



Phillips: At a recent concert in San Francisco, "groupies" screamed at her every word.
—Photo by Richard Berger

Esther Phillips: don't miss her

An almost unconscious ability to extract every ounce of meaning from a song

By Joel Parker
San Francisco Bureau

In the words of jazz critic Leonard Feather, Esther Phillips "offers soul-shaking evidence that there is no better lesson in the art of singing the blues than a graduate course in living it." Phillips has learned that lesson well and hard and her emergence today as one of the greatest living blues stylists did not come without paying her dues.

Born in Galveston, Texas, in 1935, she spent her early childhood shuttling between divorced parents in Watts and Houston. As with most of the great blues and soul singers, she began singing in church. At the age of 13, her older sister and a girl friend

"fixed me up to look old" and brought her to a local nightclub in Watts.

Needing money for drinks, they encouraged her to sing in the club's amateur show, which—in the tradition of Hollywood success stories—she won. Next came her singing with the Johnny Otis Rhythm and Blues Caravan and an adolescence of endless road shows and tours as "Little Esther."

But the explosion of rock 'n' roll in the early '50s—aimed at a young, white audience—had no place for earthy renditions of "adult" material. Even the more acceptable black singers, recording for what were then called race labels, usually saw whites record duplicate takes of

their hits and get the airplay and national exposure.

The Johnny Otis group broke up in Esther's early 20's and she drifted into obscurity and a long grueling bout with heroin addiction. From the mid-'50s until her stay at Synanon, where she kicked the habit, her career was constantly disrupted by the drug's deadening effects.

Esther did manage to record a hit country record, "Release Me," in 1963. And in 1965 her version of the Beatles' "And I Love Her" led to a tour with the Liverpool Four and her first major recognition since the "Little Esther" days.

But it wasn't until 1971, when she signed a contract with KUDU Records (a subsidiary of CTI), that her career began a marked upswing. This contract not only represented a giant step toward attaining the broad recognition her talent deserved, but also helped her to develop a musical idiom suited to her unique tonal qualities and powerful phrasing.

With a voice often compared to the immortal Dinah Washington's and backed by super-tight horn and string arrangements, Esther mixed dramatic renditions of popular ballads and straight-ahead versions of blues standards in her first four KUDU albums.

In "From a Whisper to a Scream" and "Performance" there's an almost unconscious ability to extract every ounce of meaning from a song. Her voice lingering on key words, splitting syllables—proud and defiant or mournful and pensive—is given full show. Singing Gil Scott-Heron's powerful song, "Home Is Where the Hatred Is," she breaks into a monologue defying her listeners to understand the complex roots of drug addiction is this society. "You keep on saying Kick it, Quit it/ Lord, but did you ever try/ To turn your sick soul inside out/ so that the world can watch you die?"

Her most recent albums, "What a Difference a Day Makes" and "For All We Know" are backed with predominantly electronic, guitar-featured tracks and Esther glides through quasi-disco versions of the title cut in the former and "Fever." "Unforgettable" and "Caravan" in the latter. "What a Difference a Day Makes" was her first bonafide single success in a long time and broadened her audience. At a recent concert in San Francisco's Great American Music Hall, Esther Phillips "groupies" screamed at her every word.

A new album of hers will be released this month, titled "Capricorn Princess." The word (from a member of her band) is that it will represent a departure from her previous two.

Esther is touring the country with her new band and will be appearing Nov. 20 at the Miami-Dade Community College in South Miami, Fla., and Nov. 24 at the Village Gate in New York. If she's performing near you, don't miss her.



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WINDOW TO A CHANGING AMERICA

Average White Band: 'outrageously black, outrageously good'

The Average White Band is whiter than white. Hamish Stuart, the thin Scotsman who sings lead with a screaming James Brown pureness, has carrot hair and pink skin. Until drummer Robbie McIntosh overdosed last year at an instantly famous Hollywood party and was replaced by British-West African Steve Ferrone, AWB consisted of Hamish and five Scottish pals from Perth and London.

Yet AWB's music is as popular with black record buyers as with white. A typical American concert is packed equally with young black and white teenagers. The band's hits—like "Cut the Cake," "Pick Up the Pieces," "School Boy Crush," and "Taking Care of Business," all intensely rhythmic sex metaphors with no lyric content—shoot to the top of the still-segregated soul 'n' pop charts in the music trade magazines.

Elvis Presley, Pat Boone, the Righteous Brothers, Janis Joplin and others all rode to the top by performing black music—with varying degrees of integrity. But

White on black in the music industry

only a few white performers, like Presley and the Righteous Brothers, and more recently fellow Britisher Pete Winfield ("18 With a Bullet"), ever cross over to popularity with black audiences.

Is AWB a ripoff? It's not that simple. The Average White Band is a phenomenon. They play clear, tight rhythm 'n' blues with perfectly meshed arrangements. Even jazz musicians like Les McCann praise them without reservation.

"It's not a matter of choosing," keyboard man Roger Ball said once. "Black is the only thing we can do. It just happens subconsciously."

The question is not, as the great white blues controversy of the 1960's would have it, whether white musicians can play black music competently. They can and have. The problem lies, as it al-

ways does in sweet home America, with the wider structure of things. The structure of the music industry even now, and more so in the Fifties and before, is racist. Or put another way: in a country where songs and musicians are bought and sold like other commodities, no matter what the price, the natural tendency for cultures to influence and borrow from one another becomes theft.

Presley thanked Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup for providing him with his first rock 'n' roll hit, "That's All Right." But while the song sold millions, Presley only thanked its black creator with a wall plaque. More subtly, the Beatles blew black groups off the charts, but not because they were somehow racist. They weren't. They gave credit where credit was due and rekindled the careers of artists like Chuck

Berry. But because of their overwhelming popularity among whites, the percentage of black acts on the singles and album charts plummeted from 42 percent in 1962 to 22 percent in 1966.

"The little white girl in school loved to dance to Chuck Berry," Ahmet Ertegun, the president of Atlantic Records, once told me, "but somehow John Lennon looked more like her dream, you know what I mean?"

In the current music industry black groups have charged that their record companies cannot or will not give them promotion on the concert circuit equal to their record sales. The concert and club circuit is controlled by white promoters skittish about "racial incidents" in their houses. Worse, black bands are often kept off major AM radio stations. The unwritten rule at too many stations, according to one important Boston program director, is that a soul record is not to be added to the playlist at a major AM pop station until it reaches the Top 10 of the pop

record charts nationally.

Although Stevie Wonder is now crowned "the musical genius of his generation" by the national media, his "Living for the City" was held off many AM playlists until it was unstoppable. "On and On" by Gladys Knight and the Pips was a similar casualty.

AM stations blacklist R&B hits, by the way, not because their programmers "dislike" the music, but because they feel that black and white audiences do not overlap. Many AM advertisers also consider certain products specific to the black or white market.

You may be curious: how did the Average White Band get their name? Because they sounded so outrageously black and good that the name would be a beautifully appropriate joke? That's what I always thought. But the name is a play on an old British imperialist expression: "This is too much for the average white man."

Maybe that's a better joke.

—Steve Chapple

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