

Biography of Dylan fails to deliver the goods

By ALLAN GOULD

When we think of the word "phenomenon" as it relates to the world of entertainment, certain names come quickly to mind: Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Bob Dylan, possibly Meryl Streep. You know what we are talking about; the men and women who became, seemingly overnight, icons of an era, superstars, giants of the screen, radio or TV, whose faces/bodies/voices and (occasionally) words became instantly recognizable to hundreds of millions around the world.

Which is why a thick, and unauthorized, biography of singer/songwriter Bob Dylan should have come with great hopes attached (Dylan, by Bob Spitz; McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 639 pages, \$29.50). Would we finally get the truth behind one of the great myth-makers - as well as folk, rock and pop musical artist - since the Second World War? Would we discover what led to such awesome talent in a middle-class Jewish kid from a small town in Minnesota, to the point where he, and his songs, became rallying cries to a generation? Would we learn why he was attracted to Born Again Christianity - to the point where it profoundly influenced his music for some time, which is quite a bit deeper than certain pornographers and serial killers we have read about - and, later, to return, with great passion, to the faith of his youth?

No, alas, this book fails mightily on all counts. What author Spitz does manage to accomplish only recalls the prescient words of the American lover and genius who was a sort-of-Bob-Dylan of the previous century, Henry David Thoreau, who wrote wittily in Walden, that most seminal of works, that "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate... We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world

some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough." In other words, far too much of what passes for "news" or "insight" in today's world, whether on TV, in People Magazine, or in Spitz's massive tome on Bob Dylan, is little more than useless gossip.

The author's note at the opening of this book is promising: "The problem confronting any biographer of Bob Dylan is not merely one of reconstructing his life but also of demythifying it. For, in fact, such a book is not about one man, but many - the Bob Dylan who wrote brilliant songs and revolutionized our culture by making it conform to his abstract imagination; and the panoply of alter egos he created in order to become that pop phenomenon."

Fair enough. But when we read, just paragraphs later, that "no effort was made to speak with Bob Dylan himself, as it was not my purpose to embroider or become part of the legend," the reader's heart falls. Surely, the best biographies are created after an author at least attempts to interview the subject (made more difficult if the subject has long since met his or her Maker, of course). The result, alas, is more than 600 pages of mishmash: endless interviews with nearly everyone on earth except Dylan's pediatrician, plus 40 pages of footnotes on the 30 chapters, as if to say, "Look, this is pretty serious biography going on here." Which is just not so.

There are hundreds of irritations in reading this book:

-The author's tendency to switch back and forth between calling the singer "Dylan" and - really! - "Bob" or "Bobby."

-Frequently smart-aleck writing ("A self-promoter, Bobby reputedly wheedled things out of friends and family more smoothly

than an accomplished pickpocket. Abe and Beatty (his parents) found it difficult to deny their son anything his little heart desired").

-We read that Robert Zimmerman of Hibbing, Minn., changed his last name to that of a great Welsh poet, but are never told why.

-We are told how the brilliant manager, Albert Grossman, latched onto the young lad, and then read, only in passing, that Dylan had broken with him "over financial matters," and nothing more is made of it.

MADDENING

This biography is really quite maddening to read. And yet, pleasures abound as well, as one would hope, in such a lengthy, in-depth book: A description of "the evil of rock and roll" as seen in Dylan's home town. The young

singer's visit to the dying Woody Guthrie. The endless fabrications that Dylan would invent about his youth. Some solid criticism of the early songs. The time that the folksinger flew up to appear on Canadian TV and confused everyone. Some superior rock history, and the way Bob Dylan weaved his way through it, both influencing it and being influenced by its many changes. And the generous selection of photos is quite wonderful, as well as invaluable.

There's a lot of ugliness in this volume - ranging from the way singer Joan Baez was used like a doormat, to the break-up of Dylan's marriage - that makes for uncomfortable reading. What I would think everyone really wants to know is: How did this small-

town kid with the scratchy voice become such a damned good poet and songwriter? What is he really like? Why such a passion toward religiosity?

With the last few chapters, rushing through Bob Dylan's most recent decade as if Spitz's tape recorder was on fire, we are denied answers to those questions and countless others. And if we are expected to shell out thirty bucks for a hardcover book, we can certainly ask no less. But Dylan remains an enigma, 639 pages after we began.

-Allan Gould is a Toronto-based journalist and author, whose latest book is one of Canadian political satire, *The Great Wiped Out North, or When Sacred Cows Come Home to Roost*.

Gentler mace tastes like nutmeg

DEAR POLLY - What is the difference between nutmeg and mace?

-ALAINA

DEAR ALAINA - Nutmeg and mace come from the same tree. Mace is a lacy red membrane that covers the nutmeg itself. The two have similar flavors, but nutmeg's is fuller and more assertive, while mace is gentler and more subtle. In a pinch, they can be substituted for each other; however, when substituting mace for nutmeg, you may want to increase the quantity slightly to your taste.

Mace is often used in baked goods when a softer, gentler hint of flavor is desired.

By the way, if you can find it, try grating whole nutmeg sometime instead of buying it already ground. The flavor is much nicer, fresher and less "sharp." - POLLY

RECIPE OF THE WEEK: This light, tangy dessert sauce can top fresh fruit, pudding, sponge cake or any dessert that you would use whipped cream, sour cream or custard sauce over. It's made with yogurt cheese - yogurt that is drained in a

POLLY'S POINTERS



POLLY FISHER

colander for two to 24 hours, until it reaches the desired consistency.

Stir 3 tablespoons powdered sugar and 1 teaspoon vanilla into 1 cup yogurt cheese. Cover and refrigerate for an hour before serving to allow the flavors to blend.

My newsletter "Cooking with Yogurt" offers detailed instructions on making your own yogurt and yogurt cheese as well more delicious recipes using these healthful and flavorful products. Send \$1 for each copy to

POLLY'S POINTERS, in care of this newspaper, P.O. Box 93863, Cleveland, OH 44101-5863. Be sure to include the title. - POLLY

DEAR POLLY - Years ago when my children were little, we put bunk beds in their room. Somehow the bottom of the top bunk was always a target for little fingers to poke holes in and even to write on. To stop this, I put a length of drapery fabric over the ugly brown material that was there.

The smiling animals printed on the drapery fabric did the trick - there was no more prodding or writing. When we sold the bunks recently, the animals were still bright and smiling and ready for the next child to look up at from bed. - JAN

Polly will send you a Polly Dollar (\$1) if she uses your favorite Pointer, Peeve or Problem in her column. Write POLLY'S POINTERS in care of this newspaper.

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Many thanks to Mark Rowe, President of Esquesing Historical Society who wrote this article.

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