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Rescue remedy

Aug 3, 2014 | Sue de Groot

Born in Texas and living in PE, legendary singer-songwriter Shawn Phillips is about to launch his 25th album. He tells Sue de Groot why, after 50 years in the business, he's not about to stop making music or saving stranded boats



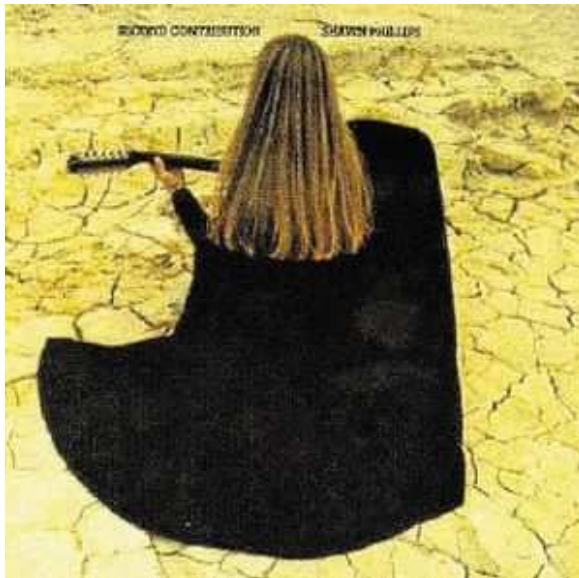
Shawn Phillips

Photograph by: Waldo Swiegers



Second childhood: Left, Donovan, Arlo Hennings, Liam, Juliette, Shawn and Donovan's wife Linda at the Royal Albert Hall in 2011 for the 25th anniversary concert of 'Sunshine Superman', on which Phillips played sitar. Juliette says, "Liam kept singing, 'They call me Mellow Yellow, that's right', and Donovan was so taken with him, until Liam added another verse: 'If it's yellow, let it mellow, if it's brown, flush it down.' We were in the middle of a drought in PE."

Photograph by: Sunday Times



Good hair day: Album cover for 'Second Contribution' (1970)

Photograph by: Sunday Times



Phillips in the '70s

Photograph by: Sunday Times



High tide: Phillips in Positano in 1976, hair growing back after his accident

Photograph by: Sunday Times

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'The music takes you to the edge, but the words make you jump'

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The Sony Playstation Theatre in Parkhurst, Johannesburg, used to be a MOTH hall for World War 2 veterans. It smells quietly of ghosts and dust. A faded red backdrop is pinned up behind the stage and in the wings are two trellised screens that might have been left over from a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

On a cold night in July, around 200 people huddle on plastic chairs, waiting to hear a different kind of veteran. Shawn Phillips takes the stage with seven guitars and a looper, ponytail gleaming in the spotlight. There is a restless rustle of windbreakers as he tunes up, then he launches into Landscape, from the 1972 album Faces, and all movement ceases.

Not even a moth flutters as Phillips's agile fingers blur on the guitar. The nails of his right hand are honed to long marble nibs by years of plucking steel. His eight-octave voice soars to treble heaven one second and descends to a chest-thudding bass the next.

Rewind 44 years, to 1970. The line-up at the Isle of Wight festival included Joni Mitchell, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, Richie Havens and The Who.

"I was so stoned I could barely walk," says Phillips. "We all were." But he performed an impromptu solo set and 657000 people gave him a double standing ovation.

Sitting in the winter sun the day after his Parkhurst concert, Phillips, who hasn't been stoned for some decades, says the size of the audience makes no difference to the way he plays.

"I have to create the excitement I felt when I wrote that song," he says. "That's my job. Doesn't matter where it is. I'll do a private concert for two people in their home, and it's exactly the same as what you would hear at the Guthrie." The Guthrie is Minneapolis's famous concert hall, where Phillips still holds the record for the most sold-out shows.

There's another reason for his sanguine outlook. Phillips qualified as a fireman and emergency medical technician in the US in 1994. "One of my first calls as an EMT was an 89-year-old female who had fractured her pelvis. She'd never been to hospital and she was terribly frightened.

I told her it was going to be okay, put her in a scoop stretcher so she wouldn't hurt, and got her to the hospital. I said you're in good hands now. Before I could go she grabbed me by the arm, looked in my eyes and said, thank you so much for taking care of me." He gives a rumbling Texan laugh. "And the music business disappeared into the distance."

Phillips has a recording studio in Port Elizabeth ("the Austin, Texas of SA"), where he lives with his South African wife, Juliette, and their eight-year-old son, Liam. He writes music constantly but would rather talk about his work as a volunteer for the National Sea Rescue Institute.

"I would have done duty last weekend if I hadn't been doing concerts. You got 800 people who do this for nothing. They are for all intents and purposes the SA coastguard. They save so many lives. We do search and rescue, tow boats in, catch poachers. We have the ability and resources to patrol the waters for illegal fishing, easily. The NSRI needs to be recognised by government and funded."

On the phone from PE, Sea Rescue station commander Ian Gray said he had no idea who Phillips was when he applied to work on the station. "He had this broad Texan accent and these long flowing locks, but I looked at his medical qualifications and the emergency work he'd done and that was all I needed.

I only heard his music two or three years after he'd joined us. People would come and say, wow, you work with Shawn Phillips? But there is no fuss with Shawn. He's as humble as anyone I've ever met. He's a fantastic guy to have at sea. He has this calm demeanour and he's become a mentor to the younger guys."

Phillips was a far bigger star in the US than Rodriguez ever was, but like the *Cold Fact* singer he discovered an unexpected fan base in SA. On his second tour in 2000, he met Juliette, then 33, at the Bassline in Melville.

"I was wearing my firefighter's dress blues and I had a helicopter patch, and Juliette was thinking about taking rotor-wing lessons, and she saw my patch and we started talking and I thought, hey, this is an interesting lady. So we hung out for a week and I invited her back to Texas, and in 2001 we were married at a gas station in Austin by the honourable judge Dewey Hollingsworth."

Juliette certified as a firefighter and emergency care attendant and they worked together until 2003, when she wanted to move back to PE to be close to her parents. Phillips wanted to stay with the fire department, where he was about to become a lieutenant, but his wife pointed out that he had just turned 60 and would no longer be allowed to ride the engine.

"She put it so diplomatically," he says. "She said, 'They gon' set your ass behind a desk'. So that was it."

Phillips was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1943. His mother, who died when he was 13, had been a model and a pilot in the 1930s. His father, a former marine, wrote spy novels under the pen name Philip Atlee. "I remember as a child the phone would ring in our house at 3 o'clock in the morning, and Jim [his dad's real name] would stop typing and go, 'Hello, yes, mm-hmm, okay, fine .' Finally he'd say, 'Raymond, you're drunk, you sonofabitch. Go to bed'. It was Raymond Chandler."

Phillips began playing music when he was six. "I drove Jim crazy with A minor and E minor. He was a bit of a disciplinarian. When I was in my 20s he'd call me up and he wouldn't say hello, he'd say, 'Report'. But he was a huge influence. He said if you're going to write in the English language you have to have a command of that language.

Don't say 'bloodbath', say 'the multitudinous seas incarnadine'. I use words that say what I want to say. I don't want to dumb down. People are not stupid - well, some of them are, but for the most part we're a fairly intelligent species, and if anything let's ratchet it up higher. The music takes you to the edge, but the words make you jump."

As a schoolboy Phillips used to race lawnmowers around the parking lot of the Lone Star drive-in with his friend Henry John Deutschendorf, who later became a country singer and changed his name to John Denver. Another schoolmate was blues singer Delbert McClinton. He and Phillips played in a band called The Straitjackets that would back Jimmy Reed when he was in Fort Worth.

After leaving the US navy, Phillips went to California, where he met composer Tim Hardin, and they travelled the continent together. In Toronto, Phillips was "blown away" by Ravi Shankar, who taught him to play sitar and inspired a move to London.

In the UK he played guitar and sitar (including on most of Donovan's albums) and met fellow musicians such as Grammy winner Paul Buckmaster, with whom he still collaborates.

Two good friends from that era died young: Jim Morrison ("He was a very introverted person, but nice") and Brian Jones ("We got on like gangbusters. He just took too many Quaaludes"). But Phillips says no one ever has a concept of musical history being made.

"We were just guys hanging out. You have no idea what's going to happen later. People say, oh it must have been amazing to know so-and-so. No, it wasn't amazing. It was very normal."

He is just as diffident about a brief encounter with a young Susan Sarandon. "We had a lovely evening. That's all I'm saying."

After three years in England, Phillips's work permit ran out, so in 1967 he moved to Italy with his then girlfriend, British actress Francesca Annis (now married to actor Ralph Fiennes), for what was supposed to be three months.

"We got to Positano and I thought, 'I ain't moving'. Francesca stayed a couple of years. I stayed until 1980. It was great. A lot of music came out of that. The day I landed in Italy I had my sitar, a 12-string and a duffel bag, and I caught a cab from Naples airport to Positano. I took notes as we were driving along, and five days later I had the song *Landscape*."

He recorded 10 albums in as many years and toured every year. "Going back to Italy between tours allowed me to be objective," he says. "It allowed me to look at the world outside me. Ninety-five per cent of artists will never make music again after five or six years."

They'll just drop right out because they're stuck in that genre and they have no knowledge of any other musical idiom, so they can't continue. I tell young musicians to listen to everything there is, absorb it, take it in and collate all that knowledge, all those emotions, and you will make great, original music. You have to turn your focus outside."

In 1976, Phillips spent three months in hospital after a boating accident that ripped his scalp off. In 1980, he helped rescue earthquake victims in southern Italy ("I wish I'd had my training then") and shortly afterwards moved back to the US. In Los Angeles he faced a fresh adversary: the musical idiom called disco.

"The labels were telling me, 'Don't write these seven-minute songs. We need three minutes and 30 seconds, and don't write about anything that's of any kind of intelligence'."

He couldn't do it. "I never write from imagination. It's always from experience. And I need to write music that is unpredictable, because how can I ever move you, either musically or lyrically, if you know what I'm gonna say?"

He ignored critics and continued writing and performing genre-busting music. He has composed a symphony for the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and is busy writing a sequel to that, as well as a ballet. Some described his early work as "folk rock", but later compositions defy classification. Just listen to the mixed bag

that is 2003's *No Category*.

"No one has been able to categorise my work," says Phillips. "Once at a festival in Toronto, Johnny Winter's brother Edgar said to me, 'Man, you come from Texas, how come you got so far away from your roots?' And I said, 'Because there's a whole tree above the ground, Edgar'."

Phillips is about to launch his 25th album, *Perspective*, a double CD.

"A lot of the songs deal with money and the economy, because it's totally screwed up," he says. "All our advances - going to the moon, making something like the new Mac Pro, medical discoveries - all this has come from the human mind, and you mean to tell me after all this we can't come up with an economic system that is equitable for the entire species on this planet? That's bullshit."

"Lately it seems like music has tried to distance itself from social comment. I write about topical things. People ask me, 'Don't you ever get writer's block?' No! Life doesn't allow me to have writer's block. It just goes on. And I get a lot of, 'Oh, but you're a bit complicated'. That's because life is complicated."

Perspective (shawnpPhillipsmusic.com) features 20 previously unreleased songs written in the last 15 years. Most of the tracks were recorded in Phillips's home studio, and most of the band comes from PE.

"There's Lloyd Martin on drums, Joe van der Linden on bass, Mauritz Lotz on guitar and Wesley Keet, John Edwards and Ruby Gill on keys. Wesley and John are more jazz-oriented, and I needed someone with classical skills - Ruby is 17 and she plays an amazing arpeggio piano. And Bryan McLagan did the engineering."

"A lot of records are made today where the singer-songwriter will do the guitar and voice and they'll send it to somebody to put the bass on, and then a click track, and then a drummer will be put on. you can't get magic that way. Joe van der Linden said, 'Don't you want to tell me what to play?' And I said no man, you play what you hear. Sometimes I listen to stuff and I go, 'We did that?' I listen to *Spring Wind* off *Collaboration* and I can't believe we did that in one take. We'd never repeat it, you'd never capture that moment again. Every concert is that moment for me."

Next month, Phillips embarks on a 10-week tour of the US and Canada. After he was burnt twice by managers who diverted his royalties, Juliette now handles his business affairs. "You can be an artist or you can be a businessman, but you can't be both," he says.

"Jules is the best thing that ever happened to me. No bullshit. She is a treasure trove of songs. She's just got such a fantastic mind. Seeing the world through her eyes adds a lot to my writing."

He's not slowing down by any means, but wants more time with his family. "I won't do those eight-month tours anymore. Liam is growing so fast and I don't want to miss out. He's wonderful. He plays this game Minecraft where you build things, and he creates these amazing structures. What's going on in his mind is phenomenal. I think he might be an architect."

In times past, Phillips would tour with eight band members and a crew of 28. "Now it's just me and the equipment. I'm tech, I'm crew, I'm everything. I'm a tech freak, so there's 78kg of stuff. It's a lot of lifting and loading."

In 1994, he had quadruple heart bypass surgery after coming off stage grey with exhaustion, but at 71 he is as fit as a 17-year-old.

Back in Parkhurst, fans swarm the stage after the concert. Phillips is as gracious as only a southern gent can be, but as the crowd starts to thin, he says, "Okay, now I have to do what they pay me to do. Pack this stuff up." LS

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