

A Letter from Kanji

Hello to all my friends.

It's late July, and Ottawa is in the midst of summer. The weather is pleasantly warm without being too hot, and the humidity is bearable, making it a comfortable season. The sky stretches on with an endless blue, and the white clouds look like pieces of art. I wish this summer could go on forever. At this moment, there's no sign of autumn, but the reality is that Ottawa's summer is short-lived.

Now, I just want to share my love of "The Band" with you.

The thing is that I started the monthly music column called "Musical Paradise - Another Canada" on Nikka Today in July last year. This column is about Canadian music in Japanese. For July, I wrote on "The Band." Actually, I have been eagerly waiting for this opportunity. The reason is that The Band has much more to talk about than just being Canadian. So, I am sending a provisional translation to you together with some photos. I truly hope you enjoy reading this.

The Band is really special. First of all, among the five steadfast members, including the de facto leader Robbie Robertson, four are Canadians, but the main drummer and vocalist, Levon Helm, hails from Arkansas, USA. The Band found themselves in the heart of rock history as Bob Dylan's exceptional backup band, showcasing their outstanding musical abilities. After going solo, they operated out of the United States. Yet, and perhaps for that reason, they seemed to strongly hold onto their Canadian identity. They have songs that confront Canadian history head-on and sing about it straightforwardly.

One such song is "Acadian Driftwood," the fourth track from The Band's later album, "Northern Lights - Southern Cross." While most rock bands, or even popular music in general, tend to gravitate towards love songs, The Band stands

out by seeking inspiration from history. I first heard this song about two years after the album's release, back when I was a college freshman. The beautiful intro played on live guitars left a lasting impression, and I immediately fell in love with it. Interestingly, as I bought and listened to an imported version cheaper than the Japanese edition, I had no access to the lyrics and had no idea what the song was about. I mistakenly thought it was a song about a disillusioned man reminiscing about his hometown, based on the phrases "Acadian driftwood and gypsy tailwind" and the melody. However, after over 40 years, living in Canada and learning about its history, including events like the 1754 French and Indian War, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the Acadian Expulsion, and the 1763 Treaty of Paris, listening to this song takes on a whole new level of emotion and sentiment. I remember playing this song during a dinner party at the official residence when former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien was invited, and we engaged in lively discussions about politics, diplomacy, and history.

Now then, let's delve into the world of The Band.

The Prodigy from Toronto

Every story has its beginning, and The Band, being a five-member group, had individual lives before their formation. Among the five exceptional musicians, let's start with Robbie Robertson, the guitarist, songwriter, composer, producer, and de facto leader. He was born in July 1943 and hails from Toronto. His father was a Jewish professional gambler, and his mother was an indigenous Mohawk woman. When Robertson was young, his father passed away in a hit-and-run accident, leaving him to grow up in a financially challenging environment. However, he frequently visited the Six Nations Reserve near Toronto, his mother's ancestral home, where, at the age of seven, he received guitar lessons from an older cousin. In no time, he displayed remarkable progress. By the age of 13, he began performing as a professional musician and, at 14, formed his own band called "Robbie & The Rhythm Chords." After some changes and transformations, the band evolved into "The Suedes," and their activities took a serious turn. It was a true display of a musical prodigy.

The Door of Destiny

On October 5, 1959, the door of destiny swung open with a fateful encounter. Here is how it all unfolded:

On that day, Robbie Robertson led The Suedes, and they were performing at a club operated by the local radio station CHUM. Among the audience was the rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins. Hawkins, based in Arkansas in the southern United States, was a seasoned performer with a hit song that reached number 26 on the US pop charts. As a trivia note, Hawkins had performed a stage act called the "Camel Walk," which was a precursor to Michael Jackson's "Moonwalk" more than 30 years before Michael popularized it. In any case, Hawkins, feeling that rockabilly's popularity had waned in the US, brought his backing band, "The Hawks," to Toronto in the spring of 1959.

As intended, Hawkins became a big hit in Canada. However, the members who came from the southern US struggled to adapt to life in Toronto, and except for Levon Helm on drums, they all returned home. In a bind, Hawkins embarked on a new recruitment drive for "The Hawks," and that's when he found the prodigious 16-year-old Robbie Robertson. As soon as Hawkins heard the first note, he knew he had found a genius.

Subsequently, Rick Danko on bass, Richard Manuel on piano, and Garth Hudson on organ and saxophone, who were all previously active in different local bands, joined "The Hawks" one by one. Hawkins had a keen eye for spotting young talent. Let me say a few words about Garth Hudson here. The five members of The Band were all incredibly talented and versatile musicians who could play various instruments. However, Hudson was the only one with formal music education. He studied Bach's church music and well-tempered tuning at the School of Music at Western Ontario University. However, he dropped out, finding classical music too restrictive. Hudson was a skilled musician who brought sophistication to the earthy blues and mastered playing the synthesizer. And so, the unshakable lineup of The Band was complete.

Preparations for the Festival

Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm, Rick Danko, Richard Manuel, and Garth Hudson continued their activities in Toronto as Ronnie Hawkins & The Hawks.

Performing alongside the seasoned performer Hawkins, they were thoroughly trained as professional musicians. The four members of The Hawks honed their skills and had ambitions to step into the spotlight rather than remain a mere backing band. They were determined to go beyond their mentor. By the end of 1963, The Hawks decided to break away and pursue their independent path.

In 1964, as a tribute to their eldest member, who could also sing, they began performing under the name "Levon & The Hawks." They signed with ATCO Records, a subsidiary of the semi-major label Atlantic Records, released singles, and toured in both Canada and the United States. However, they had yet to achieve any hits. Although they were highly skilled musicians, they faced the challenge of continuing to find steady work. But, in life, perseverance is key. Amidst their unwavering commitment to making music, they encountered opportunities that would shape their future. Collaborating with blues singer and harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson was an awakening to the true essence of the blues. And, finally, in 1965, they had a fateful meeting with Bob Dylan.

The Encounter and Leap

1965 was a significant year for rock music, as it transitioned from mere entertainment to avant-garde artistry. The Beatles released the masterpiece "Yesterday" on their album "Help!" and the groundbreaking "Rubber Soul," which marked the beginning of the psychedelic sound. Bob Dylan, having shed his folk singer image of performing anti-war songs with just an acoustic guitar, introduced electric guitar, organ, bass, and drums. In July 1965, he released "Highway 61 Revisited," featuring the iconic track "Like a Rolling Stone," causing a sensation as the folk hero transformed into a rock and roller.

In the fall of 1965 to 1966, Dylan planned a nationwide US tour and a UK tour, requiring a backing band. His friends advised him of a fantastic band in Toronto - Levon & The Hawks. So, Dylan came to Toronto to see them perform, with the intention of hiring their guitarist, Robbie Robertson. However, Robertson made a bold demand: if Dylan wanted to hire him, he would need to hire all five members of Levon & The Hawks, including Danko, Manuel, and Hudson. This negotiation between the then-unknown 22-year-old Robertson and the superstar Dylan was quite an event. Dylan was enamored with Robertson's guitar skills and found him to be a trustworthy person. It reflected the camaraderie among young musicians and the musical integrity they held. Dylan eventually hired all five members for his backing band, and they embarked on concert tours as "Bob Dylan & The Band" from September 1965 to May 1966.

Throughout the tours, Dylan faced both praise and criticism. Traditional folk fans and music critics, in particular, accused him of selling out. During a performance in Manchester, UK, on May 17, 1966, amid jeers from the audience calling him a "Judas" (a traitor), Dylan retorted, "You're a liar," and then, turning to his band members, said, "Play it fucking loud," before launching into a powerful rendition of "Like a Rolling Stone." This moment was vividly captured in the documentary film "No Direction Home," directed by the movie maestro Martin Scorsese. Starting something innovative inevitably invites criticism, but the audience loved and appreciated the electrified Dylan. As a result, "Highway 61 Revisited" achieved significant success, reaching No. 3 on the US album chart and No. 4 in the UK. The Band, who supported Dylan, received much praise from the music community.

However, with success comes challenges.

Big Pink and the Basement

On July 29, 1966, shortly after successfully concluding their UK tour and returning home, Bob Dylan suffered a near-fatal motorcycle accident. All scheduled concert tours were canceled, and he withdrew to a secluded life of recuperation in the remote mountains of Woodstock, New York. Meanwhile, The

Band, who had experienced the forefront of a major revolution in rock music and were about to take flight, suddenly found themselves without work.

In the spring of 1967, as Dylan's injuries began to heal, he reached out to The Band's members. They gathered at Dylan's home in Woodstock and started playing music together. It wasn't a formal recording or performance; they were simply enjoying the pure joy of making music. It was almost like the jubilation they felt as teenagers when they formed a band and played guitars in a friend's living room. Along with familiar Dylan songs, they also experimented with old blues and new compositions by The Band's members. Soon, their creative passion was ignited.

The Band members rented a house in the nearby town of Saugerties, a few kilometers away from Dylan's home. The house was painted in a striking peach color, which made it stand out, and they called it "Big Pink." Its basement was transformed into a makeshift studio.

Dylan and The Band spent numerous sessions in the basement of Big Pink. They played freely and relaxed, leaving the tape running continuously. From June to September 1967, they recorded over 130 songs intermittently. These recordings were intended as demo tapes and were not originally planned for official release. However, dedicated fans learned about their existence. After the accident, Dylan had stayed out of the public eye, but his most trusted allies, The Band, joined him for these extremely private sessions. Bootleg copies of the tapes circulated, and music fans were deeply impressed by the rich and intimate performances. While Dylan was already a superstar, The Band, lesser known at the time, gained recognition here. As trivia, these bootlegs were officially released as "Basement Tapes" in 1975, and in 2014, a 6-disc box set containing all 139 tracks was also released. It's a must-have masterpiece that captures the brilliance of Dylan & The Band. Now, back to our story.

In 1968, The Band finally made their major debut with "Music From Big Pink." As the title suggests, it was the music born in that basement. With full support from Dylan, the album was completed. The cover design, somewhat amateurish but effective, was done by Dylan himself. One of The Band's signature songs, "I Shall Be Released," which became famous as an insert song in the movie "Easy Rider," was written and composed by Dylan and given to the band. The album

showcased an amalgamation of rock, jazz, blues, country, and more, creating a unique blend of old and new music. It offered a simple beauty of music to those tired of psychedelia and influenced many contemporary musicians, including The Beatles and Eric Clapton. The glory days of The Band had begun.

Conclusion - The Last Waltz

On January 12, 1970, they graced the cover of Time magazine, a testament to their social significance beyond just music. The Band achieved great success based in the United States while encapsulating a significant Canadian event in the exquisite song "Acadian Driftwood," which can be considered a cornerstone of Canada's roots. One could even argue that it rivals Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Evangeline - A Tale of Acadie" in its impact. The Band is undoubtedly a Canadian band.

The Band played a pivotal role in one of the most important chapters of the 1960s and 1970s golden age of rock music. However, every story has an end. On November 25, 1976 (Thursday), The Band held their farewell concert titled "The Last Waltz" at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco. Ronnie Hawkins, Bob Dylan, and numerous other musicians associated with The Band participated as special guests. Of course, Canadian artists like Joni Mitchell and Neil Young were also present. Martin Scorsese directed a documentary film, "The Last Waltz," which centered on this concert and traced The Band's history. It is a must-see for music fans, and the soundtrack of the same name is a must-listen. They were an extraordinary bunch born in Canada.

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