

THE MAMMAS AND THE PAPAS

“CALIFORNIA DREAMIN’.” EVEN NOW THE PHRASE HAS THE POWER TO haunt. Though a bit shopworn, co-opted by advertising sloganeers, it still evokes what it first suggested – an overpowering yearning, a dream from the depths of winter, of healing sunshine. ☞ And it’s impossible to hear the phrase without hearing the harmonies, soaring and wistful, of the Mamas and the Papas. John Phillips wrote the song, as he did most of the quartet’s singles, but the sound is emphatically a group sound: John’s guitar backing the soprano of his wife Michelle, Denny Doherty’s lead tenor, the ripe alto of Cass Elliot, strongest of the group’s four singers. Not only did it embody in 1966 a utopian California of the Aquarian mind, but its singers tantalized us with the hope of new community. A band that spotlit both male and female vocals, songs whose folk-rock bones were fleshed out with pure pop arrangements, chord changes that

The Mamas and the Papas:
John Phillips, Michelle
Phillips, Denny Doherty,
Mama Cass Elliot (from left)





echoed in sophistication those of the classic American songbook (the Gershwins, Cole Porter, et al.): The Mamas and the Papas elevated Sixties Top Forty radio by offering a joyous something for everyone.

Bohemian in dress, they were yet perfectionist in their harmonizing (beautiful and dynamic, the sound was achieved by stacking up notes from the sixth of the chord). "Outrageous" at the time – their debut album cover depicted them (clothed) in a unisex bathtub – they were still an adamantly sunny gang of rebels. The Californias of their peers – the Beach Boys' surf reverie, the Dead's acid test, the Doors' Gothic threat – each, too, promised something revolutionary of the golden West. The Mamas and the Papas gave us something different, by



turns more subtle and accessible, a California dream raffish and carefree but slightly bittersweet, a bit wised-up.

John Phillips's California ethos was at first a mythic construct. Like John Fogerty's bayous, like the sagebrush tableaux conjured up by Big Apple songwriters of the 1930s, Phillips's dream landscape sprang initially from his imagination. Only later did his dream begin to conform to his reality. A Southerner by birth, he was by 1957 a fixture on Greenwich Village's music scene. He'd apprenticed in doo-wop and close-harmony crews with charming names: the Del Ray Locals, the Abstracts, the Smoothies; he'd studied the Four Lads, Four Freshmen, Four Aces and Kingston Trio. In 1961, while part of a folk group with Scott McKenzie called the Journeymen, John met seventeen-year-old model Michelle Gilliam. The group's sole native Californian, she later marveled, on a trip with new husband John to New York, at her first sight of snow. It was her wonder that inspired the band's trademark song.

The other Mama and Papa were also veterans. Doherty had played with future Lovin' Spoonful ace Zal Yanovsky in the Halifax Three before joining Cass Elliot in a group that became the Mugwumps. Doherty then hooked up with John and Michelle in the New Journeymen. After a post-Mugwumps stint in a jazz trio, Elliot joined them in the group soon to be known as the Mamas and the Papas.

The name change followed a woodshedding holiday in the Virgin Islands and a move to California. There, John came across Barry McGuire, freshly renowned for "Eve of Destruction." McGuire introduced Phillips to producer Lou Adler, head of Dunhill Records. The quartet then backed

McGuire on a new composition of John's: "California Dreamin'."

Turning in flawless instrumental tracks were famed L.A. session men, drummer Hal Blaine, bassist Joe Osborne and keyboardist Larry Knechtel. Adler released two takes: McGuire's, and another with Doherty singing lead. Doherty's version sparked the hit, and the Mamas and the Papas were launched (the participation of Adler and the Blaine/Osborne/Knechtel troika helped ensure the band's success).

In two years, the former ragtag folkies were superstars. Scoring six Top Five hits in 1966 and 1967 – "California Dreamin'," "Monday, Monday," "I Saw Her Again," "Words of Love," "Dedicated to the One I Love," "Creeque Alley" – they began to realize the romantic vision Phillips's first hit had provoked. Bell-bottomed aristocrats, they partied with the Beach Boys, Jane Fonda and Jack Nicholson in fabled digs (John and Michelle bought Jeanette McDonald's mansion; Cass moved next door to Rudy Vallee). Four gold albums – *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears*, *The Mamas & the Papas*, *The Mamas & the Papas Deliver*, *Farewell to the First Golden Era* – provided the soundtrack not only for their halcyon days but for ours: The zeitgeist trembled with loving vibrations and their songs caught the vibes on tape. Featuring flutes, harpsichords and woodblocks, the songs delighted us with whimsical, almost show-tune instrumentation; Phillips and Adler copped tricks from Tin Pan Alley's arsenal, but the spirit of the songs was freer, the spirit of fresh-air rock & roll.

The Monterey Pop Festival, 1967: Adler and the band were moving forces behind it, and the concert encapsulated the Summer of Love. A rainbow coalition of bands performed – the Mamas and the Papas not least among them – and another



er Phillips composition, Scott McKenzie's "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)", wafted up from festival-goers' transistors. Then, as all idylls must, the golden era began to fade. John and Michelle split. John put out the underrated *The Wolf King of L.A.*; Doherty released a pair of solo albums; Cass embarked to sing on her own (later, in 1974, a heart attack stilled forever that powerful voice); Michelle proceeded to concentrate on an acting career.

The inevitable reunions commenced – a 1971 comeback album, and then a tour featuring Phillips's daughter Mackenzie in 1981. Reminiscences began: John's 1986 autobiography, *Papa John*, became one of rock's sensational tell-alls.

Today the remaining Mamas and Papas – John Phillips, Michelle Phillips and Denny Doherty – singly, flourish. And their richly deserved induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame confirms their legacy: music that transcends its moment and prevails. Music for dreamers of a California – and a universal – dream. ☾

