

# The Pop Wizardry of Sam Phillips

By Josef Woodard

COMING ON CHRISTMAS LAST year, singer-songwriter Sam Phillips was wandering around Ocean Way studios, in Los Angeles, mulling over the final mixes of *Cruel Intentions*, the album that would be a follow-up to her 1988 cult hit, *The Indescribable Wow*. Her producer-husband, T Bone Burnett, was watching David Letterman in the lounge while Phillips listened closely to fresh mixes cranked up to a bristling volume.

For all intents and purposes the project was done, but the long-awaited album would have to wait just a bit longer. Virgin Records had wanted Phillips to add a cover song to the package as a commercial safeguard. The company had good reason to handle its artist with care: *Wow* had duly wowed the critics — winding up on many ten-best lists — but despite boasting some of the brightest pop hooks in town, the album had failed to connect strongly with the public.

*Cruel Intentions* was finally released last May, without a cover song. "We couldn't find one that we liked and were comfortable with," Phillips says now. "They just nixed the idea. I'm glad, because to do something forced like that doesn't work."

Burnett, an attentive student of musical Americana, was sensitive to the magical buzz at Ocean Way. With unabashed awe, he pointed to the studio where much of Brian Wilson's masterpiece *Pet Sounds* was put together. He says, "I listened to that album a lot before launching into Sam's album." And, like *Pet Sounds*, *Cruel Intentions* is full of inventive touches and studio wizardry but never at the expense of introspective themes, basic melodic appeal or enticing layers of sound.

It's midsummer, and Phillips has just returned from the U.K., where she was on tour opening for Elvis Costello. In her manager's office, she's rummaging through a pile of promo photos. She selects an image from a contact sheet of "glamour shots," in which she's mugging with a kind of pouty-but-haughty Greta Garbo look. Choosing photos and making videos seems to be tricky business for her. Phillips is a composite and an enigma, a pop musician going deep.

"This is the problem," Phillips says. "My music is sort of alternative, but it's not quite alternative. Comments I hear from professional people are like 'Well,

it's not dance music, it's not *this* or *that*.' Nobody can tell me what it is or where it can fit. The other thing is, even though I do like some strange things, I'm a sucker for a pop song."

Clearly, *Cruel Intentions* is more complex than her previous album. "Somebody said that this album is more mean or more sad or something," Phillips says. "I don't know if that has anything to do with getting married to T Bone" — she breaks into a laugh — "but that's the main thing that happened."

On the album, Phillips and Burnett have managed to make her songs audibly provocative without being merely crafty, or... "tricky," she says, laughing. "We don't want to trick anyone. We're just trying to make it interesting to listen to."

One of the album's tracks is "Where the Colors Don't Go," the most plainly poppish song and the one most like *The Indescribable Wow*. Elsewhere on the album, conventional ingredients are transformed into something stranger, more evocative, to suit Phillips's cryptic lyrics. Marc Ribot's alien guitar sounds, Van Dyke Parks's savory string arrangements, thick icings of Phillips's harmonies, the antiquated synthesizer known as the

Chamberlain and unusual percussion tracks make up *Cruel Intentions*' palette.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Phillips was a lover of mop-top-era Beatles and then her parents' collection of 78s. In her teens, she graduated to the study of such singer-songwriters as Randy Newman, Joni Mitchell (*Blue* was "the only record of hers that I liked") and Bruce Cockburn. Writing her own songs was the next step.

"I love clever, because I'm not clever," Phillips asserts. "I admire that in people

like Elvis Costello. But I think I'll always gravitate toward melody, because the old Forties music was about that. I don't hear a lot of that in music, and I miss it."

Phillips cut two albums for the Christian label Word Records but soon became fed up with that parallel universe. In 1987 she met Burnett, who produced her final album for Word, *The Turning*. "I'm very negative about the Christian media in general," she says. "I feel that it's exploiting somebody's faith, basically."

Through Burnett she was introduced

to Virgin, her first secular home base. She swapped her given name, Leslie, for her nickname, Sam, which unwittingly connected her to the legendary Sun Studios founder, Sam Phillips.

*Cruel Intentions* may not introduce Phillips to the music marketplace at large, but she maintains the long view nonetheless. "Celebrity is really uninteresting, and it's tiring. If you're well known for something you love, that's great. What could be better than that? But just to be famous for who you go out with or what you wear or because you're the latest thing, that's completely unrewarding. The work is the thing," she adds, "the great thing." ♪



## Def Leppard: Ready to Roar?

WE'RE ON THE SLIPPERY slope down to happyland," singer Joe Elliott says confidently when asked about the progress of Def Leppard's long-awaited follow-up to its 1987 multiplatinum album, *Hysteria*. "We've got eight songs finished, two that need finishing up. We're going to reconvene as a four-piece in two and a half weeks' time to nail these other two songs down. Then I've just got to record the vocals on them and then, hopefully, just mixing. We'd like to think we'll have the record finished this side of Christmas."

"Mr. Prediction here," he adds with a laugh. "I told [comanager Peter] Mensch that we would have the last album ready by January '85. He got it two years and eight months later."

This time around the Leppards have once again been dogged by bad luck and tragedy. Work on the new record was interrupted when founding guitarist Steve Clark was found dead in his London town house on January 8th. According to the

coroner's report, Clark died of respiratory failure resulting from excessive quantities of alcohol mixed with antidepressant drugs and painkillers.

After Clark's death, Elliott, drummer Rick Allen, bassist Rick Savage and guitarist Phil Collen labored on the new album for another two months. "We were pretending to get on with it," says Elliott. "But there was no heart or soul in it." The Leppards, who are coproducing the album with engineer Mike Shipley, kept a couple of Elliott's vocals but recut everything else, with Collen playing all of the guitar parts.

Collen's efforts to recreate Leppard's distinctive twin-guitar attack yielded, at least in one instance, rather spooky results. "They played me a little bit of a solo Phil had done," says Elliott, "and it sounded so much like Steve it was really eerie. We all looked at each other and got shudders down our backs."

As for the new material, Elliott hasn't given any titles away but describes the songs as "shorter and more to the point" than those on *Hysteria*. "The last album,

we tended to drag songs out," he says. "This one, there's a couple that are mid-tempo, there are a few ballads. But the rockers are rockers. And the ones we would consider singles are more in the vein of 'Pour Some Sugar on Me' and 'Armageddon It,' which aren't really fast, but they've got power."

Once the record is done, the Leppards' next order of business will be selecting a new second guitarist. They've tossed some names around already but so far have only agreed on two things. The first is that whoever gets the job must have a British passport. "We'd look daft with an American or Canadian or Venezuelan guitarist," says Elliott. The second is that there will be no auditions. "I don't like the idea of judging someone on twenty minutes of blizzing out. I'd rather go on past reputations, obvious ability."

In the meantime, Elliott insists, "we're finishing the record as a four-piece, there will only be four of us on the sleeve, and it will probably be dedicated to Steve." — DAVID FRICKE