

The Band's Last Waltz



The Night They Closed Old Dixie Down

Robbie Robertson smiles his way through an anecdote about road-life. He tells of a job the Hawks did in Fort Worth, Texas, recalling the venue. He describes a sort of decrepit hall, with the stage set far down one end. The structure was so decayed, he explains, that the roof had had to go, which was why the place was called the Skyline Ballroom. It wasn't a classy joint. They had a one armed go-go dancer. It was only months afterwards, says Robertson, they discovered that this was Jack Ruby's nightclub.

The story, one of the moments of *The Last Waltz*, captures a little of the Band's heritage. The Band is after all, one of the finest products of the sixties, and all that decade holds. Robertson himself talks about years of assassination, South-East Asian involvement, causes of one sort or another. As collaborators with Dylan, and regulars of late sixties music festivals, The Band inevitably finds itself linked with the social phenomena of its formative years.

And yet *The Last Waltz*, a film of a 1976 concert, released in 1978, is so much more than a historical curiosity. As the Ruby nightclub tale reveals, a degree of social history has rubbed off. The Band have been to interesting places at interesting times: Albert Hall with Dylan in 66, Woodstock, the 1968 Woodie Guthrie tribute concert at Carnegie Hall. But The Band are also musical survivors. To this *The Last Waltz* resoundingly testifies. Whatever the sociological fascination of Jack Ruby's Skyline Ballroom, playing two-bit joints like it in those early years has wrought an undisputed excellence.

They set off in 1960 as The Hawks, backing combo to rock-a-billy Ronnie Hawkins, and wound up their touring career (professedly anyway) on Thanksgiving Day, 1976, at the Winterland, San Francisco. That simply, is what Martin Scorsese's movie *The Last Waltz* and the Warner Brothers' soundtrack album are all about.

The Winterland was the first venue to see Robertson, Danko, Manuel, Hudson and Helm play as The Band. It was decided fitting that it should also be the last.

Promoter Bill Graham went overboard to ensure it would be a special event. 5,000 tickets were sold at \$25 a piece and went within hours. Dinner and a promenade orchestra



were laid on. The set from *La Traviata* was hired for \$8,000 from the San Francisco Opera Company. The chandeliers were props from *Gone With the Wind*.

Maybe such unholy extravagance speaks of the middle-class absorption of rock 'n' roll. But the real gold of the event was not in the baroque setting, but in the committed performance of The Band, and the astounding parade of friends they brought along to celebrate.

It is quite fair to call *The Last Waltz* celebratory. Most of the musicians wear a respectful, and in some cases reverential air. Neil Young comes on to state, with awkward self awareness, that it is one of the pleasures of his life to be on the stage with these people. And as if to demonstrate feelings of mutual regard, The Band provides uniformly excellent backing for each artist.

Unlike almost any other parade-of-stars event I've experienced, there is a unity and an excited atmosphere to this presentation. The film gives an abundance of entertaining images. Ronnie Hawkins fans Robertson's guitar during a solo in corny tribute, using an improbably shaped ten-gallon headpiece. Neil Young leaves his microphone to gather, almost star-struck, with Danko and Robertson around another.

Virtually all the musicians given a spotlight respond in kind. Some of the enthusiasm re-

sults in moments of bizarre abandon. Van Morrison demonstrates staggering lunges which pass for dancing. Dr John, regaled in pink bow-tie, sharing a mike with Neil Diamond is similarly amusing. Only Diamond appears wholly misplaced in this company, even if Joni Mitchell and Clapton do not fit as well as say Paul Butterfield and Muddy Waters.

Those of us who have never and will never see this great rock and roll band play live can only express gratitude for Robbie Robertson's decision to have the farewell concert both recorded and filmed. *Rock of Ages* stands as the definitive live Band album, but without a doubt *The Last Waltz* will endure as a visual record. The animation of characters, who for New Zealanders at least, are those indistinct five in frontier costume pictorially frozen on the back of *Music From Big Pink*, is a treat.

Not surprisingly there are revelations. Robertson, a man whose photographs make him look like a close-cropped accountant, comes to life as more the guitar-hero than I would ever have expected. I should not be surprised to find the film garnering a minor Robbie Robertson following amongst N.Z. female adolescents. Meanwhile Garth Hudson, labouring distractedly amidst arrayed keyboards and sellotaped scraps of music manuscript, is as much the nutty professor as anyone is likely to conceive.

In a sense the film is shot and edited to dis-

play such neat and confined images. Scorsese, the man responsible for *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *Taxi Driver*, *Mean Streets* and *New York New York*, wrote a 300 page shooting script in preparation for the show. Allowing little to chance he spent the entire evening issuing instructions to his cameramen. Although such an elaborate camera choreography tends to channel and manipulate the viewers response, *The Last Waltz* shows the signs of being the only rock movie with an original rationale since Pennebaker's innovations in *Monterey Pop*.

Like each of the performers, Scorsese's set pieces, particularly the anecdotal interviews shot later, are evocative. In each, some small portion of The Band's development and history is featured, Scorsese's clear intention is to create a kind of annotated concert, without losing the energy of the live show. He is more successful with the Winterland shots than with the studio sequences of "The Last Waltz Suite" even though the latter are played live. Only the concert footage really grasps the emotion of such a ritual farewell.

Undoubtedly the impact of auditorium scenes is sustained by excellent sound. *The Last Waltz* was the first rock film to be shot in 35mm; it was also the first to use a twenty four track recording system. What is more important is that Robertson spent months mixing tapes down for the movie and for the record (they are incidentally mixed slightly differently). Unfortunately we shall never hear much of the material played that night merely because there was so much of it. Suffice to say that the *Last Waltz* record buyer gets more of it than the film goer.

Choosing highlights from either a three record set or a two hour film is a task overly prone to peculiarities of personal taste, especially with material of such a high standard.

Of The Band's standard repertoire, "Up On Cripple Creek," and "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," carry the biggest wallop. Of the guest performers Van Morrison and Ronnie Hawkins record best.

But my suggestion is to get out and see *The Last Waltz* for yourself. With any luck you'll feel as I did, like clapping half the performances, right there in the picture theatre.

Bruce Belsham

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