Dan Durchholz

The Band

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The Band (left to right): Rick Danko, Levon Helm, Richard Manuel, Garth Hudson, and Robbie Robertson.

Odd, isn't it, that the quintessential American band just happened to be four-fifths Canadian?

Credit the lure of the music of the United States in all its crazy-quilt of forms—Appalachian folk, Delta blues, New Orleans jazz, honky-tonk country, and, yes, rock'n'roll—and how distant it all seemed to Ontarian teenagers Jaime Robbie Robertson, Garth Hudson, Rick Danko, and Richard Manuel. Not distant in physical miles, of course—the cities of Toronto, London, Stratford, and Simcoe, where the four grew up, are not all that far from US soil. But the US of their imagination, of late-night juke joints, of hard-living bluesmen, of the hard-rocking high life in all its forms, might as well have been a million miles away.

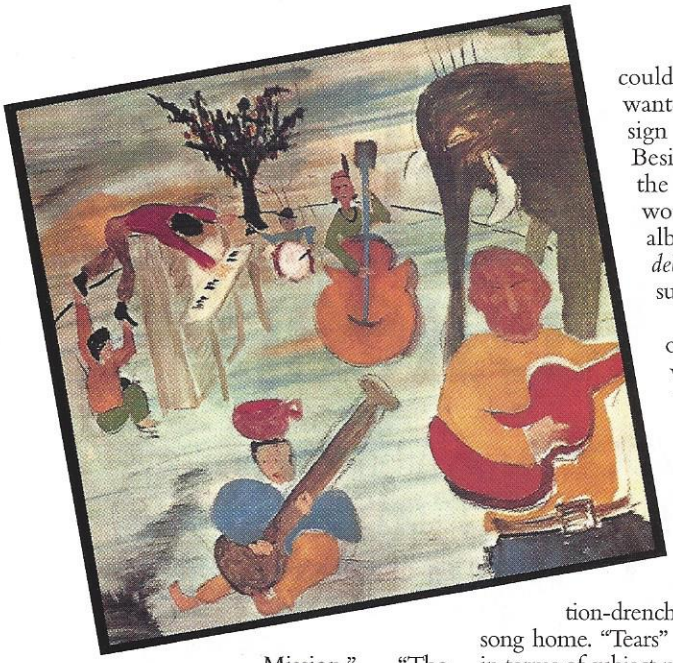
The fifth member of the Band, Levon Helm, didn't have to imagine those things. He grew up in the middle of blues and rockabilly territory, in Marvell, Arkansas. When he was 16, he signed on to play drums with Ronnie Hawkins, a would-be rockabilly hero ("Mary Lou," "Who Do You Love") who decided it was better to be a big fish in a little pond (*ie*, the Canadian market) than to be a fish out of water in the States, so he took his band north and worked a club circuit in Ontario for years. One by one, as Hawkins' Arkansas band deserted him, the musicians who would later form the Band signed on. They played all kinds of music in all kinds of places, gaining all kinds of experience that would temper them for what would come later.

They left Hawkins and struck out on their own, first as the Levon Helm Sextet and then as Levon and the Hawks, playing raw R&B and cutting a few singles. Brought to New York by John Hammond, Jr., they were tapped by Bob Dylan, who wanted an electric band to back him. They stood with him through the boos of the 1965 and '66 tours (except for Helm, who couldn't stand the abuse), and eventually moved with Dylan to the then-quiet artist colony of Woodstock, New York. There they experimented with Dylan (on the mend from his famous motorcycle accident), and made the music that would become known, and later released, as *The Basement Tapes*. They also made music of their own, and, reunited with Helm, began work on what would be their debut album as a band—indeed, *The* Band: *Music from Big Pink*.

That album, and the rest of the Band's Capitol Records catalog is being reworked and reissued in a program sure to shine a spotlight on one of rock's most important and iconoclastic acts. Their first four releases—*Music from Big Pink*, *The Band*, *Stage Fright*, and *Cahoots*—are already in the racks along with a newly selected *Greatest Hits* disc. Four more are scheduled to follow in 2001—*Moondog Matinee*, *Rock of Ages*, *Northern Lights–Southern Cross*, and *Islands*. Overall, the new discs present a much warmer version of what were pretty primitive recordings—a decided step up from the already issued CDs, which were not drawn from first-generation master tapes. These were, and the remastering and repackaging of the discs—with copious liner notes by Band scholar Rob Bowman—were done under the supervision of the three surviving members of the group; Robertson, Helm, and Hudson. The Band's story is one of triumph and tragedy, and in it, nothing surpasses the sad demise of the two members no longer with us—Manuel, who hanged himself in a Florida motel room in 1986, and Danko, who died of a drug overdose in 1999. Let's deal with some of the triumphs first.

The most striking thing about *Big Pink* is what a deliberate piece of art it is, from the songwriting and the performances right down to the album cover. Released in 1968, *Big Pink* modestly but assertively rowed against the current of *Sgt. Pepper's*-fueled psychedelia, rock-star worship, and what was not then called baby-boomer self-importance.

With three writers contributing songs (some with a co-writer named Dylan), *Big Pink* is the Band's most democratic album. Robertson wrote four numbers: "To Kingdom Come," "Caledonia



Mission," "The Weight," and "Chest Fever." Another four—"Tears of Rage" (with Dylan), "In a Station," "We Can Talk," and "Lonesome Susie"—came courtesy of Manuel, while Danko and Dylan co-wrote "This Wheel's on Fire." The album also contains the classic Marijohn Wilkin and Danny Dill murder ballad, "Long Black Veil" (picked up from Lefty Frizzell's hit country version), and Dylan's "I Shall Be Released."

Absent a dominating frontman, the Band forged an identity that was truly that of *a band*. They shared vocals, not merely in the sense of singing harmonies, but rather trading verses, sometimes actually finishing each other's lines. Their voices—Manuel's soulful plaint, Danko's country-ish moan, and Helm's Southern-fried rasp—were highly individual, but together gave the group a sense of community and commonality that other groups were singing about, but few were living out so demonstrably.

The songs from *Big Pink* that have had the most lasting impact are "Tears of Rage," "The Weight," and "Chest Fever." "Tears" is striking not merely for Manuel's gripping white-soul vocals, but for its subject matter, its dirge-like arrangement, and its placement as the album's opening track. The song—a father's reproachful scolding of a rebellious daughter—seems conservative, if not downright reactionary, given the anti-establishment tenor of the times, and it announced in no uncertain terms that this was a group that would keep its own counsel and be happily out of step with the indulgent navel-gazing of the love generation. (The album's lack of showy guitar solos by Robertson, who could play them if he wanted to, was another sign in this direction.) Besides that, who but the bravest of souls would kick off an album, particularly a *debut* album, with such a slow song?

But Robertson's opening guitar line, which was run though one of Hudson's home- built effects boxes, made listeners sit up and take notice, and Hudson's funereal organ and Manuel's emotion-drenched vocals drove the song home. "Tears" has been compared in terms of subject matter to the Beatles' "She's Leaving Home"; certainly they're the era's first two songs that spring to mind about the then-widening generation gap that are told from the perspective not of youth, but of the elders.

"The Weight," one of rock's most enduring classics, is also one of its most complex. It sports a Biblical subtext and a cast of characters—Fanny, Carmen, the Devil, Miss Moses, Luke, Annalee, Crazy Chester, even a dog named Jack—as rich and quirky as anything found in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Robertson has said the song was inspired by the films of Luis Buñuel, which described "the impossibility of sainthood." Ambitious as that sounds, "The Weight" follows an uncertain story line and has no real conclusion, yet conveys a sense of hard-won wisdom and preternatural world-weariness that, again, set the Band far apart from the world of conventional '60s rock and pop.

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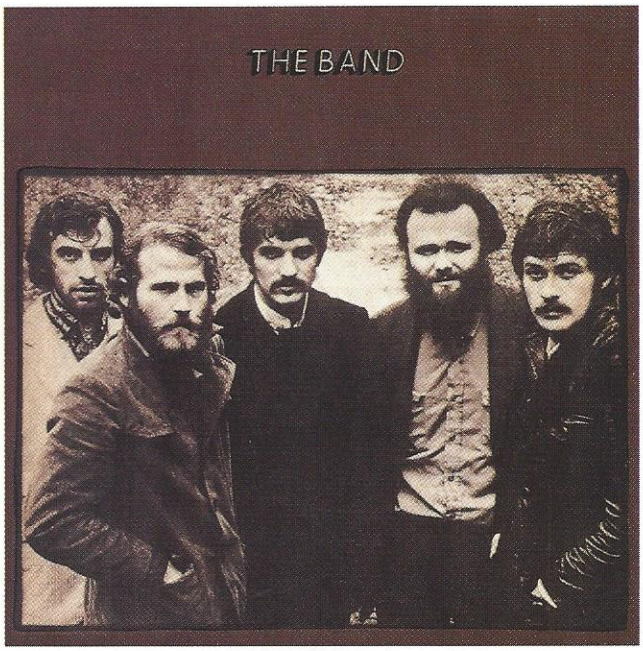
"Chest Fever," on the other hand, offers a bit of fun—Robertson has referred to it as a "vibe song" meant to undercut the serious tone of the rest of the album. There's also a bit of almost mock rock-star preening in Hudson's portentous organ solo, a take-off on Bach's Toccata and Fugue in d that later grew into a solo concert piece called "The Genetic Method"; and a touch of humor in the wheezing Salvation Army–style middle section, which features Hudson and producer John Simon on saxophones and Danko on violin.

Those are not *Big Pink*'s only memorable moments, of course. "To Kingdom Come" presents Robertson's first lead vocal, and his last for a long while. (He finally relented and sang "Knockin' Lost John" in 1976, on *Islands*.) There's also country funk in the forms of "Caledonia Mission" and "We Can Talk," and some of Manuel's most poignant performances ever, including his elegiac reading of Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" and his own "Lonesome Susie," a song of such bottomless despair and loneliness that it's difficult to listen to in light of Manuel's own sad end years later.

As deliberate and well-thought-out as were the songs on *Big Pink*, so, too, was the album art. The cover bore only a faux-naïf painting contributed by Dylan (note that he depicts six musicians, not five), while the only identification of the group were the printed words "THE BAND" on the album's spine. Inside were photos of the Big Pink house itself (it was actually quite small) and the Band, standing in a field and trying to look as anonymous as possible. All but Hudson wear hats, and all but Manuel had grown beards. The photo is so stark, it'd be easy to mistake it for a Civil War–era daguerreotype, or a shot of some West Virginia miners dressed up in their Sunday best.

Most memorable of all, though, is a full-frame shot of the bandmembers standing in the midst of *four generations* of Dankos, Manuels, Robertsons, and Hudsons (that's Ma and Pa Helm up there in the corner). Remember, this was a time when parents and other family members were seen by rock'n'rollers only as a force to rebel against. If the music on the album didn't make explicit enough the Band's commitment to tradition and respect for the past, this photo, captioned "NEXT OF KIN," did the trick.

Big Pink was never a commercial smash; it rose to only #30 on *Billboard*'s album chart. But it did make an impact—certainly among fans, some of whose heads were completely turned around by the defiantly unconventional work, but also by musicians, who heard something hard to quantify or qualify that had never before been captured on record. Eric Clapton, it's said, was so obsessed with the album that he found it futile to carry on with his power trio, Cream—one reason the group eventually packed it in.



The Band's follow-up album, simply titled *The Band*, also proudly stood outside the late-'60s rock mainstream. It sounds as if it was recorded in a woodsy cabin in the hills of Virginia or somewhere equally bucolic. In fact, it was mostly recorded in the pool house of a home once owned by Sammy Davis, Jr., in the Hollywood Hills.

By the time of *The Band*'s release in 1969, a certain mystique had grown up around the group. Part of this was due to the fact that they didn't tour after *Big Pink*—Danko and Helm were both involved in automobile wrecks—and part because of their refusal to grant interviews. Holed up in Woodstock, they seemed inscrutable, inaccessible... and all the more intriguing.

The Band—so named to put an end to persistent consumer confusion over just what to call them—grew into a sort of accidental concept album about the South, or at the very least about the rural United States in general, incorporating along the way many of its untamed musical idioms: the blues, country, ragtime, gospel, etc. Robertson was rapidly becoming the group's dominant writing voice (Manuel shared three songwriting credits here, Helm one), and many of these songs brought to life at last the wonder and mystery of the Deep South that Robertson had been turning over in his mind since he was a child in Toronto, his ear pressed against a transistor radio tuned to Nashville R&B station WLAC.

Like *Big Pink*, *The Band* sounds like something out of a time capsule: a song about the Civil War, another about a servant sent packing after committing some unnamed transgression against his mistress, still another about an old sailor retiring to a rocking chair back in "old Virginny"—this is rock'n'roll? Well, yes, as it turns out. Indeed, *The Band* is regarded by many fans as the group's true masterpiece.

That may be on the mark, given how far they reach on the album and how much their grasp attains. One could argue that *Big Pink* is better, mostly for intangible reasons—a more democratic writing situation, the easy fellowship espoused by the shared vocals (not as omnipresent on *The Band*), and the previously uncharted territory that *Big Pink* tried to map out. On the whole, though, *The Band* is more assured and more fully realized. Hudson really came into his own on this record, playing an inventive array of keyboard parts (like the famous Jew's-harp sound he created on the clavinet for "Up on Cripple Creek"). The bandmembers may not share many vocals, but they take their communal values even further here, occasionally swapping instruments—Helm on guitar or mandolin, Manuel on drums, Danko on violin, producer John Simon (who for a time was a virtual sixth member of the group) on tuba. In short, for an album that sounds so accomplished, *The Band* came about in ways almost shockingly spontaneous.

The album's stone classic, of course, is "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," which Robertson wrote over a period of eight months, quizzing Arkansas native Helm repeatedly in order to get the story of a Southern Civil War soldier just right. The writerly choice of doing the song from the perspective of the devastated (and intensely angry) South is a masterstroke, and the level of storytelling is about as high as it gets in a pop song. The Band's performance matches it, though, with Helm's moving vocal, and the intentionally ragged but explosive transition to the chorus, which sounds like rounds of heavy cannon fire.

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Other songs show evidence of Robertson's ability to operate on several levels at once. "King Harvest (Has Surely Come)" is a finely textured piece about the sights and smells of the fall season, but is also about heavy-handed union politics. "Unfaithful Servant," another song that seems totally out of step with the world of rock'n'roll, is one of the Band's (and especially Danko's) most beautiful performances. Other gems on the album include Manuel's prayerful "Whispering Pines" and Robertson's wistful "Rockin' Chair."

As serious as those songs may be, there's quite a bit of whimsy on *The Band*—in songs like "Across the Great Divide," which set the tone for the album in an upbeat direction just as surely as "Tears of Rage" set *Big Pink* in a mournful one. There's also the rollicking, randy, decidedly un-P.C. "Jemima Surrender," the jubilant bayou fantasy "Up on Cripple Creek," and the high-stepping "Rag Mama Rag"—which, go figure, became a huge hit in the United Kingdom.

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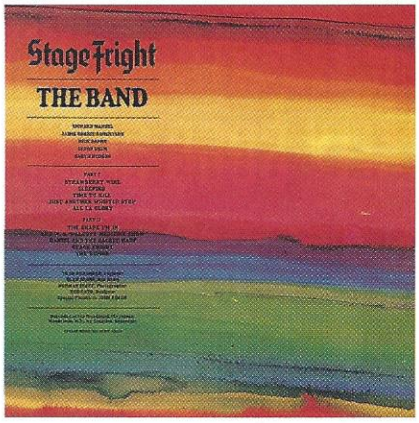
Stage Fright was meant to be an easy-going, upbeat, good-time album. Initially, the Band hoped to record it live

at the Woodstock Playhouse—an idea nixed by the town council, who already felt burned by the previous summer's massive Woodstock festival and its aftermath and didn't want another rush of rock-'n'roll people overrunning their town. The group recorded at the Playhouse anyway, either with the curtain closed or facing the empty seats, which may account for the notion that something is definitely missing from the mix.

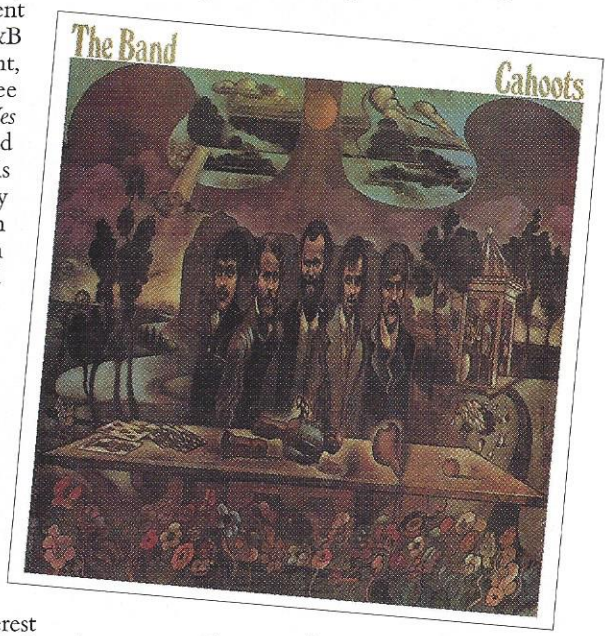


But it's not just the lack of an audience. The sense of combined effort and camaraderie is still present on some of *Stage Fright*, but only just. Manuel, whose writing abilities had atrophied terribly by this point, took only two co-writing credits, "Sleeping" and "Just Another Whistle Stop," while Helm had one, "Strawberry Wine." Robertson wrote everything else, and even his abilities had shifted into a lower gear. Unlike his songs on *Big Pink* and *The Band*, there were no grand themes or insights into America on *Stage Fright*; nor were there any characters like Molly, Crazy Chester, or Ragtime Willie. Instead, Robertson wrote about his own life, which increasingly was becoming the insular and pampered life of a rock star. The switch from writing about what he imagined to what he knew made *Stage Fright* stultifyingly ordinary. The performances were also hampered by the Band's increasing alienation from each other, and their decreased joie de vivre in general. The vocals here are almost all solo performances, with no ensemble singing of the sort that made the first two albums so distinctive and fun to listen to.

There are a few bright spots, though. The title track is one of the most poignant descriptions of looking down from the dizzying precipice of fame, and "The Shape I'm In" makes the best of a tragic situation. (Robertson supposedly wrote it about Manuel, who was frequently addled by drink and drugs, notably heroin. Helm and Danko dabbled in smack as well.)

Yet incisive and engaging as those songs may have been, they were only so much rock-star narcissism compared with the classic myth-making compositions of the previous records. The two attempts at similar kinds of work here, "The W.S. Walcott Medicine Show" and "Daniel and the Sacred Harp," come off as forced and disconnected from the rest of the album. As for the good-time concept, there are only "Strawberry Wine" and "Time to Kill." The rest feel like the results, if anything, of *too much* of a good time. Ironically, *Stage Fright* proved to be the Band's highest-charting album ever, rising to #5 in 1970, but staying on the charts only 14 weeks.

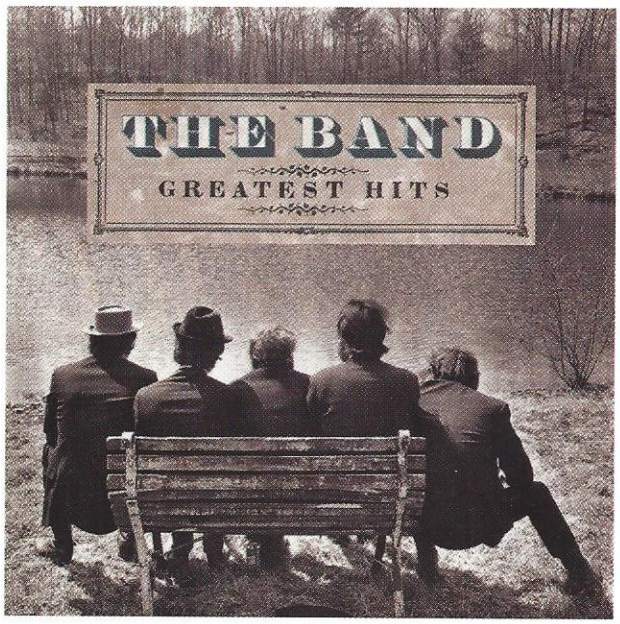
From the outset, *Cahoots* seems like a return to form. The opening track is the brilliant "Life is a Carnival," a celebration of the excitement and chaos of street life. What kicks the song into high gear, though, is the funky, kinetic horn arrangement by New Orleans R&B great Allen Toussaint, whose work on Lee Dorsey's 1970 album, *Yes We Can*, Robertson had admired. Equally fine is "When I Paint My Masterpiece," a Dylan tune about an American artist stuck in Rome and dreaming of his homeland. The accordion-driven arrangement sounds less like Rome and more like a Parisian sidewalk café, but that didn't hurt the song as much as Dylan's own version of it, which followed quickly on the heels of *Cahoots*.



Another song of interest is "4% Pantomime," which Robertson co-wrote with Van Morrison. The title refers to the difference in alcohol content between Johnny Walker Red and Johnny Walker Black, and the elaborate way that Morrison and Manuel acted out the song while recording it. It's not a great song, but the pair's traded vocals are reminiscent of what the Band was once capable of within its own ranks.

From there, the quality of the album drops off considerably. Robertson has said his increasing interest in cinema is responsible for songs like "Shootout in Chinatown," "The Moon Struck One," and "Smoke Signal," but those influences are seldom discernible to the listener. The performances are stilted, as well, which could be explained in part by the method of recording. For *Cahoots*, the Band was breaking in the new Bearsville studio owned by their manager, Albert Grossman, and apparently all the bugs hadn't been worked out of the system yet. Then, too, the parts were mostly recorded (by a young engineer named Todd Rundgren) piecemeal rather than together, as had been their method on previous albums. Their isolation from each other is almost audible, and the songs aren't up to scratch. The album-sleeve photo of the members of the group with their eyes closed only added to the impression that they had pretty much slept through this one.

Each of the four albums in the current round of reissues is adorned with bonus tracks, some more interesting than others. *Big Pink* sports an amazing nine extra cuts, virtually doubling the album's playing time. Among them are songs that Robertson has referred to as "goofy basement songs," like "Ferdinand the Imposter," "Orange Juice Blues," and "Long Distance Operator." Documentation in the liner notes is sketchy, but according to sources at Capitol Records, "Katie's Been Gone," from *Big Pink*, and "Bessie Smith," from *Cahoots*, are the only bonus cuts in this first five-disc release sourced directly from Dylan's 1975 *Basement Tapes* box. At least one of the songs, "Ferdinand,"



hails from a 1967 demo session that Robertson remembers as being supervised by the Band's manager, Albert Grossman. "Orange Juice Blues" is a demo version featuring Manuel on piano (a full-band version appears on the out-of-print box set "Across the Great Divide." The alternate "Tears of Rage" is not substantially different from the final version, but a take of "Lonesome Susie," presented as a slow shuffle, is considerably reworked. The other outtakes—"Yazoo Street Scandal," "Katie's Been Gone," "If I Lose," and a version of Big Bill Broonzy's "Key to the Highway"—are of interest to Band scholars, but none of them would have improved the original album had they been included.

Still, it's nice to have them now.

The Band's bonus cuts consists largely of alternate takes or mixes—"Rag Mama Rag," "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," "Up on Cripple Creek," "Whispering Pines," "Jemima Surrender," and "King Harvest." "Get Up Jake" was intended for the original album but left on the cutting-room floor. It did surface in a live version on "Rock of Ages" and in a mono version on the B-side of a "Moondog Matinee" single "Ain't Got No Home." The bonus track here is a stereo mix.

The extra tracks on *Stage Fright* are far fewer in number and significance. The only one of real interest is a version of "Daniel and the Sacred Harp" that is radically different from the final take. The others—alternate mixes of "Time to Kill" and "The W.S. Walcott Medicine Show"—plus a radio commercial hyping the album, are mostly just curios. The selection on *Cahoots* is much better, with "Bessie Smith" featuring a rare lead vocal by Robertson, and a studio take of the Band's version of Marvin Gaye's "Don't Do It" (which they also covered on *Rock of Ages*). There's an alternate take of "Masterpiece" plus an original song, "Endless Highway," that was left off of the album because it seemed to Robertson to represent an era of the Band that was gone forever.

In addition to the four original albums, Capitol has also issued a selection of *Greatest Hits*—something of a misnomer for an act that made it into the Top 40 only twice. It's a good and generous selection, (18 songs over the course of 77 minutes) though an easy one to pick apart—for example, why no cuts from *Rock of Ages*, in particular "Don't Do It," which *is* one of their two chart hits? For those wanting just to observe the arc of the Band's career, *Greatest Hits* might be the way to go; it includes songs from the later albums *Moondog Matinee*, *Northern Lights—Southern Cross* (the terrific "It Makes No Difference"), and *Islands*. But anyone interested in experiencing the Band at their absolute best should go straight to the first two albums, each of which is an essential part of any serious rock'n'roll collection.

All five discs in this release feature newly remastered, 24-bit digital sound, a great improvement over the original CD reissues, and one that makes even the hard, dry sound of *Stage Freight* listenable.

It'll be interesting to revisit those later albums when they're re-reissued as well, particularly *Rock of Ages*, one of the finest live rock recordings ever. But judging from the Band's first four albums, their legacy is decidedly mixed: two releases that are staggeringly great, two that are not. Most artists never achieve half as much, of course, but the sense of loss from the Band's ultimate failure, and the pitiable way they've limped along since regrouping in 1983, is palpable. Still, this mostly Canadian band changed the face of American music forever, and many of their songs are as essential today as they were 30 years ago, if not more so.