

Positively Main Street: Bob Dylan's Minnesota

By Toby Thompson

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Reviewed by Ken McCullough

Here's *Positively Main Street* (henceforth referred to as PMS) in a nutshell -- in 1968, Toby Thompson, age 24, Dylan aficionado from Day One, makes some connections in Hibbing by phone and decides to go up there (from Washington, DC) to look around and interview as many people close to Dylan as will give him an audience. What came out of this foray initially was a

series of pieces in *The Village Voice* in 1969, that attracted a great deal of attention. The first edition of PMS was published in 1971 and the book went out of print in '77. In a world of reprises, PMS certainly deserves a reprint. Read it with hindsight -- the tone and persona are decidedly in tune with the late '60s, when Thompson made his two pilgrimages to Hibbing and Minneapolis.

There are lots of good things about PMS: the style is lively and articulate, even 30 years after the fact. A whiff of retro, but not dated -- part of why it is such a compelling document. The chapters probably most interesting to Dylan fans are Thompson's meeting with Dylan's mother Beatty and his two encounters with Echo Helstrom, Bob's 11th grade girlfriend and probable subject of *Girl from the North Country* and several other songs.

So Thompson goes to Hibbing to investigate Dylan's roots. What he discovers, in part, is Bob's life typical of a middle class townie in the Amerika of the '50s (hence the morph on Positively 4th Street to Positively Main Street). Bob was not the person he came to invent -- the one who grew up in Gallup, New Mexico, for example. My friends here in Minnesota still talk about

Dylan doing time in the boys' reformatory at Red Wing (chronicled in the song *The Walls of Red Wing*), though there is no evidence that that ever happened -- another fiction (one thinks of the kid in the film *I'm Not There*, who makes up his personal legend on the fly). Bob was a rebel primarily in his fantasies -- like most of us then, we aspired to Brando but in actuality were closer to Pat Boone, our adolescences out of Leave it to Beaver and Ozzie and Harriet, as opposed to Blackboard Jungle. As Thompson points out, Echo WAS a rebel, from the wrong side of the tracks, and facilitated Bob's "bad boy" impulses.

If you go to Dylan Days in Hibbing, celebrated in late May on the weekend closest to Bob's birthday, you will experience remnants of Bob's life and to a large extent the atmosphere of PMS. You can tour Hibbing High School (an amazing structure, worth the trip in itself), the open pit iron ore mine, the site of Old Hibbing, the house Bob grew up in, the Dylan Collection in the public library, and even walk around the exterior of Echo's house and outbuildings.

This past May I was in Hibbing for my first Dylan Days. I'd been there twice before, just passing through. It was a grand experience -- Hibbingites take it seriously and approach the occasion with generosity to Bob and to his fans. One of Bob's mentors, B.J. Rolfzen, his high school English teacher, is still there, retired, though he's had a stroke and gets around on a specially rigged-up scooter. Rolfzen's self-published memoir, *The Spring of My Life* (\$16, available from Howard Street Booksellers, Hibbing), is a gem -- the writing is solid, but the story and its telling are exemplary -- about growing up poor in rural Minnesota during the Depression. Leroy Hoikkala, the drummer with Bob's high school group *The Golden Chords*, and fellow Harley rider shows up, too. This year Ramblin' Jack Elliott was a guest of honor.

As Thompson tells us, he was influenced by New Journalism, especially Tom Wolfe. This is evident,

though in no way derivative. For those of you too young to remember N.J., the idea was that the writer became an active character in his or her own writing; hence, not straight, objective journalism. Then Dr. Hunter Thompson took this to the baroque extreme of Gonzo Journalism. Most of us around at the time were influenced in one way or another by New Journalism and its permutations.

Now, at this point, I must introduce my own New Journalistic tack by admitting that I was in Hibbing this May to support and hang out with Toby Thompson, my old friend, who was the keynote speaker at Dylan Days, on the occasion of the republication of PMS. Toby had shown up at the "Highway 61 Revisited: Dylan's Road from Minnesota to the World" symposium the year before in Minneapolis, although he didn't see much point in attending, as his book had been out of print for so long. When various other authors were stationed at tables to signs copies of their work, Toby was adrift in the room; nevertheless, 28 people lined up with their well-thumbed, 30-year old copies for him to sign. Thus, his belief that PMS still had a life was confirmed. And what press more appropriate than the University of Minnesota Press. I take some credit for bullying him into attending that symposium.

I met Toby at the University of Delaware in 1962 when he was a freshman, I, a sophomore. We attended our first Dylan concert together in Philadelphia in '63, and later the Rolling Thunder tour in DC in '77. And I was a frequent guest in his parents' home in Cabin John, Maryland, later, his apartment in NYC, and his house in Montana and we have hiked Montana on many occasions. I was Montana point man for his second book, *Saloon*. He has been a constant in my life. I consider him a close and dear friend.

For me, personally, the long interview reprinted from the British magazine *The Bridge*, as an appendix to PMS, adds a great deal to the book. You see Thompson not as the callow, self-deprecating youth characterized



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in PMS, but as a mature, thoughtful musicologist and peer of Dylan. Over the years I've read Thompson's work in such magazines as the *New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *Big Sky*, *Outside*, etc. many of the pieces in draft form. His understanding of music and American culture and appreciation of Dylan run as deep as the Mariana Trench. As to my own allegiance to Dylan's work, I can say that, as a poet myself, I've learned more from him than any other contemporary poet -- make that my top ten favorite contemporary poets.

As Thompson indicates in the interview, as a teenager in DC he was a guitar student of both Charlie Byrd and Bill Harris. During our college days Toby became my music mentor, introducing me to performers such as Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, John Hammond, and Dave Von Ronk. I tagged along to hear the likes of Charlie Byrd and Mose Allison at Byrd's Showboat Lounge in DC and ate steamed pig's feet at Harris's club The Pig Foot in northeast DC, where other musicians stopped in frequently to jam with Harris. Together, we heard Segovia play on two occasions and John Williams' American debut (at age 16) in Town Hall, NYC.

Toby sang and played at various coffee houses in those days, and while his voice wasn't any better than Dylan's, he could play anything Bob, or Charlie Byrd, or Bill Harris or John Williams could play. Maybe that's why he didn't pursue it -- it came too easily.

This past spring my wife and I stayed with Toby and his sweetheart Belinda in Georgetown. Toby and I took a five-hour walk through DC and he pointed out landmarks, many of them related to African-American music and culture, now subsumed by gentrification. He knows these maps, both visible and subliminal. We'd taken many similar walks over the years. Toby remains an excellent teacher and guide, if the pupil is attentive. His knowledge is precise and complete and I will be forever indebted to him for sharing his knowledge and friendship.

Yes, there's definitely a retro ele-

ment to PMS. And if you were alive and conscious at the time, you'll dig reliving those days through Thompson's experience. The "Postgush" (afterword) written by Richard Goldstein (Toby's editor at Bantam's US Quarterly for a story about the second trip to Minnesota), is lively and insightful. The Bridge interview brings a sweeping, intelligent perspective to all that's transpired since.

On page 165, Thompson says, as he is leaving Hibbing, that he is going down to Iowa City for some R&R. He was, in fact, coming to visit me, in my poet's garret. Upon arrival he told me enthusiastically about his interviews, showed me photos of Dylan's house, of Echo, and the main street of Hibbing, but, frankly, I didn't get it. I was off in my own self-absorbed world, and didn't even consider journalism real writing -- being precise and getting it right were outside the realm of tragedy, self-destruction and romance. Over the years I have widened my parameters considerably.

After the *Voice* pieces came out, Dylan's response (which Thompson uses as an epigraph for PMS) was "That boy...this fellow, Toby...has got some lessons to learn." I can tell you as someone who knows Toby Thompson like a twin brother, that he's been receptive to these many lessons, learned from them and articulated his findings always stunningly, with wit and acute perception. The *Voice* series and the first edition of PMS elicited controversy, as does anything in print with cojones, as does most anything regarding Bob. This second edition has stirred up its share. Several people claim that Thompson was naïve about many things -- well, he admits that, and that's half the point anyway. Others have said that Thompson "used" Echo Helstrom, as did Bob. In fact, Echo still corresponds with Toby as she does with Bob.

If you cruise the Internet, it is obvious that Dylan has a huge world-wide fan base that thrives on speculation, partly because Bob has remained so elusive, despite the publication of *Chronicles* and his radio show. Toby Thompson's *Positively Main Street* stands the test of time

and deserves a permanent and prominent place in the pantheon of Dylanology because it nails down so many facets of Robert Allen Zimmerman before he became our enigmatic hero, Bob Dylan. But more than that, it's a book about US, when we were innocent and believed. The writing is as sharp and entertaining now as it was then, and the energy of the book will put a strong wind back in your sails, and a smile of affirmation on your face. The book doesn't intend to be prophetic, but it certainly does resonate with everything we know now all these years later.

Ken McCullough lives with his wife and younger son in Winona, where he is an administrator at Saint Mary's University. His most recent books are Walking Backwards (poetry), Left Hand (fiction), and Crossing Three Wildernesses (memoir), co-written with Pol Pot survivor U Sam Oeur. McCullough is also involved in The Hawk's Well Literary Center, through The Book Shelf, in Winona.

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