



Jericho
The Band
(EMI)

After the Band's humiliating Robbie Robertson-less incarnation in the mid-eighties, I feared the worst for *Jericho* (3.5) but was immediately impressed by the class, heart and rare musical ability of this outfit.

For the first half of *Jericho* I was wondering why they ever needed that Robbie Robertson guy: "Remedy" is a lively, horn-driven number in the Toussaint tradition, "The Caves of Jericho" and "Too Soon Gone" are moving and "Country Boy" is a precious Richard Manuel find. Their take of Bruce Springsteen's bleak "Atlantic City," a tale of a man so desperate he sees the casino as his best chance in life, is cluelessly jolly, though their reinterpretation is commanding. But midway through, *Jericho* simply runs out of steam: the material is uninspired in late-Band tradition, though the musicianship makes it worthwhile.

Jericho can be perfectly split down the middle into good and okay. Regardless of some weak material, it's a truly inspiring underdog story. Despite losing two enormous talents in Richard Manuel and Robbie Robertson, the Band sound like ageless masters.

a quickie Band retrospective

Seeing *The Last Waltz*, Martin Scorsese's documentary of the Band's final performance, was a pivotal point in my life: those big lumberjack-lookin' guys with those big weepy voices -- it was beautiful thing, I thought. Further immersion into the Band's music led to similar highly emotional revelations; besides Van Morrison, nobody can match the sheer emotional power of these guys. The Band's subtlety, teamwork, unpretentiousness and passion defined not only music but life. With the release of a dubious new album, *Jericho*, I decided to dive back into their catalogue.

With their 1968 debut, *Music From Big Pink* (5), the Band were already fully mature (they'd already been together for eight years). Possibly responsible for the album's breadth was the array of writers. Robbie Robertson would eventually phase out the other members, but here he only writes four songs (though two of them are "The Weight" and "Chest Fever"). Except for an off-key, sped-up version of "This Wheel's on Fire," the album is absolutely flawless.

Astoundingly, their second album, simply titled *The Band* (5), was even better, meaning it may very well be the greatest album ever made. Their playing was even more richly textured, though their instrumental impressiveness never overwhelmed the material.

After that there was bound to be a decline: 1970's *Stagefright* (4.5) was undeservedly pegged as the Band's great fall. Though less inspired and spontaneous than its predecessors, it is nonetheless much in the same spirit and features some fantastic singing from Richard Manuel. Had they included "Don't Do It," *Stagefright* would probably occupy the same lofty territory as *Big Pink* and *The Band*.

The slide truly began with 1971's *Cahoots* (3.5), though once again, the stunning music that came before it was an unfair reference point. The songwriting is generally weak and forced, the choruses are especially contrived and many of the songs sound like imitations of early ones. But *Cahoots* contains some sublime moments: "4% Pantomime," a duet between two of rock's greatest vocalists, Richard Manuel and Van Morrison; Bob Dylan's "When I Paint My Masterpiece;" and "Life is a Carnival," the first appearance of Allen Toussaint's darting horns. The double live album, *Rock of Ages* (4), is worthwhile just for Toussaint's tasty brass and a killer version of Marvin Gaye's "Don't Do It," but many of the songs simply sound too much like the originals.

Moondog Matinee (3), an album of oldies covers, keeps the band at a stand-still. It's shockingly restrained and anonymous, but picks up steam as it goes. *Northern Lights-Southern Cross* (3.5), their first album of new material since *Cahoots*, was also oddly slick, though they still exhibit a warmth most bands spend a career trying to attain and Garth Hudson adds some lovely keyboard and saxophone. "Ophelia" and "It Makes No Difference" were the high water marks. The Band bottomed out with their final album, *Islands* (3), where the glossiness increased and the writing was at its weakest yet. But even here they still have their moments, like "Christmas Must Be Tonight," "The Saga of Pepote Rouge" and "Knockin' Lost John," all of which are collected on *To Kingdom Come* (4), a two-disc anthology. The sections from the first two albums are flawed since both are pretty much perfect, but the post-*Stagefright* selections are fine. Buying the first three albums, then somehow getting your hands on just Disc Two of *To Kingdom Come* would be my suggestion for a perfect Band collection.

After you have all those albums, *The Last Waltz* soundtrack (4) isn't quite so essential. The best moments generally don't come from the Band, though their back-up adds muscle to the material. The highlights are truly a rock'n'roll testament: Neil Young's "Helpless," which makes CSNY's original sound like the whitebread crap it is; Dr. John's "Such a Night;" all of Dylan's stuff; another Manuel/Morrison duet and "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" in which Levon Helm sings it with the anger it deserves.

Robertson left the Band but they continued on in the eighties without him, reduced to an oldies act. In 1986 Richard Manuel committed suicide.

