sense of people were saying how can you be a poet, you better take education classes. You know, you've got two children you have to care for. But something in me knew beyond reason that I would be taken care of because that was me, that is what I was supposed to do. And that's important. A lot of times we get sidetracked by what we think other people think we should be or what society thinks we should be. I think we all came in with a kind of map. We came in okay, these are things I want to accomplish. It even makes common sense. If you look at the plant world, even if you look at a family or the map of a family, there is a design. Some of us go outside the lines and some of us stay within the lines and make something incredible within that form. There is room for all of it. That's what characterizes this place is an incredible diversity and that's what makes us beauty.

**JE:** Well there are lots of calls on your time and I appreciate it very much. Looking forward to adding your story to [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com). Thank you, I really enjoyed this. I appreciate it very much.

**JH:** Ok, thank you so much.

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**Chapter 17 - 0:33****Conclusion**

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**Announcer:** This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

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