

Shawn Phillips: Ignored Talent?

by Albert Salerno

Since the mid-1960s, when he began veering away from folk music, Shawn Phillips' music has been nearly impossible to categorize. Is he a progressive folk-rocker, a protest singer, or a singer of orchestrated pop?

Perhaps "singer of art songs" is more accurate. Yet each of these descriptions could be justified by listening to a scattering of tunes on any of his *Best Of* compilations, and every person who listens is apt to hear something different.

An exceptional singer with a multi-octave range, Shawn Phillips is perhaps the definitive American cult artist. Perhaps you know his music; maybe you've only heard of him, or possibly remember the image of the long-haired guy with hazel eyes that stared dreamily out from his album covers. His dozen or so albums received only regional airplay through-

out the '70s and '80s, and he never scored the hit single which might have helped him expand his audience. But certain of Shawn's albums were popular in the midwestern and southern United States, on the West Coast, Canada, and South Africa.

Phillips' voice has always been his trademark - hear him once, and you'll usually recognize him again. His 35 year career has been fraught with bad management, lack of promotion, tax problems, and various mis-dealings. At a particularly low point in the early 1980s, he could be found playing guitar and panhandling on Santa Monica Pier. Although currently without a recording contract, Shawn still makes his living as a performer. Stubbornly refusing to take part in the corporate music hustle, he appears at festivals, college concerts and bars - any place where he can connect with his audience. He performs either solo, as part of an

acoustic trio, and occasionally with a 7-piece band. When he's not on the road, Phillips lives with his wife in Austin, Texas, where he serves as a part-time volunteer firefighter and certified emergency technician.

During the 1970s, he tended to be overshadowed by fellow ex-folkies like James Taylor, Paul Simon, Neil Young, Jackson Browne, and Joni Mitchell. Some of these performers lacked Shawn's vocal gifts, but due to other factors - better management, higher visibility, more accessible songwriting - they achieved a level of stardom that would elude Shawn throughout his career. Radio by then had already begun solidifying into the rigid categories in place today. Programmers must have considered Phillips someone who fell just outside their ever-narrowing formats, and excluded him from their playlists. A fellow ex-folksinger who escaped a similar fate was Judy

Collins. Like Phillips, Collins had been consciously moving away from folk as she began using rock and neo-classical orchestral arrangements. Her recording of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" was given a straight-ahead pop treatment, became a Top 10 single, and introduced her to a mass audience in 1968. Had Shawn's "progressive pop" songs reached those listeners who were embracing Collins, he might have enjoyed a similar crossover success.

In the liner notes for the 1992 compilation, *The Best Of Shawn Phillips -- The A&M Years*, Bob Garcia writes: "Phillips has never played the rock and roll game with exactly accepted rules. A prolific writer, Phillips has composed poetry, fairy tales, and even two ballets. He has continually worked outside of mainstream rock, in a variety of musical forms - from his early symphonic, fully-orchestrated musical tone poems, to his much later



photo: Rob Gravis

rock / jazz musical configuration with scat, be-bop and croon vocalizing.”

Shawn adds: “I have chosen to be a musician. I discovered early in life that I had what I consider the greatest gift any individual can be given – the ability to create music. Not rock and roll, but music.”

A&M Records co-owner Jerry Moss says, “I admired and had a great deal of respect for Shawn Phillips when I worked with him. He was, to me, a very interesting and unique artist. He never fit into any particular slot on the programming scale, but he was a wonderful guitarist, composer and vocalist. Bright, sometimes downright funny, and always easy to be around.”

A host of legendary musicians have appeared on Shawn Phillip’s albums; keyboardists Steve Winwood, Joe Sample and Rick Wakeman, guitarists Glen Campbell, Larry Carlton, Caleb Quaye and Robben Ford, bassists Alphonso Johnson, Lee Sklar and Chuck Rainey, drummers Russ Kunkel and Jeff Porcaro, among many others, have contributed their services. Producer Jonathan Weston and orchestral arranger Paul Buckmaster (who also provided orchestration for Elton John) were longtime collaborators, providing lush settings for Shawn’s quirky compositions.

Born in 1943 in Fort Worth, Texas, Shawn is the son of writer/journalist James Atlee Phillips, who published a long series of cold-war espionage novels in the 1960s under the name “Phillip Atlee,” and also wrote the screenplay for the 1958 film “Thunder Road,” starring Robert Mitchum. As a child, Shawn traveled constantly with his father, settling for brief periods in various parts of the United States, Mexico, the Canary Islands, Tahiti, France, England, Switzerland, Germany, Africa and Italy.

Shawn’s musical talents were evident from an early age. In addition to his impressive vocal range, he also became a nimble and creative guitarist. Add to this his talent for composing offbeat songs, many of which reflected the cynicism and spiritual musings of the 1970s, with titles like “Manhole Covered Wagon” and “Schmaltz Waltz.” Finally, there is that unmistakable image: long, straight blonde hair which fell languidly past his shoulders, reaching almost to his waist. Blue-jeaned and black-caped, he was the consummate flower child, a perfect hippie emblem for the times.

While in high school in Fort Worth, Shawn played in his first band, The Straight Jackets, which featured classmate Delbert McClinton on vocals. John Denver (then known as John Deutchendorf) attended the same high school, and occasionally performed with Shawn.

After leaving high school, Shawn embarked on an existence worthy of Kerouac – bumming across the country with his buddy Tim Hardin, getting high on LSD and mescaline, performing in coffeehouses all over the U.S. and Canada. Eventually he became a regular on the Greenwich Village folk scene, along with Hardin, John Sebastian, Carly Simon, and Cass Elliot.

In 1963, at age 20, Shawn emigrated to London, where he made his first album. *First Impressions* was recorded for the Lansdowne Series, a Capitol Records affiliate, and included interpretations of songs by Phil Ochs, Shel Silverstein, Gibson & Camp, Rodgers & Hammerstein, and some originals. The next year he made a second album for

“Second Contribution was one of the finest American progressive rock albums ever made.”

the series, *My Favorite Things*, with a similar format. A merger with CBS resulted in the re-release of both albums, but after poor sales, the struggling folksinger was dropped from the label. (The Lansdowne masters were subsequently acquired by Polygram, and are now owned by Universal.)

In London, Shawn roomed briefly with Donovan, with whom he co-wrote the *Sunshine Superman* album. During this period, he met and hung out with the Moody Blues, Paul Simon, and several Beatles, and also acted in a film called “Run With The Wind.” Returning to America, he was chosen to play the lead in the Broadway musical “Jesus Christ Superstar,” but when the deal fell through, Phillips set off for Europe again, eventually settling in Italy.

In 1970, he was signed to A&M Records, which released his *Contribution* album, a collection of folk-rock songs with cryptic lyrics that seemed deliberately obscure. His next two releases, *Second Contribution* and *Collaboration*, continued in this style. *Furthermore*, from 1974, was recorded with the English rock band Quatermass.

The late 1970s found Shawn experimenting with a variety of musical genres, including classical, jazz, progressive rock, and even disco. A distinct funkiness could be heard on 1975’s *Do You Wonder*, which *Billboard* called “an intriguing mix of disco-styled songs, some soul, a bit of scat singing and a side devoted primarily to classically-oriented material, with strong vocals from Phillips in all of the formats.” Of this period, Shawn says, “The entire U.S.A. went apathetic and spiritually bankrupt, didn’t want to think any more, and escaped with dance music.”

While certain of his albums sold fairly well (*Second Contribution* eventually went platinum in Canada and South Africa), Phillips was unable to come up with the “Holy Grail” he needed to solidify his career – a hit single. In 1973, three of his singles found their way onto the lower rungs of *Billboard*’s Top 100: “We,” “Bright White,” and his last-charting appearance, “Lost Horizon,” the theme from the ill-fated Bacharach/David film musical.

His recording schedule slowed down in the 1980s, although he continued to tour. Reluctantly leaving A&M, he recorded the *Transcendence* album for RCA. “A&M was really a family affair,”

Shawn remembers. “They were truly more interested in who made really good music than who would sell the most singles. There were, of course the usual bunch of naysayers and bean-counters like Bob Fead. Still, some 60,000 records [sold] by word of mouth alone should give you some indication that you might have had a hot one on your hands. At last report, the people who were working there believe that the finest record made at RCA during their tenure was *Transcendence*.”

Phillips survived open-heart surgery in 1991. “I had no idea that 42 years of smoking, stress, and fatty foods, (in that order), had caught up with me. After the procedure, I was glad to be alive, but I felt incredibly violated. After the pain passed I went into a deep depression, and still am to some degree. I know how many people out there love my work, and how I have affected people all over the world, maybe changed their lives or helped them get through crises and trauma, and I cannot get through to them any longer, because of the arrogance, greed, and flat-out stupidity of the people who control the machinery of the music industry.”

In 1994 Shawn Phillips became the first American musician to perform there in over 20 years, ending the cultural embargo which had remained in effect during apartheid. Beginning with the Splashy Fen Festival, a career high-point which demonstrated to Phillips his incredible popularity in South Africa, he went on to play 27 shows in that country, of which 20 were sold out.

Shawn has changed with the times. His current interest in electronics has led to the creation of an elaborate website (shawnphillips.com). Eight of Shawn’s albums have been reissued for the first time on CD, and are selling briskly over the internet. Arlo Hennings, Shawn’s manager, negotiated for the release of *I’m A Loner*, *Shawn, Contribution*, *Collaboration*, *Bright White*, *Furthermore*, *Do You Wonder*, and *Transcendence*. Aided by Phillips’ fan club and the New York-based Wounded Bird Records, Hennings pulled off this coup based on the interest generated by the website. “We don’t know exactly who Shawn’s fan base is anymore,” says Hennings. “We get an average of 1500 hits per day on the site. I believe most of them are USA fans who lost track of Shawn in the early ‘80s. But we seem to

be finding them again every day. I’m always surprised at what an avid bunch they are, too.”

Barry Margolis, who worked in a Minneapolis record store in the early ‘70s, says *Second Contribution* was a monster hit in Minneapolis. “Our local progressive station, KQRS-FM, was playin’ the shit out of that album, along with people like Joni Mitchell and Jackson Browne, while ignoring all the interesting British artists like David Bowie, Mott The Hoople, and Roxy Music.” Arlo Hennings says of *Second Contribution*, “It is Shawn’s *Let It Bleed*, *Dark Side Of The Moon*, – take your pick, hallmark. Personally, I think the record should be recognized by the [Rock & Roll] Hall of Fame as a work of special merit. It was one of the finest American progressive rock albums ever made. In Quebec and South Africa for example, it’s considered a cult classic like *Sergeant Pepper*.”

To further substantiate his claim, Hennings credits Shawn with introducing the sitar into pop music. Phillips was instrumental for the sitar being heard on a few songs from Donovan’s *Sunshine Superman* album in 1966. But the commercially oriented Hall of Fame is not noted for inducting many cult artists into its hallowed ranks; and, notwithstanding its immeasurable stature in Indian classical music, the sitar’s influence on pop music proved to be fleeting, briefly adding a quaint touch of druggy exotica during the psychedelic ‘60s.

Today at 56, Shawn is brimming with insights, and has amassed a bumper crop of new compositions. There are enough, he says, to fill three CDs. What he lacks is a label to provide the financial backing necessary to produce such a project, and then to promote it. Shawn speaks in a Texas accent far too energetic to be called a drawl, and recently discussed his long career and its current challenges with the magazine.

Discoveries: I’m hearing your early folk albums for the first time, and they are certainly as good as a lot of the stuff that came out in the ‘60s. Why weren’t these records released in the United States before now?

Phillips: I don’t know, I’ve never understood it. Never had really aggressive management. I’ve never bothered myself with the business part of things, always trusted someone else, because you really can’t do both simultaneously. So these two albums have finally been released in America on CD, thanks to Terry Wachsmuth at Wounded Bird Records. He used the original artwork – talk about a pimply-faced kid on the record cover!

Discoveries: What brought you to London when you were 20?

Phillips: I went to England on my way to India, to study the sitar. I was playing at a party, and I met Dennis Preston, who unfortunately is now deceased. He was involved with Columbia’s “Lansdowne” series. He liked my playing and singing, and he asked if I’d like to make an album.

Discoveries: Just like that? Had you been performing prior to this?

Phillips: I’d been performing in California, New York – I’d been doing gigs for quite some time. I was in New York with Tim Hardin, and then we traveled out to California. During that time I was getting gigs in all kinds of places, the Midwest, Toronto. I spent some time with Joni Mitchell there when she was just getting started.

Discoveries: Did you perform with her?

Phillips: No, she wasn't performing then, but I taught her how to play guitar. I was playing in Saskatchewan, at a place called the Louie Reo Coffee House, where she was working as a waitress. I was playing my red twelve-string at that time, and she said, "Can you give me some guitar lessons?" So I gave her a few lessons, taught her a few things.

Discoveries: How did you discover the sitar?

Phillips: I had gone to Toronto in around 1963 or '64 to play at a coffee house called the Purple Onion, and somebody there told me to go see this guy called Ravi Shankar, that he plays this strange instrument called the sitar. So, on my night off, I went to his concert in Toronto, and after the concert, he was kind enough to sit down with me for about four hours. He showed me how to sit with the instrument, how to hold it, the very basics of the sitar, and that hooked me.

I think Donovan was the first person in pop music to use a sitar, on a tune off the *Sunshine Superman* album called "Guenevere."

Discoveries: How did you happen to get signed by A&M?

Phillips: Jonathan Weston, who was my English manager, came to Italy after I'd lived there a couple of years, and he said, "Do you want to come back to America and make a record?" And I said, "No, I've got my 2-track Revox tape recorder, I'm having a real good time just creating music, and I'm not ready for any of this to come out yet." He said, "Well, what would you

" This entire industry is made up of nothing but charlatans and thieves."

like to do if you had the chance?" So I told him about the trilogy I wanted to make, that included the fairy tale, and the semi-classical music I'd been writing, and all the new songs, as well as the first attempt at science fiction on a record. So he went back to England, he got together with Dick James, and they came up with the \$25,000 we needed to record three albums.

We did in fact record all three, and Jonathan took them to a guy named Jerry Love at A&M Records, who listened to them and called Jerry Moss that afternoon and said, "We have to sign this guy!" They flew Jonathan and me out to Los Angeles, and we did the deal then. In my opinion, Jerry Moss is the only person with any integrity in the recording industry.

He's still my friend to this day, and I have a great deal of respect for the

man.

Discoveries: What was it like to be a pop star during the 1970s? Were you pretty much living the "high life" back then?

Phillips: Well, it wasn't really so much the "high life," because I wasn't living in the United States. I was still in Positano, a small fishing village in Italy. The best part about it was, I was making enough money to be able to continue to buy the equipment that I needed to go forward in creating music. I finally became aware that people were listening to my music and really responding to it.

Discoveries: So far, you've released 14 albums. Who are your fans?

Phillips: People love my work. That's all there is to it. The funniest part about it is that most of my records were sold in non-English speaking

countries.

Because of this, I know it was the music that carried them. The most difficult thing for any musician, composer, or songwriter to do is to create unique melodies. Over the thousands of years that music has been created, for someone to come up with a brand new melody is really the most difficult thing. That's one of the reasons I veer more toward writing what I consider classical music. I was always influenced by classical composers, Debussy, Prokofiev, those kind of people. And when Pete [Robinson] and Paul [Buckmaster] jumped into my life 35 years ago, they started playing me composers like Krzystof Penderecki, and that totally turned my head around.

Discoveries: People don't think of Shawn Phillips as a classical composer.

Phillips: Part of the reason for that is, there is no category for me. If they had a box for composer, it would just open up an entirely new field in the music industry. They almost tried to do that with New Age, but it ended up a lot of computer sequencing.

Discoveries: Do you listen to New Age music?

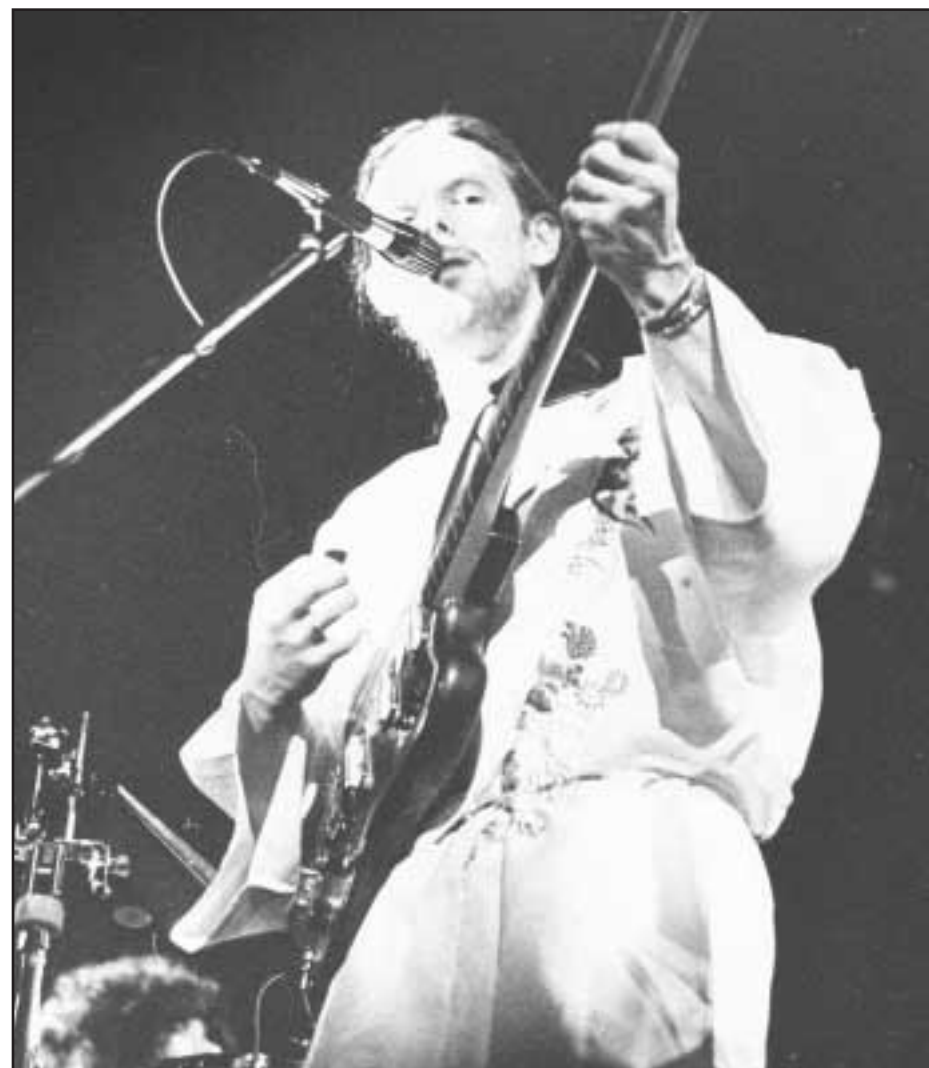
Phillips: No, there's not a lot of it that's much good. There's a couple of folks out there that are happening, but not too many.

Discoveries: Would you be comfortable as a New Age musician?

Phillips: No, I couldn't go that route, because, very simply, there's too much energy in my work. The only thing I can say is, they can put any label they want on me at this point, as long as I make a living at it.

Discoveries: You have threatened to

BELOW: South Africa tour 1994; L-R: Jonny Fourie, Shawn, Trevor Donjeany



BELOW: "Bright White Tour" 1975

title your memoirs "The Two Most Important Words in the Music Business: Fuck You!" Sounds like you really been screwed.

Phillips: I have. If your manager, or whoever it is you're working with - if they do something wrong, it's considered your fault. Another big part of my disillusionment with the music industry is [one experience] that could have turned my entire life around, but it really disappointed me. I was approached by two gentlemen, Kevin Maher and Wink Martindale, to write some music for a television special called "The Game Show Biz." I wrote the music for it, 36 minutes of music for this program. I did everything by the book, cue sheets, index cards, the whole lot, who the publisher is, all this stuff. I presented it to ASCAP, and I waited and waited for my royalties. I asked the people at ASCAP, 'How does this work, how do I get paid?' and they told me, 'For anything you do that goes before the public, you will be compensated as the composer.' That was their promise to me. I remember the guy saying this. Well, I did this program, and it aired on 136 stations across the nation, including WNBC in New York City, at 9:00 p.m. Prime time! And I waited and waited, and finally I went back to ASCAP and said, 'Where are my royalties for this work?' and they came back with something like, 'Oh, well, we have a company that does random sampling. They'll watch the television for four hours in Dubuque, Iowa, and if your program comes up, we pay you, and if it doesn't, we don't pay you.'

They called this an excuse! Random sampling. I never got a penny for it. Had they paid me what they were supposed to pay me, it would have been about \$468,000. That really disappointed me, that really turned me off to the whole thing.

Discoveries: Wasn't there any way to fight this?

Phillips: We tried, with lawyers and everything, but because of the previous problems with my management, I had some I.R.S. problems, and there wasn't a lawyer in the world that would touch it.

Discoveries: What did you end up getting paid for this work?

Phillips: Not a penny. At that point, I just decided that this entire industry is made up of nothing but charlatans and thieves. That's what "Money Dance" (from *The Truth if It Kills*) was all about, which I'm going to re-record, because it's an important tune."

Discoveries: It's too bad you have to write a song like that.

Phillips: I know. But all my songs are written from my own life experience. That's what my dad taught me.

He was a great influence on my creativity. He said 'You need to write with



Hugh Ambrose

anger, with wonder, and with technique. Anger is, when you look at the world around you; is it a perfect place? If you think it is, then you're probably certifiable. Wonder comes from looking at the world through the eyes of a child. And technique is keeping a balance between the two.' That's the way I write, always has been.

Discoveries: The theme of your current tour is "Health, Love, and Clarity." What does this mean?

Phillips: I realized that you can't have any one of those three without the other two. I like to come up with sayings, I like to take situations in life and give them a verbal definition that anybody will understand. People ask me what my philosophy is. I tell them, 'If I tell you what my philosophy is, I'm just telling you how full of shit I am!'

Discoveries: Which singers do you listen to?

Phillips: My favorite singer is a man named Carl Anderson. Carl sang the part of Judas in "Jesus Christ Superstar." Great voice.

Discoveries: What was your involvement with "Jesus Christ Superstar?"

Phillips: Well, I'd heard the record, I knew Peter Robinson had played on it, I knew Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice. My agency sent me to the audition. They gave me a song to learn, "The Garden of Gethsemane," and it took me about 45 minutes. I was in Philadelphia, doing a concert, so I flew up to New York at 9:00 in the morning, walked out onto this stage in a Broadway theater, and it was all dark in front of me. I sang the song, accompanied by a single piano player, and I heard a voice in the darkness say, 'That's fine, he'll do fine.' I recognized the voice, and I said 'Andrew? Andrew is that you?' and he said 'Yes!' So that's how I got chosen, and the way

ABOVE: Shawn Phillips and Donovan, 1964

that I got unchosen was simply because Robert Stigwood subsequently discovered that Jonathan Weston was my manager, CMA was my agent, Dick James was my publisher, A&M was my record company, and Stigwood wasn't going to get his finger in the pie!

Discoveries: Were you disappointed?

Phillips: A bit, at the time. But in retrospect, no. Ted Neely, who ended up getting the part, is a good friend of mine. He's happy with what he's doing now, but he always felt that the part limited him, he hasn't really been able to do anything else after that.

Discoveries: Tell me about the movie you starred in.

Phillips: In 1964, I made a movie called "Run With the Wind" in England. I wrote the music for it, and Phillip Martell did the musical direction. The movie starred another guy named Sean, I can't remember his last name, and the Shakespearian actress Francesca Annis (I wrote the songs "Woman" and "Hey, Miss Lonely" for Francesca). Anyway, this other Sean played the boxer, and I played the singer. It was fun, I loved doing it.

Discoveries: You have a very wide vocal range. Has your voice ever failed you during a show?

Phillips: When I played at Lincoln Center, I was sick as a dog on the day of the concert. I had no voice at all. I went to see this famous voice doctor, and two minutes before I was supposed to start the performance, he sprayed my larynx and vocal chords with pure adrenaline. A minute-and-a-half later, I went out on the stage and sang like a bird! It was phenomenal. He sprayed me once more during the intermission,

and I went out there and finished the concert. Of course I didn't sleep for two days, but it was well worth it.

Discoveries: What kind of venues are you playing these days?

Phillips: On my Canadian tour, it's mostly college gigs, bars. For me it never really matters where I play. If I'm in a bar, I turn it into a concert hall. This has lost me work in the United States. I've tried to go back into certain clubs where I'd packed the place, and the manager says, 'Nah, you made my bar into a concert hall. We don't sell enough alcohol when you play here!'

Discoveries: How did you first discover you had a large South African following?

Phillips: I ran into some South African people at Peter Robinson's house. They were staying downstairs from him. When Peter introduced us, these people just went nuts! I said, 'You guys know my music?' and they said, 'Didn't you know? You're bigger than Paul Simon in South Africa!' I told them they were out of their minds, but they said 'Absolutely not!' and soon afterwards I got over there, and it was very strange.

When we drove in from the airport, I kept seeing signs and posters on telephone poles and walls, with my name on them. I said, 'Is that the advertising for the concerts we're going to do?' and they said 'No, those are concerts that have already happened.' I said, 'Wait a minute, I've never been here before, man!' They stopped the van, and I got out and looked at one of the posters. It had my name in big letters, and underneath it said, "A Tribute to Shawn Phillips." It was singer/songwriters in South Africa that were doing my works! I was fairly impressed with that.

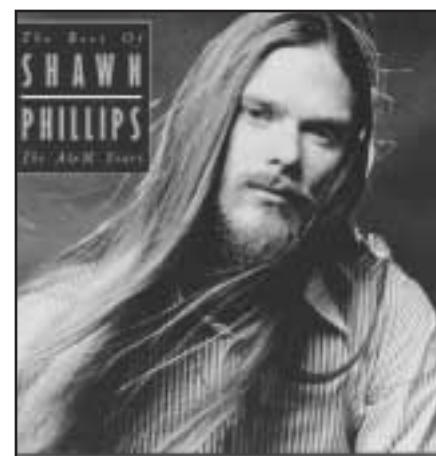
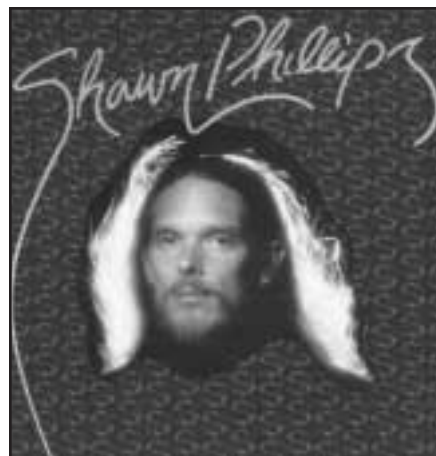
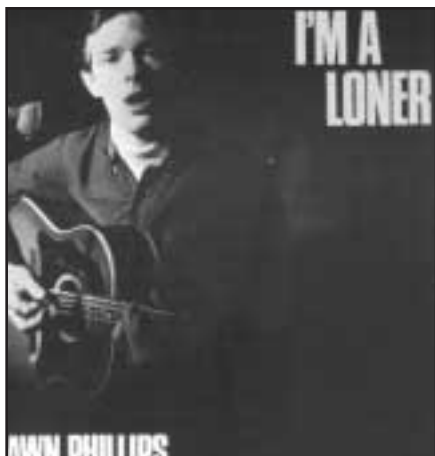
Discoveries: And you'd been unaware of this?

Phillips: Completely! It was very gratifying. I was absolutely amazed. Within the next six months, after that first visit, I ended up doing more shows than any international artist had ever done there. I enjoyed it immensely. I think we're scheduled to go back there in March, 2000.

Discoveries: Tell me about your new project.

Phillips: I would like to re-record some songs that appeared on an album I made in Montreal in 1992, *The Truth if It Kills*. On that project, the producer, Michel Le Francois, didn't follow my vision. I want to re-record those tunes, because they're good ones.

What I have in mind is to do a three-CD set, because I've been writing classical music for about 15 years now. I want to do all the new things I have, re-record a few others, and present all of it together as one project - and I'd like to use the



classical music as links between the songs.

Discoveries: Why is it so hard to get your new songs recorded?

Phillips: I haven't the faintest idea. I'm looking for an investor. After being in the business all these years, I don't want to do it unless I can work with the same tools that the major labels use. I need about \$400,000, which in the music industry is chicken feed; sometimes they spend that much for production alone. My production fee will be about \$150,000, that will do everything that I want. Paul Buckmaster and Peter Robinson will do the arranging and producing. It'll be the "Terrible Trio" back together again!

The remainder of the money will be used for promotion. My manager estimates that in order for the investor to recoup, I only have to sell 77,000 CDs. At that point, the investor will recoup everything plus 10%. My point is, it's not much of a risk for the investor because we're not trying to establish a market - the market is already there. We've just got to tell people there's something new on the shelf. If I can't sell 77,000 CDs, I figure I'm in the wrong business.

Discoveries: People in the recording industry don't seem to have the vision to look at what the public really thinks of your work. The only thing they look at is 'How did your last album do?'

Phillips: Well, my last album had a legal injunction on it that I made so that it couldn't be released anywhere else except Quebec, because I didn't like it. Basically what happened was that halfway through the album, I told the guy that he wasn't going to sell the record, and he didn't believe me. Basically, because I'm a platinum record seller up here in Quebec and Canada, the guy was absolutely assured he could sell it. He gave it to the people at the label [Imagine] to listen to, they listened to it for a couple of days, and just gave it back to him, saying, 'it's a beautiful production, man, but it ain't Shawn Phillips. We know the work that he does.'

Discoveries: So this was not a good collaboration.

Phillips: No, it was not a good collaboration. Had he listened to me, it could have been a fantastic record, an amazing record, if he'd just let me do what I wanted to do.

Discoveries: Are Peter Robinson and Paul Buckmaster eager to work with you again?

Phillips: Both Peter and Paul are 110% gung-ho. They really want to do it. For Peter, taking the time out to do this project is very difficult, because he's probably one of the top ten film scorers in the world right now. But he's committed to the project.

Discoveries: The big-selling music today seems to be rap, alternative, techno, and smooth jazz. Have these trends affected your market?

Phillips: No, if I can get the word out, and I have the money to hire the independent promotion men to go to the radio stations. If I can get my tunes played on the radio again, I'll sell records. The point is, I have to get people to go to those twelve or thirteen guys that control the entirety of the AM/FM formats across the United States, and say, 'Look, if you put this record in rotation, then we'll give you a percentage of the action. Because that's just the way it works. It's not payola, it's business. Your record is

your advertisement. So, play our record and we'll pay you for the advertising that you're providing. That's just how it's done, it's business as usual.

Discoveries: So it must be frustrating for [you].

Phillips: It's very frustrating. For the creator of the music, it is not a business. If you think of your craft of songwriting as business, you cannot craft a song. You can write a song to fit into some commercial formula, but you're not really crafting a song.

For example, on that ill-fated album, there's a song called "Most of Us Don't Understand at All." I think it's particularly well-crafted, but what they want on commercial radio is music that is predictable. If you want "predictable" music, you are never going to touch anyone, you are never going to move anyone's soul. The words might take you to the edge, but it's the music that makes you jump.

Discoveries: Did you expect you'd still be touring when you reached your fifties?

Phillips: No, I did not. When I was living in Italy, and things were happening in the 1970s, I thought, 'Oh yeah, everything will work out. I'll be pretty set for my old age, as it were.' But it didn't turn out that way.

Discoveries: How did things change for you after your quadruple bypass in 1991?

Phillips: Well, I felt pretty defeated. I wanted to do something. At that point, I felt like I was a failure at music. My wife has been wonderful, she's been my biggest supporter, and she made me realize that the music itself was wonderful. It was the business end of it that was ugly. I just kept running into unscrupulous people. This is very difficult to say, but everything, everything revolves around money. I just felt that, since I'm not making money, it's just not worth it. So I started looking around for something I could do that would affect people and myself, and got into what I'm doing now.

After the bypass, all those feelings of despondency and depression - I mean, you look in the mirror and you feel violated. But soon after that, at home in Austin, I saw on television this community bulletin board type of thing, and they said they needed volunteer firefighters and dispatchers, and I had been a firefighter when I was in the Navy. So I called them up and said, 'I've had this surgery, I'm recovering, and so on, and they said, 'Fine. Here's the fire phone.' And they put the fire phone in my house!

So I did dispatching for a few months, and as I gradually got better, I started doing maintenance on the trucks around the fire station. Then I started going to the various training academies, and now I'm a certified firefighter in Texas. I just finished a 14-month course, where I am now also an EMT [Emergency Medical Technician]. Believe me, there's not a whole lot of difference between a double standing ovation at the Isle of Wight, with 650,000 people, and an 83-year old lady with a fractured pelvis, after you've transferred her from the ambulance to the ER bed, and she grabs your arm and she looks into your eyes and says 'Thank you so much for taking care of me.' Not a whole lot of difference between the two.

DISCOGRAPHY

ALBUMS:

- I'm A Loner* Columbia - Catalog number unknown (1964) Re-released as: *Favorite Things* Capitol - Catalog number unknown (1965)
- Shawn* Columbia - Catalog number unknown (1965) Re-released as: *First Impressions* Capitol - Catalog number unknown (1966)
- Contribution* A&M SP-4241 (1970)
- Second Contribution* A&M SP-4282 (1970)
- Collaboration* A&M SP-4324 (1971)
- Faces* A&M SP-4363 (1972)
- Bright White* A&M SP-4402 (1973)
- Furthermore* A&M SP-3662 (1974)
- Do You Wonder* A&M SP-4539 (1975)
- Rumplestiltskin's Resolve* A&M SP-4582 (1976)
- Spaced* A&M SP-4650 (1977)
- Transcendence* RCA - AFL1-3028 (1978)
- Beyond Here Be Dragons* (CD) Chameleon Records D2-74764 (1988)
- The Truth If It Kills* (CD) Imagine IMD-2042 (1994)
- The Best Of Shawn Phillips* A&M SP-9045 (Canada) (1980)
- The Best Of Shawn Phillips - The A&M Years* (CD) A&M 31454 0016 2 (1992)
- Another Contribution: An Anthology* (CD) A&M 31454 0508-2 (1995)
- Lost Horizon* (1973 soundtrack) Bell B-1300
- The Best Of Shawn Phillips - The A&M Years* (CD) A&M 31454 0016 2
- Another Contribution: An Anthology* (CD) A&M 31454 0508-2
- I'm a Loner* (CD) Wounded Bird WOU 1748
- Shawn* (CD) Wounded Bird WOU 6006
- Contribution* (CD) Wounded Bird WOU 4241

- Second Contribution* (CD) A&M 7502-13128
- Collaboration* Wounded Bird WOU 4324
- Bright White* Wounded Bird WOU 4402
- Furthermore* Wounded Bird WOU 3662
- Do You Wonder* Wounded Bird WOU 4539
- Transcendence* Wounded Bird WOU 3028

SINGLES:

- The (New) Frankie And Johnny Song / Cloudy Summer Afternoon - Ascot 2152 (1964)
- Hey Nelly Nelly / Solitude - Columbia DB7611 (1965)
- Doesn't Anybody Know My Name / Nobody Listens - Columbia DB7699 (1965)
- Little Tin Soldier / London Town - Columbia DB7789 (1965)
- Summer Came / Storm - Columbia DB7956 (1966)
- Woman Mine / Stargazer - Parlophone R5606
- The Christmas Song / Lovely Lady - A&M 1238 (1970)
- L Ballade / We - A&M 1402 (1972)
- Lost Horizon / Landscape - A&M 1405 (1973)
- Anello / Hey Miss Lonely - A&M 1435 (1973)
- Bright White / Dream Queen - A&M 1482 (1973)
- All The Kings And Castles / Salty Tears - A&M 1507 (1974)
- Do You Wonder / Summer Vignette - A&M 1750 (1975)
- One Way Ticket - Imagine MS-2037 (1994)

Shawn Phillips today



Arlo Hennings