

“Joan Baez”—Joan Baez (1960)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Rick Massimo (guest post)*



Original album cover



Original label



Joan Baez

Some records happen at the perfect time and in the perfect place. Joan Baez’s self-titled debut record was an instant success—a smash hit, really, given the amount of advertising and tour support it didn’t receive. Fred Hellerman, of The Weavers, who accompanied Baez on a few songs on the record, later explained, “She was tapping into something in the air that wasn’t just musical.”

Born in California, Joan Baez took to singing and performing naturally and immediately from a young age. She got her first guitar lessons from a colleague of her father and a childhood trip to a Pete Seeger concert inspired her to become a singer. Baez said that as a child “the only image I had of myself was of an ugly Mexican,” and it struck a nerve to hear Seeger encourage the audience, as he did all his audiences, that they could make their own music. “Joan told me later that it was after that concert that she looked herself in the mirror and said, ‘I can be a singer too,’” Seeger later said. (Her younger sister, Mimi, went to the same concert and got the same message.)

And when the family moves to Belmont, Massachusetts, in 1958, Joan, at 17, arrived just in time for a new explosion of interest in folk music—one that adapted the eternal verities of decades- and centuries-old songs to a new generation, time and place.

Folk music had long been an indigenous art form, performed and occasionally recorded by unschooled, talented amateurs who sang ancient ballads and songs about their own lives and communities. But when groups such as The Weavers (led by Seeger) recorded such songs, some of them, most notably The Kingston Trio’s “Tom Dooley,” became glossy pop hits. The music had become big business.

That was a welcome development on a certain level, but the definition of folk music, always a contentious topic, had become more so. Folk was becoming just another flavor of pop music, with heavy productions and smooth harmonies coming to define the genre.

But by the late '50s, thanks to the work of artists such as Pete Seeger (who carved out a grass-roots following after his unofficial but transparently obvious blacklisting), Barbara Dane and more, folk music had found a new place in the culture—it also became an art form beloved by college students and college-age youth who were looking for a homegrown, rough-hewn antidote to the antiseptic, mass-produced, “new and improved” ethic of the postwar boom.

Suddenly, coffeehouses--some tiny, some large--opened all across America as an alternative place for young people to meet and hear music that spoke to them, despite its origins among people very different from the listeners. And Joan Baez began to make her mark, playing locally and by appearing on the 1959 compilation “Folksingers ‘Round Harvard Square.”

Baez first rose to national attention at the inaugural Newport Folk Festival in 1959. Her unbilled guest appearance during Bob Gibson’s set literally turned heads among the audience and fellow performers, and, figuratively, in the music business. Gibson, once credited with discovering Baez, scoffed and likened the characterization to “discovering the Grand Canyon.”

There was a bidding war after that; the folk-music impresario Albert Grossman brought Baez to Atlantic Records, where the legendary John Hammond supposedly offered her “whatever you want” to sign with him. But Baez eventually signed with the much smaller Vanguard Records, preferring to work with a label where she would have more freedom and less showbiz pressure: “They didn’t have any gold records on the walls,” Baez said later of Vanguard. (Hammond later said he turned her down because she asked for too much money. As in so many music-business negotiations, both these things can be true.)

The result was “Joan Baez” (1960), a collection of Baez’s renditions of traditional works that for the first time captured her crystalline voice on record and enchanted a generation of listeners.

Where so many commercial folk recordings were smooth, professional productions, “Joan Baez” was recorded in one room with the 19-year-old Baez’s voice and guitar, with Hellerman playing as well on a few songs. And that was it.

“It took four nights,” Baez told “Rolling Stone’s” Kurt Loder in 1983:

We were in some big, smelly ballroom at a hotel on Broadway, way up by the river. We couldn't record on Wednesday nights because they played bingo there. I would be down there on this dirty old rug with two microphones, one for the voice and one for the guitar. I just did my set; it was probably all I knew. Just put 'em down. I did “Mary Hamilton” once, that was it. That's the way we made 'em in the old days. As long as a dog didn't run through the room or something, you had it.

She had it. Her luminescent soprano comes into its own on the third song, the loping “Fare Thee Well,” but her voice is front and center at all times.

The album kicks off with “Silver Dagger,” a song in which the female protagonist explains that she’ll never marry for fear of upsetting her mother, who was fooled by a smooth-talking rake many years ago. The album also includes the haunted “House of the Rising Sun” and the classic

“Mary Hamilton,” a centuries-old ballad about a servant to a queen who not only faces hanging for having been impregnated by the king, but disposes of the baby and admonishes the king in his attempts to save her life: *“Oh hold your tongue my sovereign liege, and let your folly be/For if you'd a mind to save my life, you'd never have shamed me here.”*

Baez also inhabits the male role on the obsessive love of “East Virginia,” as well as “Rake and Ramblin’ Boy” and “Fare Thee Well,” both songs about ramblers who profess a newfound steadfastness. She also reaches vocal heights on the stately, spiritual “All My Trials” and celebrates her heritage on “Preso Numero Nueve.”

Still as Hellerman said, there was something alongside the music going on. It might not exactly be feminism, but the songs showed an independence that’s always been a part of traditional American and British folk music. The songs also feature an inner-directedness, a personal tone, that departed from the sing-along ethic of Seeger and his generation and set the stage for the careers of many singer-songwriters who came up in the 1960s and ‘70s (as well as Baez’s own songs, though she’s primarily known as an interpreter).

That independence, and that frankness, resonated with audiences, especially women. Despite its low-tech production, the record was a commercial success and a cultural touchstone. “She seemed like somebody who was absolutely free and in charge of herself, even though she was young,” Barbara Dane later said, “... I think women were absolutely starved for an example of somebody like themselves who could walk out on the stage and dominate the stage and be a different kind of woman up there and also have the guys interested.”

Robert Shelton wrote in “The New York Times” that Joan Baez “sends one scurrying to the thesaurus for superlatives. It represents one of those beautiful folk performances that one could give to the most conservatory-oriented listener, yet at the same time commands the respect of the most tradition-directed auditor.” The album reached number 15 on the “Billboard” charts at the height of its 140-week run and eventually sold a half-million copies. It’s been re-released with extra tracks twice.

Baez went on to perform and record for the next six decades. She was one of the earliest champions and singers of Bob Dylan’s work; her own songs include “Diamonds and Rust,” her peerless eulogy for her relationship with Dylan. She has always been involved with social change movements, including the Civil Rights movement (she met Martin Luther King, Jr. while she was still a high schooler), environmental activism and the antiwar movements from Vietnam to Iraq and beyond. In 2018, Baez announced that her current tour would be her last.

Of her Newport performance in 1959, Baez later said, “I didn’t faint; I sang, and that was the beginning of a very long career.” “Joan Baez” is the recorded version of that first explosion onto the scene, and to this day it leaves the listener determined to follow where this talent takes him or her next.

(It’s only fair to acknowledge the debt this essay owes to the essential book “Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Farina and Richard Farina” by David Hajdu.)

Rick Massimo is the author of "I Got a Song: A History of the Newport Folk Festival."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.