



Down the Highway: the Life of Bob Dylan

By: Howard Sounes

A well-balanced look at the man, the times and the music

If you're going to read a book about Bob Dylan, there's certainly lots to choose from. "Down the Highway: the Life of Bob Dylan," a 2001 unauthorized biography might be the one and only I'll ever read about the man, who ranks pretty high on my list of favorites. (Although I am pretty sure I read Scaduto's work, which oddly enough came out the same year as this one. But that was years ago ...)

It probably stands to reason an artist with such a prolific track record would be *out of the ordinary* in real life. I guess there were early signs, when at age 4 singing songs at family gatherings he showing little patience for anyone who wasn't listening. The kind of guy who later would trade for a couch an Andy Warhol gift, a silk screen that ultimately sold for more than half a million dollars, years later. (Google Double Elvis gift to Dylan and you can see what it was)

For me the book really gets interesting when his career takes off, with Capitol Records. Although Dylan seemed to lack really close relationships with other musicians, early on, he was certainly acquainted on some levels with many of the Folk artists who dominated the music scene since the early '60s. Dylan seems to have met them all and left his mark, as a musician and a character on the scene. Some of the most fascinating reading centers around Dylan's leadership in the recording studio. Not a fan of rehearsals, I don't think I'll ever hear his music in the same way, knowing how impromptu those recordings really were, beginning with "Highway 61 Revisited."

Dylan's personal relationships, and love life, are covered extensively, as you'd expect. Often I had looked at that cover of "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" and wondered about that girl in the green coat, clutching his arm as they walked along a snowy city street. There's a whole lot about "Suze" in this 500-page account. Very complicated, to say the least... And of course "Sara," who apparently came alive through "Blonde on Blonde."

Tracking through the book I did my best to play albums along with the chronology.

The Freewheeling Bob Dylan: some of that material, seems a little dated? Masters of War?

Another Side of Bob Dylan: a few all-time favorites including Ballad in Plain D.

Highway 61 Revisited: powerful stuff, seems like his abilities were in full bloom, very poetic.

Blonde on Blonde: the second Nashville album? Just really good, really, really good stuff.

Books like this are a huge fascination to me. For years you listen to albums and hear songs on the radio, maybe you relate to the concept of the song, a specific place in time, but until you delve into a musician's life, how much do you really know about the motivations behind the music? And who exactly might be the real-life character mentioned in a verse or brief snippet ...

I highly recommend this book. It's never dull. Page after page delivers deep insight into how the world shook and vibrated from the shock wave that was, and thankfully still is, Bob Dylan.