



JOAN BAEZ INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Joan Baez, Musician and Activist
July 27, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 14 minutes and 03 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

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JOAN BAEZ:

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Joan Baez

Musician & Civil Rights Activist



Meeting Dr. King

00:00:36:00

INTERVIEWER:

You just start telling us about the first time you met Doctor King and what that was like and how you felt.

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JOAN BAEZ:

You know, the first time I saw Doctor King, I honestly don't remember when 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 and it was all about nonviolence. And every year they had a speaker and that year it 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 a sudden there's this person talking about the bus boycott and people, you know, walking instead of rioting. 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 16 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. I was like, you cut out the time to do that? And we started doing a lot of joking. It's a healthy way to begin.

Fighting racial segregation

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INTERVIEWER:



So let's talk about Grenada. And that was that the first, you know, and your experiences there and, the resistance to segregation.

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JOAN BAEZ:

My first experience in the South was 1961, and I went there and gave concerts, and the contract actually said, and I, of course, never looked at it, whites only. I was mortified. I went back the next year at '62 with that changed, of course, no Blacks came. They didn't know who I was. So I went back to third year and sang in Black campuses. So I had already launched that feeling you get in the South when you're gonna say something real.

Grenada, Mississippi

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INTERVIEWER:

So, what brought you and King to Grenada?

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JOAN BAEZ:

Doctor King called to find out if I would go to Grenada because he couldn't get there on... right away. And so he thought, if the cameras are 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 the King. And so it did probably hold things off for a day. And then he came in, the next day, and we were, we were marching and we have it in our films, to that giant cop in 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, can't go no further. And so I talked a little more about, you know, they wanted their education. You can go no further. And somewhere on that March, I was walking with King, and I saw all of us and these kids saying, ain't let nobody turn me around, and across the street these miserable looking little clutch of white kids. And I went like this to King. And I said, you're sure you want to go through with this? That's it. They're going to be in class with and he says, all the cameras and rolling Joan.

Marching with Dr. King

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INTERVIEWER:

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

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JOAN BAEZ:

I was elated walking down the street with King and the kids because I remember one of the young preachers, his sermon was called Singing at Midnight, and it ended up saying, everyone is 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...you know, it was Grenada where Doctor King was really, really tired after coming in. And, they put him to bed in this, you know, the master bedroom was a small, humble, little lovely place. And, nobody wanted to wake him up, and he was due to speak. And so I went into the room, and I, I



just remember I'm 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, Hmmm I believe I hear the sound of an angel. Let's have another one Joan.

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INTERVIEWER:

So can you talk about, like, as a person, his personality a little bit?

Personal Reflections

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JOAN BAEZ:

First of all, when he was speaking, he didn't really dare to do much humor because he was...there were so many eyes on him and so many critics and people ready to...I mean, it would have been ha! You know, he's just joking around. He's not serious. So you really didn't see much of that in his speeches, in his public presence. 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 Joan Baez is in the audience, it makes her cry. And it did, I just fell apart when he started what he did. King was almost Doctor Martin Luther King by default. I mean, I don't think he really necessarily wanted that position, but he got it. And he was, for all of us, the right person. And he took it seriously. They knew he was going to be killed.

Dr. King's assassination, 1968



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INTERVIEWER:

You know about this a little bit: could you tell us about the moment you heard about his assassination?

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JOAN BAEZ:

I don't know where I was. I was in a hotel room somewhere, and I completely went into denial. They said, are you going to go to the funeral site? Oh, no. I don't go to funerals. I didn't feel anything until 10 or 15 years later. And I was here in this house watching, you know, a documentary came out about Doctor King, I said oh I'll watch this. My heart just dissolved. My son remembers walking through the room and 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 and it was just too overwhelming.

Humanizing Dr. King

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INTERVIEWER:

In the history books we celebrate these, you know, 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?

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JOAN BAEZ:



I think discussing and admitting to King's later fights and or anything, whether it was depression or his foibles. I think it makes a difference in whether you're looking at somebody who's unattainable. What he does is like in another world....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.

Dr. King's legacy

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INTERVIEWER:

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

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JOAN BAEZ:

Dr. King is one of the most important people who moved me beyond being a student of nonviolence to being a practitioner, you know, beyond just whatever stubbornness I was showing at home. I refused to stand up to the flag and all that. By the way, King and I always had this fight over the state of America because a war was going on. And I thought, this place is pretty decadent. And he would give a speech about wanting their share of the American pie. And I would say the pie is really not very tasty right now, and we'd always have this fight about it because that was part of his speech. 3 or 4 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 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.

Applying lessons from Dr. King

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INTERVIEWER:

And how about to this day? How do you, how do you, how do you think? Why do we need those lessons today?

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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. I always felt that the world was close to falling apart, and that's obviously how I feel now. But I had the understanding from when I was about 12 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 down. 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, 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.

Nonviolence today

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INTERVIEWER:

And in retrospect, how do you feel that nonviolence is fair?

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JOAN BAEZ:

I don't think nonviolence has even had a chance to come into its own, I've said it 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, some people are just addicted to it, just they can't make themselves think another way. So and then in the atmosphere we're in now, the year of the bully, it's even harder to try and present...to try and present something other than either being liberal, which isn't enough, being a progressive, which is, hasn't really pull itself together in a way that it can make itself understood. Right now I have this little saying: little victories and big defeats because we're living in a big defeat. I mean, we're living with our background. Our scenario is global warming. So that's not exactly a leg up, I 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 and find our way through it and be very dedicated.

Hope for the future

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you have hope right now or on the hope scale...how do you?

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JOAN BAEZ:

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, courage is the most important of all the virtues, to be courageous and great courage is contagious. I mean, violence is contagious, but guess what? You know, so is courage. And so if you've experienced nonviolence and it's, you know, 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 and it's not weak, it's very strong. You can refer to it as fighting, battling, but just different tools...with different tools.

END TC: 00:14:02



Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.