

Garth Hudson, The Band's last surviving member, dies at 87

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Organist and multi-instrumentalist Garth Hudson died in his sleep in Woodstock, New York Tuesday morning after a lengthy illness. Born in 1937 in Windsor, Ontario, he was both the oldest and the last surviving member of The Band.

Hudson is mainly remembered as the quietly offbeat but immensely talented member of the group who could usually be found at the rear of the stage playing intently behind his massive Lowrey organ. Known to some as The Band's "secret weapon," he brought the group its unique and recognizable voice. He was inspired by the classics, like Bach and Mozart, but also very much by jazz and American traditional music.

In band member Levon Helm's 1993 book, *This Wheel's On Fire*, Hudson explains his influences:

I sort of grew up with country music because my father would find all the hoedown stations on the radio, and then I played accordion with a little country group when I was twelve. My parents sent me to study piano at the Toronto Conservatory. I had a good teacher who used older methods and older pieces. That's how I learned to play the Bach preludes and fugues, material like that. I loved Chopin, and Mozart amazed me. But I found I had problems memorizing classical annotated music. I could do it, but not to the extent that is necessary. So I developed my own method of ear training and realized I could improvise.

Ronnie and the Hawks

Hudson was recruited by frontman Ronnie Hawkins to the rockabilly—the name given to the type of music popular in the American midwest that combined country music and blues—ensemble then known as "Ronnie and the Hawks." Hawkins was an ambitious performer who considered himself a competitor of such popular figures as Conway Twitty, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley (who was just two days older than Hawkins).

Hawkins' band booked appearances in nightclubs and bars along the Mississippi River corridor, much influenced by the musical scene around Memphis, Tennessee. "The Hawk" was always looking for new talent and, largely due to the fast and loose lifestyle his groups always had on the road, the personnel were always changing. Levon Helm, who went on to become part of The Band, was recruited in 1957 while attending high school in Turkey Scratch, Arkansas, performing only on weekends until he graduated.

When Levon graduated, he became a full-time Hawk and their circuit expanded to include Toronto, where Rick Danko, Richard Manuel and Robbie Robertson were added. They were all young, talented and eager

musicians who later become the core of The Band.

On a junket to Detroit (across the river from Windsor), The Hawks encountered Garth Hudson playing the organ and horns for a local band, Paul London and the Capers. Hawkins recognized his virtuosity, and even though some said he would rather play Bach than rock, he wanted him in the Hawks. As early as 1959, Hawkins tried to hire him, but Garth wasn't interested.

Levon explained,

He was a little older than us, a trained classical musician who was only playing rock and roll to make a little money in his spare time. His family was very conservative, and Garth didn't think they would approve of him joining any rockabilly band on a permanent basis. ... We all knew that if Garth Hudson joined the band, it would put us up a notch, and we'd be unstoppable.

Hudson elaborates in Helm's memoir what got him into the Hawks:

I saw the Hawks were making the big money because they worked seven nights a week, every week. I told my parents about Ronnie's offer to join the band, but they still disapproved of my playing music in bars and taverns. Finally I had Ronnie talk them into it.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hudson," Ronnie told them in his most earnest and straightforward manner, "I have a band of talented young men who are being held back by their lack of musical education. I want to hire your son Garth to come along and teach them music. I want them to learn how to read notation properly. I've offered Garth a higher wage than anyone else, a cash bonus to join us, and we will pay him an extra ten dollars a week for the lessons he gives the boys. We'll also buy a new organ so Garth can be heard at his best. Now, how about it? Do we have your blessing on this?"

My parents, God bless them, finally said it was OK. This was in late 1961, around Christmastime. It was Levon, Robbie, Rick, Richard, and Garth for the first time.

That's when I went to organ. Richard [band member Richard Manuel played keyboard] not only had the voice, he had this great rhythmic feel, so I never had to play that heavy left-hand stuff. We bought a Lowrey organ, which nobody else was using except that guy in Detroit. I played it for the next fifteen years.

The organ was a sizable investment for the Hawks, but they were unanimous in wanting Hudson in the band. "It took us six months to save up enough money to buy the Lowrey organ," bass player Danko later

recalled.

For the next several years, Hudson traveled with The Hawks, garnering significant experience in the process. According to Hawkins:

He heard all sorts of weird sounds in his head, and he played like the Phantom of the Opera. . . . Most organ players in those days would just play through everything, but Garth would lay back, hit licks, hit horn shots. He knew exactly what to put in and what to leave out.

“Once we had a musician of Garth’s calibre in the band, we really started to sound like a professional act,” Levon later reminisced. As Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks they performed for two years or so at venues all over the Midwest, the Eastern US and Canada.

When they were in New York, they did recording sessions for Roulette Records with producer Henry Glover (“Honky Tonk,” “Peppermint Twist,” “California Sun”), who was an old friend of Ronny’s. Elias McDaniel’s “Who Do You Love” and “Bo Diddley,” Leiber and Stoller’s “Ruby Baby,” and Chuck Berry’s “Forty Days” are a few of the songs they covered on the Roulette label.

The Hawks on their own

When Hawkins got married in late 1963, the Hawks performed and recorded more often without Ronnie. On one occasion at the studio, Glover asked the five Hawks when they were going out on their own. Helm recalled,

We wanted a band where everyone played and had a voice—literally. We were already swapping the singing duties around, working in harmonies as we needed them. With Richard, Rick, and me, we had the beginnings of the voice that became The Band. Three singers on one song; that became our trademark.

So we were all singing and playing instruments, and to our minds that was the basis for a new kind of band—one without a front man.

After much discussion, the five Hawks made the decision to move on without Ronnie and performed under the name Levon and the Hawks and later, the Canadian Squires.

Word circulated in music circles the five were the tightest group around. In August 1965, during the Hawks’ gig on the Jersey Shore, they got a call from Bob Dylan, who was looking for a backup band. This was just a month after Dylan had “gone electric” at the Newport Folk Festival. But The Hawks knew nothing of that or the controversy it aroused. They considered Dylan one of the “strummers,” a word they used for the folksinging protesters—the diametrical opposite of the musical world they inhabited.

The first American infantry troops had been dispatched to the Vietnam War only months before, but as far as they were personally concerned, life was fairly good. The group was well aware of racism, particularly in the entertainment field. All of them admired and emulated the music of black musicians such as Little Richard, Ray Charles, Sonny Boy Williamson and Bo Diddley. They had experienced being on the wrong side of racist Southern cops, but their attitude to the injustice was pragmatic—just stay

out of trouble as much as possible.

The past that Dylan had fabricated as a hobo-esque misfit who traveled with minstrel shows and carnivals, corresponded more closely to the life the Hawks actually lived. They were just the kind of band he wanted. As for the Hawks, they had misgivings about Dylan, but they knew working with him would open doors for them.

Bob Dylan’s backup band

By Labor Day, the five signed a contract with Dylan’s manager as his backup band. For almost a year they toured with Dylan in the US and Europe as his electrified backup band to audiences many of whom hated his new style and loudly expressed their displeasure. Helm, who was most affected by the booing, and quit the group for over a year, said food was often thrown at the musicians.

In the summer of 1966, a motorcycle accident left Dylan with broken bones in his neck and his tour was canceled. This gave the five musicians time off they hadn’t had for years.

While he was recuperating, Dylan moved to the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York, to a town called Woodstock. He encouraged his band to relocate to that area as well. Hudson, Danko and Manuel rented a house on a 100 acre lot in nearby West Saugerties they termed “Big Pink.” They set up a makeshift recording studio in the basement and the former Hawks wrote and brainstormed songs for months.

Hudson played a major role in choosing the instruments and equipment they used. In addition to the huge Lowrey organ, they had a Leslie rotating speaker that provided a unique vibrato to any instrument plugged into it. Dylan’s recovery became the incubation period which generated the unique sound embodied in the July 1968 album titled *Music From Big Pink*.

First, however, Dylan played with the future members of The Band at the Woody Guthrie memorial concert at Carnegie Hall in New York City in January 1968. Together with Dylan, they performed three of Guthrie’s songs, “Grand Coulee Dam,” “Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,” and “I Ain’t Got No Home.”

Music from Big Pink

On their off time, even before the Hawks became Dylan’s touring backup band, they lived the life of a “permanent stag party”—alcohol, drugs and women, but the eccentric Hudson spent his time in other ways. At every new town he would find the local music store and frequent hardware stores to acquire gadgets that could be used to produce new and different sounds. For example, at a war surplus store in one locale, he picked up a telegraph key that he later used as a controller for the organ output. That found its way onto the recording of “This Wheel’s on Fire” on the *Big Pink* album.

The album was released at a time of great political turmoil and unrest. Martin Luther King had been assassinated in Memphis two months earlier. Ghetto rebellions then raged in Washington D.C. and over 100 other cities across the US. In May and June, millions of workers and students participated in a potentially revolutionary struggle against the de Gaulle government during the French general strike. The escalation of the war in Vietnam under President Lyndon Johnson provoked massive student protests. Just one month before the release of *Big Pink*, presidential candidate Senator Robert F. Kennedy, widely seen as anti-war, was

assassinated. The Democratic National Convention opened in Chicago to massive protests and police violence a month afterward.

In spite of the social turbulence of the time, or perhaps because of it, the album made a huge impact on audiences. It was recognized widely as a different kind of music. This was largely due to Hudson's virtuosic contribution on the Lowrey, which added sophisticated and melodic layers behind the harmonic voices of Manuel, Helm and Danko. It seemed an egalitarian project. There was no frontman or soloists, and with that first album, the band didn't even have a name.

Going against the standard practice of opening an album with a group's most popular "radio ready" cut, The Band's first album opened with the ballad "Tears of Rage," written by Manuel, with lyrics by Dylan. The first sound to be heard is that of Robertson's warbling guitar through the Leslie speaker with Hudson's long, evocative organ chords underneath.

"Tears of Rage" also goes against the rebellious and psychedelic conventions of the time. While the lyrics appear to tell the emotional story of a father who has lost his daughter to the new youth counterculture, it can also be interpreted as mourning the lost promise of America. Either way, the track opened up something more than just an album. There was something deeper and more sincere.

The group's only concession to showcasing soloists involved Hudson. The introduction to "Chest Fever" was a classically-inspired improvisation that would become part of their setlists at live performances known as the "Genetic Method."

The Band

Hudson had an otherworldly persona. His familiarity with old American music became the underpinning of the group's repertoire and influenced all its members and associates, including Dylan. Partially due to photography by Elliott Landy, who modeled his imagery on the work of Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, the group's publicity evoked the feel of something older and perhaps more enduring.

The old traditional banjo tune, "Cripple Creek" metamorphosed into "Up on Cripple Creek" and became one of The Band's best known hits. A signature theme of the tune is Hudson Jew's harp-sounding interludes that he produced on a clavinet (electric clavichord) keyboard with the use of a "wah-wah" effects pedal. In a video made during rehearsal of the tune, Hudson's glee at his sound is clearly apparent and infectious.

The group had a problem choosing a name. Robertson explains the way they got their name in the film *The Last Waltz*: "When we were working with Bob Dylan and we moved to Woodstock, everyone referred to us as 'the band.' He called us the band, our friends called us the band, our neighbors called us the band..." So they decided on "The Band." They weren't officially known as such until their second, eponymous album released in September 1969.

Hudson's contribution to The Band earned him the moniker "H.B." among his bandmates. Helm explains,

This stood for "Honey Boy," because at the end of the day, after the other instruments were put away, Garth was still in the studio sweetening the tracks, stacking up those chords, putting on brass, woodwinds, whatever was needed to make that music sing. Garth made us sound like we did.

The Last Waltz

The "final performance" of The Band was organized primarily by Robertson and his Hollywood contacts in the entertainment business. The extravagant affair included many renowned musical guests, among them Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Muddy Waters, Eric Clapton, Van Morrison, Doctor John, Paul Butterfield and even the unlikely Neil Diamond. It was presented Thanksgiving Day 1976 at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco and chronicled in Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Waltz*.

In the film, Robertson explains his reasoning for breaking up The Band:

Okay, look. We've been together 16 years. We did eight years in bars, dives, dance halls, eight years in concerts in stadiums, arenas. ... I couldn't live with 20 years on the road. I don't think I could even discuss it. It's a goddam impossible way of life.

This was not actually the group's last performance, just the last performance of the Band with Robertson. Helm, Danko, Manuel and Hudson had not wanted to call it quits and continued to perform as The Band without him.

In 1975, Hudson appeared on blues legend Muddy Waters' last recording made under the Chess label, called *The Muddy Waters Woodstock Album*. It was recorded in Helm's Woodstock studio and featured Helm, harmonica artist Paul Butterfield and Pinetop Perkins on vocals and piano. Produced by one-time Roulette Records A&R man Henry Glover, it won a Grammy award in 1976 for the Best Ethnic or Traditional Folk Recording.

Although Hudson was in demand for different projects, including film scores, he is best remembered for his years with The Band. His death has been mourned by many fans and musicians. The Chicano rock band Los Lobos posted on their "X" feed:

It is with profound sadness that we learn of the passing of our hermano & hero Garth Hudson. We treasure the time we got to spend & the simple fact that he was in our lives & on our records gives us enormous joy but above all, we are grateful for the gift of his friendship.



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