

# Shawn Phillips' *Contribution* and *Second Contribution* and the unresolved trilogy

by Todd Whitesel

After college, when I began to seriously collect old LPs, one record I'd always see in the used record bins was Shawn Phillips' *Second Contribution* (1971). The intriguing album cover features a long-haired Phillips dressed like a folk sorcerer, in a cape with his back to the camera, playing a 12-string guitar on some stretch of dry, cracked soil. Anyone that could play — not just strum — a 12-string guitar was someone I had to hear. Or did I?

Because I kept seeing the album, I figured it was some early '70s throwaway and resisted buying it. After all, if it was so good, why was it being discarded by so many?

When I finally purchased *Second Contribution* and listened to it, I was astonished. It's an album of remarkable color, imagery, poetry and music. It seemed that Phillips had locked onto a muse that was part Bob Dylan, part Donovan, and part Sergei Prokofiev. It's a partnership of classical, folk, jazz and rock — music without boundaries. Beginning with the opening "She Was Waiting For Her Mother At The Station In Torino And You Know I Love You Baby But It's Getting Too Heavy To Laugh," the first four songs flow together as an extended suite, setting a course over a mysterious musical landscape, punctuated by orchestral passages and flashes of rock and R&B.

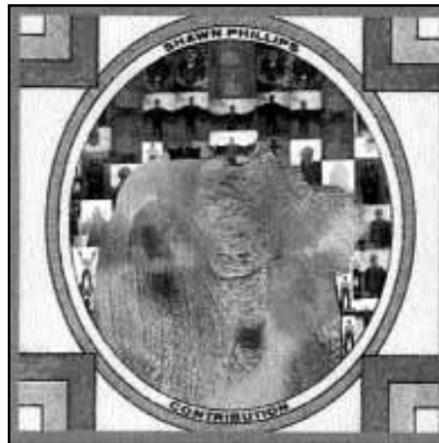
And where many of Phillips' singer/songwriter peers were only passable musicians, he could play six- and 12-string guitar and the sitar with skill, and his voice could travel across three full octaves.

So why didn't *Second Contribution* blow the roof off the music world in 1971? And why, 35 years later, have so few people heard this album? I was determined to dig deeper and find out more about *Second Contribution* and Phillips' like-named 1970 album, *Contribution* — another gem with stunning songs such as "Manhole Covered Wagon" and "Screamer For Phlyses."

Phillips currently lives in South Africa. He is still writing and performing music, but a fondness for the *Contribution* albums remains with him along with a sense of regret for what might have been. There is also one more piece of the puzzle — a true "lost" classic.

Goldmine: *What is the connection between Contribution and Second Contribution?*

Shawn Phillips: The two albums, *Contribution* and *Second Contribution*, are inextricably intertwined, as the material was all written in the same time period, when I was living in Positano, Italy, in a one-room apartment with 7-foot Gothic win-



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dows that overlooked the Mediterranean and faced the highest mountain in southern Italy. The only music within the sphere of my consciousness was the Italian form of the Shenai [a north Indian oboe] and a tambourine, played by two gentlemen with great dissonance, who came around at Christmastime to liberate some money from the various households.

You must understand that at the time, I wanted to do something different, to create a trilogy of albums that ranged through a full spectrum of music. From pop-type tunes to rigidly disciplined classical work and even narrated poetry with a musical backing track. I did this, and the entire trilogy was entitled *A Contribution*. The first album was called *Songs*; the second was called *Spectrum Genesis*, and the third was *A Fale (The Beginning Of The End Of The Story)*, By Razzledorff Rebumpkin.

*Songs* was exactly that. It contained material that later ended up on *Contribution* and *Second Contribution*. Disc two, *Spectrum Genesis*, had experimental music that I had been developing with the sitar and manipulating the velocity of the tape for each take and running the tape backwards and forwards and improvising to those variations in velocity. It also had

poetry that had the same experimental music underlying the narration. The third album consisted of the one side with a fairy tale written about a subject I had never heard any stories written about, with an accompanying suite composed by myself and Patrick John Scott, who would later on go on to compose the scores for *Greystoke* and many other films. I have had been told that this piece is a "Peter And The Wolf" for the 21st century. This work is still sitting in a vault at Interscope Records. It has never been released to the public.

Side two was a collection of classical pieces I had written. Both sides were performed by specifically picked members of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. One of the highlights of those sessions was the harpsichordist Wanda Landowski. She passed on shortly after that.

*What became of the trilogy?*

The trilogy was actually made and presented to A&M Records with the stipulation that each album would be released separately, so that people would not have to buy all three at once. Everyone at A&M said yes to this project except one man, an executive with A&M. He considered it unrealistic and looked at it solely from a

financial standpoint, never even considering the artistic endeavor involved. He was the comptroller at the time. He made me take the trilogy apart and put eight of the songs onto one album, which became *Contribution*. The rest, with the exception of one or two, went on *Second Contribution*. This man was one of the forerunners for the desolate miasma the music business is today.

*What stands out about those albums, looking back some 30 years later?*

Of the highlights I remember on the recording of the songs from *A Contribution* was the fact that every single song was recorded in less than three takes, and the master vocals were not overdubbed later but were done in the same moment. Some vocal harmonies and guitar parts were later added as sweetening.

The basic structure of each tune remained what I had originally composed, and I let each musician play whatever they felt would do justice to the piece. To this day, I have never told another musician what to play, on any of my albums or CDs. You simply *do not* tell Leland Sklar or Alphonso Johnson how to play the bass — or any other musicians of their caliber.

*Was there anything unusual about how a song developed or changed during the writing/recording process?*

I remember recording "Withered Roses" in one take and how relieved we all were that we didn't have to do it again. "Manhole Covered Wagon" was originally supposed to be guitars, but when Mick Weaver — Wynder K. Frog — sat down at the piano and started playing that double-time riff, it really took off. "For RFK, JFK, And MLK" was, at that time, a coup de grâce for me, as the musicians were then known as the band Traffic. I think the only freelance member was the bass player, otherwise it was Steve Winwood, Jim Capaldi, and Chris Wood. This was the first recording of "L Ballade," and Sheila Kanga was featured on harp. We also used the experimentation I was doing by turning the tape over and running it backwards and dropping the speed while I sang to it and then turned it back over and restored the original velocity.

All the pieces on both CDs were elevated by the presence and mastery of Paul Buckmaster and J. Peter Robinson. Later on, when Paul Buckmaster told me it took almost nine hours to write one second of music for a 65-piece orchestra and he had written an arrangement for 85 pieces for "L Ballade" and the song is seven minutes

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long. I re-recorded it on *Faces*, simply because he had done this enormous work as he loved the tune.

The rest of much of the material went on to *Second Contribution*. The thing about this record was that I wanted people to be able to put the record on and float away, on their own images that the music induced. Not for three or four minutes, as was the average time for a song, but for 20 minutes, like they were listening to a symphonic work. The music starts and doesn't stop till it gets to the end of the record.

Again, the work on both sides was recorded in one take, with the master vocals. You can hear me counting the band into the different sections as we went along. The only song that was added was "The Ballad Of Casey Diess." During the initial writing period of the material on the two albums, Casey was still alive. He was struck by lightning shortly before the recording of *Second Contribution*, and I wrote his song just before we went into the studio.

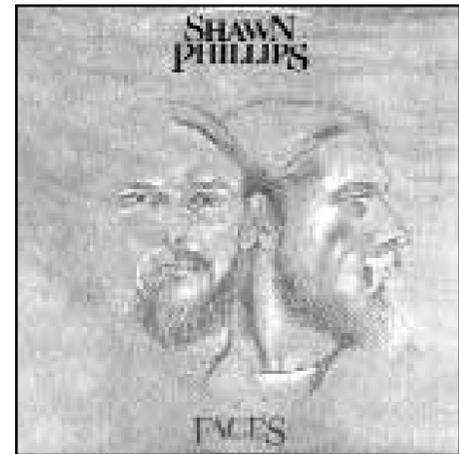
*Did you feel like you had done something special with these albums?*

I felt that way with the trilogy and with *Second Contribution*. I knew I had done something extraordinary and still do. My disappointment with having the trilogy taken apart dampened any fervor I might have felt for *Contribution* as a stand-alone album. I'm sure you can understand that.



*Courtesy of Shawn Phillips*

**Shawn Phillips performing in South Africa, 1994.**



To refresh my memory for this interview, I listened to *Contribution* for the first time in a long time. All I could think of, was, "Jesus Christ. Did we really do that? How amazing."

*Indeed.*

{Be sure to check out the recent re-release of *Faces*, Phillips' 1972 album featuring "L Ballade" with Paul Buckmaster's full orchestral arrangement and the bonus "A Christmas Song," which was recorded during the making of *Second Contribution* and originally released as a 45 in 1970. (Early Morning Hours Music, [www.ShawnPhillips.com](http://www.ShawnPhillips.com))

*Contribution/Second Contribution* are now available as a two-fer from Gott Discs. The reissue features excellent liner notes from Goldmine contributor Sean Egan.}