

The Band: Their Theme Is Acceptance of Life

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Pop

The Band: Their Theme Is Acceptance of Life

By SUSAN LYDON
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THE BAND, who made "Music From Big Pink," have a new record out and it's a stone beauty. Called simply **The Band** (Capitol STAO 132), it consists of 12 new songs, every one different and personal and special. When "Big Pink" was released over a year ago, reviewers lauded it for its honesty and simplicity. Staying power is what has made the heavies in rock and roll, and the extraordinary depth of "Big Pink," which enabled one to listen to it over and over without ever tiring of it, immediately elevated **The Band** to the echelon occupied by Dylan, the Beatles and the Stones.

The Band's members are musicians' musicians, but it's not their musical virtuosity—though it exists in impressive abundance—which accounts for their stature. Rather, it is that **The Band's** music is essential music. The stuff of their songs is the stuff of life: birth, death, families, earth, crops, love, weather, people, feelings. They feel at home with country music, partly because they were all raised on it, but more importantly because in country music emotionalism is so close to the surface. Country music,

unlike more sophisticated music, springs from people's deepest feelings about their own lives.

The songs on "The Band" remind me of the rural South, of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, and also of the songs on "Sgt. Pepper's Lonelyhearts Club Band." There is an entire cast of characters, a variety of situations, a range of different human emotions. The songs are all about real people and real concerns; like the music **The Band** plays, they're simple, unaffected, and down-to-earth.

The Band's members have been together for almost 10 years. Like the Rolling Stones, they are the quintessence of a group; they play as one person. On their records, there are no solos to speak of. Their art is a very private thing, and it shows up in the strange distance they keep between themselves and their audience in live appearances. They're really playing for themselves and for their music, and they seem uncomfortable about displaying their private communication in public. They even made the new record themselves, in a studio they built at a rented house in the Hollywood Hills.

Thus the record, like their

music, is a homemade product. Most of the music is acoustic, and even closer in feeling to country music than was "Big Pink." "Big Pink" had one song written by Dylan, another two co-authored by him, and one traditional country ballad. All the songs on "The Band" were written by lead guitarist Robbie Robertson, several with Richard Manuel and one with Levon Helm. "Big Pink" seemed a spiritual album, with its songs about death and imprisonment. "The Band" is happier; the music is more rollicking, the songs are funnier. If there's a theme, it's the acceptance of life.

"When you believe, you will relieve the only soul / That you were born with to grow old and never know," promises one of the songs. It doesn't, in English teachers' terms, mean anything. None of the lyrics do. What's important is not what they mean when you figure them out, but the feeling their images suggest and evoke in the listener. "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," a poignantly beautiful ballad with Levon Helm's Arkansas voice at its most mellow, is a song about the Civil War. It doesn't express a particular point of view about the Civil

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Richard Manuel, Garth Hudson, Levon Helm, Robbie Robertson and Rick Danko of The Band
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 War, it only suggests some of the feelings that were at stake. They're all songs of feeling, although they also have stories to tell.

There are a lot of old people in the songs: Ragtime Willie, the aging sailor whose "Big rockin' chair won't go nowhere"; Old Jawbone ("I'm a thief, and I dig it"); the wise grandpa in "When You Awake." In some of the songs

there's a dialogue between the generations. There are men/women dialogues also. "Across the Great Divide" is a conversation between a hopelessly unfaithful man and his pistol-toting girl friend. "Jemima Surrender" is a hilarious seduction song, like a tomcat howling on a fence: "You don't have to give out if you'll only give in / You can jump and shout, but can't you see, girl, that I'm bound to

win." The rocker on the album is "Look Out Cleveland," a warning about a storm. The central song on the record, according to Robbie Robertson, is "King Harvest (Has Surely Come)." It's a country album and the theme of harvest, as a time of change and fulfillment, runs all through it.

The arrangements of the songs are tight and economical, the sound is complex and

richly textured. Helm's drumming is heavy and holds The Band together through its weird syncopations and timing changes. The chord changes, tempos and instrumentation are totally fresh and unexpected. Robertson's guitar bridges in "Look Out Cleveland" sound imaginative and spontaneous every time.

The Band surely possesses one of the most impressive vocal complements in all of

rock 'n' roll. Richard Manuel's haunting and expressive tenor, Rick Danko's funky wail and Helm's mellow voice are each perfect on their own; when they sing harmony or echoes, the result is loose and free and flowing. Besides the usual guitars, organ, piano, and drums, a lot of surprising musical instruments crop up in unexpected places on the record; the best one is the twanging jew's harp in "Up

On Cripple Creek."

All in all, it's a masterful record. If the ultimate purpose of a review is to tell people whether or not to buy a record, then "The Band" has to be categorized, like that rare handful of rock LP's that includes "Revolver" and "Highway 61 Revisited," as a "must have." Like a perfectly cut gem, every time you turn it, it shows you something else.