

# Levon Helm, the distinctive voice of The Band, dies at 71

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Levon Helm, the multi-instrumental drummer and singer of the musical group, The Band, died at age 71 on April 19 at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City after a long bout with throat cancer. Helm helped give The Band its characteristic sound with his poignant singing voice. Helm had a passionate, lifelong love of music and developed an equally passionate hatred of the music industry establishment.

Helm was diagnosed with throat cancer in 1998. He fell on hard times as cancer took his voice and medical bills threatened his house. “You got to pick one—pay your medical bills or pay the mortgage. Most people can’t do both, and I’m not different,” he told CNN in 2010.

After the official breakup of The Band, in 1976, Helm acted in feature films, most notably *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980), *The Right Stuff* (1983) and *In the Electric Mist* (2009). According to his web site, he performed in a total of 30 films, including those in which he appeared as himself.

Helm told his story in *This Wheel’s on Fire*, co-written with Stephen Davis in 1993. The September, 2000 printing is still available in the US and well worth reading. It is tempting to relate more of it here than this space permits, but the interested reader can go to the source.

In May of 1940, he was born Mark Lavon Helm (Levon came later) in the small town of Elaine, in Phillips County, Arkansas and grew up on his family’s cotton farm in nearby Turkey Scratch, a small hamlet a few miles west of the Mississippi River town of Helena.

It was a difficult life, but Lavon’s father, Jasper Diamond Helm, encouraged his children to appreciate music. Though the family had no electricity, they had a battery-operated home radio on which they listened to the “Grand Ole Opry” live broadcasts of country music greats such as Roy Acuff, Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell and Bill Monroe from Ryman Auditorium in Nashville Tennessee and “King Biscuit Time” coming out of radio station KFFA in Helena, featuring black blues artists Sonny Boy Williamson II and Robert Lockwood, among others.

When Lavon was only six years old, his family went to a performance of Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys, which included the legendary Lester Flatt on guitar and Earl Scruggs on banjo. This experience “really *tattooed my brain*” and from then on, Lavon was sure of what he wanted to do with his life.

The Helm family frequently attended musical acts that traveled through the Mississippi Delta, but one in particular was everyone’s favorite: F.S. Walcott’s Rabbit’s Foot Minstrels. Levon attributes any training that he received on drumming from his hours of watching the

drummer from this show.

Helm associated the “midnight ramble”—the after-hours “adult” performances that many of these traveling acts offered—with the birth of rock and roll. Helm was colorblind as far as his musical influences, even though performances he attended in his childhood separated black and white spectators with a center aisle.

At an early age Lavon performed at 4-H club functions [a youth organization administered by the US Department of Agriculture; the name refers to the “head, heart, hands, and health”] with his older sister, Linda, he on guitar and she on washtub base. Their parents eventually made Linda stop when “Momma was less and less sure about the propriety of her younger daughter appearing public with her bare leg hitched onto an upside-down washtub.” Phillips County was less than a two-hour drive from Memphis, where young Lavon went with his friends to catch rock and roll acts such as Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis.

Phillips County had its own homegrown stars, such as Harold Jenkins, who became famous under the name Conway Twitty (1933-1993). Because of his enthusiasm and talent, Lavon became friends with many local musicians and started his own band in high school called the “Jungle Bush Beaters.” By that time he had switched to drums as his main instrument.

Ronnie Hawkins (born 1935), an ambitious rock and roll frontman from Fayetteville, in northwestern Arkansas, recruited Lavon to his band, The Hawks, while the latter was still in high school. Hawkins had some savings left over from his career as a bootleg whiskey runner in high school and invested in gear. He was an audacious and good-looking performer who himself played no instrument, but had already pinched Twitty’s guitar player and was determined to give Elvis Presley a run for his money.

In May of 1958 the Hawks went to Toronto (where he became Levon), where Ronnie had heard there was a good audience for rock and roll. By 1963 the only two Arkansans left in the Hawks were Ronnie and Levon. Canadians Robbie Robertson, Richard Manuel, Rick Danko and Garth Hudson had been brought in and the Hawks became quite successful in the Toronto nightclub scene and beyond.

Over the years, the Hawks had made connections in New York City and acquired Henry Glover as manager. A split with the lead singer eventually occurred and by 1964, the group had become “Levon and the Hawks,” and tried to make a go of it on the East Coast of the US.

In August 1965, the group was playing Jersey Shore clubs when they got a telephone call from Bob Dylan, who was looking for a band. The previous month Dylan performed at the Newport Folk

Festival with electric instruments, causing much controversy in the folk music scene. Dylan asked them if they wanted to play the Hollywood Bowl.

The relationship with Dylan began explosively. For Helm and what became The Band the venues suddenly went from small nightclubs to stadiums and amphitheatres with audiences numbering in the thousands. The joy in the music was dampened by something new they had to endure—booing. Dylan's turn to electric instruments was met by many of his folk music devotees with hostility. Large portions of the crowd hooted the band and even threw things at the musicians.

Levon was so demoralized by the negative audience response that he quit the band. He left music altogether for a short period and went to work on an oilrig in the Gulf of Mexico.

The tempestuous period subsided over the course of the next few months. Dylan had a motorcycle accident in July 1966 and removed himself from public view. The remaining band members and he bought houses in pastoral Woodstock, New York and began playing sessions in their home which were later released as "The Basement Tapes." The group was contracted by Capitol Records and Rick Danko persuaded Levon to come to Woodstock and return to what became The Band.

One highlight of this period was the performance of the group behind Bob Dylan at the Woody Guthrie memorial concert in January 1968. Dylan, Helm and company performed boisterous and up-tempo versions of Guthrie's "I Ain't Got No Home," "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt" and "The Grand Coulee Dam."

On July 1, 1968, The Band released its long-anticipated first album—*Music From Big Pink*—which became an instant sensation. Its popularity reflected a widespread desire for more authentic and truthful music after the general carelessness and excesses of psychedelia.

Dylan found in Helm a connection to Southern musical traditions that arose from a lengthy and tempestuous history. This was especially recognizable on tunes such as "The Weight," "Chest Fever," and later on "Jemima Surrender" and "Up on Cripple Creek."

The collaboration in Woodstock produced a new type of music. There was no frontman. Band members shared vocal leads and instrumentation. Many musicians also responded. Eric Clapton commented that his life changed when he heard *Music From Big Pink* for the first time. He was inspired to create his own group, Derek and the Dominoes. Groups like The Little River Band emerged in Australia in response to the sound of The Band.

The Band produced six studio albums before their dissolution in 1976. *Music From Big Pink* and their second album, *The Band* (1969), were the best received critically and their most popular. Later albums had a few notable songs on them, like "Don't Do It" and "Life is a Carnival," but weren't nearly as intriguing as the early LPs. In truth, The Band fairly rapidly ran out of things to say.

Robbie Robertson became known as the leader of the group, since so many of the songs were credited to him. Rightly or wrongly, he felt it was time for The Band to retire and collaborated with director Martin Scorsese on a film of a final concert, held at San Francisco's Winterland Ballroom on Thanksgiving, 1976, known as *The Last Waltz*.

There are conflicting accounts of the evolution and fate of The Band, but they can arguably be reduced to two: the somewhat sanitized version offered in *The Last Waltz* and Levon Helm's

version, as told in his book. Helm felt that Robertson effectively hijacked the group and while most of the proceeds of record sales went to Robertson, the other four members needed to tour to make a living.

The story of The Band members after their last concert in November 1976 concert is mostly a tragic one.

In his autobiography, Helm wrote of an earlier period "If you never made a million dollars overnight, like we did, you have no concept of what it can do. We saw it ruin people—kill them! Suddenly we had all the money we needed, and people were falling over themselves to make us happy, which meant giving us all the dope we could stand. People wanted to turn us on for free, do us favors, and some of us were happy to be taken care of like that. ... I'm here to tell you that it's a *crying shame* to see what success can do to some people. I'm sure it wasn't the best thing that could have happened to the band."

The suicide of Richard Manuel, 42, in 1986 followed years of trying to make the remains of "The Band" something other than a nostalgia group. Helm asserts that Rick Danko's death at the end of 1999 at the age of 56 was a product of overwork resulting from the settlement that officially ended The Band twenty years earlier. The media accounts classify Danko's death as drug-related, but he was on painkillers in part to cope with an old injury.

Helm continued to make music after The Band's official dissolution. In 1977, he released *Levon Helm and the RCO All-Stars* with a great lineup of musicians including Mac Rebennack (Dr John), Donald "Duck" Dunn, Steve Cropper and Howard Johnson.

Artistically, Helm later work may not have approached the level of The Band's at its best, but his later albums are worth listening to. Notable among his later CDs are *Dirt Farmer* and *Electric Dirt*. The sheer volume of Helm's output is phenomenal and many pearls can be discovered by listening through them, such as "The Mountain," his cover of a Steve Earle tune.

His daughter, Amy, who took care of him during his illness and drove back and forth to New York City for his radiation treatments, became his bandmate. When money became tight due to Helm's treatments, the pair revived a tradition in his studio/barn called the "Midnight Ramble," which harked back to the old minstrel shows and provided an unforgettable musical experience for all who participated.

Helm always loved to play, and he did so until the end.



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