

If 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



Bob and Joan

Rock 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

themselves: Greil Marcus, Peter Guralnick, Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs and Robert Shelton.

To that short list can be added the name of David Hajdu, 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 bohemia 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 their brief affair) as "the unwashed phenomenon" to public attention has long been acknowledged, albeit grudgingly. But few know anything about 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 was just 16 and who died on her 21st birthday, 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*.

"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

"*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 real world."

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.

"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" – came later.

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."



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 illness.

"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 all-too-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*.

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 vaudevillian."



Richard and Mimi

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 biographies. 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, train-spotter'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.