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DVD Review: Bob Dylan and The Band: Down in the Flood

By **Glenn McDonald**

For Bob Dylan fans of a particular intensity, the events of 1965-1967 have long since passed from history and biography into legend.

This was the era of the '65 U.S tour and '66 world tour, when Dylan would confront his legions of fans who felt betrayed by his move from acoustic folk to electric rock. It was also the era of his holy trinity of recordings – *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*.

It was the period of Dylan's fabled motorcycle accident, his convalescence and reinvention, and his collaboration with the musical entity that would eventually be called The Band.

The documentary *Bob Dylan and The Band: Down in the Flood* is a fascinating chronicle of this seminal period of musical history, assembled with skill and a clear-eyed reverence for the matter at hand. The film fuses archival footage with contemporary interviews to provide some new insights into one of music's greatest collaborations.

In the Beginning

Flood begins with the story of the Hawks, the backing band assembled by rockabilly star Ronnie Hawkins in Ontario, Canada, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The key members of this group would later split off to become Levon and the Hawks, the Canadian Squires and ultimately, The Band.

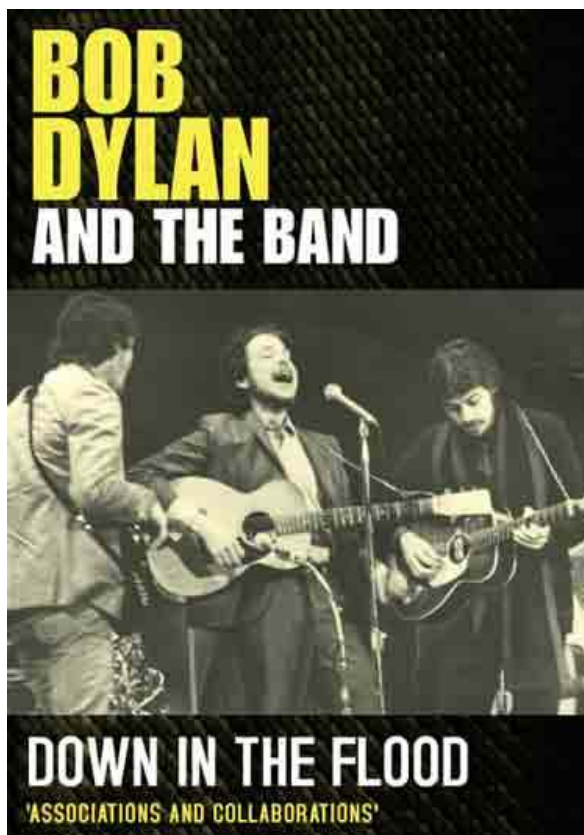
In one of several new interviews included in the film, Hawkins remembers this young version of The Band – strong musicians but also young and charismatic guys who could work the bar circuit and keep venue owners happy.

"They would bring in a lot of good-looking women, and once you bring in the good-looking women, you get a lot of guys coming in buying drinks for the good-looking women," Hawkins recalls with a laugh. "That made the bar successful."

The Hawks' experience as road warriors with Hawkins would serve them well when Dylan hired them as his backing band on the '65 and '66 tours. Because Dylan tended to meander a bit within songs, troubadour-style, the backing band had to be able to roll with the changes. The Hawks were accustomed to Hawkins taking dance breaks at the lip of the stage, so it didn't bother them when Dylan would add a 17th bar to 16-bar blues.

These sorts of details are delicious, and the archival footage from this segment of the film is particularly engaging. The filmmakers do a nice job inserting rare photos and graphical elements like concert posters into the mix.

Meanwhile, the story is filled in by a series of contemporaries and commentators: Band keyboardist Garth Hudson; producer John Simon; '66 tour drummer Mickey Jones; Dylan guitarist Charlie McCoy; and marquee music critics Robert Christgau and Anthony DeCurtis.



Released on Sept. 25, 2012. Running Time: 114 minutes. [Get it here.](#)

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One of the best passages from this part of the film concerns Dylan's famous run-in with a heckler in Manchester, England. Dylan's old folk-music fans were restless and increasingly confrontational on the tour, angry that their acoustic hero had "sold out" by playing electric rock and roll.

After an audience member cries out "Judas!" Dylan starts rewing up the band and then snarls into the mic, "I don't believe you. You're a liar." He turns to the band again and commands: "Play it f—ing loud!"

The song they launch into is Dylan's most iconic track, "Like a Rolling Stone," which DeCurtis puts into perspective *vis à vis* the larger concerns of rock music.

"It had a tremendous impact," DeCurtis says of the song. "There is no way to overstate its significance, no matter what superlative you want to throw in there. It couldn't have been bigger or more important."

The Basement Tapes

After his motorcycle accident, Dylan brought the Band to his country retreat in Woodstock, New York, where they began the jamming and occasional recording sessions that would result in the hallowed *Basement Tapes*.

Much of the detail here is provided by the Band's Garth Hudson. In a new interview, Hudson describes how the musicians took advantage of their isolation by turning inward and back, into the heart of American roots music. The songs written during this period would surface again in the Band's debut album, *Music from Big Pink*, and Dylan's follow-up, *John Wesley Harding*.

"It's the folk memory of American history," says Christgau. "Murder ballads, songs of poverty and biblical damnation."

Footage and photos from this period are rare, so the filmmakers fill in the spaces with old reels of Depression era images and 1920s jazz club scenes. Also mixed in are counterpoint images that suggest while Dylan and the Band retreated, their contemporaries in '60s rock were going the other way— into spectacle and psychedelia.

The last section of the film focuses on work of Dylan and the Band after they'd each gone their separate ways. As the critics and historians point out, *Music from Big Pink* had an enormous influence and resulted in subsequent roots-oriented direction for bands like the Grateful Dead and the Rolling Stones.

"It's one of the most extraordinary debut albums ever made," says Band producer John Simon. "It would eventually become what's called Americana music. They invented that."

Dylan would go in a similar direction with his next record *Nashville Skyline*. In one of the most interesting passages, we see old videos of Dylan performing "I Threw It All Away" and "Girl From the North Country," a duet with Johnny Cash. Dylan is now presenting himself as a country gentleman, and the synthesis of cross-cutting influences between Dylan and the Band is apparent and complete.

Documentary and Authenticity

As an unauthorized historical inquiry, *Flood* has a loose, ramshackle and authentic feel to it. In keeping with the subject matter, the form of the documentary is entirely traditional – a mix of interviews and archive footage, sequenced to tell a particular story. Extras include additional material on the '66 world tour and contributor biographies.

One weird thing: the DVD title menus are incredibly confusing and poorly designed. You literally cannot tell what onscreen options are highlighted when selecting sections or chapters. The DVD must have been rushed into print before this process was finished; it's hard to believe anyone would put this out on purpose.

Technical disappointments aside, this is an intriguing piece of music scholarship. For music fans interested in this particular era of rock history, *Down in the Flood* is a treasure trove of songs, images and insight.

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