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Out of the Attic

From Del Ray to Monterey Pop Festival

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Image: The Momas and the Popas. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

At the center of Alexandria's connection to rock and folk music fame was John Phillips. Born in South Carolina, John and his family lived in Del Ray for much of his childhood.

He attended George Washington High School, like Cass Elliot and Jim Morrison, graduating in 1953. He met and then married his high school sweetheart, Susie Adams, with whom he had two children, Jeffrey and Mackenzie, who later became famous in her own right.

Phillips and Adams lived in the Belle Haven area after high school, but John left his young family at their Fairfax County home to start a folk music group called the Journeymen in New York City. The new group included lifelong friend and collaborator Philip Bondheim, later known as Scott McKenzie, also from Del Ray.

The young men had met through their mothers, who were close friends. While in New York, John's romantic interests turned elsewhere and he told Susie he would not be returning to her. Soon after, he married his second wife, Michelle Gilliam, who was barely out of her teens. They had one daughter, Chynna, who also gained fame as a singer.

Gilliam and Phillips joined two former members of a group called the Mugwumps, Denny Doherty and Cass Elliot to form The Mamas and the Papas in 1965. This photo from that time shows Gilliam and Doherty to the left, Phillips and Elliot to the right, and fellow Alexandrian Bondheim at the center. Though the group formed in New York, they were "discovered" by record producer Lou Adler in California. The Mamas and the Papas were one of the first groups to have both male and female members at a time when most musical groups were single gender.

They supposedly came up with a gender-specific name for the group, combining the tough-sounding slang for maternal and paternal titles, after learning that the California biker gang Hell's Angels called their ladies "mamas." It was a perfect choice as Elliott had already been using the nickname "Mama Cass" for several years while she was part of an earlier trio called The Big Three.

After joining together, the Mamas and the Papas had quick and smashing success, with "California Dreamin'" and "Monday, Monday" gaining popular and critical success in 1966. They were one of the most commercially successful bands of 1966 and 1967, but broke up in 1968.

A major factor in the dissolution of the group was Phillips and Gilliam's divorce in 1968. During this time period and afterwards, John wrote hits not just for his own groups, but others as well, including the Beach Boys and the Grateful Dead. He also wrote the massive hit "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)" for McKenzie.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Phillips also helped organize the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, which is credited with introducing Jimi Hendrix and The Who to American audiences. The Mamas and the Papas performed as well.

Like many of his contemporaries, Phillips struggled with drugs and alcohol. In 1980, he was jailed on a narcotics conviction for a month, and then went into rehabilitation. His drinking forced him to have a liver transplant in 1992. He later formed a new iteration of the Mamas and Papas with his daughter Mackenzie, who later alleged that he had sexually abused her. Phillips died of heart failure in Los Angeles in 2001.

“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.