

## AMY HELM

She was a smiling little girl with a head full of golden curls, the most angelic cherub in Woodstock in the early '70's. Amy Helm was born in Rhinebeck on December 3rd, 1970.

photo by Johanna Hall



Her mother is the legendary beauty, Libby Titus; co-writer of "Love Has No Pride", one of the most poignant and perfect ballads in all of pop, and fomenter of much interesting music. (Witness husband Donald Fagen's thanks to her on winning a Grammy last year.)

Amy's father is Levon Helm, local hero and international star of music and film through his work as drummer and singer in The Band, and as a superb actor in films like "Coal Miner's Daughter" and "The Right Stuff". He's even made a foray into publishing with one of the best bio-books to come out of the music world in our time, *This Wheel's On Fire*.

Amy Helm sat for a recent interview in Saugerties, NY, grown into a beautiful, charmingly modest and accomplished woman. She said that as a child, she had no sense of being born into royalty.

"I thought my dad was in Rick Danko's band," she laughed. "Because the only song I knew was Stage Fright. All the kids loved it! 'When it gets to the end,/he has to start all over again'. It has that clockwork quality. It was the only thing I wanted to see at The Last Waltz."

At that historic, Scorsese-filmed finale of The Band, the children, a tight group of Dankos and Robertsons and Manuels, some of whom she is still friends with, were sequestered backstage, she says, "in an insane playroom, with toys and nannies and cartoons. I remember asking if I could go see Stage Fright. It was the favorite of all the Band kids."

"He got caught in the spotlight..."

It's no accident that her favorite Band song was Stage Fright. You'd know at hello that she is a born singer. Even her speaking voice is mellifluous. Lovely to listen to, and without the artifice or self-consciousness common in the diva. But as an intelligent, thoughtful girl who'd seen it all, she didn't want the spotlight. Although she sang all her life, she ran from it

as a career path. She says she was always comfortable onstage in choirs, jazz ensembles, high school bands. Within a small community, it was easy and natural. But she took a long way 'round to becoming a professional singer.

She lived with her parents in Woodstock and Los Angeles until they split up. Then it was weekends with her dad, and schooling in New York City where she lived with her mother. She went off to college in Madison, Wisconsin and earned a degree in psychology. "It was a chance to be with my friends, away from New York. And maybe hide a little... Part of my running away from music."

But then, for three years, from 1998 to 2001, she played with her dad in the Barn Burners. She says it was like walking through the fire. At their weekly Joyous Lake gigs in Woodstock and out on tour, Amy played keyboards with the sound turned off in the house. Only she could hear it on her monitor. "It was a chance to practice," she said. "I worked on singing and being onstage. My dad was showing me how to serve that singular vision, the music. He took me under his wing and taught me how to strive for that.... I think all of us want to be more confident and present in our art."

Indeed, from those timid times, she has blossomed into a charismatic, joyful performer. Her acclaimed band of fellow travelers, Ollabelle is about to release their second album after a solidly successful left-field first effort, mainly of old gospel tunes. In their high energy, passionate shows, she sings with conviction, abandon. When she and her dad sing together on Midnight Rambles, the love and pride they feel for each other is unmistakable, and part of the audience's delight. She is tickled to be co-producing (with Larry Campbell) an album of her dad doing obscure songs he learned as a child, and that she says is some of the best singing he's ever done.

But it was a long and arduous path to this place in her life. She spoke fervently in the interview about her struggle to find her way. Her fear and lack of confidence, the natural stumbling any singer goes through, combined with a celebrity father, a mom who was known, and the tumultuous environment that comes with the territory.

"Nothing was safe! It was so much scarier to be onstage and be 'the daughter of'. But it became clear to me that I had to make a commitment to serving my own gift, instead of serving my insecurities. I think every artist must feel that on some level.

"Becoming a singer and feeling gratitude for what I've been given..."

she reflected. "Gratitude takes the place of the insecurity. Which then allows me to do it. Two things played a huge part in that for me. Singing with my dad: getting onstage every night, knowing that the second my foot hit that stage floor, I was seen as Levon's daughter. There was no getting around it. I was billed as such, I was coming out as the cameo singer on his gigs. Having to walk through that!

"The second thing is this volunteer work that I do in hospitals. I've been doing it for about 5 years. When I'm not on the road, I go once a week, to different hospitals in New York and sing room to room with my friend Kenli Mattus. I've been doing it for a long time and I feel that it helped me to make a new commitment to myself.

"We sing doo wop, 50's stuff, Sea Of Love, Why do Fools Fall in Love, Dream by the Everlys...all that good harmony, very therapeutic! For any musician who wants to volunteer and do that, it's very rewarding. I'm really supportive of the program. It's called Musicians On Call. It's really cool."

And you're not anybody's daughter there?

"There's anonymity, and there's no room to worry about how you sound. If a note comes out flat, it's just another moment. It doesn't interfere with what's happening. It takes the focus off you in a way.

"You have to know who you are. That's made me strong. Now I step on stage all the time as Levon's daughter, proudly."