

**This interview with  
JOAN BAEZ  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on August 4, 2020**



**Library of Congress: Your first album was recorded for the Vanguard label. How did you come to their attention or did you approach them?**

Joan Baez: Albert Grossman took me to New York from Cambridge. He really wanted me to meet with the powers that be at Columbia, which had signed a lot of the big acts at that time. I was more interested in Vanguard, which was primarily a classical label, [and] that's where I ended up.

**LOC: Did you actually meet with Columbia?**

JB: I did. I met with Columbia. I met with John Hammond, who famously signed Count Basie, Billie Holiday, and, later on, Dylan and Springsteen, among others. From the moment I stepped in the building, I knew it wasn't right. I was catching a cold and I always think a cold comes from feelings of pressure and conflict. And there I was at this desk, with a contract in front of me, and he was handing me a pen—it was like something in a movie--but I didn't sign.

I went to see Maynard Solomon [at Vanguard]. Still, I needed to wait to think about it. I gave a performance that night at a club—it wasn't Club 47, but one of them—both Maynard and John Hammond came. John assuming he had it in the bag; Maynard very serious and nervous. But I went with Maynard, the softer less-commercial approach.

**LOC: I'm glad you brought up Maynard Solomon. He is credited as the producer of the album. Did he function for the album in the way that we use the term producer today?**

JB: Oh, absolutely. Because, making the record, it was just Maynard and an engineer and me. The engineer was a German guy and they were always fighting over pronunciations!

So there were just those two and me, and an electrical cord that stretched across the floor up to them, and a reel-to-reel tape deck, and that was it. That's how we made the album.

**LOC: I had read that you recorded the album in an empty ballroom. Is that true and how—why--did that come about?**

JB: Yes, it was an empty ballroom in the then Manhattan Towers on Broadway; I think it's some sort of seedy bar now.

Maynard had done a lot of his classical recordings there. And he had recorded Pete Seeger and the Weavers there. He could work there every day, well, every day but Wednesday because that's when they had bingo.

**LOC: How long did it take you to record the entire album?**

JB: Just four days!—So easy! The only time we had a big fight is when Maynard wanted to bring in Freddy Hermann to play guitar on one song and I didn't want him because I thought it was too "commercial." But we ended up doing it and it was wonderful.

**LOC: Did you record the album in four consecutive days? I assume more recent albums you have done have taken longer than four days?**

JB: I think it was four days in a row, or it might have been two and two... I was a traditionalist. "Mary Hamilton" was one take.

I've gone through a lot of phases in my career, in how I record. I did an album that was just four musicians and myself ["Play Me Backwards," 1992]. I was doing it in Nashville. You are alone in your little cubby. We were working on the song "Strange Rivers" and I said, "Let's work it out while we're face to face." Then, I was, "Let's just record like this." And they got so excited doing it that way! One musician even called his wife and told her to come down and watch this unique thing happening!

**LOC: What about the song selection on the album? How were the songs chosen? Was there anything that was left off?**

JB: I went in with whatever I knew. I had already spent years in the coffee shops making songs my own. I was very young and it came easily. So I came in with what I had, and I don't think anything was rejected.

**LOC: Have you listened to this particular album at all lately? What strikes you about it now?**

JB: Well, in the last few years I have listened to it and some of the other early things. And, really, I'm stunned by that voice. I think I can say that now, I'm so far from it now. I feel so disassociated from it that it's like listening to my own child. I think it's quite magnificent, really. I have always viewed my vocal cords as a gift—they aren't man-made, they aren't woman-made—they were just given to me and keeping them tuned was my job. I like the sound of that tiny vibrato and that pitch...

**LOC: Today, in music, it seems that image is as important as the music. Did Vanguard or others attempt to mold you into something ready-made for the public as the album was about to come out?**

JB: No. You maybe didn't need it as much then. Besides, I had already come out of Newport: the whole "madonna" image. Of course, that was a lot to live up to and, not having had a great self-image in high school, I was happy with it; I was like "Hey, I'll take that!"

I was thought of as a big pain in the ass sometimes for being such a purist. I wanted nothing on stage but a black background so, I'm sure, people were weary: "Oh, no, here she comes again!" But it was just how I lived, how I was.