

JOAN BAEZ

Musician and Activist

Interviewed by Trey Ellis

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Total Running Time: 38 minutes

00:00:00:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can you just start telling us about the first time you met Doctor King, and what that was like, and how you felt?

00:00:10:00 JOAN BAEZ:
You know, the first time I saw Doctor King, I honestly don't remember whether I actually met him. He came to a high school gathering of kids from all over the country and we were all discussing world affairs. It was all about nonviolence. Every year they had a speaker, and that year was Doctor King. So, I just stood there and wept for the entire speech, because this man was doing what I had read about, you know, and studied about, and then all of the sudden there's this person talking about the bus boycott, and people, you know, walking instead of riding. And so, it was everything I'd read about, was actually taking place. And I'm so overwhelmed still with that moment. I honestly don't remember whether I met him there. I was a sixteen-year-old kid along with all the rest of them. And I don't remember officially when I met him. I know it was at one of the conferences. We finally had a face to face. He cut out the time to do that. And we started doing a lot of joking, so it was a healthy way to begin.

00:01:17:00 TREY ELLIS:
What kind of jokes? Were you intimidated, and then you met him as a jokester? Did he disarm you in that kind of way?

00:01:23:00 JOAN BAEZ:
Um... No. That very first talk, I think we were both sort of a little bit intimidated maybe. Later on, I mean, his jokes, and Andy knows it too, they all know it, they would tell dirty jokes by the hour, by the hour. I went to pick up- I got- was allowed to go in the car full of lieutenants, there was Jesse, and Bevel, and Andy. And we went to pick up Doctor King. I think it was to bring him in to Grenada. And they had said, yeah, I could come along. I thought- 'cause- huge demonstration planned for the next day. So, I went, and I thought, "Oh man, I'm really going to get the inside story on how they organize one of these things." They picked him up at the airport, and they told "n-" jokes from the airport to their favorite restaurant, where he ate everything you would think he would order, fried chicken, okra, potatoes, apple pie at the end. Got back in the car and continued until we got back to the conference.

And I asked Andy later, I said, "Andy, I thought I was going to hear how your guys organize a march." He said, "You did."

00:02:35:00 TREY ELLIS:

So, let's talk about Grenada. Is that the first- and your experiences there, and the resistance of segregation, once legally segregation was, and the resistance to legal segregation, and how difficult it was going to be.

00:02:50:00 JOAN BAEZ:

My first experience in the south was nineteen sixty-one when I went there and gave concerts. And the contact actually said, and of course, I never looked at it, "Whites only." I was mortified. I went back the next year, sixty-two with that changed. Of course, no blacks came. They didn't know who I was. So, I went back the third year, and I sang in black campuses. And I was in fact singing at a- I was furious 'cause I wanted to be in town in the middle of all the arrests. It was in Birmingham- which school is it? Miles? It was Miles and gave a concert there. So, I had already launched that feeling you get in the south when you're going to say something real.

00:03:38:00 TREY ELLIS:

And, so what brought you and King to Grenada?

00:03:43:00 JOAN BAEZ:

Doctor King called to find out if I would go to Grenada 'cause he couldn't get there right away. And so, and he thought if the cameras were rolling, then maybe the whites would stop throwing rocks at the kids, which is what happened. The first day I was alone with my people, and, you know, the marchers and the people, but not King. And so, it did probably hold things off for a day, and then he came in the next day. We were, we were marching, and we have it in our films to that giant cop on the corner. And I just stood there and said, "We'd like to- we'd like these children to go to school," you know, and he says, "You can't go no further." So, I talked a little more about, you know, they wanted their education. "You can't go no further." And somewhere on that march I was walking with King, and I saw all of us, and these kids saying, "They ain't going to let nobody turn me around." And across the street were these miserable looking little clutch of white kids. And I went like this to King and I said, "Are you sure you want to go through with this? That's what they're going to be in class with." And he says, "Not while the cameras are rolling, Joan."

00:05:10:00 TREY ELLIS:

Coming to Grenada after Chicago, and the sort of perceived defeat of Chicago? People talked about how depressed he was some nights, and what would it take to get him. Did you see that? How did that make you feel when you saw him?

00:05:26:00 JOAN BAEZ:

You know, I honestly, don't remember much of that, but maybe 'cause I was still in the glow, you know. I saw more of the people trying to extract power from him as in,

you know, the Black Power, the Black Panther movement. And I mean, young people saying, "We've been oppressed for two hundred years." And I'd say, "How old are you?" You know, I got, I think, combative with that, because it takes off on its own freight train. And they're really young people, who hadn't kind of earned their position, I felt, to be gobbling that up. And in some of those situations, I was sort of made fun of, or- you know, "You don't get it, girlfriend," and that kind of stuff. But I don't remember specifically him being talked about as depressed.

00:06:22:00 TREY ELLIS:

And how did it feel being a young white girl in this world of these people? And how were you treated?

00:06:28:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I was a young brown girl, probably in the world of his people. Well, the biggest compliment I ever had in the south was some kid. And we were at the church in probably Grenada, and I was singing, you know, a spiritual, "Break Bread Together," or "Swing Low." And some little black kid looked up at my friend and said, "Is she? I mean, does she got? I mean, is she?" He said, "Is she bla- Negro? Is she a Negro?" Said, "Maybe she is a little bit somewhere."

00:07:03:00 TREY ELLIS:

I thought at the ... Was there a time then when King was depressed, and Andy sent you in to sing to him?

00:07:14:00 JOAN BAEZ:

It was Grenada where Doctor King was really, really tired after coming in. And they had put him to bed in this, you know, the master bedroom, which was a small, humble, little, lovely place. And nobody wanted to wake him up, and he was due to speak, you know, at the church down the street. And he, you know, half an hour late, then an hour late, and then it even got beyond CPT, you know, it was- so nobody- they said, "Joan, you go in, and wake him up." And so, went into the room, and I just remember it was like looking at a chocolate drop on this pillow. Everything in the room was white, white doilies, white sheets, and there was black King. And so, I sang "Swing Low." And he didn't wake up, he just rolled over, and he said, "HMMMM. I believe I hear the sound of an angel. Let's have another one, Joan."

00:08:12:00 TREY ELLIS:

And how did you feel about walking down those streets with King and the kids?

00:08:17:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I was elated walking down the street with King and the kids, because I remember one of the, one of the- when I heard a preacher, it wasn't Birmingham, it was a place like that, a young preacher singing at midnight. His sermon was called "Singing at Midnight." And it ended up saying, "Everybody's going to join us, because this is where they're going to want to be." You know, this is anybody with any kind of

ideals or desire to do something was going to come to be with us, because it was joyful, and it was strong, and it was full of music. And, and there was danger, and so what, you know?

00:09:02:00 TREY ELLIS:
We'll jump to the Penn Center. Remember the strategy sessions in South Carolina?

JOAN BAEZ:
I hated them. Penn Center, I don't remember where the different conferences were.

TREY ELLIS:
We'll talk about Penn Center, and then Airlie House later. In Penn Center, well, Taylor Branch talks about it being that the SCLC was very divided then in South Carolina, and there were sort of fights. Were you privy to that? Did you have a feeling that these internal divisions of where to go next, and what to do?

00:09:34:00 JOAN BAEZ:
Paying attention to the divisions, and the splits, at the conferences, there were internal power, you know, personal difficulties, and then there were the difficulty of how are we going to maintain what is our mission statement. Is it still nonviolence, or is it moving into something else? So, I think probably with the younger people, they were thinking about moving on, you know, meaning moving backwards. But- and then the other stuff, there were personal things, and you know about them, so I won't bother going into them. But, yeah, I mean, any conference of that type, and so high powered, and, you know, it just seems as though King was almost Doctor Martin Luther King by default. I mean, I don't think he necessarily wanted that position, but he got it. And he was for all of us the right person, and he took it seriously. He knew he was going to be killed.

00:10:41:00 TREY ELLIS:
You describe him as, like, the most laid-back person you ever met. But other people talk- but he also would pay pool, and eat, and joke around with people. Can you talk about him as a person, his personality a little bit?

00:10:54:07 JOAN BAEZ:
Doctor King's personality when he's not on stage? First of all, when he was speaking, he didn't really dare do much humor, because he was- there were so many eyes on him, there so many critics, and people ready to- It would have been, "Ha, ha, ha, you know, he's just joking around, he's not serious." So, you really didn't see much of that in his speeches and his public presence. But for me offstage, it was- I could either have a genuine talk about nonviolence, or about personal things, or it was a situation like the car where everybody is joking, which was really fun.

00:11:37:00 TREY ELLIS:

And what other personal things would he talk about besides, when you weren't talking about the movement?

00:11:42:00 JOAN BAEZ:

Well, Doctor King knew how moved I was when he spoke. And he said at one point, "I always say nonviolence once or twice extra when I know that Joan Baez in the audience. It makes her cry." And it did. I mean, I just fell apart when he started his, his- what he did.

00:12:04:00 TREY ELLIS:

I love how the different people impersonate doing their King voice. It's just really fantastic. In terms as King as a man, and how he dealt with women, was, he- there was a lot of sexism on that world, did he feel more less feminist, or enlightened than that world? How did you feel? It seems like a boy's club, and you were the woman in this boy's club?

00:12:27:00 JOAN BAEZ:

Yeah. For Doctor King to have been a feminist is pretty much a stretch, I would think. You know, it hadn't reached that point in time, in history. On the other hand, I mean, those churches are run by moms. And you don't find any young man probably ever really- in sports, "Well, what do you owe your whatever?" And they'll say, "My mama," you know, so mamas really ran the whole thing. They just didn't, you know, hey were pretty much ... Well, I shouldn't say that. If they got ticked off in a church, they would let themselves be known, and be heard. They were wonderful.

00:13:08:00 TREY ELLIS:

I'll jump a little into Vietnam, and the sort of the schism or the where to go with the SCLC towards, you know, the fight towards either Operation Breadbasket Against the War, antipoverty, all these sort of these divisions, and of course you were more on the antiwar camp. Can you talk about that as that division came up, and those discussions, and how you felt about it, and how you felt the movement was changing then? How was responding to the riots, there's the war, and there's Civil Rights Movement all happening at the same time then in sixty-five, sixty-six?

00:13:47:00 JOAN BAEZ:

Yeah. And then there I was in jail, you know, about the war. And when Doctor King came to visit me, I think he was barely- it was sixty-seven- barely getting his grounding as far as where he was going to be on the war. I mean, he knew where his heart was, but he also knew the criticism, and the splits that would happen the moment he said anything against the war in Vietnam. Of course, he did and that was the end of his relationship with the White House. You know, in a way, it's good riddance, but it also it was, it devastated his work, and his- he needed, the things he needed. You know, I mean, I think that Riverside Church, he knew. That's when he really knew, is what I think.

00:14:47:00 TREY ELLIS:
And how did you feel when you read- and you heard that speech or read about it?

JOAN BAEZ:
I still listen to it, and I'm a mess. I just weep through the whole thing, but I wasn't there, but, um...

TREY ELLIS:
Did you have a feeling of about time? I mean, did you feel like it was a year or two too late? Did you feel that he'd finally come around?

00:15:06:00 JOAN BAEZ:
No. I didn't feel. I mean, I'd seen him work. I wasn't plugging to try and bring that out of him at all. I felt as though, you know, he had given so much, and done so much. And it was just- I was surprised and absolutely delighted and sort of shocked, you know.

00:15:28:00 TREY ELLIS:
Did you think that his silence on the war...? We talked about the lead up to the Riverside speech. Did you feel that it was building up within him, that it was affecting him, and that he had to sort of bite his tongue because the politics of the time, because of Johnson, and the SCLC finances? Did you feel that was eating away at him? That as a moral man, he knew that this struggle to come out against the war-

00:15:57:00 JOAN BAEZ:
Yeah. I'm not sure how engaged I was in his struggle to decide what move to take next, whether it included Vietnam or... When he did- in fact, one of the first times he did was when he came to visit my mom and me in prison, in jail. And I remember somebody said something about David Harris, who was my ex, he was a big shot in the resistance movement, and I know Doctor King didn't know the name. And somebody kind of got it to him in time, but he was new to the whole business. So that was sixty-seven. And he made a statement. I don't know if you have that speech or not. Yeah. I think he said something about- he began anyway talking about that "immoral war," so...

00:16:52:00 TREY ELLIS:
Speaking of the war, like, in Chicago they talked about the returning veterans already in Chicago. Especially these black veterans and the disproportionate number of black and brown people being killed. How did you in terms of combining the antiwar movement with this- it seems like it should have been a natural fit. Were there discussions about that, that this is- poverty and the war are really, there's a link between them?

00:17:20:00 JOAN BAEZ:

Poverty and the war, and Doctor King knew the link between them and I think he did talk about our young black soldiers coming home and they can't, you know- they have no status. And over there they did, or they got killed, you know. Yeah, I mean him dealing with that particular business.

00:17:46:00 TREY ELLIS:
Did you think that the Riverside Church speech, was there a different- was there a pivot in his, sort of, politics after that or...?

00:17:54:00 JOAN BAEZ:
No. I don't think, although I don't know what speeches came before that. I think that at that point whether he knew it or not, during that speech maybe, 'cause he would take off, as you know, in flight on those speeches. And either it came to him the way things did, or he knew ahead of time. It almost sounds as though during his own sermon, he began to understand, and know what, what he had to do, and what he would probably pay for it.

00:18:31:00 TREY ELLIS:
And then the pivot, like the focus of this documentary, there's a pivot from that to this internationalizing poverty, the war against poverty, and peace as a global issue. Did you feel that sense that he was starting to understand that it was bigger than Birmingham or Selma?

00:18:49:00 JOAN BAEZ:
Oh, he always knew that. He always knew it was bigger than Birmingham or Selma. And I don't know where I was at those specific moments with the, you know, with the workers in Chicago and all that. And I wasn't deeply involved at that point, so I couldn't say.

00:19:08:00 TREY ELLIS:
But, I mean, as a feeling. Did you feel looking back now, looking at how he's- like, we keep thinking if he had lived where would he have gone, and the movement went? And he was pushing towards the Poor People's Campaign for example. Does that ...?

00:19:20:00 JOAN BAEZ:
Yeah. What would he have done, you mean, if he...

TREY ELLIS:
Yeah.

JOAN BAEZ:
... When he had to reorganize himself after Chicago? I don't know. At the end of Gandhi's career, when everything starting falling apart between India and Pakistan, he said he would take his shoes off and just walk and start over again, everywhere,

just go on what he always did. So, maybe that would be what Doctor King would do. Be hard to imagine him deciding, you know, he wanted to quit, or retire, or go into teaching. He was- he did what he did.

00:20:01:00 TREY ELLIS:

At that low point, After the March on Washington, about seventy percent of Americans had a favorable opinion of him. By the time of the Poor People's Campaign, sixty percent of Americans had a negative opinion of him. Did he talk about that? Did you feel that weight on him?

00:20:19:00 JOAN BAEZ:

No, didn't talk about it. I'm thinking as we're talking now that I wasn't present in my mind for a lot of those things. That I wasn't analyzing the Civil Rights march, or Doctor King, and what's he going to do next.

00:20:36:00 TREY ELLIS:

Right. There's just, there was time back then when they said ... Where, I guess, he told somebody like, "I don't want to do this anymore. I just want to be, like, a little country preacher."

JOAN BAEZ:

Yeah. I remember that. Yeah.

TREY ELLIS:

Was that to you?

00:20:50:00 JOAN BAEZ:

When Doctor King started saying openly saying, "I don't want to do this anymore. I just want to be a country preacher," I might have heard him say that when he was drunk one time, or I heard it enough from other people that I thought I heard it from him.

00:21:05:00 TREY ELLIS:

And when he was drunk and saying that, was there a sense of did you feel for him, or was it more just always a friendly drunk, or did your heart ...? How did you feel?

00:21:14:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I always felt for Doctor King. I mean, I couldn't imagine the pressure that was on him. Nobody could. None of us could imagine that. So, I just would probably support him. Supported him with just about anything.

00:21:31:00 TREY ELLIS:

There's a story where he says, and he's finished in the next morning, and says, "Now you know that I'm not a saint." Do you remember that?

00:21:41:00 JOAN BAEZ:
I do remember. That was the first kind of formal meeting that we had just the two of us, because he'd been drunk, and carrying on and everybody knew it, and Coretta was hiding somewhere. I don't know where. And I was surprised at that point. And I think Andy was supportive then. And I- what did I say? He said he wasn't a saint, and I said, "I'm not a virgin," or something like that. Whatever it was, it was par to what he was saying. And we had a little chuckle. And that kind of is when our relationship began beyond me listening to him, or him listening to me.

00:22:25:00 TREY ELLIS:
So, we can go back a little bit, just so we have this one piece? When you first- so you meet him, and do you meet him, and he's already drunk, or are you watching him?

00:22:33:00 JOAN BAEZ:
Well, no, no. At some point on, you know, at some point in our SCLC career. And I don't think, I don't know where this was in time, you know, but it was that I somehow rather had left behind the image of the Virgin Mary. And he had clearly given up his image of being a saint, and so with that we had our first time just, "Hi, let's talk," and that was what came out, "Well, now that you know I'm not a saint," and I said, "Well, now that you know I'm not a virgin." I'm not sure how I made that clear, but... and then we were off and running.

00:23:19:00 TREY ELLIS:
You're with Andy, and everybody. You're having a talk, and he's- you're just watching him getting drunker, and drunker?

JOAN BAEZ:
He was in another room. King wasn't even- he was in the other room. We heard him, you know.

TREY ELLIS:
And what did it sound like in the other room?

JOAN BAEZ:
It sounded like a drunk guy.

00:23:38:00 TREY ELLIS:
Could you- you know, this is sort of hard, but could you just tell us about the moment you heard about his assassination, and where you were in that week?

00:23:45:00 JOAN BAEZ:
I don't know where I was. I was in a hotel room somewhere. I completely went into denial. They said, "Are you going to go to the funeral?" I said, "Oh, no. Ha ha. I don't go to funerals." I didn't feel anything until ten or fifteen years later. And I was here in this house watching a, you know, a documentary came on about Doctor King.

I thought, "Well, I'll watch this." I just dissolved. My son remembers walking through the room wondering what had happened to his mother. I was just devastated. And all the feelings that I might have had back then, I was having ten years later. It was just too overwhelming

00:24:26:00 TREY ELLIS:

So, you know, in the history books, we celebrate the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Selma March. Why do you think it's important to think about, to discuss, and study his later struggles, his later fights?

00:24:41:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I think discussing, and admitting to King's later fights, and- or anything whether it was depression, or his foibles, the thing that makes a difference in whether you're looking at somebody who's unattainable, what he does is in another world is... I think, when they become human, I think it's very important for us to see that, that you can go on doing the good works, and have slipped and fallen, you know, or gotten drunk, or womanized, or whatever he was into doing. Again, since we have no idea really what that feels like, we don't have any room to criticize it.

00:25:28:00 TREY ELLIS:

Diane Nash talks about the perils of charismatic leaders, and following charismatic leaders opposed to a movement, following a movement. How do you feel about that?

00:25:37:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I think that discussing a movement with or without a leader is a topic for discussion that I haven't found a solution to. I think ideally a movement would be leaderless. I think practically I have not seen it working, you know. Some places like the Serbian uprising, they were all kids, average age twenty-two, and they all read Sharpe on nonviolence, and they followed that and they really didn't- I mean, they were in cells. It's what Occupy wanted to do, to be separate cells all over the country. Well, Serbia is small. The kids knew exactly what they wanted. And they managed to do it without one, you know, one specific leader. There were people who were the ones who you would seek to go to talk to, but basically you could have talked to anybody. I don't know any other. Not that I'm much of a historian, but, um...

00:26:41:00 TREY ELLIS:

How do think your friendship with Doctor King changed the course of your life?

00:26:47:00JOAN BAEZ:

Doctor King is one the most important people who moved me beyond being a student of nonviolence, or being a practitioner, beyond just whatever stubbornness I was showing at home. I refused to stand up and salute the flag, and all that. By the way, King and I always had this fight over the state of America because the war was going on, and I thought this place was pretty decadent and he would give his speech about wanting "their share of the American pie." And I would say, "And our pie is

really not very tasty right now." And we'd always have this fight about it because that was part of his speech. I can't remember what the questions was.

TREY ELLIS:

Oh, just saying how he changed the course of your life.

00:27:41:00 JOAN BAEZ:

Change my life? Three or four people made an impact on my life the way Doctor King did. To really care about him, you know, there are people I've admired, haven't gotten that close to and I was able to get to close to him. And again, it was seeing nonviolence in action that, you know, won my heart, and made me want to go work with him, and be with him.

00:28:08:00 TREY ELLIS:

And how much to this day? How do you think- why do we need those lessons today of what's going on in the world today?

00:28:15:00 JOAN BAEZ:

What's going on in the world today is beyond anything anybody could have imagined. It's so corrupt, and of course we need those voices. It's hard to hear them when the right wing owns the press, you know. So, we need- of course, we need- I would say that right now, we need to understand the power of nonviolence because to try anything other than that right now is self-defeating and treacherous.

00:28:50:00 TREY ELLIS:

Can you talk a little bit about Andy Young, and Martin's relationship? How was seeing them together?

00:28:57:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I thought Doctor King and Andy were very close. Andy was ... They joked about him, because he was the only one who was really brave. They would prop him up in the front of the march, you know. And I don't know if this is true or not, but I heard it from more than one source, and I heard it back then, that they had him at the front of the march somewhere and a bunch of kids came out, and knocked him on the head, and he passed out. And they were dragging him along, keeping him in the front, and the kids went around the block and hit him again, and he woke up. That makes sense to me.

00:29:36:00 TREY ELLIS:

In terms of entertainers we've interviewed, you and Harry Belafonte, what was the role, and how did King come to enlist, and use entertainment? And for himself, I know he's a big Mahalia Jackson fan. Was he ever super fan of anybody? Was there a sense of he was a just regular guy that he was a super fan of someone?

00:29:56:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I never, I never knew whether King had ... what, what in the entertainment world really interested him. I'm not sure he had much time for it.

TREY ELLIS:

But he knew that strategically it was one of the- it was a really smart use of-

00:30:11:19 JOAN BAEZ:

Well, to try and have a movement without the music would have been ridiculous, plus it's there, I mean, it's just there. "Ain't going to let nobody turn me around," it's just like saying "good morning," you know. A picture two kids, which I saw, they had to be ten or twelve, and marching with a- it was Washington, I guess, with a sign saying "freedom," or the like, and a cop running at them. They got down on their knees, and went on singing, and the cop didn't know what to do with himself. It was too embarrassing to... not always, but in this case, too embarrassing to, you know, hit them, knock them out, whatever his plan was. If they had just flipped him the bird, it would have been enough to do whatever he really had in his heart to do.

00:31:01:00 TREY ELLIS:

Are there any- are there other stories about King, like, personal stories, non-political, just things that come up, anecdotes you remember that, you know, that would really again, this idea of humanizing King and what he's been through?

00:31:16:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I saw him one night at one of the conferences, SCLC conference, and somebody wanted to know about where the finances stood, and either he didn't know, or he didn't want to talk about it, so he started preaching about everything else, everything else until everybody was all riled up, and singing, and clapping. And he got away with- he got away with it because he was so charismatic and lovable, you know.

TREY ELLIS:

So, he was tricky.

JOAN BAEZ:

Sorry?

TREY ELLIS:

He was tricky.

00:31:47:00 JOAN BAEZ:

He was tricky. I mean, not many people have the combination of things he had. He had the vision. He had- if he didn't have the organizational stuff himself, he was surrounded by people who did. And he had the knack for taking an idea that he could have done alone, because he had to be able to do it alone, but with the organizing, and with his kind of special gift, he didn't have to do it alone. There'd be a hundred and fifty thousand people there with him. It's like Gandhi's march to the sea. He went

down to pick up a grain of salt to defy the British, by the time he got there, he had a half a million people with him. And that's a very specific gift. And that would be something where it would be highly questionable whether you want this person to a leader or not, because without him, it's those ideas, and that courage, and charisma.

00:32:45:00 TREY ELLIS:

I want to just go back a little bit to Vietnam, and Chicago, and could you give us for people today in 2018 about the level of violence on the streets between the rioting, the violence of the war, the sense of in this violent tumultuous time, how revolutionary nonviolence, and how difficult maybe it was to be- that commitment to nonviolence.

00:33:16:00 JOAN BAEZ:

Probably more difficult to organize nonviolence than to organize violence. I think we figured that out after a millennium...

00:33:25:00 TREY ELLIS:

Yeah, I was wondering about, yeah, personally we can't even understand. We live in interesting times right now, of course-

JOAN BAEZ:

Oh, that's a lovely way to say it.

TREY ELLIS:

But the violence, the assassinations, even before the JFK assassinations, the rioting, and Watts, and Detroit, the antiwar war movement and Kent State. There's a world of violence, then here's this message of nonviolence. Can we just personally- how did you feel when you wake up in the morning? People talk about- Clarence Jones talked about how he felt, like, people don't understand how close the country was to breaking apart. Or did you feel that?

00:34:06:00 JOAN BAEZ:

I always felt that the world was close to falling apart. And that's, of course, obviously how I feel now. But I had the understanding from when I was about twelve that adding to the violence was not going to do anything. It was not going to help anybody, any side. So, I just took a path then, and I took it, and I never really left it. It's the only thing that made any sense to me. So, I knew that for the most part that people wouldn't know what I was talking about. They would think I was nuts. They would belittle it. They would give you the "what would you do if" scenarios, in which you can't get out alive. And you have to just know all that stuff and keep walking.

00:34:55:22 TREY ELLIS:

Certainly, people of your generation of younger than King, many of them were pulled in more radical, or, you know, violent directions. Did you ever question it

yourself? I mean, you said from twelve you had that moment, but did you ever have any kind of ...

00:35:10:05 JOAN BAEZ:
Whether I ever had any ...

TREY ELLIS:
... second thoughts?

JOAN BAEZ:
... second thoughts about nonviolence, organized or otherwise? I don't think so. I mean, I when Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, you know, spoke out against some nonviolent stand that I had taken, it never- I mean, I just thought that they didn't get it. They probably didn't. So, no, maybe I was dumb, but I just blithely went on my way. And that was my belief system and it never- I mean, it wasn't as though something came along to challenge it that looked like a really whole better way to do things.

00:35:58:00 TREY ELLIS:
And in retrospect, how do you feel that nonviolence has fared? Do you think it still has ...?

00:36:06:00 JOAN BAEZ:
I don't think nonviolence has even had a chance to come into its own, except a couple of times, and it may not because it's difficult. You know, I guess, Gandhi said that the human psyche is both violent and nonviolent and the question is which one are you going to organize? So, after all these years of violence, and people are just addicted to it, just- they can't make themselves think another way. So- and in the atmosphere we're in now, sort of the year of the bully, it's even harder to try and present- to try and present something other than either being a liberal, which isn't enough, being a progressive, which is it hasn't really pulled itself together in way that it can make itself understood. I think right now, I have this little saying, it's "little victories and big defeats," 'cause we're living in a big defeat. I mean, we're living with our background of scenario is global warming. So that's not exactly a leg up, you know, for kids. So that's there, and you have to do everything in spite of that. And then the bully comes along and everything gets worse every single day. Things get worse for the majority of the people in this country. Most of them don't even understand that yet. So, it's against that scenario that we need to be very inventive, and very imaginative to find our way through it, and very dedicated.

00:37:48:00 TREY ELLIS:
Do you have hope right now? On the hope scale, how do you ...?

00:37:51:00 JOAN BAEZ:

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Well, on the hope scale, I've never been very hopeful. On the other hand, I'm not hopeful about the state of the world, I am hopeful about people's resilience, and what we can do if we really want to do it. And I think courage is the most important of all the virtuous, to be courageous. And courage is contagious. I mean, violence is contagious, but guess what, you know, so is courage. And so, if you've experienced nonviolence in its various forms, it can also be contagious if you have a moment to see what it's actually doing, and see that it's possible, and see that it's not soft, that it's not weak, it's very strong. You can refer to it as fighting, battling, but just different tools. They're different tools.

00:38:51:00 END OF INTERVIEW