**Levon Helm Remembered**

For a total music nut, I came to The Band awfully late in the game. When others were listening to new underground and free-form FM stations, I was glued to Top 40. I did hear that catchy "Take a load off, Fanny" refrain and liked it, but I didn't know that that tune was called "The Weight" until Diana Ross & the Supremes and the Temptations cut it for the soundtrack of their NBC-TV special. Still, I developed a peripheral awareness of The Band and certainly heard about "The Last Waltz," their star-studded "finale" concert in San Francisco in 1976. But that wasn't their last show.

I don't know why historical accounts of The Band fail to mention that the final performance of the original five-man line-up took place a year or two later at the Roxy Theater on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. Maybe it's because there were only a couple hundred people in attendance in the small club. But I know. I was there and I was transformed. The occasion of that evening's performance was a show by former Band member Rick Danko, who had just released a solo album. Fellow Band-mate and keyboard player Garth Hudson, I believe, was the first to sit in. But there was a buzz in the room, and after Danko knocked out the obligatory tracks from his new LP, other familiar faces began joining him onstage. Richard Manuel, also on keys; Robbie Robertson on guitar; and Levon Helm on drums. The set quickly became a "best of The Band" showcase. When they launched into "The Weight," Levon hollered to Danko, "Sing it, it's your show!" Rick responded, "It's your song!" And Levon delivered the goods in that classic, soulful voice that truly made him the heart of The Band, Robbie Robertson's role as chief songwriter notwithstanding.

That show ran later than any I ever attended at the Roxy. They played for hours. At 1:45 a.m. the drinks were removed from the tables. At 2:00 the lights were turned on. And at 3:00 a.m., having refused management's requests to wrap it up, the power to the stage was turned off. And that concluded The Band's final performance. It was among the best three or four shows I have ever seen. And I went to Tower Records on Sunset and purchased their entire catalog later that week.

Like everyone else, I heard that Levon Helm was near death when his family released a statement two days prior, so his passing was not a total shock, just a grave disappointment. Having battled throat cancer so valiantly for years, Levon skipped on out on a high note in his life. As he seemingly was recovering from intensive treatment, he cut two Grammy-winning LPs and, by all accounts, the Midnight Ramble series of summer concerts that he and his daughter hosted on his farm in upstate New York in recent years were the absolute greatest events for true music lovers. I will always curse myself for not trekking up there to attend one or two of them.

I didn't know Levon Helm. I met him once, briefly, at a screening of the Loretta Lynn biopic, “Coal Miner’s Daughter”—he played Loretta’s father. I can tell you that he radiated the same joy in person that he did onstage behind the drum kit and on the microphone. And by the way, rent or buy the DVD of "The Last Waltz" and pay close attention to Levon on the skins. He was more than just a backbeat, his drumming was part of the melody. And to play like that and sing at the same time!? He has no peer in that regard. I cried for a moment when the official news of his passing came in. Anyone that embraces life with such joy and truly lives to impart that to others as he did is to be mourned and then celebrated.