

# THE BAND

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**F**ew debut albums had such far-reaching impact as The Band's 1968 release *Music From Big Pink*. The Band went completely against the grain of the existing pop mainstream to produce some of the most enduring music in history. The strident political messages and introverted lyric fantasies of psychedelia and the frenzied instrumental soloing of a genre suddenly freed from the strictures of the three-minute single were the dominant tropes of rock style at the time. The Band countered with a music which was at once understated and cutting-edge, a style in which instrumental excess was sacrificed at every turn for the sake of the song.

For the next eight years until its magnificent swan song, *The Last Waltz*, The Band defined the best instincts of American rock. The Band delivered thoughtful songs that implied a lifetime of hard-won wisdom rather than the exhilaration of youth. Robbie Robertson's masterpiece, "The Weight," steeped in biblical imagery and wrestling with the shifting nature of good and evil, cast a spell over a music that had been infused with us-against-them sentiment in its songwriting.

At the height of the Viet Nam War the draft-age rock audience was understandably viewing reality in stark moral terms. The Band gave disaffected rockers, denied their heritage by those who equated conscientious objection with treason back their mythic American roots. In an era of harshly-drawn political conflict, The Band produced music of inclusion, crossing generational, historic and, in light of the group's Canadian-American make-up, international borders.

Few rock bands ever mastered the ensemble brilliance demonstrated by The Band. Every piece of this quintet fit together in a magic symbiosis. The three main vocalists, separately and together, created a uniquely soulful atmosphere perfectly attuned to the material—Levon Helm's wry, woodsmoke southern drawl, the mid-range backwoods wail of Rick Danko and Richard Manuel's mournful, ghostly high-end moan. Bassist, Danko and drummer, Helm provided one of rock's slyest, nuance-filled rhythm sections, punctuating the material while driving it along. The two-keyboard arrangements used Manuel's atmospheric piano and Hudson's virtuosic organ playing to complete advantage. Robertson pointed the way to a new kind of rock guitar hero, relying on fewer notes to create more drama.

The Band was already a seasoned unit when *Music from Big Pink* was released. Through the first half of the

1960s the Arkansas-born Helm and his Canadian bandmates backed up the raucous rockabilly journeyman Ronnie Hawkins as the Hawks. After leaving Hawkins in late 1963 they toured as Levon and the Hawks until Bob Dylan hired them in 1965. Dylan and the Hawks were exploring uncharted musical waters, but their discoveries were spurned by Dylan's folk-purist audience. Helm left the band, but the rest remained to make legendary music, which fortunately was preserved in a recording of their show at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

The Hawks followed Dylan to the rustic Catskill artist's community surrounding Woodstock, New York, where they indulged in some American mythmaking of their own, recording a series of sessions with Dylan that became known as "The Basement Tapes." With Helm back in the fold, *Music From Big Pink* celebrated the basement sessions held in that communal house.

*The Band*, their second album, included "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," as well as such Band staples as "Up On Cripple Creek," "Rag Mama Rag," "Unfaithful Servant," and "King Harvest (Has Surely Come)." Fine albums followed: *Stagefright*, *Cahoots*, the live *Rock of Ages* and the roots revisit, *Moondog Matinee*.

After reuniting with Dylan for the *Planet Waves* album and "Before the Flood" tour, The Band made a final major statement under Robertson's direction, *Northern Lights*, *Southern Cross*. "The Last Waltz" closed out The Band's golden age in 1976 with a Thanksgiving day celebration at Winterland in San Francisco, but the mythmaking power of its members continued on in a series of solo recordings and film work—Robertson with the eccentric "Carney" and Helm in an Oscar-nominating support role as Loretta Lynn's father in "Coal Miner's Daughter."

Robertson's richly-imagistic storytelling skills still illuminate his writing, best demonstrated in the cinematic landscape of his 1991 album "Storyville," an atmospheric love story set in New Orleans.

The Band regrouped without Robertson in 1983 for touring purposes and stayed together until Richard Manuel's death in 1986. A new Band lineup put together by Helm, Danko and Hudson rekindled its recording career with the 1993 release of "Jericho."

From the *Basement Tapes* to the *Last Waltz*, from Woodstock to Watkins Glen, The Band added a vibrant new chapter to American musical history. And The Band plays on.

—John Swenson





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