

Local group to perform The Band's music

“Carnival” shows mark anniversary of famous band’s debut

In late April of 1969, The Band – the great Canadian-American rock group whose ground-breaking recordings defined the “Americana” genre – made their very first concert appearances, in a legendary 3-night stand at San Francisco’s Winterland, promoted by Bay Area rock godfather Bill Graham. These shows are remembered as an iconic, dramatic moment by music historians and connoisseurs, including Berkeley’s Greil Marcus, who described them in detail in his famous book *Mystery Train*.

This spring marks the 45th anniversary of those remarkable shows, and in early May they will be commemorated in a series of concerts devoted to The Band’s music, as played by the veteran local band Johnny Harper & Carnival. According to band leader Harper, “These shows are really the first time a group has seriously performed The Band’s music in California – or really, anyplace west of Woodstock, New York! – since *The Last Waltz*.” He is referring to The Band’s famous 1976 farewell performance, documented on record and film. *The Last Waltz* also took place at Winterland.

The first performances of “Life Is A Carnival,” Harper & Carnival’s Band tribute show, will take place at Avonova, an intimate performance space in Oakland, on Saturday May 3rd, and then at several larger venues, St. Cyprian’s Church in San Francisco on Saturday May 10th, the Sebastopol Community Center on Friday May 23rd, and Don Quixote’s in Felton (Santa Cruz County) on Friday June 13th. More dates are in the planning stages.

Harper, a well known Bay Area guitarist, singer, songwriter, band leader, and record producer, is outspoken in discussing the complexity of The Band’s music. “Audiences love The Band’s songs,” he says. “But aside from two or three hits, you just don’t hear these songs played live. And there’s a reason for that: frankly, most groups can’t do it! The Band’s music sounds loose and casual and folksy, but it’s actually very intricate and complex. Most musicians won’t put the time in, to really get all those amazing details right, the chord voicings and the subtle rhythmic shifts, the overlapping voices and instrumental parts. If you don’t get those details down, you’re just not really *doing* these songs.” But he believes his own group is equal to the challenge. “I’m very lucky,” he says, “to have a group of amazing players with me, who have been willing to put in the time to get this music right.”

The concerts will cover the full history of The Band’s music, from their debut album *Music From Big Pink* to later masterpieces like “Acadian Driftwood,” “Life Is A Carnival,” and “Ophelia.” Famous hits like “The Weight” and “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” will of course be included in the program, but so will more obscure material, including, says Harper, at least one classic which The Band themselves never performed live, “Daniel and the Sacred Harp” from the album *Stage Fright*. “They used some really unusual instrumentation on that cut,” Harper says, “and I guess they just weren’t willing to try to re-create it in concert. It was a challenge, but we found a way to do it that I think works really well. And it’s such a powerful song – I just couldn’t leave it out.”

The group, Johnny Harper & Carnival, is a 4-piece unit of guitar, keyboards, bass, and drums, with all four members singing. (The players are Harper on guitar, bassist Patrick McKenna, keyboardist Neal Roston, and drummer Rick Alegria.) For the Band tribute shows, Harper says, they will add a few additional instruments (horns, fiddle) to capture more of the instrumental texture of The Band's recordings. Harper and his band mates are veteran pro's with a very long list of credits among them, having worked with artists ranging from Maria Muldaur and Barbara Dane to Asleep At The Wheel, Mary Wells, Big Joe Turner, the Drifters, and many more, including (in Harper's case) Louisiana legends like Katie Webster, Queen Ida, Willie Tee and Ernie K-Doe.

Harper is quick to point out that his group is not primarily a "tribute band" devoted to playing The Band's music. "First and foremost," he says, "this is a band with its own music, its own statement. We're coming out with an album in June, which will be almost entirely original songs of mine – mainly R&B songs with really strong lyric content. That's really our primary focus. We also play a lot of New Orleans rhythm and blues – I've been known for that style for many years. We do some great Allen Toussaint songs, things by The Meters, Huey 'Piano' Smith, Earl King, Dr. John. Taking on The Band's music at this level, doing these shows – that's something extra we are doing. It's just one side of our musical life."

Harper's decision to do the Band concerts was motivated by a lifelong love of their music. He saw The Band perform many times in the early '70s. "It's something I feel very strongly about," he says. "All three of The Band's main singers are gone now – Levon Helm was the last of those voices. Of course we have their records, those are incredible. But I felt that their music should still be played *live* for audiences today. These songs can be so exciting in live performance. I guess I felt an obligation to do this, a sense of duty to that music. I knew I *could* do it, I knew my band could do it, and I decided I should step up to the plate."

The Band – Arkansas drummer-singer Levon Helm, guitarist and chief songwriter Robbie Robertson, bassist-singer Rick Danko, pianist-singer Richard Manuel, and organist-saxophonist Garth Hudson – were instantly hailed as master musicians, by critics and fellow artists, when *Music From Big Pink* appeared in 1968. Their soulful down-home style had an immediate influence on the music made by their even more famous contemporaries, including the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, and the Grateful Dead. Aside from Helm, all the group's members hailed from Canada. Only Robertson and Hudson are still living today.

The members of The Band had honed their chops playing roadhouse R&B for years with rock'n'roll wild man Ronnie Hawkins, and then had backed Bob Dylan on his famous "goes electric" tours of 1965-66. But when it came time for them to step out on their own, performing their original material, even these tough road warriors began to develop a severe case of stage fright. Robertson, The Band's unofficial leader, was so nervous about the Winterland shows that he came down with a raging fever, and was only able to make it through the first night with the aid of a hypnotist gesturing to him from the wings. Does Harper think he might fall prey to the same fears, as he prepares for the Band shows and also his group's debut album?

"I don't think so," he smiles. "I'm really in my element on stage. Lots of audience members have come up to me, over the years, and told me I just look so happy up there playing,

doing the thing I love best. And I've got these great guys to play with, hearing them just lifts me up. I think we'll have a great time together on these shows. Still," he muses, "I do know a hypnotist, actually – he takes guitar lessons from me. Maybe I should talk to him, just in case!"

*Johnny Harper & Carnival are performing ***Life Is A Carnival: A Tribute to The Band*** at these venues:*

Saturday afternoon, May 3, at Avonova, 417 Avon St., Oakland. Doors open 2:15 pm, show at 3:00 pm. Admission \$15. E-mail for reservations: go to RSVP at www.avonovamusic.com.

Saturday evening, May 10, at St. Cyprian's Church, 2097 Turk St. (at Lyon), San Francisco. 8:00 pm. Admission \$15. (415) 454-5238. <http://noevalleyministryseries.com>. Tickets at <http://www.brownpapertickets.com>.

Friday evening, May 23, at the Sebastopol Community Center, 390 Morris St., Sebastopol. 707-823-1511. Admission \$15. Tickets at <http://www.seb.org>.

Friday evening, June 13, Don Quixote's International Music Hall, 6275 Hwy. 9, Felton CA 95018 (Santa Cruz County). Show at 8:00 pm. (831) 603-2294. Admission \$12 in advance, \$15 at the door. Tickets/ reservations: see details at <http://www.donquixotesmusic.info/tickets.html>.

The group will also perform The Band's music live on Derk Richardson's show, KPFA, 94.1 FM, at 10 pm on Thursday May 1st. The show will run live on line at <http://www.kpfa.org>, and can then be heard on line any time through May 14th, via the "Archive" section of [kpfa.org](http://www.kpfa.org).

For more information on all these events: E-mail jjmusic@ix.netcom.com, or call (510) 710-5969.