

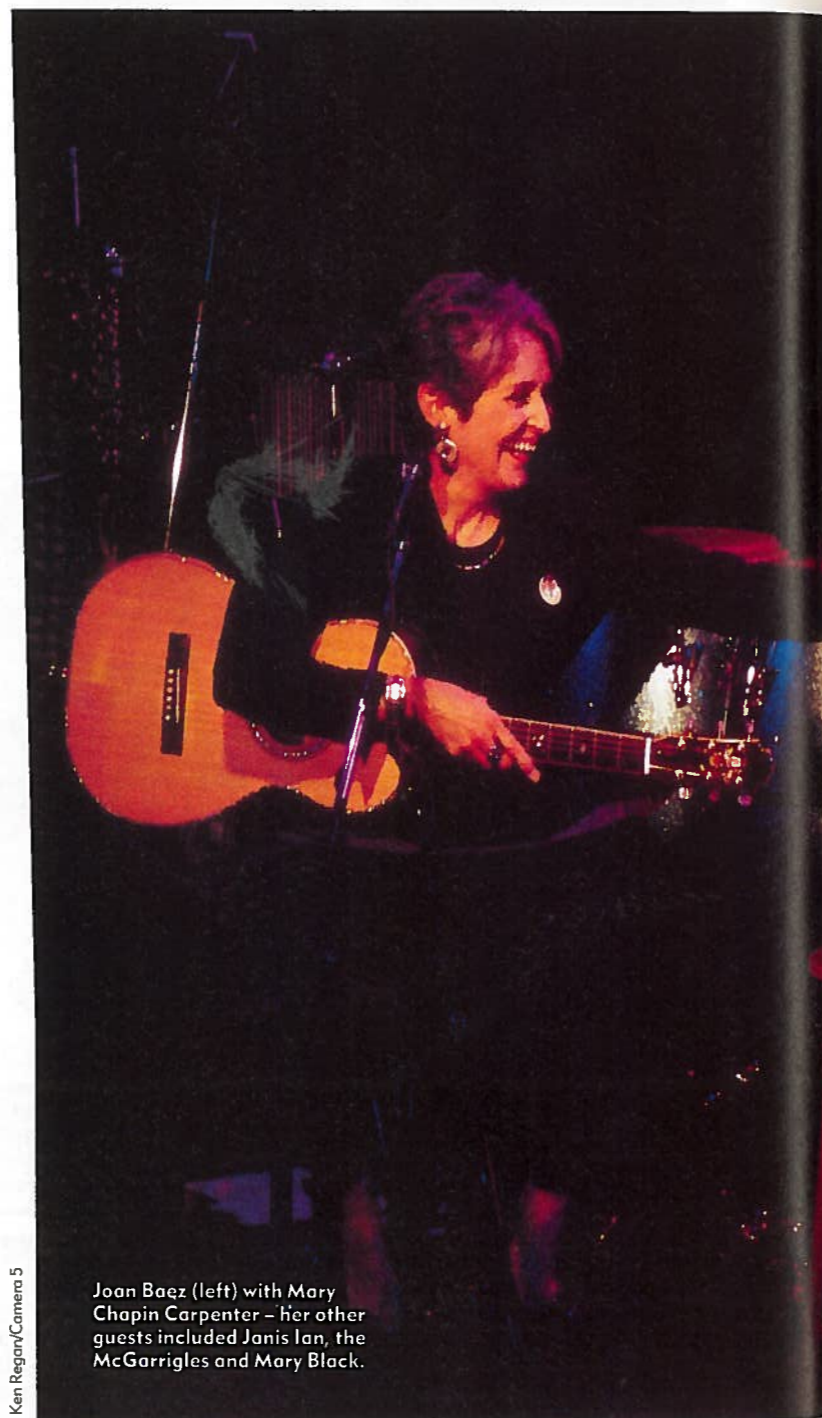
# EVERY NIGHT ABOUT THIS TIME

## Live Shows From Around The World

# Joan Baez

The Bottom Line, New York City

WHEN JOAN BAEZ, STRUGGLING TO READ A CUE SHEET, acknowledged that being "a certain age" meant a dimming of her visual faculties, the audience at New York's Bottom Line laughed in recognition. Singer and audience have grown up together and, after 35 years, are well acquainted. But while many in the capacity crowd looked as though they'd enjoyed "breakfast in bed for 400,000" at Woodstock '69, a sizeable number could easily have been conceived during the long lie-in. Standing at the bar was a couple in their mid-20s: the man held his girlfriend's hand as, with the other, she wiped away a torrent of tears that came with Suzanne. Sighed a critic, up from Washington DC to cover the event, "Hearing Joan Baez sing that you wonder why Judy Collins ever bothered."



Ken Regan/Camera 5

Joan Baez (left) with Mary Chapin Carpenter - her other guests included Janis Ian, the McGarrigles and Mary Black.

Baez's eyesight may not be what it was but her voice remains undiminished by the passing years. Undoubtedly it is changed, but in many ways for the better. The coarseness that marked some of her '70s recordings, the ungainly break - these problems have been attended to and daily vocal workouts have paid dividends. The "achingly pure soprano" of the early '60s is these days merely pure, enhanced now by a sonorous contralto whose range of tone colour and surety of pitch at its best knocks Dame Kiri into a cocked hat.

Where once Baez relied on the ethereal beauty of her voice to carry songs from which she remained clinically detached, these days she is musically engaged. Part of her appeal (paradoxically, the reason many people could not abide her) has always been her political commitment. But moral courage frequently led to unwise artistic decisions and, even in concert, music sometimes ran a poor second to humanitarian concerns. For the moment at least, politics is on the back burner and at The Bottom Line the closest Baez came to social comment was a dig at California-style political correctness and an exemplary performance of Eric Bogle's chilling *And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda*.

The four concerts, recorded for a live album to be released this autumn, were the talk of New York. Harvard Square, Boston, was where

the teenage Baez first paraded her then meagre repertoire but Greenwich Village was where she and a whole generation of singer-songwriters came of age. In playing the club, on the hallowed ground of West 4th and Mercer, Baez at once acknowledged her past (interestingly, Dylan's name was never mentioned) and looked toward the future, sharing the stage with her younger contemporary, Janis Ian, sister Mimi Farina, the long-serving Mary Black and such new wave folkies as Mary Chapin Carpenter and The Indigo Girls.

The opening night started a touch tentatively - hardly surprising, given the presence of more than 40 critics - Baez disguising her nerves with self-deprecating humour. Traditional folk songs from her earliest albums shone like new: *Mary Hamilton* (1960), *Lily Of The West* (1961), *Geordie* (1962). Old songs new to Baez were enthusiastically received, notably Phil Ochs's *When I'm Gone* and Tim Hardin's *Don't Make Promises That You Can't Keep*. From her own back catalogue, Baez blew the dust off *Sweet Sir Galahad* ("The first song I wrote which I sang outside the shower"), *Honest Lullaby*, a reworked *Lovesong To A Stranger*, and *I'm With You* from her last album, *Play Me Backwards*.

Such numbers provided the framework for the first two concerts, with Baez departing from schedule to oblige with the occasional request.

A solo performer for so many years, she is perforce a skilled instrumentalist, her intricate guitar work effectively providing both lead and rhythm. But the inspired support of Fernando Saunders on fretless electric bass, Paul Pesco on acoustic guitar and percussionist Carol Steele made for many more musical possibilities and some damn fine backing vocals.

Of her guests, only Kate and Anna McGarrigle disappointed and their disappearance in the mix was no great loss. On the same bill Mary Chapin Carpenter was splendid, her voice blending perfectly with Baez's. Their shared roots showed in a performance of *Angel Band*, a gospel standard, followed by *Stones In The Road*, which Carpenter gave to Baez before recording it herself. *Diamonds And Rust* was 24 carat, and when Baez punctured any air of encroaching sentimentality by changing the closing line to "well, I'll take the diamonds" the audience erupted.

As to Mary Black, until four hours before showtime she'd not sung a note with Baez - a surprise to anyone who heard them perform Bob Dylan's *Ring Them Bells* and Phil Colclough's *Song For Ireland*, which the American had learned in tribute to Black that very afternoon. But by far the most exciting collaboration was that between Baez and Janis Ian, whose verbal and musical knockabout (a spontaneous burlesque of *On The Street Where You Live*) could come only from two performers totally at ease onstage. Their readings of Ian's *Amsterdam* and *Jesse*, with the composer on first guitar and then piano, were supercharged and there can be no doubt that Ian is one of contemporary music's great songwriters.

What these concerts affirmed was that great talent, like good wine, mellows and matures. Musically speaking, age brings added perception, a more subtle performance in which influences have long been effortlessly blended. Greenwich Village, a romantic bohemia that each generation discovers anew, was where the Baez vintage was laid down and by returning to record an album and to work with artists scarcely born when last she performed there, the singer emphasised popular music's continuum.

Dylan unplugged merely short-circuited. With Joan Baez you could feel the electricity.

Liz Thompson



DIAMOND NIGHTS

*Joan Baez declines to rust*