

AMY HELM

WAKE OF THE FLOOD

Amy Helm embraces her own legacy with the help of her family band and a stacked cast of modern Americana stars

By **JEFF TAMARKIN**

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MY HELM WAS ALL OF 5 YEARS OLD WHEN she figured out what her father, Levon Helm, did for a living. At least she thought she had.

“The Band, to me, was Rick Danko’s band, and my dad—as far as I could perceive it—was Rick Danko’s drummer,” she says with a laugh, “He played drums in Rick Danko’s band, and their hit song was ‘Stage Fright’ because that’s the only song that I liked and was interested in.”

It wasn’t long until Amy Helm—who was born Dec 3, 1970, just a few months after the release of *Stage Fright*, The Band’s third studio album—realized there was more to it than that. Levon, it turned out, was one of the most beloved musicians in all of rock-and-roll. And

all of those people traipsing in and out of her family’s home in Woodstock, N.Y.—and the adjacent recording facility Levon commissioned in 1975, formally called Levon Helm Studios but known affectionately as The Barn—were musicians, too. Some of them were pretty darn famous, not that it impressed the younger Helm very much at the time.

She was already well into her teens before she even heard an album by The Band—*Music From Big Pink* was the first she took in—but once she did, she understood what her dad and his friends were up to. As she got more caught up in the music herself, Helm came to appreciate the unique position she was in, enjoying ready proximity to so many talented musicians, both those in The Band and their many friends in the music world.

“It definitely affected me. It can’t *not* affect you,” Helm says about growing up amid her dad’s musical colleagues. “I think that whenever you walk into the same career choice that your parents did—it doesn’t matter if it’s a rock-and-roll star



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or a plumber—if your parents are good at what they do and have made a name for themselves in their community, then you can't walk into that field without having people project an expectation onto you. It's just human nature. I think that it made me have to commit to my own belief in myself."

Today, Amy Helm carries on the family tradition, proudly and vigorously. She discovered early on that she not only had a voice, but also that she enjoyed singing tremendously. At age 14, Helm began performing with bands and as a voice-for-hire on others' recordings. By her late 20s, she'd turned professional, singing in various groups and, eventually, leading bands and recording under her own name. Helm's third solo album, *What the Flood Leaves Behind* (Renew Records/BMG), released in June, is where it all comes together in a big way for her. Fifty may seem like a strange time in life to be making a coming-of-age statement, but that's exactly what the album is for her.

"I just feel like I had a different relationship with trusting myself," Helm says while discussing the album's creation. "That guided me through the performances. There were years of getting some experience as a solo artist, getting some experience as a mom. My kids got a little bit older; there were great tours, shitty tours, triumphant gigs, failures. My life, in the last five or six years, has been really exciting. But it also has been really challenging at times and full of wreckage. I distilled all of those experiences into my songwriting and my performances in a different way. I was coming from a different place, singing these songs."

"I think that Amy has found Amy," agrees Josh Kaufman, who produced the album and plays many of the instruments heard on its 10 tracks. Kaufman's long list of credits ranges from co-producing Bob Weir's *Blue Mountain* album to contributing instrumentation to Taylor Swift's *folklore* and *evermore*, as well as working with The Hold Steady, Joe Russo, Guster, Hiss Golden Messenger and Josh Ritter. "Some people come out of the gate when they're young and they're fully formed. And other people have the raw talent, but they learn over time what it is they do. It's a longer game, a little longer discovery."

ONE CAN'T BLAME AMY HELM FOR TAKING a cautious approach to a career in music. Born and raised in the fabled town of Woodstock, N.Y., she may have been exposed to all of that great music during

her youth, but she also saw firsthand the pitfalls that often accompany the lifestyle. "Cotton and the Cane," one of the most poignant songs on *What the Flood Leaves Behind*—co-written by Amy and Mary Gauthier—is a real-life account of what it was like to live among talented people with crippling substance abuse issues. "My father was a sharecropper's son/ Handed hope and hymns to ease the pain/ The sacred songs my family sang, they're all that remain," she sings. Then comes the gut punch: "I come from knees on kneelers/ Back stabbers, dirty dealers/ Heroin, I'm locked out again, on the side of the road/ Tears and dust and goodbyes/ Saying I love you on the phone."

"That's just chapter one," Helm says of the song. "I was trying to convey what it was like growing up surrounded by so much addiction and to speak about it with a kind of fearlessness, which I think is important. If you're going to talk about something so heavy, then you want to be as truthful with yourself—and with your audience—as you can. We tried this song so many different ways; we tried to make it like a rock-and-roll, Allman Brothers sort of vibe. When I brought Josh the song, I told him: 'I've sung it a thousand times, but I can't feel people when I'm doing it. People like it and it's cool, but the heart of the song isn't there yet.' And he totally got what I meant. He helped me reharmonize a couple of chords in the chorus, and we slowed it way down. We took out anything that could be catchy or radio-friendly. As soon as we did that, I feel we really served that song. The heart of that song came out on this record."

"I think that I knew, from a young age, that people were struggling and suffering," Helm adds about those whose troubled lives inspired the song. "But I also knew that they were special, and I think maybe their music and their artistry was the light part of a sometimes very dark scene, the addiction. But I loved all of them and thank God for recovery and sobriety and forgiveness because I can still celebrate them at 50 years old. I can celebrate all that they accomplished."

Of the other songs on the new album, six are composed in part or wholly by Helm; the others are by friends and collaborators. In that sense, *What the Flood Leaves Behind*—the title of which comes from the lyrics of the opening track, "Verse 23"—has a lot in common with Helm's 2015 solo debut, *Didn't It Rain*, which consists chiefly of tunes co-written with her former Ollabelle bandmate, producer/musician Byron Isaacs. But thematically, and in its overall vibe, the earlier album shares little with Helm's

two subsequent releases. The debut, recorded at The Barn, was created over a period of several years, during which time Levon took ill and died, and Amy went through a divorce. (Of note, *Didn't It Rain* also features Levon's last recorded drum performance.)

For her sophomore album, 2018's *This Too Shall Light*, Helm decided to take an artistic turn, covering songs written by or associated with artists ranging from The Band's Robbie Robertson to Rod Stewart, T Bone Burnett and the album's producer, Joe Henry.

"It was really challenging to sing those stories and that narrative," Helm says of the second album. "I love doing covers, and I think it's a really important thing for singers to work on covers. I feel like it really expanded my singing and my vocals. I took some flak for it. People thought it was an odd turn, but I really enjoyed it. And looking back on it, it was just the right thing for me at the time, creatively, to explore. I have always moved through my career and my life just following my instincts and following what is in front of me. I've always followed the chemistry, really. And I had the opportunity to work with Joe Henry, which I was very excited to do."

Working with Kaufman and recording in The Barn—as opposed to Los Angeles, where her previous album was made—put Helm in a more confident state of mind. Finished a few months before the pandemic shut everything down, the sessions came together organically—the personal nature of the material dictated how Helm and Kaufman chose to arrange and record them. Some of what ended up on the final release was lifted directly from the demos the pair worked up at Kaufman's Brooklyn studio. The rest was recorded with a band—including keyboardist Phil Cook (Hiss Golden Messenger, Megafaun), multi-instrumentalist Michael Libramento (Grace Potter), drummer Tony Mason (John Scofield, Norah Jones) and electric guitarist Daniel Littleton. Helm focused on her vocals, mandolin work and piano parts while Kaufman jumped between various keyboards, guitars and percussive instruments. There wasn't any denying, Kaufman recalls, that the spirit of Levon Helm, who died in 2012, was felt as the music was created.

"Amy has so much history and so much invested in [the studio]," he says. "And there are so many stories. We got halfway through 'Verse 23' when the power went off. This guy Walter—who was Amy and Levon's runner, longtime assistant and friend—comes in. He still



"He could be ornery. He was old-school," Helm says of her dad. "He came up on the bandstand being taught differently. But he was very generous and really took care of his players."

works at the studio, and he goes, 'Amy, that's your dad. He's got his eye on you.' So you know you're with family. It feels like you're being hugged a little bit, cradled or something. You definitely feel like you're at a ceremony. Amy set up her little vocal section of the space that way—she had pictures of her and her dad, and pictures of her kids. She's a deep person."

BECAUSE HER LAST NAME IS HELM, IT'S common knowledge that Amy comes from rock royalty. But fewer know, perhaps, that her mother is Libby Titus, herself a highly regarded singer, songwriter and actress. Titus and Levon met in 1969 and stayed together until the late '70s. Titus next took up with Dr. John, and then Steely Dan's Donald Fagen, whom she married in 1993. (Amy contributed background vocals to Fagen's *Kamakiriad* and *Morph the Cat* solo albums.)

"She also influenced me a lot," says Helm of her mother. "She made sure to round out my musical education by turning me on to Laura Nyro and Brenda Russell and Joni Mitchell, the singer-songwriters whose poetry was so fierce and whose singing was so different from the soul music I had been listening to. I fell in love with Aretha Franklin and never looked back, but she made sure to open up my ears to other singers, too."

Helm's own tentative steps into the music business began with session work, adding vocal parts to albums by a long, diverse list of artists. "Doing all of that

background work was easy for me, and it gave me some confidence," she says. "Anything that you work on increases your awareness of what you're good at and then you get better at it. And that's always good for your head and your heart." Helm's contributions to Levon's *Dirt Farmer* album earned her a Grammy in 2007—her only one thus far—in the category of Best Traditional Folk Album.

Helm's self-assurance received a further boost as she began joining bands, including her dad's post-Band solo outfits. She worked prolifically with her father on the Midnight Ramble concerts he brought to the Barn and on his tours. "With the Midnight Ramble Band, I learned how to sing over the volume of a band that was loud and fiery. I learned to sing *with* a band, instead of just shouting over it," Helm says, adding that having her father double as her boss was a positive experience.

"He could be ornery. He was old-school," she says. "He came up on the bandstand being taught differently. But he was very generous and really took care of his players. Anybody in the Ramble Band will tell you that. If someone was sick and missed gigs, he paid them anyway. He was generous."

Another big step for Amy was joining Ollabelle, a folk-oriented vocal/instrumental group that formed in the early 2000s and gained a modicum of popularity, thanks to their powerful live performances and Americana-leaning studio releases. Incorporating elements

of several genres, Ollabelle proved to be a fertile nurturing ground for Helm's talents. "I'm so grateful for all my musical experiences. I've really had a great education so far," she says.

Eventually, she formed her own band, Amy Helm and the Handsome Strangers. And, as her 45th birthday loomed, she was finally ready to put her name on a full album. "I was just digging what I was doing at the time," she says about her late arrival as a frontwoman. "I used to answer that question [of why it took so long] by saying I was insecure. But, looking back as I get older, I don't know if I was actually insecure. I think I was just really into learning. With Ollabelle, it was about being in that collaboration and learning harmonies and learning how to be on the road and learning how to be a woman touring around the country. And then in the Ramble Band, it was a whole new set of skills that I had to get together as a singer.

"I just did stuff that felt good," she says. "Your craft signals to you, like the ringing of a bell. It just goes, 'OK, it's time to expand again, take the next leap.' So I just did it when it was ready."

She's also keeping her eye on the next generation: One of her sons, Lee, plays congas on *What the Flood Leaves Behind*. "It's funny; my 13-year-old is already deeply into drums and music," Helm says. "He wants to be in a band. He eats, breathes and sleeps the drums. It's funny that he fell into drums. And I didn't even push him at all!"

