

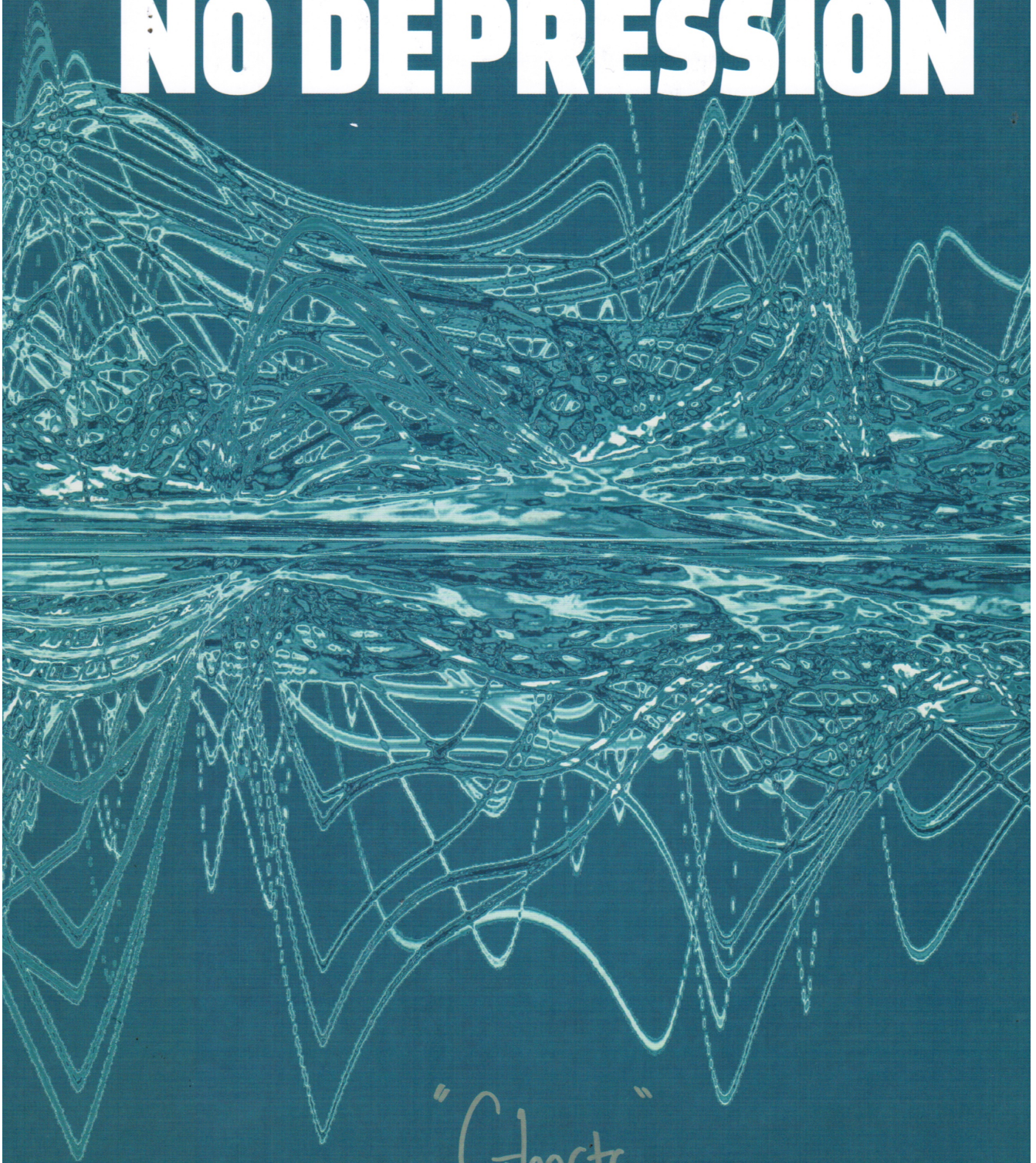
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NO DEPRESSION

"Ghosts"



THEY'RE ALL HERE

**Family forms the foundation
as Amy Helm stakes her own identity**

by Anne Margaret Daniel

THE COVER OF AMY HELM'S NEW record, *What the Flood Leaves Behind*, is like echo of artist John Everett Millais' best-known work, *Ophelia*. In the 1852 painting, William Shakespeare's doomed heroine has fallen into "the weeping brook," surrounded by the bright flowers she had picked to hang in the trees overhead. Singing old songs, Ophelia soon sinks to her death.

But no one is sinking on *What the Flood Leaves Behind*. On the contrary, Helm is resurgent, in the image and in person, rising from the cold Catskill creek waters running next to her home into new power and glory. Her old friend and bandmate on the album, Daniel Littleton, says, simply, "This record feels like an emergence because it is."

Helm's baptism in the world of music — the world she has inhabited all her life — has not always been a benedictory one by water. Sometimes it's been by fire. The daughter of The Band's Levon Helm and singer-songwriter Libby Titus, Helm was born into something higher than music royalty, closer to Americana and folk-rock cosmology. She saw a lot and saw it young, having spoken in past interviews as well as on her own website about growing up within a "village of brilliant and talented people who were also wrestling with the grips of addiction."

During these past three years since



her last studio album, *This Too Shall Light*, Helm has actively realized and shaped her life as a woman on her own. As a single mother and full-time musician in the midst of these trying

times, she has used the best of her heritage and her own immense abilities to make new art at the highest level. Helm's legacy and lineage are powerful, and they have fueled and fed her growth



as a singer and, increasingly, as a songwriter.

Letting the Soul Shine

As a girl and young woman, Helm had powerful teachers, including her parents, her mother's former partner Dr. John, her stepfather Donald Fagen of Steely Dan, and Rick Danko, also of The Band. Helm's roots are deep and strong, grounding her as a singer and songwriter as she blossoms on her own and in collaborations with others. "I've had some incredible teachers, along with my father of course. I got to study with Dr. Aaron Bell. He was a profound jazz instrumentalist, Duke Ellington's bass player. He taught me all the standards, how to phrase things. Rick Danko and all those guys I learned from. Rick was always really generous and sweet. My stepfather, too."

When Helm was a teenager, she began to sing with Levon Helm & The Barnburners (active from 2000 to 2004, when the core band transmuted into the Midnight Ramble Band for shows at Levon's house). At first, she was shy about assuming instrumentals. Allen Toussaint changed that for the better, Helm recalls. "Once Allen Toussaint came to a Ramble, and I wasn't going to sit in on drums. And he said, 'But if you don't play, we cannot

see your soul shine.' I walked out, and I sat my ass down at the drums, and played."

From such a foundation, Helm looked next to her in school classes and as a young artist to her contemporaries. She says with a laugh, "Your peers aren't projecting your past, your heritage, onto you. No one thinks you're gonna sound like 'Cripple Creek' when you open your mouth. You really start learning with your tribe. It's so cool to get older, and get to where you've known these people for 40 years."

But for Helm, especially on this new album, the combination of old and new — the spirits, traditions, and lessons from the past, with the vitality supplied by new friends and musicians — is unbeatable. After years of recording across the county, she chose to return home to make the record at Levon Helm Studios in Woodstock, New York. Affectionately called "The Barn," it's the hallowed place of her father's *Midnight Rambles* and many Grammy award-winning recordings, the place where the voices and instruments of his old friends like Mavis Staples, Ralph Stanley, Pinetop Perkins, Muddy Waters, and Phil Lesh have left their traces deep in the acoustically pristine oak beams and rafters.

"You know, it's funny," Helm begins, "the second I came home after recording I

knew I'd done something different — my intentions were different. I was in a closer knowing of myself, in a way. Touring hard, being a single mom, the responsibility and patience and love involved as a parent are all there. I was able to reside in the contrasts — like good gigs and terrible gigs. And I was more compelled, and prepared, to reveal myself."

Lyrically, Helm reveals new thoughtful perspectives on family ties and motherhood. "There are such different seasons in parenthood. You grow and evolve, trying to stay patient, to do better," she says. "That experience really helped me reflect on my own past, through the lens of being a parent, a mother."

The depth of *What the Flood Leaves Behind* reveals itself slowly, and while many songs were inspired by sadness, they also celebrate the people who made her who she has become. "Renegade Heart," for example, which Helm co-wrote with M.C. Taylor of Hiss Golden Messenger and Elizabeth Ziman of Elizabeth & The Catapult, stems from the loss of her big brother Ezra Titus, who died in 2009 at the age of 43. And the centerpiece of the record, "Cotton and the Cane," which Helm co-wrote with Mary Gauthier in 2017, is a full-on tribute to her Arkansas side, with lyrics honoring "the sacred songs my family sang," and her



What the Flood Leaves Behind release show at the Barn.

father, the “sharecropper’s son.” Her grandfather, Diamond Helm, was also a musician, and the lilting track thanks him as well.

Joining her on the record are a mix of locally based musicians and those from farther afield, including producer and multi-instrumentalist Josh Kaufman. And as a result, the 10 tracks on *What the Flood Leaves Behind* sound unlike anything Helm has done before. “The creative honesty between Josh Kaufman and me was a real driving force. We had met twice before, at a Leonard Cohen tribute and a Richie Havens tribute,” Helm says. “We talked about an album, and were finishing each other’s musical sentences. He’s about the instruments, going along with my voice. Working on the record with him felt great.”

Indeed, the instruments on the record, in the hands of Daniel Littleton (guitar), Michael Libramento (bass, organ, percussion), Tony Mason (drums), Stuart Bogie (saxophone), Jordan McLean (trumpet), and Phil Cook (keys, harmonica), follow Helm’s voice, richer and more varied now, with lyric phrasing and all its shyness of showing emotion a thing of the past. Says Littleton, “She’s done what other people needed her to do, invested a lot in partnerships, and is now casting her net wider for what she needs.

Her new songs pull me in and make me wonder — I love to hear it.”

Coming Full Circle

There’s one more special guest that helps bring the record full circle — a young man named Lee Collins. Helm’s eldest son, now 13 and already an accomplished drummer, plays congas on *What the Flood Leaves Behind*. Once a member of her father’s band, Helm now has a son in her own ensemble, which delights her. “It’s wonderful. When you have a kid bit by the music bug it also brings you back to your own childhood. And there are so many great teachers in Woodstock. ... He just loves it.”

Listening back, Helm’s father’s drumming can be heard on several tracks on her 2015 record *Didn’t It Rain*. Levon wasn’t here in the flesh for his daughter’s newest record, but according to Helm and Littleton, his presence was certainly felt while they tracked “Verse 23,” the album’s swooping opener based on the 23rd Psalm, which begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

The sonic quality of the Barn stunned Helm, as did something more. “I felt his presence so clearly. And I felt → [Daniel Littleton’s] mom had passed recently — all the people there with us. And we

finished the take, and we started to walk up the stairs, and Dan looked at me, and he said, ‘Your pops is here. They’re all here.’ And I said, ‘I know, I felt it too.’ As soon as he said it, the lights went out, man, the electricity went out, and stayed out for the rest of the day,” Helm recalls with a laugh. “There’s good ghosts on this album.”

Those “good ghosts” are benevolently watching the future unfold — not only in the hands of Helm and her contemporaries, but in the hands of their children. Lee Collins used to run across the Ramble stage as a white-blond toddler, pounding on a little red toy drum, much to Levon’s glee. And Littleton’s daughter with fellow musician Elizabeth Mitchell, Storey Littleton, began singing at the Barn when she was a little girl. For Helm’s album release shows at the Barn in late June, Storey Littleton played acoustic guitar stage left and opposite her father.

“The Barn community,” as Levon often called it, is now a part of Helm’s recording process and touring band. The community is helping her embrace her new sense of self — evident in the songs she’s writing and those she pulls into her musical orbit. It’s a powerful living embodiment of the Barn’s swirling spirits and her father’s last request: “Keep it goin’!” ■