

# The Band Comes Back to California

SAN FRANCISCO—It was exactly 9:30 p.m. Saturday when Bill Graham, far more relaxed than in his intense Fillmore days, walked on stage at the Civic Auditorium to make one of his rare (these days) introductions: "It's always a pleasure to introduce friends and one of the great groups in this industry—the Band."

With the applause rising, the Band, perhaps the most respected group in rock, walked on stage for its first California concert in more than a year and a half. As usual, they went right into the music, wasting time on neither song introductions nor greetings for the audience. The Band comes to play. And they did.



Levon Helm

Opening with "Life Is a Carnival," the five men who once served as Bob Dylan's band played (including two encore numbers) until 11 p.m., taking material from each of the group's four Capitol albums. From the beginning, the skills of the Band (Robbie Robertson on lead guitar, Rick Danko on bass/vocals, Levon Helm on drums/vocals, Garth Hudson on organ and Richard Manuel on piano/vocals) were apparent.

There is more intelligence, precision and over-all design to the Band's music than to any of its rock competitors. Both vocally and instrumentally, the Band has the technical skills on conceptual insights to tailor its music to achieve the maximum rewards from a song.

## Spotlight Man Has Trouble

It isn't unusual, for instance, for the Band to shift lead vocals three times (from, say, Helm to Danko to Manuel) within the same verse to give extra shading and emphasis to the lyrics. Similarly, the Band often rearranges itself instrumentally (with Helm moving to mandolin, Hudson to piano, Manuel to drums and so forth) to give a song the proper texture.

Except for Hudson's long solo introduction to "Chest Fever," there is little room in the Band's music for solos. In fact, there is such a unified sound to the instrumentation (the highlights come from a quick guitar lick from Robertson here, a series of drum chops from Helm there and so forth) that a spotlight operator has trouble knowing where to place his focus.

The perfectionist quality of the Band's music runs all the way down to the concert hall sound system. While some rock groups don't even make a sound check, the Band spent more time Saturday afternoon (two hours) getting the proper balance than they did on stage that night.

From "Life Is a Carnival," the group went through "The Shape I'm In," "Where Do We Go From Here," "Cripple Creek," "Chest Fever," "Unfaithful Servant," "Shoot Out in Chinatown," "Smoke Signal," "Stage Fright" and their already classic version of Bob Dylan's "When I Paint My Masterpiece."

Though it is one of the group's newest works, it al-

ready is apparent that "Masterpiece" has joined "The Weight" and "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" (among others) as one of the group's classic efforts. Helm's lead vocal, which brings out every ounce of feeling (and then some) that Bob Dylan put into the song, is not only one of his best vocals, but one of the finest I've ever heard in rock. He holds up a word here, speeds one up there. The Band's arrangement is all the more impressive after you hear Dylan's own version on his new album. Capitol ought to release it as a single.

After "Masterpiece," the group finished with "King Harvest," "Time to Kill," "Dixie Down," "Across the Great Divide" and "Rag Mama Rag" (with Danko on fiddle). After a standing ovation, they came back with "The Weight" and a no-holds-barred rock version of "Baby, Don't You Do It."

The San Francisco concert was one in a series of "warm-up" appearances before the Band goes into New York's Academy of Music Dec. 27-30 to record (if all goes well) their first live album. In those four concerts, they expect to do some new things: an acoustic number or two, some numbers with horns and so forth. They've been working with New Orleans musician Allen Toussaint (who did the horn arrangements on "Life Is a Carnival" and is known for his work with Lee Dorsey and others) on the horn arrangements.

## Music Related to Color

Robertson speaks of the album in terms of color. "The black and white photos on our album covers reflect the raw attitude of our music. The songs have been a little underdone rather than the other way. In New York, we want to add just a touch of color. Something like a cry or a moan to it. Just a touch that can come through without bringing anyone down or getting in the way."

"The reason we're thinking of a live album is that it will help us end this era in our music properly. A live album seems the right way to do it. Some of the new tunes haven't fit into the kind of albums we've been doing. But we don't just want to move on to the new things. The New York concerts would be a good way of making the transition."

Though the Band won't be in Los Angeles on this tour, they do plan to play here next year. They are looking into the possibility of doing a concert at the Music Center, thus becoming the first rock group to play the facility. There couldn't be a better choice.