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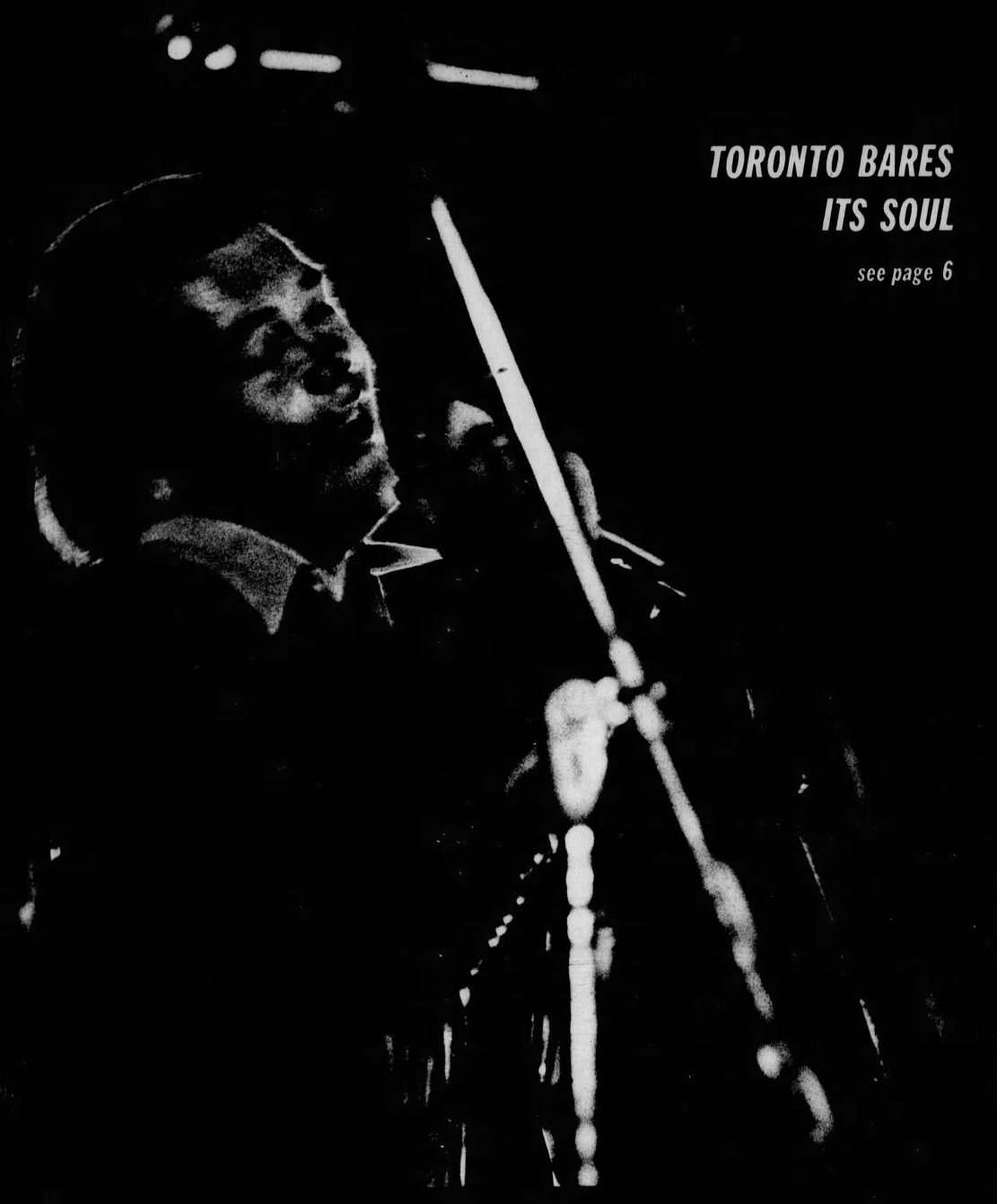
# Weekend

MAGAZINE

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ITS SOUL**

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# Now It's The Toronto Sound



## Groups like Blood, Sweat And Tears, Steppenwolf and The Band are making Canada's presence in pop music felt all over the world with their own blend of the blues, hard rock and folk music

By Ann Berkeley

DAVID Clayton-Thomas is the kind of man you'd least expect to be a rock musician; muscular and thickset, soup-bowl haircut, square face, his body tattooed like a stevedore, drinking steadily, not Coke but Scotch on the rocks.

Five in the afternoon rolling around again, rock musicians everywhere, stumbling about in their bare feet looking for something to eat for breakfast before pushing on to their evening gig in yet another draughty hall.

Clayton-Thomas, 26, Toronto blues singer with America's top rock group, Blood, Sweat And Tears, is in a fancy hotel back in his hometown, throwing off ideas about the emergence of Toronto sound in international rock music.

"There aren't many white musicians singing the blues," he says, talking fast. "They think it brings them down. Blues is like getting up in the morning and putting your foot in the toilet. It's terrible when it happens, but somehow funny when you tell about it later."

A lot of singers who come from the towns and farms of southern Ontario have, if you consider the high proportion of them on the world record charts, been getting their feet wet lately. Because of his raunchy baritone voice, belting out his own song, Spinning Wheel, Clayton-Thomas has put Blood, Sweat And Tears at the top of the U.S. hit parade, made them into a supergroup able to generate near riots among their fans, and earn at least \$20,000 and a percentage of the gate for each of their performances. Then there is Steppenwolf, also a supergroup, from Toronto and now singing adjunct to the U.S.'s new left, making its fortune not in New York, but in Los Angeles. They won a gold record for the music in the film Candy.

And The Band. There's a lot of

what Ontario novelist Graeme Gibson calls "this solemn world of uncles" in The Band. Rural Ontarians; most of them, they wear biblical beards and a sense of dignity and are responsible for what could be called the Canadian country church sound in international rock. Their first album, Music From Big Pink, was greeted with rapturous awe and subsequently voted, in the U.S., rock album of the year.

David Clayton-Thomas has become the self-proclaimed spokesman for Canadian, particularly Toronto, rock. "I have to show the kids they can make it," he says. Draped in the successful rock star's establishment uniform, \$200-worth of tailored purple leather, he moves with restless lunges that set his bellbottoms flapping, and rasps in a middle-aged blues voice: "All of us . . . me, The Band, Steppenwolf are soulful musicians. We had to be, playing in the bars where we had to play. Yech."

The Toronto sound, then, was born in the red-lit, red-carpeted taverns of Yonge Street, the 42nd Street of Canada, down alongside the kinky lingerie and dirty bookstores and where the greasers in their carnival Chevys leave rubber on the road. Hardly anyone inside the taverns really listens to the house musicians, anyway. People just sit there with their beers, gazing through the smoky haze dreaming of making it with the dancers on stage. In better days, about 15 years ago, these were the haunts of the great jazz players; a few of whom, old men now, hang on talking to the long-haired kids playing their guitars.

"We looked up to jazz musicians as gods," Clayton-Thomas recalls. "After all, we don't have a Juilliard here." Their musical finishing school then was the tavern, their critics the patrons who didn't mind what you played as long as it didn't blow the

froth off their beer. "We all had to play this three chord dinky Muzak," says David bitterly, "otherwise the manager would rush over to tell us to keep the sound down. It's still the same."

The son of a London music hall artist, Clayton-Thomas ran away from home, got a job as "a 14-year-old drummer to get rid of my hostilities", took up the bass and began to sing. Life at home he remembers as "pretty sordid" and somewhere along the line, after coming to Canada with his parents as a boy, he landed in Burwash reformatory doing "industrial work", where someone gave him a guitar to while away the time. When he got out, he went into music because "I wouldn't have to work". All his songs seem to reflect the gut issues of life, love, bad women. All that is, except Spinning Wheel which is a poignant musical picture of himself:

*What goes up must come down  
Spinning wheel got to go round  
Talkin' 'bout your troubles  
It's a cryin' sin  
Ride a painted pony  
Let the spinning wheel spin  
You got no money, you got no home  
Spinning wheel all alone  
Talkin' 'bout your troubles and you, you never learn.*

The lives of all the great blues singers demonstrate that emotion has to well up from some core of bitter experience. Merseysound was the vitality of the Midland mills, mixed with Bill Haley rock and blues. Can-rock is, according to Clayton-Thomas, "a kind of Canadian country barroom rock and roll". Toronto rock sprang from love of jazz, allied with the Canadian knack for folk singing (listen to Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen and Gordon Lightfoot), overlaid with country and western, popular in the bars, and with a solid rock beat. What comes out is a layered, textured sound.

*Continued on next page*

Photos, including cover, by Harold Whyte

Canada's soul music ranges from the wild beat of Steppenwolf (top, far left), to the big band sound of Blood, Sweat And Tears, led by David Clayton-Thomas (top left and cover) and the solemn dignity of The Band (left).

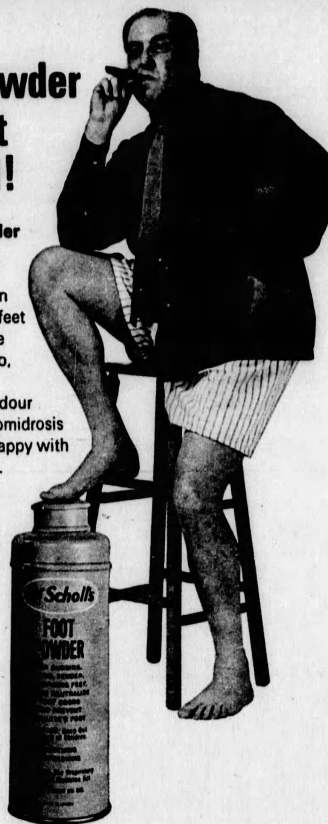


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## THE TORONTO SOUND

*Continued from preceding page*

"We've made it now and maybe it's because U.S. audiences are sick to death with razzle-dazzle and want some reality for a change," explains Clayton-Thomas. "In the U.S. everything has a tag on it, everything is segregated. In Canada we don't have to fence off our corners; we bring in other kinds of music."

*Did you find your directing sign on the straight and narrow highway?*

*Would you mind a reflecting sign? Just let it shine within your mind And show you the colors that are real.*

Albert Grossman is fiftyish. He wears steel-rimmed spectacles set precariously on his nose. His soft, round Thomas Jefferson face is framed by his long, curling hair loosely tied into a wiry ponytail. Because he is Bob Dylan's manager and chief shareholder in Dylan's Witmark Music Corporation his presence anywhere in the world is enough to make rock musicians tremble. With the Music From Big Pink album, he launched Jaime Robbie Robertson, guitar, Scarborough; Richard Manuel, piano; Garth Hudson, organist, London; Rick Danko, bass, Simcoe, Ont., and Levon Helm, drums, West Helena, Arkansas, into a musical career that brings them the chance to exchange tapes with the Beatles and receive flattering messages from them, too.

In putty-colored suits, some with frock coats and of course, their beards, they could be old order Menonites. "The Band," says the Village Voice newspaper, puzzling over their extreme coolness and crystalline musicianship, "has a mythical aura."

They shun everything hokey (their drums are of wood and their instruments have a lived-with look), even phoney names. "Why" asks Robbie gazing intently through his over-sized glasses, "should we sit down and think up some name like the Peanut Butter And Jam Band? We've been together too long." On stage they play each other's instruments effortlessly and team up for duets, one throwing one line while another replies. "With us it's sheer musicianship," says Robbie.

There was an added dimension to the Yonge Street tavern academy for The Band. Each member was recruited while relatively green by Arkansas' Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins,

the grand old man of rock in Canada. Robbie joined him when he was 16 after he had had a stint trying unsuccessfully to get work for his own group. Richard Manuel, who wears his beard beneath his jaw and not upon it and puts on an almost schoolboy soprano, formed a band called The Revols while in high school. He shared the bill with Hawkins when he visited Stratford and impressed him so much they got together afterwards. Rick Danko is a "string" man, plucks mandolin and violin as well as guitar. He dropped out of school and joined Hawkins because "I always wanted to go to Nashville to be a cowboy singer. From the time I was five I'd listened to the Grand Ole Opry and blues and country stations." Rompin' Ronnie kept him in Canada and gave him the chance to play "rockabilly" music.

"We came from ordinary backgrounds," explains Robbie. "Our parents didn't beat us or anything." Garth Hudson's farming family had in it a number of musicians and his father was fond of stashing instruments all over the house. Garth started to play the piano when he was five and had his own school band, "a kind of vaudeville act". His father used to find all the hoedown stations and Garth played accordion with a country group when he was 12. He also learned to use a divining rod and listened to music on an old Victrola, influences of which creep into The Band's music.

The last time they appeared in Canada it was with Bob Dylan, as his backup band, and it was a disaster. "The audience was furious when Dylan came out and introduced these guys they'd heard in barrooms on Yonge Street," says Grossman's Ontario talent scout, Marty McGinnis.

"One day Dylan telephoned and asked, 'You wanna play the Hollywood Bowl?' We asked who else was going to be on the bill and Dylan said, 'Just us,'" Robbie draws like Dylan. Later they were booed because the fans said they were turning Dylan to evil ways, i.e. electric guitars and such.

Needless to say, since that time, rave reviews in everything from the Village Voice to Life magazine have built their reputation into a personification of all that is mysterious about this country and the far North in particular. The group is one of the most important bands to hit the U.S. since Guy Lombardo emigrated with his Royal Canadians. Scalpers can sell single \$5 tickets to their concerts for \$20. The Band managed to earn \$20,000 for its performance at Bill

Spinning Wheel Copyright © 1968 by Blackwood Music and Minnesingers Publishers Ltd.



Graham's Winterland in San Francisco.

The makeshift studio for the Big Pink album was a pink house belonging to a carpenter in West Saugerties, New York; for their second album, they moved recording equipment into the pool house on Sammy Davis Jr.'s former estate in Hollywood.

It is said that when you light a whole package of incense you get mildly stoned, and if you habitually light great quantities in your living room you can watch the paint peeling off your pictures. Imagine then, Varsity football stadium in Toronto covered by a gigantic bubble caused by the burning of thousands of sticks of incense and carrying with it the heady smells of orange peels, mescaline and pot while 40,000 people wait in the dark to greet the city's prodigal hard-rock superstars, Steppenwolf. At 11 PM, these unlikely and motley Caesars returning from triumphal forays in foreign lands, stumbled out onto the stage. John Kay, 25, singer and leader of the group; Nick St. Nicholas, 25, bass, Jerry Edmonton, 22, drums, Goldy McJohn, 24, organ and Los Angeles-born Michael Monarch, guitar.

## Steppenwolf: A flock of fierce sheep led by a Neanderthal man

Kay hurls the words out at the audience. "Here we are. All hometown boys. I went to Humber College Collegiate which was a bummer." And that's all. They begin singing.

Newsweek says Kay sounds "like a bullfrog whose mate has found a better lily pad". He is wearing squared-off dark glasses to mask his near blindness. As for the rest of him, nothing strange, just the standard rock musicians' tight leather pants and batik print shirt. The others, their hair curled out and frizzed, follow him onto the stage like a flock of fierce sheep led by a Neanderthal man.

*I don't know where we come from  
Don't know where we're going to  
But if all this should have a reason  
We would be the last to know  
So let's hope there's a promised  
land  
Hang on till then as best as you  
can.\**

Alas, moan the less than prosperous coffee-bar owners, who used to get the likes of Steppenwolf for about \$150 a night, the jamming and all that

went with it was killed off in "ego struggles" and the money the kids would make playing at high school dances and "swinging Toronto" parties.

Steppenwolf, like the others, moved out and over to a revolutionary stance, shaking with righteous fury at the problems of the Smothers Brothers, "alienation", the generation gap and balladeering against hard drug pushers, even tearing into one of rock's sacred subjects, the groupies, the good friends, the girls who follow the bands around.

New York remembers Steppenwolf, and how! At the Fillmore East, one of them wore only a jockstrap and a pair of bunny ears. Which to some eyes, was a better scene than that in Toronto's Mynah Bird club a year or so earlier when Steppenwolf, partnered with a mynah bird named Roger and called the Mynah Birds, wore yellow "Roger" suits. "I used to dress them all in yellow," says their former manager and the club's owner, professional golfer Colin Kerr.

Oddly enough, the rock musicians, under constant strain to remain on top, which they can only do by a nonstop tour during the short lifetime of their popularity, are seen over and over again by the same people, the pop festival fans. Torontonians were flabbergasted when, during the country's first pop festival, thousands of cars with licence plates from all over North America, piled high with blankets, converged on downtown parking lots and side streets. These pop festival nomads take their rock seriously; kids from Texas came to Toronto expressly to hear The Band.

Secretary of State Gerard Pelletier's sometime adviser on youth affairs, 22-year-old Brian Gilhuly, sent a telegram of good wishes and welcome to the rock superstars coming home to play at the pop festival. Hearing of the gesture, a student from Michigan State University, already relieved by the absence of police hassling in Canada, blurted, "Damn it, man, do you mean to say you've got a government department for rock here?"

Not yet, perhaps, but the word is out that the government wants to make sure the emerging Steppenwolfs and Bands will be heard in their own country; the radio stations are being gently pressured to play records by Canadian groups at least 15 percent of the time. Sugar-coating the pill (who wants a Royal Commission on the State of Rock Music in Canada?), some stations are starting Maple Leaf clubs to do just that. ◀

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