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Music Review

For Baez and Friends, Celebrating a Birthday With Concern for the Future

By STEPHEN HOLDEN JAN. 29, 2016

Joan Baez is still the mother of us all. At the Beacon Theater, where she celebrated her 75th birthday on Wednesday evening with an all-star concert of duets, she was a quietly magnetic woman in charge. Radiating her characteristic maternal strength and easygoing humor, she projected the welcoming empathy of someone you can turn to in times of trouble. She looked terrific: trim and fit, with short silver hair and a wonderfully goofy smile.

That strength is embedded in a voice that has shrunk in range and power but conveys an embracing reassurance and solidity. Her upper register is all but gone, but her middle range, where she remained comfortably settled for most of the evening, was as warmly expressive as ever.

It wasn't actually the birthday of this great folk-pop singer, who was born on Jan. 9, 1941.

An all-acoustic show with younger guests bringing the adrenaline.

But why quibble? The concert, in which she sang with guests including Paul Simon, Judy Collins, Mavis Staples and Jackson Browne, was taped for the PBS series "Great Performances" to be broadcast in June.

For the live audience, the concert presented technical difficulties. Except for Ms. Baez, the singers were under-rehearsed and had trouble reading lyrics on a teleprompter at the back of the orchestra. The sound in this unusually quiet concert was passable at best. Too many



Joan Baez The singer's concert at the Beacon Theatre on Wednesday included duets with, clockwise from top, Nano Stern, David Bromberg and Judy Collins. The show was taped for PBS's "Great Performances" photos: Hiroyuki Ito, The New York Times

of the duets were so glaringly out of tune that they will have to be redone or adjusted before the broadcast. A particularly embarrassing casualty was David Crosby, who was so confused he seemed barely present during his chaotic duet with Msps. Baez on the Beatles' "Blackbird."

The technical lapses suggested a depressing possibility: that as much as they'd like to continue, many folk singers (not Ms. Baez) can't go on forever without losing vocal power, stamina or spirit. The younger guests — the Irish folk singer Damien Rice, the Chilean singer Nano Stern — gave the show a shot of adrenaline and passion it desperately needed.

The all-acoustic concert began with strong, steady performances by Ms. Baez, accompanying herself on guitar, of her original "God Is God" and the great Phil Ochs song "There but for Fortune." The parade of guests began with David Bromberg and continued with Mr. Crosby, Mr. Rice, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Emmylou Harris, who recalled that while growing up she wanted to be Ms. Baez.

Mr. Browne, playing the piano, sang his prophetic '70s anthem "Before the Deluge" with Ms. Baez, who glumly observed that "as we head into the abyss" this expression of apocalyptic foreboding is even more relevant today than when it was written.

A weary sense of impending doom was a persistent undercurrent throughout a concert that tried and mostly failed to conjure a '60s-style inspirational fervor. Ms. Staples, 76, came close in her duets with Ms. Baez of "Oh, Freedom" and "Turn Me Around."

Ms. Baez's duets with Richard Thompson on "House of the Rising Sun," arranged as a waltz, and his original song "She Never Could Resist a Winding Road," were stronger. Late in the evening, Mr. Simon sang a low-keyed rendition of "The Boxer" with Ms. Baez. The concert's final number was her solo rendition of Bob Dylan's "Forever Young," a trite song that mocks baby-boomer narcissism.

The appearance of Mr. Stern lent the concert its only moment of genuine excitement. That 30-year-old Chilean singer and guitarist infused the theme song of the Argentine diva Mercedes Sosa, "Gracias a la Vida," written by Violeta Parra, with an incandescent verve and spirit. It is the title song of Ms. Baez's mostly Spanish 1974 album. As he and Ms. Baez sang it, their performance generated the kind of lightning you might have experienced at a joyful '60s hootenanny when everything seemed possible and hope was in the air.

For a moment, the hush of depression lifted, the generational sense of defeat abated, and the concert came thrillingly alive.