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Featured Artist: Spencer Phillips

By the time he was five, Spencer Phillips knew he was interested in the world of music. That perhaps was not unusual considering he was born into a family of talented vocal and instrumental musicians. He immediately began to take piano lessons from his uncle, Carl Phillips of Arlington, a well-known piano and voice teacher and performer. For eight years, Phillips took lessons and dutifully practiced before turning his attention to guitar. He couldn't help but be influenced by his cousin, James Phillips, who is considered one of Prince Edward Island's finest guitar players, and his older brother Mark, who generously sold Phillips his own electrical guitar at a good price. Phillips says it was great to have three people whom he greatly admires for their talent to show him the ropes. Since that time, Phillips has kept adding instruments to his line-up. He also plays the mandolin, the Irish Bouzouki, the ukulele, and the harmonica.

Early on Phillips saw himself more as an instrumental player than a singer even though he had sung in church and school concerts since he was a young child. But that all changed in the span of a week when he was sixteen. His brother was scheduled to play at the Guitar Festival being held in Tyne Valley with another musician who had to drop out close to the date. Mark bribed Phillips with tickets to see Bob Dylan in concert in Moncton and the young musician suddenly found himself on stage singing a song first popularized by Bessie Smith. Even though Phillips insists that footage of the performance is pretty embarrassing to look back on, the positive feedback launched his singing career.

Phillips loosely labels himself a folksinger, although he hates to put a narrow definition on himself as he likes many types of music and does not want to limit what he enjoys hearing or performing. He especially enjoys the work of songwriters like Stan Rogers, Ron Hynes, and James Keelaghan — those who have written songs that rely heavily on Canadian history and culture.

As a teacher Phillips has had the opportunity to teach music at several schools and he tries to instill in his students an interest and love of music. "I like to teach them to open themselves to the world of music and not to confine themselves to a particular genre. I tell those who might find it difficult to study music 'that if something is worthwhile it is likely hard in the beginning, and the big thing is to believe you can accomplish something after you've struggled with it.'"

For the twenty-seven year old musician who plays weddings, pubs, and whatever other gigs he can line up, it is not about making the big times but about enjoying the music itself. He says, "If this is as far as my musical career goes it is alright, because so many important rela-



Spencer Phillips: Musician

tionships have been formed and strengthened within my musical experiences." This includes his girlfriend, Ellen McQuillan, a French Immersion teacher and violinist who he often performs with. "I just do my best to please an audience, and it's that much more fun when you know you have. It's all good."

Even though he is content, Phillips does admit to one big musical ambition and that is to release an album with his brother. He has started to write songs and as a student of music, is allowing himself to be open to the influence of other performers and styles, which he says makes him a different writer every time he sits down to compose. "Yesterday I might have been a 19th century fisherman, while today I may be writing from a more modern perspective. I do not confine myself in the least."



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