

# anything but common

## mike phillips

uncommon denominator



■ by M.L. Burwell



"Uncommon Denominator"

**M**ike Phillips definitely has something to say and it is perfect timing when jazz music can use all the young blood it can get. Striking an impressive balance of a new school aura, solid musicianship, with a deep appreciation and respect for the giants of jazz and its history, the Mount Vernon, New York native is poised to be a permanent fixture in the jazz scene.

Deciding to play professionally at sixteen years old, Phillips has already had an amazing beginning to his promising career. Signed to Hidden Beach Recordings, he immediately went on tour opening for Jill Scott and it has been all up hill ever since, performing with a variety of artists such as the Notorious B.I.G., Brian McKnight, Kenny Lattimore, Rachelle Farrell, Babyface, Boyz II Men, Stevie Wonder and Prince.

Phillips has also had the great honor to perform at such distinguished events at President's Bill Clinton's Inaugural Gala at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. and the 80th Birthday Celebration for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. His television appearances include Saturday Night Live, BET on Jazz, and The David Letterman Show.

Continuously growing and exploring new professional avenues Phillips has collaborated with Teddy Riley on the "Rugrats: The Movie" soundtrack, as well as performing the national anthem at various sports events as the only non-athlete endorsed by Nike and Michael Jordan's Brand Jordan label.

It is with no question Mike Phillips is wise beyond years and has something essential to contribute to music and we should be listening. Today we discuss his being a hot young musician, the marketing of jazz, his hip-hop influences, and his deep love for performing.

**SJM:** Mike, when I first met you at the Luther Vandross tribute party in Los Angeles, I mentioned to you that I wish you and Joe Sample could sit down and talk. After listening to both of you, I believe there could be some very interesting dialogue about the appreciation of jazz music, its history and the new generation of jazz musicians. Who are some the cats that inspired you musically?

**Mike:** I'll never forget when I was 12 years old I used to listen to a tape of Dexter Gordon, "Live at the Village Vanguard." They had a jazz station, I think it was 89.1 in New York. The hip-hop stations were all on the other side of the dial so I literally would go back and forth. They would be playing 'Trane, Grover, Lester Young, I mean all those cats. I had this musical ear, so then I'd go to the hip-hop station and listen to some other cats within the realm of hip-hop like early Jay Z, it was so crazy, but the influences from a saxophone standpoint definitely would have to be Bird and Cannonball, from a horns perspective; Sonny Stitt, Sonny Rollins, Coleman Hawkins. I truly believe if you don't go through the history of jazz then you're not going to be able to play it and put it in perspective as far as how the giants played it. They had an appreciation and drive for music. Even when be-bop was coming to terms and they were forming that whole renegade way of playing, they had respect for the parameters of the music. I'm also influenced by the people I've played with: Prince, Stevie...Lord, if I had a CD player and I've got three CDs in there it would be Biggie Small's first album, Ready to Die. I've got Michael Jackson's, Off the Wall, and Miles Davis', Kinda Blue.

**SJM:** You've had come great, great experiences already. I'm thinking about your touring with Prince and Stevie Wonder. At this early stage, what would you say has been the highlight of your career thus far?

**Mike:** I would say having Prince hit me up and say, "Can you fly out here. I want you on the Musicology Tour." I was like what?! I mean out of all the sax players you can pick? And then I get there and the first dude that gives me a pound is Maceo (Parker)! I mean that is the grandfather of sax. That was like my father on the road. So to actually be in the midst of the



people who influence you... Once I got off of that tour I was so amped to practice everyday and to grow. But what a highlight to have with dudes like that.

**SJM:** *You're a young cat, especially for the jazz, smooth jazz genre. How have you been received from the older musicians?*

**Mike:** They have received me with open arms. They know I come from a different generation. I might not look like them, I might not use the same lingo, but the music is always the same language. The older cats always say you have an old soul, they always encourage me and give me their blessings at the same time.

**SJM:** *Mike, what happen in your life that made you pick up a horn?*

**Mike:** To be honest with you, to get out of class. One day a guy came in and said you can get out of class to be in the band. And this was a class that I really couldn't take: social studies. So I was like, "I'm out!" – I originally wanted the trombone because all my homies played the trombone and the trombone would be in the front of the line in the parades and our thing was to always be in the front. Well, they didn't have any more trombones so they sent me a sax. I think in life, things just don't happen just to happen.

**SJM:** *Interesting how you said earlier in life, the class you turn away from was social studies and now you are talking about respecting the history of jazz.*

**Mike:** Exactly, and it's all relevant because another one of my subjects I really didn't like was math. But until I got the music and found out that when you play a C scale and a D scale, you're just moving it up one number, it's all numbers at the end of day.

**SJM:** *At what point did you know, "Hey I'm going to do this jazz thing for real."*

**Mike:** I guess the first time I really wanted to do it was when I played a solo in church. I think I was seventeen and a lady came up to me, she must have been going through a lot at the time, and told me she was truly blessed by the gift that God gave me. I said, how powerful is this? Where maybe someone has a bad day and they need to be encouraged and you can play a song that can totally change how they were thinking. It was never about artistry, or money, or getting large. It was the fact that this music when you play it, when I put my lips to the horn has the ability to change someone's [mood]. One of the greatest compliments I ever received was when I did a concert in Atlanta. A dude came up to me who was manic-depressive. He said he was suffering from the disease, but for the one and half hours when he listened to me play, he didn't even worry about the disease he had, he was just so happy to listen to music

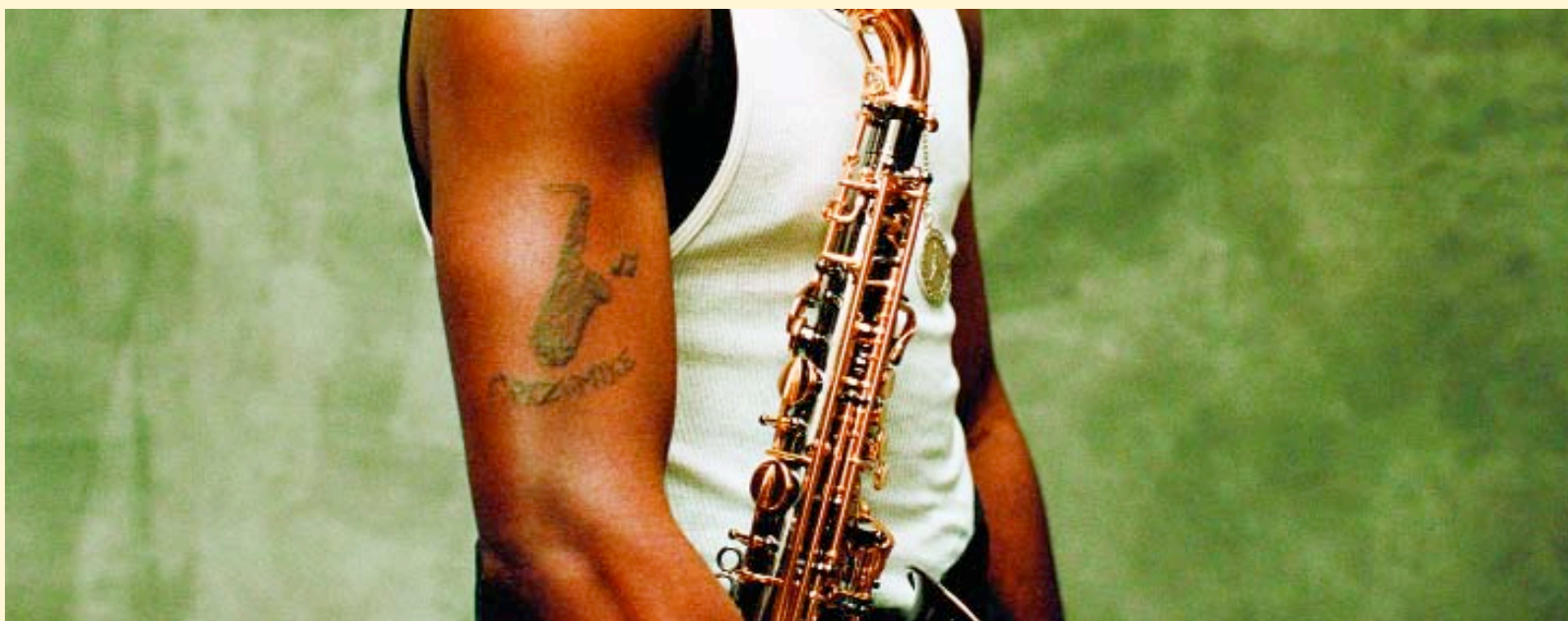
and hear me play. So the power of [the music] is something we can't take for granted. Obviously people in the business think about how many units they sell, but just to brighten someone's day with the true gift of what music was meant to be, it's one of the core reasons why I even wanted to do this.

**SJM:** *And here you go again talking about not liking math, but you come out with an album titled, "Uncommon Denominator." Tell me about that?*

**Mike:** And that's so crazy right? Uncommon denominator. When you look at those two separate words. 'Uncommon' obviously means something a little bit different. I might flow a little bit of hip-hop in there. Even in my show, I might grab the mic and freestyle thirty-two bars and then come back and play something in the genre of smooth jazz and flip it a little bit, so that's pretty uncommon. The fact that the album has sixteen tracks, that's pretty uncommon. Experimenting and doing different things in my marketing aspect in terms of being the only non-athlete to ever have a deal with Nike. That's uncommon in the genre. The word uncommon really describes who I am. I'm influenced by all of the jazz greats. I'm humbled to even listen to them and learn something. But at the end of the day, I have to put all that into the pot, sprinkle what I consider my individuality and come up with a sound that I can truly say is authentically a Mike Phillips sound.

**SJM:** *The deal with Nike's, Brand Jordan – How did that come about?*

**Mike:** I perform a lot of national anthems at football games, NASCAR, NFL games. I've gone to the NBA Finals, so right there it's a [connection] between the music and sports so I've hooked up with some people from Nike and the Brand Jordan and I actually put the Brand Jordan logo on my horn. When you look at the national anthem for a NASCAR race and I have two minutes with the Nike logo on my horn, and the brand Jordan headband on, right there that's a different level exposure for the brand. Obviously they pay athletes millions of dollars to jump and dunk a ball but now it's all about lifestyle. It's a whole different twist on how products can be promoted and sold. Also with M (Michael Jordan) being one of the owners at Hidden Beach (Phillips record label), there is a lineage with me playing at all these events and him actually signing off on the deal and saying, man, I love what Mike Phillips does because MJ is not just signing anybody. Not only promoting the brand is great, but I get to explain the concept all around the country when Nike has me travel to speak and play to kids not only exposing the music, but to expose the Brand Jordan lifestyle which is really doing what M did: If they're going to cut you when you're in high school then you need to come back and show them that you can not only make it, but show them that you're the greatest ever to do it.



**SJM:** *Mike were you an athlete?*

**Mike:** Oh yeah, I played basketball at Mount Vernon High School (New York). We were 27-0. I also played baseball and football.

**SJM:** *The reason I ask is you definitely have a different vibe as a jazz artist. I was checking you out just as you were getting ready to go on stage at Garden of Eden, and it was interesting, especially with the whole Jordan thing, because you reminded me of a ballplayer just about to go through the tunnel to do his thing, the movements and preparation. What goes through your mind, moments before you begin a performance?*

**Mike:** Its almost like MJ's mentality. We hang around him all the time and all the people who are signed to the Brand we get that from him. It's like when I pick up this horn, it's time for business. We're going to talk and shake hands and laugh after but once this horn is to my mouth, it's time for business. And that's the whole mentality when you're coming down the tunnel or you're getting ready for that boxing match. You're anxious but at the same time your level of confidence in the gift that you know you have will always see you through. All of those things culminate at that particular time right before you play. It's a great feeling.



Personally selected by Prince, Phillips blows a hot sax on the world famous Musicology Tour.

**SJM:** *My favorite cuts on your CD are, If You Had a Heart and If It Takes All Night. I'm a sucker for a ballad, but I also love Brent's Bounce. I really crank that one up in the car. Which are your favorites and why?*

**Mike:** We Are One. I had the opportunity to play with [Frankie Beverly] at the Essence Music Festival and on the Tom Joyner Cruise. That message is so true. At the end of the day, we're so different, but the same. We Are One sonically, melodically, and harmonically is a great song, but it's the message in it. There's so much division [between us] not only the way we co-exist in America, but on this planet, man. Look what's going on out there. There has to be some kind of constant reminder that we are one, and that message transcends to everybody all over the world. It's one of my favorite songs. I love it musically but the message is so much stronger than what the music could ever be.

**SJM:** *I understand Prince told you playing solo is like making love. So uh, has that stuck with you and do you keep this in mind?*

**Mike:** Its pretty accurate. When you're making love you're taking your time. You're having it escalate; you're letting it grow. It's just like with a solo. You take your time and marinate in it and let it grow and be a product of what it is that you are. Solos are played from the heart. You have to feel it from an emotional standpoint.

**SJM:** *I notice you didn't have a lot of guest artists on this CD. Tell me about your decision to have this album mostly Mike Phillips?*

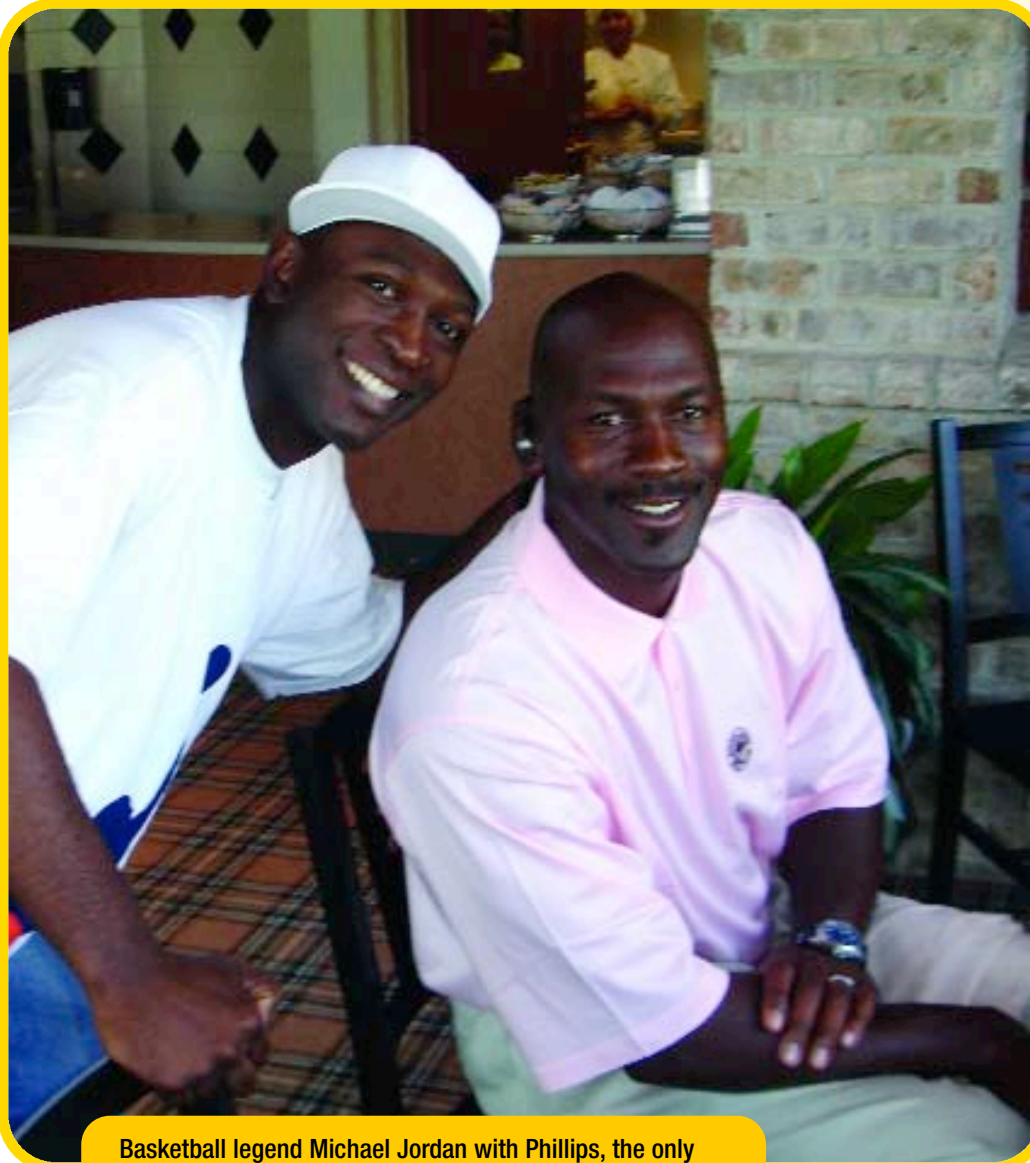
**Mike:** Because I listen to a lot albums and there'll be nine tracks and seven guests! That's what you call a compilation album. That is not an album that reflects the individuality of the person. Now, I might get on an Unwrapped or I'll have a guest or someone help me out, but I really feel like records should get back to the artist displaying what they're about, their individuality without having a compilation feel to it. That's just my view on it and I make sure that I limit that because I'm an artist that has some things to say musically and I don't ever want to confuse the fans.

**SJM:** *In so many ways the jazz artist and the hip-hop artist come from the same place, socially, physically and mentally? What do you think of the chances that hip-hop and jazz can connect with each other?*

culminated from the Negro spiritual, and if you go further back than that, the African drum. The Negro spiritual bounced off into the blues, the blues bounced into gospel and it kept on evolving and jazz came about, then swing came about and then

bop came from a renegade aspect from swing. When that culminated from the ghettos, you had musicians who would take this music and twist it inside and out. 'Trane coming up with Giant Steps and Countdown and all this intricate stuff where they were just playing wild. Some elitists just don't understand this integration, but at the end of the day, everything must evolve. And even within the realm of hip-hop and jazz, that has to evolve into something different too where maybe the next level is the main stream hip hop artist will get on the tracks instead of doing covers and we can flip it up. I was just talking to Ludacris and eventually we're going to hook up and do something together that's going to be crazy. So there's a lot more ground for us to reach to really give jazz a facelift and not to be caught up in the box. There's a whole new different demographic and if this genre does not realize it and start reaching out, the consumers are going to be 70 years old and the musicians are going

to be 55. I truly believe the longer we stay in the box and do not try different things with the format it will die slowly. The people who have the so-called power in the format have to slowly come to terms whether they hold on to where it is and just let it die or think from a legacy perspective and do some creative things so this music can get a face lift and live on for the next musician who is ten years old right now and is practicing to be the next Grover. What's going to happen to him?



Basketball legend Michael Jordan with Phillips, the only musician endorsed by Nike's Air Jordan brand.

**Mike:** It's a bright future. We have to tweak it and try different things. Not only have I been in the field talking to the kids who listen to it, but I was a dude who took these [jazz] records to the hip-hop radio stations in all the big markets and exposed it to them and there's a huge appreciation for both of us, the jazz musician and the hip-hop artist in one musical place that they can both co-exist, that's a hot thing and I wish it could continue. When you look at the roots of Afro centric music it

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**SJM:** Speaking of the kids, I know you're involved with Sax In The Schools. Tell me about that project and how you've shared your knowledge and experiences with kids?

**Mike:** The 'Sax' in Sax In The Schools stands for standards according to excellence. Obviously I play the sax but it has little to do with it. It takes the examples of MJ, myself and really sitting the kids down and talking about focus and goals and using great examples of people who've been through what it takes to truly be focused. Empowering the kids and making sure that not only do we tell them great stories and encourage them but having the mentorship program set up to help them. If one of the kids wants to be a lawyer, then I need to call up one of my boys who is in entertainment law to sit that kid down maybe once a week and make sure the spirit of apprenticeship has already taken place. We kick it with the kids on a real positive level. I expose the music to them, I play to them, we talk, we connect through the internet and create a real cool community.

**SJM:** You seem to be real interested in having the fans experience your growth as an artist. What territory do you see yourself exploring in future CD's?

**Mike:** There will be a CD that will strip down all the electronic elements and its just going to be me, a piano, an upright, and a guitar. That's something that is a must. Within the versatility of music we have the beats, and the samples, and the electronic stuff, but I'm encouraging the growth of my musicianship to go back to that. 