MILLION DOLLAR BASH

BOB DYLAN, THE BAND, AND THE BASEMENT TAPES

Sid Griffin

Bob Dylan's motorcycle accident has come to be viewed as a pivotal moment not only in his life but in his career. One of the givens among fans is that before his motorcycle accident Dylan was prolific and did little wrong, and that afterward he suffered a period of writer's block, that his creative streak ended when he fell off his Triumph that hot July morning.

Yet 1967, the year after the accident, is far and away the most prolific of Dylan's career. He would record week after week after week with Robbie Robertson, Rick Danko, Richard Manuel, and Garth Hudson (and, before the end of the year, with Levon Helm too). It proved to be his longest sustained period of recording – and he would still find the time and enthusiasm to travel to Nashville for a few more days of recording in order to complete the dozen songs for *John Wesley Harding.*

Dylan would record at least 60 originals in Woodstock in addition to his 12 for *John Wesley Harding.* He recorded a total of at least 107 different songs in Woodstock alone – including those new Dylan originals, plus around 32 imaginative cover versions of songs by his favorite artists, a dozen of his beloved traditional folk numbers, and a handful of humorous improvisations. And he may even have recorded a few more songs. Dylan collectors worldwide are still looking for the rumored 1967 versions of 'Wild Wolf,' 'Minstrel Boy,' and possibly some other minor miracle captured by Garth Hudson during one of those summer-of-love days up in Woodstock.

Dylan's sound audibly mutated into something different from what can reasonably be called the electric folk-rock of his mid-1960s music. But he still occasionally dealt in the surrealist, witty, sometimes unfathomably poetic lyrics as he had done in his days before the motorcycle spill. Any barroom musicologist could make an argument for the entire Americana/No Depression/alt.country scene beginning right there in Woodstock some time in the first half of '67. In fact, the sole non-American song recorded during all the Basement Tapes sessions is Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Flight Of The Bumble Bee,' and even then their improvisation is hardly a traditional reading of the piece. Admittedly, no

one knew until the bootleg tapes or until the first copies of the *Great White Wonder* LP bootleg hit the shops of Los Angeles that Dylan was going through this creative purple patch. But the Basement Tapes era of 1967 will probably go down as Dylan's most powerful period of sustained songwriting greatness.

A list of the pick of the compositions is enough to impress the Bob novice and send a large tantalizing chill down the spine of the Dylan fanatic: 'This Wheel's On Fire,' 'I Shall Be Released,' 'You Ain't Goin' Nowhere,' 'Tears Of Rage,' 'Nothing Was Delivered,' 'I'm Not There (1956),' 'Sign On The Cross,' 'Down In The Flood,' 'Too Much Of Nothing,' 'Quinn The Eskimo,' and 'Million Dollar Bash.' Such a list fails to include the classic material on *John Wesley Harding* like 'All Along The Watchtower' and 'I'll Be Your Baby Tonight,' songs surely written during the latter stages of recording the Basement Tapes.

If another songwriter had written any four of these songs in their career then that person would be considered a creative force of note. Dylan wrote each song on the list and then quite a few more in less than a calendar year and perhaps in as little as six months.

A rather startling sidebar to this remarkable activity comes when you compare the fruits of 1967 to the next few years of Dylan's career. He wrote over three dozen songs that sound completely composed and sorted out before he recorded them in Woodstock, while some two dozen more Basement Tapes Dylan originals sound created on the spot or perhaps only partially written beforehand. This is a total of some 60 new Bob Dylan songs in 1967, a high-water mark of creativity for the Bard Of Hibbing. And even some of Dylan's Basement Tapes songs that are clearly improvisations and not real identifiable songs are nonetheless bursting with musical and lyrical inventiveness.

During the following calendar year his inkwell would run almost dry and, to be quite specific, his new songs in the next half-decade after the Basement Tapes would be smaller in number as well as artistically weaker when compared to that dramatic burst of creativity in '67. Depending on

your point of view, it would take until November 1973 and Dylan's reunion with The Band for the *Planet Waves* album or possibly until the September 1974 sessions for *Blood On The Tracks* for Dylan to get up and running at full steam again.

Dylan's activities in '67 seem now like a tremendous recovery from the motorcycle accident and the start of a new, abundantly creative period in his songwriting career. They appear in hindsight to mark the absolute high point and an emphatic exclamation point to a six-year pattern of creative growth unparalleled by any individual in the world of modern popular music.

The year began with The Hawks still in position as Dylan's faithful backing band, a team of hired hands called upon for their daring musical support and conscious or perhaps unconscious help in cultural change. Dylan did not discharge his musical partners, even though with no concerts scheduled it would make sense to stop paying the four Hawks their retainer, as he had only record royalties to rely upon now. But these particular musicians were special to him. He had asked The Hawks to tour the world and they had. They suffered for their art in a way that damn few MTV heroes will ever know. Now he would ask them to act in a motion picture and they would.

Before Christmas '67, The Hawks too would shift their sound, moving slowly away from the declaratory R&B of 1966 and morphing with apparent effortlessness into what became, for two grand, magnificent LPs at least, the ultimate rock'n'roll communal artistic effort. This was The Band, where no one member was any more important than the next.

There was no bootleg industry in 1967, and so the year would end with no secret tapes smuggled into vinyl pressing plants during clandestine late-night visits. His future as The Most Bootlegged Artist Ever had not begun. And yet the quality of the Dylan–Band Basement Tape acetates and reel-to-reel tapes that would be passed around the record industry would create a strong underground buzz. So strong that in 1969, when a copy fell into the hands of two young men in Los Angeles, they thought they

might go into the record biz themselves. They would do so in the gleeful hippie spirit of the day and inadvertently start today's black-market million-dollar rock music bootleg industry. Bob Dylan was their first artist and Basement Tapes songs (with a few relatively minor outside additions) made up the aesthetic core of their first release.

The whole Basement Tapes episode began innocently enough, Robbie Robertson claims. "The Band didn't go up to Woodstock to do some recording. That is not really true. The guys who became The Band went up there. Rick [Danko] and Richard [Manuel] came up at one point: they were doing some additional shooting for *Eat The Document*, they were still trying other experiments with the film, and they shot some things early in the year with the snow still on the ground. I don't think they were ever used, if I recall correctly, but that's how it all started." [1]

Robertson was already in Woodstock alongside Dylan, Howard Alk, and Bob Neuwirth as the Dylan–Alk axis devised yet more ingenious ways to edit Dylan's planned film, *Eat The Document.* Dylan and Alk would continue to edit the movie for years before agreeing on a cut that was shown in 1971 at the New York Academy of Music and later that year at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art. *Eat The Document* was finally broadcast on television in 1979 on New York City's WNET station.

A bootleg DVD of the film appeared in 2003 that included the legendary limousine ride where Dylan gets a lift from John Lennon while Bob Neuwirth films away and Rolling Stones employee Tom Keylock drives. Whatever the merits of the original footage and the multiple versions edited by Alk and Dylan, the film would provide much of the backbone for Martin Scorsese's dynamic *No Direction Home* documentary of 2005, which would have ended limply without the dramatic *Eat The Document* inserts.

Rick Danko remembered later: "When I first moved up to Woodstock in 1967 I went up there with Richard Manuel and Tiny Tim to work on Bob's movie *Eat The Document.* We stayed at the Woodstock Motel for a couple of weeks and, the country boy that I am, I realized that since I left Ontario and my home neighborhood I'd been living in cities for seven years, or

however long it had been, and I realized I did not have to be in cities any more."[2] It was February 1967 when Danko, Manuel, and Tiny Tim were told by Dylan to come to Woodstock to shoot additional scenes for *Eat The Document*, scenes that Dylan cryptically explained might be used for another film he was thinking about doing, something about a circus. I'll say.

Yes, The Hawks had been recording tracks in Manhattan whenever they could, sometimes in Barry Feinstein's photography studio, sometimes behind singers such as Tiny Tim or the young Carly Simon. But that was dining on humble pie after the wild ride of the 1966 world tour. They'd been without direction since Dylan fell off that Triumph in July. Their six months of restlessness and creative wandering were about to come to an end.

There was indeed snow on the ground of Ulster County that February of 1967. The creeks were frozen over and, yes, the windows were filled with frost. Tree branches groaned with the white weight of last night's snowfall and only the winter wind broke the quiet softness of the woods around Overlook Mountain, its many snakes hibernating till the warmth of spring.

Leaving Manhattan at 3:00am in order to film at sunrise, Danko and Manuel were instructed upon arrival to unpack their instruments and back up Tiny Tim musically. The three of them performed songs in the cold early morning hours and then filmed some spots of their own until three in the afternoon, when they retreated to the Grossman home off Route 212. Sally Grossman greeted them there with logs crackling and blazing on the fireplace. They warmed their hands and welcomed the hot toddies served to warm the soul.

On subsequent days they rose at 5:00am to work, filming with Dylan and Alk in the first hours of daylight. The Canadians, like Robertson before their arrival, felt at home in the Woodstock winter. Danko the farm boy and Manuel the small-town son grew to appreciate the town and were reminded of the charms of rural life after all those years on the road with Ronnie Hawkins, the years with Helm when they were Levon & The Hawks, and finally with Dylan on his world tour. The big city was out for

now and Woodstock was home. Well, not quite. Originally, Danko and Manuel lived in the Woodstock Motel, as did Tiny Tim, who was very much a part of the Dylan–Grossman circle at the time. If the days of filming curious scenes were challenging and fun, the nights at the Woodstock Motel must have reminded Danko and Manuel of the road. Comfortable it was, although surely a step down from the Gramercy Park Hotel in New York City. A touch bohemian it might have been, too, but a home?

Danko rivaled Robertson as the business mind of The Band and was always thinking about where they were going collectively. And he rivaled Garth Hudson in having The Band's best memory. "These people had this restaurant in town where I ate, as I was living in [the] motel," Danko recalled, "and the lady's husband died, unfortunately, and so they closed the restaurant down. But she told me about this pink house they were living in and that it would be available. The rent was something like $250 a month." Levon Helm wrote in his autobiography that it was $125 a month.

"It sat right in the middle of 100 acres," said Danko, "and it had a pond, and mountains were right nearby, and it had a lot of privacy. So Garth, Richard, and myself ended up renting the house, and we weren't making very much money as Bob had had the motorcycle accident."[3] It was a split-level house, not far from the hamlet of West Saugerties, that Danko recalled as "really more cotton candy, a pale magenta, than pink."[4] Nonetheless, the house was known as Big Pink.

Danko the businessman is reputed to have told Robertson and Manuel that they needed more permanent quarters than a motel and reminded them they would eventually need a place to rehearse. It was out of the question for them to rehearse in the Woodstock Motel and, lest they have the same problem they had in Manhattan, they would need their own home and their own studio with it. Renting Big Pink at 2188 Stoll Road would solve many of their problems. They would have three bedrooms, a kitchen, a garage, acres and acres to ramble in, enough flat space for touch football games, a view of Overlook Mountain, and their employer not far away. Three of them were up for it, but Robertson was never going to

share this particular lease. He had met his future wife, Dominique, when the Dylan world tour played Paris on May 23 of the previous year. Dominique was a journalist at that day's memorable press conference given by Dylan at the Hotel Georges V.

Robertson was smitten with his beautiful French girlfriend and marriage was on the cards. No way would he move into a bachelor palace like Big Pink. "This scene, this place started as our place to go and write some songs and to just have the pleasure of being able to enjoy a situation to play music," says Robertson. "To really start to figure out what we were gonna do for this first [Band] record. That's what we were doing, and once we got it set up and everything, I mean there isn't a tremendous amount up there to do outside of your home life and normal chores.

"So Dylan would just come over, and it was like the clubhouse. Rick and Richard and Garth and later Levon all lived there. At one time, that is. Garth, Rick, and Richard moved into Big Pink but I moved to a different place because I had a girlfriend – and I didn't want her to see what happens!"[5]

Robbie and Dominique wisely moved a few short miles away from Big Pink, setting up domestic shop in a cabin on Sally and Albert Grossman's property. This may have been so he could liaise with Grossman easily, and surely Dominique – a newcomer to this circle of rather unusual personalities – would have felt more comfortable with the hospitable Sally Grossman nearby than with the street-gang mentality of young men in a rock group living next door. The Robertsons later moved to a house on Ricks Road, a lazy country avenue running north and south, connecting Glasco Turnpike with Route 212 and closer to Big Pink's shenanigans.

Back on Stoll Road, there was another kind of domesticity brewing. Manuel did the cooking, Hudson did the dishes, and Danko was responsible for taking out the trash, keeping logs on the fire, and the general upkeep of the house itself. All three were responsible for the grounds immediately surrounding the house and all three soon learned to love the nearby woods and the rapidly running creek, as well as the wildlife that so often strolled by their window.

They were all relaxing. They were pleased that they did not now have to play six nights a week, four sets a night at the gin joints and cheap party palaces of the East Coast, the drunken frat bashes of deep South universities, and the cold cowsheds of Ontario and Quebec, and all just in order to eat and pay rent. Now it was time for something. But what was that something?

They shot scenes for *Eat The Document* that Dylan described quickly while Alk focused hastily. It taught them rapidly that they might one day become more formal actors but that their improvisational skills were limited. Attempts at movie making added something new and made for an interesting sideline, but as Robertson put it: "Music is what we do."[6] It was only a matter of time before their attempts at imitating Dylan's favorite film, Truffaut's *Tirez Sur Le Pianiste (Shoot The Piano Player,* 1960), proved to be a side road and not the main avenue.

Within a few weeks of Danko, Hudson, and Manuel moving into Big Pink, Robertson began driving over daily. Frequently they would play football or goof around like the young men they still were, talking for hours, discussing their collective future, taking stock, and playing each other their favorite records. Their tastes included country & western (Danko), Ray Charles (Manuel), city R&B (Robertson), and Anglican church music and the avant-garde (Hudson).

Robertson was the one most aware that they needed to push further, but Danko was the one who months earlier had told Dylan quite frankly on a late night plane flight during the world tour that The Hawks didn't see themselves as just Bob Dylan's backing band and that one day they would leave their mentor and friend Bob to go and do their own thing musically.

In Big Pink they began to get out their various musical instruments and jam on old favorites, at first setting up their equipment upstairs on the ground floor, happy in the knowledge that no one near them on Stoll Road could possibly hear and complain about the racket. When filming was not scheduled they played a bit. If filming ended with the diminishing light of the shorter winter day they'd frequently retire to Big

Pink and toss around musical ideas. The four of them were back at it, experimenting with the music of their old day-job, sweating away at the coal face as they had with Ronnie Hawkins. If the change to domesticity was challenging for Dylan it was even more so for his backing band. Levon Helm had been on the road with Hawkins since 1957; earlier he had played with Conway Twitty and before that he led his own Razorback groups back home. Robertson had been with Ronnie Hawkins since 1958; Danko signed up as a Hawk in 1959; Manuel joined the act in 1961. Garth Hudson, an old man of 24 when he joined The Hawks not long after Manuel, was the last one to learn the Ronnie Hawkins rules of the road when he arrived in December 1961.

These men had endured between five and eight years of living on the road, of quick hot coffees on the run, of greasy meals in diners, of bad headaches from stale cigarette smoke, all while traveling with a hangover. They were used to moving around a lot. In Woodstock they now had a place of their own and no road to go on. They were acclimatized to a nocturnal lifestyle where they went to work in the late afternoon, worked through the dark hours, and went to bed not long before dawn. Now they would have to readjust to normal life and normal hours in Woodstock.

These residents of Big Pink would start to keep hours that, while hardly conservative to the average working stiff, were positively banker's hours compared to their previous caffeinated lifestyle. They were not discovering a new way of life but rather an old one they had intentionally discarded long ago, back when they decided to give their dreams a try instead of maintaining conventional careers or following parental wishes. They were discovering who they were spiritually in the same way they would soon discover who they now were musically.

Garth Hudson would soon begin recording Dylan and The Hawks in Woodstock and, as we'll discover, this would take place at various locations, but notably the work was done in the basement of Big Pink. The recordings are what became known as the Basement Tapes.

In total there are allegedly 37 tape boxes, each containing a seven-inch reel of recording tape. John Simon says that Garth Hudson recorded his friends and musicians with the tape running at 7½ i.p.s. (seven and a half inches per second). At that speed, there would be approximately 20 minutes of recording time on each reel, and not every tape reel is full.

Those hoping to hear Dylan discussing anything at all on the 37 reels – be it civil rights, Vietnam, or philosophical matters – will be disappointed. His voice is heard almost exclusively singing. He does, however, at one point instruct a keen-to-tape Mr. Hudson when to turn the machine off

and on other songs encourages Richard Manuel to sing this or that.

Hudson would start the tape following a nod or word from Dylan, and when the song was finished he rapidly reached over to the tape machine and turned it off. This is why there is so little studio chat, so few wasted moments, and no tuning-up heard on the Basement Tapes that have escaped so far. The tapes themselves consist of the songs and very little else. Songs are even cut off on several recordings before they come to a complete musical halt as Hudson is so anxious to save tape.

At the time of this writing, over six hours of true Basement Tape music has been unearthed, totaling at least 107 different completed performances of songs, including multiple takes of some. (This does not include most of what are accepted to be recordings that The Hawks put to tape in Woodstock without Dylan's input - see chapter 13; many Hawks/Band tracks long considered from Woodstock were in fact out-takes from later sessions in N.Y.C. and L.A.)

So, 37 reels with 107 songs averages to around three songs per 20-minute tape. That means there is hardly room for many other out-takes to exist, be they missing songs like 'Minstrel Boy' and 'Wild Wolf' or yet another take of 'You Ain't Goin' Nowhere.'

Some of the songs were officially issued on the 1975 Columbia Records two-LP set *The Basement Tapes*, although some of The Band material on that set was not from Big Pink nor from any of the other places in Woodstock where they recorded. A version of 'Quinn The Eskimo' came out ten years later on the Dylan *Biograph* collection, and on the long overdue (and quite remarkable) boxed set *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3* two more Basement Tapes songs appeared, 'I Shall Be Released' and 'Santa Fe.'

That means that fewer than 20 songs totaling less than an hour from this now legendary Dylan period have reached the public at large. That's all. Meaning around five hours remain unheard by even the most observant fans. Meaning almost 100 songs, and possibly even more, are waiting in the black market as fans of Dylan, The Band, great songwriting, '60s music in general, and what we now call Americana hope and pray for

an official, remastered, souped up, all singin' and all dancin' issue of this remarkable chapter in the life of modern America's most creative songwriter.

"We were playing with absolute freedom," Robertson confided to Greil Marcus. "We weren't doing anything we thought anybody would ever hear as long as we lived. But what started in that basement, what came out of it ... and The Band came out of it, people holding hands and rocking back and forth all over the world singing 'I Shall Be Released' came out of this little conspiracy, of us amusing ourselves."[22]

Like their primary creator, these recordings have been the subject of myth and mystery, a little fact, and quite some fiction. Their stature has grown as rumor has spread and their absence is pondered. Never has a session that lasted for so long, with so many worthy out-takes, and which dictated the next few years' musical direction for both the principal singer-songwriter as well as his faithful and priceless backing band, been so discussed, so pondered over, yet so misunderstood.

Both the singer and the band were finding a new voice, a new idiom with which to perform. These two acts were more than mere pop music performers. The singer was a cultural force, whether or not he wanted that title. The backing band would soon stop backing and strike out on their own, briefly eclipsing the mere pop-music world and becoming a cultural force, much like their Hibbing-born employer. And then, this most democratic of bands would crash back down to earth, mortals after all.

The more you twist the kaleidoscope as you peer into it, the more the patterns change and the more there is to digest. In 1967, five (later six) musicians would understand that, and on every level. They dealt in such patterns, musically speaking. They were about to create a new pattern, one which reflected their pasts as well as their futures.

Ladies and gentlemen: the Basement Tapes.