



AS SEEN IN THE  
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The new edition of Toby Thompson's *Positively Main Street: Bob Dylan's Minnesota* commences with the energy and optimism of the late 1960s and early '70s, when the first edition was written. Primed by the wide-open style of Tom Wolf's *New Journalism* and moved by the spirit of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Thompson sets out (twice) for Dylan's hometown of Hibbing, Minn., to find Robert Zimmerman, the man behind the myth.

But all of this wild excitement plows up against a bleak northern town and the legacy of a shy, polite Jewish boy who had an instinct for inventing himself in the spotlight, a boy who asked his parents' permission to create himself as a runaway rebel on his early record covers, a boy who went to the University of Minnesota and joined Sigma Alpha Mu, the Jewish fraternity, a boy whose sweetheart, Echo Helstrom (the Girl of the North Country), was a bit wilder than the boy himself, a boy who slipped on the lawn doing wheelies on his motorcycle and cracked a vertebrae (but in the legend broke his back flying drug-crazed against the gypsy wind).

Thus there is a feeling of tremendous absence in *Positively Main Street* (University of Minnesota Press, \$15.95), a bit like the absence we feel when the real Wizard of Oz steps out from behind the curtain. Thompson tries to spice up his journalistic accuracy by having a brief fling with Bob's sweetheart, a drink with Bob's English teacher, and he chats with Bob's mother, brother and music teacher. For me, it works, and Thompson briefly becomes a sort of hometown surrogate for Bob, to the extent that Echo tells him that he reminds her of her boyfriend, and Bob's mother starts, well, mothering him.

But the real Dylan (if such a person exists) never shows up, even in this new 40-years-later edition where *Positively Main Street* has become an important part of the Dylan discourse. The Man's only indirect comment to Thompson comes through an early *Rolling Stone* interview: "That boy ... this fellow, Toby ... has got some lessons to learn."

When Terry Kelly interviews Thompson at the end of this new edition, Thompson puts his book in the cultural context of the past four decades, gives us samples of both the praise and the criticism it has garnered, and lets us know that he's still waiting for that interview with the Man himself.

In the tradition of The New Journalism *Positively Main Street* reads like a novel — a bleak but engaging one — where Bob Dylan is the myth and Robert Zimmerman, Toby Thompson and Echo Helstrom are the reality. Dylan fanatic or not, you'll most likely appreciate "this fellow, Toby," and, in the long run, learn a few lessons with him.



— Greg Keeler