

» Books

'I hope Bob would think this version is close to what he wanted to write'

A biography re-released to coincide with Bob Dylan's 70th birthday gives a real insight into the star's life, co-editor Elizabeth Thomson tells **Bridget**

» In September 1961, New York Times journalist Bob Shelton saw a little known folk singer playing support in a smoky Greenwich Village coffee house.

He subsequently wrote the first review of a Bob Dylan gig. Two weeks later, the singer songwriter was signed to Columbia Records.

Shelton went on to befriend Dylan, hanging out in 'the village' during those heady New York years in the early 60s with the star and his girlfriends Suze Rotolo and Joan Baez.

He was the first to interview Dylan's parents Abe and Beatty Zimmerman, and was present at key moments in his career, at Newport in 1963, when he went electric at Philharmonic Hall in 1964, and on the Isle of Wight in 1969.

Despite completing his seminal Dylan biography in 1978, Shelton didn't see it published for another eight years, and only then with heavy editing and interference from his publishers.

Co-operation

No Direction Home remains the only biography written with the star's co-operation.

It has been revised and updated to coincide with Dylan's 70th birthday on May 24. (Omnibus Press £19.95)

Publishing and music journalist Elizabeth Thomson, a close friend of Shelton, has co-edited the new edition. She was first gripped by Dylan on his 1978 visit to Earl's Court, and the following year met Shelton at a Dylan conference.

He mentored her through her early journalism career, and remained a friend and inspiration until his death in 1995.

Thomson, who lives in Muswell Hill, has pruned and clarified unwieldy sections, tightened up chronology, and restored 20,000 words of unpublished text, including interviews with Dylan, and his family, and friends from his pre-fame years in Minnesota. The biography also draws on interviews with Rotolo, Baez, Phil Spector, Allen Ginsberg and Pete Seeger.

Thomson says Shelton was never happy with the original. "He called it 'abridged over troubled waters'. It was very long and it wasn't a showbiz biography but a serious study contextualising Dylan as an important cultural figure, which fell on stony ground with his publisher.

One problem was that by the time it was published,



■ From little-known folk singer to worldwide fame, Bob Dylan

Dylan was going through his worst career patch and wasn't regarded as the figure he is today.

At one stage they wrote to Shelton that he'd get more readers if he said Dylan was homosexual. Bob shot back that he presumed it would also shift more copies if he was a mass murderer.

"I have restored some of

Authentic insight

the resonance of Bob's writing and some of the expansive, free-flowing interviews that give an authentic insight into what Dylan was like at that time.

"I hope Bob would think this version was closer to the book he wanted to write 25 years ago."

Thomson accepts that because of Shelton's personal closeness to Dylan and the New York 60s scene, the book lacks a detached authorial overview.

And the price he paid for being a friend of the singer

was to omit prurient details about his private life.

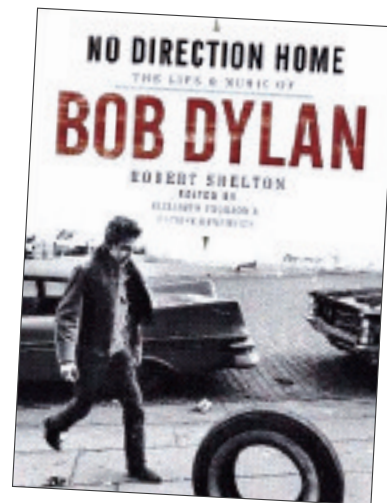
"He was always upfront that in exchange for access to Dylan as a friend and an artist, he agreed that the wife and kids should be left out of the story, saying: 'I am not going to sell off the relics of a friend'.

"What you do get is a real sense of what it must have been like to be in Greenwich Village at a very special and important time, seeing the singer song writing revolution. The early years of anyone's career are always the most interesting and from 61-66 Shelton and Dylan were drinking buddies. Dylan passed out on his sofa, they met for dinner with their girlfriends, and kept in touch for another 12 years, meeting for interviews and at gigs."

In his final years, Shelton took a humble job as arts critic for the Brighton Evening Argus. By now disillusioned with the muckraking of journalism, and



■ Above, Elizabeth Thomas co-edited Bob Dylan's biography No Direction Home, below



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the trivialisation of the music industry, it was a downbeat end for the man Thomson calls "the father of popular music journalism".

"In the late 50s and early 60s on the New York Times, Shelton was the only one writing seriously about popular music, jazz concerts and Woody Allen's stand up gigs."

"He never capitalised on his fame or his past, and although Rotolo credits his review with launching Dylan's career, he never claimed that he 'discovered Dylan,'

he always said Dylan discovered himself. But it was a very perceptive review and I'm not sure anyone else would have got Dylan so quickly.

"When he and Dylan became friends it wasn't thought of as 'having access' because there wasn't a music business as such, it was a much more naive world. They were just part of the same circle. He regarded Dylan as a little brother, and Dylan trusted him. To the end, that trust was never breached."

Cultured influences

Regular north London literary fixture the Arab-Israeli book club will take place next month at Joseph's Bookstore.

The event, in association with the Jewish Community Centre for London starts at 8pm on June 6 at the Temple Fortune bookshop. Crouch End writer Samir El-Youssef will be joined by author and creative writing teacher Ariel Kahn to discuss Sarah Shilo's *The Falafel King is Dead*.

The Israeli children's writer has penned her first adult novel about the emotional fallout when the patriarch of a Moroccan-Jewish family drops dead from a bee sting.

■ Bookings from Joseph's Bookstore 020 8731 7575. 1255-57 Finchley Road. www.josephsbookstore.com

Irish actor's gift of gab

Actor Neil O'Shea brings his one-man performance celebrating Ireland's rich literary heritage to the London Irish Centre.

An Evening With Great Irish Writers is full of humour and emotion including extracts of poetry by Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

■ The show runs from June 14-16 at the centre in Camden Square, Camden Town. Tickets cost £10 from 020 7916 7272 or contact info@londonirishtheatre.com.

Writers open up in talks

This year's annual Primrose Hill lecture series includes a talk by much-loved local author Alan Bennett on the value of England's disappearing libraries.

The former Beyond the Fringe star, who has published his latest book *Smut*; Two Unseemly Stories, will be at St Mary's in King Henry's Road on June 15.

Also in the series, left wing MP Frank Field, the politician charged by Tony Blair to 'think the unthinkable' talks about poverty on June 8th. Travel writer Colin Thubron will talk about his extensive globe-trotting on June 22, and academic Mary Beard speaks "On Classics" on June 29th.

Enquiries and tickets from parish administrator Celyn Cooke on 020 7722 3238.