

Robbie Robertson, lead guitarist of the Band, dead at 80

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Robbie Robertson, best known as the lead guitarist for the Band (formed in 1967), died on August 9, at 80 years of age, from prostate cancer. The group with which he was most famously associated officially broke up in 1976, an action largely motivated by Robertson himself.

The Band's "farewell" performance was held at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco on Thanksgiving night 1976, billed as *The Last Waltz*. It was a five-hour-long extravaganza, featuring some of the most popular musical artists of the day—Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Muddy Waters, Paul Butterfield, Eric Clapton, Dr. John, Van Morrison, Ringo Starr and even popular singer-songwriter Neil Diamond. The event was filmed by Martin Scorsese and released in 1978 under the same title. It also featured post-production performances by the Staple Singers and Emmylou Harris.

The farewell concert and ensuing documentary were the beginning of a new stage in Robertson's musical career, a less remarkable and tumultuous musical period but perhaps more remunerative. He worked with Scorsese on the music for several films, including *Raging Bull*, *The King of Comedy* and *The Color of Money*, and years later, *Shutter Island*, *The Wolf of Wall Street* and others.

Signing with Geffen Records in the 1980s, he recorded several albums, none of which were as successful, musically or otherwise, as those put out in the name of the Band. After the release of *The Last Waltz*, he produced two top-selling albums for Diamond.

Perhaps Robertson's most consequential work of his last four decades was *Once Were Brothers*, his personal narrative of the Band made into a film. The documentary was largely based on his 2016 memoir, titled *Testimony*. It was viewed as his response to his late former band member Levon Helm's 1993 account, *This Wheel's on Fire*.

The Band was widely noted as a collective effort of all five musicians. There was no frontman. Helm's book advanced the argument that Robertson, however talented he was, took more writing credit than he deserved and therefore the lion's share of the royalties. He maintained that the breakup of the

group was engineered by Robertson along with entertainment VIPs who stood to profit from the plan. Helm also asserted that the tragic fates of band members Richard Manuel and Rick Danko (suicide and early death related to substance abuse, respectively) were the direct result.

Robertson was born in Toronto during World War II to a mother, who was a Cayuga and Mohawk, and a father, as he later learned, who was Jewish-American and at some point a professional gambler. His mother lived for a time in Cabbagetown, a major working class neighborhood in downtown Toronto. Robertson made family visits to the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve as a child, where he was taught to play guitar. He grew up an admirer of rock and roll and rhythm and blues.

In 1959, age 16, he met American rockabilly artist Ronnie Hawkins, and it was in Hawkins' band that the future members of the Band met and coalesced.

A half-century after its entry onto the music scene, the Band still generates a great deal of interest. The group's music, like a good deal from that period, remains respected and influential. At its best, it combines intimacy, soulfulness and urgency, firmly planted in popular musical traditions but extending and transcending the latter. The Band represents both high-quality, professional musicianship and nuanced intelligence about human relationships.

One year before the release of the Band's first album, the US had undergone what was dubbed the "long hot summer of '67." Ghetto rebellions flared up in many major cities, most notably Detroit, where thousands of National Guardsmen were sent in by President Lyndon Johnson. Simultaneously, the US government and military were escalating the Vietnam War, which was being fought by young working class men, many from urban centers, who were sucked into the increasingly bloody war in Southeast Asia. Protests grew across the US and the world against the war, and the music quickly began to reflect that opposition.

While the Band eschewed direct social commentary, its music emerged at a time when a generally anti-establishment mood prevailed. The transformation of that atmosphere in

the late 1970s had an impact, not a generally happy one, on the Band, its music and the lives of its members.

Of course, what became known as the protest era had begun earlier, particularly centered on the struggle for civil rights in the South and beyond. The postwar economic boom ushered in contradictory economic and social conditions that made racial inequality and Jim Crow racism stand out in sharp relief. The rising radicalization of middle class youth in particular was accompanied by folk music, which Peter Yarrow of the trio Peter, Paul and Mary described as the “liturgy of the consciousness of change in America.”

The seat of folk music quickly became the coffee houses and bistros of New York City’s Greenwich Village. Bob Dylan was one of its primary exponents or embodiments, a talented and ambitious young man from Minnesota who adopted the style and personal manner of his hero, the Dustbowl troubadour Woodie Guthrie, and applied his own lyrics to current social issues.

In the early sixties, Dylan was promoted as the “spokesman of a generation,” but quite soon, the most prominent product of the British musical scene—the Beatles—had a huge impact on American popular music.

In response to musical and other cultural changes taking place, Dylan decided to perform at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival with a rock backup band, resulting in an infamous clash of cultures. In a tempestuous performance that evening with his electric backing, he was booed by many in his audience.

Meanwhile, Robertson’s band, then called Levon and the Hawks, consisting of four Canadians and one Arkansan, achieved notoriety as the tightest band around. After the Newport festival, Dylan made up his mind to go electric and sought a band to accompany him. By the end of that summer, the Hawks quit their regular gig in New Jersey and signed on as Dylan’s band.

They went on tour in the US, Europe and Australia performing at huge venues while crowds alternately cheered or booed, and even threw things at the musicians. Dylan was called a sellout and a “Judas,” which made him all the more determined to stay his musical course. Whenever they performed for the next several months, the singer and his band encountered booing and hostility, as well as admiration.

Then, in July 1966, Dylan broke his neck in a motorcycle accident, forcing a hiatus.

Dylan and his backup musicians used the downtime to explore creative possibilities. The latter set up an ad hoc practice and recording studio in the basement of a house in West Saugerties, New York (near Woodstock) known as “Big Pink” and in 1967 began a unique collaboration on recordings, some with Dylan, some without. Musically, it

was an environment that could be described as an incubator. In December 1967 Dylan released his long-awaited first album since *Blonde on Blonde*, *John Wesley Harding*. The music was a rupture from what he had done previously. It was tuneful and consciously evocative of America’s frontier days. “All Along the Watchtower” and “I Pity the Poor Immigrant” were featured and of a piece with the music that was being hatched out of the basement of the famed “pink house.”

Word had got around that Dylan’s backup group was due to release a groundbreaking album. They had played with him at the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert in January 1968, creating a strong impression.

The Band’s *Music from Big Pink* was released to popular acclaim July 1, 1968. Breaking with precedent, the first cut on the album was a ballad, “Tears of Rage.” Dylan wrote the words and Manuel the music. It was the opposite of a protest song, telling the story of the heartbroken parents of a young girl, who left home to be a part of the “counterculture.”

It wasn’t until after the first album’s release that the group officially adopted the name “The Band.” That is what they had become known as in the Woodstock area. The recording contract they signed in 1967 with Capitol Records listed them as “The Crackers.”

The Band went on to record six more studio albums before the official breakup in 1976. In an interview with *Musician Magazine*, Robertson said that he broke up the Band because “we had done it for 16 years, and there was really nothing else to learn from it.”

As a member of the Band, Robertson was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Canadian Music Hall of Fame. The only surviving member of the Band is Garth Hudson.



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