Bob and Joan

ock has no definitive history, nor can it. Its chronicling is a wholly idiosyncratic exercise undertaken within the shifting parameters of taste and commerce, where each new fad requires a rewrite, a conscious re-evaluation of what has gone before. A few players resist downgrading, but straight biography, even when undertaken with the best of intentions, rarely explains their survival. Moreover, when it comes to popular music, what passes for biography is either an assemblage of clippings wrapped in a poster, or - in the case of dead rock stars - a blatant attempt at grave robbing, a genre of which Dr Albert Goldman was past master. In terms of both style and content, only a handful of writers have distinguished

Richard and Mimi

themselves: Greil Marcus, Peter Guralnick, Robert Christgau, Lester

To that short list can be added the name of David Hadju, whose Lush Life, a biography of Billy Strayhorn, won both praises and prizes, and whose latest project, Positively Fourth Street, tells a hitherto largely untold story from the 1960s, a story set in the student bohemias of Harvard Square, Cambridge, and Greenwich Village, New York City, where the lives of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez and Richard Fariña converged and flowered. That Baez played a significant role in bringing the young man she described (in 'Diamonds and rust', the 1975 song that reflected on

> the work of Mimi, Baez's younger sister, or of Richard Fariña, the wild but charming novelist and songwriter whom she married in secret when she died on her 21st birth-

Bangs and Robert Shelton.

their brief affair) as "the unwashed phenomenon" to public attention has long been acknowledged, albeit grudgingly. But few know anything about

was just 16 and who day, 30 April 1966, on his way back from the launch party for his first (and last) novel, Been Down So Long It Seems Like Up to Me.

not for you

Bob Dylan, the most eloquent of angry young men, turns 60 in May. Two books mark the occasion, as Liz Thomson reports

"Positively Fourth Street is an effort of holistic cultural history," explains Hajdu, on the phone from New York. "It is an attempt to illuminate the coming of age of post-War popular music and the post-War generation through the story of four complexly entwined artists at the heart of the era." Not straight biography, then, but a slice of social history in the manner of, say, Carolyn Cassady's Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac and Ginsberg, or Joyce Johnson's Minor Characters: A Young Woman's Coming of Age in the Beat Generation. "I believe group portraits bring people closer to the

Subtitled The lives and times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña and Richard Fariña, Hajdu's book is about "maturation" - of popular music in America in the early 1960s; of the post-War generation, politically and intellectually; and, of course, of its four central characters. "Like countless others in every period, they all set out in their late teens and early twenties to change the world. Unlike others, however, two of them - Bob Dylan and Joan Baez - actually did. The second pair - Dylan's rival musician/writer, Richard Fariña and Joan Baez's sister, Mimi, a singer and guitarist like her older sibling - might well have been just as successful if not for - what?" asks Hajdu. The answer is complex and fascinating and has to do with talent, ambition and rivalry, time and chance.

Hajdu, 46, grew up in the "netherland" of New Jersey. His brother was nine years older and, like just about every other American teenager in 1962, listened to folk music. "That was the music that was around the house. In 1964, I was playing guitar and I was in high school bands, though I gave it up when I got into jazz, which I was never good enough to play." A student at NYU from 1973-78, he was thus around the Village at the time Dylan was again haunting its streets before, in 1975, returning to Gerde's Folk City, scene of his 1961 triumph, to assemble what became the Rolling Thunder Review with old friends including Baez. Having put together a course that included journalism and dramatic writing, he wrote a screenplay, Electric, about the schism between Dylan and Baez over rock 'n' roll, and chronicled the Village's folk music heyday in a piece entitled "Ghosts of the folk era" which he later attempted to turn into a book. In 1976, the 10th anniversary of Fariña's death on the back of a friend's Harley, he proposed a piece to Rolling Stone, who declined it.

'So the subjects are in my blood but, today, I'm relieved I didn't publish anything serious on any of the when I was younger. I don't think I would have done the job properly." So with Dylan and company on the shelf, Hajdu began work on what became Lush Life. Between completion and publication and to ward off perpetual anxiety that his work will be found wanting, he began the groundwork for Positively Fourth Street. "I visited many people at my own expense before writing the proposal. I don't like to get close to my subjects but I knew if were to write the book that I had to have access to at least two people in the story."

Mimi was guarded at first but won over, Hajdu thinks, by his sensitive handling of Strayhorn's private life. "She understood that I'm not a rock 'n' roll writer but a historian. I'd met Joan and found her imperious, suspicious, distant, though she finally opened up." So too did their parents, Albert

and Joan Senior, for the first time ever. Dylan, though he never closed the door, didn't get around to actually opening it. "I had to show that I was a serious historian, not a writer looking to dig dirt." It must have helped, too, that Hajdu had a sympatico editor: Paul Elie of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, who'd written his Masters on the folk boom and who'd actually gigged at Gerde's. In addition, he talked to scores of fellow travellers and drew on the papers of the late Robert Shelton (author of Dylan's first review, in the New York Times) at the Experience Music Project in Seattle. His greatest thrill was getting Thomas Pynchon to break silence: the novelist had been Fariña's roommate at Cornell and later became a close friend of Mimi.

Despite his long-time fascination with Fariña, Hajdu admits that he regarded him

rather as a dabbler and a dilettante. "But I have come to see him as an uncommonly creative musician. Indeed, I think his songs are better than his fiction. (His non-fiction was mostly second-rate.) He mingled strains of Middle-Eastern, Irish, American and African music long before that was commonplace. He merged mature, poetic lyrics, folk and rock 'n' roll before Dylan did Bringing It All Back Home - no small achievement. And his songs were often laced with irony and wit, two elements direly lacking in adult music of the Sixties. The lyrics are more carefully wrought than some of Dylan's who, for all his genius, had moments of carelessness."

Indeed, Hajdu's view of all four changed as he wrote. "I now see Dylan as a much more fragile person, a fearful cat with lethally defensive claws. I had never realised how much of a careerist Joan was until I probed behind the scenes of her first years in Cambridge and I mistook Mimi as an inert, rather symbiotic force in the lives of both Richard and Joan." Pace many

Dylan fans, he believes Baez was a key factor in Dylan's early success. "Even in the midst of deriding her, he has acknowledged her role in launching his career. Her long decline since the 1960s has made it difficult to remember how huge a figure in popular culture she was in her prime. She made the cover of Time as a symbol of the whole post-War generation's shift to a new aesthetic challenging long-prevailing notions of success and glamour. Bob was virtually nothing, an unknown playing in Village coffeehouses when she forced him upon young America, prodding her audiences to stretch, to look beyond conventional notions of beauty and see the beauty and power she recognised in Dylan."



The two writers whose shadows fall across the book are, says Hajdu, Ralph Ellison for the ghosts among us, "for that which remains unspoken", and Jane Austen, for her probing of the relationship between sisters and their relationship with society. There are three Baez sisters and the relationship between Joan, the middle one, and Mimi has not always been easy, as Baez herself has written. In recent years they have been close, the more so since the onset of Mimi's grave

'The book is critical but it's fair," concludes Hajdu. "There's nothing gratuitously damning - or groundlessly celebratory. I'd like to think the whole quartet comes off very well, as a group of sympathetic figures with gifts, passions and alltoo-human flaws.'

Positively Fourth Street is published by Bloomsbury on 1 June at £17.99. David Hajdu will visit Britain in late May and extracts will appear in Vanity Fair.

"The intention was to give the complete story," agreed Sounes. "It's not for the Dylan fanatics, though they will find stuff in there that's new. It's for the likes of my sister, who's got one Dylan album - Blood on the Tracks - which she likes but she doesn't know much about him. I hope to entertain and to give enough that's new and sharp to satisfy readers of Isis [one of the many Dylan fanzines]. But I tried to balance it. It's aimed at a broad market, at regular people, not Dylan obsessives. I'm not a fanatic and I tried to write the book I wanted to read."

A journalist whose first foray into books, an account of the lives and grisly times of Fred and Rosemary West, grew out of his reporting. Sounes' most recent book was a study of Charles Bukowski. "The West book was a commercial success but I didn't want to be stuck in a tabloid pigeonhole writing true crime. I hoped Bukowski would be a critical success and make

a bit of money. More important, it was an American subject which I hoped would lead to something bigger." Nevertheless, though he'd long wanted to write a Dylan biography, Sounes wasn't sure he was yet up to the task. "But my agent, Russell Galen, said I had to do Dylan for his sixtieth."

Before attempting to place the book, Sounes spent a year doing preliminary research. "Then I wrote a 60-page proposal and a chapter. It was clear when it was presented that it would be new but, though it was a colourful proposal, it wasn't revelatory - just thorough." Grove bought it within a day, selling UK rights to Doubleday. The revelations - the secret second marriage and divorce, the young child, the arcane business dealings, the specifics of manager Albert Grossman's "insider trading" -

So how had Sounes managed to unearth what no previous Dylan biographer had

unearthed? "I'm a journalist and used to digging stuff up. I don't think anyone had really tried before. There was a whole list of potential wives and mothers of children and, if you talk to 250 people and you ask every one of them, eventually you get some answers and you can piece them together and go to the right courthouse and find the certificates ... A lot of books about Dylan are written by amateurs. They don't check stuff, they don't persevere. But the second marriage isn't the be all and end all of the book."

Sounes, 36, who's been a Dylan fan since his teens, ended up admiring his subject enormously. "I didn't tire of him, or the music. You listen to it endlessly and you still find good stuff on every album, even on Self Portrait and Dylan. I admire him for keeping on, applaud him for it. He's dignified and he has gravitas and he'll keep going until he's dead, like an old

SINCE the production line was set in motion in 1966 with Sy and Barbara Ribakove's Folk-Rock: The Bob Dylan Story, there have been innumerable Dylan biographics. Among them, Anthony Scaduto's triumph (1971) was in persuading the sphinx to talk, while Robert Shelton (1986), a friend of Dylan's from the earliest days in Greenwich Village, offered the most elegant and respectful account of the glory days of the 1960s but became progressively thinner from the late Seventies on. Bob Spitz (1989) wrote vituperative nonsense and Clinton Heylin (1991, rev 2000) a clunky, trainspotter's guide.

In Down the Highway (Doubleday, £17.99, 2 April), Howard Sounes has written the first truly complete biography likely to satisfy the intelligent general reader.