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**Michael Giltz**

Posted October 27, 2008 | 03:49 PM (EST)

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# Joan Baez on Barack Obama: "It feels like King"



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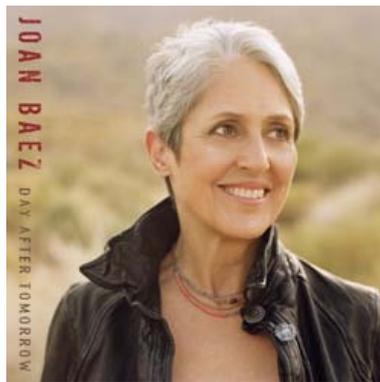
**Joan Baez** has a marvelous new album out, a quiet, wisdom-filled work called *Day After Tomorrow* produced by Steve Earle and filled with songs by him, Elvis Costello, Tom Waits/Kathleen Brennan, Thea Gilmore and others. Tunes like the brilliant opener "God Is God" ([you can listen to it here](#)), the ancient-sounding "Rose Of Sharon" (a new tune that sounds like some long-lost ballad from 300 years ago) and Patty Griffin's "Mary" reveal a voice that is older, obviously, and wiser, certainly. Where once that angelic soprano would ring out over a

crowd at a civil rights march led by Martin Luther King Jr., now Baez can speak quietly and confidently, knowing we'll listen.

"Gravity has a big part to say," says Baez, in an exclusive interview with Huffington Post. "The voice lowers and lowers. Every brilliant arrangement I worked out over the years, I can't use anymore because it's just too high to sing."

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Her voice may not be quite as flexible, but her way with a lyric is better than ever. Perhaps a youthful joy in pure melody has been replaced by a greater emphasis on the words, such as the title track "Day After Tomorrow" where Baez sings the lines "It is so hard and it's so cold here" in such a plain, unadorned voice she's practically speaking them. The effect is gripping.

But how could you talk to Baez -- a fighter for social justice virtually her entire life (her first act of civil disobedience was to refuse to scurry to cover during an air raid drill at school) -- and not talk about the election? Her last CD, a live album, was recorded in New York City's Bowery Ballroom just days after Bush won reelection in 2004.

"Days!" says Baez, who is celebrating 50 years of performing. "I was amazed we could even work. New York City was in a state of total depression."

The city was like a dead man walking, wasn't it?

"That's what I call McCain," she laughs. "Dead Man Walking and Shotgun Sally - what a terrific ticket."

You won't be surprised to hear Baez has endorsed Barack Obama. But you should be. Throughout decades of campaigning for the weak and the powerless, the poor and the lost, Baez has always been steadfast in staying away from politicians. She's never endorsed so much as a dogcatcher, much less someone running for Congress or the Senate or the White House. But Barack Obama is different.

"I am positive and hopeful," says Baez, who turns 68 on January 9, just 11 days before the next President is inaugurated. "I've always shunned party politics, for good reason. Obama just overwhelmed me really -- knowing that once he's in office he'll probably do things I hate." She laughs. "But the things that appeal to me and young people and poor people and black people -- it's undeniable. It feels like King. I'm sad in a way that he didn't stay outside of the system because I feel like he could have spearheaded a real movement. I don't know how much he can do in that office."

What about Sarah Palin? When she was announced and most people didn't know her or her record, did Baez think, even for a moment, "Hmm, a woman. That's interesting."

"No," says Baez. "I took one look at her and I thought, 'Jesus Christ. What has happened?' She looks like a retired pom-pom girl."

Is it a safe bet Baez didn't get along with the cheerleaders in high school?

"You know what, I tried out to be a cheerleader," she confesses. "Me and my friend Bunny, we had a wonderful [cheer] worked out, but we were Mexicans. They were absolutely not interested in how clever we were. [As for Palin,] I thought it was panic. Are they stupid enough to keep it up? And to the credit of the American people, her rising star is starting to dip below the horizon at least a little bit."

But what is it about Obama that convinced Baez to endorse a politician for the first time in her life?

"The level of intelligence," she explains. "The reintroduction of the word compassion. The concept of sacrifice. The interest in literally reaching out to countries - like Spain," she laughs, then adding seriously, "Any guy running for President who has a picture of Mahatma Gandhi up in his office is going to intrigue me."

"The only way I can really make sense of it is King because my politics have always been at the

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base of the pyramid. This is the first time I've been willing to extend or stretch my stuffy beliefs to the top of the pyramid. With King, it was so active. We were shoving that pyramid around from its base. That's what I'm comfortable with. The higher up that pyramid you go, the more dastardly things you're going to be requested to do."



On Tuesday, **October 28**, Baez begins a US tour at Town Hall in New York City (the first of two nights). She's sure to sing a healthy chunk of her new album and draw upon the wealth of classic tunes she's sung and made famous over the years. She's performed in New York many times. But she's never sung at an inauguration. If Obama is elected and she could perform at it, what song would she sing?

"'Swing Low' or 'Amazing Grace,'" says Baez. "Whatever will just add to the joy and excitement that everyone -- in my camp anyway -- is experiencing. A song like 'Amazing Grace' brings out the absolute, utmost good in just about anybody. It's a song that people sing on. It's a song that people are moved by and they have been for my entire 50 year career. It can be an homage, easily."

And hopefully one of the songs on her new album would fit right in by proving prophetic. On Thea Gilmore's "The Lower Road," Baez sings "Because for every midnight hour, there's always a rising sun."

"Isn't that lovely?" says Baez.

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**PaulLev** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of PaulLev](#) [permalink](#)

My wife and I were at the Town Hall concert tonight - superb. Here's my complete review -

<http://paullevinson.blogspot.com/2008/10/joan-baez-sings-dylan-lennon-earle-and.html>

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**PlantGod72** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of PlantGod72](#) [permalink](#)

I've been an Obama supporter since the day he announced his bid for the Democratic nomination 18 months ago. But for me, one of the greatest days of this long, arduous campaign season----after the euphoria of the Iowa caucuses and just a few days before the tense results of 'Super Tuesday'----was the day Joan offered her endorsement of Senator Obama.

As a fan and follower of all things Baez over the past 38 years, I was aware that with all the work she's done on behalf of the poor, vulnerable and oppressed, both here and around the world, she'd never before supported a political candidate for office.

It was like a bolt out of the blue, and a reassurance that what I had seen and sensed in Barack Obama was something truly special. Thank you, Joan, for everything you've done throughout your life, and for the inspiration, joy and entertainment you still provide with your words, your wisdom and your music!

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**NanCNA** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of NanCNA](#) [permalink](#)

I'd like to see an Obama/Baez ticket - wouldn't that be cool!

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**arethabaez** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of arethabaez](#) [permalink](#)

I too was shocked when Queen Joan endorsed him, but quite pleased. Baez should have a regular column on HP. In Europe she's treated like a goddess in the US like a traitor/wierdo relic.

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KickerBoard See Profile I'm a Fan of KickerBoard permalink

Joan Baez is the most consistently decent person in America - a national cultural treasure.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 05:38 PM on 10/27/2008

PlantGod72 See Profile I'm a Fan of PlantGod72 permalink

Agreed and AMEN! She's certainly one of the most courageous proponents of non-violence and equality I've ever known.

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Thanks for reading. Your feelings describe the way I felt when Bruce Springsteen endorsed John Kerry in 2004.

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SKMojo See Profile I'm a Fan of SKMojo permalink

Forty years ago, I worked for a little kilowatt radio station in the Arkansas Ozarks and would play Joan's records on the air for hours on end; no one ever complained! I loved her then, and I still do.

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PlantGod72 See Profile I'm a Fan of PlantGod72 permalink

'My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains', 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken', 'Hickory Wind', I'll bet you played some of these more than a few times.....She's the best!

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 05:06 PM on 10/27/2008

MPeter See Profile I'm a Fan of MPeter permalink

Beautiful music. I love Joan Baez. She has been a relentless advocate for peace and justice. May you continue to be blessed and to speak up for the oppressed and silenced! Thank you Joan.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 04:11 PM on 10/27/2008

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