



Baez, Joan (b. 1941)

by Teresa Theophano

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Joan Baez (left) performing with Bob Dylan at the 1963 March on Washington, a critical event in the history of the struggle for African-American civil rights.

Joan Baez is nothing less than a legend, both as a folk musician and as a catalyst for social change. A singer, guitarist, and songwriter with eight gold records and six Grammy nominations thus far, Baez has long been visible as a protest figure supporting civil rights, peace efforts, and human rights through her direct activism and numerous free concerts.

Born on January 9, 1941 in Staten Island, New York to a Scottish mother and Mexican-American father, Baez moved with her family to California when she was a small child. She lived in Baghdad from 1951 to 1952; there, confronted with rampant poverty and human suffering in the streets, she first realized her passion for social justice.

Baez stood out as an artistic nonconformist and peace activist in her high school in Palo Alto, California, and then at Boston University--where she remained for only a short time. She had begun playing at local coffeehouses and decided to drop out of school in 1958 to concentrate on her musical career.

Only a year after leaving Boston University, Baez started playing in clubs such as Gate of Horn, which belonged to impresario (and Baez's future manager) Albert Grossman, and appearing with well-known musicians such as Pete Seeger. She gave a highly successful performance at the inaugural Newport Folk Festival in August of 1959.

In 1960 her first album, *Joan Baez*, was released to huge acclaim by Vanguard Recording Society. Gifted with an extraordinarily beautiful voice, she also brought an unusual intelligence to the interpretation of folk songs, both traditional and new.

As the 1960s progressed, Baez became increasingly involved with the civil rights movement, using her growing fame as a means of drawing attention to a cause she believed in deeply. She especially worked in conjunction with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Dr. King's speeches and Baez's singing were a staple of demonstrations and rallies during the turbulent 1960s.

Baez also became very active in promoting nonviolence. During the Vietnam War, she visited Hanoi for thirteen days to witness the horrors of war herself, and for ten years she withheld the percentage of her income taxes that would have been put toward military expenses. In 1967, she was arrested twice--and jailed for a month--for blocking the entrance of the Armed Forces Induction Center in Oakland, California.

All the while she continued recording albums in her signature clear soprano, both writing her own material and performing classic songs of resistance such as "We Shall Overcome," "Oh, Freedom," and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?"

She founded both the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence (now The Resource Center for Nonviolence) in California in 1965 and the Humanitas International Human Rights Committee, which she headed from 1979 until its demise 13 years later.

In August of 1975, she was honored with a Public Service Award at the first annual Rock Music Awards and a "Joan Baez Day" in Atlanta.

Although she may be most famous for her civil rights and peace activism, Baez has also been prominent in the struggle for gay and lesbian rights.

She has been open about the relationship she had with a woman in 1962; in an interview a decade later, she told a reporter that she basically considered herself bisexual, a statement she stood by despite the controversy it sparked. She did marry activist David Harris in 1968, and had their son Gabe in 1969; although the couple eventually divorced, Baez never again pursued a lesbian relationship.

Still, she has been visible in the gay community; in 1978 she performed at several benefit concerts to defeat Proposition 6 (the Briggs Initiative), which proposed banning all openly gay people from teaching in the public schools of California. Later that year, she participated in memorial marches for the assassinated San Francisco city supervisor, openly gay Harvey Milk.

Alongside Janis Ian, she played a benefit for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1994, and has performed numerous times with the lesbian duo the Indigo Girls.

To date, Baez has recorded over 40 albums--including several greatest hits records, compilations, live albums, and a boxed set. She has written two memoirs: the best-selling *Daybreak* (1968) and the more recent *And a Voice to Sing With* (1987).

Baez continues an active schedule of concerts and tours.

Bibliography

Baez, Joan. *And A Voice To Sing With*. New York: Summit Books, 1987.

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Biography from The Joan Baez Web Pages www.joanbaez.com.

About the Author

Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).