



Levon Helm

The Classic Drummer Interview

by Bob Girouard

photo by Paul La Raia

No one plays drums or sings a song like Levon Helm. . . .no one. He's in a select club of musical pioneers that have cut across time and trends; legend and fact being one and the same. In a way he's the everyman; a true American original and his impact on popular music over the past five decades is in a category unto itself.

Helm is undeniably a larger than life persona, yet at the same time humble to a fault. Very few have commanded the respect of such a cross section of influential artists as he has, and drummers are only a part of it. A short list would be people like Ringo Starr, Jim Keltner, Richie Hayward, George Receli, and Steve Jordan, as well as icons like Muddy Waters, Bob Dylan, and Eric Clapton. Truth be told, Levon is usually on everybody's A-Team, whether they be musicians or movie stars.

Since the beginning, music has reflected his soul, whether he was listening to

Sonny Boy Williamson on KFFA, The Grand Ole Opry on WSM, Rhythm & Blues on WLAC, or "diving-in" to the fray with his first band, "The Jungle Bush Beaters." Local dues paid, it was time to venture out into the great unknown with wild man Ronnie Hawkins, and later Levon & The Hawks, who received a *Brill Building* baptism courtesy of mogul/gangster, Morris Levy. The aforementioned all leading up to his stint with Dylan along with a group often heralded as the greatest ever in American-roots rock music: **The Band**.

Drawing from his own influences, Levon set the gold standard by creating a style uniquely his, and achieving a level many drummers are still trying to copy. Musically, when one listens to such staples as *Up On Cripple Creek*, *The Weight*, and *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*, they are hearing not only songs....but rather a living-breathing history of a bygone era. As is commonly known, that particular chapter culminated with *The Last Waltz*. For drummers, it represents one of the finest individual performances ever captured on film, a virtual lesson on how to play with other musicians in any context.

Time marched on, and so did he. But not before adding to the equation with gems like “*The Muddy Waters Woodstock Album*”, “*The RCO All Stars*”, and a trio of new Band CD’S, “*Jericho*”, “*High on the Hog*”, and “*Jubilation*.” With the late 90’s came some major hurdles, but never one to run away from a challenge, Levon even looked the big “C” in the eye and put up his dukes.

Today, the miracle of his return to health and the bonified success of *The Midnight Rambles* have added yet another dimension to his legend. Moreover, his first solo album in 25-years, *Dirt Farmer*, has won unilateral praise from both the public and press including CBS News, CMT, Rolling Stone, NPR, The New York Times, and Entertainment Weekly. The end result coming front ‘n’ center with the ultimate tribute - two Grammy Awards. Fittingly, *Dirt Farmer* for “*Best Traditional Folk Album*” combined with a “*Lifetime Achievement Award*” for his contributions (as a member of The Band) to American music. Recently, *Classic Drummer* was given the opportunity to chat with Levon at Levon Helm Studios, which serves as his home, creative, and business headquarters. Considering our mutual history, I was quite honored about sharing this moment and its magnitude with our readers.

Classic Drummer: Levon, over the past few years there have been several milestones that have all been part of this amazing journey leading up to today. One of the most formidable has been the success of your *Midnight Ramble Sessions*. You must be happy about that?

Levon Helm: Yes, it is a real blessing for all the players. Woodstock used to be one of those places where you could go out in the middle of the week and hear three or four live bands. Those days have changed, and there are only a couple of venues left for live music. For the *Rambles* to have developed the “legs” it has, it’s been good for the musicians and the audiences who have come.

CD: The performances have impacted in so many ways and resounded with other great musicians. I often get asked

about them in interviews.

LH: I wish they could all be here! They would understand how much easier it is to play in the studio instead of trying to pack everything up, constantly from place-to-place!

CD: Yeah, what drummer wouldn’t want your set-up: I mean, you walk into the living room, do a brilliant show, sign a few autographs, wave goodbye, and head back in to catch the late movie on TV!

LH: (Laughter): Yeah, it is pretty good isn’t it!

CD: Coming off your amazing return to health and also performing again, your new CD “*Dirt Farmer*”, signals another milestone in your career. Its traditional sound is like a virtual history of American roots music in itself. Kind of like offering a window to your soul.

LH: Well, you know, I guess you could say that. In my life, that’s the language of heaven. After being as ill as I was, and faced with the possibility of not being able to perform, makes me appreciate the opportunity a whole lot more. I kind of took it for granted. I’d have a gig and I’d enjoy it....but I did take it for granted.

CD: A musician friend recently told me when he first heard it he felt the presence of Ralph Stanley.

LH: Wow...to be mentioned in the same breath with (“Dr.”) Ralph Stanley. I’ve just always worshipped the Stanley Brothers and the bar they set is a hell of a reach for all of us to work for; at least to do the music with the same spirit.

CD: Without question, you seem to be coming from a very spiritual place. In your own words you’ve stated that your daughter Amy, was the motivator behind the idea. Was this a challenge musically, to go literally...back to the beginning?

LH: You know it really was one of the more pleasurable things that I’ve ever had the opportunity to do. I counted on Amy,

Larry Campbell, Teresa Williams... everybody, especially the singers to keep me from singing myself into a hole. Even though I had my voice back enough to attempt the songs, I would have days where I’d start too early and I couldn’t find my voice. It would concern me, but having Amy, especially helped guide me through those spots and I was actually able to perform *better* than I thought I could.

CD: Amy actually co-produced, along with Larry. Did their collective input provide any unexpected musical turns along the way?

LH: Oh, sure, sure. I depended on them. The first few songs from home that we cut seemed to lead us right on into the other tunes that became the “*Dirt Farmer Sessions*.” We’ve got probably two dozen songs all together and we’re talking about a *Dirt Farmer II*. We’re thinking about putting those out too and also working on some promotional videos.

CD: On the video, can I wager you’ll be riding a tractor? I actually read somewhere that as a kid, you were a champion tractor driver?





photo by Paul La Raia

LH: (Laughter) You know on the farm, the 4-H Club was how *country* kids got to go to town! If it was that, or a hog-calling contest...whatever was going down, I was game for it...just to get out of work!

CD: You tear into the album's first cut, "False Hearted Lover Blues", with a march-like, rolling feel and a wicked

lead vocal. Both your drumming and singing reaffirm an exuberance that's all over the disc. What makes this record different than other classic ones you've made in the past?

LH: The most different thing about this one is probably the use of acoustic instruments. For the most part, I don't think we have an electric instrument although maybe a pick-up here and there. We're using acoustic piano, bass, drums, guitar(s), mandolin and so-forth. At the same time we used a full rhythm section so it still has enough rock 'n' roll on it to hopefully make it *danceable*.

CD: There's a feeling I got when listening to *The Mountain*: I closed my eyes and felt the presence of Rick Danko and Richard Manuel. Forgive me, but you almost seem to be channeling here, reminding us of the collective greatness

you had together in The Band.

LH: Well, I love to hear you say that because I sure feel Rick, Richard, and Stan's (Szelest) presence. They're my three *brothers* if you will... and my parents too. Funny you mention that

Most of the things I play certainly have a street-beat-march to them. So, it's between that and watching Peck Curtis play with Sonny Boy Williamson and The King Biscuit Boys. That march and that shuffle is where I live most of the time.

because when we were working on *Blind Child and Little Birds* I couldn't quite remember a couple of spots....it was almost like....I would either dream them or they'd come to me in other ways. It was wonderful. Vocally, for the first time it was like all of us who were singing were as comfortable with each other and reached that level that Rick, Richard, and I used to aim at. For sure, I copied Rick and Richard....we sang together so many times and I tried to sing like they would sing and phrase like they would phrase. I love em' that much.

CD: *The Girl I Left Behind*: My take on this was a bit more blues than Cajun but the accordion really creates a flow here. The groove is right out of your own playbook: A fat 2 & 4 back beat, and it sits so far "behind" it almost steps into the next bar!

LH: You know, I'm not so sure that it might be Amy playing there?

CD: So, it's a *genetic* thing? I'm literally *waiting* for that beat to come down!

LH: She did a fabulous job on *Got Me a Woman*. I think deep down, she's a drummer at heart.

CD: She can out-groove most of us!

LH: That's part of the joy in this album. We didn't have any plan and we let the music dictate the instrumentation for the most part. We also had plenty of help. For instance, George Receli came in on percussion to tie everything together in a nice way. I mean, to play as tasty as he plays... never overplays...never in the way...always the *right* part.

CD: So many drummers ask this, especially when it comes to you, 'The Memphis-New Orleans feel, is it something that all Southern players have? Or is it a case of hard work and discipline?'

LH: I think it's just that old...or, *some-where in-between*, that Saturday-night



dance and a street parade. Most of the things I play certainly have a street-beat-march to them. So, it's between that and watching Peck Curtis play with Sonny Boy Williamson and The King Biscuit Boys. That *march* and that *shuffle* is where I live most of the time.

CD: The “playing behind the beat” style is not necessarily geographical?

LH: I’ve heard that and I’ve heard people say it. But every now and then you can go to places like Buffalo or Rochester. Let me tell ya’ there’s some of the baddest players up there that you’re ever going to find! It’s about the rhythm section. Look at Muscle Shoals...Roger Hawkins and David Hood or Al Jackson and Duck Dunn from Memphis. Hell, you could take them to Hollywood and they’re still going to sound like they sound.

CD: Artistically, you’re not afraid to have some fun on this disc. For instance, the title song, *Dirt Farmer* and *Got Me a Woman* reflect a sense of joy and humor that comes through musically and lyrically.

LH: (Laughs!) Yeah, (recites) “*How bad the old farmer must feel...fell off his tractor up under the wheel...now his head is shaped*

like the tread.” It’s like your regular kind of a blues tune. *The World Is Mad* is an example: “*I heard a smash and a terrible crash...and bodies laid out in the street. The undertaker smiled and he winked his eye and said man’ the business sure is sweet!*” (Loud laughter)! Those kind of songs, just singing and talking about them show there’s another side to the blues.

CD: The album closes with *Wide River To Cross*. This is a beautiful, at times haunting, song. It almost could be construed as autobiographical; the sorrows, the joys, and the friendships along the way. The song’s arrangement is basic, not glossy. Again, it feels like a perfect arrangement for what might be the most personal statement you’ve ever put on record.

LH: There again, it shows how the writers Buddy and Julie Miller, captured the moment. When you hear that special song it’s almost like it’s about you. It

may be the first time you’ve ever heard it, but that song’s about *you*, your life, your sorrows and joys.

CD: True, but in this case there is a certain amount of *intensity* you convey on this song; coming from what sounds like your reflections thus far, on your own life experiences. It’s very moving.

LH: Yes, I know what you mean.

CD: I’d like to give a nod to the drums for a minute: Over the last few years, your signature sound has gotten more powerful. You’re attacking the backbeat harder, and using your kick and snare to propel the rhythms. You also continue to innovate by never doing the same thing twice. Are you exploring or essentially reacting to the music in a different way?

LH: (Laughs!) Exploring? Yeah, because I couldn’t get it right the first time! Well, in the old days I used traditional grip

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about 80% of the time. I developed a habit of being overly busy with my left hand. I wanted the backbeat but also wanted to do a lot of other stuff. It became unnecessary to me. When I got sick and was playing blues with the Barn Burners (with Little Sammy Davis), the backbeat became much *more* important. By changing my grip to mallet-style it basically simplified everything. It kept me concentrating more on the backbeat and less busy; a little of the “less is more” theory.

CD: Let’s talk about your drum equipment? Traditionalists love your set-up: Snare, two toms and kick, along with a 20” (or in-past, 18”) ride w/rivets and a 16” or 17” crash with four rivets (Any one of which you have a way of making sound like an *orchestra*).

LH: And a cowbell. That’s the funny bone of the drum set!

CD: Oops, sorry I forgot that.

LH: I also use a crash-splash type of cymbal that sits right next to my cowbell. I’m still looking for the perfect one. It’s what I like to call the “Jimmy Reed” cymbal. I need to start checking the pawn shops again....got to find that “elusive” crash.

CD: Vintage lovers out there will be pleased to know you continue to use a 60’s Ludwig “Speed King” for your foot pedal. True?

LH: I can’t find anything that will beat an old Speed King. You put a drop of machine or olive oil on the pedal part if it starts squeaking...and there aren’t many that are faster.

CD: Yes, but they always seem to get temperamental when you’re in the recording studio right?

LH: Kind of like a *squeeeal!* (Laughs).

CD: Do you prefer wood over metal snare drums?

LH: I love that wooden rim. You know it’s hard to tell the difference if you catch it just right. When you get used to the rim and the alignment of the batter head....it actually *knocks* better if it’s wood.

CD: Anybody you’d like to give a nod

to equipment-wise?

LH: I’d like to give credit to all the good companies that have supported me over the years: Pro Mark, Zildjian, and Slingerland Drums. I played Yamaha for years, and liked the drums....mainly because the people were so nice to me. Great people over there. You know, Slingerland has a drum factory in Arkansas.

CD: How convenient...Right in your home state!

LH: How bout’ that. I’ve been playing them for about two years now. I really like them. Most important, they’re *sounding good*.

CD: Reflecting on some of your personal *tour de forces*: What means most? The Last Waltz, or more recently, The Ryman Auditorium?

LH: I got good feelings about the Ryman. The Last Waltz *performance* I had good feelings about and still live by it but it quickly turned into a rip-off. I think the Ryman....to have something like that happen this many years later, was as good as having Muddy Waters come to Woodstock. To have the likes of Ricky Scaggs, Sam Bush, Emmylou Harris, John Hiatt, and others? Gosh, everybody showed up! The Ryman was just a wonderful, special night. There’s so much history there. It was a thrill of a lifetime to work with some of the nicest people in the world.

CD: It was a validation of what you’ve given to so many and what you are all about.

LH: Well, I don’t want to go that far, but I did take some of it back in *interest* that night!



Bonus Feature: “Behind the Mixing Board”

The making of a landmark album is often the result of “ears” between the artist, producer, and engineer. Justin Guip, production manager and house engineer for Levon Helm Studios played a major role on the *Dirt Farmer* record. His revelations offer a unique look inside the “technical arts” so vital to the process.

CD: Justin, as the engineer on the *Dirt Farmer* project, how did you approach the recording process?

JG: As engineer, I approached the project with the most simple and pure form of recording: A great microphone, great mic pre amp, good placement in the room, and not a lot of compression or production to document the performances. There were no bags of tricks on this one. Well, maybe a few?

CD: From a musical sense, you’ve kept the traditional form constant throughout. Were there any points instrumentally-speaking, that you were tempted to veer away from?

JG: I could not possibly veer away from tradition with a project like this. It had to be approached from a selfless, egoless production, staying as close to the root as possible. With a CD like this, a hyped production would not sound right. What you hear on the CD is the room and them performing in it. We started as live as possible, playing together and feeling the energy in the barn. Then we went in and did any fixes or overdubs that were necessary. The project’s feel was to remain constant with the sonics and sound. We did not go in and try to make it sound like a vintage record. Our intent was to capture the essence of what was happening in the room at that moment. No long and drawn out discussions...that was just a given.

CD: Was the “roll the tape” aspect more conducive to the relaxed vibe of the record?

JG: No. The tape was not always rolling but when they were ready it had to be good to go. There were no long sound checks and tweaking tones for days. The

vibe was when they got together things had to be set. Because of everyone’s schedule there was not a lot of time to waste by talking about the music. It was all about playing it and capturing that energy when it went through the room. I spent a lot of time setting up beforehand so when someone wanted to go from instrument to instrument it would be ready to be recorded that minute. Not, “Hey, let me set up this mic and run a cable then I will be ready.” It was...are you ready? Great ...GO!

CD: Technically-speaking, aren’t there complexities involved with leakage?

JG: The leakage was our friend. It was welcomed because it was the glue that joined everyone together. It was the hidden “ambiance” we were looking for. I did have baffles up around the band to minimize some leakage but I also wanted some for a live feel. I don’t like the sound of everyone in an isolation booth. Have you ever tried to perform that way? To *feel* the dynamics in the room is so helpful especially relative to this type of music.

CD: Levon’s drum sound on the album is very full. It’s clean and focused, without sounding either thin or boxy. There’s a nice separation; like you let the drums breathe. What was the secret to that?

JG: The drum set up was his traditional set up: 20 x 14 kick, 6 x 14 snare, 12 x 8 rack, 14 x 14 floor. All drums were close mic’d as well as distance mic’d. I wanted to have the option of capturing both sound and detail...so that’s where the close mic’s came in. Then, I used distance miking to capture the sound of the kit in the room. I did not record wide-open and live. We taped the toms down a bit and had a pillow in the kick with a port on the front head. The snare had a zero ring on it as well as some additional taping. Just when I thought they were dead, Levon would deaden them a little more. Part of the sound is the way he hits them with the sticks. On some songs he used *Blasticks*. On others, *Hot*

Rods. He likes a deader sound and it translates to a punchier tone for recording. It’s all in how you hit the drum.

The cymbals were all A Zildjian: 17” medium crash with rivets on his left, 20” medium crash ride with rivets on the right, and an 18” thin crash on the right as well. Hi-Hats were 14” New Beats. Levon’s cymbals have a very distinctive bell tone which he uses to perfection with the music. We tried to have new ones made to duplicate the bell sound but they could not match them. His cymbals are a certain tone which fits the music’s pitch and he nails it every time. We sometimes have to send those cymbals to Zildjian for them to duplicate but we don’t want them to leave the studio! They were close mic’d with a pair of Neumann TLM 103 ‘s to capture the whole tone of the kit as well as his bell work. Having two small baffles on either side of the kit helped bring out the detail as well as keeping the kit contained inside the ambiance of the barn. That helped with the separation as well.

CD: With today’s emphasis on technological perfection, *Dirt Farmer* is a refreshing change. Do you feel it might create a new trend...or a throwback to days gone by?

JG: I hope so. The music sounds “real” like the way this music should sound. It’s not manufactured with fillers and additives; polished, wrapped, packaged, shipped and sent. This record sounds like real musicians performing songs in a room. It’s exciting to hear the human feel...the push and pull of the groove instead of the life force edited and processed out of the performance or song. It has been a real inspiration.

The Levon Helm Band will be doing a series of *Rambles On The Road* this summer/fall.

For more info on Levon Helm, The Midnight Rambles or LHS Studios please go to: www.levonhelm.com