Robbie Robertson Regrets Nothing

Rocking with Clapton, movies with Marty: Welcome to the perfectly contented life of a rock & roll legend

By Stephen Rodrick Photograph by Mark Seliger

Robbie Robertson’s past was recently delivered to his West Los Angeles studio. It arrived in a sturdy box marked FRAGILE from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Today, Robertson pulls a beat-up guitar case out of the crate. He carefully opens the latches and lifts out an oddly colored six-string. “That’s the guitar I used in The Last Waltz,” says Robertson, referencing the classic concert film about the Band’s final performance. “Before the show, I had it bronzed. Like baby shoes. I thought it was appropriate.” He plucks at one of the strings. “The bronzing made it sound like you think it would.” He’s dressed all in black down to his slipper shoes. “Heavier, more metallic.” He holds the guitar up.
to the light. For a rare moment, he goes as- stent, running his free hand through his naturally thick black hair. “I haven’t played it since that night. I just wanted to look at it, but I don’t know what I’ll do with it. He gently lays the relic back in its case. “We’ll see.”

ROBBIE ROBERTSON

ROBERTSON was raised in Toronto, the son of a Jewish gambler and a Native American. His father died when he was an infant, and Robertson grew up on a貂 control, putting on and off as Scorsese’s musical super- visor. The legendary story being the lengths he went to find the obscure orchestra re- cording of Mascagni that plays as Robert De Niro shadowboxes at the beginning of Raging Bull. "He’s an incredible pa- tient," says Scorsese. "He will wait and listen until he finds the right thing.”

Robertson cues a smash-up he created of rhythm & blues singer Dinah Washington’s “This Bitter Earth” and German-born composer Max Richter’s “On the Nature of Daylight” that plays over the closing cred- its of Scorsese’s Shutter Island. "He came to me with just ‘This Bitter Earth,”” says Scorsese. “I told him that was a little too exact. I like it, but I want some- thing slightly different. That’s why I told the five were then calling them- selves the Band, recording on their own, and it’s not hyperbo- le to say they created modern roots music with their first two records. Robertson wrote al- most all the songs, including "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," a ballad that captures the death of the Old South more effectively in three and a half minutes than 12 hours of Ken Burns interviews. "By 1976, Robertson was busting from the road and announced he was done touring. His bandmates were less than happy, evident from their held-hostage looks during much of the Last Waltz interviews, spe- cifically Helm’s mesmerizing hate-singing of “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down.” (Regarding The Last Waltz, Helm once said, “It was Robertson and Scorsese and that fucking crowd of thieves that got paid. I’ve never gotten a check for it in my life.”)

How to Become Clairvoyant

Where I Get Off,” Robertson’s explanation of that decision. A desperate-sounding Robertson said: “I just got out of dodge. You see, my heroes,” says Robertson. “He declared, “I am no longer a member of this road, I find it obscene.” That’s how Rob- ertson started to feel: “Our musical abili- ty was disappearing before my eyes. You’re in a place and it’s on fire and you say, ‘I’ve got to get out of here.’ ”

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[Cont. from 65] My hands won’t shake,” says Robertson with a sigh. “So you say, ‘OK, but don’t have too much medicine, because then you won’t be yourself.”

Robertson insists today that he didn’t intend to kill the Band, just get them off the road. But that’s not how it worked out. After The Last Waltz, the Band had one last record on their deal and released Islands, an odds-and-ends album. They were working at the group’s Shangri-La Studios in Malibu, California, a former whorehouse with winding hallways and plenty of places to hide or get high. Robertson showed up one day to record, but no one else did. “It made me angry,” says Robertson. “After that, I didn’t have a big love in my heart to come back to the studio. It just burnt me.”

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Robertson and Helm haven’t spoken since the Last Waltz days. Robertson says they actually talked a few years back—a cordial catching up that didn’t heal the rift. (The Band, minus Robertson, started touring again in 1983. Helm declined to play with Robertson when the group was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994.) “When the other guys wanted to go back on the road as the Band, I gave them my blessing,” says Robertson. “But Levon’s always been pissed off at either the manager, the agent or the lawyer. It’s always been somebody. When those guys weren’t there anymore, it was me.”

T he great irony of Robertson’s “The road is killing me” stance in The Last Waltz is that he promptly re-created the same temptations, just in a domestic setting. His partner was Scorsese. Robertson, who had recently separated from his wife, moved into Scorsese’s house on L.A.’s Mulholland Drive. Cocaine was often the only item on the menu. The new disc’s “He Don’t Live Here No More” recounts Robertson trying to break away from the druggies and hangers-on that populated his and Scorsese’s world. “It was a strange time,” says Robertson. “I’d done Mean Streets and Taxi Driver and was still making movies in my head, but I just couldn’t face the raising money, the sets, the actors part of making a film. I was so tired. The music and editing of The Last Waltz and being with Robbie were a real lifesaver.” Scorsese laughs. “I know that sounds funny considering the way we were living.”

The flammable New Yorker and the brooding Canadian made an odd pair. “Robbie’s so quiet and I’m, um, not,” says Scorsese. “I’d work myself into one of my states at the house, and Robbie would just be sitting on the couch nodding and talking to me in a soft voice. I’d say to him, ‘I know what you’re trying to do, you’re trying to calm me down and I’m on to you.’ He’d just sit there and smile. It drove me crazy.”

Robertson, who dropped out of high school at around 14, is largely self-educated. He is a voracious reader, a passion that earned him much grief from his bandmates. “They’d say, ‘What are you doing, let’s talk about girls, what the fuck are you doing, reading this book?’” says Robertson. “I was going through a period of Faulkner at that time, because we were in the South and everything, and then I would veer off into reading books on Buddhism. That really pissed everybody off.”

He became a serious movie buff when he got off the road and tried to play catch-up with Scorsese. Most nights, around 1 a.m., the duo would start a double feature that could range from Kurosawa to C-grade vampire flicks. Dawn was tough to greet. “We would come out of the screening room and it was bright outside and it made you sick to your stom-

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ach,” says Robertson. “The most offensive feeling was getting caught by the sun. The sound of birds whistling in the morning made you feel like you had done something wrong.”

Robertson and Scorsese solved the problem in their own way: They soundproofed the house and blackened all the windows. “I still don’t like the sound of birds in the morning, says Scorsese.) Robertson’s attempts to catch a little shut-eye were sometimes interrupted by Scorsese’s stereo. “I would wake up with the Sex Pistols just blasting and screaming, and it was like, ‘This is awful,’” says Robertson. “I have never in my life had to go to some-

An unlikely friend performed a sort of intervention. Francis Ford Coppola came over one night so he could watch an early cut of The Last Waltz. The two skeletons standing in front of him appalled him. “Francis said, ‘I’m going to hire a chef that’s going to work for you, and I’m going to cook some pasta for you right now,’” says Robertson, laughing at the memory. “He just thought we didn’t have the right culinary help. He didn’t put it together.”

Scorsese and Robertson lived together from 1978 to 1980. Scorsese remembers hearing Robertson playing piano in his

room and thought it was the beginning of a solo album. In fact, the record wouldn’t be released until years later. “Some people might be happy just doing ‘Be-Bop Baby’ over and over again,” says Scorsese. “Robbie’s not like that.” Scorsese then poses a rhetorical question: “Is the point of existence to just keep creating or to enjoy life and do different things?”

His friend definitely voted for the latter. Since the Band’s demise, Robertson produced and starred in a movie, Carny, became a DreamWorks executive, and now talks excitedly about a Cirque du Soleil–style Native American show that just needs a little more funding. (Tellingly, outside this film, Robertson’s appearances backed by the young, Band-inspired crew Dawes, Robertson isn’t touring behind the new album.)

Robertson’s cellphone chirps constantly. There’s a man on the line asking if Robertson wants to pick the songs for the Tom Cruise–starring movie version of the Broadway musical Rock of Ages, and, oh, by the way, would he be interested in doing a stage adaptation of The Last Waltz? (Robertson is undecided on both.)

That night, at Craft, a trendy Los Angeles restaurant, Robertson promptly orders a $250 bottle of wine and tells the waiter to bring whatever he thinks is particularly tasty. Most rockers might try and defuse the opulence, but Robertson revels in it. “Isn’t this fantastic?” he says, slurping an oyster while telling a story about a flaming parachutist descending during the Band’s 1973 performance at Watkins Glen. “We had a hell of a time convincing people that wasn’t part of the show.”

He swirled his wine a bit and talks about the “winter abuse” of his Canadian childhood. “I remember thinking, All you people think there’s no way out and this is all there is, but I don’t see it that way,” he says. “One of these days, I’m gonna pick a fuckin’ orange in the middle of the night, look up at the stars, and I’m going to smell night-blooming jasmine in January.”

A waitress brings over some beignets and then the bill. Robertson sips tea, and his face falls into sleepy contentment.

He heads into the Southern Californian night. “Do you smell that?” Robertson asks. “That’s jasmine!” The valet brings around his midnight-blue Mercedes coupe. Robertson gives a wave and jumps in. He guns the engine and disappears down the Avenue of the Stars.