

**A Conversation with Joan Baez**  
**by Frank Goodman (12/2003, Puremusic.com)**

On the day of our phone interview, my subject called the management office at which I was more or less employed. She was picked up by young Ryan, a good looking up and comer in his twenties. “Falcon Goodman, this is Ryan” he intoned in the customary fashion. After a slight pause, he heard a female’s voice, a little lower than his. “Ryan—this is BY-ez. I believe I have an interview today with Frank...” “Oh yes, you do,” he replied, with a big smile slowly crossing his face.

A little flushed, he hit the button for my extension, and I picked up. “This chick is Hot!” he whispered. “This chick is kickin sixty in the ass,” I said, “but you’re right, I’m sure. Well, let’s not keep her waiting.” (Actually, the winsome artist was born in 1941.)

Whether you are 20 or 80, I probably don’t have to tell you who Joan Baez is. Even though her heyday could be said to be decades ago, a high percentage of people would recognize her face, and many would recognize her voice, ringing like a bell that’s mellowed and softened over a long time. A relentless activist for humanity, justice, and the environment over the course of a well-publicized lifetime, she has played the jewel in the crown for some and the thorn in the side for others.

More than forty years, more than forty records. She’s lived an awesome life, and has made contributions to global culture that reach far beyond the musical. So I was deeply charmed to find her so self-effacing and right-sized on the phone this day. She laughed easily, and effortlessly turned any compliment directed toward her in the direction of another without calling any attention to it. Although I don’t generally feel this way during interviews, I so wanted to be in her company as we spoke. I only hope that the next opportunity we have to converse will be in person.

We spoke a lot about her new release, *Dark Chords on a Big Guitar*, a title taken from a line in a Greg Brown song that’s on the album. That was our jumping off point, anyhow. It’s a great record, be sure to check out the clips on the Listen page, and use the links at the end of the interview to purchase it. We feel privileged to have had a chance to talk with one of the great women of song in our time, and are most happy to share that conversation with you here.

**Joan Baez:** Hi, Frank, this is Joan.

**Puremusic:** Oh, hi, Joan, how you doing?

**JB:** I’m doing okay.

**PM:** Thanks for your time today. It’s very nice to get your call.

**JB:** Oh, right back at you.

**PM:** I’ve been enjoying *Dark Chords on a Big Guitar*.

**JB:** Oh, good, good.

**PM:** It’s wonderful to hear another record from you. That’s a great band you’ve

assembled. How did you round them up?

**JB:** Well, I think a lot of credit goes first to my manager for finding the drummer, George Javori, and then to George for finding everybody else.

**PM:** Ah.

**JB:** We made him musical director, in fact, because he's just really brilliant and well connected, and seems to inspire the mood of whatever song is coming next.

**PM:** And who's your manager that found him?

**JB:** Mark Spector.

**PM:** Oh, so the guy who produced as well.

**JB:** Yeah, he did. He was looking for a producer, he had George, who I'd been playing with, and Byron [Isaacs]. And he knew about Duke McVinnie up north. And he'd say, "Oh I've got to find the right producer. I've got to find the right"—and I said, "Why don't *you* just produce it? [laughs] You know me, you know what you want to hear, you know the musicians." And so he didn't say anything else, but we never—I never heard any talk about another producer after that.

[laughter]

**PM:** Oh, well, that's a beautiful testament. I mean, I can feel throughout the record and the website, really, the trust and just the love that you put into the band.

**JB:** [laughs]

**PM:** It's really evident, and it's evident in what you're saying right there.

**JB:** Oh, nice. Okay, well, thanks. It's true.

**PM:** Beautiful. So after a handful of years out of the studio, what prompted you now to pop a record out and go on the road again?

**JB:** Well, I've been on the road, actually, all of this time. It's a strange industry, though. I mean, the competition is just unbelievable.

**PM:** It's insane and unseemly.

**JB:** Uh-huh. [laughs] Very good, yeah. So if you don't do something fresh and make a big racket about it, nobody's going to know you exist.

**PM:** That's right.

**JB:** So your question is perfectly valid. I put a lot of energy into this, into making the record, and now into touring with it. And I have faith in it. I love what you said about it, because it really—it has a lot of caring for the music in it. The question is: Why did I make another CD?

**PM:** Yeah.

**JB:** Because I didn't have to. And so we waited around for the right idea to strike, and it started to develop, finding the kind of song that was right. Songs by people who—they all have a little bit in common, they're a little bit quirky.

**PM:** [laughs]

**JB:** And the songs are all just under the radar.

**PM:** Absolutely.

**JB:** Yeah. So they began to find a home with each other, these songs. And it looked more and more like record making time.

**PM:** I've always enjoyed the way your records have reflected important and unusual writers of any given period when they appear. And I thought it was quite a testimony that both Greg Brown and Gillian Welch & David Rawlings got two songs apiece on this record.

**JB:** [laughs] Well, they're good, huh?

**PM:** Yeah, they're good. And along with Steve Earle's great "Christmas in Washington," there were covers much more obscure. Caitlin Cary and Josh Ritter, and one of my favorites, Joe Henry.

**JB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** You must listen to a lot of records to be really inside all these guys.

**JB:** I'm inside their songs once I hear them. But when I listen to music I usually listen to classical.

**PM:** Ah. So how do you get turned onto writers this far under the radar?

**JB:** My manager. I said, "Listen, I'm going to quit writing songs, [laughs] so... I'll take care of the voice. I'll do maintenance and delivery. You find me the stuff."

**PM:** [laughs] "I'll do maintenance and delivery!" Oh, that's funny.

**JB:** It's true. It's true. So he said, "Okay." He took it as a challenge.

**PM:** That's wonderful. He pulled up a beautiful bunch of songs.

**JB:** Yeah, he did.

**PM:** And Josh Ritter has done some opening for you, I think, right?

**JB:** Yeah. He's a doll. I go out and sing on his set also.

**PM:** Oh, I love that.

**JB:** Yeah.

**PM:** I've been admiring the album photos, the way one does when listening. You

look...fantastic. I mean, how do you do it?

**JB:** [laughs]

**PM:** How do you do it—good genes or clean living?

**JB:** Well, part of it's genes, I have to say. My mom is 90, and she looks about 75.

**PM:** No kidding.

**JB:** So I'm really lucky. The other is, I'm really careful. I mean, I eat about half of what's put in front of me, usually.

**PM:** That seems to be a huge secret.

**JB:** [laughs]

**PM:** That some people just do that.

**JB:** Print it. Print it.

**PM:** [laughs]

**JB:** It shouldn't be a secret. I mean, in this country, we are just served too much.

**PM:** Right.

**JB:** And so that, and I do Yoga, and I do a lot of meditation.

**PM:** Do you practice any certain kind of meditation or follow any specific spiritual path?

**JB:** I do. Well, in the meditation, I do the Vipassana meditation. Because, I think from my Quaker upbringing, it's more about being aware—because Vipassana is an awareness meditation—than it is about trying to lose yourself in a candle flame or something—which also has its merits, because it's nice to float off. But I think we're stuck here, so we might as well get to know what this minute is about.

**PM:** Yeah, the Vipassana crowd, they don't close their eyes, either, right? They more focus on that spot about forty-five degrees down. Or is that true, or—

**JB:** Well, some of them do. I think it's the Zen folks who do that more. But I've seen both. I've seen both—

**PM:** Are you an eye closer?

**JB:** I'm both, because I do walking meditation, which means I've got to keep my eyes open.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, yeah. It's good to open your eyes when you're walking.

**JB:** It shouldn't be any surprise, but it's grounding.

**PM:** Sure.

**JB:** You concentrate on your feet and where they're hitting the ground, footstep by footstep.

**PM:** Yeah. I'm real excited about one of those little meditation benches coming, I think, tomorrow. I ordered it from this guy up in—you know the Ananda people up in northern California?

**JB:** Yep, yes I do.

**PM:** Yeah. There's a guy there who makes them.

**JB:** Up in Nevada City.

**PM:** Nevada City. You ever been up to the Vipassana place up in Marin County, Jack Kornfield's joint? [[www.spiritrock.org](http://www.spiritrock.org)]

**JB:** Jack is a friend of mine.

**PM:** I figured he might be.

**JB:** And that's kind of how it got started, when my sister was ill and dying, and I thought, who's going to give me—enlighten me the most? And out of all the stuff I'd read, I liked his writings the most. And so lo and behold—I mean, Marin County is the epicenter for those people.

**PM:** Right.

**JB:** So I found him, and we've become friends. And that's where I did my first two weeks of Vipassana retreat, during Mimi's illness, and it was a huge help.

**PM:** Wow. I've lived all over that San Geromino Valley, and that is just a beautiful, warm place.

**JB:** Yes, it is.

**PM:** And I was a huge fan of Mimi's, too. I mean—

**JB:** Yeah.

**PM:** —that was very sad. [Mimi Fariña died of cancer in the summer of 2001.] That whole Bread and Roses thing was such an amazing movement, and still is.

**JB:** Yeah, it's still going.

**PM:** So maybe you'd share with us any recent or current books that you've been exploring?

**JB:** What have I been exploring? Oh, yeah, sure. *Dude, Where's My Country?* [by Michael Moore]

**PM:** Ah.

**JB:** What can I say?

**PM:** [laughs]

**JB:** He does such a brilliant job of it. It's very, very funny. He has his facts straight. But I think in the end what gets me, or really draws me to him and his work, is that I think he's genuinely compassionate, and he genuinely cares about, say, the kids who are getting killed in Iraq on both sides. And it hurts him that the government is behaving so ferociously. It hurts him that they can get away with it. They're a bunch of really cowardly businessmen, and they're running the show.

**PM:** Yeah. It's gotten down to levels of insanity that are even hard to comprehend in the Republican sense of the word.

**JB:** I mean, it's the only other time I've heard martial law mentioned by anybody but me, because I worked with Amnesty for so long—

**PM:** Right.

**JB:** —and the fears for this country because of the way they arrest people. And then I saw Michael Moore had mentioned something about that—obviously it's not out of the question if we keep going like this. And I think he's—you know, there are hard pills to swallow, but I think I would rather swallow it from him than from a lot of other people.

**PM:** I heard that. You're a person, obviously, to whom many things have mattered enough to get passionately involved and raise a ruckus—

**JB:** [laughs]

**PM:** —or otherwise bring attention to the issue.

**JB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** What matters most in this way at the moment?

**JB:** Well, it's funny. I guess there's a new context for me, and it's from reading Derrick Jensen's books. He has a book called *The Culture of Make Believe*. Basically he's saying exactly what Michael Moore said: "This is a fictitious government that's running a fictitious war. We have a fictitious president." *The Culture of Make Believe* is saying, too, that we're all pretending that we're living in a sustainable world. We're using it all up. We kill indigenous people and we kill forests full of trees. You know, it's a very good possibility we're just going to do ourselves in. And, you know, he doesn't give any answers of what to do about it. But when I read that, I didn't feel depressed, I felt relieved, because it puts one in a new context. Okay, if I'm on this plane and it's going down, what am I going to do, rather than pretending that it's up there flying happily along?

**PM:** Yeah.

**JB:** I mean, there may be a way to get it back up. If we're really going down, how do we behave? Do we jump and let everybody else—do we grab the first parachute, or do we try to tend to people? And then my guess would be that if everybody in the plane had instincts that were good and decent, the plane would have the best chance of staying aloft.

**PM:** I just heard today that Kris Kristofferson's new record is a complete anti-war record.

**JB:** It is. And it was produced by Alan Abraham, who did three of my CDs. He is a wonderful guy. I mean, and Kris is—he's been always like that, where I think he's just, you know, he's just had it up to the teeth, so he just said everything he wanted to say. And the album is doing pretty well, I hear.

**PM:** It's amazing. Yeah, I'm trying like hell to get an interview with him. I want to talk about that, because what an amazing guy he is.

**JB:** Yes, he is.

**PM:** And you, you've accomplished so much throughout your life. What would you like to do that you've not yet even attempted?

**JB:** Oh, well, how do I answer that? I have attempted things that I know I love to do, some of them. Like I know I love sleeping in a tree because it's close to the birds. Things I want to do, they're all very personal things. I think I didn't spend enough time with my mom, and I'm lucky enough that she's still alive. She's 90 and she just came on tour with us for 10 days. [laughs]

**PM:** Oh, my.

**JB:** She's unbelievable.

**PM:** You're so lucky.

**JB:** Yep, I am. And so we moved her in with me on my property. About six of us live there.

**PM:** You're still out in Carmel somewhere?

**JB:** No. I'm up near San Francisco.

**PM:** Ah.

**JB:** And we've sort of, all of us, well, my niece and a couple of friends and a couple caretakers, we sort of got it in time that mother is the elder on the property, and she deserves to be treated a certain way. And she has to learn that too. She doesn't have to worry about sleeping too long. She doesn't have to do her dishes anymore.

**PM:** [laughs]

**JB:** We're going to do it the Buddhist way, we're going to—I just don't want that revolting western approach to death.

**PM:** Right.

**JB:** So things like that. I mean, they're more personal things that I want to sort of be with. Also I have probably about three books worth of poetry ready, and I just haven't gotten it together to put them out. So there are things like that.

**PM:** You know, I often ask that kind of a question in an interview, what people might like to

attempt, and I think you're the first person who really answered it in a very personal realm.

**JB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Everyone else wants to talk you about their career. But what you said makes more sense to me.

**JB:** Well, I've had a long, long career.

**PM:** Yeah.

**JB:** And I've done heaps of things, so it does make sense, that yeah—

**PM:** Yeah, been there, done that.

**JB:** Go back to the roots.

**PM:** I've been listening a lot to these tapes of Pema Chodron. Do you like her?

**JB:** Oh yes, I'm acquainted with her words. When Mimi died, her boyfriend was listening to those, and they got him through a lot.

**PM:** I'm listening to one now called *The Places That Scare You*.

**JB:** Oh, lovely. I'll check that out.

**PM:** I'm very respectful of your time, and I've taken all that I was allotted.

**JB:** [laughs] Well, thank you.

**PM:** And it's a joy to speak with you today.

**JB:** It was my pleasure speaking with you, I must say.

**PM:** We'll run the interview this coming month. A lot of our readers will be overjoyed to see you on the cover.

**JB:** Well, thank you, Frank. Thanks very much.

**PM:** Take care, Joan.

**JB:** Okay. Bye-bye.

**PM:** Bye-bye.

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