

# riffs



YOU COULD TELL something special was happening on Second Avenue by the way the weekend crowd swooshed instead of sauntered down St. Marks Place. And when you got closer to the Fillmore East, the beaded beggars' cry was not an aggressive "Spare Change?", but a hopeful "Spare Tickets?"

The four Band concerts were sold out weeks before. Excitement about their East Coast debut was generated partly by the splash of

their first album, "Music from Big Pink"; partly by the heightened curiosity their reticence has created (ten months after a hit album, they're just beginning concerts); and partly by their own country gentleman mystique, which is a combination of the first two factors—outstanding music and a retiring unconcern for "making it"—plus a little something more. In other words, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and the Band already have an almost mythical aura.

You could measure some of that aura as it reflected back in the pre-concert crowd's anticipation. This cheery expectation was exhaled like a group high as the audience settled down to Cat Mother and the All Night Newsboys.

The whole evening was a lesson in what can happen when a group of musicians take themselves seriously enough to really work together for a long time. Cat Mother has been playing around in the city for the last two years, beginning at the dank Cafe Wha and on up to second and third on everyone else's bill.

They are not especially accomplished or imaginative instrumentalists but they do have it together. They've improved steadily over the years and if their focus is still a little fuzzy, they

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have a strong determination to be good. More important, they write excellent songs and have a solid vocal sound. They did a friendly set, finishing with a jaunty medley of oldies like "Blue Suede Shoes" and "Chantilly Lace." Cat Mother could work themselves into a big group, especially among people who miss the Buffalo Springfield.

Mystery crept back into the night as the Band's paraphernalia was hustled on in the dark and the ubiquitous equipment men dissolved into the wings leaving five stark silhouettes. Pause. Screams. Lights. There they were, shy and formal in suits and neatly trimmed beards, with the exception of Garth Hudson looming like a hoary Biblical prophet behind his Hammond organ.

In contrast to Cat Mother's awesome banks of amplifiers, the Band's equipment was modest. Levon Helm uses the most minimal drum set in unassuming plain wood shells, Danko and Robertson run through small Fender amps, and Manuel's baby grand is miked acoustically.

Four and a half years ago they played their last solo gig; four

years ago in their last public performances they were booed by folk-purists while on tour with Dylan. It's easy to see why they're a hard group to get on a stage. Robertson is so sweetly bashful that he only sneaks a glance at the audience when he's introduced. The whole group seems slightly embarrassed and eager to get on with it.

They do. And the theatre is filled with startling-aliver-than-live version of Big Pink. Because the Band uses production only to capture their real sound, they can reproduce it anywhere. As they run through their album cuts—"Tears of Rage," "This Wheel's On Fire," "Caledonia Mission"—the response is wild. Their myth is reinforced.

The Band functions like a precision watch. Intricate, exact, with dazzling 24-jewel perfection, the five pieces move flawlessly through their paces, separately and as a whole mechanism. They play with the experience, finesse, and resultant taste of top studio musicians. Individual virtuosity and textured arrangements that overlap vocal and instrumental parts create the illusion of diversity accidentally harmonizing.

It's like a classical concert in that they address their instruments instead of the audience. The highest compliment the musician can pay his listener is taking his music seriously and playing as well as he can. The Band have no act, put on no show, extract no visual excitement. But they know you're there and they let their hair down and play.

Both Robertson and Danko move in a way I'd only seen jazz and occasional classical musicians do before. The whole body plays, not just the fingers. Manuel, Danko, and Helm split the vocals with Robertson and Hudson coming in only for the five part harmonies like "I Shall Be Released." Their conversational style of throwing the lines back and forth emphasizes the lyric.

This is a comfortable group who have whiled away many a day experimenting with each other's instruments. In the course of the evening, the drummer played mandolin, acoustic guitar, and organ; the pianist took over drums; the organist switched to piano; the bassist played acoustic guitar; and the guitarist played bass and acoustic guitar.

Through an hour-long set including three encores, they did

only three songs other than Big Pink cuts. The first was a new song of their own, or possibly Dylan's. The second was an authentic antique country tune "Levon's dad taught us. We hope you like country music here in New York City." (Fierce applause.) It was a cracking sweet harmony, "Little birds that sing in the bushes." The last was the old Four Tops "Loving You (has made my life sweeter than it ever was)". The two nonoriginals gave us a flash into the Band's roots and how they came to create a real fusion of rock and country that emerges as a distinctive whole that is neither.

Helm grew up in Arkansas, the rest in Canada, but they all teathed on Grand Ole Opry. It wasn't until high school that they began to get into rock but with the country music running deep like a hidden spring. They drifted together as a rock band and played as a group for five years before Dylan found them. Now they've been together for nine years and the incredible dues they've paid were evident in "Loving You." They did it so beautifully that the song was almost unrecognizable. What a dynamite dance band they must have been, slaving their asses off in bars and bar mitzvahs, playing everybody's favorites. Remember the Beatles in Hamburg?)

You don't get uniqueness, tightness, and fresh creativity in a group effort unless the music has been brewing for years, melting into something all members of the group can express themselves through. Each member of the Band came across vividly as a distinct personality, yet each one as an integral, inseparable part of the entity. It takes years of growing together, working and experiencing music to build the kind of impact the Band has.

Groups don't stay together long in today's trend because the temptation to cut a record after six months is strong and when confronted with their finished product—a failure to express their talent as a satisfying whole—they split rather than get down to work. Because the Band has been tempered by years and experience, not too many can cut them on record or in person. What they intend to do with their enormous potential as a superduper group is doubtful because they just seem too sensible and settled and satisfied to be bothered with anything but honest lives and honest music.

—Johanna Schier