

LISTENING TO OLD VOICES

Shawn Phillips

Arias for the Common Man By Andy Whitman

Bruce Springsteen once remarked that Roy Orbison was the only truly operatic singer in rock music. With no disrespect intended toward the great Mr. Orbison, it's apparent that Bruce never heard Shawn Phillips.

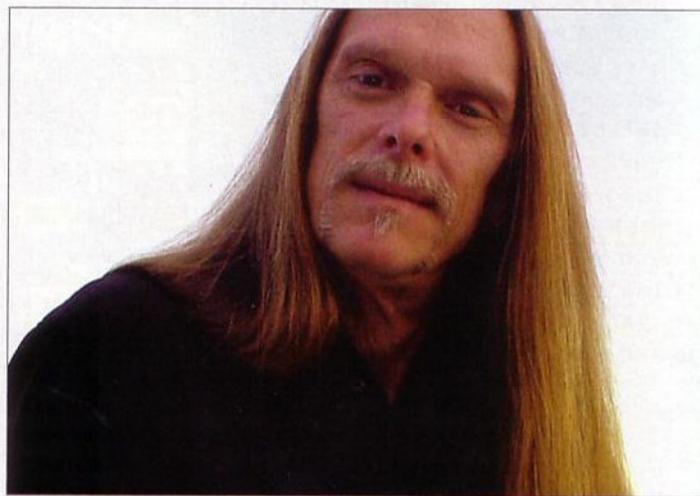
Shawn Phillips was and is the original cosmic contra-tenor—a hippie Pavarotti with a waist-length ponytail and a buckskin jacket, a sometimes gifted songwriter with a mastery of several stringed instruments, a prodigious vocal range and, by most accounts, a formidably drug-shrouded mind. He stopped making albums in the late 1970s, and I'd pictured him as the quintessential hippie burnout, the slacker/stoner who faded away in his mid-30s and disappeared from the public eye. As usual, the truth is something far different and far more complex, driven more by the vagaries of the music industry than by personal demons or tragedy. In any event, Shawn Phillips may be the greatest singer you've never heard—even if you've paid close attention to the music of the past 25 years, there's still a good chance you haven't heard him. Thirty-five years after he played in front of 600,000 people at the Isle of Wight Festival, Shawn Phillips is a nearly forgotten man.

I distinctly remember the first time I heard his voice. Phillips' "Song for Mr. C.," from his 1971 album *Second Contribution*, was played fairly frequently on Chicago FM-radio stations in the early '70s, and the song's greasy R&B reminded me of the grit of Leon Russell and Lee Michaels, blue-eyed soul men who were popular at the time. I snatched up the album, thinking I was in for more of the same. What I got was something altogether different, something less prone to easy categorization—tender love ballads that sounded like Johnny Mathis with testosterone; sweeping, romantic strings; strutting R&B horns; sitars; progressive jazz; hushed, acoustic folk music with exquisite six-string fingerpicking; and, on "The Ballad of Casey Deiss," the sound of the human voice soaring into the

heavens. A conventional folk ballad for its first four minutes, it suddenly takes a turn for the celestial when Phillips' pure falsetto spirals upward, upward, impossibly upward until I couldn't believe the notes I was hearing. It was my introduction to the most remarkable voice of the singer/songwriter era.

If that voice borrowed influences from almost everywhere it's perhaps because Phillips lived almost everywhere. A military brat who grew up in Texas, Mexico and Tahiti, he traveled in his young adulthood to California, Paris and London (where he befriended Donovan in his Flower Power phase and spent time with Lennon and McCartney). He finally settled in the picturesque Italian fishing village of Positano, where he lived throughout the '70s and '80s. Phillips absorbed the music around him, from Texas to India, and the sounds all found their way into his songs. As a result, he made relentlessly eclectic music, impossible to pin down and label. He recorded nine albums for A&M Records between 1970 and 1977. The best of them were bunched at the beginning of the decade—the trio of *Collaboration*, *Second Contribution* and *Faces*. They rank as some of the most beautiful, ethereal albums to emerge from the '70s singer/songwriter movement.

Unfortunately, much of Phillips' music sounds hopelessly dated now, the product of the patchouli-scented times in which it was made. It hasn't aged well, and the sitar drones and "love your brother, man" sentiments only serve to highlight the naiveté and excesses of the Age of Aquarius. But the voice still sounds exquisite—soulful, passionate and gritty one minute, light as a feather and soaring the next. The song titles tell another story: "Spaceman," "What's Happenin', Jim!" and the ridiculously named, impossibly lovely "She Was Waitin' For Her Mother At The Station in Torino And You Know I Love You Baby But It's Getting Too Heavy To Laugh." Far out. And therein lies the problem. To listen to Shawn Phillips is



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to be confronted with stark contrasts. With the possible exception of Al Green, never has a human voice combined such earthy soul with such a soaring, angelic falsetto. And never has such an otherworldly, gorgeous human voice been placed in the service of such hazily muddled hippie tripe.

What renders the tripe palatable, even enjoyable, though, is that voice. Possessing a three-octave range that could move effortlessly between a natural baritone and the most astonishing falsetto I've ever heard, Phillips sang not so much songs as hippie arias, impossibly dramatic mini-operas that showcased his evocative passion and startling vocal range. If the words have not always aged well, the good news is that the falsetto is often wordless. And it's singing of the highest order—of an unearthly order, for that matter.

Today, Phillips is 62 years old and lives outside Austin, Texas, where he works as a fireman. "I had two dreams as a kid," he says. "I wanted to be a rock 'n' roll star, and I wanted to drive a big red truck. I've been able to do both." He's recorded two albums in the new millennium, his first recorded output in nearly a quarter-century. The second album, 2003's *No Category*, was the gift of his longtime fans, who donated more than \$20,000 toward the recording expenses. The man who sold over three million albums in the '70s was broke.

He still has the waist-length ponytail, his once light brown hair now shot through with grey. And he still has his pipes, now a little weathered by the years and miles. His infrequent concerts still find him soaring impossibly upward, trying to find a place to a light that's not of this earth.