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Traversing The Endless Highway

A Look at Creating
A Tribute to

THE BAND



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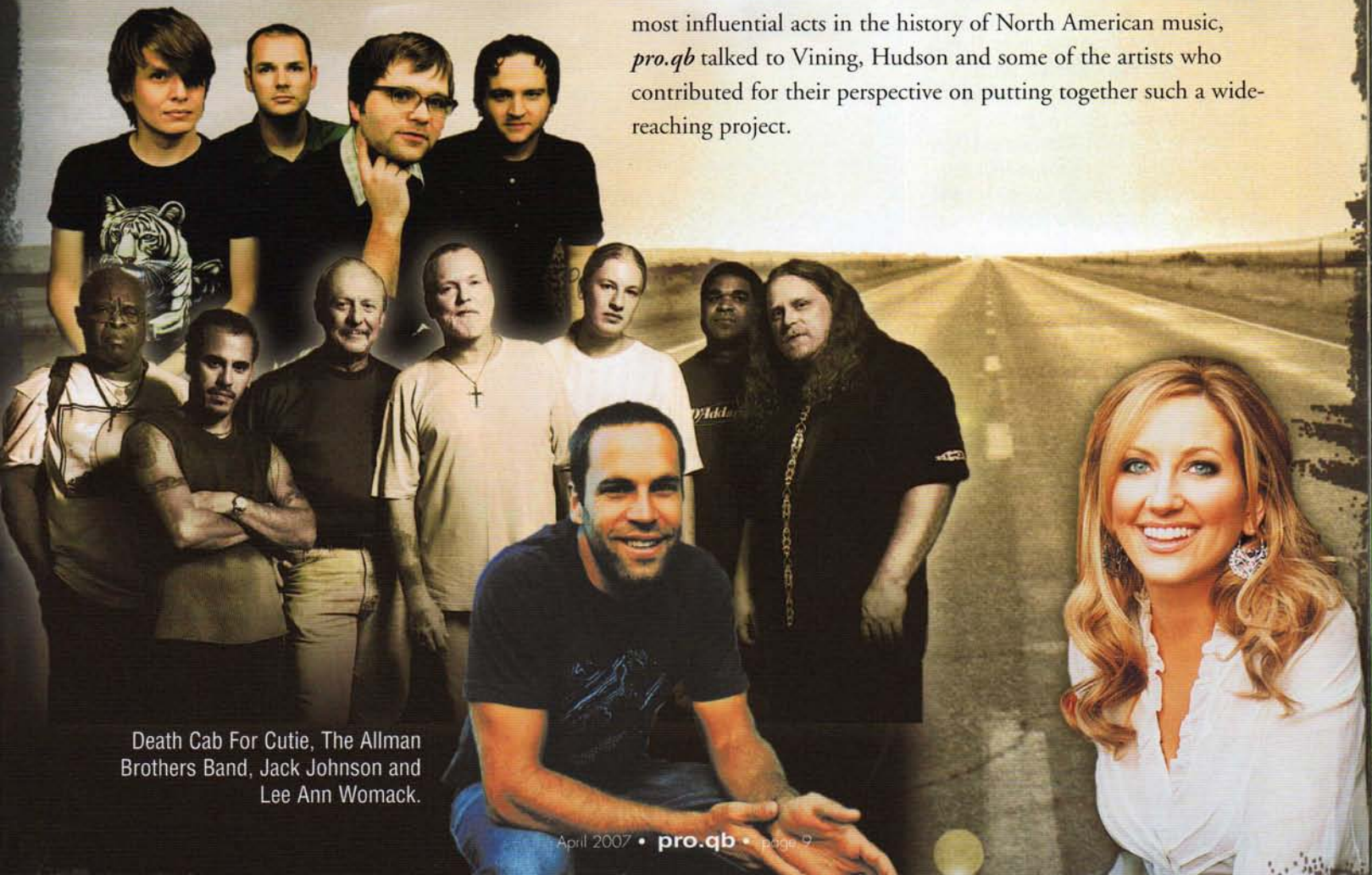
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Traversing The ENDLESS HIGHWAY A Look at Creating a Tribute to The Band

By Jack Barton

At the beginning of this year, 29-years after the release of The Band's seminal debut, *Music From Big Pink*, 429 Records released *Endless Highway: The Music Of The Band*, a 17-track masterpiece tribute to Rick Danko, Levon Helm, Garth Hudson, Richard Manuel and Robbie Robertson. The CD is obviously a labor of love, produced by Savoy Label Group [429's parent company] President Steve Vining and its A&R consultant Stu Fine, with oversight contributions from Robertson and Hudson. The record showcases the incredible treasure trove of Band material through performances by a wide range of current artists from an even wider range of genres – everyone from The Allman Brothers Band to Jack Johnson to Lee Ann Womack to Death Cab For Cutie. In fact, so many stellar performances were turned in that three “special” versions of the disc were created for retail partners Best Buy, Borders and FYE, each containing unique bonus tracks not available on the base version.

To take a look at the creation of this tribute to one of the most influential acts in the history of North American music, *pro.qb* talked to Vining, Hudson and some of the artists who contributed for their perspective on putting together such a wide-reaching project.



Death Cab For Cutie, The Allman Brothers Band, Jack Johnson and Lee Ann Womack.

The Band's Garth Hudson On *Endless Highway*



It is gratifying to hear new renditions of the music realized and recorded by The Band. The musicians presented on *Endless Highway* have obviously found affinities with original The Band members, but not

one here fails to project their individuality.

As The Band assembled this music, considerable thought was given to textures and idiomatic melodies that would underscore the poetry. The artists here have listened carefully to original tracks and it is rewarding to hear their fine musical craftwork. May the spirit in these new voices from new vistas echo on.

I listened several times to the *Endless Highway* CD in the car, in the studio, in the kitchen, and used random select. It would be unfair to list my favorites, because everyone did admirably. But I will mention two of the highlights that caught my attention **Trevor Hall's** vocal attitude on "Life Is A Carnival" and **Giles Reaves'** piano accompaniment to Lee Ann Womack's appealing voice on "The Weight."

I would also like to compliment each and every producer on *Endless Highway*. Accolades to Stu Fine and Steve Vining at Savoy/429. Thanks for the tribute!

There has been a strong response from radio since *Endless Highway* landed on programmers' desks. That must be pretty gratifying for a tribute record.

We had way too good a time putting this together and it turned out way too well. I'm really proud of it. These days it becomes more and more of a rarity, especially with as many people as were involved with this thing. It could have gotten weird or gone south any number of times. We worked hard on it, tried to make good choices and encourage people to really follow their muse. A lot of it comes down to just The Band repertoire is so great. Every artist is on there because they were really into participating on the record, and almost immediately had a track that they absolutely had to do.

Where did the idea to do a Band tribute come from?

Most of the senior management of the label is of a particular age, and we talk a lot about the music from the late '60s and early '70s that was really important to us and why it was important. We look around the current landscape, and we were saying, "Could a band like The Band really make it today, the way they did in the late '60s and early '70s?" The conversation went back and forth. The songwriting was great, and they were kind of Rootsy and jam benders, but those kind of groups don't really break mainstream anymore because the radio opportunities weren't there.

Then we got into a discussion about what groups sound like The Band? That list came up pretty quickly. Then it morphed to, "Well, why don't we ask them if they



Steve Vining

want to do a Band track?" Because it's all music we like, and at Savoy we're really good at marketing to that 30-and-up demographic. The radio contacts are very strong; the retail contacts are very strong. We have a very solid press department. The more we talked about it, we really believed that, even though the record had a younger demographic to it, it really was going to have resonance with that 30-, 35- or 40-year-old consumer, on up. And we're good at reaching those kind of people. We understand their sensibility.



Bruce Hornsby

So it evolved from there. We started to talk to a few artists about it, and we were encouraged that the first couple groups we got to went, "Oh yeah! Great! We're in."

From there it just started to roll. What was really interesting was that we all thought we knew The Band repertoire, but we went back and did a refresher course on it.

That must have led to a few choice track discoveries.

It was memory lane around here for about a month-and-a-half because the big box set was being passed around and played in all the offices. The stories at lunch became, "Do you know what I was doing when I first heard 'Up On Cripple Creek,' or when I first heard 'The Weight?'"

Then artists started coming up with stuff. Jackie Greene is a great example. We asked if he wanted to be on the record and he came back with, "I've got to do 'Look Out Cleveland.'" We all looked at each other and said, "What the hell is 'Look Out Cleveland?'" So we had to dig back in and find some of these. The artists were coming up with things that, even those of us who had been putting the project together, had to go back and search for. That was a lot of fun, so it didn't turn into just a cavalcade of hits.

There's really some of the less well-known repertoire that got covered on the record, and got covered really well.

We went into it knowing that tribute records have a bad rap. But we were hoping that if we built this one really well and it was *really* organic, it was going to be a great introduction to younger music consumers to The Band. We just wanted to be sure that everybody on it really deserved to be on it and they extended themselves and spent some time working on their track.

With the number of artists who wanted to be involved, how did you make the final selections?

Given the time frame that we needed the masters delivered, it came down to which people were able to get into the studio. Did they want to do a track we already had committed, or was it something that we still needed to cover? There's a business element to this thing, and, unfortunately, we lost a few people because of real stiff-necked approaches to the business side. We thought it was odd because some of the big stars on the record had signed on, saying, "Great, terms are fine for us. Let's go."

We missed what I think would have been pretty interesting contributions from some

younger artists that, for whatever reason, were getting advised, "No, you can't do a deal like that. They have to pay more and you have to own it."

It was funny because we have a saying around here that you get the record you deserve to have. And it happened. It shouldn't have been 17 tracks, but we got to the point where we kept adding stuff and finally we thought we should stop. It's a 71-minute Pop record! We couldn't have put another track on if we wanted to, and we still had stuff left over. So the good news is we had some nice bonus tracks to use with our retail partners that made them excited.

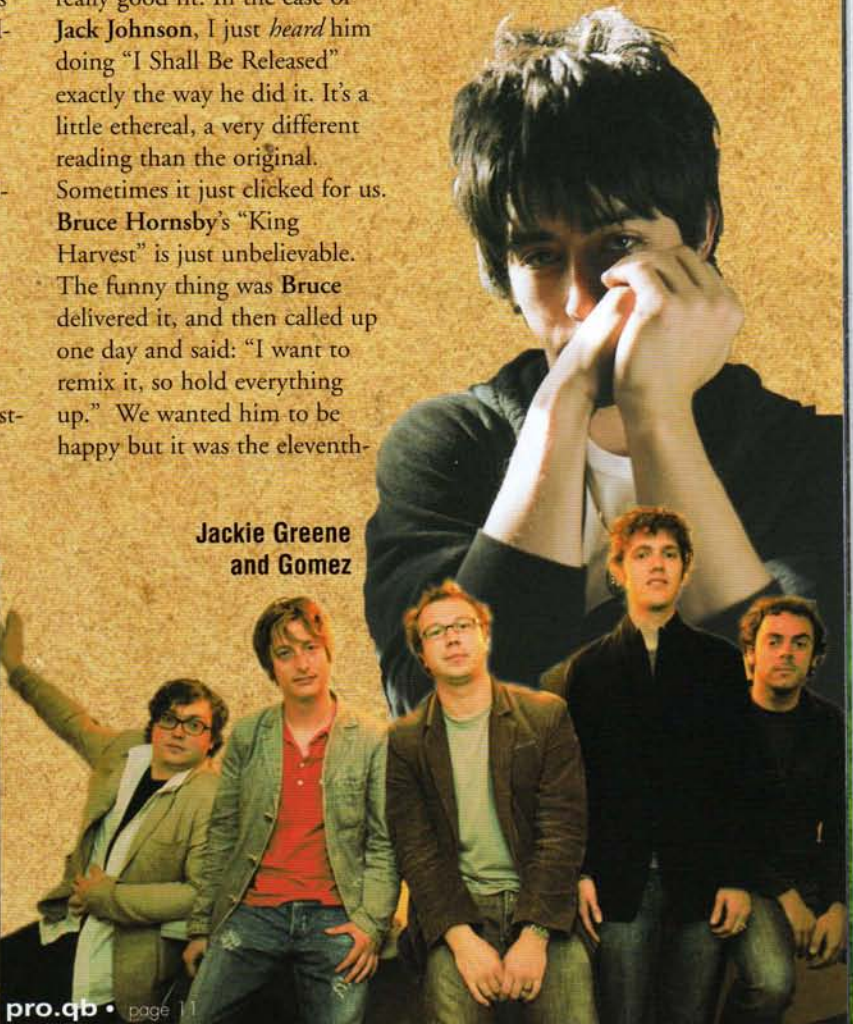
And the base commercial version is a really full record that covers the hits but also has some of the more interesting things on there. Some artists just immediately came to mind because we thought they were a really good fit. In the case of Jack Johnson, I just *heard* him doing "I Shall Be Released" exactly the way he did it. It's a little ethereal, a very different reading than the original. Sometimes it just clicked for us. Bruce Hornsby's "King Harvest" is just unbelievable. The funny thing was Bruce delivered it, and then called up one day and said: "I want to remix it, so hold everything up." We wanted him to be happy but it was the eleventh-

and-a-half hour. But he said, "No, no, I'll get it to you, but I want to make it better." So we ended up doing a remix of "King Harvest," that *is* better.

We wanted to have some Country people involved as a nod to that part of the group's heritage. We wanted to have some of the newer groups like Gomez that really kind of shared an ethos with the band. We really them involved and it came to pass.

And then there are some surprises. The "Chest Fever" by Widespread Panic knocked us out. It turned out to be one of the breakout tracks at radio.

Almost in every case, when the final mixes came in, all of them were inspired. That's one of the reasons that the tracks that made the final commercial version of the record are on there.



Jackie Greene and Gomez

The Band's camp – specifically Robbie Robertson and Garth Hudson – have a reputation of being very, very protective of The Band's legacy. How did you get the blessing to do this?

We had a lot of conversations with them. Stu Fine did the record with me and spent more than a bit of time with Garth. Since we're lucky enough to have Robbie here in Los Angeles, we were able to really flesh this thing out. It was understanding what we were trying to create, why we were doing it, and that it was going to be a genuine and honest approach to a new look at the repertoire.

Over time, everybody got comfortable with everybody and Robbie suggested groups – a couple of them surprised us – and we went after people and told him what we were doing. We were just really fortunate. There was a purity of spirit about the project from the beginning that helped make them comfortable, and frankly,

got them involved at a level that I could only have hoped for.

In what ways did they involve themselves?

It would have been very easy for Robbie just to stand back and not suggest groups or artists that he thought might make really good contributions, or spend time listening to some of the mixes and coming up with some of the comments he did.

But everybody had a chance to make suggestions, which we pursued. They listened to the project and how it was coming together. When you hear about The Band's history, you come in with preconceptions. None of those have really borne themselves out. We found that both Garth and Robbie have been gracious in giving of their time. Short of them playing on the record, I don't know what else I could have asked from them. It's been a great experience.

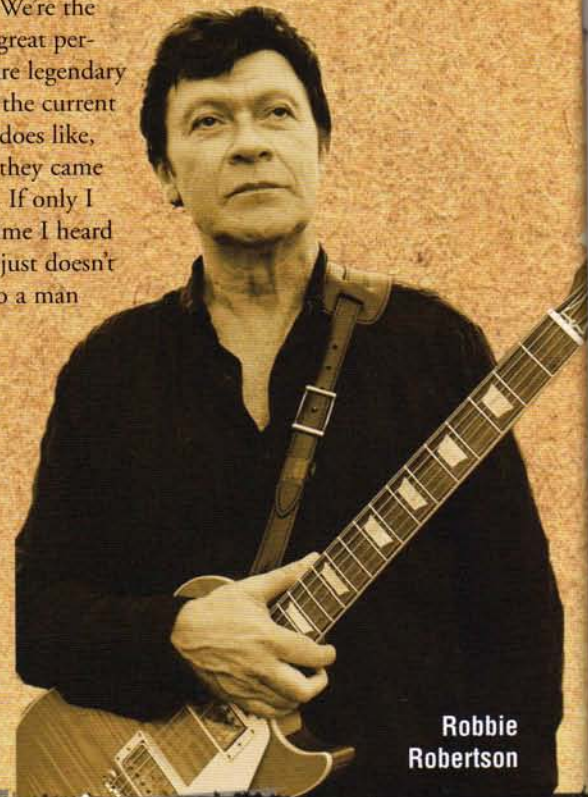
There was some concern that Triple A had gotten away from artists like The Band, yet

you've had remarkable success at the format with this release. What do you attribute that to?

At the heart of it, it's really great music. Broadcasters make choices on what they can program on a day-in, day-out basis. I started out in radio, but it's still a mystery to me why the wheels turn and work the way they sometimes do. We're the happy recipients of great performances of what are legendary songs from some of the current artists that Triple A does like, and I'm happy that they came to it with open ears. If only I had a nickel every time I heard from that station X just doesn't play tributes. But, to a man, not only have they been supportive, but one station that was vehemently against tributes in general has been one of our biggest supporters. Each week we look at the spin count it's just amazing. Knowing where the

stations came from and where they've evolved to, it's just got to be that when they listened to the music it really fits who they are, and happily that's been the case with just about everybody.

Our problem is going to be focusing the commercial guys on a single track because the record is so broad and so deep.



Robbie Robertson

Endless Highway Artists Talk About The Band

While gathering the background on *Endless Highway: The Music Of The Band*, pro.qb thought it would be fun to get some of the contributing artists' feelings on The Band and its music. Here is what a few of them had to say:

Jackie Greene ("Look Out Cleveland"): The Band is one of my favorite groups, so paying tribute to The Band was a no-brainer for me. The influence of The Band on American music is vast and mysterious. A lot of kids don't know The Band, but they damn sure know "Up On Cripple Creek" or "The Weight." Their musicianship, songwriting and feeling is really magical. The Band is a blueprint for a perfect musical group. They set the bar very, very high.

One of the biggest things I've learned from The Band is that it's okay to let moments happen. Their music is organic, not calculated and static. It breathes. It has beautiful moments, it has harsh moments. It's not over-thought. When you hear a song by The Band, it seems so natural and expressive.

I always liked "Look Out Cleveland" for reasons I can't really name. It's somewhat an obscure, lesser-known song, but still really great. I like the sloppiness and the vibe of the original recording. You get the feeling they just set up the microphones and went for it.

The Roches ("Acadian Driftwood")

Terre Roche: The label asked us to do this song, and coincidentally, it figured prominently in my own history. The year it came out, Maggie [Roche] and I had hitchhiked from Louisiana to New York City. It was winter and freezing and we were broke. A friend let us sleep on his floor and he had [the final Band album with Robbie Robertson] *Northern Lights Southern Cross*. This song is about Canadians who were driven from their homes and were wandering in Louisiana. It seemed to be about people like us. It was a real friend. Now, years later, it was a pleasure to pay tribute to it.

Apart from "Acadian Driftwood," I wasn't particularly familiar with The Band's music. When *The Last Waltz* came out, I wondered why someone would focus on their last concert as being significant. After I saw the movie, I had the impression that the end of The Band signaled the end of an era – an era during which I was particularly vulnerable to the effects of popular music.

Suzzy Roche: As a kid I went to see *The Last Waltz* three times, and all the boys I had a crush on had worn out copies of *Music From Big Pink*, but the biggest impact The Band has had on me was working on this song. It was a challenge because it's a masterpiece, and we were working on a deadline. The only way I could think to do it was to listen to their version a million times and try to completely embrace their idiosyncratic inflections, rhythms, heart and soul. It was extremely difficult, the deeper you go. They are so different from us, it's impossible to capture another band's spirit – and I wouldn't want to anyway – but it's the reaching for it that translates into love.

While working on "Acadian Driftwood," I read **Levon Helm's** book and could really relate to their story. It's not easy to be a "band," as no one is a star in a band, yet each member is a star. It's all about surrendering to the whole. A band is like a family, with all the same problems. When you're on the road to make a living, it's a hard life. After a while it takes its toll and, unless everyone makes a lot of money and stays healthy, it's impossible to sustain without heartbreak. In the dictionary, a definition of legacy is "gift." The Band gave it all.

Steve Reynolds ("Stage Fright"):

Growing up in Canada, The Band was one of the best examples of great Canadian music translating to the larger world. Their music was an integral part of my repertoire as a struggling guitarist. The fact that they could achieve as much as they did and do it without compromising their musical integrity has always been an inspiration.

I remember leaving school after graduation and driving from Vancouver to New York to play music with four other musicians I'd never met, and they made *The Last Waltz* the soundtrack for the trip. We were utterly broke and had to stop in every city and busk to make enough money to make it to the next town. We learned a bunch of songs off that record and would play those to the unsuspecting citizenry. The magic of their music resonated so well, even channeled through a bunch of misfit Canadians in America, the coins started dropping. Thanks to The Band's music we made it to our final destination with full bellies and loads of stories.



The Roches and Steve Reynolds