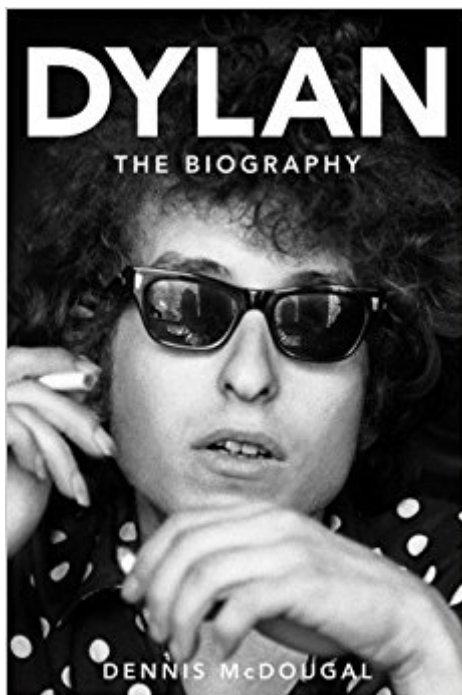


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Dylan: The Biography



Synopsis

The ultimate biography of the musical icon. A groundbreaking and vibrant look at the music hero to generations, *DYLAN: The Biography* digs deep into Bob Dylan lore—including subjects Dylan himself left out of *Chronicles: Volume One*. *DYLAN: The Biography* focuses on why this beloved artist has touched so many souls—and on how both Dylan and his audience have changed along the way. Bob Dylan is an international bestselling artist, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and an Oscar winner for "Things Have Changed." His career is stronger and more influential than ever. How did this happen, given the road to oblivion he seemed to choose more than two decades ago? What transformed a heroin addict into one of the most astonishing literary and musical icons in American history? At 72 years of age, Dylan's final act of his career is more intriguing than ever—and classic biographies like *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades* and even his own *Chronicles: Volume One* came too soon to cover this remarkable new chapter in Dylan's life. Through extensive interviews and conversations with Dylan's friends, family, sidemen, and fans, Los Angeles Times journalist Dennis McDougal crafts an unprecedented understanding of Dylan and the intricate story behind the myths. Was his romantic life, especially with Sara Dylan, much more complicated than it appears? Was his motorcycle accident a cover for drug rehab? What really happened to Dylan when his career crumbled, and how did he find his way back? To what does he attribute his astonishing success? McDougal's meticulous research and comprehensive interviews offer a revealing new understanding of these long-standing questions—and of the current chapter Dylan continually writes in his life and career.

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Customer Reviews

From Publishers Weekly: The legendary singer-songwriter Bob Dylan matures from a carefree, foolish poseur to calculating, canny poseur in this gleefully acid-etched biography. New York Times scribe McDougal (The Last Mogul) chronicles Dylan's project of building a character that will sell by transforming himself from a middle-class Jewish boy with nice parents in Minnesota into an ersatz orphaned carnie and hallucinatory folk-rock oracle (and later into a country-western balladeer and born-again Christian). Along the way, he argues, Dylan stole the personas and stylings of other entertainers, and plagiarized tunes, words, and paintings (sometimes copyrighting them as originals). Amid makeovers and appropriations, the truly authentic constants of Dylan's character in this critical portrait are a hard-nosed drive to succeed, self-centered betrayals of intimates, incessant misrepresentations, and voracious appetites for booze, drugs, and women. McDougal eschews gushing exegeses of lyrics and other staples of Dylanolatry; while he acknowledges a body of great music and perceptively analyzes its resonance, he's happier tossing jibes. (A tale told by an idiot-savant on PCP is his review of Dylan's novel Tarantulas.) Few of his revelations are novel, but McDougal presents his caustic indictment with energy and panache. (May)

From Kirkus Reviews: "The biographer of Lew Wasserman, Jack Nicholson and Otis Chandler returns with a sometimes-scholarly, sometimes-snarky life of the songwriting and singing legend." McDougal leaves few doubts about his seriousness in this long account of Robert Zimmerman, who grew up in the small town of Hibbing, Minn. Many pages feature footnotes, some of which are substantial, others adding but a dollop of color. The author's admiration for Dylan's artistic accomplishments is patent—in the preface, he compares him with Shakespeare, Twain and Dickens—though he does not hesitate to blast Dylan for shoddy performances, weak records, personal coldness (even cruelty), drug and alcohol abuse, and a serial sex life that would make Casanova's grave glow green.

McDougal's work is starkly traditional: He begins with family background and marches steadily forward in 4/4 time, showing how this small-town kid went to New York City and eventually owned it to the core. It was "Blowin' in the Wind," writes the author, that shot him to fame, distancing him from the many other wannabes in Greenwich Village, but Dylan later abandoned protest songs (and, soon, his acoustic guitar) and spent the next decades in a continual reinvention of his music and his persona. But patterns emerged: He eventually wore out even the most indulgent of wives; he abruptly dropped business acquaintances and fellow musicians; he wished always to have the spotlight on him; he borrowed lyrics and images for his paintings; and he remained intensely private, probably realizing that too much exposure would remove the mystery. McDougal

offers engaging details about the major records, as well as Dylan's books and films. He even finds some good things to say about Dylan's dreadful performance in Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Richly detailed, though the author places Dylan on a higher shelf in the cultural library than history may permit. "Whether you agree or disagree with the author, you will likely never read a book as purely entertaining about Dylan." — Tom Waldman, *nohoartsdistrict.com*

Praise for *Five Easy Decades: How Jack Nicholson Became the Biggest Movie Star in Modern Times*

"Dennis McDougal is a rare Hollywood reporter: honest, fearless, nobody's fool. This is unvarnished Jack for Jack-lovers and Jack-skeptics but, also, for anyone interested in the state of American culture and celebrity. I always read Mr. McDougal for pointers." — Patrick McGilligan, author of *Jack's Life* and *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light*

Praise for *Privileged Son: Otis Chandler and the Rise and Fall of the L.A. Times Dynasty*

"A great freeway pileup--part biography, part dysfunctional family chronicle, and part institutional and urban history, with generous dollops of scandal and gossip." — Hendrick Hertzberg, *The New Yorker*

"McDougal has managed to scale the high walls that have long protected the Chandler clan and returned with wicked tales told by angry ex-wives and jealous siblings." — The Washington Post

Praise for *The Last Mogul: Lew Wasserman, MCA and the Hidden History of Hollywood*

"Real glamour needs a dark side. That is part of the fascination of Dennis McDougal's wonderful book." — The Economist

"Thoroughly reported and engrossing . . . the most noteworthy trait of MCA was how it hid its power." — The New York Times Book Review

"Over the years, I've read hundreds of books on Hollywood and the movie business, and this one is right at the top." — Michael Blowen, *The Boston Globe*

Dennis McDougal, writer for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, has won more than fifty awards for his hard-nosed coverage of the entertainment industry. He is the bestselling author of eleven books, including *The Last Mogul: Lew Wasserman, MCA*, and *The Hidden History of Hollywood* and *Five Easy Decades: How Jack Nicholson Became the Biggest Movie Star in Modern Times*. His book *Privileged Son: Otis Chandler and the Rise and Fall of the LA Times Dynasty* was produced as a two-hour PBS documentary.

The book's subtitle (*THE Biography*) and length -- 500 pages, albeit large print -- suggests that it will be a comprehensive, serious examination of Dylan's life and career, and though it does cover its subject's entire life, it has a superficial, careless feel to it. And though a grudging respect for Dylan's accomplishment eventually comes through, overall I found McDougal's tone, and his whole

approach, snarky and cynical. I wanted to know the bad stuff -- the drugs, wanton sex, broken friendships, etc. -- but McDougal presents these episodes with little context or explanation; it's just Bob being "womanizing Bob" or "Amphetamine Bob." A biographer shouldn't be a fawning admirer, and he shouldn't cover up unpleasant facts about his subject, but he should help us understand the complexity of his subject and why the bad stuff happened. Granted, Dylan's so famously enigmatic that getting to know him through a biography seems unlikely, but *Dylan: The Biography* doesn't even seem to be trying. The book is more distracting than anything else: the seemingly endless allusions to Dylan lyrics (for example, Bob had "been through all of F. Scott Fitzgerald's books" -- this line doesn't come along in a paragraph about Dylan's admiration for Fitzgerald; it's just a winking reference to "Ballad of Thin Man") becomes a stale gimmick pretty quickly, and the use of footnotes to toss in random information also create a sense of distraction in a book that could be offering insight. But I did keep reading. I have to admit that there's something compelling not just about Dylan but about McDougal's fast-paced, gossipy style. And, even having read several books about Dylan previously, I learned a few things along the way. So it's not a total loss, and it's about as quick a 500-page read as you're going to find, but it's a long way from being a definitive Dylan biography.

This is not the first biography of Bob Dylan but it is quite likely to be the last. Surely we'll see more works focusing narrowly on specific facets of the superstar's life, or, in the grand but dubious tradition of Dylanology, parsing to death his endlessly confounding (and sometimes utterly nonsensical lyrics), but it's hard to imagine any further need to examine the totality of the man's life now that Dennis McDougal's Dylan has entered the canon. Exhaustively researched, much of it from primary sources, Dylan is not a rehash of prior works but a freshly considered, *de novo* examination of one of the towering figures of American musical culture. And while McDougal certainly adopts a point of view, he clearly is not pushing an agenda for which he cherry-picked evidence but appears to have developed his understandings as he processed the information he unearthed. This "telling it like it is" feel permeates the book and leaves us feeling that McDougal's work is destined to be canonical. But let me not give the impression that Dylan is a scholarly tome to be slogged through. To the contrary, the book is a fast-paced, ever-fascinating roller-coaster romp not just through a life but through an era. Dylan's musical evolution sometimes reflects, sometime refracts and often leads the evolution of music over the last half century. Iconic figures we grew up with wafted in and out of his life, "out" being especially relevant since he left a horde of discarded friends and acquaintances in the dust of his towering and unapologetic, even gleeful, contempt.

That Dylan made full use of celebrity license to be a nasty sonofabitch is only one of the inescapable conclusions to be drawn from this book. Part of the author's brilliance is in being able to effortlessly juggle seemingly contradictory ideas, in much the same way that he describes Dylan as doing. McDougal is transparently admiring of Dylan's musical genius even as he demonstrates that some portion of the work derives directly from that of others. (Not outright plagiarism, necessarily, but more towards what Shakespeare meant when he called himself "a borrower of the trifles of others.") Dylan sees no troubling contradiction in sneering at commercial striving while he himself aggressively pursues the accumulation of wealth, with the rationalization that it's okay for a singer-songwriter to sell records, but not Coca-Cola. There's also no reticence about pointing out that, like many geniuses in a variety of fields of human endeavor, Dylan put out a lot of junk along with the gems. For anyone who might be thinking that you need to be a Dylan fan to enjoy this book, let me tell you, you don't. And if, like I, you've always enjoyed the man's music but couldn't have cared less about his life, this book will change your mind. I can't remember ever using "biography" and "page-turner" in the same sentence but Dylan had me riveted from the first chapter. The only times I paused were when I reached for the headset to re-hear his vintage songs, this time knowing the context in which they were written and recorded. What a revelation.

It seems like Dylan bios are something of a cottage industry. However, the subject's notorious reticence and tendency to obfuscation make any bio's claim to accuracy questionable. Given this, McDougal's bio seems a good effort. It makes a lot of reference to previous bios, which at first was a bit disappointing until I realized careful filtering of material uncovered by previous authors is a good approach to Dylan. The author doesn't seem particularly enamored of or have an ax to grind with his subject (something to which Dylan bios are especially prone). Dylan: The Biography gives you as good a sense of the man as there is to have. If you like Dylan, grew up with him, own a few of the records, seen a concert or two, and want to have some of the dots connected on who he is, this is the book for you. (On the other hand, if you've read everything out there, own everything Dylan's ever released AND the bootlegs, and have followed him from venue to venue, this book will be redundant.) My major gripe is that the book dwells on the second half of Dylan's career but seems to leap through the early years a bit quickly. I'm still a little vague on how Dylan came out of Minnesota, hit the Village and boom is a force in the folk music scene. Maybe there's just not much to say in that regard -- or much available, at any rate -- but it still left me wondering what I'd missed. Otherwise, a good effort and worth your time if you want to get a sense of who this Bob Dylan guy is.

Very well written, its nice to see ones idol does have Fleet of Clay. How he could have so many ongoing love affairs and tour the world is a mystery to me..Dylan must be a sort of Superman. One thing I question, a photo supposedly his first girlfriend in Minnesota. That looks to me like a photo of Jean Harlow who died long before Dylan was born. I have seen photos of his first girlfriend and she looked nothing like that photo. Perhaps some disclaimer should be added to avoid possible litigation. If the photo was posted as a prank, then so be it...

Good songwriter,not much of a human being but I guess he never claimed to be did he.

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