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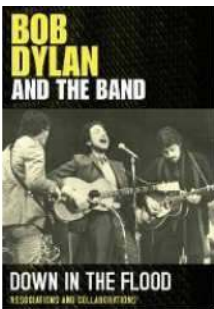
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Movies: Bob Dylan and the Band – *Down in the Flood: Associations and Collaborations* (2012)

by [Nick DeRiso](#)



Down in the Flood, a forthcoming documentary stuffed with new interviews, archival footage and seldom-seen photographs, joins a musical revolution already in progress: “It was as big a thing,” Rolling Stone’s Anthony De Curtis says, “as has ever happened in the history of rock ‘n’ roll, Dylan going electric.”



And the band with him in that moment, on a raucous, audience-splintering 1966 tour, was the Hawks — later, known simply as the Band. Together, they would connect the narratives and the imagery of folk music with the dangerous power of rock, forever changing the genre.

The Band continued to intersect with Dylan off and on over the ensuing decade, perhaps most famously during a lengthy sequence of loose sessions held at an upstate New York farmhouse, later officially released as *The Basement Tapes*. They began, however, as a tough R&B-focused group learning the ropes behind the Arkansas rockabilly wildman Ronnie Hawkins. One key early moment in *Down in the Flood* — due September 25, 2012, from Sexy Intellectual — finds a remarkably clean-cut Levon Helm performing and singing in a 1959 edition of the Hawks.

After Hawkins, with Helm in tow, settled in Toronto to ply his wares, the remaining members of the Band eventually joined in, one by one — first a teen-aged Robbie Robertson, and then Rick Danko, Richard Manuel and Garth Hudson. (“They were pretty hip, this bunch of boys,” Hawkins, ever the scamp, says in the film. “They were young, strong, and they started drawing good-looking women.”) By 1964, the Hawks were getting their own offers to play, separate from the bar band-hero Hawkins — even as Dylan was in the run up to his genre-bursting, literally electrifying *Highway 61 Revisited*.

[REMEMBERING LEVON HELM: [We celebrate the late Levon Helm's stirring legacy both as a solo artist and as the loamy voiced, rail-jumping rhythmic center point of the Band.](#)]

Folk music’s newest savior was moving toward rock, even as the Band broke free from an endless series of dead-end saloon-stage jobs. Dylan hired them for his subsequent tour, and a new moment in music was born — though, at first, it would be without Helm, who wasn’t interested in being a part of a back-up band anymore. Many of Dylan’s legacy fans were no more excited, and the performances were marred by boos and catcalls. Dylan, if anything, seemed to dig in his heels. After one particularly unruly fan complained during a 1966 show in England, Dylan can be clearly heard telling Robertson: “Play it fucking loud!” The times, they had already changed — whether his audience was ready for it, or not.

After that bruising tour, Dylan was planning to take a short break before another round of shows when he suffered a debilitating motorcycle crash. The tour was cancelled, and Dylan went into an extended sabbatical. When he reconnected with the Band again, as part of those informal sessions outside of Woodstock, there was a more contemplative atmosphere surrounding the proceedings. Rootsier, folkier, beginning with covers and then moving organically toward original work, *The Basement Tapes* was as quiet and ruminative as their earlier work had been raw and angular.

The music, which took shape at the old house where the Band had taken up residence (affectionately known as “Big Pink”) worked in direct opposition to everything else that was going on in popular music, then being swept by the kaleidoscopic distractions of psychedelia. But this wasn’t part of a grander statement. It was more like a personal quest — for both Dylan, and for the Band, who was quickly beginning to sound like the nuanced group that would produce a pair of late-1960s classics in *Music from Big Pink* and *The Band*.

Yet, *The Basement Tapes* would remain officially unissued until 1975. Dylan, ever unpredictable, abruptly left for Nashville to begin work on the stripped-down *John Wesley Harding*, while the Band — with Levon Helm now back at the drum chair — began constructing its 1968 debut. Without the connective songs contained in those lost collaborations, both albums seemed in some ways to come out of nowhere. Taken together, however, the connections become clearer — and not just because a trio of *Basement Tapes* songs were reworked for *Big Pink*.

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vulnerable, more straight forward. As Dylan himself retreated further into the safety of country music, the Band emerged with some of the guttiest, most mythically complex, most honest music of the decade.

Dylan and the Band would appear on stage once in both 1968 and in '69, but by then his former backing band had developed its own entity: 1969's all-original *The Band* boasted a more interior feel, as if a world of characters had sprung up around them. Yet, a lasting musical connection remained. When, in 1973, Dylan decided to mount his first major tour since 1966, he called his old friends in the Band — just as adept at the grease-popping R&B stomper as the heartbreaking Civil War ballad — to join him once more. A sold-out valedictory tour followed in '74, as it became clear all over again just how tailor-made the Band was for the chameleon-like Dylan.

"There was a mind meld there that was rare," De Curtis says, "and it's certainly rare for an artist as mercurial as Dylan to find musicians that were that in tune with him."

Though Dylan remains, the Band would last only two more years with its original lineup. Richard Manuel, Rick Danko and Levon Helm have since passed. The results of their dynamic partnership, however, live on — not just as great albums, but within the crossroads aesthetic that would one day be called Americana. Their work together, and the places it took them when they parted, remain key inspirational starting points for the entire country rock and, later, alt country movements.

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GIMME FIVE: CELEBRATING LEVON HELM, CO-FOUNDER AND VOICE OF THE BAND: The loamy voiced, rail-jumping rhythmic center point of the Band, Helm re-emerged in the last decade after an initial diagnosis to reclaim his mantle as yearning storyteller and timeless soul singer. Three straight Grammy awards followed, starting in 2008. Unfortunately, Helm's third-act triumphs in the studio were matched pace for pace by his illness. Helm, 71, is now said to be in the final stages of his cancer battle. The Arkansas native leaves behind, however, a series of lasting musical statements. Those Grammys helped to underscore Helm's importance, within the Band and within the broader landscape of American roots music — but it is here, within the songs, that it becomes manifest. Even after all of that, Helm's signature style remained. His playing was an involving mixture of rhythm and emotion — someone once said he was the only drummer who can make you cry — while his singing remained a wonder of ribald bewilderment, old-time religion and shotgun shack-rattling joy.

SOMETHING ELSE! FEATURED ARTIST: BOB DYLAN: In honor of Bob Dylan's birthday, Something Else! Reviews presents 7 for 70 — our list of top recordings from across the 70-year-old's lengthy career. We were careful to select at least one project from each of his five decades in music, stretching between 1963 and 2009, but didn't order them in any particular way. The list is necessarily subjective. But like all birthday presents, it's the thought that counts.

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Author: [Nick DeRiso](#) Nick DeRiso has explored jazz, blues, roots and rock music for Gannett News Service and USA Today, Blues Revue Magazine, AllAboutJazz.com, Rock.com, Popdose, Living Blues magazine, the Louisiana Folklife Program and NoDepression.com, among others. As a longtime newspaper editor, he

was named columnist of the year five years in a row between 2003-07 by the Associated Press Managing Editors of Louisiana/Mississippi, the Louisiana Sports Writers Association and the Louisiana Press Association. DeRiso, who oversaw a daily publication that was named Top 10 in the nation by the Associated Press in 2006, also worked for a decade in radio, and has owned his own live music venue.

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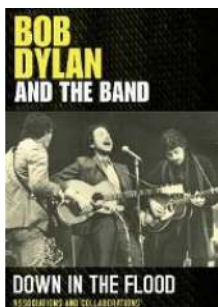
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