

# The Band' Shuns the Bandwagon

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Pop



"The Band," who made the hit album, "Music From Big Pink," plays at the Fillmore East on Friday and Saturday. They learned from Dylan that a rock song doesn't have to be a nitwit song.

Elliott Landy

## 'The Band' Shuns the Bandwagon

By SUSAN GORDON LYDON  
SAN FRANCISCO.

LAST July a quiet sort of bombshell exploded on the rock music scene. It was "Music From Big Pink," an unpretentious record done by a five-man rock group calling itself The Band. All anyone knew about them was that they had backed Bob Dylan on some of his concert tours and that they lived up in Woodstock, N. Y., with him. Dylan's imprint on the album was unmistakable: he wrote one of the songs and co-authored two others, and he did the primitive painting that graced the album's cover. And his influence was readily apparent in the cryptic lyrics of the songs. But the record's sound was unique to The Band, and unique in new rock. The music was so good that "Big Pink" became one of the year's musical events, in the way that a new album from the Beatles or from Dylan himself is always an event.

Meanwhile, the five people responsible for the event—Jaime (Robbie) Robertson, the lead guitarist, Garth Hudson, the organist, Levon Helm, the drummer, Rick Danko, the bass guitarist, and Richard Manuel, the pianist (all shared the vocals)—were lounging around in the country. They weren't promoting the album, they weren't giving live performances, they weren't granting interviews, all of which are deemed essential to the success of a first album by an unknown group.

"Well, it was summertime, and hot, and there wasn't much to do," Robbie Robertson explained recently, waiting to begin rehearsing in San Francisco's vast, empty Winterland, where The Band was to play its first gig alone in four and a half years. "So we just sat around Woodstock—some more. We didn't think the album would go down as well as it did. After we finished it, we sat down and listened to it really carefully and decided we liked it very much. It was the kind of music we like to play. But we didn't expect the hullabaloo. I guess we weren't ready to come out in public yet. We had done a very long and hard tour with Bob. Most of the weight was on him, but some of it was on us, too. We saw all that crazy success stuff going on, and it just put us back in our chairs for a couple of years.

"Actually, we had thought about it some: if we put out this record and it does do really well, it might be nice not to jump on the bandwagon and say, 'It was us, it was us.' We thought we should go somewhere like Jamaica and watch it all happen from there, rather than jump right out and milk ourselves dry. Because if things go well, we hope to be doing this for quite a while."

After long negotiations in Woodstock during which rock impresario Bill Graham agreed to pay them \$20,000 for a weekend's work at Winterland, The Band made its post-album performing debut there and will follow it next Friday and Saturday at Graham's Fillmore East in New York. They arrived in San Francisco following a two-month recording stint in Los Angeles. Their manager, Albert Grossman, flew out to see them, bringing news of Woodstock: spring planting and which dogs had puppies.

They said that at their concerts they would mainly be playing the music that was on "Big Pink." We didn't play that music before we recorded it, and we didn't play it afterward, so it's still

fresh," Rick said. What did they play at home? Country songs like "Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos" and "Little Birds":

*"Little birds are singing all around me,  
On every bush and vine.  
My pleasures would be double  
If I could call you mine."*

Levon plays his antique in-laid mandolin on these songs and Rick the acoustic guitar. Rich, who was born the son of a woodcutter in Simcoe, Ont., and grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry on a wind-up Victrola and battery radio, and Levon, the only American in The Band, from West Helena, Ark., are responsible for most of the country sound in The Band's music.

Opening night at Winterland was not altogether auspicious. Robbie Robertson had been sick with flu for two days and could only appear after being hypnotized, with the hypnotist right on stage working his spells. But on the two subsequent nights, The Band was magnificent. They are all versatile musicians and switch instruments on stage, the drummer playing mandolin, the organist playing piano, the pianist playing drums. They are together in a way that only a band which has played together for nine years, as they have, can be. Their sound is richly textured (due in large part to the organ—they consider Garth the musical genius of the group) with cascading rhythms and the wailing voices, sometimes alone, sometimes in bluegrass harmonies, of Rick, Richard and Levon. Their songs are deeply moving, almost spiritual in their content and effect, as in Richard Manuel's "In a Station":

*"Isn't everybody dreaming?  
Then the voice I hear is real.  
Out of all the idle scheming,  
Can't we have something to  
feel?"*

Robbie calls their sound "mountain music," half country, half rock and roll.

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"It's a great thrill to play in front of people again," Robbie said. "We're able to travel and live well and we don't have to scrounge around like we used to. You know, this is the first time in four and a half years we've played that we haven't been booed. We used to play very hard and fast with Bob, and people didn't understand us. The hostility was directed at us. 'Get the band out of there,' the audiences yelled. In Europe they used to say, 'Send that band back to America.' People have forgotten about that with 'Music from Big Pink,' but we remember."

The Band got together with Dylan in the summer of 1965. The way the story goes is that they were playing a gig in Somers Point, N. J., a seaside resort, when Dylan telephoned them and asked, "You wanna play the Hollywood Bowl?"

"I didn't really know who he was, or that he was that famous," Robbie said, so they asked him who else was going to be on the bill. "Just us," said Dylan.

Dylan was then going into

hard rock and was looking for a rock and roll band to back him on his concert tours. The Band had then been together almost five years. They all had similar backgrounds: they had grown up on country music, gotten into rock and roll in high school, where they all had their own bands (Levon's was called The Jungle Bush Beaters), and had joined up, one by one, in their teens, with Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins, Canada's rockabilly king, who, at the height of his popularity, had three million-selling singles. They played behind Hawkins for three years, then quit to go on their own as Levon and the

Twittys. They played old-style rock and roll, sharing bills with people like Carl Twitty, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. When Dylan telephoned them, they were almost unknown, playing an endless round of what Robbie now calls, "low-down, honky-tonk places" in the South.

From September, 1965, to May, 1966, The Band toured with Dylan, first in America, then in Europe and Australia. "It was no flash," Robbie said. "Bob didn't zoom us like he does a lot of people. He was a man with a lot of words we weren't even aware of before. We were just a rock and roll band. But, as time went along,

ing Nowhere," and with "Music From Big Pink."

It was in Woodstock also that The Band started growing beards and mustaches and wearing funny hats.

"We were up there just living," said Robbie. "There was nothing that we had to do, no obligations. It was just easy; we didn't do anything but sit around and joke and laugh. Bob had been wanting us to make a record for a long time. Our fun was beginning to run out, and we needed to take care of business a little. So we made 'Music From Big Pink.' We could have made it any time; it's that kind of record." It took two months to complete. John Simon, the producer, asked them how they wanted the record to sound. "Just like it did in the basement," they told him. "We don't want to use any tricks."

They did the new record, which should be out this summer, in a recording studio in the poolhouse of a house they rented in the Hollywood Hills. They built the studio themselves in just three weeks; Robbie did most of the engineering on the album "because it was something new and a challenge. We did the same thing with this record that we did with 'Big Pink,' sat down and listened carefully after it was finished. We like it. The music is different from the last album, though it's hard to describe exactly how. All we know is that it's another step for us. We're just moving along the best we can."

things fell together, and we found out that the same things that meant a lot to us meant a lot to him, too, that the same songs we still liked, he did, too. What we learned from him was that a rock song doesn't have to be a nitwit song, that you have to work on it to make it hold up. And we taught him what we knew about rock and roll."

Exhausted, The Band took six months off after they returned from the European tour. Then Dylan, recuperating from his motorcycle accident, invited them to Woodstock. Richard, Rick and Garth moved into the pink house in nearby West Saugerties, built a recording studio in the basement, and Dylan and The Band began playing together six days a week, coming up with Dylan songs like "The Mighty Quinn" and "You Ain't Go-