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The ever-changing ballad of Shawn Phillips

Minstrel, maestro, medicine man - this globe-trotting artist has done it all, and on his own terms

THERE WAS ALWAYS SOMETHING MYSTICAL ABOUT SHAWN PHILLIPS.

The melodies were complex, multi-layered and unearthly, bearing no resemblance to any other music of the 1970s. The lyrics were impressionistic, idealistic and poetic. His appearance was just as trippy, with full hippie regalia, long, flowing hair, and a faraway look in his eyes. He had an ethereal mastery of the 12-string guitar, and that voice. That voice. It had to have come from somewhere else. No one in the world of rock music before or since could range more than four octaves with the ease and otherworldliness of Shawn Phillips, who seemed to manifest fully-blown from Italy, half a planet away from Haight Ashbury, at the time of his A&M record label debut in 1970.

It's four decades later, and I'm racing through the frozen-foods section of an Austin, Texas, grocery store with the master of mystique, his wife and their 4-year-old child. We're rounding up TV dinners and other supplies for their cross-country trek in an RV, as Shawn Phillips keeps his music alive in the 21st century, still singing, playing and appearing remarkably the same. And yet, no one in the store knows of the alternate identity of this guy pushing a grocery cart. His Southern drawl alone blends him right in with the other grocery shoppers. Despite his musical and philosophical credentials, Phillips is a remarkably regular guy, with a good-ol'-boy personality and as firm a grasp on the real as the surreal.

Back at the RV park, he says, "Edgar Winter once said to me. 'Hey man, you're from Texas. How come you got so far from the roots?' I said, 'Because there's a whole tree above the ground, Edgar!'"

Shawn grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, among other places (Tahiti, Spain, the Canary Islands), living a gypsy life with his father, James Phillips, a mystery novelist who wrote under the name Phillip Atlee.

"Jim always wrote on location. That's why the moving. He didn't want anybody to write him and say, 'No, the hotel is on that side of the street.' My father was Raymond Chandler's favorite author. Raymond Chandler would call him up at three in the morning and natter on to him. Then 45 minutes later, he'd go, 'Raymond, you're drunk, you son of a Go to bed.'"

Phillips still credits his father as a tremendous influence, particularly as it relates to his usage of the English language in song.

"When I tried to read him a lyric once, I'm standing there all proud, he grabbed me by the front of the shirt and he jerked me about an inch away from his face, and he said, 'Listen, punk. I've been writing for half a century, and I still can't write a better line than 'Jesus wept.'"

The father and son's nomadic lifestyle instilled in Shawn a willingness to live life on a grand scale, starting with a stint in the Navy at the beginning of the '60s, before he moved into music. He had played the guitar since his father had given him one at age 6, so when he left the service, it was off to make music, and thus was the beginning - or perhaps the second chapter - of a Forrest Gump-like existence.

In California, Phillips became a folk singer, partnering up with fellow artist Tim Hardin. In New York, he wrote and performed in the coffee houses with Hardin. Both crossed paths with a new wave of new folk stylists, including a fresh-from-Minnesota Bob Dylan. In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, Phillips spent some time with a young waitress, further developing her guitar skills over the course of two weeks. (Her name was Joni Mitchell.) In Toronto, Phillips got a three-hour sitar lesson from an Indian musician named Ravi Shankar.

After two folk music albums on Columbia, Phillips was off to England, where he would give George Harrison his first sitar lessons and hang out with his other contemporaries, Rolling Stone Brian Jones among the closest. He was Donovan's roommate and collaborator on much of his work, including the "Sunshine Superman" album (Donovan has acknowledged that Phillips wrote "Season of the Witch" but never was credited for it).

And somehow, Phillips found himself singing backup on what would become the most important album in rock music history.

"You don't think about the fact that this is gonna be some kind of music history. You're just a bunch of guys hanging out and getting stoned. That's what we were. We were a bunch of musicians hanging out, getting stoned, carrying on. We'd known each other a year by that point, and Paul invited us to Abbey Road, and we went there. We went to the studio, and at some point Paul says, 'We need backup vocals on this. This is what I want you to sing.' So David Crosby and I went in there and we sang backup vocals on 'Lovely Rita.' And then we watched Paul put the first of the chords on the end of 'Day in the Life.' They used 22 pianos in the end. They had a couple or three pianos in that night. That's just the way that happens."

Paul of course, was Sir Paul McCartney, just one member of the thriving London musical scene of the time, where Phillips was, perhaps unconsciously, evolving into something more than the folk singer represented on those first two albums.

"We were hanging out at The Moody Blues' [house] one night, talking about sports, and I went, 'Lions: 12. Christians: Zero.' John thought that was hilarious. Paul didn't like it at all."

Phillips then starred in the film "Run with the Wind," where he became romantically involved with co-star Francesca Annis (who went on to star in Roman Polanski's "Macbeth" and David Lynch's "Dune"). The couple moved to Positano, Italy, which Phillips would call home for 13 years, the entire run of his A&M recording period and the defining era of his music.

Shawn Phillips became a rock star with a distinctive sound. Five years had passed since his Columbia folk albums. Between 1970 and 1972, he released four extraordinary records: "Contribution," "Second Contribution," "Collaboration" and "Faces."

Each challenged a generation of cosmically conscious young adults whose minds had been opening to more complex music and messages since that Beatles album with "Lovely Rita" created a world of musical and spiritual possibility.

Phillips did not write or record three-minute pop songs. His beautifully mysterious pieces defied standard structure, demanding an attentive ear, reflection, consideration and deep thought. This was rock music that had more in common with Beethoven than the rocker who told him to roll over. It was a time when the Album-Oriented Rock radio format came into existence, and more richly produced tracks could be heard more clearly on the FM dial. By 1973, Phillips' transcendent voice could be heard over the opening credits of the motion picture "Lost Horizon." The song was by Burt Bacharach - as were all the songs in the big-budget musical - but it was a good fit, as the song and the film depicted an imaginary Shangri-la that required a rich imagination, like Phillips' own songs.

As we're sitting at a picnic table at the RV park on the outskirts of Austin, talking about that voice, you'd never know it's the same guy. Shawn's speaking voice is gravelly, smoky and Southern-accented. Yet he can still sing like he used to, still a master at a craft of his own vocal creation.

"There was no conscious thought to it whatsoever. I would write, and I would hear those high notes. I wouldn't actually sing them. I would only sing them in my mind for several months, and then when I was singing a song, I would actually go for it," he says. "When I went for it, I would then learn the muscle position that allowed me to hit that note, because you have to dream it before you can manifest it. So I would dream the note. I would imagine the note, and then I would just try and reach that note."

This visit in Austin is a homecoming of sorts for Shawn, as he had moved back to his native Texas for a number of years, living just outside of Austin from the mid-'90s to 2003. Briarcliff is a small community in the Hill Country, much like neighboring Spicewood, where Willie Nelson lives when he's not on the road that never ends. And yes, the two like-minded musical dalai lamas did cross paths. Willie did occasionally pick up the phone and call Shawn - but it wasn't to jam.

"Occasionally, after an [ambulance] call, my phone would ring, and Willie's going, 'What's going on, man? I heard all the sirens.' It's just a medical call, Willie, don't worry about it.' He was calling to find out what the sirens were about," Phillips recalls.

And this is where his cerebral music and firm grasp of reality collide: Shawn Phillips is a fireman. And it's a job he takes every bit as seriously as he does his music.

Shawn filled me in on his years in Central Texas, and how he came to be here. "I played a concert in Austin with Van [Wilks, Austin guitarist]. We finished the concert, we were packing up the stuff, and he said, 'You don't look so good. You're gray, and your lips are blue.' I went, 'Oh really?' The next day, we called Van's doctor, [who] said, 'I don't even need to see him. Take him straight to David Abramson, cardiologist. David put me on the treadmill I lasted about eight seconds. He took me in his office and said, 'I listened to your music all through high school and I

listened to your music all through medical school. And I'm telling you, no bullshit, you're going from that chair to Seton hospital. We're doing an angiogram.' So two days later, I had the quadruple bypass. And that's when I moved to Austin. This area became my home," he says.

While recuperating, Phillips just wanted something to do. Having been a firefighter in the Navy, the thought of doing that again, and becoming a Briarcliff community volunteer appealed to his senses of adventure and of service. Shawn Phillips was 51 years old.

"I thought these guys will have a fire once every two years with a community of 3,000 people. They'll have a medical call maybe twice a month. So I called up the chief at the time and I said, 'This is the situation, I'm recuperating.' They went, 'Fine, here's the fire phone.' They put it in my house, 'cause they knew I wasn't going anywhere." He was soon going through fire training academies and certification as an emergency medical technician.

"My first call as an EMT was an 89-year-old female named Clara, who had fractured her pelvis by stepping out of bed too hard. I took a great deal of care to keep her from suffering before we transferred to Austin EMS. When I was leaving Clara, I said, 'We're gonna give you to these guys, but you're in very good hands.' She was very frightened. I said, 'We have to go because we've got more calls coming.' As I left, she grabbed me by the arm, and she looked me in the eyes and she said, 'Thank you so much for taking care of me.' And the music business just disappeared into the distance. I got a double standing ovation in front of 657,000 in the Isle of Wight in the 1970s. You can imagine that rush.

"Clara was a much more powerful moment, because that work is immediate. And it's life and death. It's as real as you can get. I really loved doing it. I still love doing it," he says.

As the suburban community outside Austin grew, so did Shawn's responsibilities and passion for his career saving lives. This was it for him. He ultimately walked away from his music, presumably for good.

His Italian days were over, but he managed to meet his own Juliet down in Texas. She was a beautiful woman originally from South Africa, and she wanted to return there. It might have been a tough move to make for Shawn until he learned a crucial fact about his day job: mandatory retirement.

"I wasn't about to move [from Texas]. I only moved when the fun went away!" he says. "I couldn't ride on the fire engine anymore. Mandatory retirement at 60 means that: You can't even ride on the engine."

Shawn loves his life and his wife in South Africa, but removing himself from the meaningful responsibility of his life-saving work was no easy task. So he now does it at the southern tip of the African continent, and he's just as passionate in discussing it.

"Now, when a call comes in, it's Sea Rescue," he explains. "It only took me less than two and a half years to certify as a firefighter and EMT. But it took me four and a half years before they ever actually let me go on an operation at Sea Rescue. That's because at 4 o'clock in the morning

on the Indian Ocean when you're 40 nautical miles out to sea, you don't f\*\*\* about. That's all there is to it. I'm a navigator with them. I gotta know where we are, because it's pitch black out there. That's the work that I really love to do."

Still, his drive to create music simply could not be retired. The dichotomy that has fueled his soul, the earthy regular guy with a constant eye on the world of imagination, continues to drive the way he fills his days: life-saving emergency work and soul-saving sounds that envision a serendipitous peace.

And the intangible funds the tangible, as his music is his family's only source of income. That's why he and Juliet and their 4-year-old son crossed the pond to the States to rent an RV and tour the country, taking his music directly to the people.

Live performances create income; decades of album sales do not. Even after releasing 10 major-label albums and another 10 in his career, Phillips has never profited from the recordings - a result of the convoluted machinations of the recording industry.

Commissioned work appears from time to time; Phillips has composed a classical symphonic piece that has been performed by the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. Not bad for a self-taught musician who still does not read music.

Such musical achievements have surely been advanced by his fascination with technology and early embrace of the modern computer's usefulness in the crafting of a song. Phillips' live performances are usually solo, yet filled with rich orchestration, created and incorporated on the computer live during the show.

"The technology has allowed me to do so much stuff with classical music," he says. "If I write something for a trumpet line and I need that trumpet to triple tongue, then [the program] Midi allows me to play it slowly and speed it up without changing the pitch. And the technology allows me to play a cello with guitar."

Shawn loves talking about his techno-geek side as much as he does the fire and rescue side.

"I started with digital performer No. 1. That had to be early '80s. I got a Mac SE and I started learning how to do this. That was the beginning of digital recording. Pro Tools didn't even exist at that time. I use Digital Performer. Everything you hear on stage except for the drum samples, I am creating in real time. I create loops. When you hear strings, I'm playing the strings. It's not pre-recorded or pre-sequenced. I'm actually triggering the strings, via the guitar as it patches into the computer. And I'm using a plug-in called Symphonic, and I'm triggering string section samples."

It's the next night at Threadgill's World Headquarters, the restaurant and venue for the Shawn Phillips concert. Threadgill's serves as something of a monument to a famous Austin concert hall from the 70s, the Armadillo World Headquarters, which sat less than 100 yards away and played host to a Shawn Phillips concert in the mid-1970s, as evidenced by a poster on the restaurant wall.

The outside stage in the beer garden is immaculately lined with equipment and guitars for what is essentially a one-man show. The two-hour performance showcased Phillips' guitar prowess; on this night, it accompanies his voice, and the artist takes both instruments to demanding and stirring heights. There's also extraordinary guitar work from Phillips' old Austin friend, Van Wilks.

It's a fully religious experience for those in attendance, the people who still believe music should be about the pursuit of health, love and clarity, the three words Shawn uses when signing copies of his albums. It is for them that he has, in two hours, created another world, with computer-added flourishes on some songs and with Wilks' masterful touches on others. Several songs are rendered in a truly solo presentation, just a man, a guitar and an awe-inspiring voice.

But after it's over, the real world of Shawn Phillips returns, as the man in his late sixties serves as his own road crew, loading all his guitars, equipment and computer accessories into the storage section of the RV, ready to take his family and his music to the next town. That's when it hits me: Shawn Phillips has become his own father. He's an artist, creating the unreal in the real world, writing for half a century, doing it on the road with his little boy in tow.

I ask him about this massive pile of equipment.

"It's a thousand pounds of stuff. It's all in the compartments of this motor home. This is what they pay me for, for loading out, setting it up, tearing it down, and packing it back in the bus. The playing," he adds with a smile, "I do for free." GM

Shawn Phillips (right) performs with Donovan, with whom he collaborated on the "Sunshine Superman" album. Photo courtesy Shawn Phillips.

A self-taught musician, Shawn Phillips still does not read music to this day - although he composes it. RCA photo.

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