

Rising like creeping vines from an urban jungle, the architectural wonderlust of Century City reveals not only the ingenuity of man but his empty spirituality: shopping centers, huge high-rise offices, towering apartment complexes and a token park complete with sodded grass and color-coordinated water fountain effects, all constructed with respect for the best intentions of the Bauhaus — cold and functional, where arty flourishes border on kitsch.

Twenty-four hours after his solo debut at Hollywood's Roxy Theatre, Rick Danko, the 34-year-old (perhaps) former Band bassist, contemplates his future within the 15th-floor conference room of Arista Records, shielded by the concrete fortress of Century City from the outside world. Clad in blue workshirt, a tough brown suede jacket, Levi's, and black boots of Spanish leather, Rick sheds the protective coating that has heretofore insulated the Band's personalities from the media. He exhibits a frisky, extroverted demeanor as he leans back on a beige chair.

Rick Danko is a warm, sensitive and unguarded character further described by friends as funny and manic. He's still smiling from his Roxy stint, where he packed the room for two nights and showcased his new group to the likes of Ali MacGraw, Leo Sayer, Alice Cooper, Al Stewart, Ronnie Hawkins, and Band mates Garth Hudson and Robbie Robertson. The paying public made the most noise, demanding and receiving two encores each performance.

Danko's backing outfit includes his brother Terry on guitar; Danny Siewell from an early flight of Wings on drums; Marty Greb, once with Bonnie Raitt, on organ; Michael DeTemple, once associated with Dave Mason, on another set of guitars; Jerry Peterson on saxophone; and Walt Richmond on piano.

Since the Band's "Last Waltz" in San Francisco on Thanksgiving, 1976, Danko has put together a bubbling, celebrative rock and roll unit that combines urgent, festive white southern blues with Southern California humor and precision.

Danko admits that there are strains in the music akin to past works of the Band. Talking to one writer, he said, "Well, you gotta remember that I've been in the Band for years. But I don't think what we're doing is as disciplined as the Band's music. I was looking for a simpler, fresher routing. It's an extension, that's for sure. But I really like this new group. I can go out and perform the record *now*."

"I'm the focal point on stage this time, and it doesn't bother me. I put this new group together. I telephoned them all. I sought out personalities who could bus and fly together and continue to put up with each other. What I do is collect performances from everyone. I make quicker decisions in this position than when I'm a member of the Band."

Born on December 9, 1943, Danko grew up in the small Ontario rural town of Simcoe. Country music was all over the radio dial and he admits to especially liking Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, and Johnny Horton. Later, young Rick listened to 50,000-watt Nashville country station WLAC. At 14, he quit school and worked briefly at cutting meat for a market, but before he logged time in the butcher shop, the Grand Ole Opry had made a major impression on Rick's musical sensibilities. He learned to play guitar, bass, mandolin, and a variety of other instruments.

Not much time had passed when he put down his cutting knife and formed a group who would rent halls, book themselves, and clear up to \$300 per night. After five sets opening for Arkansas rockabilly singer Ronnie Hawkins one night, Danko was asked to join his band, the Hawks.

In the late Fifties, Hawkins scored U.S. chart success with remakes of Young Jesse's "Mary Lou" (recently again revived by Bob Seger) and Chuck Berry's "Thirty Days," mysteriously retitled "Forty Days" for that reincarnation. "It was different back then," Danko told Richard Blackburn for *Circus*. "When the cops knocked on your motel door, they weren't looking for acid or grass. They were looking for guns, man. Guns, blackjacks, and pills. And underage girls."

Rick was still a teenager when the Hawks broke from Hawkins to work under names including the Crackers, the



DANKO'S NEW DANCE

It Isn't a Last Waltz

BY HARVEY KUBERNICK

Canadian Squires, and then Levon Helm and the Hawks. In that last form, they recorded several classic singles including "Leave Me Alone" and "The Stones That I Throw (Will Free All Men)." Helm wrote what was to become a rhythm and blues classic, "You Cheated."

(Four years ago, a record buff approached another Band member and Hawks alumnus, Richard Manual, and in just asked him to sing a couple of bars of "Leave Me Alone." Manual responded immediately with much more than a few bars, as if the group has been performing the song, uninterrupted, for the preceding decade or so.)

John Hammond, the white blues singer, invited the Hawks to New York, where they participated in some of his best recordings. In 1965, they met Bob Dylan in Atlantic City. Dylan had completed his first electric-music sessions, with studio musicians providing the backup, and was looking for a road band. The Hawks toured with him in late '65 and '66 before settling in West Saughterties, New York, with a big, pink house serving as their headquarters. In 1968, they had again changed their name, to the Band, and released their first album, *Music from Big Pink*.

Ten years later, Danko is equipped to give a complete dissertation on the Band. He lights a cigarette and grins. "We put out that first album and it was a relative underground success. Then we issued *The Band*, and it sold a million copies immediately," he snaps his fingers. "Just like that."

But now, says Danko, the Band is "on ice" for a while. "It

had become like eating dinner night after night with the same person. It was time to make a change.

"A week or so after our second album came out, we were on the cover of *Time*," he remembers. "From that point on, everybody was . . . uh . . . a little spaced," Danko had said earlier to Daisann McLane of the *Soho Weekly News*. "I stayed in my house for about a year and a half once, not really speaking to anybody. Then we went out and spent a million dollars touring. It changed everybody's life immediately, and took all of the fun out of it."

"We've in no way broken up," he assures me. "In fact, we've just signed a collective record contract with Warner Bros. *The Last Waltz* soundtrack is issued this week. It's the live show plus a side of new studio material."

[The album was *not* released that week. More than a month after this interview, Warner Bros. was still awaiting master tapes, to be delivered by the album's producer, Robbie Robertson. The three-disc set *may* be out by the time you read this, but nobody's holding his breath.]

In 1976, the Band played about thirty live dates before their Thanksgiving eve Last Waltz at Winterland. After sixteen years on the road, the Band decided to bow out while on top, rather than diminish to self-parody in the manner of, say, the Beach Boys. The Band refused to sacrifice what they felt to be their integrity, and months before the actual concert they began planning the special performance.

"We focused on one last concert. It gave us something to concentrate our energies on. When people heard that we weren't going to perform anymore, the phone wouldn't stop ringing. They all wanted to be there: Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Joni, Van Morrison . . ."

"You were there. You saw the concert. Wasn't it terrific? The cameras didn't inhibit *anyone*. We wanted to feed five thousand people a gourmet dinner — and I think we also gave 'em a good show." He winks.

"The movie was a labor of love. At the start, the Band had to raise a few hundred thousand bucks so that the event could take place. We were taking a chance. We almost hocked our houses. We would have been the *perfect* House Band. Even the rehearsals were incredible. It cost \$125,000 to renovate Winterland. I hate to keep relating to money, but I want to show you how important it was for us to have the theme and decor amplify the mood of the celebration.

"Preparing for the gig was a trip in itself. For four days, we did nothing but play music. We finished *Islands*, our last album for Capitol, then began nonstop rehearsals for the Last Waltz.

"The Band really came alive that night. We had been cruising for the last year, and that was obvious. For the *Waltz* show, we were onstage for six hours and worked 'til five a.m. the night before. We rehearsed with Dylan at the hotel. We presented the cameramen with a 300-page script. The Band has always been into precision, like a fine car. We didn't take it easy during preparation. I think that it will show in the movie. There's no split screen stuff, and very little backstage footage to pad the performances. *No way* was I going to wing it next to Joni Mitchell. And Muddy Waters — wait 'til you see Muddy in the film. I was playing next to him and got chills," he confesses. "I think that both Muddy and Ronnie Hawkins arrived at the high point of their lives that night.

"It's a very honest movie," Rick says enthusiastically. "It was a very special and a very memorable night for all of us.

"It was the Band's last performance. What more can I say?" he concludes, slightly out of breath and forgetting, perhaps in his excitement, his earlier contention that the Band has "in no way . . . broken up."

"The truth of the evening will come out on the soundtrack. The essence of *The Last Waltz* is in the grooves."

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Harvey Kubernick is the Los Angeles correspondent for *British music weekly*, *Melody Maker*. His work has also appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Crawdaddy*, *Bay Area Music*, and *Record World*. Al Stewart performed at his most recent birthday party. Harvey adds that he prefers girls who wear glasses and are into Bruce Springsteen.