

The Soul of Woodstock

Levon Helm, the coolest singing drummer of all time, keeps the spirit of an age and a place alive.

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A Woodstock friend e-mails me about Levon Helm. “It’s a mafia over there,” he warns. “Nice people but very protective of him.”

A hippie mafia. I’m enthralled. “What else?” I write back.

“He can’t hold onto money,” my friend answers.

Helm, the former drummer for the Band and a Woodstock resident since 1968, when the Band’s *Music From Big Pink* put the town on the map, is on the verge of a major moment. At the end of this month, he releases *Dirt Farmer*, his first solo album in 25 years and his comeback from throat cancer, with which he was diagnosed in 1998.

Actually, *Dirt Farmer* is a comeback from much more. In 1991, his Woodstock home, built post-and-beam style without nails, went up in flames. Helm rebuilt it with the same footprint, adding a few stone walls as fire barriers. In 1986, while on tour with the Band, singer and keyboardist Richard Manuel committed suicide in a motel room with Helm down the hall. And in 1999,

Helm lost another close friend in the Band: bassist Rick Danko—who'd once sung, "Ain't no reason to hang your head/I could wake up in the morning dead"—died in his sleep.

Dirt Farmer is a testament to perseverance. It's an outgrowth of Helm's Midnight Rambles—intimate biweekly jam sessions, held at his home-studio-barn with a rotating cast of simpatico young musicians, plus an occasional star like Elvis Costello, Gillian Welch, or Rickie Lee Jones. I'd attended a Ramble, and though I'd spent my entire adult life resenting the sixties for being so much less in retrospect than they supposedly were at the time, I left a convert. That night, as Helm grinned behind his drum kit during a version of the Band's "Chest Fever," everything that mattered about the decade seemed alive for the taking.

A couple of weeks later, following an afternoon Family Ramble at the barn, Helm agreed to his first in-person interview for *Dirt Farmer*. As the music wound down, he led me through a wide wooden door that connected the studio to a bright, rustic sitting room off his kitchen. He wore a spotless blue oxford shirt and twill pants, and sat down on a stool with his chocolate-brindle pit-bull mix, Muddy (as in Waters), lying on a towel at his feet. He was thoughtful, eloquent. It didn't take me long to understand why Helm's mafia is so protective. He's excessively private, until he's in front of you. Then he has no boundaries at all. He lifted his chin and showed me a neat square patch on his throat, with three tiny black holes in a line across it. It's a radiation scar. "They make a mask for you, and there's places for bolts in the back, and they bolt you to a table," he said slowly. "They shoot the radiation beams through those three holes. This happens every day, five days a week. It only takes five minutes after you get on the table. It's fairly quick. But I would have to be very careful and make sure my nose was blown, and I could breathe real good. 'Cause you can almost panic in that kind of position, and there's nothing you can do. You can't get off that table."

Helm's cancer saga began when he lost his voice and couldn't get it back. "The first doctor wanted to take the whole thing out and give me one of those Donald Duck voice boxes," he said. It's an intolerable thought; Helm's graveled southern drawl is already in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. So he went to Dr. Dennis Kraus, the director of the Speech, Hearing and Rehabilitation Center at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. Kraus thought he could save not only Helm's life but his voice too.

Singing, though, was iffier. Levon's 36-year-old daughter, Amy Helm, now a singer with the gospel-roots band Ollabelle, moved from Manhattan back to Woodstock to drive him to his treatments. A year after his diagnosis, he was in remission and looked as though he would stay that way. Another year later, he spoke above a whisper for the first time. He put together a band called the Barn Burners, with Amy and an eightysomething blues singer named Little Sammy Davis on vocals. "After a couple of years, I would try and double Amy's vocal or Little Sammy's vocal, and sing some background parts," Helm said. "And I sang in my head all the time. Someone told me that even though you're not physically singing, just to do it inside your head affects those parts of you that do the singing. I kept doing that."

As he relearned to sing, Helm had to also learn to be less self-critical. "I've always worried about singing in the middle of the note and trying to get it as pitch-perfect as possible. I can hear a lot better than I can sing, so it's a hell of a challenge to get it to please my ear. I realized that there

were a lot of nights when I'd been overly hard on myself." He chuckled. "Now if I hit a bad note, I don't fall out with myself a bit."

Though Helm recovered his physical health, his financial health was another matter. "You can't afford to pay your bills and buy your medicine—you've got to give up one or the other," Helm said. "I got behind on my mortgage. The only way I could hang onto the place was to declare bankruptcy." The Barn Burners shows evolved into the more regular Rambles, named after the traveling medicine shows of his Arkansas youth. It was, as Helm puts it, "hard times." "I didn't know if I was going to be able to hang onto the place," he said. "But I thought, well, I'm going to go out with a bang. I'm going to have as many Rambles as I can, and have as many people as I can get come here and enjoy the music and see the place. And then when they see that I've sold it, they'll know what it was."

But it never came to that. Helm assembled a support team of friends and fans to help him. Barbara O'Brien, a former waitress with a day job at the sheriff's department, came on as general manager. A New York City fireman and his son drove up on weekends to work in the parking lot. Jerry Klause, from southern Jersey, advises Helm on business matters. All were volunteers. There's no payroll. "It's a labor of love for everybody," Helm said. "I've never been able to do anything for any of them—just return their friendship."

At the same time, Amy began pressing him to record. "I wanted to document him singing again," she said, "because I thought it was incredible." She brought in Larry Campbell, a former guitarist in Bob Dylan's band, as co-producer, and a handful of roots-conscious singers and pickers, including Campbell's wife, singer Teresa Williams. Helm wanted to begin with the songs that mattered most to him, country and gospel traditionals like "Little Birds" and "The Blind Child." The lack of a budget didn't stop anyone. "Sometimes they'd go home with a hundred bucks in their pocket after four or five days of recording," Amy explained. "Sometimes they wouldn't."

Helm says he's now just about out of bankruptcy. *Dirt Farmer*, which combines traditional country songs Helm learned from his parents as a child in Arkansas with more recent rural evocations by the likes of Steve Earle and Julie and Buddy Miller, should help. It seizes the southern pastoralism that always lurked in the Band's music and blows it up full size, in all its gritty, rollicking, joyous, melancholic, and even absurd wonder. "The poor old dirt farmer, how bad he must feel," Helm sings against sawing fiddles, huffing accordion, and a lurching waltz rhythm. "He fell off his tractor, up under the wheel/And now his head shaped like a tread/But he ain't quite dead."

Dirt Farmer is an iconic album, this year's *Time Out of Mind* or *Freedom*. Just give him a Grammy. Not that Helm worries about such trifles anymore. "I don't have any big plans for it," he said of the record. "If people like it, then I've gotten away with another one."