

U.S. film academy apologizes to Indigenous activist for Oscar abuse

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Sacheen Littlefeather became the target of racist abuse after taking a stand for Native American rights at the 1973 Academy Award ceremony, where she criticized insulting portrayals of Native Americans in the US film industry [File: AP Photo]

Hollywood, August 16 (RHC)-- The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has apologised to Sacheen Littlefeather, a Native-American activist who endured abuse when she took a stand in the 1970s against anti-Indigenous racism in the United States film industry.

The U.S. film academy said in a statement on Monday that it will host Littlefeather, now 75, for an evening of conversation and healing on September 17th.

Littlefeather received a formal letter of apology from the head of the academy in June, nearly 50 years after taking the stage at the 1973 Oscar awards ceremony to denounce stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in film.

She became the target of racist abuse after she announced that actor Marlon Brando would not accept an award for his performance in "The Godfather" in protest of the poor treatment that Native Americans received in the film industry.

"The emotional burden you have lived through and the cost to your own career in our industry are irreparable. For too long the courage you showed has been unacknowledged. For this, we offer both our deepest apologies and our sincere admiration," then-Academy President David Rubin said in the letter, which was released on Monday.

"This is a dream come true," Littlefeather said in the statement shared by the academy. "It is profoundly heartening to see how much has changed since I did not accept the Academy Award 50 years ago."

The 1973 Oscars took place during a period of mounting Indigenous activism in the United States, including the American Indian Movement's occupation of Wounded Knee in South Dakota in protest of the country's legacy of anti-Indigenous violence and discrimination.

Wounded Knee was the site of a massacre of Indigenous people by the US military in 1890 that left hundreds of men, women, and children dead.

Wearing a buckskin dress and moccasins, Littlefeather skewered the industry in a 60-second speech on the 1973 Oscars stage that brought attention to the insulting portrayal of Native Americans in U.S. films and television shows. As she spoke the audience booed her, and actor John Wayne is said to have been restrained from attempting to attack her on stage. Littlefeather also said that she endured personal attacks, discrimination, and insults for her stand for Indigenous rights.

In the letter, Rubin called her speech "a powerful statement that continues to remind us of the necessity of respect and the importance of human dignity." The academy has attempted to reckon with accusations of a lack of racial diversity in recent years.

Sacheen Littlefeather welcomed the change, saying that "regarding the Academy's apology to me, we Indians are very patient people. It's only been 50 years! We need to keep our sense of humor about this at all times. It's our method of survival."

At the September event in Los Angeles, Littlefeather will join producer Bird Runningwater, co-chair of the academy's Indigenous Alliance, for a conversation.

Sacheen Littlefeather elaborated on her decision to speak out against discrimination in an interview earlier this year. "I felt that there should be Native people, Black people, Asian people, Chicano people. I felt there should be an inclusion of everyone," Littlefeather said. "A rainbow of people that should be involved in creating their own image."



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