

**Before the industry locks down  
the new music model,  
one artist is staking a claim  
with a boldly creative,  
inventive hybrid**

## Ladies and Gentlemen, Please

I've flown across the country to see Sam Phillips perform. Twice. The first time when she played Carnegie Hall in 2005, the second at a more intimate venue in

Santa Monica a few months ago. (Each time she has introduced herself with a wry, sly, seductive, "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome . . . Sam Phillips." It's something audiences have come to expect from this generation's most magnetic torch singer.)

Now, at her suggestion, we are meeting at the Beverly Hills Hotel. We opt for the retro-chic fountain coffee shop downstairs—instead of the notorious Polo Lounge—which is vastly more appropriate, and more than a little symbolic. Phillips has always pinged under the radar, while floating creatively,

intellectually, spiritually above musical mediocrity. But even this former rebellious Christian singer, Grammy-nominated mainstream performer, television composer, occasional actress, and producer has never sent a signal like this before.

Phillips has left her admittedly artist-friendly label Nonesuch for a new venture, a fascinating hybrid of music and art that's a worldwide web away from the usual tease-heavy, substance-free fan dance currently on the Internet.

"We've called it *Sam Phillips: The Long Play*. You know, after LPs of a bygone era," she explains, delicately perched at the counter of the ivy-stenciled coffee shop. "What it is a yearlong project of releasing and recording music. I'll be releasing an EP every two months and this time next year a full-length album, plus

extra tracks along the way. Basically, it's a subscription for a year of music. And people will be privy to the writing and recording process through the blogs and videos and outtakes."

A glance at Phillips' site and one thing's immediately apparent. She's modest.

Two EPs have already hit, the exquisite *Hypnotists in Paris* and the bare-free delicate Christmas collection *Cold Dark Night*. In this age of Tweet, Phillips' blogs are luxurious and fascinating. One reloid encounter with a stranger at an art museum could easily slip inside the pages of *The New Yorker*. Phillips' videos run the gamut from atmospheric glimpses into the recording process to haunting, MOMA-esque shorts. Audiophiles can thrill to drum fills while visualists can

decode and decipher Phillips' sharp collages, worthy of any and all Barbara Kruger comparisons. And her "Phone Booth" section features conversations with musicians or artists that would make Bill Moyers proud. The conversation with sculptor Jim Hodgson, whose child has Down Syndrome, is especially tender. If *The Long Play* is a precursor to new artist-generated content sans record label, nobody's going to mourn the label's whiny demise. Still, Phillips knows some A&R guy somewhere will spoil the party soon enough.

"The reason it's so important to me is I feel like this is the time, this is a window of opportunity and freedom before the new music business is set in place and locked down," she says. "Before we can't do this kind of thing anymore." . . .

## Welcome Sam Phillips

by Steven Foster  
Photos by Eric Gorfain

**Steven Foster:** You've worked with some remarkable artists. Elvis Costello, REM, Marc Ribot, Van Dyke Parks. And you're in that Largo circle with Aimee Mann and Jon Brion as well, right?

Sam Phillips: Well, yeah, I kinda fell into that through Jon Brion, who's a film composer and who does a lot of music. He has a residency at Largo. He's just a doll, and he's so talented. So yeah, we all meet in a community. When you're odd, you have your odd friends back you up.

**Elvis and Michael are famously prolific writers. Are you?**

I'm not usually. I think I'm a little more the tortoise than the hare. I do happen to have quite a few outtakes from this last record which is what got me thinking about this year-long project, too. I wanted them to be heard.

**Which is what the listeners want.**

Yeah, because artists as well, on our end, it gets old, too. Like my ex-husband T-Bone [Burnett, Grammy- and Oscar-winning producer] grew up in Fort Worth, and when he was 17 he had a recording studio [that] happened to be downstairs from a radio station. They would actually record records and walk them upstairs, and the DJs would put them on the radio and play them the same day.

**How did you and T-Bone meet?**

I actually hired him back in 1986.

**The Turning, the last album for your gospel label, got you in a little trouble, didn't it?**

I think I was already in trouble. I had gone to my record company and said, "You know what, I feel there is so much hypocrisy, and I feel the spiritual path I'm on is not what's happening in the fundamentalist camp here, and I, as an artist, want to be free to write what I want to write about." So my A&R guy said, "Do one more record for our company. What person do you want to work with?" And I mentioned T-Bone. But after T-Bone and I made *The Turning* together, they didn't want to let me out of my contract. . . . I had a moral clause in my contract at that time, and I said, "I've broken my moral clause. I've slept with somebody and I'm not married." And they said, "Okay! You're out of your contract." [Both laugh]

**Did you fall in love with him when you were making the album?**

I did. And to this day I've never had any more fun making music with anyone. He's completely charming and great in the stu-

dio. That's why we made so many records together.

**I remember when Rolling Stone reviewed The Turning, they said if church was as open and honest in their approach to spirituality as your record, they'd have to turn people away. I think that's why I responded so strongly to your music, because your spirituality was more genuine about the seek.**

That's really so kind of you to say. I feel the same. You know, talking about being an odd person . . . I do have a deep spiritual belief, but it's so easy to be disenfranchised from churches.

There is an Episcopal church here in Pasadena. When we had our tussle with Prop 8, they said, "Hey, we don't care if the state doesn't recognize it. If anybody wants to get married, we will marry you. You come here."

I feel like there are some bright spots. You have to look for them, but there are people of faith who are really about love. I'm always looking for those people to hang out with and to love and support. I want to be one of those people, and I hope I've been able to make my way towards that, you know? It's tough. Especially what we've been through in the last eight years. What people have done in the name of Christianity, it's shocking. And sad.

**I know your split from T-Bone informed so much of your recent material. How long have you been divorced?**

I don't want to go into the gory details but . . . it's just that for us it was really complicated. It wasn't like, "Sign a piece of paper and it's over." It was a ripping apart, that's the only way I can describe it. And I wrote about it. T-Bone wrote a little bit about it on his record, but not as much. I just kind of tore open my heart and laid with it as politely as I could. And I didn't want to tax my listeners, but I felt that it was the most honest thing to do, because it was really an intense time for me. The last two years have been great, but I think the five years before that were very, very tough. But I think in a funny way I feel that we've had a successful marriage and a successful divorce, because we still have great affection and respect for each other and are able to work together to raise a child. In a broken situation, that's the best you can do, or hope for or ask for.

**A**my Sherman-Palladino remembers her first encounter: "The first time I saw her perform, I saw her at the Roxy," the *Gilmore Girls* creator and executive producer recalls. While Phillips' work has always been uniquely cinematic, never was this more utilized than when Palladino sought out Phillips to score the music for her smash series. Phillips' jaunty guitar →

**Sam Phillips** *continued from previous page*

chords and Beatlesque "La-la-la-la-la-la" refrains were as integral as the chemistry between stars Lauren Graham and Houstonian Alexis Bledel, and as compelling as the caffeinated, pop culture-referencing banter. The exposure brought a whole new generation to Phillips' music.

"She stood up there in all of her black," Palladino continues, "and she's got that blonde hair and that pixie fairy face, and she stands there and she's looking at the audience like, 'I f---king hate you people.'"

Phillips rattled her.

"There was nothing she said to the audience, there was just a presence," Palladino



Torch song:  
Phillips burns  
up the web.

says. "And when I met her, I'm like, 'My God, you hated us!' She's like, 'What?'" And if you meet Sam... she's a delight! And yet there's this gravitas to her onstage. Like there's this whole other side to her that is melancholy and angry, and it's wry and it's ethereal and it's not full of shit. It's serious stuff. Her voice might be my most favorite female voice ever. It's kind of like Jean Didion's writing to me. It's a little, um... haunted."

Palladino pauses for a brief second. "That show [*Gilmore*] would not have been the show without that music."

**Foster:** So I talked to Amy.

**Phillips:** You did?!

**And she mentioned you onstage.**

[Laughs] She said I didn't move and I didn't smile, and she thought I was so scary. She always teases me about that. When they got a deal to do *Gilmore Girls*, they called and I met with them, and they wanted me to do the music, which was really left field, because I had never thought of doing something like

that. I'm so glad I did it, because I grew to really love the show and Amy and Dan [Palladino, Amy's partner in work and in life] and their scripts and their directing. It really grew into something lovely.

**I'm noticing a theme here. Amy sees you in concert and you scare her, and isn't that how you got the part in *Die Hard*? John McTiernan saw your *Martinis and Bikinis* cover and thought you looked so...**

[Laughs] Yes! He thought I would make a good German terrorist. My mother probably thought that, too.

**By the way, thanks for not playing "Don't Do Anything" at your show the other night. To me, that song is the most dead-honest expression of unconditional love I've ever heard, and it just brings me to tears almost every time I hear it. If you would have played it, I would have lost it. Seriously.**

Thank you so much for telling

me that. That's so funny because the Section Quartet did a show at Largo, and they invited me to do a couple of songs. Jon Brion was at the show, and he said, "I'm gonna do a song that is one of the best love songs I've heard in a year." And he plays "Don't Do Anything." And I was crying because I respect Jon so much. He's a huge Beatles fan and is very particular about what he respects in music. I meant it that way—it's a really dead-honest expression of love. And I'm so glad it meant something to you. I don't want to be famous or anything like that or sell millions of records, but I do want to be able to connect, and so when I can hear things like that from you, that's the reason I'm doing this.

To access *Sam Phillips: The Long Play*, log onto [samphillips.com](http://samphillips.com). And for our exclusive interview with *Gilmore Girls* creator Amy Sherman-Palladino, visit [outsmartmagazine.com](http://outsmartmagazine.com).

Steven Foster also interviews Cheyenne Jackson in this issue of *OutSmart* magazine.



**NARIN'S**  
**Bombay Brasserie**  
*Gourmet Indian Cuisine*

[www.narinsbombaybrasserie.com](http://www.narinsbombaybrasserie.com)

**Narin's Bombay Brasserie**  
3005 W Loop South, Houston, TX 77027  
713-622-2005

- Daily Luncheon Buffet
- Private Room
- Full Bar
- Wine Room
- Large Wine List



**"Best of Houston"**  
**Houston Press**

**Also Visit:** [www.thebombaybrasserie.com](http://www.thebombaybrasserie.com)  
2414 University Blvd., Ste. 210, Houston, TX 77005