Crafting Americana: The Band, The Last Waltz, and a Revivalist American Perspective in the 1970s

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By
Grant Lawrence Unnerstall

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Music

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Crafting Americana: 
The Band, The Last Waltz, and a 
Revivalist American Perspective in the 1970s

Abstract of a thesis at the University of Miami.

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The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock&Roll (1980) distinguishes the rock group, the Band, and their eponymous LP stating that, “The Band came out in the fall of 1969, and there was no time more appropriate to the release of such a collection of Americana. But what is Americana? The 2011 Grammy category descriptions state that the genre is, “contemporary music that incorporates elements of various mostly acoustic American roots music styles, including country, roots-rock, folk and bluegrass resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms of the genres upon which it may draw.” To simplify this definition I argue that Americana has become known today as modern music that reflects or revitalizes notions of historically American genres.

This thesis presents the Band and the group’s celebrated event The Last Waltz as case studies for research in American popular music. While the previously published studies by Greil Marcus and Craig Harris have provided biographical information, these sources do not discuss the relevance of The Last Waltz as a culmination of the Band’s
identity. My focus here on the Band and *The Last Waltz* specifically within the context of 1970s America will contribute to popular music studies by providing an example of how the revivalist term Americana was constructed around the Band.
DEDICATION

To my father, Jay Unnerstall, for first introducing me to the Band; I still remember the day he sat me down in front of the family stereo and played me “Don’t Do It” from *Rock of Ages*.

To my mother, Patti Unnerstall, for purchasing our family copy of *The Last Waltz* after finding the film in a drug store discount bin; that small gift turned into one of my greatest possessions.

Finally, to my great aunt, Trude Buechner, for graciously opening up her home to me for the two years that I spent at the University of Miami; I couldn’t have asked for a better companion.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to my advisor on this project, Dr. David Ake, for continuously pushing me to be the best writer, editor, and educator that I can possibly be; Thank you for always believing in me and this project; I could not have done this without your direction and dedication to my development as a scholar.
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Introduction

Rock ‘n’ roll historian Ed Ward once described the iconic 1970s music group, the Band, as a distinctly “American” ensemble. Writing in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, Ward notes of the group’s eponymous LP, “*The Band* came out in the fall of 1969, and there was no time more appropriate to the release of such a collection of Americana. The amazing thing about the album was that, without quoting or making direct reference, verbal or musical, to country music, 19th-century parlor and military music, or any of the patriotic poets like Whitman, Sandburg or Lowell, it seemed to evoke all these things and more, entirely on its own terms.”¹ While Ward’s description specifically references the Band’s 1969 self-titled album (shown above), the group’s

entire musical identity has since been historically branded by American terminology reflected in similar labels such as “pilgrims”\textsuperscript{2} and “pioneers.”\textsuperscript{3} Critic Tom Moon states in his book, \textit{1,000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die}, “It’s as if an itinerant old-time medicine show somehow skipped a few generations, pulled off a two-lane Arkansas highway in 1910, and woke up in 1968.” Such associations have resulted in the Band’s music often being categorized under the nostalgic label of “Americana.”

But what is Americana? The 2011 Grammy category descriptions state that the genre is, “contemporary music that incorporates elements of various mostly acoustic American roots music styles, including country, roots-rock, folk and bluegrass resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms of the genres upon which it may draw.”\textsuperscript{4} To simplify this definition I argue that Americana has become known today as modern music that reflects or revitalizes notions of historically American genres.

This thesis presents the Band and the group’s celebrated event \textit{The Last Waltz} as case studies for research in American popular music. While the previously published studies by Greil Marcus and Craig Harris have provided biographical information, these sources do not discuss the relevance of \textit{The Last Waltz} as a culmination of the Band’s identity. My focus here on the Band and \textit{The Last Waltz} specifically within the context of 1970s America will contribute to popular music studies by providing an example of how the revivalist term Americana was constructed around the Band.

\textsuperscript{3} Craig Harris, \textit{The Band: Pioneers of Americana Music}, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 58.
A decade historically associated with American disillusionment because of events such as the Vietnam War and Watergate, the 1970s served as an opportunity for artists to reflect on a nostalgic idealized revival of the past. Pessimistic outlooks combined with problematic issues of urban decay and violence to become catalysts for a return to a more simple and rural-based lifestyle, which was emulated through music, film, and other art forms from the 1970s. In a 1976 interview with film critic Roger Ebert, director Martin Scorsese explains his depiction of 1970s America in the context of his films: “You can't make movies any more in which the whole country seems to make sense. After Vietnam, after Watergate, it's not just a temporary thing; it's a permanent thing the country's going through. All the things we held sacred—the whole *Time-Life* empire...whoosh! Well, *Time's* still left.” Scorsese’s quote illustrates the disenchantment of the 1970s specifically relating current events as points of departure for a new perspective on American culture.

The Band’s drummer Levon Helm recalls working on naming their second album: “The title of the record was [originally] Harvest, because we were reaping this music from seeds that had been planted many years before we’d even been born. But we could have called it America as well, because this music was right out of the air. We were saying, ‘Listen! You can’t ignore this.’” Helm’s statement summarizes the Band’s crafting of an American sound by relating their compositional process to “reaping” the musical history of America. And although the group would eventually name the album *The Band*, the retrospective relevancy of considering the name “America” for an album

that would eventually be described as a “collection of Americana” (by Rolling Stone) confirms the group’s success with their constructed identity. And this emphasis on a 1970s revivalist American perspective provided an opportunity for groups such as the Band, whose music evoked America’s historic roots, to become prominent in American culture.

Additionally, the Band’s identity is clearly projected in the group’s swan song event: The Last Waltz. Intended as the Band’s final concert, The Last Waltz presented the group’s career in a direct relationship with historical music. With performances that included a range of musical styles such as Southern rockabilly, New Orleans rhythm & blues, Chicago electric blues, and folk revival music, The Last Waltz presents a geographical showcase of American music that projects the group’s collective personality.

Martin Scorsese chronicled the live event in his film, The Last Waltz, released in 1978. As Ellis Cashmore states in Martin Scorsese’s America, “Surviving remnants of an earlier time appear throughout Scorsese’s films, sustained by either a fatuous longing to hang on to the past or an inventive plan to reinvent history. When Barry W. Sarchett sees in The Last Waltz ‘a perfect emblem of the nostalgic desire for a transcendent, stable referent immune to the contingencies of history,’ he alludes to Scorsese’s yearning for permanence.” Here we read how Scorsese’s film reinforces a 1970s nostalgic American perspective through the production of The Last Waltz. By preserving the Band’s final concert in a documentary film, Scorsese contributes to the reflective identity that is associated with the group’s musical legacy. I will later discuss how the significance of

The Last Waltz as a multimedia production is substantial in crafting the Band’s American identity.

I highlight The Last Waltz as a distinct point on a charted musical history that lies at the intersection of a continuous horizontal American timeline and a specific vertical moment represented by a 1970s historical revivalist perspective, an outlook that I argue exists as a reaction to the turmoil of the times by emulating notions of the past. In Chapter One I contextualize this perspective by situating the state of 1970s disenchantedment in America through a discussion of other revivalist sources in both music and film that worked parallel to the Band. This context will display how the Band was not conceived in a vacuum but worked alongside other 1970s artists who also invoked a revivalist perspective. In Chapter Two I discuss how each member of the Band contributed to the group’s constructed American identity. Backgrounds detailing each member of the ensemble’s musical upbringings will provide insights into how the Band gained this historical distinctiveness through American musical associations. Finally, in Chapter Three I use The Last Waltz as a case study for the portrayal of the Band as an American musical group. Detailed descriptions of the multiple attributes of American music featured at the concert alongside a discussion of the implications of the film will provide a better understanding for how the final production of The Last Waltz establishes the Band’s place in musical history. In summary, this thesis explores the concepts behind the group’s label as an Americana ensemble, and their fundamental role in helping to shape what the term means, all through the lens of a 1970s revivalist American perspective. These topics coalesce into the event The Last Waltz as a culmination of the Band’s American identity.
Chapter I
1970s America: “The Shape I’m In”

I’ve just spent sixteen days in the jailhouse,
   For the crime of having no dough,
   And here I’m back on the streets,
   For the crime of having nowhere to go,

   Save your neck, or save your brother
   Looks like it’s, one or the other,
   Oh, you don’t know the shape I’m in.

The United States entered the 1970s with competing narratives. Multiple versions of America clashed in an attempt to create an identity that could reconcile the historic victories of the 1940s, return to the picturesque nuclear families of the 1950s, and resolve the social revolutions of the 1960s. A country that once proudly claimed victory in World War II now found confusion and disillusion with the continuous Vietnam War. Romantic letters once sent from loved ones on duty in Europe had been replaced by the realist images of dead soldiers projected across family television screens. An unemployment rate that started at 3.5% in 1969 grew to 8.5% by 1975. The idealist nuclear families and the formerly clear distinction between evil communism and heroic capitalism had dissolved into a state of skepticism. Popular patriotism had been replaced by dissatisfaction and as Jefferson Cowie states “the most salient image in 1970s working-class iconography is not the insurgent striker warming himself by a picket-line barrel fire but the beer-slugging bigot of the blue-collar backlash.” Ultimately, the drawn-out battles of the 1960s, both at home and abroad, resulted in a disenchanted populace that

would shape 1970s America. While many looked toward the next decade for the new idealized American narrative, this thesis focuses on a specific group of revivalists who reflected on an idealized past rather than a bright and shining future. This chapter describes how the Band did not work in an artistic vacuum. Musicians, authors, film directors, and other artists worked during the same period as the Band to shape a revivalist perspective in the context of the 1970s. This chapter highlights some of these other artists who worked under the same conceptual ideas of reviving America’s past.

**The Grateful Dead**

The Grateful Dead are often labeled under the late 1960s description of “psychedelic,” “hippy,” or “jam-band” music. While “the Dead” certainly fit that particular identity during specific points of their career, the group also contributed to a nostalgic vision of American history with two albums released in 1970. Appropriately titled *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty* respectively, these albums stood as a shift in the group’s music to a more retrospective and folk-style approach that suggested notions of both the beauty and betrayal of the American dream.

Preceding the release of these titles, the group released their first three albums, *The Grateful Dead, Anthem of the Sun,* and *Aoxomoxoa,* between 1967 and 1969. The cover artwork on these early albums clearly characterizes 1960’s psychedelic culture with bright colors, atypical fonts, experimental artwork, and abstract titles. Additionally, the music on their first three albums utilized extended musical jams featuring electric guitar and organ instrumentation that contributed to a late-1960s “Summer of Love” identity:
Anthem of the Sun (1968)  
Aoxomoxoa (1969)

However, the group’s two 1970 releases stood as a significant change in the band’s output. Both *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty* exemplified more rustic characteristics through album artwork that displayed faded colors, black and white photographs, and wooden textured backgrounds—similar to the artwork on the cover of *The Band* (1969). Additionally, these albums featured acoustic instrumentation and high vocal harmonies that created a nostalgic tribute to country and bluegrass music.
The Grateful Dead captured the retrospective notions of historic music on *American Beauty* through simple folk-like melodies and country harmonies more associated with Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry than San Francisco’s psychedelic movement. Additionally, the group’s lyrics focus on rural images of American landscape. A prime example of the band’s depiction of these concepts is displayed in the lyrics from “Sugar Magnolia (Sunshine Daydream)”:

> Sweet blossom come on under the willow,  
> We can have high times if you’ll abide,  
> We can discover the wonders of nature,  
> Rolling in the rushes down by the riverside

The playful imagery of “discover[ing] the wonders of nature” and relaxing “by the riverside” depict a pastoral narrative of a free and untroubled America without the dismal conception of urban decay. However, the band recognizes this false projection as an idealized American dream and contributes a contrasting perception through the song “Truckin’” also released on *American Beauty*:

> Arrows of neon flashing marquees out on Main Street,  
> Chicago, New York, Detroit, it’s all on the same street,  
> Your typical city involved in a typical daydream,  
> Hang it up and see what tomorrow brings

In “Truckin’” the band reveals the reality of the American “daydream.” “Hang it up and see what tomorrow brings” because no matter if you live in “Chicago, New York, [or] Detroit,” it’s all the same thing. This autobiographical narrative contributes to the broader 1970s projection of the city as a center of corruption and the need to escape a modern urbanized lifestyle, therefore idealizing a previous rural history that was devoid
of major metropolitan areas. Here we view how the Grateful Dead’s music featured a nostalgic past represented by an idyllic lost simplicity.

The liner notes to the 2001 reissue of *American Beauty* point out the group’s inspiration for creating the retrospective album:

As work began in September 1970, Bob Weir had lost his parents, bassist Phil Lesh’s father and Garcia’s mother were dying, and vocalist-keyboardist Ron “Pigpen” McKernan’s health was declining. ‘We were starting to have more adult considerations to think about when we were writing songs,’ Weir recalls. The Band and Bob Dylan had spearheaded a return to the roots of American music and the use of string-band instrumentation in “rock” records; and the maturing of the Dead’s songwriters as individuals and composers rendered a collection of songs that demanded the intimate settings we hear on *American Beauty*.

Here we read about a direct relationship between both the Band and the Grateful Dead’s inspiration for songwriting in the 1970s. Both groups recognized the associations of acoustic “string band” instrumentation with American roots music and the “intimate” sounds that they could produce. As we read earlier in the 2011 Grammy descriptions, instrumentation plays a significant role in defining the genre of Americana. The Grateful
Dead personified the transitions made from the experimental and revolutionary movements of the 1960s to the nostalgic perspective of the 1970s as a result of musical influences produced by the Band.

**Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young**

Another group of musicians that recorded during the same time frame and at the same San Francisco studio as the Grateful Dead included guitarists David Crosby, Steven Stills, Graham Nash, and Neil Young (CSN&Y). This so called “super-group” consisted of four established musicians who combined their talents in 1970 to create, *Déjà Vu*. The album is filled with retrospective references beginning with the choice of the title. Using the concept of *déjà vu* and a modern perception of the past as an overarching theme, the members pose on the cover of the album in front of a forested backdrop that looks as though it could have been taken during a hike through the Appalachian Mountains. Additionally, the cover presents a decorative 19th century font that suggests that we are about to hear a recording of historical music by a makeshift family band.

*Déjà Vu* (1970)
In *Crosby, Stills, & Nash: The Biography* author Dave Zimmer recounts the band’s inspiration for the album cover of *Déjà Vu*:

In conjunction with art director Gary Burden and photographer Tom Gundelfinger, CSN&Y, Taylor, and Reeves “went back in time.” “We tried to look like we thought our ancestors might have looked one hundred years ago,” says Nash. So, after visiting a costume store, they congregated in Crosby’s backyard. Each member had been transformed: Crosby into Buffalo Bill Cody (complete with rifle), Stills into a Confederate soldier, Nash into a pipe-smoking worker, Young into a cagey gunfighter, Taylor into a desperado, and Reeves into a freed servant.” Gary Burden used an old camera and processing technique to further simulate a Civil War—era photograph, but the shot eventually used on the *Déjà vu* cover was actually taken with a Nikon and then doctored.9

The group’s commitment to presenting an album cover that would reflect on certain notions of American history became so pivotal to the overarching theme of *déjà vu*, that each member created specific caricatures of themselves. With these Civil War based characters going so far as to include the “freed servant” played by lone African

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American member and bassist Greg Reeves one understands the dedication of the group’s projection to both the positive and negative aspects of America’s past. Similarly, the concept of staging an acknowledgement to a specific moment in American history on the album cover plays a pivotal role in crafting Americana. By selecting a precise historical era, an artist could make a tribute to an earlier period while also presenting a connection between modern happenings and circumstances of the past. Using the cover art of the Déjà vu album as an example, the depiction of both a “freed servant” and a “Confederate soldier” in the same photograph becomes more powerful in the context of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In this way, the artwork proves that, despite a century of difference, the past can still display the complications of the present. This theme of reflecting on the present through the lens of the past (“we have all been here before”) continued throughout the album and stands as a prime example of my definition of a 1970s revivalist perspective.

The track “Teach Your Children,” includes acoustic guitars, tambourine, and close-knit vocal harmonies that combine to create a rustic country sound that could be found right at home being sung at a family gathering around the campfire. Along with the high twanging timbre of a solo steel guitar (recorded incidentally by the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia), the retrospective quality of the lyrics works with the backyard-style musical presentation to create a nostalgic identity that contributes to the déjà vu theme:

Teach your children well,
Their father’s hell did slowly go by,
And feed them on your dreams,
The one they picks, the one you’ll know by

10. Congruently, the theme of the Civil War was used not only by CSN&Y but was also used earlier by the Band in their 1969 song, “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down.”
The narrator of the song speaks directly to the parents of the 1970s, asking that they “teach [their] children well,” despite the “hell” that they themselves may have gone through. However, the narrator then turns the subject around by addressing the children:

Teach your parents well,
Their children’s hell will slowly go by,
And feed them on your dreams,
The one they picks, the one you’ll know by

The narrator’s message adds another dimension to the meaning of the lyrics by addressing a retrospective reaction between the parents and the children that embodies the group’s déjà vu narrative. This artistic image directly relates to a revivalist perspective by using two separate generations of characters, both the children and the parents, to reflect on the present through past experiences.

Continuing with the theme of a longing for a more idealized past, “Helpless” by Neil Young, describes the desperate feelings of disillusionment that surrounded the 1970s. Young expounds on ideas of escaping the ruthlessness of societal decay for the beauty of nature with simple instrumentation that features an acoustic guitar performing at a leisurely tempo. The eerie sound of an electric guitar plugged into a tremolo pedal creates an ambient musical texture behind the simple three-chord changes of D-A-G continuously played throughout the song. The quiet blend of background vocal harmonies that chant “helpless, helpless, helpless” behind Young’s bright, straining, and desperate voice creates a musical contrast that fits the disheartened narrative of the song. The lyrics depict a weary character tied down by society’s metaphorical “locked chains” while nature’s representative “big birds” fly freely “across the sky.” The contrast between the
human made constrictions of social and urban decay with the liberating depiction of nature contributes to the nostalgic narrative of Déjà Vu and subsequently the entire 1970s revivalist perspective.

**Bob Dylan**

Known primarily as a folk-revivalist, Bob Dylan, a singer/songwriter from Hibbing, Minnesota, stood as a voice for social change and the anti-war movement with songs such as “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1962) and “The Times They Are a-Changin’” (1964). However, in the 1970s Dylan also took part in contributing to a revivalist perspective through songs such as “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.” Written for the soundtrack to the film, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* in 1973, Dylan takes a different approach to his songwriting that contrasts to his earlier presentations of hope and change.

Similar to both the Grateful Dead and CSN&Y, Dylan creates a rustic sound in his song by alternating between two simple chord sequences of G-D-Am and G-D-C performed on an acoustic guitar and supported by background harmonies. Dylan describes a defeated young man without the strength or the will to keep fighting. He projects this desperate image through his lyrics using a consistently repetitious chorus that includes only the title words, “knock, knock, knockin’ on heaven’s door.” The narrator asks that their “guns [be put] to the ground,” with their will to fight completely diminished and the overwhelming thought that each moment they inch closer and closer to “heaven’s door.” In the scene in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (set in New Mexico in the year 1881) where Dylan’s song is featured, characters are being gunned down left and right until the only surviving members gather by a river as the sun sets. This destructive
visual imagery combines with Dylan’s lamenting ballad to produce a defeated atmosphere in the film that can be directly associated with the modern state of America. Keeping in mind the previously mentioned statistic that unemployment rates would peak in 1975, Dylan captures the sentiment of the overwhelming societal exhaustion of the 1970s through his song.

Additionally, Dylan spent a significant amount of his career collaborating with members of the Band in the 1960s and 1970s including on the albums, *The Basement Tapes* (released in 1975 but recorded primarily in 1968), *Planet Waves* (1974), and *Before the Flood* (1974), the latter, of which showcased recorded performances from their combined American tour. These historic collaborations between two of the most iconic figures in the Americana canon have contributed to each other’s musical identity and subsequently helped to shape the genre as a quintessential American art.

**1970s Cinema**

As Sam Peckinpah’s film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* shows, the revivalist perspective of the 1970s was not limited to music. Also in the popular genre of American Westerns, Arthur Penn’s 1970 film *Little Big Man*, based on the novel by Thomas Berger, presents the story from the perspective of a fictional 121-year-old character, Jack Crab, purportedly the last white survivor of the Battle of Little Big Horn. The character of Mr. Crab narrates the story of his life to a journalist throughout the film, beginning with his first interactions with the Cheyenne Native Americans at the age of ten. The audience is transported back to the nineteenth-century, when Native Americans and the United States Army engaged in seemingly constant conflict. Through the historical lens of a fictional
character that grew up in the nineteenth century, but is still around in 1970, we view yet another example of a revivalist perspective that comments on issues of the present through events of the past. Much like how CSN&Y’s album cover uses the Civil War era to compare similarities between the past and present, *Little Big Man* becomes even more poignant when contrasted with the 1970s Vietnam War. Historian Howard Zinn reflects on the state of mass confusion and internal conflict caused by the ongoing war in the opening paragraph of his essay “The Impossible Victory: Vietnam:”

> From 1964 to 1972, the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the history of the world made a maximum military effort, with everything short of atomic bombs, to defeat a nationalist revolutionary movement in a tiny, peasant country—and failed. When the United States fought in Vietnam, it was organized modern technology versus organized *human beings*, and the *human beings* won. In the course of that war, there developed in the United States the greatest antiwar movement the nation had ever experienced, a movement that played a critical part in bringing the war to an end.11 [Emphasis added]

While this statement accurately depicts the factual outcome of the Vietnam War and points out the almost ironic fashion in which the United States lost, the quote

becomes even more thought provoking when put in the context of *Little Big Man*. In the film the Cheyenne Native Americans refer to themselves specifically with the term *human beings* fighting against the United States Army. These comparisons make an uncanny connection between Zinn’s description of the Vietnamese people and the Cheyenne Native Americans of the film.

In this way, *Little Big Man* calls attention to the contemporary war by displaying an alternative perspective through an historical event. Here we find an example of the effectiveness of a revivalist perspective. While presenting the viciousness of the Vietnam War directly during wartime may have been objectionable to certain viewers, comparing the modern event through an historical lens creates a more approachable and perhaps even George Santayana’s more powerful message: “those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it.” By indirectly depicting the Vietnamese people as Native Americans and presenting the United States Army as vicious murderers, the film critiques the policies of modern 1970s America using American history. As I will later discuss in Chapter Two, the Band uses this same revivalist perspective in their music to project their own commentary on the 1970s.

Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973) is another example of 1970s disenchantment shown through cinema. The film features four Italian-Americans living in the crime ridden streets of New York’s Little Italy and depicts the city and urban America as a source of gambling, alcoholism, drug use, sex, homelessness, waste, suicide, and murder. This modern idea of the city as a source of societal urban decay remains prevalent throughout every aspect of the film. Even theater posters for *Mean Streets* featured vicious urban imagery including the silhouette of a gun as the center of a
city skyline and further supporting the idea that big city culture is literally built on violence and crime.

The opening lines of the movie clearly support the overarching theme of 1970s perceptions of the city:

You don’t make up for your sins in the church.
You make up for them in the streets.
You do it at home.
The rest is bullshit and you know it.
These opening lines solidify the 1970s belief of the ruthlessness of the city “streets” and claim that they are the only place that you can atone for your sins. In this narrative, even the sanctuary of the “church” provides no relief from the reality of the continuous violence in the city. In this manner, Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* also contributed to the 1970s projection of a decade filled with a jaded inevitable adulthood realism in contrast to the 1960s ideal of a youthful and innocent celebration of change. In the film characters are not inspired to change their world or driven to improve upon their own livelihood, but instead fight to stay alive in a violent environment driven by money and corruption. In conjunction with gangster films such as *Mean Streets*, other features in the
same genre, such as *The Godfather* Part 1 (1972) and Part 2 (1974), also depicted the same 1970s idea of the city as a center of crime driven urban decay.

As a direct reaction to these violent modern depictions of the city in cinema, 1970s television and film also captured a projection of an idealized past. Popular shows such as *The Waltons* (1971-1981) and *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983) depicted wholesome family values in the context of rural America. With locations that featured the Appalachian Mountains amid the Great Depression and a romanticized Wild West during post-Civil War America, these shows enforced the concept of an escape from modern society and a collective yearning for a simple and idyllic past. Additionally, the 1970s stood as a paradigm for a nostalgic film industry with the release of historically acclaimed productions such as *American Graffiti* (1973) and *Grease* (premiered in 1971 as a musical and released theatrically in 1978) that both featured coming-of-age storylines set in the teen dominated jukebox era of the late 1950s and the early 1960s. These modest accounts about young adults dealing with their first relationships and other high school drama immediately appealed to an audience thirsting for an escape from the daily drudgery of adulthood and a chance to celebrate sentimental memories.

In summary, the collective representation of a disenchanted 1970s urban America filled with the explicit exhaustion and violence associated with the Vietnam War contributed to a revivelist history as seen in the music of artists such as the Grateful Dead, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, Bob Dylan, and the Band. Additionally, retrospective films and television shows such as *Little Big Man, Little House on the Prairie*, and *The Waltons* show that this perspective existed not only in music, but in all forms of art and culture. I argue that this outlook became most prominent at the turn of
the 1970s as a reaction against the internal and external conflicts of the previous decade and a desire to return to an idealized past. Furthermore, I argue that the Band stands as one of the original architects of this perspective.

The Band

As guitarist Robbie Robertson points out in his autobiography, *Testimony*, he felt that the Band’s music was directly influenced by the tumultuous ending of the 1960s: “When our [first] album came out four weeks later (after Robert Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles, while running for president and the same year that Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered) it almost felt like a reflection of the sadness and disillusionment that hung low over the nation.”12

The album Robertson references in his quote, *Music from Big Pink*, was released in 1968. This first album appeared nearly two years before the earliest example provided by the other groups mentioned in this essay and therefore establishes the Band’s influence in this aesthetic movement. Although many artists of the 1970s—including but not limited to the examples previously discussed—stood as a reaction to the turbulent and exhausted state of America, the Band stands as a geographic contrast to the San Francisco Bay Area groups popular at the time. Instead, the Band’s association with other regions such as the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, and the Canadian border, were a reflection of the diverse individual upbringings of the five members. This helped to shape the Band into the Americana ensemble that we know today and draws us a topographical map of their version of America. Chapter Two focuses this discussion on how the Band crafted

an American identity and will provide a detailed examination about each member of the group and their individual associations with American music.
Chapter II
The Band: “Across The Great Divide”

When they released their second album in 1969, The Band helped people dizzy from the Sixties feel that America was big enough to include them, too.13

The Band’s sonic associations with American landscapes can be heard through the combination of musical characteristics from each individual member of the group. This approach contextualizes the group’s personal relationships to American musical influences. Genres such as rockabilly, bluegrass, country, gospel, Mississippi Delta blues, Appalachian folk music, Evangelical church music, New Orleans jazz, as well as elements of American history coalesced in the personal experiences of the different members of the Band. In Testimony, Robbie Robertson discusses how the idea of constructing a new sound for the group came directly from American music studio influences: “While we were still in the basement putting ideas together for our album, I kept harping to [producer] John Simon that it had to have a unique sound, a flavor of its own. I played particular records for him from my collection: tracks from Chess Studios in Chicago, Sun Records in Memphis, Cosimo’s Studio in New Orleans, Muscle Shoals in Alabama, and Gold Star in Los Angeles.”14 Here we read how multiple influential American geographical music locations inspired the group’s creative output and helped to produce the Band’s sound.

In this chapter, I discuss the individual members of the Band and the creation of an American identity in the chronological order of the group’s formation. The Band’s

evolution into a single ensemble parallels the group’s previous work as the Hawks, the backing members of rockabilly artist Ronnie Hawkins. Each member of the Band joined Hawkins one at a time until the group eventually broke away from the front man to pursue their own musical aspirations. I will reference specific musical examples from the Band’s albums that correlate with their individual contributions to the group’s sound. This approach will reinforce the Band’s association with multiple American musical genres and geographical locations that combine to categorize the group under the modern label of Americana.

Levon Helm

Levon Helm was born on May 26, 1942 and raised on his family’s cotton farm in Marvell, Arkansas. Helm grew up listening to his relatives perform at local gatherings that featured country and bluegrass music played on guitars, fiddles, mandolins and washtub basses. Raised in the musically rich Mississippi Delta, Helm was exposed to multiple styles of music that reached beyond his white rural upbringing. In the nearby city of Helena, Helm was just as exposed to the race record blues of Robert Johnson and Howlin’ Wolf as he was to the white country music of Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass Boys. Helm was equally influenced by musical media such as the local “King Biscuit Time” radio show, which featured his personal idol, black musician Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller), as well as the touring F. S. Walcott’s Rabbit Minstrels with Rufus Thomas. 15 This musically rich upbringing inspired Helm to begin playing guitar at the age of eight and soon afterwards he taught himself harmonica. Throughout high

school Helm performed with friends and family members at local venues until one evening when he snuck into a nightclub and met band leader Ronnie Hawkins.16

Hawkins, known to his fans as “The Hawk,” was a fellow Arkansas-born musician who had already made a name for himself in the Southern rockabilly circuit with his group, the Hawks. One evening, knowing that Helm was a local musician, the Hawks invited the young man up on stage to fill their empty position on drums. Although the only piece of percussion equipment that the band owned was a single snare drum, Helm’s enthusiastic performance was enough to secure him a position in the band.17

Helm’s development into a drummer as a member of The Hawks, coupled with his multi-instrumental talents and Southern musical upbringing directly influenced the sound of the Band. His associations with white country music, black Delta blues, old time medicine shows, and Southern rockabilly music combined to form the cornerstone of the Band’s association with the American South. Robbie Robertson describes Helm’s suggestion on writing what is arguably the group’s quintessential Southern tribute, “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down”:

Around this time, there was a chord progression and melody rumbling through my head, but I didn’t know yet what the song was about. I played it on the piano one day for Levon. He liked the way it stopped and started, free of tempo. I flashed back to when he first took me to meet his

parents in Marvell, Arkansas, and his daddy said, “Don’t worry, Robin— the South is going to rise again.” I told Levon I wanted to write lyrics about the Civil War from a southern family’s point of view. “Don’t mention Abraham Lincoln in the lyrics” was his only advice. “That won’t go down too well.” I asked him to drive me to the Woodstock library so I could do a little research on the Confederacy. They didn’t teach that stuff in Canadian schools.\textsuperscript{18}

Consequently, Helm’s position as the only member of the Band who was born in the United States provides a figurative musical passport for the primarily Canadian group’s association with American music.

Helm’s modest self-taught drumming style coincides with the Band’s homegrown image. Rather than recognized as a strict rhythmic time keeper, Helm’s drumming has a push and pull to the tempo, usually chugging along with the music rather than driving the beat. A good example of his drumming style can be heard on “Up On Cripple Creek” from the Band’s eponymous album. In the opening seven seconds there is a clear sample of Helm’s loose hi-hat cymbals as he begins the song in a basic 4/4 beat pattern, adding his own flavor of syncopated snare hits that create a slow, funky groove. Helm favors the snare drum as his main instrument for performing fills which can be heard at 0:20 and 0:32 into the song. Helm’s method of performing can be related to the free rhythmic strumming often associated with a rhythm guitar player or the sporadic accents of a jazz \textsuperscript{18} Jamie Robbie Robertson, Testimony, (New York: Crown Archetype, 2016), 333.
drummer in that he consistently adds different snare hits throughout the song, rarely using the same exact pattern for each measure. This loose approach to drumming creates a looser, more rustic musical feel in the Band’s sound in contrast to more driving styles of other rock drummers of the time, such as Keith Moon of the Who and John Bonham of Led Zeppelin.

Helm also utilized extended techniques in his drumming. In the song “I Shall Be Released” from the 1968 album *Music from Big Pink*, Helm runs his thumb up and down the wire snares on the bottom of the drum to create the metallic strumming sound we hear during each of the verses. Although Helm’s preferred drum is the snare, he does utilize his tom-toms on occasion. For example, on “the Weight,” also from *Music from Big Pink*, we hear a strong low, three-note drum fill at 0:58. Helm typically tuned his tom-toms very low on studio recordings, most likely to provide a deep and resonant contrast to his crisp and high-pitched snare sound.

Additionally, Helm served as the Band’s mandolin player. Helm picked up the instrument, a staple sound in most bluegrass music, after inspiration from family members and other performers from his Southern upbringing. The mandolin is typically heard as an accompaniment instrument in the Band’s music and is used primarily to evoke Southern notions of country and bluegrass inflections. On “Rag Mama Rag” from the group’s 1969 release, *The Band*, Helm’s strums the mandolin behind Rick Danko’s jaunty fiddle playing at the beginning of the song. As discussed in Chapter One with the Grateful Dead, this association with rural string band instrumentation contributes to the Band’s image as an “American” ensemble.
These important contributions aside, Helm’s most distinctive musical feature is his voice. His straining Southern twang lends each song that he performs with a characteristic rural accent. Robertson recounts utilizing Helm’s branded vocal inflections on one of the group’s songs: “I had written a tune called ‘Yazoo Street Scandal.’ Levon had once shown me a street in Helena, Arkansas, called Yazoo, and Yazoo was a pretty common name in the Mississippi Delta. The song had some of that voodoo southern mojo to it, which made it an obvious fit for Levon to sing.” But Helm’s voice is most recognizably featured on “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,” where he perfectly fits the role of Virgil Caine, a Southern farmer mourning the fall of the Confederacy. Helm remembers collaborating with Robertson when writing the song and “taking him to the library so he could research the history and geography of the era for the lyrics and make General Robert E. Lee come out with all due respect.” As discussed in Chapter One, the use of historic American topics such as the United States’ Civil War projects an historical perspective in the context of 1970s America and reinforces the Band’s association with American imagery.

Robbie Robertson

Jamie “Robbie” Robertson was born in Toronto, Canada on July 5, 1944. Raised by a mother of Indigenous descent, Robertson never met his biological father and instead took his name from his stepfather, who stood as a primary figure throughout his upbringing. Because of his mother’s background, Robertson spent many summers and holidays with

his relatives at the Six Nations Reservation near Lake Erie. These visits to the reservation inspired an appreciation for historic myth and storytelling that would resonate with him in his future songwriting career:

I was introduced to serious storytelling at a young age, on the Six Nations Indian Reserve. The oral history, the legends, the fables, and the great holy mystery of life. My mother, who was Mohawk and Cayuga, was born and raised there. Whether it was traditional music, or story-songs like Lefty Frizzell’s “The Long Black Veil,” or sacred mythologies told to us by the elders, what I heard on the reserve had a powerful impact on me. At the age of nine I told my mother that I wanted to be a storyteller when I grew up.21

Early in his youth Robertson first encountered American popular music through late night radio stations, such as WLAC Nashville—the signal of which traveled much farther in the 1950s. “I had heard of Home of the Blues only on fifty-thousand-watt southern radio stations that on cold, clear nights could beam all the way up to Canada,” states Robertson.22 Here the young aspiring musician was exposed to R&B, gospel, blues, and rock ’n’ roll artists such as Jimmy Reed, Little Richard and Elvis Presley and was driven to take music lessons. Invigorated by the guitar playing of Bo Diddley and Hubert

22. Ibid, 15.
Sumlin (of Howlin’ Wolf’s band) Robertson stated: “They put me over the top. I had no choice but to play guitar.” The young musician eventually dropped out of school and ran away from home determined to begin his musical career. After gigging with multiple groups throughout the Canadian bar circuit, Robertson became the lead guitarist for Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks and eventually the single guitarist and primary songwriter for the Band.

Even though he was the Band’s only guitar player, Robertson typically filled an accompaniment role rather than contributing extensive guitar solos. Because Robertson was also credited as the group’s primary songwriter, his guitar parts typically featured simple background chord changes that he created during the writing process. Guitarist Eric Clapton once said of Robertson’s guitar playing that he “plays guitar like a songwriter. He’ll put together in his head and then through his fingers, the series of phrases and melodic lines that make sense to him, and make sense to you.”

The few guitar solos that Robertson does take are typically during live performances and he often produces a distinctively heavy attack of the strings that pops through the songs texture. This characteristic can be traced back to Robertson’s self-taught study of guitar technique where a misunderstanding of how to produce a slide blues guitar sound led to his own personal style. Robertson has stated, “When I first heard bottleneck guitar by Muddy Waters or Elmore James, I didn’t know they were playing bottleneck. They would take a bottle, cut the neck off, sand it down and play it like a slide. I’d never seen or heard of it, so I thought that it was just someone playing a guitar in a particular way. When I found that they were using a bottleneck I said, ‘Oh,

Robertson’s guitar attack can be heard on the introductory riff to the track “The W.S. Walcott Medicine Show” off of the Band’s 1972 live album, Rock of Ages.

In addition to his guitar playing, Robertson’s fascination with American history contributed to the Band’s identity with inspiration for lyrics and song titles often drawing from historical topics. Songs such as “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” captured the Confederate perspective of the outcome of the Civil War, while titles such as “King Harvest (Has Surely Come)” dealt with the life of a poor sharecropper and his reliance on a labor union for financial stability. “For reasons I wasn’t consciously aware of, the songs I began writing at this time had a strong theme about things becoming extinct: railroads (‘how can you get to sleep when the whistle don’t blow’), blacksmiths, traveling carnivals, the old ways of the North American Indians. There was a despair to it, and a reflection of the world shifting inside the Band.” Here we read how Robertson’s songwriting contributions reflected on distinctive features of American culture that had or were becoming “extinct.” These historical themes and retrospective lyrics captured notions of an American revivalist perspective that solidified the group’s label as an ensemble inspired by subjects of the past.

**Rick Danko**

Rick Danko was born on December 9, 1943 in Simcoe, Ontario, a small tobacco farming community located only twenty miles south of Robertson’s Six Nations Reserve. The area was historically populated by tobacco farmers from the Carolinas who had migrated

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24. Ibid, 56.
to the rich soil of southwest Ontario after the Great Depression. This Appalachian influence had an impact on the music making in Simcoe, as well as on Danko and, eventually, the Band. The Danko family was raised on weekly field work and weekend musical jamborees and the young musician spent much of his childhood listening to his father and uncles playing banjo and mandolin while his mother and aunts sang makeshift harmonies at local barn dances. Growing up listening to the sounds of the Grand Ole Opry and Nashville radio stations WSM and WLAC, Danko taught himself guitar, violin, and trombone knowing that he wanted to pursue music.

In 1961 Danko scheduled his band to open for Ronnie Hawkins with hopeful intentions of meeting the Hawk. That very evening Hawkins asked Danko to join the group. Although initially hired as a rhythm guitarist, Hawkins decided to switch Danko to bass, which would eventually become his primary instrument while working with the Band.

Danko’s approach to bass playing primarily served as a supporting role in the Band’s music often mimicking the position of a washtub bass player or a Dixieland tuba. An example of his style can be clearly heard on the title track of the group’s third album, Stage Fright. Danko’s bass first enters around the 0:17 mark. After the piano and organ have introduced the main chord structure of the song we can hear how Danko reinforces the chord changes. Playing a single tonic pitch throughout the duration of each chord change, Danko supports the melodic structure of the song that was introduced by the keyboard instruments. One of Danko’s rare musical decorations is a syncopated

27. Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 81.
descending riff played around 1:12. However, this is the only point on the track when Danko takes a more individualistic role in his bass playing.

Although typically playing a more reserved role in the studio, Danko often performed more elaborate bass parts in live performances. One instance in which Danko’s bass playing is highlighted includes the beginning of the song “Don’t Do It,” from Rock of Ages. While Danko’s bass line is first used as the introduction to the song, once the other performers begin, his part immediately slides into a rhythmic role that both drives the syncopated rhythm of the song and supports the harmonic texture.

Danko intended for his bass playing to serve as a rhythmic and melodic connection between the drums and the piano. Danko is quoted as saying, “Sometimes, it’s not what you [play], it’s what you leave out”. An explanation of Danko’s style can be traced to joining Ronnie Hawkins’ band. Because the young musician had never played bass before stepping on stage with the Hawks, Danko would originally copy the left hand of Hawkins’ original pianist, Stan Szelest, in order to create his parts. This close connection of following the left hand of the piano and the desire to “leave out” enough room for Helm’s drum fills helped develop Danko’s simple approach to bass playing.

Although primarily considered the full-time bassist, Danko also served as the Band’s fiddle player. Having taught himself violin during his teenage years and performing primarily for his friends and family at barnyard dances, his style is both unkempt and fitting in the rural context of the Band’s sonic output. For example, Danko’s fiddle playing introduces the track “Rag Mama Rag,” and his unrefined tone produces a

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29. Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 82.
rustic setting in the context of a song about drinking and dancing. As previously discussed, alternate instruments such as Danko’s fiddle and Helm’s mandolin played a substantial role in nurturing the Band’s identity with rural America and the Appalachian Mountains. Robertson states:

[I] Don’t know if it was because we were living in the mountains, but mountain music started to find its way deep in to our vocabulary. We might do the song “If I Lose” by the Stanley Brothers, or something by Johnnie & Jack or the Louvin Brothers. We weren’t in the Blue Mountains, but it started to sound that way: Rick picking up a fiddle, Levon a mandolin, Richard a slide guitar, and Garth an accordion, and me slapping away high up on the neck of an acoustic guitar. Rick, Levon, and Richard would sing the three-part harmony, with me filling in on the low part. At the same time, the gospel harmonies of the Staple Singers and the Impressions were just as present.30

Danko also served as one of the three main vocalists of the Band. Learning to sing Appalachian style harmonies from his mother and sisters, this ability stuck with him and contributed to the Band’s rural sound. Danko regularly provided background harmonies on most songs when he was not singing lead. Robertson states: “And boy, what an ear!

He could hear intricate intonations and parts like he had a dog’s super-hearing. He was the king of harmonies in the Band, but not because he studied harmony or read music; it just came perfectly natural to him. It was because of Rick that our vocals became known for their harmonies. For a long time Rick played a fretless bass while singing countermelodies and harmony and killer lead vocals. That’s a full-on high wire act.”

Danko’s nasally voice produces an almost apologetic quality that slides into and falls off of the notes with a loose sense of melody. His abilities as a lead singer can be heard on the song “It Makes No Difference,” from the 1975 album *Northern Lights - Southern Cross*. The song features a narrator lamenting the loss of his loved one:

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It makes no difference where I turn
I can't get over you and the flame still burns
   It makes no difference, night or day
   The shadow never seems to fade away

And the sun don't shine anymore
And the rains fall down on my door
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Danko’s nostalgic voice strains through the memories of the narrator in the context of these melancholic words. While his abilities as a vocalist were continuously featured throughout the Band’s repertoire all singing duties were evenly split between Danko, Helm and Richard Manuel.

**Richard Manuel**

Richard Manuel was born on April 3, 1944 in Stratford, Ontario to a modest Baptist household and grew up singing in the local church choir alongside his brothers. “That’s what turned me on to harmonies,” Manuel later said. He began receiving piano lessons

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when he turned eight years old and even received a performance diploma in Hawaiian
guitar from the Ontario Conservatory of Music in 1959. Growing up listening to the
voices of Bobby Bland and Ray Charles on WLAC radio and always ordering the latest
records from Memphis and Nashville, Manuel became fascinated by country and gospel
music. He eventually established a career in the Canadian performance circuit with
multiple bands in the Stratford area.

At a battle of the bands performance at the Stratford Coliseum in 1961, Manuel’s
band was booked directly after Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks. After hearing Manuel
perform the popular Ray Charles hit “Georgia On My Mind,” Hawkins was convinced
that Manuel would be the perfect replacement for their vacant piano position.

Manuel’s unique piano playing style can be traced back to his first music lessons.
After “incorrectly” voicing a triad on the piano, his private teacher gave up on giving
Manuel lessons. “It wasn’t wrong,” Manuel stated. “It was just that I put the E in a C
chord on top instead of in the middle.” Describing himself as “very ‘chordy’” we can see
how this focus on harmony reflected in his playing. Manuel’s position in both the
Hawks and the Band was specifically as the “rhythm pianist” rather than a lead player.
While many bands often designated a separate lead and rhythm guitarist such as the
Beatles’ George Harrison and John Lennon respectively, the Band featured a separate
lead and rhythm keyboard player with the organ featured as the primary solo instrument.
Manuel fit this position well in that as a singer and a pianist he was primarily performing

32. Barney Hoskyns, Across the Great Divide: The Band and America (Milwaukee: Hal Lenard,
2006), 19.
33. Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago
34. Barney Hoskyns, Across the Great Divide: The Band and America (Milwaukee: Hal Lenard,
2006), 19.
instrumental accompaniment to his singing rather than as a display of virtuosity such as
in the case of Bill Payne of Little Feat or Chuck Leavell of the Allman Brothers.

This rhythmic approach to piano playing can be heard on “Across the Great Divide,” from The Band. Beginning at the first chorus at 0:20 Manuel play the chord changes on each beat accentuating the pulse of the song while establishing the rhythm and supporting the harmony. He changes this rhythm during the verses beginning at 0:37 and performs consistent eighth notes through the chord changes still emphasizing the pulse of the piece. Manuel’s role in the rhythm section of the Band was an important contribution to the group’s sound. As Helm stated, “The piano was a rhythm instrument…like the drums and the bass. The piano was there so the rhythm didn’t drop out. Richard fit into that slot right away. Energy piano we call it.”35 While the piano was Manuel’s primary instrument when performing with the Band, he occasionally contributed to the group on secondary instruments as well.

Manuel became the regular substitute on drums whenever Helm would pick up the mandolin. Completely self-taught, Manuel’s style is best described by Helm, “He played loosey-goosey, a little behind the beat, and it really swung.”36 Manuel’s drumming can best be heard on the track “Rag Mama Rag.” A highlight of his raw abilities at performing drum fills is heard at 0:57 during a drum break. His hits are just behind the beat creating a hesitant yet organic kick to the loose rag style of the song.

Manuel was considered by the other members of the Band as the most talented vocalist in the group. Rick Danko once stated, “he could really sing. He reminded me of

35. Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 88.
36. Ibid, 155.
Ray Charles, James Brown…He brought a lot of powers and strengths to the group. He brought in gospel music from his church upbringing. It was like having a force of nature in the band.”37 Learning to sing from his church choir, his vocal style is built on a more classical approach than both Helm and Danko. Manuel engages both his chest (natural) and head voices (falsetto) in his signing to project both a rich full tenor voice and to provide upper background harmonies. Robertson once stated, “Man, oh, man, Rich could break your heart, either with that voice, sounding like it was on the verge of tears at times, or with his deeply sensitive personality. He had such a rich tone. He could sing lower and higher than anybody in the Band, which made us refer to him as our “lead singer.”38 His vocal style can be attributed to the gospel inflections of his musical hero, Ray Charles, and Manuel’s soulful voice was utilized prominently in the Band’s ballads. A direct tribute to the soulful singing of Charles’ is presented in the Band’s cover of “Georgia On My Mind” off of the group’s final studio album, Islands, from 1977.

Sharing the vocals evenly with Helm and Danko, Manuel became the third and final voice of the Band. Between Helm’s country twang, Danko’s Appalachian strain and Manuel’s gospel crooning, the Band had a variety of voices that combined to create a multifaceted American accent in their music. As Robertson states: “It often felt as if Rick, Levon, and Richard were playing different characters in the stories I was writing, and Garth [Hudson] was providing a sonic counterpoint to the settings—a real workshop.”39 All three voices share vocal duties on “Acadian Driftwood,” from Northern Lights-Southern Cross. The availability of three separate voices, each with a distinct musical

37. Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 88.
timbre, created a rustic, back-porch country blend in contrast to other contemporary vocal groups such as the Beach Boys or the Beatles who were known for their crisp vocal balance. This unbalanced vocal blend stood as one of the defining examples of the group’s American sound.

Garth Hudson

Garth Hudson was born on August 2, 1937 and raised in London, Ontario to a musical family. While Hudson’s father played flute, trumpet, and saxophone, his mother was a gifted pianist and accordion player and together their influences would shape their son’s future as a multi-instrumentalist. Hudson began studying organ and accordion at a young age, often performing at church as well as at his uncle’s funeral parlor. Hudson’s close relationship to music of the church had a large impact on his musical taste and style. Hudson stated: “The Anglican church has the best musical traditions of any church that I know of. It’s the old voice leading that gives it the countermelodies and adds all those classical devices which are not right out there, but which add a little texture.”

Hudson continued his musical education at the University of Western Ontario where he developed a love for jazz improvisation and rock ‘n’ roll music that inspired him to study saxophone. “I was the only guy in London who knew how to play rock ‘n’ roll saxophone,” Hudson once joked. His fascination with jazz and rock music combined with his skills as both a keyboardist and saxophonist established his reputation

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41. Ibid.
as a superior session musician in the nearby Detroit area. Hudson would eventually backup acts such as Bill Haley, Johnny Cash, and the Everly Brothers on local gigs.

Hudson’s musical skills attracted Ronnie Hawkins and The Hawks to the point that the group asked Hudson to join the band on three separate occasions. As Robertson recalled, “We’d seen him play with his band and in little jazz clubs, and he was a phenomenon to us because of the scope of his musical knowledge. He was interested in good polka music as he was in J. S. Bach. He could play with Miles Davis or the Chicago Symphony or the Grand Ole Opry. We felt we had to have Garth.” After offering Hudson higher pay to teach “music lessons” to the other members of the Hawks, as well as offering to purchase a brand new Lowrey organ should he join the band, he finally became a member. This final addition to the Hawks brought together all five members of what would eventually become the Band.

As previously mentioned, the contrast between the two keyboard players in the group, Hudson and Manuel, provided a musical dialogue between the piano as a rhythm instrument and the organ as a solo instrument. The bulk of Hudson’s contributions as the organist included his ability to craft original and appropriate musical decorations and sonic effects into the music. One of the most significant examples of Hudson’s distinct musical ornamentations includes the introduction to the track “Chest Fever,” off Music from Big Pink. The first 35 seconds of the song features only Hudson on the organ playing an ominous tribute to Bach’s Toccata and Fugue. As Robertson stated, “Garth kicked it off with that hint of J. S. Bach on a gravel back road...Garth played an organ solo unlike anybody else on this planet, floating and soaring into space with a

42. Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 90.
combination of musicalities that you would rarely, if ever, hear streamed together.”

This unique introduction showcases Hudson’s musical influences from the reference to church organ music of J.S. Bach to the distorted delivery of his stylistic rock ‘n’ roll introductory riff. Hudson’s stylistic beginning to “Chest Fever” became a staple of the Band’s live performances to such an extreme that Hudson would significantly expand the length of the introduction far beyond the original. Eventually this opening evolved into an entirely separate feature titled “The Genetic Method,” in which the other members of the group would take a short break from performing and perhaps even walk off stage while Hudson continued to solo. Indeed, “The Genetic Method” solo on Rock of Ages spans 7:48 before transitioning into “Chest Fever.”

Continuing the multi-instrumentalist theme of the group, Hudson also contributed as the Band’s accordion player. Although not usually thought of as the most typical rock ‘n’ roll instrument, Hudson knew how to manipulate musical style on his accordion to fit into different American cultural narratives. In the case of the accordion, Hudson would use the same instrument to emulate Cajun music on the Band’s song, “Acadian Driftwood,” as well as Italian folk music on the track, “When I Paint My Masterpiece.”

Hudson also stood as the Band’s saxophone player. His straightforward rock ‘n’ roll saxophone style is featured throughout “Ain’t Got No Home,” from the Band’s 1973 album tribute to early rock music, Moondog Matinee, and specifically in the form of a solo from 2:12-2:27. A contrast to Hudson’s rock ‘n’ roll style includes his ballad performance on “It Makes No Difference” from Northern Lights, Southern Cross. Here Hudson performs a lamenting saxophone outro duet with Robertson’s guitar.

Using his knowledge of horn arrangements from studying Jazz at the university, Hudson often contributed his compositional skills to write background charts for the Band. These arrangements would either be performed by Hudson in the studio or other guest musicians during live performances. An example of a horn arrangement which Hudson created for the group is featured on the track “Ophelia.” Due to Hudson’s horn arrangements of some of their songs, the Band would sometimes hire outside horn players to accompany the group on live performances. This resulted in the horn section featured throughout *Rock of Ages* which included jazz horn players Howard Johnson, Snooky Young, Joe Farrell, Earl McIntyre, and J.D. Parran, along with rearranged horn charts by New Orleans arranger Allen Toussaint.

Robertson states, “I savored Garth for turning me on to the glorious sound of Anglican choirs, Greek and Arabic sounds with rhythms accompanying hip-rattling belly dancers, classical music maestros and their masterpieces (some through the impeccable touch of Glenn Gould’s piano), [and] jazz masters’ unique tones and techniques.”⁴⁴ Hudson’s extensive musical knowledge, his manipulation of style, and specifically his ability to create a multitude of musical soundscapes expanded the Band’s ability to craft a distinctly American sound in their music.

**The Band**

By combining geographically diverse individual backgrounds in multiple American genres such as Southern rockabilly, Mississippi Delta blues, Appalachian folk music, Evangelical church music, New Orleans jazz, bluegrass, country, gospel, as well as

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elements of American history, the Band created their own brand of American rock ‘n’ roll. This identity continues into the twenty-first century through the revivalist concept of Americana that perpetuates a nostalgic nod to the American past.

But the group’s desire to honor the sounds of American music went beyond the inspiration and use of previous genres. The Band intended to cultivate a new sound from the past by breaking barriers of the present in both how they rehearsed and how they recorded. Robertson reflects on the unusual way the group worked on music:

> Playing music in a circle in the basement or on an acoustic set in the living room was having a big effect on our musical approach: it was about a balance of vocals and instruments. If you couldn’t hear properly, somebody was too loud and out of balance. This approach was as old as music but had very little to do with the way a lot of people were playing those days. Louder was becoming king, which we had been blamed for in our past, but we had evolved to a place where loud music was like greasy food, not really good for you.45

Here Robertson explains how the group strove to produce a sound that was in striking contrast to many contemporary music groups who were often celebrated for their characteristically loud performances, such as Led Zeppelin or the Who.

While searching for ways to break through the industry standard of modern music making, the group actively searched for a new way to reinforce a return to the past. Rather than choosing to spend the beginning of the group’s career in a well-established recording studio, the group instead moved into the mountainous region of New York state where they wrote the music for their first album in a basement. Robertson remembers bringing in a sound engineer to survey the new space: “When I asked a recording engineer to look at the basement, he said the concrete walls, glass basement windows, and big metal furnace could make for the worst sound anybody ever used for recording music. To me, that was good news. This was all about breaking the rules, and the more unacceptable the setting, the more it felt right.”46 This dedication to a rural lifestyle was particularly unheard of for a rock ‘n’ roll band in the late 1960s and as Robertson proudly reflects on being asked to perform at the famous Woodstock festival in 1969, he remembers that, “The Band would be the only act in the three-day event that actually lived in Woodstock.”47

In conclusion, the creation of the Band’s American identity was fashioned through the individual musical upbringings of each member of the group along with a dedication to producing a new and original American sound through the musical resources of the past. These ideas would eventually combine on a grand scale in the historic event, the Last Waltz, which will be the focus of discussion in Chapter Three. The Last Waltz represents the culmination of the Band’s work as an American ensemble by accentuating the 1970s state of disillusion through a reflective revivalist perspective of America’s musical past. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the group accomplishes this

47. Ibid, 349.
musical display through multiple tributes to American musical genres—including the invitation of multiple guest artists—whose performances and narratives combine to celebrate the Band’s identity within the convenient context of a historically celebrated concert film.
Chapter III
The Last Waltz

It’s the last waltz, the last waltz with you,
But that don’t mean, the dance is over,

It’s the last waltz, the last waltz was through
But that don’t mean, the party’s over

On Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 25, 1976 (the year of America’s bicentennial) the Band performed their final concert: The Last Waltz.48 Hosted by rock ‘n’ roll impresario Bill Graham and located at the Winterland Ballroom Arena in San Francisco, CA, The Last Waltz quickly grew into more than a single swan song event. Elaborate preparations including a full-course dinner, ballroom dancing, and decorative backdrops from the San Francisco Opera’s recent production of Verdi’s La traviata, contributed to the celebratory occasion.49 Craig Harris describes the evening’s opulence in his book, The Band: Pioneers of Americana Music:

The Last Waltz was indeed an event. A preconcert Thanksgiving feast costing forty-two thousand dollars, included two thousand pounds of candied yams, eight hundred pounds of mincemeat and pumpkin pies, six thousand rolls, four hundred gallons of apple juice, ninety gallons of gravy, and cranberry sauce. The stuffing

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48. While the Band did resume recording and performing under the same name in the late 1980s and throughout the ‘90s, this later version of the group did not include original member Robbie Robertson and took place predominantly after Richard Manuel had passed away in 1986.

consisted of five hundred pounds each of onions and celery, seventy bunches of parsley, and sixteen quarts of herbs sautéed in one hundred pounds of butter. In addition to two hundred and twenty turkeys, there was four hundred pounds of fresh salmon flown in from Alaska. After dinner guests danced to a thirty-eight-piece orchestra, led by three teams of professional dancers.  

General admission tickets to this farewell extravaganza cost $25 a piece, leading music critic Greil Marcus to point out that “many of the band’s truest fans were now unable to share in the farewell. “For a guy and his old lady, fifty smackers is two lids of good dope.” Rolling Stone noted that, “For a while there, it looked like The Last Waltz might be overtaken by Bill Graham’s cornball express.” And while the grandiose campaign constructed around The Last Waltz can be viewed as a contradiction to the Band’s rural identity, the inclusion of a large gathering scheduled around Thanksgiving dinner certainly embodies an American narrative and also represents the final celebration of the Band’s sonic construction of America. Robertson recalled: “Bill Graham showed me where and how the white-clothed dining tables would be set up. It would look like Rock’n’Roll’s Last Supper.”

52. Ibid, 340.  
On the topic of the group’s final performance taking place in the latter half of the 1970s, Robertson stated: “The end of an era’ was how many people referred to the close of 1976. The dreams of the ‘60s and early ‘70s had faded and we were ready for a revelation, a revolt, a changing of the guard. The United States, Russia, and China were all testing nuclear weapons. Destruction loomed boldly in the air. Punk rock and hip-hop wanted to give music and culture a good slap in the face. It felt like everyone wanted to break something.”\(^{54}\) This “end of an era” theme constructed around The Last Waltz solidified the group’s already established revivalist perspective by focusing on a celebration of the past while recognizing the terminal present. Ultimately, the evening was equally dedicated to the Band’s career as well as a tribute to American musical history. Additionally, the event was historically encapsulated into a rock ‘n’ roll musical artifact through both the eventual release of the concert as a live album and particularly through the presentation of Martin Scorsese’s critically acclaimed documentary film, *The Last Waltz* (1978).

**The Concert**

The Band began the evening in tribute to the group’s rural origins in the mountains of New York State. Opening the concert with only the original five members on stage, the Band started the show by performing three songs, each featuring one of the group’s three lead vocalists—beginning with Helm’s performance of “Up on Cripple Creek.” The group promptly discarded the sophisticated setting of the ballroom by reminiscing about the “drunkard’s dream” and fictional lover “Little Bessie.” The rhythm section of Helm’s

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drums, Danko’s bass, and Manuel’s piano drove through the performance with interjections from Robertson’s pointed guitar fills and Hudson’s funky Clavinet riff meant to emulate the Ozark inflections of a jaw harp. Helm belted his way through the lyrics in his Southern twang adding a rustic element to the “Lake Charles, Louisiana” setting of the song. Danko’s and Manuel’s powerful background vocals nearly threatened to overtake the lead singer in a typical unbalanced performance that sonically captures the group’s unkempt sound. Additionally, the three vocalists add to the rural nature of the tune through exhausted attempts at yodeling throughout the choruses. Towards the end of the piece Helm shouts, “Yeah! I sho’ wish I could yodel like her!” referencing “Little Bessie.”

After the rip-roaring up-tempo performance of the first song, the concert continued with a set list that took the audience on a musical cross-country road trip through the Band’s version of America. Presenting arranged horn charts written by Allen Toussaint, the group was joined by a horn section that included Howard Johnson on tuba, Tom Malone on trombone, Jim Gordon and Charlie Keagle on saxophones, and Jerry Hey and Rich Cooper on trumpet and flugelhorn. During the performance of “Life Is a Carnival,” the horn section acts as the backing circus band alongside Hudson’s acrobatic organ playing. In an up-tempo tribute to traveling musical groups on “W.S. Walcott’s Medicine Show,” the group successfully peddles off their prescribed musical magic with the horn section featuring Hudson on a driving tenor saxophone solo. The additional wind section also lead the Band on a second-line parade down Bourbon Street in a tribute to traditional jazz music on a newly arranged edition of “Ophelia.”
The Band paid homage to the American South by including the gospel swooning of Manuel’s vocals on “Georgia On My Mind” followed by the tale of a struggling farmer working to pay his “union dues” after his barn goes “up in smoke” on “King Harvest (Has Surely Come).” The horn section transformed into a military funeral band for a staid performance of “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” complete with Helm’s country drawl as he projected his defeated Southern sympathy. The group concluded the first two hours of The Last Waltz with a vocal feature from Danko on the song, “Stage Fright,” a fitting tribute to the group’s first live appearance (which also took place at the Winterland Ballroom), followed by a final dance number referencing American ragtime music on “Rag Mama Rag” that highlighted the horns as a Dixieland brass band and Hudson on a stylistically disjunct piano solo.

Using the creative instrumentation such as the jaw-harp Clavinet effect to project notions of Appalachia, upright piano to invoke images of Storyville saloons, and brass band horns to suggest multiple musical environments ranging from American Civil War taps to carnival style circus bands, the Band successfully installed a revivalist projection of America’s musical past. Furthermore, lyrics that dealt with poverty-stricken farmers, alcoholic gamblers, and defeated Rebel families reinforced rural American narratives that firmly situated the group into a historical perspective. By drawing on these multiple musical idioms of the past and using them to reflect on the disillusioned issues of the present, the Band perpetuates an identity that embraces revivalist themes and directly

55. Cited by Levon Helm in his book, This Wheel’s on Fire, as “the best live performance of this song we ever gave.” Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 263.
contributes to the creation of what we now call Americana. In this way, the Band and The Last Waltz helped to pave the road that leads to this postmodern genre.

The evening also included multiple influential musical guests that contributed to the Band’s constructed American identity. Beginning with their original musical instructor and assembler, Ronnie “The Hawk” Hawkins, the Band paid tribute to Southern rockabilly music by inviting him to perform as the first guest on an evening of star appearances. Stripping the instrumentation down to the original bar band setup of Ronnie Hawkins and The Hawks from the early 1960’s, the musicians transported the audience back to a time before the group even existed. The simple improvisatory riffs of Robertson’s guitar and Hudson’s organ interjected over the chugging stylized Bo Diddley beat provided by the piano, bass, and drums as the Hawk howled through the lyrics of “Who Do You Love.” Paying homage to the Arkansas upbringing of both Hawkins and himself, Helm remembers the Hawk’s appearance on stage that night: “We brought out Ronnie Hawkins first, as a tribute to our original chief and mentor, the man who taught us all we knew, or at least some of it. The Hawk was in a snap-brim straw cowboy hat, a black suit over a ‘Hawk’ T-shirt, cowboy boots that made him seven feet tall, and was totally in charge.”^56 Hawkins represented the early bare bones rock ‘n’ roll roots of the Band and exemplified their association with American music well before they began producing their own material.

Building on earlier references to the music of New Orleans through the brass band arrangements of “Ophelia” and “Rag Mama Rag,” the Band continued to feature the Crescent City with the inclusion of local icons Dr. John (Mac Rebennack) and Bobby

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56. Levon Helm, This Wheel’s on Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of The Band (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 263.
Charles. Dr. John began his set by counting off his song “Such a Night” with his characteristically syncopated jazz piano style. His raspy voice slithers through the suggestive lyrics, “if I don’t do it, somebody else will,” and the backing horn section depicts a typical boisterous evening in the French Quarter. Helm remembers Dr. John’s distinct presence on stage: “shades, gold shoes, sequined jacket, the image of a Crescent City hipster, smoking a cigarette. Singer/songwriter Bobby Charles performed with Dr. John and the Band on his own song “Down South in New Orleans,” complete with Cajun style accordion and fiddle accompaniment from both Hudson and guest Larry Packer respectively.

The Band paid tribute to American blues music through multiple guest artists from both home and abroad. Chicago-born harmonica player and bandleader Paul Butterfield joined the group on a performance of “Mystery Train.” Both Helm and Butterfield shared lead singing duties during the performance that created a phasing melodic vocal line that fits perfectly with the two chugging engines of Helm and Manuel on drum sets alongside the ripping train whistle of Butterfield’s amplified harmonica. Butterfield was a champion of the Chicago electric blues movement and a direct disciple of the Band’s renowned following guest.

Muddy Waters, the Mississippi born “father of Chicago blues,” historically stands as a connection between rural Delta and urban electric blues in the canon of American music. A direct influence on rock ‘n’ roll and blues artists throughout the world, Waters, alongside pianist Pinetop Perkins and guitarist Bob Margolin, assisted the Band that evening in a raucous nod to blues music. Along with Butterfield on harmonica the group

57. Ibid, 264.
performed inspired renditions of “Caledonia” and Waters’ signature lumbering riff on masculinity, “Mannish Boy.”

Guitarist Bob Margolin remembers the significance of Muddy’s performance at The Last Waltz:

- Mannish Boy was always a show-stopper. Harp player tip:
- Muddy loved the way Butterfield played on that song, setting up a warble that ‘holds my voice up’ rather than just playing the song’s signature lick…I was simply concentrating on playing, and particularly enjoying
- Muddy’s powerful shouting, Butterfield’s warbling-tension harp, Levon’s deep groove, and Robbie Robertson’s fiery guitar fills…I realized that some of those blues-oriented rock stars had watched me rehearsing with Muddy and been impressed that I was playing Old School Chicago Blues in his road band and helping to arrange the songs for our performance…I was honored to be jamming with these fine musicians, and I realize that they belong to the same ‘club’…—deep blues lovers. 58

Historically, the blues constitutes the founding elements of rock ‘n’ roll music in both structure and in instrumentation. Featuring the standard 12 bar blues form, pentatonic scales, and highlighting instruments such as guitar, bass, drums and piano, the

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blues helped to construct what would become known as an original American musical dialect. As Muddy Waters states himself in the title of one of his songs, “The Blues Had a Baby and They Called It Rock and Roll.” The blues as a musical vernacular is historically associated with rural African American culture, yet some of the most famous consumers of this music were young white British musicians. Iconic English groups that spearheaded the “British Invasion” such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the Who, looked toward American blues music as an essential source of musical appropriation.

The Band’s following guest, English guitarist Eric Clapton, epitomized this narrative of British adoption of American blues music. Clapton performed, “Further On Up the Road,” accidentally trading solos with Robertson after his guitar strap snapped during the solo introduction. Seemingly on cue and without missing a beat Robertson jumped in on Clapton’s solo after noticing that he needed time to adjust his guitar strap. This mistake conveniently created a spontaneous moment in that Clapton’s predetermined solo feature essentially grew into a guitar duel between himself and Robertson and gave the audience a chance to experience an improvisatory exhibition of two expert guitarists.

The Band dedicated a portion of The Last Waltz to the group’s Northern roots by inviting fellow Canadian musicians to perform with them that evening. Neil Young performed his song “Helpless” from the album Déjà Vu with a quick nod to Canada in his lyrics, “there is a town in north Ontario” as well as the song “Four Strong Winds” written by fellow Canadian singer/songwriter, Ian Tyson. With references to “Alberta” and the Canadian climate in lyrics such as “by then it would be winter, not too much for you to do, and those winds can sure blow cold way out there,” both the song and Young’s tribute
to Canadian music fit well into the Band’s affectionate homage to their homeland. Additionally, the performance of “Helpless” included the first and only female performer at The Last Waltz.

The ghostly voice of Canadian singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell was featured as an offstage background singer on the performance of “Helpless.” Although intended as an opportunity to surprise the audience, one cannot ignore the fact that the first performance by a woman at The Last Waltz occurred offstage. Mitchell would be the only female performer featured that evening and this decision, along with a career that lacks collaboration with many other women musicians, solidifies that the American musical narrative associated with the Band was prominently masculine. Mitchell then appeared onstage after Young to perform three of her own compositions as a part of the tribute to Canadian music. The selection of her song “Coyote” becomes a significant statement in the context of an otherwise all male cast at The Last Waltz. The lyrics describe the story of an affair between the narrator and the character of “Coyote,” an impulsive man who wanders from woman to woman:

He pins me in a corner and he won't take no
He drags me out on the dance floor
And we're dancing close and slow
Now he's got a woman at home
He's got another woman down the hall
He seems to want me anyway
Why'd you have to get so drunk
And lead me on that way

Mitchell’s commentary provides a distinct contrast to the typically male-dominated genre of rock ‘n’ roll. While most songs in the rock ‘n’ roll canon involve the man as the central character attempting to either court or seduce a woman, Mitchell’s
song provides the alternative perspective—depicting the man as a sexual scavenger. Her inclusion at The Last Waltz allows for a feminist narrative to intersect with an otherwise masculine presentation. However, although her presence that evening optimistically opens the door to the idea that women are also included in the Band’s construction of American music, her addition also blatantly points out just how little of a role woman provided.

In a final celebration of the Band’s Canadian roots, the group brought both Mitchell and Young onto the stage to perform Robertson’s epic sonic poem “Acadian Driftwood:” A musical depiction of the expulsion of the Acadians after the French and Indian War that deported thousands of civilians from their homes and resulted in a mass migration to the Louisiana area. Here we listen to Robertson composing another connection of the group’s Canadian background to American music-effectively including Canadians in the Americana construction. The Band aurally describes the reluctant relocation of the Acadians with gradual instrumental transitions from French-Canadian flutes projected by Hudson’s organ at the beginning of the piece to Cajun fiddle playing and zydeco accordion once the songs subjects’ reach their new home in Louisiana. The lyrics depict the desperate state of the Acadian people as they are driven from their homeland-attributing to a revivelist perspective in the context of 1970s disillusion:

The war was over and the spirit was broken,
The hills were smokin' as the men withdrew
We stood on the cliffs, oh and watched the ships,
    Slowly sinking to their rendezvous

They signed a treaty and our homes were taken
Loved-ones forsaken, they didn't give a damn.
Try to raise a family, end up an enemy
Over what went down on the Plains of Abraham.
We had kin livin', south of the border
They're a little older, and they been around
They wrote in a letter, life is a whole lot better
So pull up your stakes, children, and come on down

We worked in the sugar fields up from New Orleans
It was ever-green up until the flood
You could call it an omen, point ya where ya goin'
Set my compass North I got winter in my blood

Acadian driftwood, gypsy tailwind
They call my home, the land of snow
Canadian cold front, movin' in
What a way to ride, oh what a way to go

The song stands not only as an affectionate homage to the upbringing of four members of the Band, but also as a deep connection to their American identity. Moreover, the position of the performance at the end of the Canadian music tribute connects the Band back to the music of New Orleans featured at the beginning of the evening. Throughout the concert, we hear a sonic exploration of the Band’s America as the music travels up from jazz infused New Orleans through the blues rich cities along the Mississippi River eventually reaching the Canadian border only to make another journey back to the South. In this way, The Last Waltz stands an effective conglomeration of the Band’s geographical musical America through the selection of guests and individual tributes to the music of New Orleans, American blues, and Canadian folk. As previously stated I argue that these references to specific geographical and historical musical influences combined with elements of progressive modern music making has become the foundation of what we now call Americana. Furthermore, The Last Waltz represents a sonically framed depiction of the Band’s version of America.
The evening concluded with three other guests that represented different collaborative projects with members of the Band. First, Neil Diamond, a New York born Jewish singer/songwriter, had just released his 1976 album *Beautiful Noise* with Robertson as his producer. At The Last Waltz he performed the song “Dry Your Eyes” which he co-wrote with Robertson for the album. Diamond’s inclusion at the event stands as a contrast to the Band’s career as his only previous collaboration with the group was with Robertson alone. In this way his presence that evening foreshadowed the future solo career of Robertson rather than highlighting the history of the group. Coincidentally the inclusion of a guest whose only connection to the Band was through one member’s solo project, constitutes the overarching theme of the evening: the end of the Band.

Irish singer/songwriter Van Morrison paid tribute to his collaboration with the Band on the group’s fourth studio album *Cahoots* in which Morrison shares vocal duties with Manuel on the Morrison/Robertson collaboration “4% Pantomime.” As a guest at The Last Waltz, Morrison also sang a duet with Manuel, this time on the tune “Tura Lura Lura:” a soulful lullaby that honored Morrison’s Irish background. Morrison finished his set with an uplifting performance of his song “Caravan” that replenished an audience that had become fatigued by a continuous three-hour set of music. Helm remembers the inspired performance: “The Last Waltz was suddenly revived with a spectacular version of ‘Caravan.’ John Simon conducted the Band and the horns as Van burned through his great song— ‘Turn it up! Little bit louder! Radio!’—complete with kick-steps across the stage at the end. Van turned the whole thing around, God bless him for being the showman that he is.”59 Morrison’s performance of Irish-American music pays tribute to

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the same idea of musical appropriation of Canadian-American music by the Band. By mixing these multiple “foreign” musical styles with other distinctly American genres, groups such as the Band could successfully adapt their primarily Canadian background into their constructed version of Americana through an implemented “musical passport.”

The Band ended the evening by bringing the legendary American folk revivalist musician Bob Dylan to the stage. By placing Ronnie Hawkins at the beginning of the all-star lineup and ending with Bob Dylan, the Band effectively demonstrated their ascendance in the music industry by ultimately featuring Dylan, one the most influential American musicians of all time. Dylan performed two songs that evening from the 1974 album *Planet Waves*, a collaborative project with the Band. Both ballads, “Hazel” and “Forever Young” paid homage to the joint careers of Dylan and the Band. After the set concluded, the group broke into an impromptu reprise performance of “Baby, Let Me Follow You Down” that gave the performers a last up-tempo rock ‘n’ roll number to put an exclamation mark on their collaborative career. “In the audience: pandemonium,” reflects Helm, “I mean, people were excited to have Bob there.”

The evening officially concluded with a finale performance of the final track from the Band’s debut album *Music from Big Pink*. The performance of “I Shall Be Released” included a chorus of nearly every guest who was previously featured that night along with new appearances by Ringo Starr of the Beatles and Ron Wood of the Rolling Stones. After the final song, some musicians stayed on stage for two separate jam sessions and afterwards the Band and the horn section came back on at two o’clock in the morning for an encore performance of the cover song “Don’t Do It.” After an historic evening of

60. Ibid, 267.
performances by the Band and company, the original members of the group had completed their final concert and officially laid their personal presentation of American music to rest. However, the final project of *The Last Waltz* as an historical compilation of Americana was yet to be completed.

**The Film**

More than just an event that occurred on Thanksgiving Day in 1976, *The Last Waltz* had also been recorded and programmed to be released as both an album and a film through a joint project between Robertson, Warner Brothers, and director Martin Scorsese. The film, *The Last Waltz*, released in 1978 became labeled as “the finest of all rock movies” by *Rolling Stone* and further cemented the Band’s music as a significant contribution in American rock ‘n’ roll history. It cannot be overemphasized how important it was to the Band’s legacy to have their final concert captured as an easily accessible artifact in the form of a critically acclaimed film. Robertson recalled the extent to which Scorsese and his crew went to leading up to filming going so far as to drill large holes into the floor of the ballroom and construct bases for the camera stations so that the cameras wouldn’t shake as the audience reacted to the performances.61

But this idea of “construction” went beyond the installation of film equipment and ultimately became the method with which Scorsese used to cement the identity of the Band in music history. Because *The Last Waltz* as a film allowed for post-concert opportunities to be involved in the production, separate events, interviews, and performances that did not take place the evening of the concert were also included. In the

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end, three separate performances that occurred outside of The Last Waltz were used in the film with two of these presentations featuring additional guest artists.

Country singer/songwriter Emmylou Harris joined the Band on a staged performance of the group’s song “Evangeline.” Framed by dry-ice machines that produced a swampy bayou fog and Harris wearing a flowing blue nightgown, the video captured the visual representation of the title character “stand[ing] on the banks of the mighty Mississippi, alone in the pale moonlight.” The string-focused instrumentation of acoustic guitar, mandolin, and fiddle, along with the 3/4 waltz meter, effectively captured the rustic presentation of the track. Helm discusses how Harris’ inclusion in *The Last Waltz* symbolized the group’s country inflections, “She represented our homage to country music, joining the other genres we’d tried to pay tribute to in *The Last Waltz.*”62 Furthermore, Harris’ addition to the film brought a second female role to *The Last Waltz,* although the film’s seamless transitions between concert events and other moments in time easily produces the perception that her performance came from a rehearsal for the concert.

Similarly, the gospel group the Staple Singers were also invited to perform on a music video recording of the Band’s song, “The Weight.” The presence of the Staples Singers added a different dimension to the original version of the tune, changing the context from something of a simple campfire tale into an inspired gospel hymn. But the significance of the Staples Singers in *The Last Waltz* did not lie only in the reinterpretation of one of the Band’s most famous songs. Helm remembers the importance of including an all African American ensemble that featured three women as

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a much-needed degree of diversity in the context of the Band’s otherwise masculine and Anglo-American production:

It was decided that the whole thing was too lily-white and missing something crucial, so the Staple Singers were recruited to join us…it was great to hear Mavis Staples singing the verses of “The Weight” on that stage. The Staples had been the original inspiration for The Band’s vocal blend, so it was more than appropriate to hear Mavis and her father blending their voices with ours. Mavis Staples was so awe-inspiring that after the first take I left the drums and approached her. “Hey, Mavis,” I begged, ‘you’ve got to lighten up a little. I mean, don’t go blowing us off the stage.’ She laughed. Her voice and presence were as powerful as Aretha [Franklin]’s, maybe more so.

Retrospectively, the inclusion of the Staple Singers quartet more than doubled the amount of African American members included on The Last Waltz film with Muddy Waters, Pinetop Perkins, and Howard Johnson being the only other black performers on stage amidst a sea of white men. Similarly, the inclusion of the three Staple sisters and Emmylou Harris also significantly added to the number of women performers on The Last Waltz in contrast to Joni Mitchell’s lone appearance the night of the concert. Here we view an example of how Scorsese and the Band construct a more diverse presentation
of American music through the production behind *The Last Waltz*. By making extra efforts to include more African American and women performers, Scorsese and the Band attempt to challenge the notion of an all masculine and Anglo-American narrative that dominates the group’s music. However, one cannot ignore the obvious imbalance of diversity in the Band’s event even with the additions included in the extra filming of what was to be called “The Last Waltz Suite.” With the complete absence of any Asian American, Latin American, or Native American musicians at the concert or in the film, we view the event through the lens of a primarily masculine and Anglo American leaning narrative that I argue still dominates the genre of Americana today.

Furthermore, Scorsese continues to project a 1970s revivalist perspective through his presentation of the Band throughout his film by contrasting romantic images and stories from the individual members of the group with shots of decaying urban landscape. After an opening scene that presents the Band shooting pool, the film cuts directly to the performance of “Don’t Do It,” the final song performed at the concert. Scorsese uses the length of the song to introduce each member of the Band with an individual close-up feature and in this manner, Scorsese establishes the finality behind the concert by first presenting the viewers with the predetermined conclusion of the evening rather than starting at the beginning. After the musical introduction, the film transitions briefly into the realist images of downtown San Francisco, complete with abandoned cars, garbage-filled streets, bustling liquor stores, and lines of worn-out concert goers waiting outside the Winterland Ballroom Arena under a broken neon sign. Robertson recalls: “You would never believe that in this run-down neighborhood where Winterland was located, they
were building one of the most elegant sets ever seen in rock’n’roll.”

Scorsese then transports the audience inside the concert hall where the Band’s American narrative can be seen once again. Ballroom dancers glide gracefully across the screen as the title *The Last Waltz* appears in decorative calligraphy. In the first five minutes of the film Scorsese has effectively captured the visual imagery of both the beauty and the betrayal of the 1970s American narrative.

From interviews with Scorsese, one can clearly read the projection with which the director intended to associate with the group:

> We loved the sound of The Band. No one has ever equaled that sound. It incorporates so many different facets of American music—the South, Canada, the Southwest. And influences from all over the world, too. There’s a character they created with their voices, like in ‘The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,’ which was a song that went against the grain at the time, don’t forget…But it developed into an exploration of American music, ultimately culminating with them and Bob Dylan onstage... *The Last Waltz* was really a last waltz. It gave us a chance, although I didn’t realize it at the time, to look back on something that was definitely ending.  


Scorsese continued to solidify his projection of the Band in his film by inserting interviews with the individual members between selected performances from the concert. In one such segment, Robertson, states that he “couldn’t imagine twenty years on the road… couldn’t even discuss it,” with a direct transition into the appropriate song “Stage Fright.” Another interaction showing the group reminiscing about meeting the iconic blues musician Sonny Boy Williamson is displayed directly before a transition into Paul Butterfield’s performance of “Mystery Train.” In a conversation with Helm, the drummer states that “country, bluegrass, blues and show music” come together to create rock ‘n’ roll directly before the film rips into the opening lines of Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy.” Preceding the performance of “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,” Scorsese features an impromptu living-room performance of the 1873 gospel tune “Old Time Religion” complete with Danko on fiddle, Manuel on harmonica, and Robertson on acoustic guitar. A discussion with Hudson on the topic of jazz slides directly into the second-line inspired performance of “Ophelia.” These numerous strategically placed moments in the film provide a direct relationship between American music and the Band.

Scorsese intentionally prefaced Joni Mitchell’s performance with a particularly slanted interview about woman on the road:

Immediately preceding the appearance of Mitchell…Scorsese asks The Band, ‘What about woman on the road?’ It’s a question that probably sounded less sexist in 1976… ‘I love ‘em. That’s probably why we’ve been on
the road,” answers The Band’s Richard Manuel…Rick Danko endorses his point, ‘Since we’ve started playing, just like we’ve all grown a little bit, so have the women.’ And laughter erupts. Cue Mitchell, who sings ‘Coyote,’ her own composition about a carnivore hunter’s encounter with a female. When, in the same film, Muddy Waters sings, ‘I’m a man. I’m a natural born lover’s man’…as if he actually could be that coyote.65

In the end, Scorsese’s meticulous preparation for the filming and framing of The Last Waltz resulted in a 200-page script that instructed each cameraman on every position and each moment that they needed to film during the evening. An example of the attention to constructed details around the film can be found during the post-concert recordings of “The Last Waltz Suite” at MGM studios in which an argument erupted between cinematographer Michael Chapman and Scorsese concerning the correct choice of lighting for the production of “The Weight:”

Chapman insisted it was a Protestant song and that, as a Catholic, Scorsese didn’t understand the Gospel influences. (‘Go down, Miss Moses, there’s nothing you can say. It’s just old Luke, and Luke’s waiting on the Judgment Day’). Scorsese wanted him to use the colors violet and yellow, suggesting a Catholic intonation in the song. Robertson had

no say in the matter, but listened approvingly. ‘I liked everything they were saying because I had never thought of any of it…the song is about the guilt of relationships, not being able to give what’s being asked of you,’ said Robertson.66

Here we view another example of how the detailed production behind *The Last Waltz* contributes to the construction of the Band’s American narrative. By focusing the presentation of the group’s music on important American cultural influences such as Christianity, the film works to support the groups already established identity and, in this case, even goes beyond what the group originally intended. For example, by attempting to label an American group as a specifically Christian ensemble, the inference suggests that other religious organizations are somehow less American. And in this case what is and what is not considered to be the “most American” is used to help to define the group’s identity. This example proves how *The Last Waltz* enforces a specific character on the ensemble that results in labeling the group as a founding chapter in the book on American musical history.

Scorsese concludes the film with footage from the true final performance of the Band under the original lineup. With Manuel on dobro, Helm on mandolin, Danko on upright bass, Hudson on organ, and Robertson on harp guitar, the Band looks more like a classical chamber ensemble performing the requiem to their own careers. Featuring an instrumental piece titled “The Last Waltz Refrain” filmed at the MGM studio recordings,

the camera slowly backs away from the group until each member is overtaken by the projection of their own shadows and the group disappears behind the rolling credits. Helm remembers the final moments as a group, “When we finished on the soundstage, that was it. We…didn’t discuss the fact that this was the last time we would appear on a stage together. That day, it really was over. We done led the horse to the barn and took off the saddle.”67

Through Scorsese’s meticulous production behind *The Last Waltz*, the collaborative construction between both the Band and the film director successfully enveloped a 1970s revivalist American perspective that coincided with the groups’ career. This presentation chronicled a narrative that would both help to produce a new musical genre and historically preserve the event under the modern term of Americana. With the release of *The Last Waltz*, the Band’s career would come to an end. But the legacy of the group’s output would continue to serve as a model for future artists who also sought to accentuate a musical presentation of the American past through modern musical innovations.

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Conclusion

The Band and *The Last Waltz* represent a revivalist perspective by reflecting on the feelings of 1970s disillusionment in the United States through the creation of music that represents historic American references. Through numerous musical associations with genres such as Southern rockabilly, New Orleans jazz, Mississippi Delta blues, Appalachian folk songs, Evangelical church music, as well as many other influences, the Band was successful in establishing a certain kind of American identity that would define the group’s career. *The Last Waltz* embodies these notions within the convenient context of an historical artifact that is captured in film and subsequently defines what type of American music and cultural influences establish the Band’s version of America. Finally, the combination of all these factors throughout the Band’s career coalesce under the constructed nostalgic term Americana.

Furthermore, new associations between members of the group and the modern genre continue into the 21st century. In 2010, Helm accepted the inaugural Grammy Award for “Best Americana Album,” for his solo work, and later received the honor again in 2012 shortly before his death in April of that same year. These awards prove that despite the fact that the group no longer exists and that many of the individual members have since passed away, the Band’s legacy continues to represent a quintessential example of traditional American music under the meticulously crafted term Americana.
Works Cited


