

Spotlight

Phyllis Hyman: 'A cool tomcat of a woman' comes into her own

When 6-foot-2 Phyllis Hyman debuted on Broadway, the theatre critics and audiences discovered what the music community had known for some time: that she is a performer with astonishing gifts. Both reviewers for *The New York Times* reached for superlatives to describe her impact in "Sophisticated Ladies." Walter Kerr called her an entertainer "who deserves all the accent and glow a glittering carbon-arc can give her. Her wonderfully smoky vocal chords seem to have been born and reared in the Cotton Club and then sent out into the world to get along on their own."

And Frank Rich wrote, "When Phyllis Hyman, a cool tomcat of a woman, applies her powerful, smoky voice to 'In a Sentimental Mood,' she immediately transports the audiences to a 52nd Street saloon of yesteryear at 3 in the morning."

Phyllis' triumph onstage, singing the timeless songs of Duke Ellington, was a landmark in her career, and earned her a Tony nomination. But there are many more sides to her talents, as she demonstrates convincingly on her latest album, "Goddess of Love."

It's an LP that showcases her smoldering voice in a new, contemporary light. Its production was divided between Narada Michael Walden (whose recent production of Angela Bofill yielded the No. 1 R&B hit "Too Tough") and Thom Bell (a name synonymous with the Philadelphia soul sound), and the results are extraordinary.

It seems incredible that, at an early point in her career, Hyman "used to think people were out of their minds for paying good money to come and hear me sing."

Despite a nervous public debut in junior high school ("I remember my legs shaking and my voice quivering") Phyllis went on to sing in Pittsburgh's All-City Choir, and received the first music scholarship given by a business college. There, she trained to be a legal secretary, and worked after graduation for the neighborhood legal services office.

Her professional music career got its start in 1971 when Phyllis landed a job with a singing group called The New Direction and embarked on a six-month tour of cities that included Las Vegas, Chicago and Miami, as well as Nassau and Puerto Rico. When the sextet disbanded, she went back to Pittsburgh for a

short hiatus before joining All The People In Miami.

"I became kind of the 'in thing' in Florida," Phyllis says, "because there weren't many singers there at the time who could do all different types of material: Latin, jazz and songs by the Isley Brothers and Cole Porter. It was in Miami where I really perfected my singing style and stage presence."

It was also there that she appeared in a cameo role in Bob Fosse's film version of "Lenny."

After three years in Florida, Phyllis was ready for New York City, starting first at Rust Brown's club on West 96th Street. Her engagements began attracting superstars like Roberta Flack, George Benson, George Harrison, Stevie Wonder and Ashford and Simpson. They also attracted Norman Connors, then looking for a female vocalist for the album, "You Are My Starship."

Phyllis wound up doing three songs on the record, including "We Both Need Each Other," with Michael Henderson, and "Betcha By Golly Wow," as well as touring with Connors and Henderson.

Soon to follow was Phyllis' first album, simply titled "Phyllis Hyman." It included such tracks as the hit "Loving You, Losing You" and "I Don't Want To Lose You." Her second album, "Somewhere In My Lifetime," received critical acclaim, triggered by the title track (a soaring ballad produced by Barry Manilow) and hits like "Kiss You All Over."

That was followed by another hit LP, "You Know How To Love Me," and by her appearances as a featured vocalist on two movie scores, "The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh" and Chuck Mangione's "Children of Sanchez."

Then, while singing at Mikell's on New York's upper West Side, Phyllis was spotted by the musical arranger and coordinator for "Sophisticated Ladies," who went to the producers and told them he'd found the right person for a role they were trying to fill.

She had a successful audition and was cast in the production, which led to a Tony nomination for Best Supporting Actress and the Theatre World Award for Most Promising New Talent. Reviewing the original cast album of the play, *High Fidelity* said, "Phyllis Hyman, Amazonian in beauty and stature.

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Sophisticated Lady

Phyllis Hyman: Wooing critics, audiences and her peers with her smoky vocals.

Musical Notes

Prince's new movie to premiere later this summer

Details are beginning to emerge on the hush-hush film project initiated by the 24-year-old *Newsweek* has called "perhaps the most exciting new star in pop music today" -- Prince.

The \$7 million flick, titled "Purple Rain," includes Prince, his Minneapolis cohort Morris Day, head of The Time (which *Rolling Stone* calls "the tightest, funkier live band in America"), members of the controversial female group known as Apollonia 6 and a female lead discovered by Prince named Apollonia.

But "Purple Rain" is not just a music film. The picture was directed by Al Magnoli, a 30-year-old filmmaker whose short, "Jazz," won six national awards and whose work has been listed in the "Encyclopedia Britannica." Says Magnoli: "This is a story ... a story of transcendence. It's a film that takes chances, that defies the rules, that has deeply personal emotional content."

"Purple Rain," which received wild enthusiasm when it was screened secretly for test audiences, was filmed in Prince's home town (Minneapolis), where the picture's producers (Prince's management firm, Cavallo, Ruffalo and Fargnoli) set up a cinematic

center complete with sound and film editing facilities. Security was airtight. Reporters were kept off the set and none of the crew was allowed to discuss the film with outsiders.

The feature attracted a host of Hollywood veterans to brave Minneapolis' mid-winter blizzards. Among those forsaking the sun for "Purple Rain" were: Donald L. Thorin, photographic director (from "An Officer and a Gentleman" and "Against All Odds"); Mike Frankovich Jr., production manager (from films like "Cactus Flower" and "Guns of Navarone"); Ward Preston, production designer (from films like "9 to 5" and "Airplane"), and Craig Denault, camera operator (who just came from work on the current Robert Redford-Robert Duvall film, "The Natural").

The tentative release date for "Purple Rain" is July 27 by Warner Brothers.

The film will be accompanied by a soundtrack album -- Prince's first new LP in close to two years. Curiously enough, Prince's last album -- "1999" -- is still riding high on the charts, where it's been in the top 100 for more than 75 weeks.

"1999" was the only two-record set in the last year

to go double-platinum.

Victorious Preparations

Marlon, Tito, Jackie, Randy, Jermaine and Michael Jackson are on target with the preparations for their "Victory Tour," described by numerous publications as the largest in the history of the entertainment industry.

Backup musicians were chosen for the tour in mid-May and have been rehearsing with Randy and Tito Jackson daily since then.

Rehearsals to design the choreography began May 15. All of the dance moves for the tour are being conceived by Marlon, Jackie and Michael Jackson. And rehearsals on the tour's top-secret stage set (designed by Michael and his brothers) began May 23.

Meanwhile, the Jacksons finished recording 16 potential tracks for their upcoming "Victory" LP and narrowed it down to the eight cuts that will appear on the album. Those tracks, which are currently in the very last mixing stages, include Marlon Jackson's "Body," Randy Jackson's "One More

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Songwriter-singer-producer Kashif has not only broken new technological ground by using the Synclavier II on his latest LP, "Send Me Your Love," but he also has created a program exclusively for the computerized music system.

The Summer Films

'Gremlins': A violent blend of humor, horror

By ALLEN H. JOHNSON
Executive Editor

Though it's hardly in the class of "E.T.," "Gremlins" is a solid, often exhilarating study in slapstick terror.

People die fairly often in this children's film for grownups. But you don't feel all that horrified, when, for instance, a tyrannical widow (Polly Holliday) bites the dust. You may even laugh -- if you don't cheer first.

Gremlins also make their maker in "Gremlins." One explodes in a microwave oven. Another falls into a blender and gets the same comeuppance carrots get when they become carrot juice. And you laugh.

To watch "Gremlins," whose co-executive producer is some guy named Steven Spielberg, is to watch Bugs Bunny battle the Tasmanian Devil in your backyard or the Road Runner outsmart Wiley Coyote

on Main Street.

It's comic books and cartoons come to life in a film set in an idyllic American Everytown.

That's why the characters' deaths don't bother you so much. You know it's all make-believe. Just like Yosemite Sam, who gets flattened by a boulder or blown up by a vial of nitroglycerin every Saturday morning, but, come next week, returns to the tube, good as new, to get flattened and blown up again.

"Gremlins" stars an all-American boy (Zach Galligan) named Billy who works at a small-town bank to help support his family. His father (Hoyt Axton), works, too, inventing all kinds of ingenious contraptions that, unfortunately, don't work.

While visiting Chinatown on a business trip, Dad discovers a charming little creature -- whom he later names Gizmo -- in an

obsure Chinese novelty store. He presents the "mogwai" to his son as a Christmas present -- as well as a warning that the creature should never be fed after midnight nor should he come into contact with water.

As always occurs with warnings in the movies, those two things happen faster than you can say "box office hit" and the gentle little tyke spawns a carpetful of fuzballs that evolve into mischievous, murderous bad-guy gremlins that'll do anything at anybody's expense for a good time.

Much of the rest of the film features a gremlin rampage through town that includes dastardly gremlin Christmas carolers, gremlin poker players and gremlin breakdancers.

It's fun if you're looking for fun and don't expect to be intellectually stimulated. But Fellini it ain't.

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Southern Reggae

Cinnamon Reggae's Joe Daniels takes time out for some hand-clapping during the group's recent performance in Winston Square (photo by James Parker).