

FEATURE

Joan Baez: a tribute as activist heads for 80, her voice now 'weathered with soul'

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Ever since appearing unannounced at the 1959 Newport Folk festival, Joan Baez has held a unique position in music history.

Not only were there best selling albums and a voice described "as lustrous and rich as old gold," but she generously championed the early career of then boyfriend Bob Dylan. And her consistent support for peace and social justice placed her at pivotal historic moments - standing on the Lincoln Memorial with Martin Luther King singing 'We Shall Overcome' or playing Woodstock pregnant.

Muswell Hill journalist Liz Thomson has loved Baez' voice ever since rifling through her sister's record collection to find something to learn on her guitar.

At Christmas 1971, while her fellow teenagers were "screaming for Donny Osmond" she heard Baez play at Finsbury Park's Rainbow theatre. "It was a fantastic concert, I thought it would be the only time I would hear her but it turned out not to be the case". Now Thomson hopes to do justice to a perhaps overlooked artist, who turns 80 in January, with *Joan Baez The Last Leaf* (Palazzo £14.99)

Drawing on interviews with friends, colleagues and personal conversations, Thomson who has co-edited anthologies on Lennon and Bowie and is revising Robert Shelton's classic Dylan biography *No Direction Home*, says: "Listening to her records was originally just a means of learning songs, but I thought 'wow she's got a fantastic voice'. I had no idea who she was but she led me in interesting directions, to Dylan, Judy Collins, Pete Seeger and the folk revival. I realised she



Joan Baez at a concert in Seattle in 2009.

Picture: ZONI4316

had been present at important events and even at 12 something spoke to me about how committed and brave she was as an activist. She became a venn diagram to explore American history and the civil rights movement."

Growing up in Brooklyn the daughter of Mexican-American parents, Baez started singing folks songs and playing gigs after hearing Seeger. Just two songs at the Newport Folk Festival made her "an instant star".

"Robert Shelton talked about her 'achingly pure soprano,'" says Thomson. "She had a record contract before anyone had heard of Dylan and was on the cover of *Time Magazine* when he was still

scuttling for dimes in Greenwich Village clubs. It was her voice that drew him to New York, he said she was 'like a siren from some Greek island'." Recognising Dylan's songs as "the arsenal of the protest movement" she recorded them, and invited him on stage so often her fans complained. "She introduced him at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. Shelton said Dylan 'arrived a conversation piece and left a star'. The hard Dylan nuts have been reluctant to admit she was a crucial piece in his rise, that's not to say that he wouldn't have made it, but she gave him a jet propelled start."

But Dylan, whose songs *She Belongs to Me* and *Visions of*

Joanna were inspired by Baez, didn't return the favour when he played the Albert Hall in '65. "He was incredibly rude to her, she assumed he would invite her on stage to give her a leg up before her first UK tour, but of course he didn't." Unlike Dylan, serious minded Baez was "never one for the drink and certainly not the drugs".

"She was around a lot of people who were, and it must have made life difficult for her being square - she invited Janis Joplin into her trailer at Woodstock for a cup of tea but what Joplin had in her handbag was a bottle of Southern Comfort."

Baez was "never interested in just being an entertainer".

"Listening to Martin Luther King preach as a teenager was such an emotive experience she still cries when she talks about it. That was the moment all the things she felt but couldn't yet articulate became clear. The way folk music came together with activism fitted her perfectly."

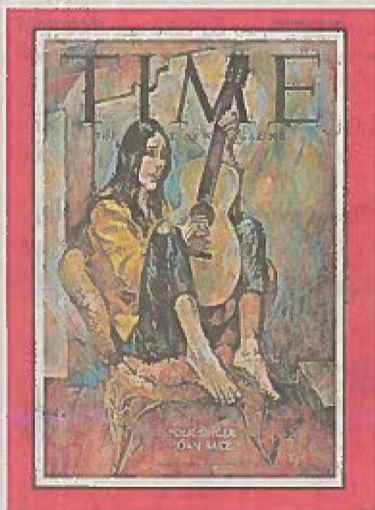
When she toured the segregated south, Baez stipulated in contracts an unsegregated audience.

"That meant giving concerts on black campuses so the white audiences who wanted to see her had to be unsegregated. When we look at how nasty America still is today, you can imagine how dangerous that was in 1962. They were terrible bloody years but there was also all that hope."

Baez met draft resistance leader David Harris in jail after being arrested, and by the time she played Woodstock in August 1969 they were married. "In front of 400,000 people on Yasgur's farm as dawn was about to break and everyone was stoned she took that moment to talk about her husband who was in jail. She said: 'The revolution went on for me even at Woodstock'."

Inducted into the Rock and Roll hall of fame in 2017 she recorded her final album in 2018 before laying down her guitar.

"She came to terms with her altered voice; one critic said it was 'still beautiful, weathered with soul,'" says Thomson, who hopes *The Last Leaf* will help a new generation appreciate her heroine.



Left, Joan Baez appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* in November 1962; middle, the programme from Joan Baez's Rainbow Theatre season in December 1971; right, Joan and Bob Dylan at the Newport Jazz Festival in Newport, America, in 1963.

Pictures: FROM LIZ THOMSON/LIZ THOMSON'S PERSONAL COLLECTION/AP PHOTO