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Out of the Attic

Two Port City musicians with flowers in their hair

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Image: Philip Blondheim, better known as Scott McKenzie of the Mamas and Papas. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

One of the iconic songs of the counterculture movement in the 1960s was sung by Alexandria's Philip Blondheim. Better known as Scott McKenzie, Blondheim sang the vocals to "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)," written by fellow Alexandrian John Phillips.

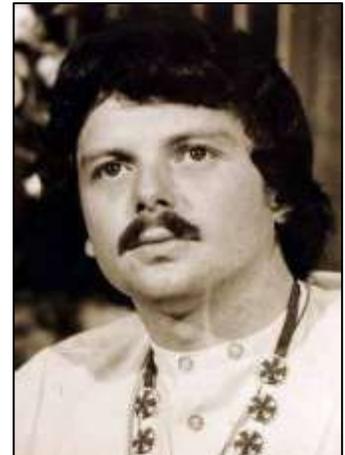
Born in Jacksonville, Fla. in 1939, Blondheim and his family moved to Asheville, N.C., where his father died a few months after Philip's second birthday. His mother moved to Washington, D.C. in early 1942 to find work in the war industries, but she initially couldn't afford an apartment of her own, so Blondheim stayed with his grandmother and other family members until 1946, when he joined his mother in an Alexandria townhouse.

Blondheim and Phillips, who later on gained fame with The Mamas and the Papas, both grew up in Alexandria in the mid-1950s and attended George Washington High School. They sang in separate vocal groups in the mid-1950s and met at a party hosted by Phillips at his apartment on Ramsey Alley. The two formed part of a quartet called The Abstracts, modeled after vocal quartets like The Four Freshmen and the Four Preps.

They changed the name of the group to The Smoothies on their first trip to New York City at the suggestion of their new agent, and started to work in nightclubs. While performing as The Smoothies, Phillips and Blondheim were on a program with a comedian who started calling Blondheim "Scott" because of his resemblance to a Scottie dog. Phillips added "McKenzie" after the name of his daughter Mackenzie, and Blondheim's new stage name was set. The group had a few pop singles in the 1960s but realized that folk music was the direction they wanted to go in. They formed a folk trio with Dick Weissman called "The Journeymen." The group recorded three albums and seven singles for Capitol Records.

After Phillips left for California with The Mamas and the Papas, Blondheim stayed in New York and tried to make it as a solo artist. Two years later, he left, having signed a new record deal, while Phillips wrote a prodigious collection of songs chronicling his personal experiences. He wrote one of them, "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)," for Scott McKenzie. Phillips coproduced the song and played guitar on the recording.

The song reached No. 4 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1967. It was also No. 1 in the UK and several other countries and sold more than seven million copies. Phillips intended for "Twelve Thirty (Young Girls Are Coming to the Canyon)" to be McKenzie's follow up hit, but record company contracts prevented it from being recorded. McKenzie did release "Like an Old Time Movie," which was a minor hit. He later said





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that if he had to be a one hit wonder, “San Francisco” was the song to have. In the late 1960s, McKenzie “dropped out” and moved to Joshua Tree, Calif. in 1970 and then Virginia Beach, Va.

In the late 1980s, he replaced original Mamas and Papas member Denny Doherty when Doherty left the new version of the group he and Phillips had formed. McKenzie and Phillips also cowrote the Beach Boys’ 1988 hit “Kokomo” with Mike Love and Terry Melcher. McKenzie died in 2012 in Silver Lake, Calif. at the age of 73.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.