

On art, activism, and letting things go



Musician and activist Joan Baez reflects on retirement, switching gears creatively, and why giving people options is more important than telling them what to do.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2441 words.

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You are in the midst of what is being described as your last tour. For someone who's been touring and playing live for the past 60 years, what has this experience felt like?

A whole lot of different ways. The tour has continued because I wanted to visit places that I hadn't factored in to begin with. But I believe that this summer, after some festivals in Europe, that will be it. I don't know what it will feel like for this part of my life to finish, but I know that I can't go on forever because the voice needs so much attention and I don't think I'm willing to put that kind of work into it anymore. Plus, this time when I came home on a break from touring I thought, "Oh, my god. My lovely home." People retire for a reason.

I also thought, "Oh, I get to spend time here, be calm here, and paint." And so it may be that I have to kiss the whole thing off, period. Because my voice is at a stage where it takes a lot of work to keep it going. I'm really happy touring. I love my tour family. I love being on the bus, and all of that. That's what I'll miss.

So much of our identity is wrapped up in the things that we make, or the thing that we do. For a lot of artists, the idea of not doing that anymore, or not being able to do that in the same way anymore, would be very upsetting. It would be hard to be zen about that.

It's hard to be really zen about anything. I do hang around a lot of Buddhists though, and that helps. I mean, it helps with looking towards getting older, and then getting old, and eventually dying. You're gonna need some help thinking about that. And the sooner, the better. I try to surround myself with meditation, meditative people, and people who have dealt with death and dying. That helps you get out of the rock n' roll head, and out of thinking about the money, and the touring—all of those things that you can't build your identity around.

Now I would say I'm really excited about my painting. I got into the semifinals of a competition for the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. There are 100 of us out of 2,600 who made the semifinals. I'm as excited about that as I've ever been about anything to do with music. I'm lucky. I have something else to look forward to and to do with my life. I'm still able to create and share things. Just because one thing ends it doesn't mean you have to stop being creative and expressive.

For someone who has balanced art and activism throughout your career, what do you think about artists who, because of the current political climate, suddenly feel this urge to get political in their work?

Maybe that would be Trump's gift to us—that people for the first times in their lives have been jolted into

thinking, "Oh, my god. I've got to do something," because they see the imminent demise of democracy. Suddenly there is that feeling of, "Oh, my god. What can I paint? What can I sing? What can I write?" It's wonderful that there's a reaction like that, because the other reaction is to just pretend it isn't happening.

Yeah. And maybe the answer is to strike a balance. Making political art is great, but being politically active out in the world during those times when you're not making art is also great.

I think it's important. And I think that's the harder part. I think political art needs to be followed up by real action. Putting the body where the paintbrush is, so to speak. But that's harder to ask of people. All I would say is that for me, that work has provided the richness in my life. I mean, I was just lucky to be born with the gift of the voice and also with a gift of wanting to do something with it. I would only say to people that's where my greatest gratification comes—the trying to do something meaningful with it. It makes life extraordinarily rich.

You have participated in all manner of activism over the past 50 years. How do you engage in this way, and still protect some part of yourself? How do you not burn out?

Well, I've never really burnt out on anything. I think that "doing something," or being involved gives us the impression—false or otherwise—that we're useful. And so I don't think that's tiring. I think people who burn out, who have a right to burn out, are people who work with death and dying. Or with refugees, where day after day after day, you're seeing so much misery. I've never been in that position, but I've certainly seen misery. But I always know that I have somewhere to go. I can go home, and I can take a bath. Or go back to the hotel or whatever. I've always been very aware that I'm privileged.

Your most recent record, *Whistle Down the Wind*, is nominated for a Grammy. On it, you celebrate all sorts of other songwriters. You've been making records for a long time now, but do you find that your process—or the way you think about singing or writing or recording—has changed or evolved much over the years?

Well, first of all, I haven't written a song in over a quarter of a century. It just stopped. It stopped. And there wasn't anything to do about it, unless I tried to go to songwriting school or something and try to learn how to write. When it stopped, I didn't try to pursue it. It felt ok to let that go. I've depended on other people's music ever since—and a lot before that, actually. So that hasn't changed much for me.

Now it's really about the process of how you find the right songs to put together and make into a rainbow. It's a whole process. And I would say in the beginning of it, I'm really lazy. I left it to my manager and a couple of assistants to collect songs and then send them to me. Then I would choose from what they sent. I look for songs, too, things I can sing.

How do you feel about the state of contemporary music? Do you still believe in music as an agent for change?

It's just very different. The singers and songwriters that are showing up right now, and having big success right now are a certain brand. It isn't my brand. It's not something I listen to and appreciate. I think probably within my brand there are those who are writing stuff that may not be being heard right now. I mean, this is not exactly the era of giving a platform to young songwriters who have something to say. However, if they begin to be heard it could be similar to in the '60s when we were a counterculture.

We were sort of an interesting under-the-radar group of crazy people. And then all of a sudden it became the culture. And we became a serious part of the culture around civil rights, and Vietnam, and then just part of the culture, period. So who knows when that could happen in the face of what we're facing now. I mean, we need some truths to battle the post-truth era, which is what we're living in.

When things feel so politically and environmentally tumultuous, it can be hard to remember why art is important. The realities of the world can make being an artist feel very ephemeral and often not so important.

You can always kid yourself, and just say your work is important. Whether it is or not, it has to be to you. It has to be real to you. There's something sort of cosmic about that. If that's real to you, then in some way it's out there as a little piece of reality in the face of all of this terrible stuff we're in. And if you stay true to yourself, and true to your art, it's got to mean something.

But the truth is, it may not mean enough. I mean, global warming is probably gonna wipe us off of the face of the Earth in the next 20 years anyway, so it's not gonna matter who's president. I'm serious about that. And if I think about it, I lament for my granddaughter. I worry she won't have a chance at a real, normal life. My dictum is little victories, and big defeats. Every little victory becomes even more important in the face of what we're facing.

That can feel like a grim acknowledgement sometimes, but it can also be this thing that makes you want to stop and appreciate what's beautiful while you still can.

Yes, you're right. I mean, it's both. I also think part of the prescription is to spend a lot of time in denial, because otherwise you just shoot yourself. You know? And then whatever time you're not in denial, figure out what you're gonna do with your life that makes some meaning for yourself, and for others. I have a list a mile long of things that people could get involved in. What happens is people will ask, "Well, what can I possibly do?" It's not my job to tell people what to do, but I can show them this list and hope they'll say, "Aha!" Then maybe they'll find somewhere that they feel comfortable doing something outside of their safety circle.

That seems like a role that you've played for a long time—being a person who could say, "Oh, here's something you could do."

Yes, I can say, "How about this?" Rather than say, "I suggest this for you." It really is about presenting possibilities, because something will call from the heart. I just want to encourage people to follow that instinct when it comes. I have this thing that I would read at concerts, a statement, about ways people could get involved. I recently wrote a revised version of it for California because when I landed in Oakland recently, it was right in the middle of the fires and the smoke. I called it the Fire Brigade. Like, guess what? Now we are the fire brigade. We are the ones who need to take care of each other, be our brothers' and sisters' keeper. We are the ones who have to take the risk. It's not enough just to be an artist and it's not enough just to tell people they need to get involved and take action. If you're able, it's good to give people options, to help point them in a good direction.

Joan Baez Recommends

After nearly a year on the road I came back to California to wrap up the tour in my home state, just as massive wildfires erupted in several areas, causing widespread devastation. I wrote the following statement to read at the final concerts.

"There is no such thing as a slow burn now. Only lightning fast destruction and the residue of floating ash. The haze is real. It is ash-filled smoke, blanketing a good portion of the state of California. This is our Armageddon. And now, on the heels of thousands of firefighters who put their lives on the line, it's we who must be the fire brigade. No one will appear on the clouds of glory to deliver us. We must be the fire brigade.

First I want to honor the terrible losses. Lives. People's homes, their dreams. Their trees, gardens, bicycles, toys. Goldfish and pet lizards. All their treasures. And all of the animals, wild and not wild. Birds, insects, and the smallest of living things, all essential to the thriving of the human race. Let's honor all of that.

We are the fire brigade.

Now is the time to be our brothers' and sisters' keeper. Now is the time to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Now is the time to love. And in spite of the ashes, haze, chaos and sorrow, now is the time to take on the larger forces of darkness.

As a Californian I pride myself in being a part of a forward thinking state. Here we understand not only the devastation, but the only cause of the devastation we can do anything about. The truth is, the world is heating

up. The lie is that everything will be fine.

The only way we can fight a world on fire from this wounded democracy is by creating a mass movement, from the grassroots up. That means walking the talk. That means taking risks. That means finding the right organization to help you resist evil. That means going to your forward thinking legislator and saying "Yes! I'll stand behind that!" and ignoring all the so-called leaders who have betrayed you.

That means talking to your kids about truth and lies, and about the Parkland High School Student Movement, and about how they can have a movement, too. That means putting empathy and compassion back into the dialogue and into practice. Gandhi said organized nonviolent action is no more than organized love.

So you here tonight, by the grace of God and the accident of your birth, make a promise to yourselves and your families that you will not sit out this firestorm. You will take the leap of faith of your lifetime. And then be true to your promise and to yourself. Do it for the children, so they have a possibility of a good life.

We are the fire brigade. Together we can create an unstoppable force for good. We need only begin."

You can begin by getting involved. Here are just a few organizations you might want to check out. Also, please look around your own community for ways you can get involved.

To donate directly to Camp Fire victims relief:

- [North Valley Community Foundation Camp Fire Relief](#) in Chico, California

Further ways to get engaged and involved:

- [Half-Earth Project](#)
- [Indivisible](#)
- [Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project](#)
- [Our Children's Trust](#)
- [Breach Repairers](#)

Name

Joan Baez

Vocation

Musician, Activist

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