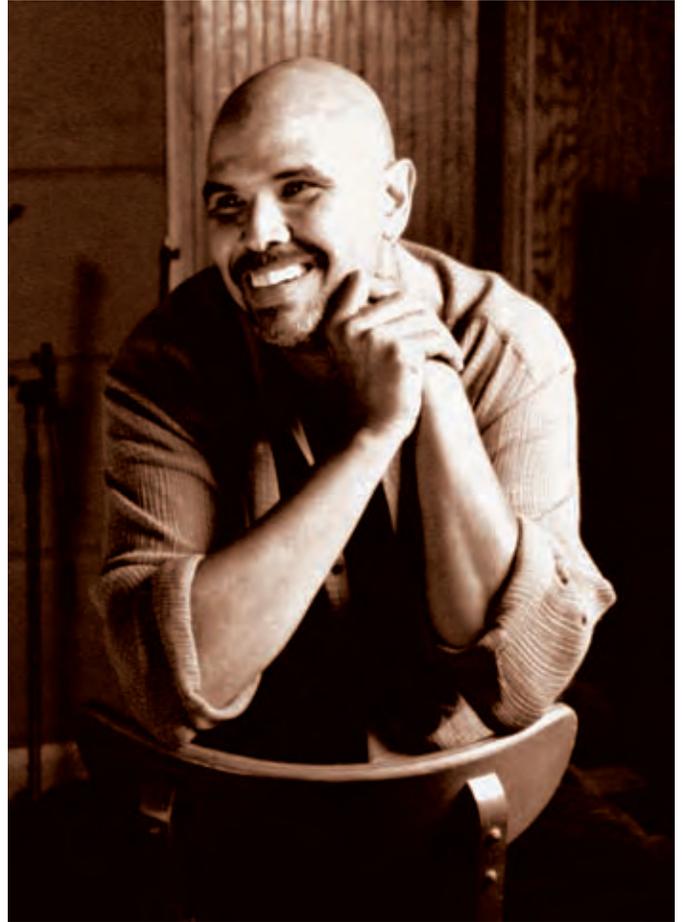


Finding



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His Rhythm



A by Peg Nichols

Jazz Vocalist Phillip Manuel Talks about Life with AD/HD

AS ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S LEADING JAZZ VOCALISTS, New Orleans native Phillip Manuel is accustomed to traveling around the world. But it wasn't until he was diagnosed in 2000 with AD/HD—at the age of 46—that his life journey began to make much sense to him.

“I don't even remember the person I was four years ago,” says Phillip. “Receiving a diagnosis, getting treatment, and learning more about myself and how I relate to others has changed my life in ways I never imagined were possible.”

Born into a family of singers, dancers and instrumentalists in the nation's jazz capitol, Phillip has been surrounded by and immersed in music his entire life. He was singing long before he was speaking full sentences in a household filled with song. “My dad had, without a doubt, the most beautiful voice I've ever heard. My happiest memories include singing with my dad, his brothers, sisters and cousins. Everybody had their own song while we all sang background.”

Phillip Manuel



Above, Phillip Manuel at age nine when he was an elementary school student. Right, Phillip and his father.

Below, Phillip's mother and grandmother at Phillip and Janice's wedding in 1979. Opposite, Phillip and Janice at their 25th wedding anniversary party in March 2004.



Phillip first performed publicly at the age of 11, was paid \$50, and—in his own words—never looked back. As a teen, he sang with a number of local bands and at 16, he made his first record. In 1981, at 28, he was asked to produce and sing the soundtrack for the movie, “Cane River,” being filmed in Louisiana. He received rave reviews—a rising star, poised for success.

But there were parts of Phillip’s life that were far from harmonious.

His parents divorced when he was four years old, and his relationship with his mother—with whom he lived, along with his grandmother—was continually fraught with tension. “My mother and I have always had a difficult relationship,” states Phillip. “No one knew about AD/HD back then, so it never occurred to her that maybe I was having problems for reasons I couldn’t control.”

As for his father, Phillip maintained a close rapport following the divorce. However, his dad had big challenges of his own. He was an alcoholic and suffered from debilitating anxiety. “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as fearful as him. He rarely leaves his home. He refused to see a doctor for almost 30 years. Several years ago, he developed such a bad infection in his legs, he had to have them both amputated,” says Phillip. “However, my dad is my soul mate. He never sat me down for life lessons, but I understand tenderness and intimacy because of the way he was with me. I have an appreciation for subtlety, understatement

and things sublime because of how he sang to me. He is my greatest example of integrity and a pure heart.”

Memories—colorful, vibrant memories—come easily to Phillip. “When I was a boy, my grandmother and I would sit on her bed—just the two of us—watching the Andy Williams show every Saturday night. He was one of my first vocal influences, and it’s one of my fondest memories with her.”

Always a free spirit, Phillip’s inattention and impulsivity became apparent when he went to school. He was rambunctious and, at the drop of a hat, could and would explode with rage. He was easily distracted and had a hard time staying focused. At the same time, he had the ability to make people laugh—though in the classroom, it often cost him dearly. “I was the first grader who asked Sister Therese Marie if nuns were bald beneath their habits. Every kid wondered; I asked. I distinctly remember just blurting out the question.”

His report cards consistently stated the same thing, “Inattentive in class. Disruptive. Talks back. Under-achiever.” In ninth grade, Phillip was expelled from his Catholic high school due to an excessively long list of behavioral infractions, capped off by a disruptive outburst in class following the announcement that Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot.

Yet despite a rocky school history, he never once doubted his intelligence—or his voice. “I doubted a lot of things in life, but my intelligence and ability to sing were two things I never questioned.”

“English was my favorite subject,” Phillip states with a smile. “I’ve always loved words. Still do. I remember writing a paper on breeding tropical fish. It was a good paper. I was proud of it, and I got an A. Looking back, I think my English teacher, Ms. Plicque, understood me. That really helped. Math, on the other hand, was my nemesis. Charts and graphs always gave me the blues.”





Blessed with his beautiful voice and equally inspiring sense of humor, Phillip made it through high school, though just barely. “I was well liked and had a way of making people laugh. And I was always singing. I sang at talent shows, in the high school choir, and I even sang in class when I wasn’t supposed to. Even the nuns, who didn’t care much for me or my behavior, knew I had a gift. But I know I was a chore for my teachers—especially in high school.”

After high school, Phillip briefly went to college but quickly dropped out. Following his older brother, he joined the Air Force, got married and had a baby almost simultaneously. Upon discharge four years later, he held a series of jobs, all while trying to launch a music career in New Orleans. He worked for three months at the post office. He worked for a small marketing company, doing quite well, until one day—bam—he was fired. He supported himself through singing gigs. His marriage was failing, he and his wife divorced, and Phillip got sole custody of his son, Kris.

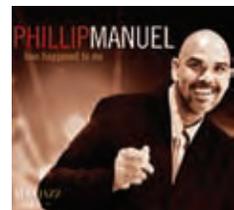
And that’s when Janice—his wife for the past 25 years—entered his life.

Introduced to Phillip by her cousin—then Phillip’s music manager and attorney—Janice was not immediately smitten with the ebullient singer. But she was definitely intrigued and moved by his passion for life and his devotion to his young son. “I was on a profes-

sional track when we first met,” recalls Janice who holds a master’s degree in urban planning. “Children were an oddity to me at the time. Yet I immediately sensed Phillip’s strong connection to family and his commitment as a single father to raising his five-year-old. He was completely at ease with children, and his openness, spontaneity and sense of joy drew me to him.”

The two began dating and 10 months later married. In time, they had two sons of their own—now 15 and 20. Janice’s job required substantial travel when the boys were young, so Phillip—whose singing gigs took place primarily at night—took care of most of the daytime activities. He cleaned. He cooked. He fixed things around the house. He took his boys to school every day, and ironically—considering how much he had hated his own school years—he was the primary “homework helper.” Phillip says, however, that while his kids were at school, he often lacked the focus to accomplish much. He had fleeting day jobs, but for the most part, he was at home, filling his day with mindless activities—restless and depressed at the same time.

As for his music career, Phillip certainly had the talent to fly, but something stopped him from being able to soar. He continued performing, achieving recognition not only in New Orleans, but also among



To listen to Phillip Manuel, or purchase copies of his CDs, go to www.maxjazz.com.

an increasingly wide jazz circle. From Trinidad to Istanbul, Paris to San Sebastian, he performed and dazzled with his incredible voice. Fellow performers included such greats as Patti Labelle, Aaron Neville, Fats Domino, Ellis Marsalis, Phyllis Hyman and Nicholas Payton. He was nominated for a “Big Easy” award as best actor for his performance in *Williams and Walker*, a musical drama about the life of vaudevillian, Bert Williams.

By all accounts, things seemed to be going well. Yet, something wasn’t right.

“Despite outward appearances, I felt like a failure in enormously big ways,” Phillip reflects with both sadness and regret. “I wasn’t *unhappy* with my life. Janice and the kids brought me—and continue to bring me—tremendous joy. But there was an inexplicable agitation within that kept me at a psychological distance from others. I began to wonder if I really cared about other people. The outside world saw one Phillip Manuel, but I felt as if the real me was trapped and couldn’t emerge. There was a real disconnect—one I was aware of—and one I couldn’t seem to shake.”

Below, Phillip and his eldest son, Kris, from his first marriage.



And then there were other little problems that, while certainly not life threatening, weren’t exactly life enhancing either. Such as his tendency to lose things. A leather coat. A cherished London Fog wind-breaker. A gold ring. Countless pairs of reading and sunglasses. Checkbooks. Keys. Umbrellas. The list goes on.

By the late 1990s, Phillip’s moodiness was becoming more noticeable. He was prone to angry outbursts over the smallest issues, and he couldn’t stay focused on anything. He was restless, impatient, fidgety and anxious. “I was well aware that I wasn’t always easy to be around—sometimes I was downright mean,” says Phillip. “But I didn’t know what was driving it. Even worse, I didn’t know how to stop it.”

Janice was also becoming concerned. Described by others as steady, grounded and even-tempered, her own internal worry about Phillip continued to grow. One day a close friend was describing a cousin who recently had been diagnosed with AD/HD. As Janice listened, the description sounded just like Phillip. So she did some Internet research and came upon CHADD. She downloaded and printed some 35 pages of information for her husband and left it by the bedside. It sat there for several weeks, untouched. Janice decided not to bug him.

They were bickering a lot during this time, typically over inconsequential things—for example, “how to cook an egg.”

Phillip typically did the morning cooking. But one day, Janice was fixing the eggs. Phillip came into the kitchen, took one look, and let the criticisms begin to flow like a mighty river. She hadn’t heated the skittle correctly. She cracked the shell the wrong way. And as for the way she cooked them, forget it.

Today they can laugh about it, and in time the egg story—for reasons that are later explained—became symbolic of a transformation about to take place. “Eggs obviously were not the issue,” Janice states. “But we didn’t know how to talk about the things that really mattered.”

Phillip eventually began reading the CHADD information. And a light went on. One day, he admitted to Janice—without a trace of defensiveness—that he saw himself in the material. A few weeks later, after finding a specialist known for treating AD/HD in adults, he underwent a comprehensive evaluation—including a 700 question self survey, interviews with members of his family, a comprehensive medical history and even a review of his old report cards.

This led to a diagnosis of AD/HD, along with anxiety disorder and depression. “When the doctor

Phillip Manuel



asked me to guess where I was on a scale of 1–10, with 10 being the most severe form of AD/HD, I told him about six or seven.”

“How about an eight or a nine?” the doctor responded.

Phillip began taking medication for his disorders and simultaneously began psychotherapy, a regimen he maintains today.

In 2000—the true turning point in his life because of his diagnosis and treatment—Phillip’s music career really began to take off. His CD, *Love Happened to Me*, was released to widespread acclaim. The *New Orleans Times Picayune* wrote, “Phillip’s rich, elegant voice braids with the other instruments in a colorful tapestry. Arms outstretched, voice floating like a butterfly in a sun-dappled garden, Phillip allows himself to be carried away by emotion.”

National Public Radio stated that his “rich, coffee-dark vocals are in the tradition of romantic crooners such as Billy Eckstine and Nat King Cole. He revels in and examines each textual and melodic nuance like a jeweler examining a fine diamond.” After a performance in San Francisco, the *San Francisco Chronicle* declared, “Phillip sang the wordless melody as if it were a prayer.”

Music isn’t the only area of Phillip’s life that began to take flight. Today, he is the creative director of Bright Moments, a public relations firm that does work for everyone from political candidates to Popeyes®

Chicken to the city of New Orleans. He writes and develops marketing campaigns, and his speaking voice is regularly requested for television and radio commercials.

His relationships have changed, too. Recently, Phillip and Janice had a heated argument about whether the entire family would drive their son back to college. Phillip had work to do at the office, but Janice felt that the entire family should make the journey together. But unlike in previous arguments, Phillip retreated, took time to consider the importance of Janice’s request and saw how much it meant to her to travel as a family. He also knew that taking his son to school—as opposed to going into the office—was the right choice. He called her and said he would go.

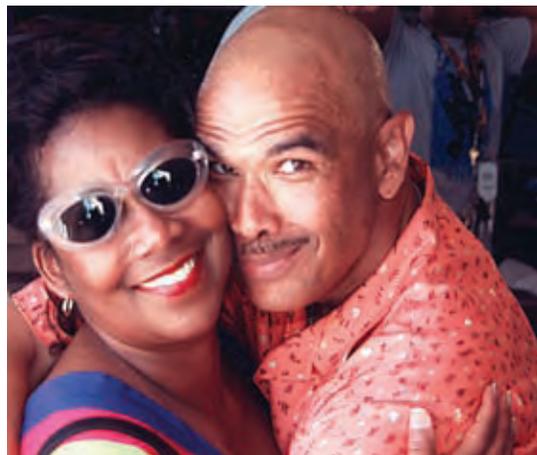
“It was a remarkable turning point for us, for me, mostly,” Phillip reflects. “For the first time in a long time, we weren’t arguing about eggs, so to speak. Instead, we were having a heated discussion about something that mattered—us! And the good news is that we both listened, we compromised, and made it work. Janice is an amazing human being,” he says, “She’s loved me right through to the other side.”

Janice, in turn, marvels at her husband’s resiliency, his ability to love and his capacity to forgive. “He’s happy,” she says. “We’re happy.”

“With a diagnosis, medication and counseling, I have come to recognize my moods and behaviors for what they are. The AD/HD feeds my anxiety, and my anxiety returns the favor. Through therapy, I’ve learned how to be a better listener. I try very hard to be a gentleman, to judge less and to love more. I’m definitely a work in progress.”

As he gets ready to leave, he smiles and then adds, “But aren’t we all?” ■

Peg Nichols is CHADD’s director of communications and media relations and executive editor of *Attention!*® magazine.



Left, Phillip and C. Ray Nagin, mayor of New Orleans, at “Real Men Cook,” a fundraiser held by the organization 100 Black Men. Below, Phillip and Janice at the 2002 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.