

## 'All one family': Songwriter uses music to bridge Indigenous, non-Indigenous communities



Adopted by a non-Indigenous family, Sandra Sutter connects with heritage as an adult

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Indigenous singer-songwriter Sandra Sutter reconnected with her Cree and Metis heritage as an adult. (Sandra Sutter/Supplied)

If someone had told a young Sandra Sutter that she would one day win a major prize at the Native American Music Awards, she probably wouldn't have believed you — and not just because finding success as a musician can be difficult.

Adopted by a non-Indigenous family, Sutter grew up not knowing about her Indigenous identity. It wasn't until she was an adult that she was able to connect with her Cree and Metis heritage.

Now, Sutter works hard to use her music as a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Her latest album, *Cluster Stars*, was awarded Best Americana Recording at the Native American Music Awards, where she was also up for three other prizes. More recently, Sutter has been nominated for Indigenous Songwriter of the Year at the Canadian Folk Music Awards being handed out in Calgary later this year.

Although she now calls Calgary home, Sutter's story begins as a child growing up in rural Saskatchewan.

Sutter was adopted in the 1960s, one of many Indigenous children adopted by white families during that time period.

Sutter's birth mother did not disclose her Indigenous identity on the birth certificate, and her adoptive parents had no idea about their daughter's Cree and Metis roots.

Despite not knowing her true identity, Sutter says that she always felt a connection to the land and to Indigenous culture — even from a very young age.

"I used to ask my mom, 'are you sure I'm not native?' and then she'd show me my birth certificate that clearly said Scottish and German," Sutter said. "She thought that would reassure me but it never did."

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Sutter was able to meet and know her birth mother for a few years before she passed away. She also was able to reconnect with her birth father's family as an adult. That's when everything changed.

"When I found my birth father's family I found that sense of belonging that I hadn't felt before," Sutter said. "I became more relaxed as a human because I found that identity that was so long denied to me."

Learning about her history has been a bittersweet experience for Sutter. While she's felt love and connection, she's also dealt with the complex nature of navigating two very different worlds.

Although certain relationships have changed, she says that for the most part, her birth and adopted families have come to embrace one another.

"Our families are all interconnected now. It's a beautiful thing," she said.

## Music as connection

The theme of interconnectedness has carried over into Sutter's music. Many of the tracks on *Cluster Stars* deal with family connections and losses, particularly those felt by Indigenous families and children that have been separated from one another.

Sutter believes music is her way of bridging the gap between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds that she inhabits — and conveying "the understanding that we are ... all one family."

"I've had so many mentors in my life who remind me that it's our responsibility to do the good and to build the bridges that we can in our lives," Sutter said. "I want to be able to share the beauty of that culture — the extreme beauty and wisdom of that culture — with people who haven't been exposed to it yet."

*With files from CBC Radio's Saskatchewan Weekend*