

## Versione italiana

Ashes of laughter, the ghost is clear | Why do the best things always disappear?

- from *Ophelia*

I was given an acetate of [Music From] *Big Pink* back in England and it shook me to the core. I was in Cream at the time with already the notion that it wasn't going in the right direction, and I thought, well this is what it is. I knew who Robbie Robertson was but I didn't realize that was their group. I thought they just appeared. I thought they were all from the Mississippi Delta. - Eric Clapton

This impression of The Band - their old-time/timeless evocation of a past American South - is one of the defining characteristics of the band, The Band, both in their appearance and their sound. It's fascinating to note, then, that these pioneers of Americana were actually almost all Canadian (Levon Helm was the only American). Robbie Robertson, The Band's primary songwriter, was born in Toronto, Canada, but had an uncanny instinct for American music and southern culture.

Upon learning of Robertson's death yesterday, I started to think about what I remembered most about him. Like so many of us of my age, I grew up with The Band's music, and I certainly knew that Robertson was the guitarist and a singer. But it struck me that what I remembered wasn't his singing or playing. Instead, I was amazed at how quickly I was able to recall whole sections of his lyrics, songs I hadn't thought about in years, even decades. I realized just how incredibly memorable these passages were, and how evocative they are. The first passage that immediately sprang to my mind was the infectious *Up on Cripple Creek*:

Up on Cripple Creek

she sends me

If I spring a leak

She mends me

I don't have to speak

She defends me

A drunkard's dream if I ever did see one

- from *Up on Cripple Creek*

Interestingly enough there is a Cripple Creek in Colorado, an old mining town - the kind where you might have found a drunkard stumbling off to be with his mate. The clever old-timey instrumentation perfectly sets this scene, and the lyrics - well, just admire the

insistent repetition of 'she sends me - she mends me - she defends me'. A 'drunkard's dream' indeed!

On the subject of memorable lyrics, in the pantheon of opening lines that people can recognize right away (and musicians can often instantly play and sing) few can hold up to *The Weight*: "I pulled in to Nazareth". The chords: A C#min D A. So simple, and so instantly identifiable. But when you read the whole firstverse, its essential *Americanness* emerges in the dialogue ("Hey mister"), the action ("He just grinned and shook my hand") and the slang ("Was feeling 'bout half past dead") - not to mention the terse denial of hospitality ("No" was all he said). You just assume the character is in Nazareth, PA, not in ancient Israel, where such a lack of hospitality would have been unimaginable.

I pulled in to Nazareth  
 Was feeling 'bout half past dead  
 I just need someplace  
 Where I can lay my head  
 "Hey, mister, can you tell me  
 Where a man might find a bed?"  
 He just grinned and shook my hand  
 "No" was all he said  
 - from *The Weight*

As it happens, Robbie Robertson died on August 9, the same day that Jerry Garcia died in 1995. Though I am not aware of any direct connection between Robertson and Garcia, there is a musical connection, through what I find to be one of Robertson's most compelling songs. The Jerry Garcia Band, like many other artists, performed a version of *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*.

What's so stunning about this song is the fact that it portrays the Civil War from the point of view of a Southern farmer. Robertson captures some of the truth of this experience of the war honestly and without judgement. For people like Virgil Caine (such a Southern name!) and his wife, Robert E. Lee was a hero:

Back with my wife in Tennessee  
 When one day she called to me  
 "Virgil, quick, come see, there goes Robert E. Lee"

Even more importantly, Robertson encapsulates a cultural snapshot of this Southern family in just a few lines. Note the subtle assertion of family hierarchy ("like my brother above me") and

submission to tradition (“like my father before me”). But most of all note the human pain in the line “he was just eighteen, proud and brave”. For me that is the universality that Robertson captures in what is all too easily overlooked by judgement about why the war was fought. Living in the South myself, I may not agree with how it was built (on slavery) nor the Confederacy’s motives for the war, but I can most certainly appreciate how the pain of all those lives brutally lost in war was the same on both sides.

Like my father before me, I will work the land  
And like my brother above me, who took a rebel stand  
He was just eighteen, proud and brave  
But a Yankee laid him in his grave

- from *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down*

What’s even more amazing about this song is the moving chorus/lament for the night they “drove old Dixie down” - “and the people were singing, they went, na, na na na na na na, na nana na na na na na”. I don’t think it’s a celebration - it’s a dirge.

I wonder how many people who have sung along with that chorus over the years realized they were joining a lament for the fall of the Confederate South?

Personally, I’ve sung along with it countless times, and this never occurred to me until today. Now *that* is great songwriting.