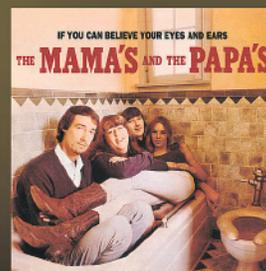


BEHIND THE CLASSICS



Denny Doherty, Cass Elliot, Michelle Phillips, John Phillips

WRITTEN BY: JOHN AND MICHELLE PHILLIPS
RECORDED: 1965, UNITED WESTERN RECORDERS, HOLLYWOOD
PRODUCED BY: LOU ADLER
VOCALS: DENNY DOHERTY, CASS ELLIOT, JOHN PHILLIPS, MICHELLE PHILLIPS
GUITARS: P. F. SLOAN
BASS: JOE OSBORN
PIANO: LARRY KNECHTEL
DRUMS: HAL BLAINE
FROM THE ALBUM: *IF YOU CAN BELIEVE YOUR EYES AND EARS* (1966)



“California Dreamin’”

THE MAMAS & THE PAPAS

Born in California and raised partly in Mexico, Michelle Gilliam was a West Coast girl through and through. But when she met and married touring musician John Phillips in 1962, she nonetheless agreed to move with him to New York City. During their first winter together there, she made clear to him that she didn't care for the chilly climate. “She kept talking L.A., and about how much she was dreaming about California, and how nice it would be to be back there,” John Phillips later recalled. Michelle doesn't dispute the account. “I did nothing but bitch the whole time we were in New York,” she admitted. “I bitched constantly about the weather.”

One evening, after taking a walk in the snow with his young wife, John sat down and set her frustration to music. He sang to a wistful melody: “All the leaves are brown, and the sky is grey . . .” “The words ‘California dreaming’ kept going through my mind,” he said. “I started working on some chords for the song.” He left it unfinished, but later that night in their Washington Square hotel room found himself unable to stop thinking about it. He woke Michelle up and asked for help completing the tune. She wanted to go back to sleep, but he would not be swayed.

“You'll thank me for this someday,” he said, thinking ahead to future royalties. Michelle duly pitched in, adding a verse recounting a recent visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Two years later the couple was living in California at last, having formed a new group called the Mamas & the Papas with singers Denny Doherty and Cass Elliot. The quartet caught the ear of singer Barry McGuire (best known for his hit “Eve of Destruction”), and John Phillips offered his new friend “California Dreamin'”—as well as his group's services as backup singers. McGuire agreed, and convened with the group and producer Lou Adler at Hollywood's United Western Recorders. But when Adler heard the Mamas & the Papas recording their parts, he had a revelation. “Lou took me and John out to a hallway at Western Studio 3 and he said, ‘We're not giving him this song,’” Michelle Phillips recalled. With McGuire's blessing, “California Dreamin'” would instead be the Mamas & the Papas' new single.

Now the foursome set about laying down their vocals in earnest: Doherty and John Phillips stood in front of one RCA DX-77 microphone, with Elliot and Michelle Phillips singing into another. “It's pretty

much the group all the way through except for a few lines that Denny sang solo,” noted engineer Dayton “Bones” Howe. “When the time came for that, John walked around to sing at the girls' microphone.” The foursome then doubled their vocals, and jazzman Bud Shank—who happened to be working at the same studio—was recruited on the spot to play a flute solo where McGuire's harmonica had been. (A bit of McGuire's lead vocal and harmonica solo can still be heard on the completed track.)

The song became the group's breakthrough hit, kicking off what was to be a successful albeit tumultuous career. The Mamas & the Papas broke up acrimoniously in 1971, a year after the Phillips' divorce. Cass Elliot died in 1974, only 32; John Phillips, 65, followed in 2001; and Doherty, 66, in 2007. But “California Dreamin'” continues to recall a time before those tragedies, when a young woman simply longed for the warmth of the sun. “I can't tell you how many people have told me over the years that the reason they were in California was because they heard the song ‘California Dreamin,’” Michelle Phillips said. “It changed their lives.”

—Chris Neal