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Positively 4th Street: The Lives And Times Of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña, And Richard Fariña



Synopsis

Tenth Anniversary Edition The story of how four young bohemians on the make - Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Mimi Baez, and Richard Farina - converged in Greenwich Village, fell into love, and invented a sound and a style that are one of the most lasting legacies of the 1960s When Bob Dylan, age twenty-five, wrecked his motorcycle on the side of a road near Woodstock in 1966 and dropped out of the public eye, he was recognized as a genius, a youth idol, and the authentic voice of the counterculture: and Greenwich Village, where he first made his mark as a protest singer with an acid wit and a barbwire throat, was unquestionably the center of youth culture. So embedded are Dylan and the Village in the legend of the Sixties--one of the most powerful legends we have these days--that it is easy to forget how it all came about. In *Positively Fourth Street*, David Hajdu, whose 1995 biography of jazz composer Billy Strayhorn was the best and most popular music book in many seasons, tells the story of the emergence of folk music from cult practice to popular and enduring art form as the story of a colorful foursome: not only Dylan but his part-time lover Joan Baez - the first voice of the new generation; her sister Mimi - beautiful, haunted, and an artist in her own right; and her husband Richard Farina, a comic novelist (*Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*) who invented the worldwise bohemian persona that Dylan adopted--some say stole--and made as his own. The story begins in the plain Baez split-level house in a Boston suburb, moves to the Cambridge folk scene, Cornell University (where Farina ran with Thomas Pynchon), and the University of Minnesota (where Robert Zimmerman christened himself Bob Dylan and swapped his electric guitar for an acoustic and a harmonica rack) before the four protagonists converge in New York. Based on extensive new interviews and full of surprising revelations, *Positively Fourth Street* is that rare book with a new story to tell about the 1960s. It is, in a sense, a book about the Sixties before they were the Sixties--about how the decade and all that it is now associated with it were created in a fit of collective inspiration, with an energy and creativity that David Hajdu captures on the page as if for the first time.

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Customer Reviews

From 1961-66, the Baez sisters, Bob Dylan and Richard Farina came of age, befriended one another, fell in and out of love, raised hell, traipsed the globe on a shoestring budget like college students, drank, got high...and produced some of the most durable music (and, in Farina's case, one of the most underappreciated novels) of their generation. Hajdu captures that half-decade in 300 pages of remarkably seamless prose, painting a vivid picture of four young artists whose intertwining paths left an indelible mark on the work they produced. Although he appears most interested in Joan Baez and her family, Hajdu produces an impressive amount of information on all four of his subjects. Dylan fans especially are likely to be surprised at some of the details of their hero's early career, such as his first appearance on a studio recording (it wasn't Harry Belafonte's "Midnight Special," as has often been reported) and the somewhat disputed origin of his stage name. Baez, meanwhile, is portrayed for once as a human being with strengths and weaknesses of her own, rather than strictly as a victim of Dylan's misogyny (though this too is acknowledged, as well it should be). Best of all, Richard and Mimi Farina are both researched and profiled just as carefully as Baez and Dylan despite being far less famous outside the realm of hardcore folk music fans. The book, like its subjects, is not without its shortcomings. For one thing, Hajdu's vision of the four and their importance is a bit sweeping. Baez may have been the first protegee of the folk revival to achieve commercial success, but she was hardly the first folk artist to have a hit record (or even the first of the rock era). Dylan was the movement's biggest name in songwriting, but hardly the only one; Hajdu sprinkles the names of others throughout the book (Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Ian and Sylvia Tyson, Paul Simon, Judy Collins, Eric Andersen and a list too long to complete here) without really acknowledging their place relative to those of his four subjects. His sly allusions to their works (i.e. "Dylan acted as if he and the social activists in the folk community never had met") are by turns amusing and tiresome. Also, his practice of phrasing all quotations in the past tense makes it impossible to differentiate between contemporary interview material and decades-old remarks without consulting the endnotes, unless the speaker is a person the reader knows to be dead.

Speaking of which, Hajdu tells his nonfictional story novel-style, not revealing the post-1966 fate of his subjects until the end of the book. For those of us who already know why any story of this quartet would have to stop that year, the efforts at suspense can be slightly offputting. These, of course, are minor criticisms. For any fan of the folk music of the 1960s - especially those who weren't lucky enough to have been in Cambridge or Greenwich Village at the time - this book is a fascinating and welcome look inside a place and time that left a great mark on music history.

David Hajdu deserves a National Book Award if for no other reason than that he was able to interview Thomas Pynchon AND Fred Neil -- two of three of America's most reclusive creative artists (J. D. Salinger being the third, of course). He seems to have talked with nearly everybody who played a role, however marginal, in the 1960s folk scene. He tells a mesmerizing, soap-operatic tale of four interweaving lives played out against the backdrop of a particularly vital moment in our country's cultural history. Though Hajdu is in no sense a debunker, only Mimi Baez Farina emerges mostly unscathed here. The other three come across, in varying degrees (Joan Baez the least, relatively speaking), as narcissists and opportunists, an impression left even after Hajdu's perhaps too-generous concluding chapter. Dylan in particular is given to jaw-dropping fits of odious conduct, though this is hardly news. Even would-be hagiographers (of whom Hajdu, though certainly a compassionate observer, is not one) struggle with longstanding reports of bad Dylan behavior, especially in the early years of his international stardom. Dylan had the dubious fortune of becoming a great artist before he became a grown-up. Still, as with all of his other biographers, Hajdu's Dylan remains as inscrutable as ever. The nearly forgotten Richard Farina, the real star of the book, is more approachable, more human, more fun: a personable, self-absorbed man on the make -- one is reminded of Melville's phrase "one eye on the cosmos, the other on the main chance" -- and canny manipulator with genuine gifts, a superior literary stylist to Dylan, but not in Dylan's class as a songwriter. Then, however, who is? Hajdu's splendid book, the finest so far on the folk revival, led me back to Mimi and Richard Farina's Vanguard recordings, which proved better than I had remembered them from my last hearing maybe 25 years ago. If Richard was not a musical genius of Dylanesque proportions, he was a more focused, disciplined craftsman. His most successful songs (for example the brilliant "Birmingham Sunday") stand up remarkably well. Mimi was his perfect musical partner, possessed of an appealing voice and technical skills her husband was unable to master before his tragic early death. Hajdu writes interestingly of Richard's determination to create a "boogie poetry" -- what would become known as folk-rock -- before the idea ever occurred to Dylan. Phrased that way, the idea sounds more original than it may have been. Rockabilly singers in the

mid- to late 1950s had already wedded folk and bluegrass songs to stripped-down blues rhythms. Folk-rock was well nigh inescapable. As the revival began to lose its creative and commercial force, it was the only logical place to go, and it would have gone there even if Dylan and Farina had never existed. But happily, they did, and Hajdu helps us appreciate anew the wise and thrilling songs these decidedly imperfect human beings brought into the world.

What wonderful writing, what a bittersweet and romantic tale of BS-artists who turned out to be real artists. I laughed out loud at some of the events and descriptions (Dylan's re-invention of the harmonica as a life-support device!), I went out and bought music by those who were under-represented in my collection. The story of Richard and Mimi plumbs the depths of sadness. As a fan of Dylan's (and Joan's), it was hard to bear his sudden cruelty to those who loved him, but it was heartening to see his reinvention as a family man, free of most of his chains (Albert Grossman's drug supplies and incessant touring that was ready to kill Bob). If you love poetry, music, rock, folk, and want an engrossing story of how Dylan came to be Dylan, Joan became Joan, Mimi started to find herself, and Richard really was somebody, read this book. Along the way, learn about the kindness and musical contributions that Bob soaked up and reinvented to build our current view of the musician's responsibility: write songs from the heart, use a language as universal as you can invent, and don't be afraid to follow your muse.

This is one of those rare popular culture biographies in which the subjects come off, for better or worse, as three-dimensional human beings. Joan Baez has been so infrequently written about, and Mimi and Richard Farina even less so, making it a pleasure to revisit their story as presented here in such illuminating detail. Bob Dylan, of course, is another story, but rarely has he been cast in such an all-too-human light. Most highly recommended to fans of Dylan and Baez, and to those initiates who want to learn more about the highwater era of American folk music.

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