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**The Last Leaf on the Tree**



By David Frew, Scholar in Residence

January 2026





*A 31-year-old Joan Baez played at Gannon in 1972.*

Joan Baez turned 84 in 2025 and as I listened to an interview that was celebrating her life as well as her birthday, my memory flashed back to December 1972 when she sang at then-Gannon College. I was a young faculty member at the time, having returned to Erie from a three-year graduate school stint. My hair was a bit longer than it had been during my engineering days during the 1960s and I had acquired a taste for folk music. My album collection was punctuated by Baez, Leonard Cohen, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seegur. Old friends were wondering?

My preferences had always been to hear live music in small venues, and I was delighted to learn that Joan was coming to Erie and Gannon. She did not disappoint. Her three-octave voice, precise, traditional guitar playing

and small acoustic backup group delighted the crowd. And when the house lights came up, I looked around and saw lots of old friends in the audience. I wasn't the only Joan Baez fan in Erie.

These days my oversized and over-old album collection sits on a dusty shelf next to a turntable and amplifier that I purchased years ago. Languishing. Music is easier to retrieve with modern technology, so when I play the old folkies as I work, I simply ask an "AI helper" to play Joan or whoever I want to listen to.

Joan has changed a lot in the 50-plus years since I saw her play at Gannon. She and her music have mellowed and become somewhat less political. Since those old Vietnam War days, she has produced more than 30 albums, been inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, navigated a long and contentious relationship with Bob Dylan (depicted in the film "A Complete Unknown"), married, had a child and lost a beloved sister (Mimi Farrina). Her music has included self-written anthems as well as beautiful melodies adopted from other writers. Her version of "The Night They Tore old Dixie Down," for example, is a Civil War song, written and performed by Robbie Robertson and The Band. The Band's version was never popular, but Joan's became a top ten hit.

A few days ago, I was in our back room writing and listening to music when two amazing things happened. For the first time this season, leaves began to fall from the maple tree in the backyard. And just as that was happening, Joan Baez' "Last Leaf on the Tree" began to play. The juxtaposition of events halted my writing, and I began to mull over the lyrics. They have been characterized as "genius" by musical observers. As I sat, thinking about life, the passage of time and the symbolism of autumn, it occurred to me that the song's lyrics could be a good gift to all of you.

***The Last Leaf on the Tree***

*“I’m the last leaf on the tree,  
autumn took all the rest.  
But it won’t take me,  
I’m the last leaf on the tree.”*

*“When the autumn wind blows, they’re already gone,  
flutter to the ground, they just can’t hang on.  
Well there’s nothing in this world that I aint seen,  
greet all the new ones, coming in green.”*

*“They say I have staying power,  
here on the tree.  
Been here since Eisenhower,  
outlived even he.”*

*“Fight off the snow and fight off the hail,  
nothing makes me go. I’m like a vestigial tail.  
I’ll be here through eternity if you really want to know,  
and if they cut down this tree, I’ll show up in a song.”*

*“I’m the last leaf on the tree,  
the last leaf on the tree.”*



*Today’s 84-year-old Joan is a bit more mellow, but still singing and playing the guitar.*

The combination of falling leaves, the wonderful poetry, and the realization that, like Joan Baez, I am growing old, made me think about the passage of time. How did Joan get to be so old? How did I? Am I marking the years with these essays?

***Happy Fall and Winter,***

***David***



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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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