

IN **R** EVIEW

PEOPLE

JOAN BAEZ: A FRIENDLY VOICE ON A NEW JOURNEY

The 'Conscience of a Generation' Relaunches Her Career with Passion

by ADAM BLOCK

I have to get my career in line and quit screwing around," Joan Baez says wryly, "because I gave all my money away. My business advisers may not like my saying that but it happens to be the truth."

Baez is sitting in the kitchen of her airy, simply appointed home, sipping freshly brewed tea. Her voice is rich as mahogany; her eyes are stunning. Across from her, at a small table, sits the word processor on which for the past three years she wrote her

Singer and activist Joan Baez, who is reaffirming her career with a new book and album, has long counted gay civil rights among her concerns.

autobiography, *And A Voice to Sing With* (Summit Books). By the entryway hang two framed crayon drawings of rocket ships blowing one another to smithereens, drawn by her son Gabe when he was seven. "I figure that framing her son's pictures of *Star Wars* is the least a pacifist mother can do," she quips. Gabe is now 17 and about to graduate from high school.

Mom is 46, but only the stylish shards of gray in her neatly cropped hair suggest the fact. And if it is a shade difficult to locate in this face the grim Madonna who intoned "We Shall Overcome" at the Washington monument 24 years ago, that may be intentional. On the refrigerator is a snapshot that Baez describes with a bright laugh as "me in my fuck-me outfit." In the photo she is mugging in a pair of leopard-skin spandex tights. "I got them for a hoot—to let off steam. Went right over to the Beverly Center and picked them out, right when I got down to L.A. to record the album."

The album is titled *Recently* (Gold Castle Records), and it's easy to imagine that Baez needed that dose of silliness. Pressure would do that to a soul. It's also easy to understand why she didn't actually record in that ditzzy David Lee Roth video Val-gal get-up, but rather in the outfit she is wearing: a sleeveless blue sweatshirt, striped cotton skirt and white Reeboks. This record had to mean business. "It had to be totally musical, totally brilliant, and have total integrity," Baez insists. "This is a make-or-break record."

If that sounds a hair excessive, it may be helpful to remember that this was Joan Baez's first crack at a new studio album—her first American record contract—in eight years. The opportunity arrived at the end of a long dry spell that had taken Baez by surprise. "It seemed like I'd looked up suddenly and didn't know what was *happening*, because ever since I was 18 I had measured how good I was by how loud everybody clapped." And they *had* clapped: long and hard.

Success came early. In 1962, at the age of

21, she was on the cover of *Time* magazine, anointed as a solemn young madonna, the Queen of Folk Music, an icon of the '60s. Baez figured she could handle the role, which called for a sturdy waif, startlingly gifted, deeply concerned and a touch puritanical. Standing slightly aloof from what became the drug-fueled bedlam of the '60s and the exploding rock scene, Baez fought for civil rights and draft resistance, and maintained the respect of many of her peers. She came to find her causes identified with what early critics called "her aching-ly pure soprano."

Joan Baez became "the conscience of a generation." Although the phrase was still being applied in the '80s, many seemed to feel that the whole notion, and Baez with it, had become an anachronism. Certainly the major record companies, which repeatedly turned her down flat, seemed to. But respect and affection for Baez runs deep and crops up in unexpected places.

Alan Robinson, a 32-year-old gay new-music DJ, one of the first to play punk rock at gay dance clubs, grinned when he heard this story was in the works. Robinson mirrored the feelings of many gay people when he said, "I love Joan Baez. I've always loved her voice and her politics. She's a lesbian, right?" He remembers when he first met Baez during an Amnesty International event on Struggle Mountain in 1976. "I thought she was totally terrific, and in those days I thought that anybody that cool *must* be gay." He laughed. "I used to own all her albums. I'd like to get them back."

Testimonials like that, even from a hardened rocker like Robinson, weren't getting through to—or changing minds at—the major record companies. After five years of polite refusals, Baez's resentment was palpable. The lady was mad. And incidentally, though deeply sympathetic, she *wasn't* a lesbian and had begun to complain in interviews of "being absolutely inundated at my concerts with homosexual women; and really, I am *not* interested."

In 1984, Baez began work on her book: a funny, touching, candid, self-obsessed memoir—an ambitious attempt to reclaim her past, and hopefully to get a grip on her future. "I hope it will unload some of the baloney people carry around about me," she says, shaking her head. "Whatever your image was of me—that I was too pristine, or not pristine enough—I think the book will offer some alternatives." She chuckles. "You know, if you thought I was left-wing, I'm not. If you thought I was right-wing, I'm not. If you thought I was queer, I'm not. If you thought I was stable, I'm not."

She writes movingly about her experience with Martin Luther King in the '60s, and of a visit to Hanoi during the Christmas bombing in 1972. She writes revealingly about her love affairs, whether with Bob Dylan or a teen-age French stable boy. For the first time she describes in detail her year-long affair with the then-17-year-old trouble child, surfer girl Kimmie. It happened in 1962, when Baez was 22 and on the rebound from a disastrous, slow-motion breakup with her major boyfriend. When she told her therapist that she was thinking of pursuing an affair with the girl, his advice was, "Don't hold hands in public." About that time, Baez writes:

There are pools which run deep, bathing pools for ladies only. In these cool and private places we can go undefended. In

though we never spent any time together. We went very different paths. She lives a sort of mysterious life. I just didn't know much about her. But when I showed her the manuscript, she said she was very flattered."

If Baez's affair didn't make her a lesbian, neither did it make her a feminist (much to the dismay, she learned, of many an ally and acolyte).

"You know, I have the same problem there that I have with black power, brown power, yellow power, women power: It's just too exclusive. I don't *feel* it. I don't feel like a woman *first*. And I think you *have* to in order to belong to that league. I support the ERA, but the movement is not a priority for me."



Baez approaches an audience to sing and speak during a "No on 64" benefit held in Berkeley, Calif., last year.

the quiet and nonresistant waters and on the warm shores beside them we can go and let out a lifelong sigh of relief and know that we are understood at last. We have white underbellies of softness which we expose only to the gentlest touch. Along the shores is an unspoken alliance of "us against the world" which purges resentments innate in us, resentments we have inherited from centuries of myth.

Baez notes that her only confusion came "from what everybody else would think.... When Kimmie and I did finally make love, it was superb and utterly natural. It made me wonder what all the fuss was about, both society's and my own."

In the book, after Baez gets the yen for men again, the two fight and then part with poignant civility on a New York street, Baez never yielding to a Sapphic temptation again. Asked what happened to Kimmie and whether she remained a lesbian, Baez says, "Yeah, and we remained friends,

'Now I deal regularly with the phenomenon of young men who come up after a concert, with tears in their eyes, and say, 'I just want to thank you.' And without them saying it, I know they've had a friend who has died of AIDS.'

chance/To send Jimmy Baldwin back over to France," weaving in a nod to the black, gay rebel writer and expatriot whom she had met during the freedom marches. The deceptively gentle song was as potent a defense of homos as any pop figure had ever committed to vinyl.

The song never got much attention, though there may have been more troubled lads with ears to hear than we can know. I recall the astonishing 21-year-old make-up artist in Los Angeles who told of escaping from an Army brat upbringing in Texas to do Patti Smith drag in bars across the state when he was 16. He was the one who announced, a little spooked, "This song tells the story of my life." Joan Baez? Who would have thought it?

Asked about the song, Baez seems bemused that it was even noticed. It's not a lyric she quotes in her book. "I wasn't traveling in gay circles particularly, although I had some gay friends then, and as I recall I was in L.A. and there were a group of gays dying to show me this place in Santa Monica. I met this extravagantly beautiful transvestite, who is still a friend, Sean. That world interests me, as all bizarre

things interest me. That night at the bar I was struck by this couple dancing, and gave them those names. It was my response. I rarely did the song live, except for once in France when I knew James Baldwin would be there. He is a shy guy. He laughed." The very casual quality of Baez's forthright appreciation of two male lovers amidst all the virulent, knee-jerk homophobia in popular music is enormously endearing.

While she has constantly championed nonviolence and human rights, working in tandem with Humanitas (the foundation she established in 1979), Baez has also regularly supported the California gay community in their times of need. She performed at benefits to defeat Proposition 6, the Briggs "no gay teachers" initiative. She recalls a benefit with Holly Near in Los Angeles and takes the opportunity to explain some of her problems with the political left.

"I appreciate Holly Near as one of the few people who really sticks to what she believes and integrates that into her music," Baez says, "but she is too left-wing for me to be *truly* comfortable with, on-stage or probably in life. When people are *only* talking about 'the great white oppressor,' I get uncomfortable. I think all of us have to learn to see—as we say at Humanitas—through both eyes. First, because it is morally correct. Second, because you become powerless in the larger world if you can always be counted on to take one party line. But we did share a stage for—I think it was the anti-gay rights amendment in L.A.," she says, smiling.

When San Francisco was reeling in shock after the assassinations of gay Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone, Baez drove up to perform a free concert on the steps of City Hall, and returned to repeat the effort on Christmas Eve. "That was when I really first felt connected to San Francisco," she admits. "It became very meaningful to me, and at that moment I realized that I'd lived here a *long* time; that this is where I come back to—the most beautiful city in the country."

Last fall, when Humanitas toted up the requests for Baez's help, she chose to go to bat against the LaRouche-backed AIDS quarantine initiative. While all the other celebrities and brat-packers were hopping on the painfully noncontroversial Clean Water Initiative, Baez took on the thornier issue that had mobilized the gay and lesbian community.

Asked why she seems to have always been there for the gay community, she ponders

for a moment. "Part of it is the sympathy I've always seemed to have with the tribulations of the underdog. And part of it is something very personal that has developed. I mean, now I deal regularly with the phenomenon of young men who come up after a concert, with tears in their eyes, and say, 'I just want to thank you.' And without them saying it, I know they've had a friend who has died of AIDS."

Baez's appreciation for gays is obviously reciprocated, but gay male readers may be pleasantly surprised by the enormously playful and sexually rambunctious quality of her memoirs. Baez is an enormously sexual and sexy woman, but by her own admission, those are qualities she seldom puts across in her singing. She claims that the high, lonesome purity of her soprano is just not equipped for the grittiness of the blues. Possibly, Baez has never been willing to really give it up. Emotionally she has protected her autonomy with a series of "splendidly impractical" affairs with peach-fuzz lads with cupid lips; this revelation may well touch the hearts of anyone who ever felt saddled with the libido of a chicken hawk. Baez's could make some green with envy.

She plainly, lyrically celebrates her affairs, and when asked about them, admits, "I'm obviously keeping my life safe. I can't deal with intimacy or reality—the reality of intimacy. I'm absolutely honest with whomever I'm with about that. And I'm absolutely enveloped in it—happy and loving and sharing." But would she be bothered if she never again had a long-term, intimate relationship with someone she considered an equal? "I'd probably be bothered if I *did*," she responds instantly.

Marriage is *not* one of Baez's projects, but relaunching her career most definitely is. And her new album, far more than the memoirs, is her ticket out of the past. It is a carefully crafted album that ought to turn the trick, admirably justifying her claims that she has never been in better voice. Producer Alan Abrahams has tooled contemporary numbers to her strengths with haunting elegiac settings of Dire Straits' "Brothers in Arms" and Peter Gabriel's "Biko." The album also reaches back to the future with a vivid, eye-opening take of the spirituals "Let Us Break Bread Together" and "Freedom," backed by a gospel choir 30 strong.

The record may not propel Baez to the forefront of contemporary music, but it welcomes a friend, ally, gifted talent and loyal activist back from pop's equivalent of internal exile. That is cause for no small celebration. Let Joan Baez provide the score. ■