

Ronnie Hawkins, the rockabilly performer who mentored The Band, dies at 87

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31 May 2022

Arkansas-born Ronnie Hawkins, who once promoted himself as “the King of Rockabilly” and “Rompin’ Ronnie,” died Sunday morning, he was 87. His wife Wanda informed the *Canadian Press* in a phone interview that he died peacefully in a Peterborough, Ontario hospital room after recently having endured several health issues.

Hawkins was most notable for assembling the group of five musicians who would later become “The Band.” The greater portion of his musical career is less widely known, however. Hawkins was a performer more than a musician. His talents lay primarily in his ability to entertain on a live stage.

Born in 1935, the son of a schoolteacher and a barber, Hawkins lived life on the edge from his days at Fayetteville High School. He earned up to \$300 a day running whiskey between Missouri and Oklahoma, where alcohol was outlawed in some counties. His “souped-up” Model A Ford was designed to outrun the police should the need arise. He invested the money he saved in local nightclubs and music venues.

Hawkins formed his first band before he graduated, during the earliest days of rock and roll. Arkansas was a musical melting pot and Hawkins took it all in. (See the WSWs on Sleepy Labeef, also born in Arkansas in 1935.) Country music blended with blues to form rock and roll and “rockabilly,” which was what Hawkins considered himself to be. Out of the powerful Helena, Arkansas radio station KFFA came “King Biscuit Time,” which broadcast the blues of black musicians Sonny Boy Williamson, Robert Jr. Lockwood, Memphis Slim, Robert Nighthawk and the like. At the same time, traveling minstrel shows entertained a wide swath of the population in the rural South.

Memphis was the hub of this musical melting pot. Record producer Sam Phillips founded Sun Records, recording the music of both black and white musicians. He is famed for launching the career of Elvis Presley,

who, coincidentally, was born just two days before Hawkins. Stax Records, a soul and blues label, had black and white musicians in its stable, was located in Memphis as well. At its peak, the label would produce Otis Redding and Booker T. & the M.G.s. Other artists, like R&B guitarist Chuck Berry, country star Bill Doggett (“Honky Tonk”), and Roy Orbison, who was considered a country R&B hybrid, dominated the music scene.

During a six-month stint in the army, Hawkins fronted a group of black musicians, calling it the Blackhawks. It was short-lived, as was his military career. After he was released from service, Hawkins was always hunting for talent for his constantly changing lineup. He recorded several demos at Sun Studios, but they didn’t sell very well.

Competing with acts like Conway Twitty, Bo Diddley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard, Hawkins was driven to make the best of whatever group he assembled. Sometime around 1957, he was looking for a drummer, when his bass player told him about a high school kid named Lavon Helm from Marvell, Arkansas who, even though he was a guitar player, was a natural on the drums. By 1958, when he graduated, he was traveling with the Hawks and became known as Levon.

Hawkins didn’t even consider himself a musician. When his younger bandmates went to Memphis to register for the union, he stayed behind, saying, “Why? I don’t play anything.” He was athletic and used all his abilities on stage to wow his audience. In his autobiographical, “This Wheel’s On Fire,” Helm tells of the Hawks’ performance style:

That first gig was great. Ronnie Hawkins could really work a crowd on a Friday night. I mean, he had ’em where he wanted ’em. He was big, good-looking, funny, and had a good voice. He was an

entertainer rather than a musician. He had an instinct for crowd psychology and could start a rumble across the room if he wanted to just by flicking his wrist. It was this power he had over people. We'd hit that Bo Diddley beat, Hawk would come to the front of the stage and do his kick, that camel walk, and the thing would just take off. Ronnie had been a professional diver as a teenager, so he could execute a front flip into a split that would astonish you. Then he'd dance over and pretend to wind up Will Pop Jones, a big, strong kid who hit those piano keys so hard they'd break. God, that rhythm was awesome!

Conway Twitty informed Hawkins about the opportunities in Canada. According to Helm, Ronnie told him "He says they're starving for a good band up there." The nightclub scene in Toronto had enough work to keep them all busy.

As the Hawks went through several incarnations, Helm became Hawkins' right-hand man. The band at one point was called Levon and the Hawks. A couple of years of crazy touring in both the US and Canada followed. Morris Levy, known as the "godfather" of Roulette Records, signed them up. The band recorded some tunes under Hawkins' name, including "Mary Lou" and "Forty Days" (a reworked version of Chuck Berry's "Thirty Days"), which became minor hits.

Hawkins took his band down to the New Jersey Shore to perform live. Levon Helm relates that experience:

The clubs on the Shore drew rock and roll fans from New York and Philadelphia. Soon we were doing turn-away business, drawing almost as well as some of the biggest acts in those days, including Sammy Davis, Jr., Teresa Brewer, and Frankie Laine. That got the talent agents all stirred up, and soon we were being courted by New York record companies who saw Ronnie as the Next Big Thing. After all, that year there was a huge void in rock and roll: Elvis was in the army, Chuck Berry was in jail, Jerry Lee was in disgrace for marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin, Little Richard had joined the ministry, Conway had gone country, and Buddy Holly was dead. Some people were saying that rock and roll was dying, but that Ronnie Hawkins might be able to save the patient.

To Morris Levy's disappointment, Hawkins preferred Canada.

Starting in late 1959, Hawkins took 16-year-old Canadian Robbie Robertson in tow. He assigned his best guitarist to show him the ropes, and brought him down to Arkansas to experience the roots of rockabilly. When Robertson had proven himself, Hawkins later added Richard Manuel, Rick Danko and finally electronic keyboardist Garth Hudson by 1961.

The backup musicians recorded some instrumental-only takes and the band's new producer at Roulette, Henry Glover, told Helm that they were good enough that the musicians could make a go of it on their own and that they should contact him in that event. That started the ball rolling. The group eventually worked with Bob Dylan and later became "The Band."

Hawkins and Helm remained close for the rest of their lives. They both gave their lives to their music as long as they were able. Helm describes Hawkins in "Wheels":

To this day he's a good friend and a great leader, with an uncanny ability to pick the best musicians and build them into first-rate bands. He was immediately likable, trustworthy, and just naturally an entertainer; one of the funniest guys I ever met. The Hawk had been to college and could quote Shakespeare when he was in the mood. He was also the most vulgar and outrageous rockabilly character I've ever met in my life. He'd say and do anything to shock you.

Hawkins was invited to perform with The Band in their farewell performance in 1976, dubbed "The Last Waltz" and filmed by Martin Scorsese.

In 1982, Hawkins won the Canadian Juno Award for country male vocalist of the year. As a resident and "honorary" citizen of Canada Hawkins received several tributes to his lifetime of musical achievements.



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