



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

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When twenty-five-year-old Bob Dylan wrecked his motorcycle near Woodstock in 1966 and dropped out of the public eye, he was already recognized as a genius, a youth idol with an acid wit and a barbwire throat; and Greenwich Village, where he first made his mark, was unquestionably the center of youth culture.

In *Positively 4th Street*, David Hajdu recounts 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 also 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 Mimi's husband, Richard Fariña, a comic novelist (*Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*) who invented the worldly-wise bohemian persona that Dylan adopted -- some say stole -- and made his own.

A national bestseller in hardcover, acclaimed as "one of the best books about music in America" (Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*), *Positively 4th Street* is that rare book with a new story to tell about the 1960s -- about how the decade and all that it is now associated with were created in a fit of collective inspiration, with an energy and creativity that David Hajdu has captured on the page as if for the first time.

Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña, and Richard Fariña Details

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From Reader Review Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña, and Richard Fariña for online ebook

Dusty Henry says

David Hadju was pretty ambitious taking on a four headed biography where each of the subjects could have (and some do) their own books devoted to them. To be honest, I wasn't even aware of Mimi and Richard Farina before this. Despite these things, Hadju pulls it off with an interesting "he-said-she-said" style which reveals the surprising roots of the folk revival.

When I started reading I was a bit concerned, it seemed a bit "Baez-centric." Dylan wasn't even mentioned until something like 60 pages in. It was a slow start but once it picked up and the four major characters/subjects had their introductions, the pace went surprisingly better than expected. I found myself getting invested in Farina - contemplating if he was a decent guy or a hack or an opportunist or brilliant (and apparently I wasn't alone in these contemplations). Farina stole the show for me, which seems all to appropriate.

Hadju successfully de-deified Dylan for me. He definitely gets hit the hardest with critiques from his actions and commentary from friends. It doesn't disqualify his brilliance for me, but changes the perspective of "why" I think he's brilliant and taking him with a grain of salt.

Everyone knows that on the Internet 3/5 stars makes it look like you think "this book sucks" - I really wish Goodreads had a decimal option - but I actually really enjoyed this piece. It would have gotten a 4/5 if it hadn't been for a few issues. Mainly how abrupt it finished. I thought it was strange that the book was so short when I started it, but I didn't expect it to end so flat. The artists' later careers are legacies and influence are left as feeling "unimportant" by their conspicuous absence. Hadju's commitment to sources was brilliant and gives "Positively 4th Street" a lot of authority. My only complaint in this regard is the amount of names and people I had to try and keep track of in my head. At time I felt like I was reading Tolstoy or something with all the names and references being thrown around. For someone who doesn't know EVERY detail and all the minor characters of the folk era, it is hard to tell who you should keep track of in your head as being important.

After reading this listening to the music of these musicians will be much different, but more fulfilling. It's made me hungry to read more in depth into each of them. This is a fantastic palette of the rise and fall of the 60s folk scene.

Lou says

A freewheeling, breezy account of a time long past, when folk music was more important than rock and roll (say around the late 1950's, early 1960's). A lot of reviews here focus on Richard Farina and Mimi Baez Farina: their relationship was rather intense, almost as intense as Dylan and Joan Baez's. Richard Farina seems like an overwhelming force of nature and not as much as an asshole as Dylan - their rivalry seems quite ridiculous but who knows if Farina had survived his motorcycle ride - what might've happened. David Hadju has done his research and the book is quite enjoyable as a good read.

Aaron says

I was going to put this down and finish it tomorrow, but I was sufficiently interested that I stayed up to finish it. This book drags a bit on occasion, but overall it's an enlightening, well-written and exhaustively researched account of the '60s folk scene.

Also, it sounds like Richard Fariña was a real piece of work.

Julie says

Provided a lot of context about the 1960s folk scene.

Kate says

Great. The text relied what seemed almost entirely on interviews. I think David Hajdu pieced it together well. He sort of sketched faint parallels and implied characters. He was not overtly present but neither was he trying to avoid authorship. I loved learning about Richard Farina and thoroughly geeked out at the Thomas Pynchon parts. In fact it's his participation that pushed me from 4 to 5 star territory. The book just got my mind running on creative ambition in relationships and the seeming hypocrisy of the folk scene, the problems with broad social movements in general but also the importance of them. yada yada. Just got the wheels going in me head.

Jeff says

I considered reading Positively 4th Street when it first came out, but never got around to it. I considered reading Hajdu's second book, Lush Life, but never got around to it. But when The Ten-Cent Plague, his third book, was published I couldn't resist, it seemed like it would be such a fun book and it was. So naturally I went and got a copy of this book, the subject of which I was familiar, i.e., the tragic story of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Richard and Mimi Fariña.

I've never been a big fan of Dylan or Baez although I have albums of both, which I've always enjoyed. Nor was I fan of Richard Fariña's now cult classic novel, Been Down So Long It Looks Up, which I only got around to reading recently though I bought the book in the early 70s (see my review). Now, his wife on the other hand, Joan's sister Mimi, I recall being enamoured of in my adolescence.

I always thought that Mimi Baez was the most beautiful girl to come of age in the sixties. No other girl at that time, be it Pattie Boyd, Julie Christie, Brigitte Bardot or Edie Sedgwick, captured my attention the way she did. I first noticed her on that poster she appeared on with her sisters, the now infamous anti-draft poster "Girls Say Yes to Boys Who Say No." (Hajdu didn't doesn't mention the poster in the book, though, in his defense, it happened after the timeline of the book, I believe)

My family lived in Carmel at the same time as the four of them and we would see Joan and Bob tooling around in her Jaguar XKE, just hair and noses going by too fast for the more conservative townspeople who barely tolerated the beatnik artists and musicians as it was. I don't think Joan ever let Bob drive.

Anyway, I enjoyed the book tremendously. It was well-researched and well-written and is an intriguing story that not just anyone would have thought worth telling, which is true of his other books, as well. And it really is a tragic story of star-crossed lovers, to borrow a Shakespearian phrase. I don't think I'm giving away anything since it's well known how the story ends with two motorcycle accidents, the one in which Fariña is killed and Dylan's, which would so greatly alter the course of his life and music.

Hajdu's hypothesis, which he probably doesn't spend enough time trying to prove, is that these four people had a direct, or in some ways, indirect and subtle, influence on the music and culture of the sixties. Dylan and Baez, definitely, and Fariña with his book, which was the *On the Road of the 60s*, but also, with the music of the Fariñas. It was they, not Dylan, that first created a fusion of folk and rock. When you listen to Mimi's guitar playing and Richard's dulcimer you realize the influence they must have had over musicians such as Cat Stevens, Eric Burdon and the Byrds.

If you have any interest in 60s culture, the folk scene or folk-rock or in real-life tragic stories, this book is a must.

Kirk says

I picked this up during a time I was really into Farina and was wishing there was a good biography of him and the story behind *BEEN DOWN SO LONG IT LOOKS LIKE UP TO ME*. It's not many people, after all, who can claim to have gone to college with Thomas Pynchon and C. Michael Curtis and then become a near-brother-in-law to Dylan. The book is strong on the cafe culture of the late 50s and early 60s. Dylan fans will no doubt feel a bit defensive bc Mr. Zimmerman is treated more as a human than a deity. The sympathy of the book is with the Baez sisters, Joan and Mimi, who remain underrated both as public figures and entertainers. Ultimately, the book does a nice job of capturing an era; it doesn't quite emphasize the point that folk was as much show business as any other musical form as I would have liked, but then maybe that's not the real purpose here. I also recommend readers go find the Richard and Mimi Farina Vanguard releases talked about in here---they won't be to everyone's taste, but Mimi had a great voice. As does Joan (still).

David Allen says

I went in knowing little about Mimi and Richard Farina, and skeptical they merited equal attention with Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, but this thoroughly researched book (with an interview-by-fax with Richard's pal Thomas Pynchon!) brings the lesser-known Farinas to life. It also scrubs some gloss off the Dylan legend, offering the novel theory that he didn't really find himself until '64.

David Ward says

Positively 4th Street: The Lives and Times of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Farina, and Richard Farina by David Hajdu (Farrar Strauss & Giroux 2001)(780.92) focuses on the period in Bob Dylan's development as an artist when folk went mainstream and international. This was the moment when Dylan and his lover Joan Baez became worldwide superstars. My rating: 5/10, finished 3/10/14.

Aaron says

It's funny how people of history hold this cemented place in your mind. Mainly because you don't know much about them. That was true for me when thinking about Joan Baez and Bob Dylan before I read this book. But now my vision of these famous songwriters is more clear and more enjoyable. In short I'll say that I like Joan much more, and Dylan much less. I'd recommend this book to anyone who's enjoyed a folk song, or any music that had political meaning. You learn a great deal about the 4 title characters, and the story is told very well.

jeremy says

while much has been written about the king and queen of folk, there is remarkably less to be found about richard fariña & mimi baez. this book chronicles the early years of the scene, from the late 1950's through the mid-1960's. it is an interesting read, and was clearly researched quite thoroughly (hajdu even scored interviews with fariña's notoriously media-wary college roommate & famed novelist, thomas pynchon).

to me, the most fascinating parts of the book dealt with richard & mimi. fariña's life was quite nearly inconceivable, and his talent was ascending greatly at the time of his death. if you haven't already, any of the three **mimi & richard fariña** albums are well worth checking out as well, as are fariña's two books.

Derek says

Obviously, there are more Dylan bios than even the most dedicated fan would have the time to slog through, so David Hajdu's fresh take on the subject puts it somewhere above most of the others. I'm sure there are some readers who picked it up out of an interest in Farina or the Baezes (kudos to all seven of you), but for the most part, I think this is a book mostly meant for Dylan aficionados. What sets the book apart is that Hajdu doesn't necessarily treat Dylan as the focus, and the book is strengthened considerably by his approach; we see him better in the context provided by the four other lives chronicled here.

I suppose there are some surprises for Dylan fans who might've assumed he was a poet-saint, but there's not really a lot of new ground broken here if you've already read a Dylan biography or two. Yes, he acted like a little shit when he showed up in New York, creating himself from scratch. Yes, he used who he needed to use and forgot about those people just as quickly, once he found himself in a position of popularity. And yes, much of his time before the motorcycle crash was spent in an amphetamine haze, spewing venom at any target, deservedly or not. But if you knew these well-established facts coming in, the book still functions as a competent, memorable narrative that chronicles one of the most important times in American music. Hajdu treats his subjects fairly and with a considerable energy, and his gift for memorable description makes the book well worth reading. Giving us the stories of Richard Farina and Mimi Baez alongside Dylan, his success never seems so sure; his brilliance never seems as inevitable as it is presented in other accounts.

Points should also be awarded for his fine handling of the Dylan-Goes-Electric-at-Newport myth, where he presents clear facts and first person accounts that credibly serve to demystify the event. The narrative of Richard Farina's and Mimi Baez's lives is also rendered beautifully here (though I admit to my lack of familiarity with their story before I began the book), and he paints Farina and Dylan as interesting contrasts:

the vivacious Farina and the sullen Dylan seem, at times, opposites, even though both found themselves moving in such a similar direction. Of course, Dylan is always painted as the inspiration, and probably with good reason. He's been exalted so often (I myself am just as guilty of this as anyone), why stop now?

I'm certainly not the person to objectively say this, but I think the book would be an enjoyable read even if you're not familiar with the genesis of Bob Dylan or the 1960's folk movement. Hajdu approaches his subjects deftly and crafts a convincing and compelling narrative, without feeling like he's ever sensationalizing the story. A fine read all around, and recommended.

Mary says

Bob Dylan looks like a real asshole in this book. Maybe he was?

Andy says

A very well-researched book on the Star Is Born-type love affair between the two leading lights of the Protest Music movement of the early Sixties, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. The book is controversial for its scathing portrayal of Dylan as an insensitive control freak with a contrived All About Eve past, but it will be up to the reader to make that judgment.

I found the revelation of Baez as cosmopolitan hipster with her expensive digs, fashionable clothes and Jag XKE to be pretty amusing. At best, I want to thank Mr. Hajdu for turning me on to the great Eric Von Schmidt. What a cool artist!

Terry says

I enjoyed Hajdu's writing so much that I'm interested in reading his other book, even though the actual topic isn't of much interest to me. That's a good endorsement, right? This book was kind of a bummer--neither Joan Baez nor Dylan come across particularly well. Dylan comes across as a cold-hearted opportunist at best, which seems at odds with his political songs, but Hajdu quotes Dylan as saying he didn't even care about the politics--he just wanted to sell records, and those kinds of records were selling. I'm kind of sorry I heard that. Joan Baez comes across as pretty opportunistic herself, as well as shallow--she's an interesting example of what happens later in life to a person who is naturally talented, but uneducated. After the high point of the career is over...they have nothing else to challenge or interest them. Mimi Baez Farina is a little damaged bird of a woman, which is just sad, and Richard reminded me very much of someone I know who has a wildly exhausting personality, but is a lot of fun to be around. The best part of this book is that it conveys how exciting it was to be a creative person in the 1960s--there were so many venues to try out any ideas anyone had about writing, theater, film, you name it. Still, in the end, it's kind of, as I said, a bummer to hear negative things about someone you might have admired.

Earlier: I've been on semi-vacation and during that time I read some REAL JUNK that I'm too embarrassed to put on my GoodReads page. What would people think?! But I just started this. I like Hajdu's writing style.

I'm sorry to say that Joan Baez is coming across terribly so far and that is a bit of a disappointment; on the other hand, why shouldn't she be just as aggressive and ambitious as anyone else? Hmmm.

Jim says

The book's timeline was roughly 1960-1966 centering on all four of the names in the title and largely in that order. The book took a unique and intimate approach by way of introduction to the four characters and leading the reader to some logical conclusions about the musicians and music. A lot of material is packed in this book to give you the background and feel for the characters and the scenery and it moves on like a thriller towards the last third of the book. For the most part Hajdu kept a sequential and linear timeline which made it easy to follow the people and the events. I didn't feel that Hajdu was overly judgemental in his assessment of anyone, he tried to be fair. He kept within the confines of what people said or felt, for the most part.

Kudos to Hajdu for not covering that same material that's been covered many times over and when he did he was careful to provide differing accounts or different aspects of the event. The book had some nice compare and contrasts of the likes of: Dylan and Joan Baez, Joan Baez and Carolyn Hester, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, Dylan and Farina, East Coast and West Coast Folk Music, Folk Music and Political Folk Music.

The book also foreshadows artists "rise" and "falls" in a literal sense, some of those falls gave character and some were more of a folly of youth or a humbling learning experience.

On the downside there were a few areas that the book skipped over that I would've expected to cover, but I'm a very satisfied reader.

Cyndi says

Man, Joan Baez is fucking irritating.

Barbara says

I really, really liked it. Liked hearing about the interconnected lives of the Baezes and Dylan and Farina.

M. Milner says

A confession: I may have a slight Bob Dylan obsession. I own a bunch of his albums, have written a bunch of pieces about him and own a handful of books about him and his music. Dylan's a fascinating guy: how did this awkward, mumbling guy from Minnesota take the folk world by storm, explode into rock music and revolutionize music in less than five years?

Those questions were part of the attraction for David Hajdu's book *Positively 4th Street*. His four-headed biography also covers Richard Farina and the Baez sisters, Mimi and Joan. And Hajdu's book more than

delivers. He covers the rapid rise of Joan Baez, the emergence of Dylan and the long incubation period for Farina's novel *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*. It's not always pretty, sometimes not even nice. If I'm being honest, it's why I enjoyed this so much.

At the book's centre are the two Baez sisters, Joan and Mimi. They grew up on the west coast with Quakers for parents and learned guitar early. As a musician, Joan was prodigiously talented: before she turned 19, she performed in coffeehouses, popped up on compilation albums and debuted at the Newport Folk Festival. She was also driven to succeed: Hajdu recounts how she hustled her way backstage at Newport, hung just off to the side and asked just about every performer if she could duet with them.

Joan didn't let people get in her way, even if they were family. Hajdu writes how Joan shut her sister Mimi's career down almost before it started, telling Mimi she couldn't sing to protect her own career: "I didn't want any competition," said Joan, "and I felt my success would overshadow her." (pg 25) Indeed, this dismissive attitude comes through at various points; later, upon hearing "Blowin' In the Wind", she remarks how she didn't think Dylan "had it in him." (pg 120)

Is it insecurity? I don't think so, especially when compared to Hajdu's portrait of Richard Farina. While Farina comes off occasionally as a fun guy, prone to throwing parties and generous with praise and adventure, he also appears as insecure as jealous husbands get: opening (and answering!) his wife's mail, telling his first wife Carolyn Hester what to eat and how to dress and convincing other people to sneak his pistol across international borders.

He does not come off as a nice guy at all. Prone to flattery and lying, Farina would tell people either what they wanted to hear or wild half-truths: he had ties to the IRA, a metal plate in his head, he fought in the Cuban revolution. For all the fun parties he threw, for all his innovations to folk music – Hajdu makes an interesting case for him revolutionizing the way the dulcimer was played – he never comes off as someone who'd be fun to be around for any length of time.

It's interesting to compare him to Dylan, though. They share some traits, especially one for reinvention. But where Farina comes off seeming like a self-promoting liar at times, Dylan comes off like an enigma: he tells so many blatant falsehoods about himself – he raced motorcycles! Ran away to join the circus! Played on early Elvis albums! – he almost dares you to realize he's fucking with you; Farina just seems to crave attention.

And once Dylan enters the book, his personality dominates it. Hajdu covers his early years and especially his relationship with manager Albert Grossman. It was Grossman's pushy management style that led to his songs being covered by artists like Peter, Paul and Mary even as his first LP stalled on the charts, but Hajdu alleges cash payoffs to club owners and reporters helped ensure Dylan found stage time and notice in the press.

But if he needed a push to get started, he quickly shot off like a rocket. Before long, Joan and Bob were on top of the folk world. Hajdu covers some of the breathless coverage from the trade papers of the day, who write about them in gushing terms. While they each influenced the other, he's also careful to show how wide apart they were even at their closest; politically, musically and even in terms of personality, they were ill-matched.

Dylan's quick sense of reinvention keeps the book moving. While Farina and Mimi became a married folk duo, experimenting with incorporating rock into folk and as Joan's music took a more direct, anti-establishment bent, Dylan was jumping headlong into rock, playing with The Hawks and writing in wild, pot-fuelled bursts. It couldn't last.

Throughout the book, Hajdu never lets Dylan get one over on him: Dylan was capable of writing great

music, but he was capable of being vicious and cruel, too. Hajdu never shies away from Dylan cheating on Joan, from his ever-increasing drug use or from him eviscerating Joan in songs like “She Belongs To Me.” Here’s his take on “Positively 4th Street”:

“The subject of (the song) is prey to a twisted psychology close to sadism... Once he establishes himself as a wounded victim, Dylan uses this justification to rip his opponent apart.” (pg 279).

Hajdu mixes this criticism throughout the book, providing background for songs and explaining technical points about the music, but it’s never as outspoken as Clinton Heylin’s books on Dylan. It’s well researched, with a nice bibliography and background notes and he’s interviewed just about everyone involved (even Thomas Pynchon!). While only Dylan refused interviews, Hajdu had access to a trove of unpublished interviews from the Experience Music Project.

I enjoyed this one a bunch, plowing through it in only a few days. It’s a compulsive, informative read on an interesting time in music. While nobody really comes off too nicely in this, that’s part of the appeal for me: it’s not an exercise in mythologizing, another book about how great Dylan or Baez are. It’s a book about four young people, each of them flawed in their own way, who broke into folk before breaking it apart. Recommended.

Michelle says

Joan Baez and Bob Dylan are my favorite artists so I'm a bit biased when it comes to anything about them. It's not only the endless talent they both share but the relationship they had and the movements they belonged too they makes their story so fascinating. But it's not just Joan and Bob's story, we get the short and sad tale of Mimi and Richard and the life they spent together as well as the music they shared. It's really well researched and written and one of the most meaningful books I've read personally.
