

Not out of the plastic corporate mold

Band: changing your mind for the better

By HOWARD GLADSTONE

Most of the records that are released in the pop field nowadays are a good for a few listenings, then inevitably are placed aside as the fads change and new heroes emerge. Few records that were popular a year ago have withstood even that short test of time. I have this image of some enormous U.S. corporation building a gigantic cauldron in which all the old Iron Butterfly, Monkees, Led Zeppelin, Steppenwolf, and Country Joe and the Fish albums will be melted down and shaped into a Super-Disc with a diameter of 25,000 miles. U.S. space-age technology will find a way to blast this super-disc into orbit around the sun as the tenth planet. On it will be forced to live all those who bought the records in the first place. This new member of the solar system will be named Plastic, and will have a pre-packaged cosmology and mythology of stars -- and not the kind that the astronomers talk about.

Well, maybe all this is an exaggeration, but not by that much. The amount of plastic that is released is staggering. There are literally thousands of records in the pop field alone released every year. And for every group or individual that gets to record, there must be a hundred who envy them their chance. (It will in all probability be the only break they get, for their record probably will not make it.)

The whole mythology of pop success was explored by the Byrds: "So You Want To Be A Rock and Roll Star? Then listen now to what I say/ Just get an electric guitar/ And take the time and learn how to play/ ... And in a week or two when you make the charts/ The girls will tear you apart."

Things are not quite that bad anymore: they used to be, though. Remember Herman's Hermits? The Dave Clark Five? All

the saccharin groups were of this mold. I recently heard the story of a 17-year-old boy who is on his way back home from California, where he was planning to spend a year out of school, because he has decided that life is not a fairy tale and consequently he is going to practice his guitar playing and become a rock musician. Pop has become the new American dream.

Perhaps all this seems pretty far away from The Band's new album, which is really what I want to talk about. In some senses it is, but on the whole it has some relevance, because it shows everything The Band is not. (This might make it easier to understand what they are.)

The five members of The Band toiled around the club circuits in Canada and the U.S. for 10 years before they made it big in a commercial way. They have brought this experience and whatever insight they have gained from it into their music; you can hear it and feel and just know it. It was hard work (if music can be called work by those who love it) and toil, not instant success. They paid their dues.

They are almost the complete antithesis of the popular conception of what a rock group is. They are not "hip" or "cool" at all. Robbie Robertson said that their appearance at the Woodstock Festival between Ten Years After and Johnny Winter was most inappropriate to them; he felt they had come off "like a bunch of preacher boys."

And it is true that there is a moralistic (if highly indulgent) tone in their music that you won't hear in the stoned blues of those two groups, or in the imaginative escapism of The Beatles, the most commercial mass-appeal group of all time. The Band won't turn off their minds, "relax, and float downstream" -- they insist on going the hard

way "down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico."

The Band members are generally older than the continually up and coming groups who grew up emulating the Beatles and Dylan. The Band had been together for a few years when the Beatles started making it big. They had a distinct musical background already; they knew blues, gospel, country, folk, and the rock of the predecessors -- Little Richard, for example. For them, music didn't begin in Liverpool. And it didn't end with being back-up band for Dylan, who I feel has been influenced as much by The Band as they have been by him.

The whole point is that The Band is not a rock group out of the plastic corporate mold; yet they have to release records like every other manufactured group. And they are thus subject to the same pattern of image-formation as most other groups, which is a good thing in some ways. After all, they are only a band. There is not too much worry about their music being lost in the sea of plastic -- somehow the good things do manage to last. Being considered a rock group probably accounts for the reason that their first record had so much impact on everybody.

Music From Big Pink was a total response to the super-cool, spaced-out, and all-too-solemn concept of music that rock groups had read about in Time, which continually heralded the importance of Rock as a new art-form. Everyone seemed to have forgotten that music could be fun as well.

It seems to me that The Band's music comes to the pop scene like an older brother's advice: removed, but emphatic; over the experience of growing up, but with a fresh memory of the wounds and the rewards. They don't put anybody down, but they just want to show us an alternative. In some ways the style of life they advocate through their music is a going back, but it does not ignore everything that is going on generally. What their music projects -- a style of living where other people matter, an honest, open, emotional yet controlled, humorous yet dignified, and basically rural way of life -- seems to have been forgotten by the trendsetters.

This is not meant by me as a put-down because personally there are parts of The Band's projected image that I could not accept. The point is that they are showing a total way of life as opposed to the fragmented one that most rock groups project. For example, I cannot see how the Jefferson Airplane will be able to live as they do for too long when they put themselves so squarely into a position of diametrical opposition to everything their country seems to stand for. They are in effect saying that 80 per cent of the people are complete screw-ups. Do they propose to live with the rest only?

Ralph Gleason said that The Band's second album seems to change shape as you listen to it; on each listening, certain songs and lines stand out and others fade. After listening many times I find that there are certain songs that stand out continually.

One song that is an immediate high and stays there is The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down. In this one, Robbie Robertson has captured more of the feeling of the U.S. civil war than in anything I can recall. The personal story of Virgil Cain who served on the Danville train could be the story of any man in the war.

Virgil (the story teller) Cain (Biblical implications intended I am sure) tells how his brave young brother was laid in his

grave by a Yankee when "he took a rebel stand." The song has all the overtones of Lincoln's "house divided against itself" speech. It has the feeling of the futility of one brother killing another -- (and might it not have been written about any contemporary war? The harmony on the chorus is absolutely beautiful, and Levon Helm's singing of the verses is powerful and stirring.

Yet a song like this one is matched by one equally memorable for its tenderness, The Unfaithful Servant. Here the master of the country home is upset by the servant who made the lady cry. He is being sent away. Yet he recalls the good times with this servant, and knows that the servant will find himself. Sort of like a Dear Landlord in reverse.

Richard Manuel's high falsetto singing edges on the over-emotional, yet it is just controlled enough. The musical ending, where a trombone and saxophone take over from the guitar, is superb. Generally there is a richness and complexity to the musical structure of the individual songs that must be heard to be truly appreciated.

Good time rock and roll with plenty of sexual puns is apparent in Jemima Surrender. (I hand you my rod, and you hand me that line -- Time.) And of course everybody knows all about Up on Cripple Creek and little Bessie who tears up her winnings at the race track just for a laugh.

Whispering Pines is the album's answer to I Shall Be Released. In contrast to the generally earthy, nitty-gritty diction and the brilliant and original use of clichés throughout, Whispering Pines is lush in both lyric and sound. Drifting in a daze is about the best description of the mood evoked by the natural high of the pines. And the harmony is superb. Drift with it.

Yet this same nature brings the cruelties of poverty and humiliation in King Harvest Has Surely Come. This final song is a jolting one. It brings all the humor back into the perspective of men struggling just to survive. The placement of faith in the power of the union has an absurd circular logic:

"I work for the union because she's so good to me
And I'm going to end up right on top
Because that's where she said I should be ..."

Yet to survive there is no choice but to place faith in the man who comes around "with a paper in his hand." There is the hint of the corruption of this type of work; the unions have invaded the farming way of life, which seems to me the only "pure" way left.

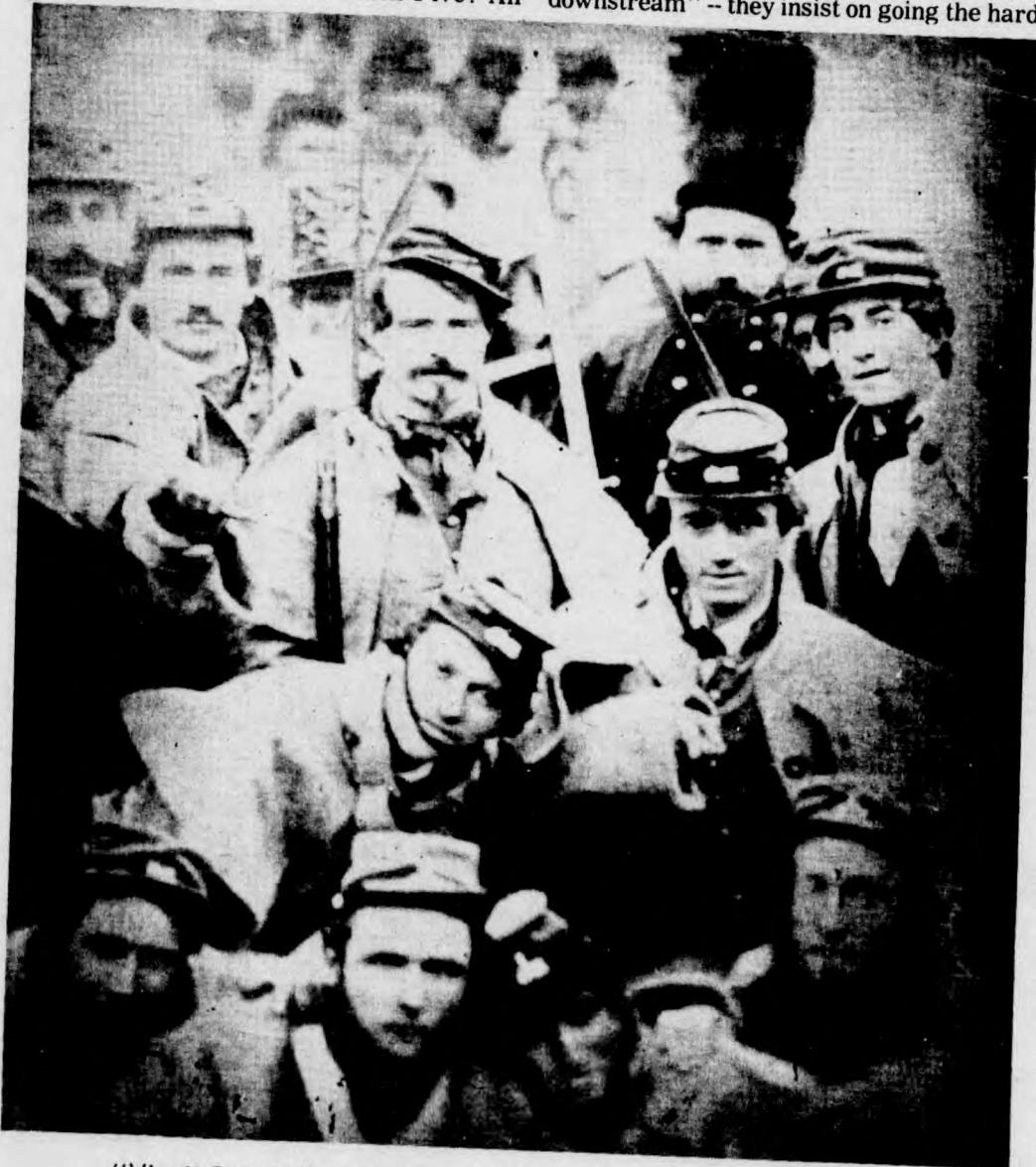
This is made more sad because all hope seems to have been given up for the cities: "Look Out Cleveland, storm is coming through And it's running right up on you ..."

Well, what is the answer? We might have gotten it right in the beginning where Molly is contemplating suicide. Yet she is urged to venture Across The Great Divide. Her despondancy is taken away by the singer's confession:

"I had a go in my younger day
And nearly wrote my will,
But I changed my mind for the better
And at the still
Get my fill
And I'm fit to kill ..."

By the end of the song she is told to feed her man "chicken every Sunday", and things will be all right.

Maybe if we all changed our minds for the better



"Virgil Cain is the name, and I served on the Danville Train ..."

Miss Cellany

That American Tribal Love Rock Musical, Hair, which is certainly the epitome of the crass commercialisation of the whole hippie cultural bit, seems to be assured of a long, long run at the Royal Alex. Even now, before rehearsals have begun or a cast selected, 20,000 tickets have been sold. Because of the overwhelming popularity of the musical, the producers have sent a memo warning: "The bulk of the ticket orders have come from towns outside Toronto as well as US border towns like Buffalo, Niagara Falls, NY and Erie, Penn. Torontonians seem to feel that they will be able to get into the show anyway -- they are unprepared for an advance sell-out." The producers urge people to get their tickets soon as an advance sell-out appears imminent.

The once-mentioned Johnny Winter concerts slated for the Winters Dining Hall in early December appear to have been dropped for some mysterious reason.

With the great success of Waiting for Godot let us hope

that the York University Players is finally on the right path. Their record to date has been pretty bad, with huge lugubrious productions of monotonous old plays. Now that they realize what people want to see and the type of plays they are suited to produce I hope they continue to do worthwhile things.

A new magazine on the Canadian scene is Poppin out of Vancouver. It's a music-oriented semi-undergroundish paper that's fairly good. The current issue has an interview with Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, Abbie Hoffman on "The Great Grass Famine", and feature on Buffy St. Marie, and quite a bit more.

The Studio Lab Theatre, one of the city's best small companies, will be putting on the highly controversial "Dionysus in 69" starting Dec. 11. The New York production last year was hailed as a major breakthrough in modern theatre. Director of the Toronto production, Ernest

Schwarz, describes the play as "a modern treatment of the 'Bacchae' making both the ecstatic and the destructive power of the Dionysian impulse of Greek theatre pertinent to our own time." Nudity was employed in the New York production but no decision has been reached if nudity will be relevant to the play presented here.

Ed Sanders of the Peace Eye Bookstore and the Fugs is working on a novel dealing with the history of the Yippies. It is tentatively called Abbie Hoffman and the Witch. The novel, says Ed, "will trace the growth of the Yippie conspiracy from its early inner treason cell days up to its current position as an international cartel of chromosome-damaged diplomats, Swedish generals, Yippie agents within the pentagon, war correspondents, bank presidents, nuns, poets, streetfuckers, and peace apes." The real names will be used and no one participating in the Yippie movement will be spared in Mr. Sanders quenchless search for the truth.