

Baez Bows Out

It's six decades since she catapulted to attention as a teenage folk star, and now Joan Baez is bringing down the curtain. **Liz Thomson** catches up with the story.



Photo: Dana Tynan

It's a beautiful early summer's day in Bristol, the first British date in phase two of Joan Baez's *Fare Thee Well* tour that will bring down the curtain on a sixty-year career. She'd notched up almost a score of concerts in March 2018, including in Britain and Ireland, then taken a month off back home in California. Two dates, at the Royal Albert Hall, the following week were to be a final goodbye – but such has been the demand for tickets, in the UK and beyond, that the farewells are continuing way into 2019. *Whistle Down the Wind*, her first studio album in a decade, debuted on the Billboard chart at number 18 and was nominated for a Grammy.

Will she finally play out with a gig at the Newport Folk Festival where, in 1959, a star was born when she took the stage as the unannounced guest of Bob Gibson, singing *Virgin Mary* and *We Are Crossing Jordan River*? "I'm not thinking that far ahead," she says, as she contemplates a bowl of pea and mint soup with a side of cheese and crusty bread in the decidedly unglamorous backstage surroundings of the Colston Hall. Baez has been a frequent performer at Newport and, in 2009, she joined her old friend Judy Collins for a duet of *Diamonds And Rust*, deservedly her most acclaimed song and one without which no Joan Baez concert would be complete. A spot in 2019 would be the perfect curtain call.

I've followed Baez's career since the late 1960s when I found *Volume 2* in my sister's record collection. I learned to play guitar from it – *Barbara Allen*, *Banks Of The Ohio* and *Plaisir d'Amour* already vaguely familiar to my 11-year-old ears. Soon I was hooked on her voice, exploring everything she'd ever recorded, and first saw her live in December 1971 at London's Rainbow Theatre. Since then I've seen her scores of times, including two of the four concerts at New York's Bottom Line – the *Ring Them Bells* sessions, the 1995 album that provided a career relaunch and which I reported for *Mojo*. I've been privileged to spend time with her over the last 40 years and in 1984 she entrusted me with a press call at Greenham Common, where women

were camped out in protest against the government's plans to install cruise missiles. She was a legend without a label and although many people were asking, "Joan who?" the visit received widespread media coverage, in Britain and beyond – an indication of the respect accorded her as a spokeswoman on political issues.

Civil rights, human rights, Vietnam, Latin America, Standing Rock: these and many other concerns have always been as important to Baez as her music. From the outset – indeed, long before her name was known even around Harvard Square – humanitarian concerns were a key element in her life and they fitted well with folk music. Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger had long ago proved that. But by the 1980s, the public's taste in music had changed. So too had the preoccupations of young people who enthusiastically embraced the Me-Decade. As she acknowledged in her memoir, *And A Voice To Sing With*, Baez spent a long time in the wilderness. "The Seventies and Eighties were the years of silence and ashes," she told me in 1990. It required all her spiritual reserves "simply to get through a concert, because I didn't understand why I was bothering." European youth engaged somewhat and inspired two songs, *Warriors Of The Sun* and *Children Of The Eighties*, released on albums that sank almost without trace. At Live Aid in July 1985, she was offered the consolation prize of one song at 9am, the Philadelphia opening. Introduced by Jack Nicholson, she sang *Amazing Grace*, segueing into an a cappella snatch of *We Are The World*, though she was not on the record. She told the crowd, "this is your Woodstock and it's long overdue."

Now all her albums have been re-mastered and re-released and Baez has found a new audience, thanks in part to her mentoring of young talent: Sharon Shannon, Sinead Lohan, Dar Williams, the Indigo Girls and Mary Chapin Carpenter, all now established artists in their own right, are among those who have shared stages with her and all have recognised how much she has taught them, musically and practically, about life as a troubadour. Songwriters such as David Massengill, Richard Shindell, Diana Jones and Zoe Mulford regard her covering of their work as a benediction, as way back when did a new kid on the Greenwich Village block named Bob Dylan. "Young folk singer types are always appreciative of whatever it was I did, sometimes through their parents," Baez says now, between sips of soup. "I've had an influence on their lives, and generally that means politically as well as musically."

Whistle Down The Wind closes the circle begun with *Joan Baez*, released in late 1960. Reviewing that first album in the *Harvard Crimson*, student John R Adler, now a distinguished neurosurgeon, wrote: "Joan Baez will not be a great big seller. English ballads are pretty esoteric stuff to most buyers. But the record is of undeniable quality, and has some stunning moments. It proves what many have been mumbling into their coffee for some time: that Joan Baez can be, if she wants, the very best in her field." In fact, the album spent three years in the US charts and was

certified gold. In 2015, it was deemed "culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant" by the Library of Congress and selected for inclusion in the National Recording Registry.

As music historian Arthur Levy points out in his liner notes to the re-release, the album is a "deceptively simple song cycle" drawing on numbers from the folk, country and bluegrass traditions, among them *All My Trials*, a lullaby from the Bahamas, and *El Preso Numero Nuevo*, a tipping of the hat to Baez's paternal Mexican heritage which still has a place in her stage repertoire. *Mary Hamilton* and *Henry Martin* were the first two of many Child Ballads she would record, the former a Scottish-Irish ballad that surely pleased her mother, also named Joan, who was descended from the Dukes of Chandos (Chandos being passed down the family as a middle name).

Joan Baez and the mighty handful of folk albums that followed it – including two albums recorded live on campuses in the American South, where Baez was the first white artist to insist on integrated audiences – had a significant influence on



1960s Joan

young musicians in America and beyond, and not just on obvious folk revivalists like Fairport Convention and Pentangle. Robert Plant and Jimmy Page first heard *Babe I'm Gonna Leave You* on *In Concert*, for example. The two *In Concert* albums are the ultimate in "unplugged" and while folk purists may regard them as too polished, folk song as art song if you like, they remain milestones of recording history. (A decade later, Judas Priest would record *Diamonds & Rust*!)

Does she ever listen to her back catalogue? "Rarely, unless there's some reason. I might run into something when I'm trawling and I'm in awe of the early voice though I take no credit for it" – by which she means she sees it as "a gift", her only task its use and maintenance. And maintenance has become ever harder, as happens in older age. "When I asked my first vocal coach when it would be time to quit, he said your voice will tell you, and it's been telling me. It's these lengthy tours – they're tough and I tend to treat everything as if I'm 35 years old." She would like to be able to emerge from retirement for the occasional one-off but admits that once back home and painting (her new preoccupation) the weeks of daily exercises and prep may be less appealing. And as the most amateur picker knows, the calluses go, the fingers soften. "I was home until two nights ago," Baez explains as I examine

her fingertips, which show more paint than thickened skin. But at 78, she is fit: "Shit happens and you stiffen and get knobby, but it's all right. That's why I have Dirk [Powell] here. I don't want to do any gymnastics on the guitar. I just keep it simple."

In fact, her guitar playing has always been pretty nifty: a solo performer for so many years, she is perforce a skilled instrumentalist, her intricate guitar work effectively providing both lead and rhythm. Over the last 25 years she's worked with various small bands and settled on Powell, who plays pretty much anything strung as well as piano, with her son Gabriel Harris on percussion. Grace Stumberg, her guitar tech, adds bluesy vocal harmonies and gets a spot of her own as she builds a solo career.

As to the voice, which the late *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton famously described as "an achingly pure soprano", one which once conquered the coloratura heights of the Villa-Lobos *Aria* from *Bachianas Brasileiras No 5*, it's now a warm, smoky alto – deep topaz rather than bright-white diamond, and in its way more expressive, weathered by age and experience. Those early recordings are dramatic, to be sure, but Baez often relied on the ethereal beauty of her voice to carry a song from which she remained clinically detached. She's now musically and emotionally engaged.

Baez admits that it took time for her to acknowledge that what she calls her "old Joanie voice" was gone forever and for a few years in the early part of this century concerts felt uncomfortable – for the audience and, one sensed, for performer. "It was difficult," she agrees. "For instance, I didn't make an album for ten years – it took me that long to accept it, embrace it actually. I like the noises that came out on this album."

I remind her that when we talked in 1990, on the back of *Speaking Of Dreams*, before her "third act" reinvention with *Ring The Bells* on manager Mark Spector's watch, she thought she had "maybe 10 years" left but in retrospect we can see the Baez career was only at mid-point. She wanted, she told me then, to be able to do "some big tours, including Eastern Europe" (the Wall had just come down) and she wanted, when the time came, to bow out on a high, at a moment of her own choosing. Understandably, she did not want to fizzle, to fade away. That tickets for *Fare Thee Well* sold out within hours and that the tour has been extended is ample demonstration that she got her wish.

Though she bravely ventured into Sarajevo to sing for a city under siege, these past thirty years have been less overtly political, both albums and concerts rebalanced in favour of pure music, the long raps that characterised her Seventies' gigs dropped in favour of well-chosen songs (Guthrie's *Deportees* and Dylan's *With God On Our Side* as eloquent and contemporary today as when they were written) or jokes. Surprisingly, since Baez has form in this arena, there were walkouts at some Bush-era American concerts. Recently, she and the band have taken a knee (to Jimi Hendrix's *Star Spangled Banner*) after the final encore, a gesture which brought the house

down in New York City, the exuberant atmosphere heightened the night I was there by the presence of Bill and Hillary Clinton. As in the 1960s, she has taken to the streets to protest against the innumerable iniquities of the Trump administration and a song, *Nasty Man*, went viral – just as she was poised to be inducted in to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in April 2017.

That was surely an honour the young Joan Baez would have refused. “I’m sure I would have! I was such a snoot,” she laughs heartily. “I’d have been appalled. But it was fun, and you can look at it either way: ‘What’s she doing in the Hall of Fame’ or ‘about time’. Accepting the award from Jackson Browne, she said: “I’m aware that I’m speaking to many young people who, without this induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, would have no clue who I am. My granddaughter had no clue who I was, until I took her backstage at a Taylor Swift concert, where she got a selfie, an autograph, a T-shirt and newfound respect for her grandmother.”

More seriously, Baez spoke in the tradition of her folk forebears when she implored: “Let us together repeal and replace brutality and make compassion a priority. Together, let us build a bridge – a great bridge, a beautiful bridge – to once again welcome the tired and the poor. And we will pay for that bridge with our commitment.”

She regards this period as infinitely worse than the 1960s, with so many of the gains made in that tumultuous decade endangered by the current president and his followers. Action, she once famously said, is “the antidote to despair” and she still believes that to be the case. “It’s hard [in both America and Britain] but you bash on regardless. We couldn’t have scripted this, nobody could have scripted this. Nobody could have imagined it.” She’s not convinced that Trump is necessarily going to be dislodged. “People keep saying ‘this’ll get him’ but I’m not sure anything necessarily is going to get him because everyone around him is supporting him and they’re all such yellow, spineless people that, even though they know he’s defective – seriously defective – and causes tremendous damage, it doesn’t

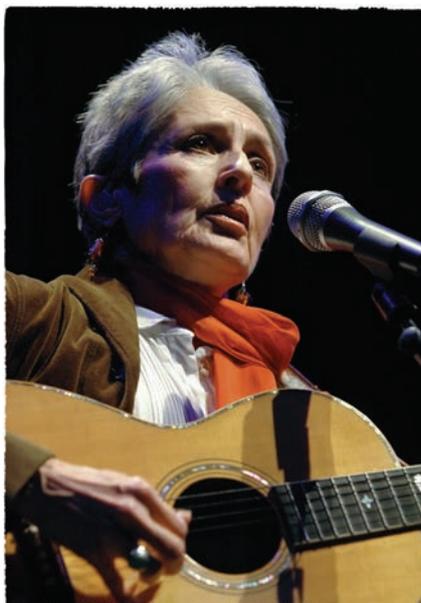


Photo: Pascal Saez

Live in 2007

matter to them. The whole conservative agenda has nothing to do with much except self-service. Money, and you teach your kids to go out and make more money. That’s all it is.”

Baez was brought up with a very different ethic. Both grandparents were ministers and her parents became Quakers. Her father, a noted physicist, was the co-inventor of the X-ray microscope and a teacher who took science to developing countries, including Iraq, where the family spent a year when Joan was ten, an experience that gave a particular piquancy to the recent war. Social activism was part of the family DNA and when an aunt took her to see Pete Seeger, thirteen-year-old Baez was hooked. Folk music, she has said, was “like a vaccine, it took.”

At around the same time, a young preacher named Martin Luther King visited her California high school. A few years later she was singing from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the March on Washington when King delivered his most celebrated speech and over the next five years worked with him in the South, singing wherever she was needed.

Joan Baez will always stand at the crossroads of music and social activism, an interpretive singer more than a songwriter, though her writing deserves more credit than even she is willing to give it: *Gulf Winds* (1976), her only entirely self-penned album, is well worth exploring, as are the few songs released on *Rare, Live & Classic* which were recorded with the Grateful Dead, whose own roots lie in folk and bluegrass. (There are more in the can, though it’s not clear if they will ever be released.) *Diamonds And Rust* she regards as a happy fluke.

These days, Baez writes poetry but not songs, but her creative energies are overwhelmingly channelled into painting. She has always drawn: cartoons, line drawings, watercolours – and now acrylics. Last year she had her first show in the Bay Area, its subject *Mischief Makers*, among them Malala, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Vaclav Havel, who liked to talk to her about “making mischief”. The collection has been bought by the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria for installation in the future Social Justice Learning Center at Sonoma State University but, until the Center is ready, *Mischief Makers* will tour, probably to Prague, Paris and London. Unsurprisingly, she’s not planning a Bob Dylan-style painting-by-numbers roll-out. “And I’m not launching whisky with my sculpting around it!” she laughs, referring to his new line of *Heaven’s Door* bourbon. “You gotta hand it to him for living outside the box.” Not for Dylan, one imagines, the post-tour decompression that Baez favours – helping out on a farm or, following the Gerdes Folk City 25th anniversary celebration in New York, washing dishes in an Upper West Side restaurant where David Massengill, with whom she’d just performed, was supplementing his income. “She posed for pictures with all the staff!”

Like anyone facing retirement, Joan Baez is not quite sure how she’ll feel. “I will miss the gang, so we’re making the most of this trip. The halls are all filled up and it’s double the excitement of any tour. I can understand that someone says ‘shit, I’m gonna go back out’. It’s been a golden time.”

joanbaez.com



Anti-Vietnam War March, London 1965. Front row Mark Feld (later Bolan), Tom Paxton, Joan Baez, Donovan, Vanessa Redgrave, Alex Campbell

