

BY JENNY JEDEIKIN

Blues



thing's pretty bleak. It's all kind of flat and soggy, and it does look like a lonesome kind of place."

Helm grew up in Helena, Arkansas, along the Mississippi Delta, beside Highway 61. He credits the terrain for the type of artistry it produces. "We've made some kind of connection. We don't understand this, but music seems to go with dirt farming. It's all that cotton and rice and hard-to-grow things. It's rich and flat as a pancake."

And, indeed, the land is rich with music. In addition to hearing tidbits from southern writer Eudora Welty and Civil War expert Shelby Foote (Vicksburg, Miss., the site of

Traveler

HIGHWAY 61 WAS RENDERED immortal in a song by Bob Dylan, who dubbed it the likeliest stretch of roadway to have God's "killin' done." But, as the road most traveled by early blues greats Robert Johnson and Little Walter and the site of Bessie Smith's fatal auto accident, the stretch of Highway 61 that runs between Memphis and New Orleans has long been legendary. It is being revisited once again, this time by drummer Levon Helm of The Band for the first of a five-part documentary series on PBS called *Great Drives*, which, among other things, encourages its audience to take to the highway.

"I think Bob got it right," says Helm of the Dylan song, which he performs in Sam Phillips' Memphis studio for the special shortly before leading viewers on a tour of the region in a "borrowed" '58 Buick Special. (Upcoming shows include Teri Garr touring the Pacific Coast Highway and Robert Townsend rolling down Route 66.) "There's a certain Sunday-night kind of feeling down there. You get one of them slow Delta sunsets in the wintertime, and every-

a major Civil War memorial, is a pit stop for Helm), the footage includes Helm's visits to the boyhood home of Muddy Waters and the burial site of Robert Johnson. "It wasn't real sad, like slow walking and sad singing," says Helm. "I enjoyed stopping by Robert Johnson's grave site. You know, I left him a couple cigarettes."

These days Helm lives in Woodstock, New York, but he still heads back down 61 for the Blues Festival in October and the Cotton Carnival in May. And if he's real adventurous, he'll go farther south. "When you get south of Vicksburg, you get those frogs singing in the bayou; it's a hell of a sound," he says.

"That's when you've got to slow down and look at the pretty homes. It's like the guy who builds dinosaurs said," says Helm, quoting a roadside artist he met. "Slow down and enjoy yourself. By slowing down, you'll live longer and you'll get there quicker." Well... somethin' like that. However he said it—it was good, though." ■
'Great Drives' premieres Thur., Feb. 1, at 8 p.m. ET on PBS.

**LEVON HELM REVISITS
THE MOOD AND MUSIC
OF HIGHWAY 61 FOR THE
FIRST INSTALLMENT OF
PBS'S *GREAT DRIVES***