



# Shawn Phillips Is Stranger Than Fiction

## Meet Navy rescuer and true rock and roll Zelig

By William Michael Smith

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Shawn Phillips: no shirt, no shoes, full service

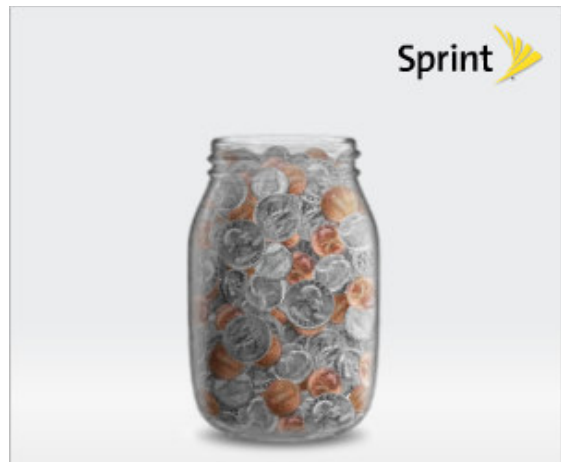
Details:

Shawn Phillips performs 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 20, at McGonigel's Mucky Duck, 2425 Norfolk, 713-528-5999.

Subject(s):

[Shawn Phillips](#), [American singer/songwriters](#)

Perhaps no one has made more contributions to rock and roll, with so little recognition, than Shawn Phillips. No less than late Bay Area super-promoter Bill Graham once called the Fort Worth native the "best-kept secret in the music business."



Phillips attended Arlington Heights High School with Delbert McClinton. He was tutored on sitar by master Ravi Shankar, later gave George Harrison lessons and is credited with popularizing (as such) the sitar in pop music. He taught guitar fundamentals to Joni Mitchell, sang backup on The Beatles' "Lovely Rita" and lived in a London apartment with Donovan Leitch (aka Donovan) and Paul Simon.

Phillips played on longtime Elton John collaborator Bernie Taupin's first album and co-wrote "Ratcatcher" with Taupin. He also worked extensively with Paul Buckmaster, the conductor and classical musician who arranged much of John's work and supposedly gave the Rolling Stones the idea to put a gospel choir in the coda of "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

A vital part of both the Greenwich Village and West Coast singer-songwriter scenes of the late '60s, Phillips has been referred to as both the father of folk-rock and the "Godfather of New Age." At a recent concert, Alanis Morissette and Yanni both sat in the front row. Seriously.

Now living in South Africa, Phillips, one of the double-neck guitar's earliest devotees, mostly composes classical music. Critics have praised him for the beauty, depth and complexity of his work, for which Phillips partly credits his father.

"He told me that if I was going to use the English language to communicate, then I must have a full command," he says. "So I'll use a word like xenophobia in a song if it's required. Out of ten listeners, I'll lose eight because of that."

Phillips, who just turned 65, has some strong opinions on today's popular music.

"Think about how many musicians you knew growing up who quit making music when the tintinnabulation of the cash registers stopped," Phillips says. "Some are working as grocery clerks or accountants now. I think many currently popular musicians would do well to learn a real-world skill. If you want a name, I suppose Amy Winehouse would do for starters."

Navy veteran Phillips's own real-world job is as a navigator and EMS technician for the South African National Sea Rescue Institute. His coworkers are aware of his musical career, but that doesn't buy him much slack on the job.

"A lot of the people in sea rescue are aware of my music, but that makes no difference when I screw up," Phillips says. "I get my ass chewed same as anybody else, and you do *not* screw up in this job — if you do, there's a good possibility someone will die.

"The Indian Ocean is very big, very dark, and unforgiving at 3 a.m. when you're on a call."

Phillips pulls no punches about popular music. "Anything of a pop nature tends to bore me," he says. "They all sound the same. Fact is, they have to, otherwise the record companies drop them like hot rocks if they veer away from formula."

Neither does he write many songs anymore. "I find myself repeating myself," Phillips admits. "My message is always the same: There are three or four thousand extremely wealthy people who run the world, and they don't care about humanity. The last thing they want in the world is peace.

Peace, Phillips explains, just isn't profitable enough.

"If an individual finds peace within himself, then the world finds peace," he says. "It is the only way to defeat those people. I try to illuminate those paths to peace to those who wish to listen."

The Godfather of New Age has spoken.