

# Robbie Robertson

## How the devil are you?

Well, I'm really good right now. I've had the busiest year of my life: this guy David Fincher just did a documentary on me, which turned out to be really interesting, and they're going to re-release *The Last Waltz* next year on a new LaserDisc format, so I did some more shooting for that with Martin Scorsese, and I did some music for Barry Levinson's film, *Jimmy Hollywood*. And right before that, Eric Clapton asked if I would like to collaborate on a record with him, so we both started writing things and working on ideas together. It was so enjoyable that I became suspicious of it: I started thinking, Wait a minute, where's the pain in this?

Then just before doing this *Native Americans* project, I did some acting in a movie called *The Crossing Guard*, which Sean Penn directed, with Jack Nicholson and Anjelica Huston as a couple who used to be married. I play the role of her new husband, so I'm, like, stuck between these two brilliant performers – it's like I have the best seat in the house for watching two people who are very good at their craft. I told Jack, I had to do this, because you're so good at this that to me it's like jamming with Django. And he said, Wow, what a beautiful compliment – I just got the Django Reinhardt box set! Jack had to attack me in one scene – he threw me into this headlock 20 or 30 times, and at the end my neck was pretty bad. He said, this is going to accumulate, we might want to have somebody here later, for physiotherapy. So Anjelica called in this Brazilian psychic healer who worked on my neck after the scene. She did quite a good job, too. So, I'm well.

## What do you think of when you think of Q?

I think there's a real dedication in Q. When I talk to someone like yourself, you seem so incredibly well-informed – Q writers always know things about you, musically, that you couldn't even remember yourself.

## How's your life changed in the last eight years?

When I did my first solo album in 1986, it was the first time I really threw up signals about my Native American heritage. I kept feeling this stuff seeping under the door for me: I'd be writing a song, and I'd think, God, these drums sound like drums that I heard when I was a little kid. It's like a scent you experience later in your life that you remember from when you were a child. It's been building momentum inside me until I finally got to express it more fully with the *Native*



*Americans* project, which has been a self-realisation for me, the fulfilment of what I started eight years ago.

## How did you get involved with this project?

It started with this big, beautiful book, *The Native Americans*, which they turned into a six-hour documentary, and when it came to doing music for it, I guess for the number of people who have experience in film, music, making records and native heritage, the list isn't that long, so I might have won this by default! For me, the bottom line was to make a record which would show what was going on musically in Native American culture – most people think it's something that stopped a hundred years ago. These musicians I was working with from the Choctaw nation, they record the rhythm of ravens' wings, and the singing stones, these huge stones in the desert that you play with your hands, the way that people play wineglasses: they howl and change notes, and when you play different ones together it becomes this vibration that goes right down your spine, utterly magical.

## Do you see The Band at all?

I do. On my previous couple of records I worked with Garth and Rick, and I wanted to work with Levon too, but his house burnt down, and it wasn't a very appropriate time to do it...

## Didn't Garth's house burn down a couple of years ago as well?

Yeah. These guys, they better check their karma!

## What did you think of The Band's Jericho album?

I've only heard a couple of cuts, but they sounded good to me. It sounds like these guys have an amazing record in them; I don't know if this is it, but I'd like to see them soar over the mountain.

## Are you ever tempted to re-join them?

Not really, because I think it was very fully realised: we discovered it, invented it, made it happen, and brought it full circle to a close, and I respect that cycle.

## Do you miss the road?

I don't miss the road at all. It's hard to miss bad food and lonely hotel rooms.

## Did you read Levon Helm's book?

No. I was told it was sort of a sour-grapes book – though he's never mentioned anything to me, ever, over all the years – and I thought, How can somebody carry around so much bitterness and anger inside them all these years? Isn't it time to

move on? Some day I'll write a book – I won't write it with somebody else, I'll write it myself – and I'll tell an amazing story. I won't leave out the blanks.

## Did you read Barney Hoskyns's biography of The Band, Across The Great Divide?

I read about the first 30 pages and there was so much he had to guess because he didn't know: he's talking about people in a room, but he wasn't there and hadn't talked to any of the people in the room, so he had to guess. It's OK if people are dead because then you can guess and nobody knows any different; but when I was reading it, I thought, That's not what we were doing and that's not even who was in the room, and that's not what the circumstance was, and I can only tolerate a little of this at a time. There's no question that he was trying to write a good book – he wasn't writing it because he didn't care – but a lot of the information was just guessing games.

## Do you think it's fair that you're blamed for the break up of The Band?

OK, I was responsible for the break up of The Band. But did I do it on a whim? I don't think so! Drugs and alcohol were the real destruction of The Band – but that's always underplayed. Richard was drunk the first time I ever met him, when we were 17 years old. He had a real allergy to alcohol, he was a serious alcoholic. And we, in our ignorance, tried to control it by doing things that were no help at all. But he wasn't the only problem. Everybody had their own drug of choice.

## What is the king of the vegetable kingdom?

The Jerusalem Artichoke.

## Tell us a joke.

NASA is putting in a new plant, out in the desert. The scientists, as they're building it, notice an old man watching them every day. Finally, this old man, a Native American, comes up to them with a young boy, who translates for him. The boy says, My grandfather wants to know what you are doing here. The scientists say, We're building things to send people up into the sky. The boy tells his grandfather, who responds, What's the big deal? My ancestors have been going up into the sky for thousands of years! The scientists say, Well, if you want to send a message to your ancestors, come and put it on a tape and we'll send it up to them. The next day, the grandfather comes back and tapes a message in his native tongue. Intrigued, the scientists ask what he said. The boy says, The message is: Don't trust these guys – they'll steal your land!

Interview by Andy Gill