



Guitarist Robbie Robertson went to director Scorsese for help.

# Last Waltz great rock footage

By Peter Goddard  
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There was salad by the ton, thousands of gallons of stew, and 5,600 pounds of turkey.

It was just part of a feast for the 5,000 people who had shown up for The Band's last concert in San Francisco's Winterland ballroom late in November, 1976.

After all, as everyone who'd payed \$25 a ticket to get in knew, this was one of the epochal events in rock history. The Band, the quintet that had started in Toronto bars backing Ronnie Hawkins, had worked behind Bob Dylan and had finally gone out on its own, was calling it quits after 16 years. And they'd invited along "a few friends" to help celebrate.

There was Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Eric Clapton, Muddy Waters, Ringo Starr, Van Morrison and Neil Diamond.

There was also director Martin Scorsese and eight cameramen — many of them still tired after just finishing Scorsese's New York, New York — filming the Band's The Last Waltz, which is due to open at the Elgin, May 10.

Scorsese wasn't new to rock films. The director of Mean Streets had edited Woodstock and Elvis On Tour, and had known The Band's members since the days they'd been living in Woodstock, N.Y., and rehearsing to go out on their own.

"Still, it was something of an accident that Marty was on this film at all," said The Band's guitarist Robbie Robertson recently in Hollywood as the production crew was completing the final sound mix. "In fact, it was something of an accident that there was a film at all.

## Project snowballed

"You see, we decided to do the concert after finishing our tour in the summer of 1976. We knew we'd come to the end. We also knew that our next performance would be our last. So after we'd invited all our friends to perform we thought it might be a good idea to make a record of the event.

"At first we thought we might just videotape it or something. Then we thought, well, if we're going to do that, we should get

someone good to put it all together. The project just snowballed."

So Robertson approached Scorsese just to ask for help in finding the right director. "But the more and more we talked the more and more obvious it was that he was the one to do it," said Robertson.

"He was one of the few directors who knew what rock'n'roll was about, who knew what The Band was all about. He knew what breaks happened in which songs. Finally, three weeks before the concert, he said he'd be finished with New York, New York and instead of going on a vacation would do The Last Waltz."

The publicity campaign for the movie is already gearing up to focus on the fact that it is the first rock film ever to be shot by an established, major Hollywood director. Scorsese talks about the concert's set from La Traviata, rented from the San Francisco Opera for \$8,000 as a "strange, Visconti kind of setting."

And, according to Robertson, it was Scorsese's idea to shoot some extra sequences of The Band reminiscing about the old days, as well

as extra in-studio segments featuring Emmylou Harris singing Evangeline with the group and The Staple Singers adding a gospel dimension to The Band's performance of The Weight.

Scorsese and The Band agreed they didn't want a standard rock film showing the delirious crowd, rapturous backstage groupies, or The Band's trucks and equipment. The Last Waltz was to be a movie about musicians and their music.

## Historical document

It's something else as well. Some of the best rock concert footage ever filmed can be found in The Last Waltz; there's Joni Mitchell's tense but animated face and her shifting smile filling the screen as she sings her song, Coyote; there's Dr. John rolling out some vintage New Orleans stomps with his Such A Night; there's Muddy Waters, looking ageless, snarling out the words to Mannish Boy; and there's Van Morrison kicking his leg to each final chorus of Caravan.

But Scorsese has cast them all, and especially The Band, in a kind

of dull glow, the kind you imagine you see looking at an old photograph. His, has, quite clearly, made a historical document, sweetly sad and nostalgic.

His is the first rock film that doesn't try to create that cutting edge of instant, now, now, now excitement. He knew he wasn't just filming the end of one particular group, but of part of the '60s generation as well.

Some of the editing is crude, and some inexplicable. And those portions in which the director interviews the band about their past really don't have the substance they might have had; we're told what we already know and Scorsese doesn't probe further.

But he deals with The Band's music as if he was an extra member. It's The Band's work that defines this movie and gives it its importance. Some of their weaker tunes — Stagefright, for instance — have never sounded better. Scorsese allowed the group's character to fill the screen, their dignity, integrity and pride in their music. He makes these musicians human.