

PHIL & GAYE:

Mountain Music For Today

by Arthur Menius



Rob Amberg

A chilly December night brings Phil and Gaye Johnson to Rhythm Alley, the acoustic music nightclub in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. During the month past they have performed their modern mountain music on the "Fire On The Mountain" show, toured in Florida, and played New York City schools with the Green Grass Cloggers. The road will take them to a couple of more stops in the Carolinas before they can finally return to their home in Green Creek on the edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains south of Asheville, North Carolina.

When the Johnsons open the show with their own "Carolina Bound," all traces of road weariness disappear. Gaye's warm, natural face and long, honey brown hair radiate sincerity. The joy of making music splashes an exuberant grin across Phil's hirsute features.

Those qualities permeate each selection in their diverse collection of tunes. Gaye's mountain alto dances across the spritely numbers, while inflecting the slow, sad songs with deep emotion. Comparisons to Emmylou Harris' sound on her "Roses In The Snow" album seem inevitable. She provides the rhythmic basis for the duo on her 1940s Martin D18 guitar.

Phil handles most of the lead in-

strumental work on an F-style R.L. Givens mandolin and a model 114 Dobro. Although lacking his wife's extraordinary vocal range, Phil provides strong harmony work, and occasionally takes the lead. Often they juggle lyrics back and forth with remarkable ease. Few other modern groups can tackle the complexities of songs such as the Blue Sky Boys' spelling tongue twister "S-A-V-E-D." When they make that one sound simple, I decide that I'll enjoy the show better if I don't think about how many hours of practice over the last twelve years have gone into their music.

"Right now we're kind of hitting our stride and our style is really starting to firm up," Phil says. "People can hear something and know right away that it's us. It's the type of song that we could do or it's our music. Our style is a combination of everything that we've heard in our lives."

At times that almost seems like an understatement. Relying on Gaye's ability to make anything mountain music, Phil and Gaye siphon an astounding variety of sources. They perform material written or made popular by Jimmie Rodgers, the Beatles, Grandpa Jones, the Dillardards, Merle Travis, Patsy Cline, the Hoosier Hot Shots, Marty Robbins, Milton Brown, and others. In the

Johnsons' hands everything sounds their own.

"It is basically acoustic, southern, rural, old-time music," Phil continues. "For anybody that's knowledgeable about the music, I always just said we played hillbilly music, but most people really don't know what hillbilly means in that sense. So I just say acoustic country."

That musical variety reflects the couple's widely differing backgrounds. Phil, 36, grew up in the Los Angeles area. As a child he became intrigued by cowboy music on Gene Autry's television station, which featured "Gene Autry movies, wrestling, more Gene Autry movies, more wrestling, and 'Melody Ranch' with Spade Cooley." From that initial discovery of music on his own, Phil's interests "just progressed into everything else—blues, Jimmie Rodgers, old-time."

By the mid-sixties Phil regularly enjoyed bluegrass outfits, most notably the Dillardards, at nightspots such as the Ash Grove and Ledbetter's in Westwood. Phil began picking the flattop guitar after a 1968 trip to Nashville to visit a girlfriend. He attended the Friday night Opry four or five times and saw Jim and Jesse, Bill Monroe, and Sam and Kirk McGee for the first time.

Back in southern California, Phil



enrolled in the Drama Department of Santa Monica College. In the fall of 1969 he had a small part in a school play. Bored by the long waits backstage, Phil brought along his guitar and found himself a corner in which to pick.

Gaye Feagan, a freshman on the costume crew, heard him singing Merle Haggard songs and struck up a friendship. "He started taking me to all these places where they had bluegrass," Gaye recalls.

Gaye had grown up in Green Creek in Polk County, North Carolina. Her mother liked to sing and knew a few guitar chords, while her Texan father was devoted to Bob Wills and, especially, Jimmie Rodgers. Gaye began singing at home and in the church choir. "When I was in seventh or eighth grade, I had a girlfriend who sang and we started learn-

ing chords on a guitar. We entered a lot of talent shows. My cousin and I did a lot of singing together and still do. In high school I got away from singing until I went out to California. Everybody out there was singing all these country songs that I knew. So I started singing with them."

In 1972 Gaye returned home due to the impending death of her father. Phil followed and they were married in August of that year. They took jobs in South Boston, Virginia, practiced, and saved their earnings.

After a year of marriage, they invested their savings in the Blue Ridge Guitar Workshop, a music store they opened in a warehouse in Harrisonburg, Virginia. They invited local musicians to gather there on Sundays. "We started meeting a lot of good pickers," Gaye recalls, "and that's where we really got the influences as far as old time country and bluegrass. They really taught us to pick."

Phil and Gaye performed occasionally using two guitars and a harmonica. Their repertoire in those days drew heavily on Jimmie Rodgers and Doc Watson. Bass player Chuck Nichols and mandolinist Wilbur "Two-Gun" Terry often accompanied them at restaurants, civic clubs, small nightspots, and annual poultry meetings.

Their sound began to mature during 1974 and 1975 when Phil learned both Dobro and mandolin. "As soon as I started playing more mandolin, we started playing more bluegrass and old-time material." Phil has developed a strong, bluesy style on the mandolin, but his individuality stands out on the Dobro. "I don't play it the traditional way," Phil explains. "I just tune it like a regular guitar and play it with a slide. I use real heavy gauge strings wrapped a little bit higher than normal. I also use this technique of fretting behind the bar and stretching the strings, and play regular guitar along with slide Dobro. It just works well against Gaye's voice. I developed this style so I could still play guitar, play rhythm, get little lead things, and still use that Dobro sound every now and then. It fills out our sound quite a bit."

Hearing about a fund raiser at local public television station WVPT, Phil and Gaye volunteered to perform live with a pick-up band of local musicians. "We had requests coming in over the phone," Phil says. "So we said, 'If you want to request a tune, give a donation.' In that hour we raised something like \$600. That was the most that station had raised in an hour. We hit them up to do a series and they fell right into it because the interest was there in the community."

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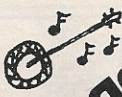


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Folk Festival. Their performances at folk and bluegrass festivals grew more frequent. Under the aegis of the South Carolina Total Arts Program, Phil and Gaye taught bluegrass, blues, and country music in the Anderson County public schools (see *BU*, June 1979).

Apparently on the verge of becoming a major act, Gaye learned she was expecting a baby. The means they devised to keep their career going demonstrates their character and determination to succeed. Phil and Gaye recruited their own sponsors and began their "Cornbread and Sweetmilk Time" radio show on WBBO in Forest City, North Carolina on Saturday evenings in mid-1980. A few months later they added a half hour version at noon Tuesdays on WEAB, Greer, South Carolina. The former lasted through most of 1981, while they continued the WEAB program until May 1983.

"We were playing our version of acoustic country music in an old time radio format," according to Phil. "The plan was just to follow the old-time route of playing live radio, then playing the schoolhouses, and announcing your shows and selling your records over the air. This is what we did to keep us out of the bars and off the road while Gaye was pregnant and when our little girl was just born. It was a lot of fun to do. It

Appearing on "Fire On The Mountain" Gaye, Leese Lanham and Phil

program, "Phil's Old Time Picking Junction," featured local bluegrass bands with Phil and Gaye as hosts. Later rebroadcast in several southeastern states, it spawned a 1977 sequel called "Phil and Gaye's Song Swap Shop."

Faced with increasing opportunities to perform, Phil and Gaye left the warehouse in 1975 for small offices where Phil just taught and repaired instruments. Around that time WMRA, the James Madison University public radio station in Harrisonburg, expanded

its power and studios. Soon the Johnsons had a live two hour show on WMRA every Friday afternoon entitled "Country Afternoon Live."

By 1977 Phil and Gaye felt secure enough in their abilities to abandon all activities outside of their music. They moved to Gaye's home of Green Creek, where they could live more economically. Over the next three years they built their career. They twice captured the "Most Outstanding Performance" award at the Asheville Mountain Dance and

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brought us closer to the music, I'll tell you that. It's an experience a lot of people our age never get. So for our situation it worked great."

Their only album, "Cornbread and Sweetmilk Time" (Park Street 43632), arrived in early 1981, as did daughter Lyla. The record captures the flavor of their radio shows. It contains bluegrass, polka, rhumba, and old-time material all crafted into Phil and Gaye's unique mountain style. Phil's instrumental skills and the intensity of Gaye's singing both come across well. Although they made their money back in six months and have an abundance of powerful unrecorded material, financial considerations have prevented the Johnsons from producing a second album so far.

In late 1982 the Linear Group selected Phil and Gaye to tape one of the two pilot programs for what became the "Fire On The Mountain" show. Since then they have made three appearances on the Nashville Network series. Their work so impressed producers Lawson Warren and Ron Reuhl that they invited Phil and Gaye to host and perform the theme song for their "Liberty Flyer" syndicated radio program.

"We just want to do the very best we can on the "Liberty Flyer," Phil remarks, "get that sold and out to the public. That would probably do great things for us. We should have no trouble getting a record deal after that."

In late 1984 Phil and Gaye put together the Radio Phantoms. The band consists of, in addition to the Johnsons, Fred Baille on lead guitar and Hillary Dirlam on banjo and electric bass.

"We're hoping that we will be able to sell some of our songs. I think one way we can stand out is with real good songs that have some commercial appeal. If this radio show and the television thing give us a little credibility in the industry in Nashville, we can approach a publisher or an artist who may have heard our name."

Phil does most of the song writing, but Gaye collaborates, usually by editing his compositions into two verse, three chorus format. "We've patterned a lot of these songs," Phil notes, "after that brother sound you mentioned. It ain't cheating songs, and it ain't drinking songs, it's just straightforward-hillbilly..."

"Love songs," Gaye finishes for him.

At Rhythm Alley the love songs sparkle brightest. The joy expressed by those pieces seems much closer to real emotion than the mere sentiment that dominates most love songs. On stage Phil and Gaye exchange glances, lyrics, and instrumental licks, while performing original tunes ranging from the infectious "Something We Call Love" to the

haunting "Though It May Be Only in Dreams." Yet nothing is overly fragile about Phil and Gaye's music. Every song packs punch and drive. At the end of the show eager fans ask when they will return...and the road stretches on forever.



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