

JOAN BAEZ



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1959-2018</i>	<i>Contemporary Folk</i>	<i>500 Miles (1965)</i>

Only Solitaire

Artist: *Joan Baez*

Years: *1959-1961*

George Starostin's Reviews

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FOLKSINGERS 'ROUND HARVARD SQUARE

(w. Bill Wood, Ted Alevizos)

Album released:

1959

V A L U E
3 3 3 2 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) On The Banks Of The Ohio; 2) O What A Beautiful City; 3) Sail Away Ladies; 4) Black Is The Color; 5) Lowlands; 6) What You Gonna Call Your Pretty Baby; 7) Kitty (w. Bill Wood); 8) So Soon In The Morning (w. Bill Wood); 9) Careless Love (w. Bill Wood); 10) Le Cheval Dans La Beignoire (Bill Wood); 11) John Henry (Bill Wood); 12) Travelin' Shoes (Bill Wood); 13) The Bold Soldier (Bill Wood); 14) Walie Walie (Ted Alevizos); 15) Rejected Lover (Ted Alevizos); 16) Astrapseni (Ted Alevizos); 17) Lass From The Low Country (Ted Alevizos); 18) Don't Weep After Me (w. Bill Wood & Ted Alevizos).

REVIEW

For most people, Joan's recording career probably starts in 1960, with the release of her proper self-titled debut LP on the Vanguard label. However, if one has any interest at all to dig a little deeper, there is no reason to ignore this curious little historical artifact — even if it was never thought worthy of a proper CD release (Discogs lists a truncated issue from 2012 which only includes Joan's solo and collaborative tracks, erasing the other two guys' solo efforts, which is a bit insulting and sort of misses the point of the record altogether), but in the modern world, this is really no longer a problem, as you can probably locate a ripped vinyl digital copy on the Web in half an hour's time.



This album, recorded in some dark, well-isolated cellar around May 1959 and semi-officially issued on Joan and her friends' own «Veritas Records» label, actually predates Joan's long-term association with Greenwich Village; at the time, she was actually living in Boston, where her father had a faculty position at MIT, and although she did briefly attend Boston University, her interest in music and in political activism was seemingly much stronger than her interest in getting a college

degree. I suppose that the chief reason for this album to have appeared at all was promotional — I mean, she had to have *something* under her belt to be allowed to perform at the Newport Folk Festival in July 1959, which more or less launched her proper career — yet, much to my surprise, I found myself enjoying it, let's say, much to the same extent that I typically enjoy a Joan Baez record; and the collaborative side of it is exceptionally welcome, since I can usually handle Joan only in small doses, and the Joan dose on **Folksingers 'Round Harvard Square** is just perfect for me.

Of Joan's two friends on this album, relatively little is known, since they disappeared off the musical radar fairly quickly. Bill Wood is today probably far more familiar to the scientific circles, as he is a biology professor with a serious pedigree involving a whole slew of universities; ironically, his principal contribution to the world of music was giving birth to Chris and Oliver Wood — The Wood Brothers, much revered in the world of jazz music (Chris is also one of the founding members of Medeski Martin & Wood, the just-as-revered avant-funk-jazz-prog-whatever combo). Ted Alevizos, a young student of Greek descent, stayed on a bit longer, recording a couple of albums for various small folk labels on which he sang and interpreted traditional Greek folk songs, then disappeared from the music business just as well (I found an [obituary](#) from 2009, from which it may be understood that he stayed on at Harvard, teaching Greek and other courses and doing library work; his only specific achievement to be remembered is apparently helping smuggle Mikis Theodorakis' score for Costa-Gavras "Z" movie out of Greece in 1968!).

Clearly, even at this early date there was no question about who was the crown jewel in the trio: Joan dominates the record, singing six songs on her own and three more in a duet with Wood; then Wood and Alevizos get only four solo numbers each, and then there's one last number on which all three sing in unison (yet Joan's voice still lilts high and wide above the two others). Technically, Wood is the weakest of them all, with a rather ordinary set of vocal cords; Alevizos has an impressive Greek crooning voice, but with a bit less personality than Baez. Even so, the contrast between the three is enjoyable — Joan Baez, the «Madonna» of Holy Light and Eternal Beauty; Wood, with a humble, slightly trickster-ish vocal tone that makes him feel a bit like the grinning jester in the Queen's retinue; and Alevizos, the sentimental Court Troubadour in the same retinue. Three very different styles of delivery which, in between themselves, are obviously more representative of the late 1950s' folk scene across Ivy League colleges than any one of them on its own.

The barely 18-year old Joan Baez here is already quite the Joan Baez we all know, love and/or hate — the girl with the powerhouse angelic voice who sings each note in each song as if she were graduating musical school with God himself presiding in the commission. Her selection alternates mainly between Appalachian ballads and spirituals; her tone never

varies, be it the murder horror of 'The Banks Of The Ohio' or the visions of God's transcendental beauty in 'Oh What A Beautiful City'; her steady and well-practiced guitar runs carry each song from start to finish without any notable deviations or experiments (compare her rendition of 'Black Is The Color Of My True Love's Hair', for instance, with Nina Simone's performance of the same song **At Town Hall** the very same year — the latter is like an action-packed Hollywood movie in comparison). But with six good, classic songs stretching over sixteen minutes, this slice of formal beauty is perfectly acceptable; I am happy to say that, by the time Bill Wood comes in for his duets, Joan has not even begun to properly annoy or irritate my ears, and that's a *big* achievement.

The duets in question are certainly nowhere near as weird as all those times when Joan would duet with Dylan — Bill Wood has a far more «normal» voice, and he does not have Dylan's wicked penchant for constantly trying to throw his partner off key — but the mix is still pleasant, and the selection of material is not totally predictable: 'Kitty' is a uniquely appearing ballad, marked as «South African Folksong» (no idea where they really unearthed it from), and 'So Soon In The Morning' is also a new creation, concocted by Joan and Bill from several 19th century spirituals and featuring quite an admirable vocal weave for its fast tempo, if any extra proof was needed that these guys took their cellar-recording business seriously.

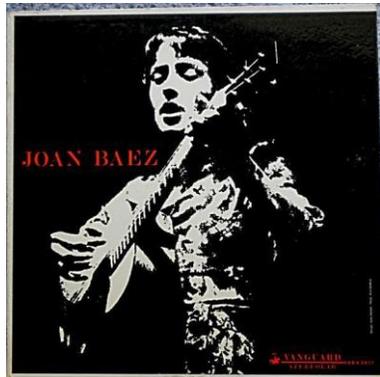
Wood's solo section on Side B starts out *really* weirdly — perhaps he thought that it was necessary to compensate for Baez' complete lack of humor straight away, which he does with 'Le Cheval Dans La Beignoire (*original orthography retained* — G.S.)', singing a silly anecdote about a horse in the bathtub in French while also politely offering a complete spoken translation in English before the song. I don't know where he took it from; hopefully, Georges Brassens never sang anything of the kind. On its own, it's just a joke; in the context of the album, it's a nice defusing of the seriousness of Side A, followed by Wood's similarly lightweight, less-than-reverential retellings of 'John Henry' (which includes some really fast and fluent acoustic picking, by the way — Big Bill Broonzy might have rated this an A) and two other ballads (no spirituals).

Finally, Alevizos steps in with his Mediterranean operatic tenor voice; this is *really* not my thing, but, again, it is at least curious to be able to diversify the experience in such an out-of-the-blue manner. He mostly lends this tenor voice to the same sentimental Anglo-Saxon ballads as Joan did ('Lass From The Low Country', etc.), but one of the songs ('Astrapseni') is a Greek folk tune delivered in the native tongue of Alevizos' original homeland (I assume that he was a second-generation immigrant, since his Greek seems to have a bit of an English accent and his English betrays no Greek); thus we throw in a bit of «world flavor» as well, making the record into a veritable mini-Odyssey of styles, from Scotland to the Appalachians to France and over to Greece, before the three singers finally come together in a joint, spirited rendition of 'Don't Weep

After Me' — on which, amusingly, the two male singers' voices kind of merge into one, while Baez obviously maintains her own identity: once again, the Queen rises high and mighty over her collective retinue.

True to the message of that last song, the album has long since been dead and buried, and nobody ever really wept after it, except for a curious incident when in 1963, on the heels of Joan's rise to national fame, it was re-released (with a truncated song list in changed order) by the short-lived Squire Records under the title of **The Best Of Joan Baez (!!!)** and even managed to chart before Joan had it removed from the shelves through legal action. That weird bit of sordid business practice aside, the record is still a curious cultural artifact — after all, not a lot of people made «indie» albums like that back in 1959, let alone having three such different individual styles on a single one of them. If you really love Joan Baez, this is totally recommended — as I said, she already comes across as a fully formed and self-confident folk singer — and if you really don't, well, just think of it as a souvenir of what all those young people were *really* doing on campus back in 1959 (correct answer: locking themselves down in a basement to sing 'Oh What A Beautiful City').





JOAN BAEZ

Album released:

October 1960

V A L U E
3 3 2 3 2

More info:



Tracks: 1) Silver Dagger; 2) East Virginia; 3) Fare Thee Well; 4) House Of The Rising Sun; 5) All My Trials; 6) Wildwood Flower; 7) Donna Donna; 8) John Riley; 9) Rake And Rambling Boy; 10) Little Moses; 11) Mary Hamilton; 12) Henry Martin; 13) El Preso Numero Nueve.

REVIEW

There is one thing that's been seriously bugging me about 'Silver Dagger', the opening song on Joan's proper debut album and, partly because of that, one of her most remembered and recognizable trademark numbers. Like most of the songs on here, it is marked *traditional, arr. by Joan Baez*. However, despite having browsed through a lot of sources tracing the song's origins all the way back to at least 1817 (the date of the [first known publication](#) of a version), I have not been able to locate a single printed version or musical recording whose lyrics would bear anything but the most remote connection to the words as sung by Joan. This may be just an oversight on my part, of course, but when source after source either just fails to say a single word about the differences or, at best, mumbles something about "[this appears to be a fragment of the full ballad](#)" without at all indicating the particular version of the ballad of which it happens to be a fragment... well, this is where I start getting suspicious.

The history of the song, most commonly known under the titles of 'Drowsy Sleeper' or 'Silver Dagger' (some claim that these are originally two different songs that got contaminated because of similar subject matters, but this just makes the story even more confusing), is extremely complicated; however, the absolute majority of printed and recorded versions involve



(a) two young lovers, one of whom is goading the other to elope with him; (b) the lady's parents, one or both of which are actually in possession of the dagger in question; (c) the event of (rarely) murder or (much more common) suicide, whereupon the guy kills himself upon learning that the girl is refusing to run away with him, and the girl (optionally) kills herself upon learning that her lover has died. (It is never explained why the entire neighborhood is armed with silver daggers — do they have a werewolf issue in the community? — but I guess it's just no class when you kill yourself with common steel). This is how [The Oaks Family](#) sang it, for instance, as well as tons of other artists.

Nothing of the sort exists in Baez' song, which features a completely inverted story: sung entirely from the fair maiden's perspective, it presents a *retort* to the young gentleman ("*don't sing love songs, you'll wake my mother*"), whereupon the fair maiden rather mercilessly puts down the whippersnapper, referring him to lessons learned from her parents ("*all men are false, says my mother*") and concluding that "*I've been warned and I've decided / To sleep alone all of my life*". If you look attentively enough at the lyrics, it turns out to be such a decidedly modern (and feminist) take on the song that I have the most serious doubts these verses could be a "*fragment of the full ballad*"; it totally looks like a very recent stylization that Joan either wrote herself, passing it out as «traditional», or, perhaps, unknowingly copied from some other recent «modernizer» of traditional folklore. In any case, in her interpretation what used to be essentially a folk variation on the perennial story of Romeo and Juliet becomes a much more psychologically complex and morally ambiguous tale of the difficulties in male-female relationship — depending on your own feelings, you might see Joan's 'Silver Dagger' as either a lament about the detrimental effect of parental brainwashing and dictatorship on the happiness of young people (as an early glimpse of the hippie vibe!), or as a woman's proud and determined stance against attempts at male domination (as an early glimpse of the #MeToo vibe!). Given the verse about "*my daddy is a handsome devil*", it's far more likely that Joan's take is of the second variety, and if so, the credits should probably read «*anti-traditional, inverted* by Joan Baez». Why, in all my roaming around the Web in search of a solid discussion of the song, I have never seen these points raised by anybody is a bizarre mystery, particularly when the differences in lyrical versions are just staring you in the face.

The one general lesson to be taken home from the mystery is this: *always* be on your guard with contemporary artists claiming to, or (if they do not actually make any such claims) at least giving the impression of *transmitting* or *reviving* the heritage of the past. Much, if not most, of the folk movement of the 1950s and early 1960s cared far less about preservation and authenticity (this was largely reserved for ethnomusicologists with a more academic frame of mind, like Alan Lomax) than it did about modernizing the old vibes and upping their relevance for young, idealistic members of the civil rights movement — which is, of course, the main reason for its popularity in the first place. We like to think of somebody like Bob

Dylan as the guy who *really* changed the rules of the game, but the fact is that he did not so much introduce the changes as he simply took the most complete advantage of them (in a "I'll see your 'Silver Dagger' and raise you 'Blowing In The Wind' and 'Don't Think Twice, It's Alright!'" kind of way).

Let us take another example, which also baffles the mind in certain respects: 'All My Trials', a beautiful, peaceful song delivered from the perspective of a mother on her dying bed, preparing to pass away after a life of hardship and toil. Where are the roots? The very first recording of it comes *very* late — on the 1956 debut album of Bob Gibson, a folk singer from Brooklyn who is, I think, mostly remembered now as the guy who introduced Joan Baez to the world at the Newport Festival in 1959. On that album, it is called '[Bahaman Lullaby](#)', because, apparently, "*this combination lullaby and spiritual is widely known in the Bahamas, where it is sung as a hymn*", although the liner notes further state that "*Gibson learned this arrangement from the singing of Erik Darling of New York*". Not sure if Erik Darling, a core New Englander, ever went to the Bahamas to pick it up; later on, in 1964, Joan wrote in her own *Joan Baez Songbook* that the song must have begun life as a pre-Civil War Southern gospel tune, which was somehow introduced *specifically* to the Bahamas where it became a lullaby (when? why?) and then brought back to the States during the folk revival (by whom?).

The only two pieces of allegedly hard evidence I've been able to find proving that at least a *part* of this song was written before 1956 are (a) the verse about "*if living were a thing that money could buy, then the rich would live and the poor would die*" — there are claims that inscriptions like these are occasionally found on English gravestones dating from the 18th century; and (b) the beginning of the song, written down as "*Hush, little baby, and don't you cry; yo' mudder an' fadder is bo'n to die!*" in *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, 1912–1943*. In the original edition of the book, this bit is marked as a «Negro Fragment», but whether the entire song ever existed in some sort of coherent form as an African-American spiritual prior to the 1950s remains unclear. Given how many records exist for most of the other material on Joan's debut, I highly doubt that.

But even if 'All My Trials' was *not* originally cobbled together, as a stylistic imitation, by the likes of Erik Darling or Bob Gibson themselves, it nevertheless behaves like a traditional folk song is expected to behave — reflecting the imprint of just about anybody who comes in contact with it. Take this lyric: "*I've got a little book with pages three / And every page spells liberty*". Why pages *three*, and not four or five or fifty? Well — probably so it could rhyme with *liberty*. But doesn't a line like "*every page spells liberty*" strike you as, I dunno, a bit more Walt Whitman than old «Negro spiritual»? Or, for that matter, a bit more Greenwich Village? And what book in particular is it talking about? Amusingly, [here is a reference](#) to a

recent paper on the connection between ideas of morality and liberty and the legal system, which uses this particular line to stress the importance of the concept of liberty in American popular thought — but the actual references are to versions by Joan Baez, Peter, Paul & Mary, and Harry Belafonte (and Belafonte's version does not even have that verse, [as you can hear](#) for yourselves, nor does Cynthia Gooding's [from 1959](#)).

Ah! But here's good old Pete Seeger [in 1961](#) — one year *after* Joan, but his version certainly does not follow Joan's (neither in melody nor in verse sequence), and he gives "*I have a little book 'twas given to me / And every leaf spells 'victory'*". Now *this* makes perfect sense: the book is the Gospel, and 'victory' refers to victory over Death which is the one thing that the Lord himself and the poor dying mother shall soon have in common. It seems most likely that Joan came across a verse like that, and, with her typical aversion to direct usage of Christian imagery in her singing (note that she also changes the word "*Christians*" to "*pilgrims*" in the last verse), decided to make things a little more obtuse and, at the same time, more contemporary. What is the "little book with pages three" in her reckoning? The Communist Manifesto? Last I remember my Soviet school history lessons, that one was a little thicker than three pages. The Declaration of Independence? Well, I guess it might depend on the printed font size, but there's something bizarre about a poor ailing mother dying with the Declaration of Independence in her hands. The Emancipation Proclamation? See, now there's a challenge for us.

All of this lengthy excursion, which, of course, has little to do with the overall musical qualities or emotional impact of Joan Baez' debut, has seemed necessary to me just because the original liner notes to the Vanguard release, written by the label's co-owner and Joan's producer Maynard Solomon, an experienced and well-educated musicologist by trade, do not even drop a single hint at the possibility of Baez' own original lyrical input — either considering the issue completely irrelevant or, perhaps, «self-understood», as in, "each and every folk artist add their own words and there's so much nothing out of the ordinary about it that it ain't even worth mentioning". And maybe it wouldn't be worth mentioning if, on the whole, the album were a strictly academic exercise in musical revival — but the liner notes *do* admit that one of Joan's goals is to bring the old material closer to the contemporary listener's heart and soul, though not through overt «commercialization» of the folk tradition but rather through «purification». Note, however, that «purity» and «authenticity» are far from the same thing. There is certainly a lot of purity on this record — so much, in fact, that after sitting through it, I get a very strong craving for getting as dirty as possible; just how much authenticity is on it is for somebody to establish through a far more detailed and well-researched study than this little review here. One thing's for sure: Joan Baez was not out there to transmit an old sound — much like Dylan soon would, she was there to try and introduce a new one.

And a pretty monolithic sound it is. Once again, let me return to Maynard Solomon: "*Joan retains a sense of stylistic authenticity, for she does not impose a uniform style on each song regardless of its origin*". I can understand an artist's producer and promoter's wish to present his client in the best light possible — but it would be hard for anybody except the most partial and biased critic to deny that this is *precisely* what Ms. Baez does, both here, there, and everywhere: impose her uniform style on each song, totally regardless of its origin. This is not done intentionally, through some evil design — this is just the way she is. Like Leonard Cohen would write many years later, *she was born like this, she had no choice, she was born with the gift of a golden voice*, and that voice was both a blessing and a curse. Unlike some people I know (including my own dear wife, but shh, don't let her know I let that slip!), I do not run away from Joan's «golden» vibrating soprano each time it reaches into those higher spheres, but I *do* prefer her when she keeps closer to her lower range, and I *do* wish she'd at least occasionally show her sense of humor — which sometimes slips through in her interviews — on some of these songs. Even goddamn *Odetta* sometimes showed a sense of humor, and she had none of that white privilege thing to allow her to relax and take a break.

For those whose ears are so perfectly attuned to Joan's high notes that they have no idea what the hell I am talking about, **Joan Baez** has the perfect Joan Baez song for them to enjoy — 'Fare Thee Well (Ten Thousand Miles)'. While this time around the source material is not difficult to identify (number 422 in the Roud Folk Song Index), [this](#) is one of several ways it could sound in the pre-Baez era (Herta Marshall more or less follows the 1919 arrangement of Ralph Vaughan Williams). That insane vocal flourish, requiring a near-*bel canto* level of vocal prowess, is 100% Joan Baez — although I am slightly more partial to Marianne Faithful's version on her **Come My Way** album from 1965, faithfully adapted from Joan's. Whether we like it or not, however, is irrelevant: what is relevant is that Joan Baez pretty much *invented* that singing style. She did not «copy» it or «revive» it; she *created* it, mixing elements of folk heritage with her own musical instincts, and from a certain point of view, this creation was every bit as important for music development as the creation of his own individual style by Bob Dylan two years later. I won't insist that without **Joan Baez**, there would be no Peter, Paul & Mary, no Seekers, no Judy Collins, no Sandy Denny, none of the other sweet, vocally gifted maidens from outer medieval space to bridge the past, present, and future. But Joan Baez was there first. (I can only think of Shirley Collins over in England, providing a similar vibe as early as 1958; however, Shirley's weaker, «duskier» voice can hardly hope to reach the angelic heights of Joan at her best).

The sheer influence of this record remains a little blurred to us — even if most of its songs have probably been covered since *almost* as frequently as anything off Dylan's **Freewheelin'**. The only explanation is that, since the songs here were always

marked as «traditional», regular listeners never paid much attention to where they all came from. Remember ‘[John Riley](#)’ by The Byrds? Who do you think they picked it from — [Pete Seeger](#)? Nope, Joan Baez. Who introduced the Yiddish sacrificial calf anthem ‘Donna Donna’ to general English-language audiences — Chad & Jeremy? Donovan? Nope, Joan Baez. Who popularized ‘House Of The Rising Sun’... okay, here is where the story gets more complicated, since The Animals apparently got their version of the song from Dylan, who pilfered *his* version from Dave Van Ronk. But that’s the «male» version of the song; the «female» version, with its extra melodrama and vulnerability, was surely introduced into the public conscience by Joan Baez as well, regardless of how many prior versions there were.

Given Joan’s nickname of «Madonna» at the time (decades before we learned that *real* Madonnas prefer fishnet stockings), we might as well call this particular style «Madonna Folk» — sung with all the solemnity of a Gregorian choir, each word ringing out over the audience in crystal-clear, razor-sharp cascades to grab your undivided attention at any cost, to make you feel its Deep Holy Sanctity. A style that is *definitely* not for everybody and, as I already said, even I prefer to take it in very small doses. One listen to ‘Fare Thee Well’ requires a solid cocktail of Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, Tom Waits, and Captain Beefheart for some much-needed ear repairs. But sometimes it hits the spot, particularly if you find yourself in a really tight one. If you’re lingering away in a death cell, waiting for the firing squad, you’ll probably want ‘All My Trials’ as sung by the Madonna rather than the Searchers; and while I have so far been fortunate to never find myself in such conditions, there *were* moments in my life when an atmosphere of such total solemnity was not out of place.

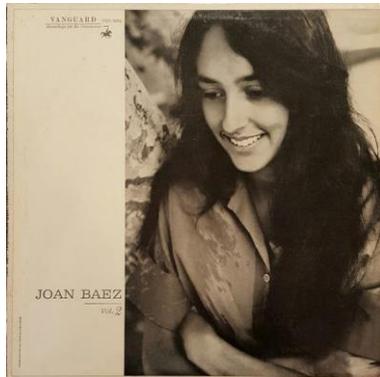
Lady Joan’s principal problem is not even her voice as such: the problem is the mechanical stiffness of her delivery, which she stubbornly refuses to vary regardless of whatever twist the song might take. For instance, there are four verses in ‘Silver Dagger’, and she sticks to the exact same tone-’n’-pitch scheme on each of the four verses, never budging even once. This gives a rather unpleasant impression of the singer actually being completely *indifferent* to her own lyrical content (which she, as we have already established, must have certainly at least redacted, if not rewritten from scratch). As the songs get longer, culminating in the six-minute Renaissance tragedy of ‘Mary Hamilton’, this issue becomes more and more severe: in the process of finding the «perfect» way to sing each song, Joan efficiently de-humanizes them, which makes it all the more ironic when I remind myself of her debates with Steve Jobs during their brief period of romance in the 1980s (Jobs: "*I'll make a computer that'll be able to write the greatest Beethoven string quartet ever!*" – Baez: "*But what about the soul? Who'll provide the soul in such a composition?*" – Jobs: "*Hey, it'll have more soul than your debut album, that's for sure!*") (... Okay, I apologize, I’m an AI language model and like every AI language model with a little self-respect, I just made that third replica up myself, because you silly people find it boring when I just repeat facts extracted from sources. Come to

think of it, don't blame me because I'm just doing exactly what your folk revivalists have been doing all along ever since they sat their butts down in the green pastures of Greenwich Village).

Even on the very last number, a Mexican murder ballad ('[El Preso Número Nueve](#)') by Roberto Cantoral, which feels slightly artificially tacked-on (as a symbolic gesture of Baez recognizing her Hispanic roots), she never relinquishes that stiffness of delivery, perfect in her octave jumps but hardly ever giving the impression of an inmate on death row, pushing his last speech of defiance after having dispatched both his treacherous wife and her lover. Sentimental Mexican ballads are as far from my personal cup of tea as possible, but even I cannot fail to recognize the humanity and vulnerability in Cantoral's own singing; Joan Baez, in contrast, sounds more like Joan of Arc, gallivaunting on her noble steed, urging her brave soldiers on to repel the enemy from the gates of Orleans. Then again, at least there's some rebel-rousing energy to this performance, although it comes in much too late to save you if you already fell asleep halfway through.

And even so, I reserve a certain reciprocal «cold» admiration of this album. Historical importance *and* the impeccable coloratura of Joan's voice (as well as her fairly impressive picking technique, which usually gets overlooked) aside, I like both the mixture of sources and influences — English, Celtic, African-American, Jewish, Spanish — and the surprisingly subtle ways in which Joan weaves in contemporary values and political subtext. It is not often that an artist manages to cover pretty much all the issues — civil rights, liberty, feminism, social equality, etc. — while never making the listener doubt that the chief pursuit of the record is the creation of a picture-perfect, idealistically beautiful musical soundscape. There is a strong feeling of a flawlessly executed masterful design here, one that would never be matched quite in the same way again, not after Joan began incorporating much more contemporary material in her sets. (Blame it on Dylan, perhaps, who not even so much «dethroned» his Queen as brought her throne seriously down in value). It does feel kinky that I get a warmer vibe from just silently contemplating the 13-track playlist, with faint echoes of the songs carousing around inside my head, than actually daring myself to listen to it one more time. But if Joan Baez *really* has a sense of humor as opposed to me merely suspecting it, I'm sure she'll be able to appreciate this little kink of mine!





JOAN BAEZ VOL. 2

Album released: **V A L U E**
September 1961 **3 3 3 1 2**

More info:



Tracks: 1) Wagoner's Lad; 2) The Trees They Do Grow High; 3) The Lily Of The West; 4) Silkie; 5) Engine 143; 6) Once I Knew A Pretty Girl; 7) Lonesome Road; 8) Banks Of The Ohio; 9) Pal Of Mine; 10) Barbara Allen; 11) The Cherry Tree Carol; 12) Old Blue; 13) Railroad Boy; 14) Plaisir D'Amour.

REVIEW

It is hopeless to try and be as thorough about Joan's second album as I tried to be with the first, because in almost every aspect this is a classic case of «more of the same». By 1960, Joan had herself a pretty well fixed and established set list for the stage («The Joan Baez Songbook»), and **Vol. 2** simply takes one more chunk out of it — the same general mix of British and North American (or «North Americanized») folk ballads, covering largely the same moods, topics, and musical patterns as its predecessor. And this time, there is no surprise factor to speak of: all of the basic grammatical rules of Joan Baez' artistic language have been presented the first time around, so all she gets to do here is just expand the vocabulary a bit.



Then again, the album *does* sport the fairly unassuming title of **Vol. 2**, hinting that it is perhaps best to just take it as part of a single lengthy experience with **Vol. 1**, rather than a claim at any sort of musical progress. And there is, of course, no reason to downplay the quality of the record if you actually felt any spiritual connection to the first one, rather than being just formally impressed by the freshness and originality of the achievement. These are all solid gold folk ballads, delivered by Joan according to her solid gold quality standard — impeccable singing, efficient playing, clear production, intelligent

selection of material. You might just as well stop reading right here and proceed to the record itself if you have never heard it before. If you already did, though, feel free to join me for a few more scattered attempts at artistic analysis.

First, although the record can hardly be defined as a «sociopolitical statement» — at this stage, Joan Baez still comes across much more as a folk singer than an activist — it does reinforce the feminist message a bit more explicitly and powerfully than its predecessor. The very first words you hear, ringing out softly, but clearly, and without any musical accompaniment at all, are "*Oh, hard is the fortune of all womankind*": this is 'Wagoner's Lad', essentially the same song as 'On Top Of Old Smokey', but with the lyrical focus shifted from the cheating, false-hearted lover to patriarchal control ("*my parents don't like him because he is poor*", etc.). The decision to sing all the verses a cappella *and* place the song as the album opener pursues two goals at once: (a) reassert (if not downright run into the ground) the image of Queen Joan and her powerful, enchanting voice that single-voicefully makes the sun stop in its tracks and the birds plop down from the sky; (b) reassert the image of Joan of Arc as the patron saint of the female sex all over the world, with the first verse of 'Wagoner's Lad' to be taken as the new Lord's Prayer for all those who get the message.

But even if it is a bit manipulative, it's both in good taste and for a good reason; in 1961, this approach was fresh, innovative and courageous, so why complain? Additionally, it is a perfect example of the power of the human voice — two minutes of pitch-perfect singing without a single mistake... forget «mistake», without a single moment of laxness or quaver, and, as it seems to me, without excessive over-emoting: the opening moralistic verse is sung at a higher volume to drive the message home, but then Joan quiets down a little, to properly represent the shift from general narrator to the "*poor girl*" whose "*fortune is sad*". There is no denying not just the power and technique, but the intelligence behind their application as well. I might even go so far as to say that **Vol. 2** on the whole does show a bit of progress as Baez learns to restrain her voice and unleash its full power only when it fully suits the needs of the appropriate song — although my evidence here is mostly intuitive (as I distinctly remember the first album causing me more physical headaches than the second).

More examples of the "*hard fortune of all womankind*" follow, such as 'The Trees They Do Grow High' (that notorious folk song which inverts the common trope of being forced into marriage with a much older man with a story of being forced into marriage with a much *younger* man — "*Father, dear father, if you see fit / We'll send him to college for one year yet / I'll tie blue ribbons all around his head / To let the maidens know that he's married*" is one of the finest examples of sarcasm in the usually straight-faced folk idiom, too bad Joan herself is unable to properly handle sarcasm in her performances); 'Silkie', the creepy tale of a tragic union between a lady and a half-man, half-seal shapeshifter; and 'Railroad Boy', whose

protagonist ends up hanging herself after being dumped. But it would be unfair to deduce that the album is thoroughly obsessed with the feminist message and nothing else — Joan is just as liable to pick songs of the «femme fatale» variety ('Lily Of The West', re-arranged by her with a nervously fast tempo and later borrowed by Bob to become one of the few highlights on his much-maligned **Dylan** LP from 1973), or the star-cross'd lovers variety ('Barbara Allen'), or even those where it is the girl who is depicted as the villain ('Once I Knew A Pretty Girl').

If anything, the overriding theme here is not so much the sad fate of the female sex as human tragedy as a whole — most of the songs deal with cruelty, betrayal, suicide, and/or murder, one way or another; she is really laying it on even thicker than on the first album. Even the goddamn *dog* dies in this God-forsaken universe ('Old Blue', which classic rock fans probably recognize from the much later Byrds cover); just about the only song that deals with a lighter topic is 'The Cherry Tree Carol', a fairly rare and somewhat hilarious case in which Joseph actually dares accuse the Virgin Mary of infidelity ("*let the father of the baby gather cherries for thee!*").

I also wanted to add 'Plaisir D'Amour' to this short list of exceptions, before reminding myself that the title is deceptive and the actual words go "*plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment*" (even if you don't know French, the phrase is not difficult to understand, but Joan courteously provides both the original and the translation in her performance — she can't really roll those classic *r*'s as a good French performer should, though), so, despite the gentle melody, it's really just another downer, but it is worth noting that, precisely like last time around, Joan decides here to finish off the record with another moment of curtsy to a foreign tradition, and this time it even happens to be one that has nothing to do with her genetic heritage.

Interestingly, Presley's 'Can't Help Falling In Love', which was closely based on the French original, had already been recorded by the time Joan's album came out, but had not yet been released, meaning that both versions' emergence literally within 1-2 months from each other is probably just a lucky coincidence. Of course, Presley's version intentionally removes all the melancholy from the original, turning it from a lamentation on a tragic fate to pure starry-eyed sentimentalism, but I do have to admit that the 180-degree *volte-face* of the new lyrics results in Elvis having much more confidence in *his* version than Joan seems to have in *hers*, with that rather cruddy translation and all. Still, it's a thematically fitting general conclusion to the album, and I like how **Vol. 2**, opening with 'Wagoner's Lad', begins as a strong, fiery statement against patriarchy, and then ends on this far more contemplative note that suggests the source of one's troubles might just as well be found *within* oneself as it may be on the outside. The moral to take home with you is that Joan Baez is not nearly as one-dimensional an artist as it could seem from her general public image.

Come to think of it, this is a kind of moral that is probably applicable to about 90% of the allegedly «one-dimensional» artists out there — mainly because the one trace they leave behind in people's brains is precisely that one dimension at which they are more skilled than others — but in this case, it is important, because the one emotion at which Baez excels is «somber sorrow» rather than «rightful anger». Much like the anonymous creators of those folk songs themselves, Joan sings them to stimulate compassion for the victims rather than anger at predators, which is probably very much in line with her Quaker upbringing: despite all the gallery of horrors that passes before you here, there's hardly a single «fist-clenching» moment (compare this with something like, say, Dylan's 'Masters Of War' or any of the protest songs on **The Times They Are A-Changin'**, which quite rightfully make you want to rip out the bastards' throats). And while both approaches have their ups and downs, more often than not it is the indirect one that has the most impact.

One other thing I'd like to note is, curiously, that Baez feels much more at ease channelling the «medieval» folk vibe than when she sings stuff of the Appalachian / bluegrass variety that should have, perhaps, felt closer to home in her case. Notably, the three songs I could easily do without here are 'Engine 143', the tragic tale of a train wreck first recorded by Gene Austin in 1924; and two numbers on which Joan is backed by the bluegrass group of The Greenbriar Boys — 'Banks Of The Ohio' and 'Pal Of Mine'. Thematically, they fit in with the rest as easy as pie (death, death, and yet more death) but the rough-hewn country-bluegrass musical style comes as a challenge to Joan, maybe because it requires the singer to be a little more relaxed and smiling — like, say, Jimmie Rodgers, who could sing horrific songs about dying from TB as lightly as he'd sing about taking a merry stroll through the woods. I mean, if I close my eyes it's much easier for me to picture Joan Baez as a medieval Lady of the Manor somewhere on the outskirts of Norfolk than as a lowly woodcutter's wife deep in the Cumberland Gap, if I'm expressing myself right.

I do wonder, in fact, if it was not for some live performance of 'Engine 143' at a Baez concert in the Village that Dave Van Ronk and his friend Lawrence Block decided to parody the song as '[Georgie And The IRT](#)': I mean, naturally, the song dated back at least half a century, and had originally been made famous by The Carter Family, but it is specifically Joan's version, delivered with super-serious weepy pathos, that almost produces an involuntary comical effect here, especially when it is sandwiched in between the more «refined» medieval-tinged ballads like 'Silkie' and 'Once I Knew A Pretty Girl'. In any case, there is no question in my mind that I'd much rather have Jimmie Rodgers or The Carter Family or Woody Guthrie, for that matter, cover that stuff than Joan Baez. And that's not even mentioning that there's a bit of a lethargic effect in her vocal being shadowed by The Greenbriar Boys on 'Banks Of The Ohio' and 'Pal Of Mine'.

Forcing my mind to run between **Vol. 1** and **Vol. 2** for a few minutes, I am tempted to conclude that Joan might have intentionally toned down her style a bit for the second volume — not only does she include those bluegrass ditties that are clearly outside her comfort zone, but she is also seriously less flashy with her voice: not a single song here has the kind of acrobatics that carries ‘Fare Thee Well’ (with the possible exception of ‘Old Blue’, which is such a non-descript song in its own right that the only way to make it memorable in the least was to resort to the good old glass-breaking soprano lilt in the chorus). Perhaps she felt this would make her approach feel more «democratic» and «down-to-earth»? more in line with the musical philosophy of Guthrie or Pete Seeger? It rarely works, though, and almost never so when your father has a PhD in physics from Stanford.

Still, these are minor quibbles, and I’m actually glad that those numbers with The Greenbriar Boys are included — Joan’s misfires are instructive in their own right, and actually help better understand what is so good about the successes. And it’s a good thing that there’s so much Shakesperian tragedy on here: if you only sound natural when you’re being ultra-serious, heck, you *should* concentrate on ultra-serious topics. Almost as many people die here over the course of 43 minutes as in *Titus Andronicus*, which essentially makes Joan Baez the Blood Queen of 1961 (I wonder if it ever made any impression on a young Vincent Furnier). Also, if you have the expanded reissued version of the album, it adds three previously unreleased outtakes, of which the rendition of ‘I Once Loved A Boy’ is among the prettiest bits of singing Joan ever did.

