

This Wheel's On Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of the Band Study Guide

This Wheel's On Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of the Band by Levon Helm

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Plot Summary

This *Wheel's On Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of the Band* takes you through the journey of Levon Helm, the Band's drummer / singer / guitar player, from his early days of growing up on his family's cotton fields of his family farm in Arkansas to the rock and roll life style of playing with such entertainers as Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks, Conway Twitty, Sonny Boy Williamson, Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan and many more.

The young men that come to be known simply as The Band meet in the late 1950's and early 1960's while playing with Ronnie Hawkins and his band the Hawks. The boys Robbie Robertson, Rick Danko, Garth Hudson, Richard Manuel and Levon Helm leave Ronnie to start a band all their own with the vow that they will indeed be a band—no lead singer, no front man, but a group in its truest sense, with every one contributing their own unique talents. However, just like so many great groups before and since, the price of fame is too great and ultimately Robbie Robertson lets too much of the Band's success fall to him, and the foundation the group was built on begins to crumble. As Robertson tries to step forward and take credit for the majority of the writing of the songs, the other members of the band begin to resent him. When Robbie basically forces the others to stop touring, the band splits apart. The Band does one final live concert that is to be filmed, the Last Waltz. They invite all the musicians who helped their careers along the way to be part of this farewell concert. Levon is very unhappy about ending the Band, but there is nothing he can do about it so he lets Robbie and the managers handle it the way they want to and he just shows up as long as they let Muddy Waters be part of the concert. The Last Waltz concert takes place on Thanksgiving night in 1976.

Rick Danko starts a solo career and Levon focuses on producing. Levon and his friend Henry Glover even produce an album for one of his music idols, Muddy Waters, during this time. Robbie tries his hand at acting; Levon also catches the acting bug and is in such films as the *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and *The Right Stuff*.

In 1983, Rick, Richard, Garth and Levon make their first appearance in the States together since the Last Waltz. While doing a show in 1986 in Florida, Richard Manuel takes his own life in the hotel the Band is staying in. This is a devastating loss for the members of the Band.

The three remaining members of the Band minus Robbie continue to play together until the death of Rick Danko in his sleep in 1999. Levon and Garth now play at Woodstock with Levon's daughter Amy. Levon has never forgiven Robbie for what Levon feels is his betrayal of the The Band and they never reconcile.



Chapter 1 and 2

Chapter 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Chapter One The Road From Turkey Scratch

The story of The Band is about the journey of Levon Helm from the cotton farms of Arkansas to the life of a rock and roll musician. Levon Helm and the other four musicians of the Band work for years to become a great band. Although many think they are one of the best bands of all times, this group of young talented musicians put their heart and soul into making each album great. In the end it costs them friendships, loves, and even one of them his life. This is the Story of The Band.

Mark Lavon Helm is born in the spring of 1940 to Nell and Diamond Helm. Lavon's father is a cotton farmer and Lavon grows up helping his father in the cotton fields. Lavon is raised in the Mississippi Delta near Elaine, Arkansas in a community called Midway, called so because it intersects between the village of Turkey Scratch and the town of Marvell.

When the Helm family is not working on the farm they are singing or listening to the radio. When Lavon is nine years old his father buys him his first guitar, which is also the same summer he starts driving the tractor. For the next several years, when Lavon is not in school he is in the cotton fields, working. It is hot, back-breaking work and he has an understanding with his parents. If he stays in school his father will not pull him out to work in the fields. He can get an education. However, on the weekends local bands come to town and Lavon stays up all night listening and watching the men play. He knows when he is nine that he is not meant to be a cotton farmer.

In 1950 Lavon wins first place in his school's talent contest doing his hambone routine. Soon after that Lavon and his sister Linda start entering 4H contests, Kiwanis Clubs, Farm Bureaus, and every other club around, and winning most of them. In 1956 Lavon meets Conway Twitty, who goes by his real name, Harold Jenkins, at a grocery store that Lavon is running for a friend who is ill. Conway Twitty and his Rock Housers are playing for the grand opening and Lavon and Linda are the opening act. When it is over Conway Twitty tells him he likes what he is doing and that he should come by some night and sit in with them. Soon after that Lavon's mother decides that she does not like Linda appearing in public with her leg up on a wash tub and makes her retire from show business. Lavon recruits his friend Thurlow Brown to take her place.

Chapter Two The Hawk (Out of Blood)

When Lavon is 15 he starts going to Memphis to see the different musicians, like Elvis, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee. On one night he sees Conway Twitty and the Rock Housers, after reminding him of the time he saw Lavon and Linda sing at the grocery store opening. Conway lets Lavon sit in on song. Lavon is in heaven. After that Conway



tells him they are on their way to Canada and that he should come see for himself how much they love "rockbilly" there. Lavon knows mother will never allow him to go to Canada while he is still in school.

Meanwhile a young rocker named Ronnie Hawkins is putting together a band and is looking for a drummer and hears that this kid that plays the guitar is also a pretty good drummer. So one day when Lavon is coming in from doing chores he sees their car coming down his road. The Hawk, as Ronnie and his band are called, talk to Nell and Diamond Helm about letting Lavon go with them to Canada. His mother says he can play with them locally on the weekends and then when he graduates he has her blessing to go with them to Canada, which he does in 1958. The band consists of Ronnie Hawkins, Levon Helms, Jimmy Ray "Luke" Paulman and Will "Pop" Jones. They play in Canada for a few months and the people there love their sound, and the Hawks' wild act. Then they come back to the south and play the southern circuit and then go back to Canada. In April of 1959 they sign with Roulette and cut a version of "Red Ruby" and "Forty Days." They even appear on shows like Alan Freed's huge Labor Day show. They also get a new guitar player; Luke wants to go home to his wife so they bring in Fred Carter Jr.

In October of '59 while in Toronto they begin to notice a local kid hanging around. He is not any problem and he makes himself useful carrying amps or making coffee runs. He is not too bad on the guitar either; his name is Robbie Robertson.



Chapter 3 and 4

Chapter 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Three Take No Prisoners

Morris Levy, the head of Roulette Records, wants the boys to stay in the States; with Elvis in the Army and Buddy Holly dead and Jerry Lee Lewis in trouble for marrying his cousin, Levy feels the door is wide open for the Hawks and their style of music. The Hawks think that the United States has gone more towards country and folk music and that their show is too loud and fast and wild for the States and they get a warmer reception in Canada, plus the money is better. The Hawks are a wild bunch of rockabillys to see and they have a big following in Canada.

Ronnie Hawkins starts looking at a young kid by the name of Robbie Robertson, whose mother is a friend of his, as a new guitar player. They let the kid come back to Arkansas and practice for a while before they let him actually join the band. Robbie practices a lot and hard and is soon a member of the Hawks. It is not long before Hawk wants another guitar player, he likes the sound of the two guitars and he gets Rick Danko from Ontario to join. From as early as 1959 Hawk has been trying to get Garth Hudson, a musician from Detroit, to join. Garth is a classically trained musician and "one of the best musicians on our circuit" Levon says, but Garth keeps turning him down because he does not think his parents will approve of him playing with any rockabilly band. Besides, Garth has seen them play and he is not sure he wants to play with them after watching Stan, one of the guitar players, causing his fingers to bleed while playing so hard and Willard, the piano player, pounding the keys on the piano so hard that the hammers are actually flying out. Finally, in 1961, the Hawk is able to convince both Garth and his parents. Richard Manuel joins the band as a singer alongside the Hawk. 1962 is the first full year for the new band.

Chapter Four Levon And The Hawks (One Step Ahead of the 1000 Dances)

Things start to change in the group. The Hawk has a lot of rules: no smoking in the car, no girlfriends at the shows, no smoking pot. He fines the boys if they break the rules. The Hawk is also missing a lot of their shows and so the guys have to take turns singing, which makes them start thinking, "do we really even need Ronnie and all his rules?" One night Rick Danko's girl shows up at one of the shows that Ronnie is not supposed to be at and when Ronnie sees her he says to Rick that it is going to cost him. Well one thing leads to another and Rick talks to Levon about what happened on the break Levon talks to the rest of the group and they all go with Levon when he tells Ronnie that he has two weeks left with the band. This is in late 1963. Ronnie seems shocked but not upset about leaving the group, in later years the men restore their friendship.



The band comes to New York to try and cut a record, but the first one they cut they hate—Leave Me Alone. In early 1965 they change their name to Levon and the Hawks and cut two more records, neither of which do anything. In April they go back to Helena and while they are there they hear that Sonny Boy Williamson is also around, so they track him down and ask him if he would like to play with them and he says he would. The men spend the entire day sitting around playing music together, Levon says this is one of the best days ever. The band thinks they are the perfect band for Sonny Boy but with segregation the way it is they are not sure how that will work and before they can figure it out Sonny Boy dies. The night the band spends with him they have a run in with racism. The local law comes into the restaurant they are eating in and tells the band that if they do not mind eating with black people they do not want them in their town and run them out. Levon is embarrassed that his friends and Sonny Boy have to witness that in his hometown.

The band goes back to Canada and sends out tapes; finally Eric Shuster wants to have a meeting with them. The contract only has him making any money, so, as bad as the band want to make a record, they have to turn him down. On their way back to Canada after their meeting with Shuster, Levon and the rest of the band are arrested for bringing pot across the border into Canada. While they are waiting for their trial they become even more popular in Canada from all the press over the weed charges. It looks like the charges will be dropped, except for the objection of one policeman. A girl who is friends with the one of the guys in the band trades sexual favors with the cop then tells him she is under age. He leaves town and every else gets off and Levon gets probation.

In August of '65 Bob Dylan calls Levon and asks if he wants to play the Hollywood Bowl with him.



Chapter 5 and 6

Chapter 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Five Dylan Goes Electric

Bob Dylan calls Levon and asks him if he wants to play the Hollywood Bowl with him, and when Levon finds out it will just be them and Dylan he agrees. They have to call the Colonel to find out if Dylan can sell out the Hollywood Bowl; they have heard him on the radio but have no idea how big Bob Dylan is. In the beginning the band is not too happy about the whole idea because Dylan only needs a drummer and a guitar player, so that means only Levon and Robbie will be going with Bob. Bob is moving from the Folk music he has been playing to more of an electric guitar sound. The first show they play is Forrest Hills Tennis Stadium in August of 1965. The fans hate it; they boo them the entire time. Dylan tells them before they go on "no matter how weird it gets, just keep playing." That is what they do, but Robbie and Levon are not used to being booed on stage. When they play the Hollywood Bowl six days later Levon is happy the crowd is than at Forrest Hills, but Dylan says "I wish they had booed its good publicity." When Bob Dylan makes Robbie and Levon an offer to go on the road with him they tell him they will not break up the band and that is how the band ends up playing with Bob Dylan during 1965. Most of the shows are like the Forrest Hills show and the crowds boo them but when they play at Carnegie Hall the crowd rushes the stage and yells for more. The Band is very happy to finally be getting this kind of reception. When the Band and Bob Dylan play, everywhere except in Texas and some of the southern states, they are still booed. As soon as the electric guitars come out the booing begins. They want the acoustic guitar. Robbie once says "they want their Folk music," and Dylan says "Yeah, We're gonna change all that now anyway." All this is hard on the Band; they are not used to all this negative attention, the crowds in Canada love them, and now they are being told they are ruining Bob Dylan. However, Bob tells them he is determined to make people like this new sound. Finally Levon has had all he can take and he tells Robbie he is leaving for a while and when the Band wants to start making music again they can reach him by contacting his father Diamond.

When Levon leaves the tour he goes to work on an oil rig. The work is not that bad although it is dangerous and he plays cards and listens to the radio. He hears Bob Dylan's song "Everybody must Get Stoned" and wonders who they got to replace him. When he finally has had enough of the oil rig he heads to Springdale, Arkansas to see his family. They tell him that Bob Dylan has called a couple of times but he did not call back. While in Arkansas he plays with a group called the Cate Brothers, and his nephew Terry Cagle took Levon's place on the drums when he left in the spring of '67.

Meanwhile the boys of the Band are still touring with Bob. He and Robbie have gotten really close in this time. People say this is when Robbie begins to change; if he is not with Bob he is spending all of his time with Albert Grossman, Dylan's manager. After the tour is over the Band's manager Bill Avis leaves the group. Soon the Band moves to



Woodstock where Bob Dylan has a house. They move into Big Pink, the house they record a lot of their early music including "Music from Big Pink," and they are offered a deal with Capitol. Rick calls Levon and tells him about the deal and tells him he should come and get his share.

Chapter Six Something to Feel

When Rick calls and tells Levon the band is getting back together and that he should come to Woodstock, Levon cannot believe it. He talks to everyone on the phone that day and they all seem "a little older and wiser." On the road from the airport to Woodstock, the boys fill each other in on what has happened while they have been apart, and when Levon finally gets to the Catskills he remembers having a feeling of "going home"; he says that all the mountains remind him of the Ozarks and of Arkansas hill country. The boys are renting a house they call Big Pink. Later they will record their first album in the basement of this house and call it Music from Big Pink. The guys have to tell Levon that while he was gone Richard has taken his place on the drums and is very good at it. So now the band has two drummers. Richard and Levon take turns on the drums, depending on who sounds better on that particular song. That is how the band worked—whatever is best for the band, no hurt feelings or egos. When Richard is on drums, Levon plays the guitar or the harmonica.

The boys work hard in the summer of 1967. In the mornings they get up and go to Bob Dylan's house and work and then in the afternoon they come back to Big Pink and play for fun. They also write songs for other musicians. They all work together to write the songs; someone might write a few verses then leave it for someone else to come along and finish. Levon can tell by listening to some of the songs Bob is putting out that his spending so much time with the band is rubbing off on him, and Bob on them. The boys are learning how to write songs.

They have several recording sessions come out of Big Pink and Bob's house that year. The one from Bob Dylan's house leaks out and begins to be bootlegged under the title "Great White Wonder." Another session is the Bauls of Bengal, a family of street troubadours from India. Albert Grossman, Bob Dylan's manager, meets them on a trip to India and brings them to Woodstock. They are at Big Pink one night and they are all smoking weed and get to singing. Garth wants to record the session so Rick and Levon sit in on the session. The tapes are released a year later as Bengali Bauls at Big Pink.

In 1968 Rick Danko starts really pushing for Grossman to get the band a record contract. They sign a management contract with Grossman, around the same time they notice that Bob Dylan and Grossman are not speaking. This is the beginning of the end for Grossman and Dylan. Soon the band has Grossman all to themselves. The band now needs to come up with a name for themselves. They throw around names like Crackers, which was Levon's favorite, and Chocolate Subway, on their first contract with Capitol Records they are listed as "Group performing as the Crackers." The deal basically calls for the band to give them ten albums and they take it. They can, however, record with Dylan anytime and it will not affect their contract with Capitol.



John Simon comes in at this point to produce their first album for them, Music from Big Pink. While they are working on this album they are settling into life at Woodstock. The people there are getting used to them, and it is not long before the town's people actually give the band their name. When someone in town asks about them they say "the band" and everyone knows who they mean. It is not long until they become The Band.

The album is released on July 1, 1968, but the band cannot go on tour to promote the album because of an old motorcycle injury that Levon gets before rejoining the band, and because Richard has third degree burns on his foot from burning it trying to light a grill. Besides, they wanted to keep making music, not stop for a tour. The album gets rave reviews from the magazines and other musicians; George Harrison and Eric Clapton are among those who praised Music from Big Pink. While getting ready to start on their next album, Harvest, Rick gets into a car accident and breaks his neck. He is in traction for weeks. Rick refuses to allow Grossman to tell the press about his accident; he remembers what Dylan went through when he had his wreck, with the press saying he was finished. So the album is put on hold until Rick is better. The band is a team and they will not go on without every member of their team.



Chapter 7 and 8

Chapter 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Seven The Band

In the summer of 1968 Big Pink has come out and the Band is just beginning to become famous. Levon meets Libby Titus. Libby will become the mother of Levon's one and only biological child, a daughter Amy. Libby Titus' family moves to Woodstock so her father can help his brother-in-law produce the Batman comic strips. In 1965 Libby marries Barry Titus, the grandson of Helena Rubinstein, who invents makeup. They have a son in 1966, Ezra. In the spring of 1968, Libby leaves her husband and she and Ezra move to Gramercy Park. One day one of her friends comes by and wants to know if she wants to go to Woodstock and meet the Band. When she meets Levon he is arguing on the street with someone. She thinks she has never seen anyone as good looking as Levon, but she does not want to be around him because of his temper that day. A few months later Levon makes a date with her and then fails to show up, but then calls her at five thirty the following morning to apologize and invite himself over. Then he does not call her for another ten days, when he does he tells her he has not even looked at another girl and that means something. Soon after that he takes her home to meet his family in Arkansas. She becomes friends with his mother.

The Band decides to move to California to get out of Woodstock for the winter. They want to get back to recording and they call on John Simon to help them and they rent a house from Sammy Davis Jr in the Hollywood Hills. They convert the pool house into a studio and Levon lives there also. This is in February of 1969. John Simon is hoping that they will let him join their group but they tell him they already have two piano players; the truth is the only thing the Band cannot do is produce. They need an engineer. They are trying to learn all they can from John.

The Band spends nearly all their time at the Hollywood Hills house working on their songs and by April they have nine songs finished. However, they need twelve in all. Before they can finish they have to move to San Francisco and they have their first weekend concert in three years. It will be the first time they play under their new official name, The Band.

The Band is going to play the Bill Graham Presents... It is a three night gig and every one is very nervous, especially Robbie, who is so nervous that he makes himself sick. When the Band lands, Robbie has a fever of 103. They all try to make it through rehearsal and sound check and Robbie is not getting any better. They call for a doctor and finally they have a hypnotist come to the room to try and help. When the Band goes on, Robbie is still sick, but the hypnotist has been able to bring the fever down five degrees in one hour. The Band plays to a crowd of five thousand that night and the crowd loves them. The Band manages to play seven numbers although Robbie looks as though he will pass out at any moment.



After thirty- five minutes Robbie walks off the stage and the others follow him as the crowd yells "play the other side!!" The audience is very mad that the show does not last any longer, and so is the Band. The next two nights were are better, Robbie is feeling good, the crowd is not as large as the first night but it is the first time in years the Band is not booed when they play.

The Band plays at the Woodstock Festival in 1969. They play on the last day of the festival and they have to be pulled out of the mud with a bulldozer just to get their rented station wagon out of the field and the ditches and finally to the road so they can leave. It takes them a couple of hours to get the 55 miles home.

Their new album The Band is released in September 1969 and when "Up on Cripple Creek" is playing on the radio, the boys are asked to come on the Ed Sullivan show. "The Band" earns the boys a gold record for sales.

Chapter Eight Divide and Conquer

On January 12, 1970 The Band appears on the cover of Time magazine. The guys never really talk to each other about being on the cover of Time although to their family and friends back home it is a huge deal. There is a write up in the local paper about Levon being on the cover of Time. However, what really changes their lives is when they start getting royalty checks. "This Wheel's on Fire" had not really been a big hit for them, but a few people record it, and when the royalty checks start coming in the guys go nuts. They have never had this kind of money and have idea how to handle it or all that comes with it. The band gets into heroin. People just give it to them. Robertson refers to the "Stage Fright" era as The Darkness. This is the time when they are all into drugs, and they are recording Stage Fright.

It is after The Band comes out that the band begins to realize something is going wrong. They do not know that song publishing, more than any thing else, is the key to making money. None of them ask for credit on the songs. If they do not get credit for a song they help on, they just let it go. As it turns out, Robbie is taking most, if not all, of the credit for writing the songs. The other guys do not pay that close attention and do not expect Robbie to cheat them out of their share. When the group realizes what is going on their collaboration declines. Levon blames Grossman for putting it in Robbie's head to begin with. Levon tries talking to Robbie about it, but Robbie tries to tell him that they are working together to build a studio so they do nothave to always be setting up and taking down their equipment and that Albert is trying to help them. Levon thinks the idea is a good one, but nothing ever comes of it.

Libby and Levon have been dating for a couple of years and Levon has a girlfriend or two also. When he comes back from L.A., Libby comes to talk to him about their relationship. Later she moves Ezra and herself in with him. In March of 1970 she becomes pregnant. Amy is born in December.

From early 1970 to the summer of 1971, the Band tours promoting their album Stage Fright. They play Wembley Stadium in London and summer festivals at Harvard



Stadium in Cambridge. They even go to Paris. Their next album, Cahoots, is recorded in Albert Grossmans Bearsville Studio; the one Robbie has told Levon is supposed to be a joint venture with the Band. Libby sings with Levon on "River Hymn"; it is the first time a woman sings with the Band.

In November 1971 John Simon finally joins the Band on tuba and electric piano to help promote the Cahoots album.

In January of 1972 everything and everyone is changing. Robbie and his wife move to Canada. Rick and his wife Grace are getting a divorce. Garth is busy building a house and Richard is retired. So Levon decides to go to school. He has always wanted formal training on the drums, so enrolls at Berklee School of Music. He and Libby and the kids move to Massachusetts. He enrolls under his first name Mark, shaves off his beard and no one knows who he is.

When the Band records "Rock of Ages," John Simon is hoping the Band will tour again, but no one wants to. So John goes to play with Taj Mahal's band for a couple of years.

Levon thinks the next step will be to move to California. He moves Libby and the kids to Malibu and the rest of the Band follows. They leave Albert Grossman when they leave Woodstock; it is easier for Levon than the rest. He can see that Grossman and Robbie are getting too close and the move just makes things easier. The Band still has a few records left before they are done with Capitol also.

Bob Dylan calls and wants the Band to record with him on "Asylum" and tour with him. Levon worries about their contract with Capitol, but they remind him it does not include Dylan. He just wishes that Capitol would let this record count as one of the records they owe them. They will not and when they think Levon cannot hear them they ask why he cannot just be happy. They do the same act that was booed years earlier and this time the crowds love them. They play this show for six weeks.



Chapter 9 and 10

Chapter 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Nine The Last Waltz

After the tour with Dylan, Richard and Levon lease a place in Malibu they call Shangri-La for most of 1975. Things are not working out with Libby so Levon moves her and the kids into a house in Brentwood. Things are getting even worse between Levon and the Band's management. They are making business deals that Levon does not agree with and there is a lot of fighting. So Levon ends up going back to Woodstock where he gets together with an old friend Henry Glover. The two of them start the production company RCO, which stands for "our company." They bring Muddy Waters to Woodstock to record an album.

In 1976 the Band begins touring again, doing mostly songs from their Northern Lights album. The Band starts to "unravel "about two thirds of the way through this tour. Rick Danko signs a solo deal. Richard hurts his neck in a boating accident, and that is when Robbie starts talking about not wanting to tour any more. They start talking about doing one final show with all the performers they have played with all these years: Ronnie Hawkins, Ringo, Eric Clapton, Muddy Waters, and Dylan. They are going to call it the Last Waltz. Levon does not want to do it. He wants the Band to keep making records and to keep touring but he does not really have a choice in it. He tries to fight it and Robbie for a while but after talking to his lawyers he realizes he could fight and he might win but he would be better off to just let it be and get through one of the toughest things he will ever have to go through, the break up of the Band

They decide to film the final concert live and make a movie out of it. The only way they can get the money backing for the movie is if Bob Dylan agrees to be in it. Dylan is already in a movie around that same time and will not commit to being in the movie. The management tells them that he has said yes and the movie is a go. When they get down to the day of the movie/concert, Bob Dylan's people come out and say that he has decided he will not be part of the movie because he does not need this movie to be competing with his other movie. In the end they talk Bob Dylan into letting them film the last two songs he sings with the Band so they are able to make the movie.

When it is over Levon and Ringo Starr start just playing music together and most of the guests come back out and jam for another thirty minutes. Finally the Band comes back out and do their last song, and it is over—the last time all five members of the Band ever play together.

After the Last Waltz the Band still has one last album they need to fulfill their obligation to Capitol, so it is back to Shangri-La to begin working on "Islands." At the same time they are trying to get the movie about the Last Waltz ready. The idea is that they will just shoot the concert, then they will have interviews and that will be the movie. However,



some of the footage is not what they wanted so they have to go back to the studio and overdub some of the songs. By the time they get to the interviews, supposed to be the Band just talking about the old days and fun times they had together, Levon is so "pissed off" by the whole thing they barely get through the interviews. When the movie finally is released Levon goes to see it with the Hawk. Robbie is about the only one in the movie, there are almost no shots of Richard, and very little of Garth. When the movie is over the Hawk turns to Levon and says "The movie'd be alright if it only had a few more shots of Robbie."

During this time Levon meets a woman named Sandy and they fall in love. He keeps her away from all the mess that is going on with the Band at this time and does not take her to the Last Waltz with him either. However, after all of it is over, in September of 1981, Sandy and Levon get married and are still married to this day.

Chapter Ten The Next Waltz

In 1979 Levon gets the role of Ted Webb, Loretta Lynn's father, in the Coal Miner's Daughter. When he goes to Nashville to read for the part he is sure he has not gotten it, but a few days later he gets the call saying they want him for the role. He is very excited and does a lot of research to make sure he does the best job he can for the part. He goes to Kentucky and meets with Loretta Lynn's family so he can know as much about her father as possible. He does not want to upset anyone or make them mad by his portrayal of their father. Levon really enjoys acting; he even gets to help choreograph one of the scenes. When they have the funeral scene when Ted dies, Levon sits up in the coffin and teaches the actors how to sing "Amazing Grace" in the old fashioned, traditional way. When the movie comes out it gets good reviews and so does Levon. Levon does a few more movies over the next few years

Five years after the Last Waltz Levon starts playing again, only this time it is with some friends from Arkansas, The Cate Brothers. In 1982 Levon runs into Rick up in Woodstock and in early 1983 the two of them do a club and a college tour as an acoustic duo. One night in February they run into Bob Dylan and he sits in on a few songs with them; it will be the last time they see him for a few more years. Muddy Waters also dies that year.

In 1978 Richard gets clean and sober and seems to be doing well, Garth is working with a new band called the Call. The Band decides to re-form in the summer of 1983. Levon does not want them to call Robbie, but Rick does and Robbie declines. They add some of the Cate Brothers band and they begin to tour. The new Band tours in Japan and is a huge hit there. They also play back in the United States at the New York Folk Festival. In November of 1985, Richard Manuel is asked back to his home town of Stratford, Ontario. His old band is having its 20 year reunion. Later he tells Levon how happy it makes him that everyone is so glad to have him back. In February of '86 Albert Grossman dies of heart attack and Richard has the hardest time handling the news. He starts drinking again, and on March 4, 1986, Richard Manuel takes his own life in a hotel room in Florida. The Band is doing a show there and Richard spends the majority of the night before talking to Levon about all kinds of things, none of them pointing to



what Levon wakes up to the following morning. Levon says the "tragedy was just overwhelming".

After Richard's death the three remaining Band members take a break, and wait for the right opportunity to present itself. Levon goes on the road with the Cate Brothers some of the time. In 1990 they get the Band like they want it with old friend Stan Szelest on the piano. However, in 1991 he dies of a heart attack.

Afterword The Most Fun I've had so Far

Rick Danko dies in his sleep on his 56th birthday in 1999. Meanwhile Garth and Levon still play together in a band called Levon Helm and the Barn Burners Blues Band Featuring Amy Helm.

Characters

Mark Lavon Helm (Levon Helm)

Mark Lavon Helm, later changed by his band mates to Levon, is born in the spring of 1940 to Nell and Diamond Helm in Midway, Arkansas. Levon has a sister Linda who, when they are younger, sings with him at 4H contest and county fairs until their mother makes Linda quit. Levon also has a younger brother named Wheeler and older sister Modena. When he is young he helps his father on their cotton farm and on the weekend he goes listen to the local bands play music. When he graduates from high school he goes to Canada with Ronnie Hawkins and his group the Hawks and they are very successful. While with the Hawks, he meets a lot of influential people including Conway Twitty as well as the men who would later form the group called The Band. Levon is the drummer for the most part, but he can also sing and play the guitar and harmonica.

When Bob Dylan asks them to play as his band for part of his tour, it looks like it might be their big break. However, when the crowds boo them at almost every concert, it is more than Levon can handle so he leaves the group for a while. While he is gone he works on a oil rig. After a few years he goes to Woodstock where the band has moved and they begin the first of their many album entitled "Music from Big Pink." The Band stays together and records several albums; their final album is the Last Waltz. When Robbie Robertson leaves the Band after that record the five men never again play together. During this time Levon has a daughter with Libby Titus but the relationship does not last. Levon marries Sandra Dodd in 1981.

After the Last Waltz Levon does his share of acting. He plays Loretta Lynn's father in "The Coalminer's Daughter" and he is also in "The Right Stuff." During one of his movie roles Levon shoots himself in the back of his leg while practicing for the role. There is a short time that doctors do not know if Levon will ever be able to play the drums again after this accident. Luckily he recovers fully from the incident.

To this day Levon and the remaining members of the Band still play together, except for Robbie Robertson. Their friendship does not survive the Last Waltz.

Robbie Robertson

Robbie Robertson joins Levon when he is a member of the Hawks in 1959. At the beginning of their relationship the two are as close as brothers. When he first joins the group he is just helping with the equipment. When the Hawk finally brings him to the U.S. he learns how to play the bass. Robbie is a great bass player and he can also write music. When the Band starts making it big Robbie gets the credit for being the leader of the group whether he is the leader or not. When the royalty money comes in he gets most of it to because he takes the credit for writing most of the songs. It does not take long for the other guys to get tired of not getting any recognition for all their hard work,



and watching Robbie make more money. However, they are loyal to the Band. Robbie is the one who calls it quits and says he does not want to tour anymore. After he basically forces every one to go along with him, he then tries to buy everyone out, which he does, except for Levon. The two men never restore their friendship.

Robbie Robertson is born to a Mohawk Indian girl from an Indian reservation above Lake Erie. He spends his summers on the reservation. This is where he learns to play guitar. He marries a French girl named Dominique. She is a journalist and they have two children.

Garth Hudson

Garth Hudson joins the Hawks around Christmas time in 1961 but the Hawks have been trying to get Garth to join since back 1959. Garth is the only one of the boys who is classically trained. He is the one who dubs in all the instruments and lays in the vocals after the Band has recorded a song or album. They call him "Honey Boy" because they say he makes everything sound so sweet when he is done with it. Libby Titus says that Garth was "older, and wiser, and everybody looked up to him. He was very funny in a subtle way and more careful than the rest of them." Garth is always going into pawn shops looking for instruments, horns or rare music books. Garth plays the horns and the organ.

Richard Manuel

Richard Manuel is said to be the best singer around, reminding some of Ray Charles. Richard Manuel joins the Hawks 1961. Richard is always getting hurt. Richard likes to drink a lot and do a lot of drugs. He is always getting into car wrecks and once he is lighting a barbecue grill and lights his foot. This injury keeps the Band from being able to go on tour to promote their first album "Music from Big Pink."

Richard leads a rough life for most of the years that the Band is together and there are times they are not sure how much longer he will last. However, he finally gets sober in 1978 and seems to be doing better. The Band even gets back together minus Robbie and starts playing gigs again. In 1986, after a show in Florida, Richard Manuel hangs himself in his hotel room, leaving only three of the original Band members left to play together.

Rick Danko

Rick Danko joins the Hawks in May of 1961. He is working as a meat cutter by day and at night he has a band called the Ricky and the Rhythm Notes. When Rick joins the Hawks they have him playing the bass guitar. According to one of their friends, Rick is the "young buck in the forest"; he is always hyper and telling stories about the horrific things that are happening to them because they live so completely at risk.



Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan meets the guys from the band in 1965. He has heard the guys play and wants them to be his band while he plays the Hollywood Bowl. Levon and Robbie play with him at some of his concerts and they are booed. The Dylan fans want folk music, not rock and roll. Over the years Dylan helps the Band in many ways. He is very instrumental in the success of the Band and they remain friends to this day.

Ronnie Hawkins

Ronnie Hawkins is the first to give Lavon his start. When Lavon is still in high school Ronnie talks Lavon's parents into letting him play with his band the Hawks on the weekends and then when Lavon graduates they all go Canada. Ronnie rounds up the group of young men who later become "The Band": Levon Helm, Robbie Robertson, Garth Hudson, Rick Danko, and Richard Manuel. In 1964 the band gets together and kicks Ronnie Hawkins out of the band because they feel he is holding them back and because he has too many rules. Later the men become friends again.

John Simon

John Simon produces their first album and becomes a lifelong friend. He also helps produce many of their albums including their final album together, the Last Waltz, for which Robbie Robertson never pays him.

Albert Grossman

The Band meets Grossman through Bob Dylan, and he becomes their manager. He is their manager until the final live concert the Last Waltz and remains a close personal friend to Richard Manuel until Grossman's death of a heart attack in 1986. Right after his death, Richard Manuel starts drinking again and few months later takes his own life in hotel in Florida.

Sandra Dodd

Sandra Dodd is Levon's second wife. She is actually the only one he marries for love and he marries her on September 7, 1981 and is still married to her today. They never have any children together.

Libby Titus

Libby Titus is the mother of Levon's only biological child Amy. The two meet in 1968. Libby's father moves his family to Woodstock to work with his brother-in-law producing the Batman comic strips for Stan Lee. Libby has a son, Ezra, by her first husband,



although she and Levon are never married he is a father figure to Ezra and thinks of the boy as his son.

Conway Twitty

Conway Twitty lets Lavon sit in on some of his gigs and tells him he should go to Canada and play. Lavon meets him when Conway plays a grocery store grand opening that Lavon and Linda open for back in 1956. Over the years Conway and Levon cross paths often but they become friends from this meeting.

Thurlow Brown

Thurlow Brown is the friend of Lavon who joins him when Lavon's mother makes his sister Linda quit singing with him. Thurlow Brown is the only person Lavon knows in Arkansas who owns a monkey. He gives it beer and after the two of them have a couple of drinks, they would get in a fight, the monkey and Thurlow. He is also an electric guitar player.

Connie Orr

Connie Orr is the Canadian woman Levon marries to stay out of the war, they remain friends.

Linda Helm

Linda Helm is Lavon's older sister and plays the bass made from a wash tub when they are young. She and Lavon play the 4H Clubs and county fairs while they are in school.



Objects/Places

Marvell, Arkansas

Marvell, Arkansas is where Levon Helm grows and goes to school. He comes back and plays the prom dance here in April of 1965. At that point he and his band meet Sonny Boy Williams and plays with him just before he dies.

Canada

Canada is where the band plays during most of their early years. Most of the boys are from Canada. Levon marries his friend Connie Orr who lives in Toronto so he will not have to go to war. They spent about half their time between Canada and the south.

New York

New York is where they meet with Eric Schuster, a music-bizzier who says he wants to help them record an album. The contract turns out to only be beneficial to Mr. Schuster and the band passes on it.

Woodstock, New York

Woodstock is the town where the Band lives while recording most of their albums. It is also where they get the name for their group; the people of the town start calling them "The Band" and it sticks.

Big Pink

Big Pink is the house that Rick, Richard, Garth and Levon live in in Woodstock. This is also where they record their album "Music from Big Pink." It is recorded in the basement of the house.

Florida

They are at a concert in Florida when Richard commits suicide.

Malibu, California

Malibu is where the Band moves in 1975. They break up the following year.



Shangri-La

Shangri-La is the house that Levon and Richard live in for most of 1975. They turn the master bedroom into a recording studio and record their album "Northern Lights Southern Crosses."

The Winterland Ballroom

The Winterland Ballroom is the site of The Last Waltz, the last concert that all five men from the Band ever play together on Thanksgiving night, 1977.

Carnegie Hall

One of the only concerts that Levon and the Band play with Bob Dylan in which they do not get booed. They are all happy and surprised.



Themes

The Price of Fame

The price of fame for the boys of The Band ultimately is much higher than any of them expect; it costs them life-long friendships and even one of them his own life. When the The Band begins they want it to be a combination of all their musical abilities, not for one person's light to shine brighter than anyone else's. They share in the creativity of the songs, although they all credit Robbie with most of the lyrics, and who plays what instruments. They do not want a lead singer or a "front man," someone who has more of a say in what they do or play than the others. They are "The Band." They are five young men who bring their own special talents to the group, and the combination of them is what makes them a great band. This is the reason they leave Ronnie Hawkins in late 1963, because he wants to tell them what direction the group needs to go in and how to live. He even fines the boys if they do something he does not agree with, such as bringing a girl to one of the shows or smoking in the car. Then when the Band starts to really make it big and Robbie is getting most of the credit for the songs and being called the leader of the group, he lets it go to his head. Robbie starts making decisions with the group's manager Albert without the band's knowledge. Before long, some of the members of the group are becoming upset that they are not making the same money that Robbie is and they are not getting any credit on the albums they are releasing. This ultimately leads to the split of the band after the Final Waltz in November of 1976. Years later Rick, Richard, Garth and Levon reassemble the group without Robbie Robertson. This is especially sad for Levon, who is like a brother to Robbie, their relationship dating back to when Robertson joins Levon and Ronnie Hawkins' band back in Canada in 1959. In 1985, Richard Manuel hangs himself in his hotel room after a concert the Band performs in Florida. Levon believes that Richard takes this drastic action to "shake things up, to make things change." However, many close to the Band say they had seen it coming for a long time. Fame always comes with a price.

Love

Love is a prevalent theme throughout this book. The love of music is most commonly seen. From an early age it is the love of music that gets Levon Helm out of the cotton fields of Arkansas and into the rock and roll lifestyle that he enjoys to this day. When he is a small child, music is what Levon's family turns to as relief from the hot work of cotton farming. Whether it is sitting around their radio after dinner, under a shade tree playing a guitar and singing, or listening to a local band until midnight on the weekends, it is music that Levon and his family turn to to escape the hardships of cotton farming. When Levon graduates high school it is this same deep love of the old soulful southern music he grew up on that takes him out of Arkansas and into the heart of the birth of rock and roll. His love for music, fueled by his determination to not only become great himself but to find and learn from other great musicians who love music as much as he does, is what leads to finding the other members of his band. Levon's love of music and



his desire to always learn more about what he loves is also what drives him to go to college later in life to learn to play the drums, something he had taught himself to do by watching other people play. Levon is lucky enough to find four other young men with the same passion and love of music.

Fear

Fear is another theme in this book, although it is not as obvious as the others. Levon tours for several years with Ronnie Hawkins and the Hawks in Canada. The Hawks are very well received in Canada and they make good money there, better than Levon is used to. However, when they come back to the States they only get the same welcome in the southern states. Their fear of failure in the rest of the country keeps them from becoming all they might have been at this time in their careers. There is a gap in rock and roll at this time: Elvis is in the army and Buddy Holly has died, and Jerry Lee Lewis is having trouble for marrying his young cousin. This should have been the perfect open door for their style of music but their fear keeps them in Canada where they feel safe and they know the money is coming in steadily. By the time they finally do concerts in the U.S., it is as Bob Dylan's band and the more popular music is folk music. The crowds in the north boo them through the entire concerts and even throw things like fruit at them. Levon eventually leaves the Band for a couple of years. Had they not feared taking control of their future, there is no telling how far this Band could have and would have gone.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of this book is mainly told in first person. Levon Helm tells the story of his life from the cotton fields of Arkansas to the rock and roll life of a musician. Levon is the main story teller in this book but on several occasions he allows his fellow band mates and friends to tell their own stories in their own words, as best they remember them. They include their own backgrounds as to where they grew up and how they came to know the Band as well as any funny stories they might want to tell about the Band members. These friends also give us insight into what we might not otherwise not know about the Band and why things turn out the way they do. From one of Levon's girlfriends we learn about Richard's self destructive behavior and his habit for getting a little too high and crashing cars or burning his foot; she says it was a glimpse of what was to come with him, referring to his later committing suicide while on the road with the Band. Levon and some of the other Band members did not really see this behavior as the writing on the wall of things to come; it was merely Richard being Richard.

Tone

The objective Levon Helms had when writing *This Wheel's on Fire* was to tell the story of the Band: where they came from, how they met, what they went through to get to where they are today.

The five members of the Band—Levon Helm, Robbie Robertson, Rick Danko, Garth Hudson and Richard Manuel—all met in Canada while playing in a band with Ronnie Hawkins. The band was called the Hawks. The five men decided to quit the Hawks when Hawkins wanted to tell the boys what songs to sing and how to live their lives. The young men wanted to have equal say in everything concerning the Band. They had a good thing going for a while and when Bob Dylan asked them to tour with him they thought this could be their big break. When things did not work out the way they had hoped, Levon, the drummer, decided to call it quits for a while and the rest of the band stayed with Dylan. After a couple of years Levon moved to Woodstock with the band and they started recording their own stuff. The Band was finally making it and after a rough few years Robbie Robertson decided he did not want to tour anymore. The Band recorded a live album called *The Last Waltz* and that was the last time the entire band ever played together. All the group minus Robbie toured for some years later until Richard Manuel killed himself in 1986. In December of 1999 Rick Danko died in his sleep. Levon blames Robbie Robertson's betrayal of the Band for Manuel's death, even to this day. Levon believes that Robertson cheated the Band out of money and that Richard worked himself to death trying to make money for his family. The Band should have been living well off the royalties from their days together but it seemed that Robertson was the only member who got any royalties. Years earlier he had talked the others into selling him their share of the Band. This was another reason for writing this



book. Robbie Robertson was the only one telling the story of the Band and Levon wanted to make sure that the truth about what they really had to go through finally came out.

Structure

"This Wheel's On Fire: Levon Helm and the Story of the Band" was written by Levon Helm and Stephen Davis and it consists of 10 chapters, each chapter about twenty to forty pages long. There are no sub chapters and each chapter derives its title from something important that is going to happen in the chapter.

Levon Helm is the main story teller of this novel however he does allow some of his fellow band mates and friends to tell their own memories and backgrounds. This biography of one of the greatest bands of the late 60's and 70's is very interesting and an easy book to read. However, when Levon allows for these changes of authors he only signifies the change by adding their name before these different authors begin their story. So the reader may be a couple of pages in before he realizes it is no longer Levon talking. Once you get use to this style and look for the change of author, the book is a quick easy read. Levon also has photos of the Band in their early days as well as photos of more recognizable musicians such as a very young Conway Twitty and Bob Dylan. Mr. Helm has a way of taking the reader back to the Age of Aquarius, when rock and roll was just beginning.



Quotes

"That's how I started out. I was nine years old when I knew I wasn't meant to be a cotton farmer." Chapter One, p. 32.

"To me the pretties sight in the world was a '57 Cadillac rolling down the road with a doghouse bass tied to the top." Chapter One, p. 42.

"They stared at us in shock, like they'd never even seen monkeys act like this." Chapter Two, p. 59.

"He could play with Miles Davis or the Chicago Symphony or the Grand Ole Opry," Chapter Three, p. 90.

"Excuse me, Mr. Williamson, but my name is Lavon Helm from Marvell, and I grew up listening to you, and we have a pretty good band here, and we wanted to know if you might be interested in going somewhere and playing a little music with us." Chapter Four, pp. 116-117.

"Just keep playing, no matter how weird it gets." Chapter Five, p. 134.

"That's what Woodstock us locally: the band." Chapter Six, p. 174.

"Music from 'Big Pink' is an event and should be treated as one." Chapter Six, p. 176.

"Somehow four Canadians and an Arkansas country boy found it in themselves to express part of where all of us are at now while expressing in language that can ignite explosive trains of thought inside your head." Chapter Seven, p. 194.

"Maybe the greatness we had heard in his voice, that catch in it, came from all that pain. To this day we don't really know. " Chapter Eight, p. 233.

"It hadn't really hit me that when the song was over, so was The Band. " Chapter Nine, p. 268.

"Levon, do you realize we have become these songs?" Chapter Ten, p. 290.

" If one of the great, noble stone faces at Mount Rushmore grew a heart, opened its eyes, and began to sing, the voice would have to be that of Levon Helm." Chapter Ten, p. 291.

"Hell, all I know is that I haven't had to cultivate cotton since I was seventeen." Chapter Ten, p. 304.



Topics for Discussion

What did Nell Helm say had to happen before she would allow Levon to go to Canada with Ronnie Hawkins and his band?

Why did the band decide to leave Ronnie Hawkins?

Where did Levon go and what was his job when he left the Bob Dylan tour?

How was Bob Dylan instrumental in helping the Band?

What events happened early in the Band's career to keep them from going on tour to promote their albums?

What events led to the break up of the Band?

What, in Levon's opinion, drove Richard to commit suicide?