

BY GARY E. FRANK PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB HANDELMAN

Impossible to fit into just one category,
the music of **Philip Hamilton '82**
has spanned many genres—from jazz
to R&B, doo-wop to calypso.

And he's just added one more.

Philip Hamilton Has the Blues



ON A BALMY AUTUMN EVENING, a small, somewhat apathetic crowd has lounged through two acts at Ryle's Jazz Club, a venerable night spot in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when Philip Hamilton '82 and his ensemble take the stage to polite but unenthusiastic applause. It's the kind of night—the kind of house—that often tempts musicians to go through the motions and quickly wrap things up, before grabbing the check and hurrying out the door.

It's evident from the outset, however, that Hamilton is not one of those musicians.

With his longtime collaborator, Barry Marshall, and his college friend John Mason '84 backing him on guitar, Hamilton seizes the moment as if it's standing room only inside Ryle's.

"If you love me Lord, you will set me free, 'cause my mind is chained to the way it's supposed to be . . ."

Hamilton's high resonant tenor fills the room. Soon all eyes are glued to the bald, cocoa-skinned man singing and rhythmically tapping a talking drum nestled in the crook of his left arm. The audience, which had been decidedly nonchalant just moments before, is completely engaged now.

As Hamilton rolls through several selections from his most recent release, *Blues, Rhythm, Rhythm and Blues*, he exhibits his extensive vocal repertoire, his voice ranging through musical genres that include R&B, jazz, blues, and what can best be described as eclectic.

"There's a story behind each song, so when you buy the new CD and take it home, you'll know what I'm talking about," Hamilton quips to the audience, which has continued to warm to his ebullient personality and the band's sinuous treatment of his work. By the time Hamilton and his cohorts complete their 45-minute set, there is not a trace of nonchalance left in the club.

"It's always fun to play with Philip," Marshall says later. "He knows how to grab an audience's attention. As a musician on stage with him, you know it's going to be a successful show."

The next morning, Hamilton sits at a small kitchen table in his childhood home, a two-story wood-frame house in a working-class neighborhood of Medford, Massachusetts. He's characteristically upbeat about the previous evening's performance, which was part of the annual NEMO Music Showcase, featuring nominees and winners of the 2004 Boston Music Awards. It was the first time that Hamilton, a nominee for best blues act, had performed selections from *Blues, Rhythm, Rhythm and Blues* before a live audience. (He has twice been nominated for outstanding jazz vocalist.)

"It was great to see the music come alive in a club setting," he says, leaning back in his chair. "One thing I learned from musicians like Pat Metheny and LaVerne Baker is that you have to interact with your audience. Even if you're feeling bad, you have to talk to them and make that connection."

During the two decades since he graduated from Middlebury, Hamilton has been connecting with audiences and fellow musicians on four continents as a vocalist, percussionist, and composer, though his mother says he's been performing far longer than that.

"He never cried when he was a baby," Millicent Hamilton says, smiling at her youngest child, who is seated at her right side, clasping her tiny hand. "He was always humming or singing to himself. I can still see him, holding onto the bars of the crib, lost in his own little world."

The sounds of reggae, R&B, calypso and soca were a familiar and constant presence in the Hamilton household when Philip and his three siblings were growing up. (A cousin, who performs

under the name Arrow, wrote the soca hit "Hot, Hot, Hot," made famous when parodied by Buster Poindexter in the late 1980s.) Millicent Hamilton and her husband Kermit—whose families emigrated from Jamaica and Montserrat, respectively—strove hard to impart the values of hard work, charity, and tolerance to their children. Hamilton attended Catholic schools for his early education and says he doesn't remember paying much attention to the race or ethnicity of his schoolmates. "I had as many white friends as black friends," he recalls.

Hamilton's awareness of social complexities began when he entered Medford High School during the mid-1970s, when the Boston metropolitan area convulsed with racial tensions in the aftermath of court-ordered busing to desegregate public schools.

A partial discography

AS LEADER

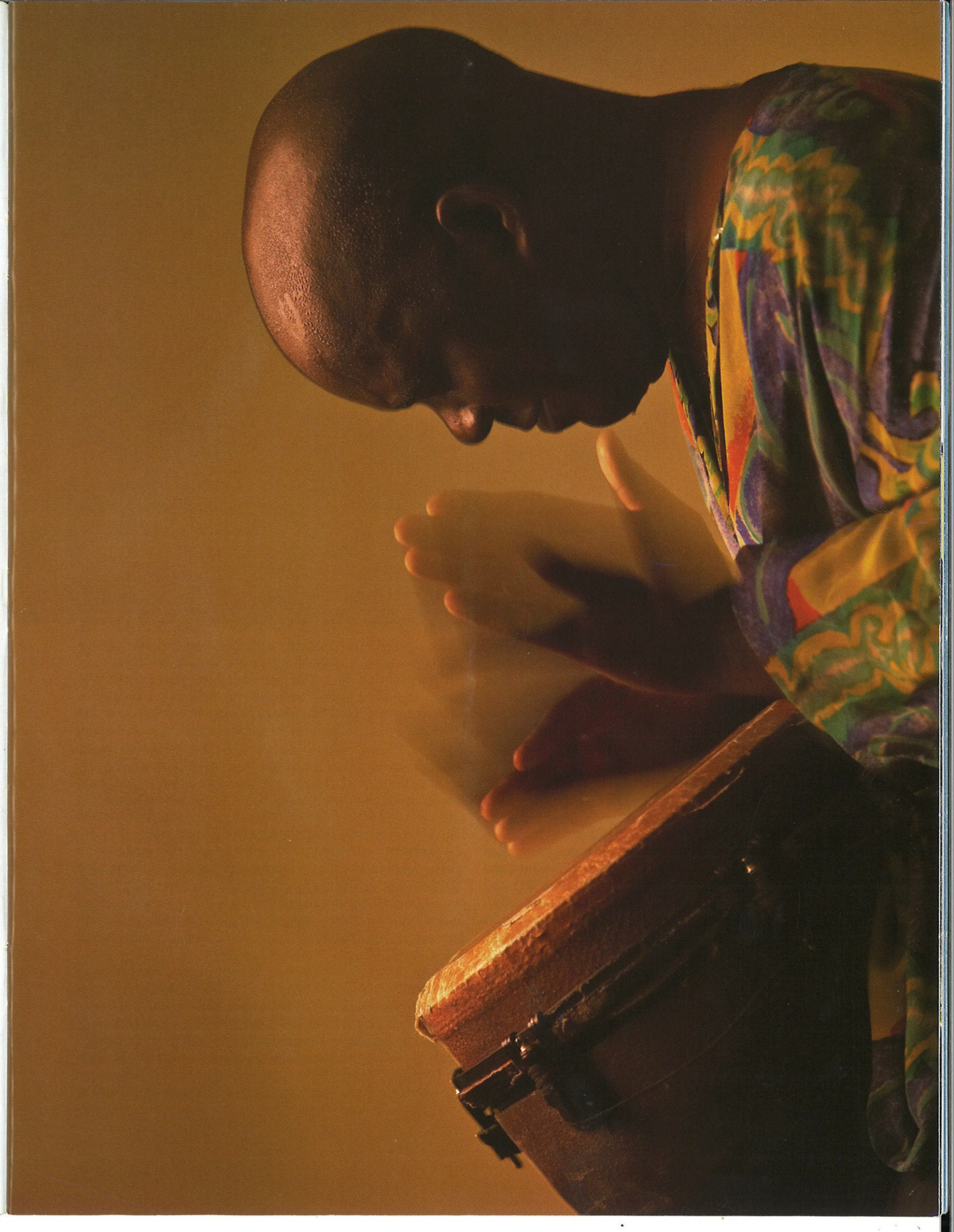
- > *Blues, Rhythm, Rhythm and Blues* (Montenegro Records)
- > *Maya* (Montenegro Records)
- > *Ezekiel's Wheel* (Montenegro Records)
- > *Philip Hamilton Live* (Montenegro Records)

AS A COLLABORATOR OR SUPPORTING MUSICIAN

- > *Home Away from Home*, Dee Carstensen (Exit Nine Records)
- > *Touch*, Bill Evans (Zebra)
- > *The New York Rock and Soul Review*, Donald Fagen, Michael McDonald, Boz Scaggs, Phoebe Snow, and others (Warner Brother Records)
- > *Live at Carnegie Hall*, The Flying Elephants New Sound Workshop (King Records)
- > *Myth America*, Full Circle (Columbia/Sony Records)
- > *Secret Stories*, Full Circle (Columbia/Sony Records)
- > *Sony Records Jazzy Christmas Recordings*, Full Circle, Harry Connick Jr., Branford Marsalis, Wynton Marsalis, Nancy Wilson (Columbia/Sony Records)
- > *Hark the Rock and Rollers Sing*, Philip Hamilton, Peter Wolf, Aimee Mann (Beantown Records)
- > *A Brighter Day*, Ronnie Jordan (Blue Note)
- > *Jewels*, Chielì Minucci (JVC Records)
- > *Taxi Lumatic*, Sixum (Polygram)
- > *Feel the Music*, Spyro Gyra (Windham Hill)

VIDEOGRAPHY

- > *Imaginary Day*, Pat Metheny Group (Pioneer Video)



After seeing Hamilton perform with Full Circle, one reviewer was moved to write, “Bravo, especially to singer and drummer Philip Hamilton. His solo . . . drew the loudest cheers of the night, and proved that with sheer creativity, you can conquer the world with a whisper.”

“Nearly every day, I’d hear stories about this black person being beaten somewhere or about fights breaking out between blacks and whites,” he says.

Even as a teenager, Hamilton considered himself to be a world citizen. He was eager to meet people of different backgrounds and experiences and just as eager to reach across any divide or gulf that may have been imposed on him or his classmates. High school proved to be a rude shock.

“I found myself in situations where I had to choose to be with black friends or white friends,” says Hamilton. “Sometimes I had more in common with Latino kids or white kids. I didn’t look at you as if you were black or white, I looked at you as a guy who played bass in my band or played for my lacrosse team.” Consequently, Hamilton viewed his acceptance at Middlebury with a “big sigh of relief.”

“I ended up spending every summer up there,” he says. “At Middlebury, I found people with similar interests, but I also ended up listening to styles of music I had never listened to before.” Although Hamilton thrived in Middlebury’s artistic environment, he decided to major in political science in addition to music. “It was the West Indian mentality, the notion that I needed to have something practical to fall back on,” he explains. “Also, I thought that as a black man, the world wouldn’t take me as seriously if I was solely a music major.”

Political science professor David Rosenberg was Hamilton’s academic adviser, and he says that he recognized Hamilton’s potential immediately.

“I remember well my first distinct impression of Phil,” Rosenberg recalls. “It was during the first discussion meeting of Political Science 103, Introduction to Comparative Politics, and we were doing a simulation about power and authority. Phil very quickly figured out the problem and came up with a creative solution that attracted widespread support from the class. It was clear then he had an aptitude for leadership. It wasn’t until later in the year that I learned about his musical talent.”

Leroy Nesbitt ’82, now a senior adviser for institutional diversity at Middlebury, met Hamilton during a three-week orientation session before their freshman year. “It was obvious after a short period of time that Philip had artistic talent the rest of us just did not have,” Nesbitt says. “He’s also the kind of person that when he walks into a room, people tend to watch him.”

His classmate’s leadership skills combined with his sense of humor were needed, Nesbitt says, when frictions developed among different groups of students during the late 1970s and early

1980s. “There were difficult moments when Philip’s levity helped to make clear to everybody involved what the problem was and that we needed to find a way to resolve it quickly and move on with our lives,” he says. “And we did.”

After graduation, Hamilton returned to the Boston area, where he started taking classes at the Berklee College of Music and the Longy School of Music. At the same time, he worked in administrative positions at the Massachusetts Council for Arts and Humanities, and later, the New England Foundation for the Arts. He continued to hone his skills by performing with various musicians, most prominently with the jazz-fusion ensemble Full Circle. The group garnered several awards, including Best Jazz Group at the San Sebastian Jazz Festival, and two Best Group Album/Major Label awards at the Boston Music Awards. After seeing Hamilton perform with Full Circle, one reviewer was moved to write, “Bravo, especially to singer and drummer Philip Hamilton. His solo . . . drew the loudest cheers of the night, and proved that with sheer creativity, you can conquer the world with a whisper.”

It was during this period that Hamilton met Marshall, who was a songwriter, guitarist, and producer in Boston. Marshall was preparing to produce a few songs featuring the legendary rhythm and blues singer LaVerne Baker for the soundtrack of the film *Dick Tracy*. When Marshall became Baker’s musical director, he invited Hamilton to join the band for a tour of Europe.

Something clicked between the two singers, and soon Hamilton was not only opening Baker’s show, he was joining the aging, but still formidable, chanteuse for a few duets, Hamilton’s high tenor contextually overlapping with Baker’s husky one.

“LaVerne and Philip are the two singers I’ve worked with whom I consider to be geniuses, especially at phrasing,” says Marshall, who has worked with the likes of Peter Wolf, Ben E. King, Aimee Mann, and Steve Forbert. Hamilton, he claims, is one of the “most fabulous singers of all time. He’s similar to the best Motown singers, sort of a combination of Eddie Kendricks and David Ruffin. He can do almost anything vocally.”

After Baker and her ensemble returned from Europe, she and Hamilton resumed performing in and around New York City. A six-month stand at a Manhattan nightclub in the late 1980s attracted the attention of the pop-rock glitterati, most notably Steely Dan cofounder Donald Fagen. Roughly halfway through Steely Dan’s 20-year hiatus from recording, Fagen had assembled the New York Rock and Soul Revue, a tribute to the rhythm and blues singers of the 1950s and early 1960s, who held court at Manhattan’s Beacon Theater and featured such guest artists as



Michael McDonald, Boz Scaggs, Charles Brown, Phoebe Snow, and Felix Cavaliere. After seeing Hamilton wow audiences, singing with Baker, Fagen invited him on board.

“What a high *that* was,” Hamilton says, a grin spreading across his expressive face. “All of a sudden I’m singing on stage with Donald Fagen,”—here Hamilton breaks into a falsetto riff, “*More leisure for artists everywhere*,” from Fagen’s solo hit, *I.G.Y.* (Hamilton’s association with the notoriously sardonic Fagen afforded him the opportunity to do something that should make him the envy of Steely Dan fans everywhere—explore the singer-songwriter’s music collection. What did he find? “Music by folks like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and lots of blues.”)

Hamilton thought the New York Rock and Soul Revue would be the pinnacle of his career, but that was before joining the Pat Metheny Group the following year. He joined the ensemble for its 1997–98 Imaginary Day tour. A multiple-Grammy-winning guitarist, Metheny has long employed backup musicians who must be adept at several different instruments; so Hamilton not only sang and played percussion but also performed on guitar and trumpet. “My trumpet playing was weak,” he laughs. “They had me pretty low in the mix.”

Concurrent with his evolving vocal career, Hamilton made a name for himself as a composer and collaborator with choreographers, such as Judith Jamison, Ron Brown, and Danny Buraczeski. He was also the composer for the musical *How the World Got Wisdom*, which is based on African folktales, and composed the theme to the Emmy award-winning PBS television series, *Say Brother*.

As the summer season dawns, Hamilton is in his usual buoyant mood, eager to charge ahead with several projects that he has underway. He will perform in choreographer Rennie Harris’s latest work, *Facing Mecca*; his band, the Philip Hamilton Group, is preparing to go on tour; and there are always continued demands of his nonprofit organization, One Voice Productions, through which Hamilton teaches workshops at various arts programs.

He’s also trying to find time to commit to an idea that’s been percolating for a while: composing a new musical that would showcase a broad range of singing styles, including Gregorian chant, a cappella, barbershop quartets, doo-wop, even Tuvan throat singing. “The idea is motivated by my love of the human voice and what it can do,” says Hamilton. “I want to do for the voice what *Bring in ’Da Noise, Bring in ’Da Funk* did for tap dancing or what *Def Poetry Jam* did for poetry.”

In the fall, two live DVDs will be released, *Vocalworks*, a revue of Hamilton’s theatrical oeuvre, directed by his childhood neighbor Calvin Lindsay ’83, and *Philip Hamilton Live*, filmed at a performance in Lithuania last year.

The interests and motivations sparked by his Middlebury experience are as powerful as ever. “Middlebury was fertile ground for my artistic vision,” Hamilton says. “This is what I do. I’m a creator. I can’t help it.”

Gary Frank has profiled astronauts, cartoonists, educators, musicians, and scientists—while also writing more than 100 music reviews—during his career as a journalist and writer. He lives in Endicott, New York.