

Native American poet/actor/leader to speak at Alfred University

1/17/01

John Trudell, an actor, poet and leader for Native American rights, will deliver a lecture, "Indian Politics: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," at 4 p.m. Friday, Jan. 26, in Holmes Auditorium, Harder Hall, on the Alfred University campus. The Alfred University Circle of Indigenous Nations (CIN) and the First Year Experience program of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at AU are hosting Trudell's appearance. Trudell, 53, was born in Omaha, and grew up on the nearby Santee Sioux reservation. His father was Santee, but his mother's tribal roots were in Mexico. At 17, Trudell, already disillusioned by an "American way of life" that meant poverty and racism for his people, joined the Navy. "I went in for economic reasons and picked the Navy because I wanted to minimize my chances of becoming a rifle-toting target," Trudell said. "But the experience did teach me that what was happening to me as an Indian, a prisoner of America, was happening to others all over the world." It was not until the Indians of All Tribes Occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, however, that Trudell said he reconnected to his indigenous roots. "I went there, trying to find something, and I found a whole lot of other people like me. And we hadn't surrendered, whatever our frailties were." Trudell served as national spokesperson for the occupation force, which drew media from around the world. While the occupation ended in 1971, out of it grew the American Indian Movement - A.I.M. Trudell served as national chairman of the new organization from 1973 to 1979. With the position came the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which compiled a 17,000-page report on Trudell, who characterized the government response to A.I.M. as "a war against us. They hunted us down. They killed, jailed, destroyed by any means necessary." In 1978, while a prisoner at the Springfield (MO) Federal Prison Hospital, Trudell was warned to watch what he said, or say nothing at all. Disregarding the warning, Trudell led a march on the FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 11, 1979, and burned an American flag he said had been "desecrated by racist and class injustice." Twelve hours later, his home on the Shoshone Paiute reservation in Nevada burned to the ground, killing his wife Tina, their three children and Tina's mother. While the Bureau of Indian Affairs officially called it an "accident," and the FBI initiated an investigation, Trudell said the fire was "murder. They (his family) were murdered as an act of war." Devastated by the loss of his family, Trudell retreated and began writing as a way "to keep some sanity" and to survive. "The writing, the poetry came as a surprise to me. I had done political writing, in the form of speeches, but not anything that I thought of as poetry. But about six months or so after the fire, when I was really down, the lines came. The lines were my bombs, my explosions, my tears." He began thinking about "joining the poetry with the oldest indigenous musical forms and the newest musical forms." Through his friendship with Jackson Browne came "Tribal Voices," his first album, recorded at Browne's studios. Then Trudell met Jesse Ed Davis, a Kiowa from Oklahoma, himself a musical legend who had performed with Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Rod Stewart, John Lennon and Jackson Browne. "When we met in 1985, he told me 'I can make music for your words.'" The two produced "AKA Graffiti Man" in 1986, gaining critical acclaim even with limited distribution. Bob Dylan proclaimed, in a Rolling Stone interview, that "AKA Graffiti Man" was "the best album on 1986." The Davis-Trudell partnership produced "Heart Jump Bouquet" and a second in the Tribal Voices series, "But This Isn't El Salvador" before Davis' untimely death in 1988. Mark Shark, the Graffiti Band's guitarist, stepped into the breach as Trudell's musical collaborator, resulting in "Fables and Realities" in 1991 and a third Tribal Voices album, "Child's Voice: Children of the Earth" in 1992. Signed with Rykodisc in 1992, Trudell was introduced to an international audience with a re-make of "AKA Graffiti Man," produced by Jackson Browne. Trudell was cast in two movies, the fictional "Thunderheart" and the documentary, "Incident at Ogala," both dealing with Indian clashes with the U.S. government. Trudell released "Johnny Damas & Me" in 1994, and returned to the screen in 1998 as the radio DJ in Sherman Alexie's award-winning film, "Smoke Signals." His newest project is "Blue Indians," also produced by Jackson Browne. The new album "is literally about the technical world as an industrial reservation. This time, everyone plays the part of the Indian with their range of feelings and attitudes." Trudell's appearance at Alfred University is sponsored by the First Year Experience program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; Hillel House; the Social Sciences Department; the Division of Academic Affairs and ALANA. Additional information may be obtained by calling 607 587 9516.