

# riffs

EVEN BY THE BAND'S high standard, their second album (titleless, Capitol STAO-132) is astonishing. You can live with this record, breathe it like air, eat it for breakfast, tap dance through the day to it, and never get tired of it. After hearing it through more than 100 times, I still discover something new with each listening. It has a musical depth and substance beyond anything in rock except some of the Beatles' best work. This is because they are all such fine musicians and because their group rapport adds up to such oneness.

It was cold in Woodstock and they wanted to make an album, so a house in the Hollywood Hills was rented to hold the Band and their assorted wives, children, and a grandmother. The cabana by the pool was converted into a recording studio without a separate control booth. With John Simon, who produced "Big Pink," setting the dials, Robbie Robertson did the engineering and the whole group produced. In that way it is a homemade album, but you'd never guess it from the clarity and presence of the finished product.

While Robbie sat behind the banks of dials and buttons, the rest of the Band were switching off on a myriad of instruments. Eighteen are used on the album, including violin, tuba, accordion, mandolin, trombone, and all kinds of saxophones. John Simon and Garth Hudson played a lot of horns and everyone else added at least three to their usual (except Robbie who stuck to guitar and

engineering). In many places the various exotica are mixed down to a subliminal level, just suggesting.

Robertson also wrote all the songs, some in collaboration with other Band members. Many were written on the spot. They are a lot more melodically developed than those on "Big Pink" as a whole. There are no songs like "Chest Fever," which was a good instrumental but nothing you'd walk around and sing. All these tunes are highly hummable; each has a strong separate identity, so that you will have different favorite every day.

As a whole entity, it is developed far beyond "Big Pink." It was not at all what I had expected to hear. Many surface characteristics are changed. Like seeing someone from the front and then from the back, this is a new view of the Band that gradually merges into a more complete idea of their identity.

While "Big Pink" was mystical on an intellectual level and consciously profound, these are earth songs about every day things—planting and harvesting, sailing ships, drinking wine, working on the railroad, fighting the civil war, growing old, and making love. Yet in their ordinariness they make you cry. There is much of the spirit of fall in them. A season that seems to affect everyone nostalgically, it is a time for looking forward and looking back, and feeling the immensity of life through its trivia. This album has the poignancy that rises in the autumn from the sense of repetition of life's rituals. It is political on the next higher level by speaking of events we will all experience as individuals but share as a group—such as dying.

I think this record will reach more people than "Big Pink" because it is much more accessible in subject and in its music. The sound is more universal than

anything before in rock. It is a blend of country, r & b, and straight rock. A lot of country harmonies are underlined by the choppy drums and bass of r & b. Listen to "Cripple Creek" with its syncopated melody line. Even on a yodel chorus there is a gutsy feel because of the rhythm section. "Rag Mama" is a country ragtime with Jerry Lee Lewis style piano and the strings playing a syncopated soul figure. Many of the songs have catchy riffs that irresistibly conjure up tricky vaudeville dance steps.

"Whispering Pines" is my personal glued-to-the-speaker favorite. Richard Manuel collaborated on it and sings with that same haunting beauty of "I Shall Be Released." It is one of the all time great love songs to go down in history with "Stardust" and "Yesterday." The chorus has a lot of the Smokey Robinson ballad in it, but in its excruciating feeling it is unique.

It is hard to break the individual songs down into component parts. That is the mark of a really good completed piece of music. The song is played so well to its own best advantage that it hits you as a single experience. You can't analyze separate contributions because the Band is so tight and tasteful and psychic as a group that it comes out an invincible whole.

To use their own words, "King Harvest has surely come."

—Johanna Schier