

**The following interview with
ROBBIE ROBERTSON
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 18, 2017**



Robbie Robertson

Library of Congress: The album “The Band” (a.k.a. “The Brown Album”) was the second album by the group. As you approached it and prepared to go into the studio to make it, did you want to do something on this second album different from what you did on the first?

Robbie Robertson: The idea was never, “We have to do something that we didn’t do before.” The album came about organically. We had gotten to this new plateau with the first album and we just addressed the new album from that point of view.

In the songs I was writing, I felt I had opened a door and, with the first album, I had gotten enough approval to go even deeper into the darkness on the second album.

I didn’t really recognize what else was happening in music at that time and, I think, with that first album, a lot of people were like, “Where in the world did this sound come from?” I think what they were referring to was that, by this time, we’d been together for six or seven years and had been “woodshedding,” learning our craft, playing the chitlin circuit in the American south. We were absorbing all kinds of musicalities and wanted to mix them into our own gumbo.

By the time we got to the place where we were making albums, we had discovered something and could be ambitious, musically. We had so much respect taking in all these flavors--gospel, mountain music, whatever struck us as timeless.

On the “Brown Album,” we got to a place, where we did not have to hold back.

LOC: When you, as a group, took upon fashioning the album, did you arrive at the studio with concepts and arrangements of songs in place or did you prefer to work organically together once you were there?

RR: In songwriting, you understand something, about the piece from the get-go. In the studio, I’d share what I knew about the composition and then talk about ideas—I’d play the song and say, “Here’s what I hear.”

The songwriting is the starting place. But then you gather other input. Someone says, “I have an idea—what if we have a break here before that section comes in?”

LOC: Were there any songs/tracks originally considered—or even recorded—for the album that were jettisoned before that first pressing? Why were they omitted?

RR: Mostly everything that we recorded went on the album. There was, however, one other song that I had written that was ...I don't know, more...basic. It wasn't as complex as the other compositions. It was "Get Up Jake." But we ended up using it at a different time.

LOC: When listening to the album again recently, I was struck at the flow of it. What thought went into the sequencing of the tracks on the album?

RR: Some of that can actually be determined from the order in which you record them, but what I wanted was to not play into the obvious. I wanted to take the listener on a musical journey, not the approach of, "Okay, this is the first single, so this is the first song on the album." To me, it was more about telling a story, to create an almost cinematic experience.

LOC: Can you tell me about John Simon and his role as the producer of the album?

RR: Music producing is a fascinating subject matter. Music producers can include anything from the guy who brings in the coffee to the guy who does EVERYTHING in the studio that makes the record what it is.

I had asked John to be our producer based on something exceptional. He had previously produced an album for Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Massage."

We had just finished "The Basement Tapes" and there was a lot of madness and a free imagination aspect to it. I thought, "John GETS this." He's going to take the ride with us and not normal it up.

I think John recognized a place for himself within the working relationship of the band. And he saw something in the music. He felt a strong connection to it and he fit in almost as if he was another member of the group, using his own experience and his studio savvy.

We recorded in a different manner than most—we set up in a circle so we could see one another. We could read the signals via eye contact or a head nod or a guitar flair. And, from that, we would know what to do.

John could read what we were doing and he was spot on.

LOC: Were you pleased with the critical response to the album at the time?

RR: I guess so. I don't know.... We didn't have a lot of connection with "the outside world." We were sort of living in a bit of a bubble. But there was an honesty to that.

We didn't read many reviews. I admired Ralph Gleason. He had made a place in North America for a type of criticism writing about jazz. When he wrote about The Band, I thought, "Okay, I'll listen to him."

LOC: Were you happy with the commercial reaction to the album?

RR: I was surprised by it. This [album] wasn't a play for commerciality. We were not getting on some trendy train, we were operating outside of what was happening.

You know, that was the first time I heard of "Americana" applied to music. And I was like, "North Americana, thank you!" [Laughs.] I was this guy from Canada writing from a deep

reflection of what I had experienced when I traveled down the Mississippi, going to where the music had changed my life, where the music just grew right out of the ground! That was when I was 16.

I had loved the rhythm of the poetry from the South. It got into my veins and it gave me the opportunity to write like I always wanted to write.

Also, I had a partner in this. Levon. I wanted to write songs that he could sing better than anyone in the world. And they had to be as true as they could be.

So there were a lot of different reasonings behind this album, none were commercial.

LOC: How do you explain the album's great endurance?

RR: I give credit to what we were talking about earlier—this was not something to do with popularity. Popularity comes and goes and changes, it's good, it's bad....

I think we had more depth in what we were shooting for. We'd been together longer and through all sorts of experiences. We had a lot of music under our belts. It had subtlety and textures with a wide horizon. I think that's it, I can't really speak more on that, only time has a handle on what endures.