

Joan Baez

WITH HER SINGULAR VOICE, SHE HAS BEEN A LIGHTNING ROD FOR SONGWRITERS AS WELL AS A LIFELONG ACTIVIST.

BY ARTHUR LEVY

For decades, Joan Baez has maintained that she is not a rock & roll artist. But back in 1958, amid all the Harry Belafonte and traditional folk covers on the demo recording she made after graduating from Palo Alto High School, there she is, having her way with Hank Ballard and the Midnighters' "Annie Had a Baby," the Coasters' "Young Blood" (via Leiber-Stoller and Doc Pomus), and Ritchie Valens' "La Bamba."

¶ Rock history has always harbored its own regard for Joan Baez (b. 1941), American folk icon, who now somewhat bemusedly finds herself inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. As she said in her understated way when she got word in December, "As part of the folk music boom, which contributed to and influenced the rock revolution of the sixties, I am proud that some of the songs I sang made their way into the rock lexicon."

Baez on the
beach, 1962



Some, indeed: Baez's first two studio and first two concert albums, released on Vanguard Records between 1960 and 1963 and produced by label founder Maynard Solomon (who produced all nine of her LPs through 1968), had an outsized impact on young musicians on both sides of the Atlantic. Folk was no less a source for rock & roll than were the blues, R&B, or country & western, and Baez's early LPs were ripe for the picking. Many of those songs became part of rock's lingua franca, including "House of the Rising Sun" (the Animals), "John Riley" (the Byrds), "Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You" (Led Zeppelin), "What Have They Done to the Rain" (the Searchers), "Jackaroe" (Grateful Dead), and "Long Black Veil" (the Band). And then there's Bob Dylan.

By 1963, Baez was taking Dylan along on tour dates and introducing the Greenwich Village singer-songwriter to her sizable audiences. Just before the May release of his *Freewheelin'*, she brought him to his first large folk festival in Monterey where they sang together "With God on Our Side," "his first song that I learned all the words to," as she recalled.

Their complex relationship from 1963 to 1965 was a romance underpinned by one of the greatest soundtracks in history. The story spans two of her finest albums. Her second live concert LP, released just days before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, includes the first Dylan song she ever recorded, "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." *Joan Baez/5* includes Dylan's "It Ain't Me Babe," as well as an explosion of songs from Phil Ochs and Richard Fariña (the late husband of her late sister, Mimi) to Johnny Cash, the Greenbriar Boys, and Heitor Villa-Lobos.

For his part, Dylan had Baez on his mind over the course of three transformative LPs, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, and *Bringing It All Back Home*. "He was turning out songs like ticker tape," she wrote of their idyllic times in Carmel and Woodstock, "and I was stealing them as fast as he wrote them."

Baez and Dylan's well-documented split of 1965 (see D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*) played itself out during his April-May tour of England. But always one to take the high road, in October, she released the remarkable *Farewell, Angelina*, including four Dylan compositions among tracks that crackled with electric guitar (Bruce Langhorne) and electric bass. *Joan*, her next major studio album, was released in 1967, with an expanded repertoire that included songs by Donovan, Tim Hardin, Paul Simon, and Lennon-McCartney.

Her first decade in the spotlight also saw Baez's lifelong commitment to activism taking shape. At 21, in November 1962, she appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and released her first live concert LP, featuring Woody Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd." She channeled her newfound celebrity to the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement, singing at voter registration rallies in Mississippi and Alabama, along with Pete Seeger (with whom she first appeared onstage in 1961). She, along with Phil Ochs, Eric Andersen, Danny Kalb, Theo Bikel, Guy Carawan, Gil Turner (composer of "Carry It On"), and other singers, were smuggled past local cops for performances that often used a flatbed pickup truck as their stage.

By August 1963, when she and Dylan sang at the Lincoln Memorial at Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, Baez was the face of folk music's role in the mainstreaming of the Civil Rights Movement. When President Johnson signed the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was the first indication that the baby boomer generation could actually bring about social change. As U.S. military action escalated in

Selected Discography



JOAN BAEZ
Vanguard 1960



JOAN BAEZ IN CONCERT, PART 2
Vanguard 1965



FAREWELL, ANGELINA
Vanguard 1965



ANY DAY NOW
A&M 1975



DIAMONDS & RUST
A&M 1975



RECENTLY
Gold Castle 1987



RING THEM BELLS
Guardian 1995



DARK CHORDS ON A BIG GUITAR
Koch 2003



DAY AFTER TOMORROW
Proper 2008



75TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION
Razor & Tie 2016

Vietnam, the boomers' passion galvanized the burgeoning antiwar movement.

Not every act went unpunished. In 1964, Baez protested the war by refusing to "volunteer the 60% of my year's income tax that goes to armaments." Her eloquent letter, published in *Sing Out!* magazine, declared that "no man has the right to take another man's life. Now we plan and build weapons that can take thousands of lives in a second, millions of lives in



FROM TOP Baez with Bob Dylan, 1963; with Dylan again on the Rolling Thunder Revue tour, 1975.



THIS PAGE Singing on British TV, 1965.

OPPOSITE PAGE Marching for integrated education with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Young, and others, 1966.

a day, billions in a week . . . It is wrong.” The IRS disagreed, and hounded her for a decade, placing a lien of more than \$50,000 on her property and her car, and confiscating her concert earnings.

Baez was there in October 1964, as the Free Speech Movement began at the University of California at Berkeley, spearheaded by Mario Savio. She led more than one thousand students on a march to Sproul Hall, defying the Board of Regents under the aegis of arch-conservative Gov. Pat Brown. Singing “Blowin’ in the Wind,” and telling the protesters to “have love as you do this thing and it will succeed,” Baez and the students occupied the hall for fifteen hours. More than eight hundred arrests were made during a raid in the middle of the night, the largest mass arrest in U.S. history since the Japanese-American internments of World War II. Reported around the world, the incident became the bellwether of student empowerment on college campuses, establishing the template by which antiwar resistance would be waged over the next decade.

Baez walked with Dr. King on the historic march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. She cofounded the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence near her home in Carmel Valley, California. In 1967, her activism led the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) to bar her from performing a concert at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., just as they had barred Marian Anderson in 1939. Baez countered by performing a free concert at the Washington Monument – attended by thirty thousand people.

That same year, after Baez blocked entry to the Armed Forces Induction Center in Oakland and was jailed, she was visited by the antiwar, antidraft activist David Harris. They soon became fast friends, sharing a love for country & western music, and wed in 1968. They moved to Struggle Mountain, the antiwar commune in the Los Altos Hills, California, where Harris awaited federal sentencing on various anti-draft charges (documented in the film *Carry It On*, whose soundtrack was Baez’s thirteenth album).



Baez thought it would be a “nice gift” for Harris if she recorded an LP for him in Nashville. In six days and fourteen sessions with Music City’s famed “A-Team,” she laid down enough tracks for both *Any Day Now* (a double-LP of sixteen Dylan songs) and *David’s Album*, which included country standards like “Green, Green Grass of Home” and Gram Parsons’ “Hickory Wind.”

Less than a year later, in July 1969, Federal marshals took Harris into custody. Baez was four months pregnant. The following month she performed at Woodstock, with her mother, “Big Joan” (1913–2013), in tow. In September, Baez returned to Nashville to record two more LPs of country music for Vanguard, her last studio albums for the label. The second, *Blessed Are . . .*, cut at Bradley’s Barn with rocker Norbert Putnam producing, included the Top Ten single “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down.” (Baez continued

to work with Putnam on her next two recordings in 1972–73, for A&M, but did not return to Nashville until 2008’s *Day After Tomorrow* with Steve Earle.)

When Gabriel Earl Harris (who now plays percussion in his mother’s band) was born in December 1969, the birth served as a bookend to a tumultuous decade.

In 1975, Baez reunited with Dylan for the Rolling Thunder Revue tour (and *Renaldo and Clara* movie), and composed “Diamonds & Rust,” a song she has performed around the world, at nearly every one of her shows, for the past forty years. It was also the title single of her fourth LP for A&M, which featured songs by Jackson Browne, Janis Ian, John Prine, and Stevie Wonder and Syreeta, among others. Baez has said she values her role as a lightning rod for songwriters, which since the nineties has evolved into a kind of mutual mentoring. That position culminated





OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP Protesting against the Vietnam War in London, 1965; rallying in support of Occupy Wall Street, 2011. **THIS PAGE** Standing strong at the Istanbul Jazz Festival, 2015.

“All of us are survivors, but how many of us transcend survival?”

in the Grammy-nominated *Day After Tomorrow* in 2008, with material by Steve Earle, Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, T Bone Burnett, Patty Griffin, and others.

Joan Baez has never strayed from the path she forged in her early career. She inspired Vaclav Havel to fight for a new Czech Republic. She sang to defeat California's Proposition 6 legislation (that would have banned openly gay teachers from working in public schools). She founded the Humanitas International Human Rights Committee and headed it for thirteen years. She joined the early Amnesty International tours with U2, Peter Gabriel, Sting, and others, and received AI's Ambassador of Conscience Award, its highest honor. She stood beside old friend Nelson Mandela at the 46664

concert in London's Hyde Park for his 90th birthday. She has supported the Occupy Wall Street movement. She's received the Americana Music Association's Spirit of Americana Free Speech Award, the ASCAP Centennial Award, the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and on and on.

“All of us are survivors,” Baez wrote, “but how many of us transcend survival?” Singing with renewed vitality and passion both at her concerts and on record, she is more comfortable than ever inside her own skin. Always searching, always on the lookout for a good song or a worthy social movement, she goes where her conscience leads her, to raise her glass to the hardworking people, to leave her mark in this world, to carry it on.