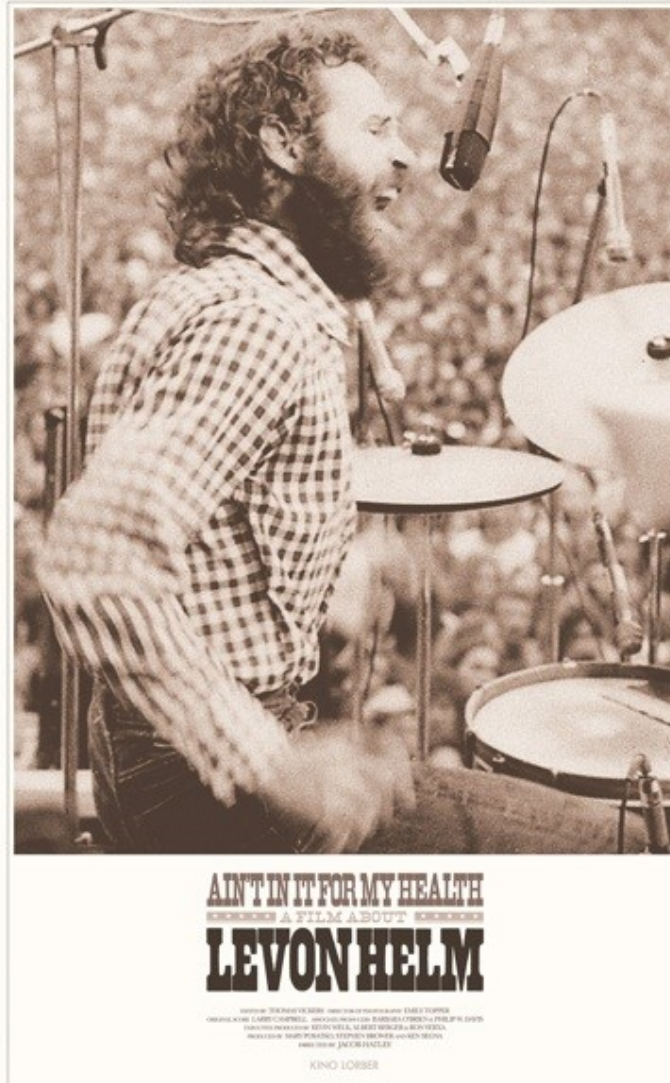


KINO LORBER
i n c o r p o r a t e d

presents



A Film by Jacob Hatley

US / 83 minutes / 1.85:1 / in English

A Kino Lorber Release

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CREDITS

Director
Jacob Hatley

Producers
Mary Posatko
Ren Segna

Executive Producers
Albert Berger
Ron Yerxa

Associate Producers
Barbara O'Brien
Philip W. Davis

Cinematography
Emily Topper

Editor
Thomas Vickers

Score by
Larry Campbell

Featuring

Levon Helm
Amy Helm
Larry Campbell
Billy Bob Thornton
Teresa Williams
Barbara O'Brien

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SYNOPSIS

Director Jacob Hatley's intimate documentary finds Mr. Helm at home in Woodstock, NY, in the midst of creating his first studio album in 25 years. Shot during the course of two-plus years, this highly anticipated film focuses in on the four-time Grammy winner and Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member after his 2007 comeback album, *Dirt Farmer*, brought him back to the spotlight.

ABOUT LEVON HELM

Born in Arkansas in 1940, Levon Helm rose to fame as the drummer for The Band, who toured with Bob Dylan before beginning their own tours from 1968 to 1976, and whose final performance was immortalized in Martin Scorsese's *THE LAST WALTZ*.

In the late 1990s, Levon Helm was diagnosed with throat cancer, and he began a series of radiation treatments that risked leaving him without his voice. Though the tumor was eventually removed, the treatment had damaged his vocal chords.

However, he made a remarkable breakthrough while drumming for his daughter, Amy. Attempting to sing backup vocals, he slowly but surely regained the use of his voice, and in 2007 began work on *Dirt Farmer*, which would become his first solo album in more than 25 years. It would go on to receive the Grammy the following year for Best Traditional Folk Album.

He followed this up in 2009 with *Electric Dirt*, which also won a Grammy in 2010 as Best Americana Album.

On April 19, 2012, Levon Helm succumbed to cancer, leaving behind an incredible musical legacy. Jacob Hatley's documentary, *AIN'T IN IT FOR MY HEALTH: A FILM ABOUT LEVON HELM*, explores the artist's creative process at work on his comeback album, *Dirt Farmer*.

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Q & A WITH DIRECTOR JACOB HATLEY

How did the documentary come about?

Very informally. I met Levon to discuss the music video we were directing for his album, *Dirt Farmer*, and before the conversation was over it was clear that we both had bigger ideas. We came up to Woodstock with a camera one week before the video shoot and just filmed everything. At the end of each night we'd buy some beer and watch the footage back on the camera--just Levon sitting around his kitchen table holding court--and replay it over and over again. He's a captivating storyteller. At first, I wanted the whole film to be a series of conversations around that table. Then things happened and a damn plot got in the way.

Did you ever discuss the direction of the film with Levon?

Not really. We both agreed this was not going to be a biography. And we definitely felt that the film should have as few interviews as possible (and none of them with celebrities). For the first month or so, I had no idea what we were doing, other than having too much fun. I didn't know what kind of access Levon was willing to grant us or how long we'd be able to stay up there. I kept waiting for someone to say, "What the hell are you guys doing here? Get out!"

I think there is a part of Levon that resists defining a project. I guess the thinking is, "If you know what it's going to be, then why do it?" So I just tried to go unnoticed for as long as possible and not get kicked out. Then one day he called me and asked if we'd like to go to the doctor with him and I knew he was fully committed to making a film.

Talk about the filming process a little bit. How long were you in Woodstock?

On and off, we were there about two and a half years. At first we rented a little place in town and went over to film the Rambles and recording sessions, but it felt like we were never there at the right time and the rent was killing us. So...we got some sleeping bags and moved in with Levon.

Describe an average day of production on this film.

Well, Levon likes to sleep in and you have to adopt the habits of your subject. So we'd wake up around eleven in the morning, maybe go into town and eat some corn chowder and talk about what we hoped to capture that day. Usually, we wouldn't get it and nothing would happen and we'd end up shooting trees in the wind or something to give ourselves a sense of accomplishment. Then around dark, people would start to come over and record or just hang out and the filming would commence. We'd shoot until everybody went to bed, which was around one or two in the morning. Then we'd watch the footage back on the camera until we fell asleep and wake up to do it all over again.

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What were some of the challenges in making this film?

I think one of the most difficult things for me was containing and limiting the story of The Band. I really wanted to avoid making a film about the rise and fall of a seventies rock group because, when you look at The Band, their story is kind of a cliché. They started off with this very pure commitment to the music and each other and there was this real brotherhood, and then they were corrupted by fame and drugs and the record industry. Their music is still this strange, beautiful gateway into an America that I never knew. But I think by this point, audiences are all too familiar with this "Behind the Music" kind of narrative. Then when Levon learned he was going to receive a Lifetime Achievement Grammy for The Band and he reacted so ambivalently, we knew that his relationship with the past was going to be a very strong thread in the film. That meant a basic understanding of what happened with The Band was required. We went through so many cuts where The Band narrative would just suck the life out of the movie. It took several years of editing before we were able to do it in a way that still allowed the film to be a character piece.

So that's how you describe the film, as a character study?

Yeah, I think so. For me, the reason to watch this film is Levon's personality. Tom, our editor, would always say that if Levon had never been in The Band, if he wasn't even a musician, if he just worked at some textile mill in Arkansas, then he should still have a documentary made about him. That was a real guiding principal in making this film. In a way, I guess we were lucky that all of these events loaded with dramatic potential kept occurring. But at the same time, I wanted to resist them because I felt a film where too many things happened might neuter the tone we were going for. Personally, I'm happy just being at that table and watching reenactments of The Wild Bunch for an hour and a half!

What tone were you looking for?

A little hazy and little weird. The movie should feel like that last cigarette you have at 4am when a wild night is winding its way down.

Three years is a good chunk of time. What drew you to the project and inspired that commitment?

Three years really isn't that long for a documentary. Hell, as hard as it is to raise money these days, it's a miracle if you finish anything in three years! The thing is, I just felt so lucky that I was getting to make this film and make it my way that I didn't want the process to end. My favorite movie stars are the ones who just kind of play themselves in every role because they're so damn cool you don't want to see them play anyone else. Robert Mitchum, John Wayne, Burt Reynolds, guys like that. And Levon has that quality.

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So when I realized I was going to get to make a movie and this guy would essentially be the "star" of the movie, I was so excited.

You captured some very intimate moments in this film. How did you create an environment where people are uninhibited by the camera?

I think you have to assure people that you aren't looking for any kind of performance. When there's a camera in your face you can't help but feel like you're obliged to say something interesting, and that notion has to be destroyed. Often, I would try and talk about things that obviously had no bearing on the documentary--things that no one could possibly find interesting enough to put in a movie. I think that way people say to themselves, "Okay, they aren't after anything today, they're just hanging out. Are they even filming this?"

Were you a fan of The Band when you began the project?

Sure, absolutely--but probably not to the degree that many folks who will see this film are. I was a big fan of Levon's work as an actor, and that's what drew me to this more than anything. I think the scene at the train station with Sissy Spacek in *Coal Miner's Daughter* is just perfect Hollywood filmmaking.

Did he ever tell you to stop filming?

Levon would never put it so bluntly. Sometimes he would say, "Why don't y'all have a Coke, enjoy yourselves a little bit," which probably meant, "Turn that camera off." But he never really tried to stop us, no. The thing he very much did resist was giving an interview. He doesn't much care for interviews, and particularly with this film I think he was afraid that it might seem too presentational or even stilted if he started to acknowledge the camera. So the following rule emerged: "I'll never tell you to stop filming as long as you don't bug me for an interview."