



Was there a greater love affair of the sixties?

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The Great Baez-Dylan Love Affair

Joan Baez and Bob Dylan's love affair captures a generation

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Those of us in our sixties - veterans of the sixties - had to be moved by the PBS American Masters biography of Joan Baez: "How Sweet the Sound." The documentary recalled great and bitter moments, and highlighted Baez's brief relationship with Bob Dylan, the greatest musical lyricist of the twentieth century. Their relationship is history - the history of a generation, of modern music, and of the remembrance of things past.

That Dylan agreed to be interviewed for the tribute was surprising - although this legendarily guarded man has become slightly more accessible recently. I hadn't heard Dylan before being so complimentary of Baez - saying that, from the start, he loved "Joanie's" soprano voice and her cotton-picking guitar style and how much he was honored by "Diamonds and Rust," Baez's bittersweet tribute to their love affair written a decade ("a couple of light years") afterwards. David Crosby said he wasn't sure of

Baez's feelings for Dylan (she said, of course, she was crazy about him - "speaking strictly for me, we both could have died then and there"). But he knew Dylan was crazy about her - worth contemplating given the emotionally constricted public pose Dylan has affected throughout his life.

It was good to see their duets again, which were remarkable musically and emotionally - they were such an interesting intersection of musical traditions. Baez was top gun when they started, with her haunting renditions of classic folk ballads, bringing them to a mainstream audience for the first time. But, as one commentator explained, the genre had to generate new material to become a leading edge in modern music, and that simply left her in Dylan's dust. (Bob Dylan's evolution during the 1961-1966 period from folk singer to "voice of a generation" to rock star is captured in Martin Scorsese's 2005 documentary, "No Direction Home.")

The PBS special elucidated the 1965 English horror trip - traced at the time in the film, "Don't Look Back" - from Baez's perspective. She recounted how she resented that Dylan didn't invite her on stage in England to reciprocate the boost she gave his early career when he appeared at her concerts. Baez didn't want the boost - she wanted the emotional acknowledgement. Now Dylan chalks up the crash-and-burning of their relationship on that trip to the craziness of the period, which he indicated screwed him up. But it is also about his ungenerous nature (expressed throughout the fictional 2007 documentary, the remarkable and baffling "I'm Not There"). Was this coldness a necessary concomitant to his greatness?

Baez detailed how Dylan rejected the openly political role she wanted him to play - which she herself played out to such a life-defining degree - and how now she would never have insisted on that. As political issues became more foggy (with integration and Vietnam off the table), the Dylan approach turned into a better career choice. Baez also confessed her regret about the resentments her political commitments created in her son, and said she would now act differently. At the same time, she said this was who she is, and that she couldn't have chosen otherwise.

The single most surprising image of Baez in the PBS special was from the 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue concert tour (which reunited her with Dylan and a host of sixties musical figures). Baez is shown briefly laughingly dancing a sexy, funky dance - who has seen this part of her? That she suppressed this side of herself in favor of her characteristic steadfast earnestness may partly explain why such a beautiful, passionate woman had nothing more than <1 year relationships (she referred ruefully to her promiscuity). Her revenge is that she is a great-looking older person, while Dylan looks demented.*