

PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: PHIL COLLINS

a candid conversation with the singer, drummer and chart topper about his music, his looks, his peers and his reputation as "mr. perfect"

Give me just one more hit. . . . That's not quite the refrain of the song that took over the airwaves a couple of years ago, but it may as well be. Turn on the tube and there he is, doing weird stuff on MTV videos—in one he was Diana Ross and all the Supremes. Switch channels and there he is, being nominated for one award or another, here a Grammy, there an Oscar. Turn on the car radio and he's there, singing or drumming; hit the button to switch stations and he's there, too, and there—and there. Yes, it's safe to assume that there is always a Phil Collins song being played somewhere in the world.

Although this would get an argument from fans of Sting, Bruce Springsteen, Prince or Lionel Richie, Phil Collins is arguably the hottest singer in pop music. Besides the awards, his three solo albums have sold well over 10,000,000 units; and as a member of the band Genesis, with whom he has recorded 16 albums, he has sold 5,000,000 or so albums. Yet unlike Sting, Springsteen or Prince, Collins seems to have appeared from nowhere, quietly, without flash. As we summed up when we inducted him into the Playboy Hall of Fame last year, "His greatest talent is that of being able to speak to the average listener. Collins is among the few genuine adult rock stars, someone whose

songs go beyond teen-beat banalities to zero in on the problems of contemporary romance. It's music to live with, not merely listen to, and that's why Phil Collins is one of the major voices of the Eighties."

We've been humming his songs for years, but he probably became an international star when the world saw him on the Live Aid telecast. Collins got the lion's share of the star-studded publicity by appearing on both sides of the Atlantic for the same concert: He sang on his own and with Sting in Britain, then hopped a Concorde to the States for another solo slot in Philadelphia, then ended his exhausting day as drummer for a reunited Led Zeppelin.

Although controversy is hardly what one associates with Collins, he had his share of that when his song "Against All Odds (Take a Look at Me Now)" was nominated for an Oscar last year. He offered to sing the song on the Academy Awards telecast, but the Academy sent him a letter, addressed to "Mr. Phil Cooper," declining his offer. Ann Reinking, the dancer, sang the song instead and Collins erupted in anger to the press. Shortly afterward, he made more news in the time-honored way—by charging after a pushy paparazzo. Still, aside from cracks about his appearance—the occasional snide comments about

his height and receding hairline—both critics and friends agree that he is a genuinely affable, easygoing man, rarity enough in the music business. There is not much in the rumor mill about Collins. Oh, yes: Robert Plant says that it is tough to get him to cough up for a round of drinks.

Collins was raised in Hounslow, a suburb of London. His father was an insurance man and his mother ran a toy store and then became an agent for child actors. His brother, Clive, is a cartoonist (whose work has been featured in PLAYBOY) and his sister, Carole, is a theatrical agent. Phil got his first toy drum when he was very young, his first full kit at five and began performing in shows at his parents' boating club.

He played in a few bands and stumbled into a session with George Harrison, Ringo Starr and others during the recording of "All Things Must Pass" at Abbey Road Studios. Things continued in the slow lane until 1970, when Phil read about an audition for a band called Genesis, which was looking for a drummer.

Genesis slowly began to build a reputation, first in England, then in the States, for "art rock" in the vein of Procol Harum and Traffic. Fronted by flamboyant Peter Gabriel, the band became known for its theatrical shows,



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"It's a shame my dad never saw me successful at this—music. He died before any of this started. I wish he could have seen that I didn't become a drug maniac or anything. That the music led somewhere."



"Listen: I'm gonna clear up a few things here: One, I'm not short. I'm 5'8". I'm not Abdul Kamal, or whatever his name is, but I'm not short. Two, I'm not bald. I have had this hairline since I was a kid."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVIES AND STARR

which utilized costumes, pantomime and props. Collins was just the drummer boy. In 1975, Gabriel left to pursue a solo career and Genesis auditioned more than 400 singers before deciding that the man in its own back yard—Phil—had the vocal cords for the job. Collins' soulful voice, until then used on a few tracks as background, redefined Genesis' sound, and the band took off. With Collins behind the mike, Genesis is now in the middle of its biggest American tour ever and its 16th album, "Invisible Touch," shot into the top ten three weeks after it was released.

It wasn't until 1977 that the songwriter in Collins emerged, and some of his songs tell a personal story that he is reticent to discuss. Apparently, his first wife, Andrea, took up with another man because Collins was too involved with his career. In "In the Air Tonight," he sang: "I was there and I saw what you did. / I saw it with my own two eyes. / So you can wipe off that grin, / I know where you've been, / It's all been a pack of lies." Whatever the details, Collins poured out his feelings in songs that became his first solo album, "Face Value." It was a raw emotional testament; the other songs were about being abandoned, about missing his two children—yet they were wrapped in infectious melodic beats and up-tempo productions. The hits began rolling out.

Genesis was coming into its own, as well, with the release of "Abacab," its first platinum record. All around Collins, things were poised for explosion. On a personal level, he met and soon married Jill Tavelman, a schoolteacher, who, as he sang in "This Must Be Love," brought him out of the gloom of his divorce. He and Jill today live in Guildford, outside London, a short hop from Fisher Lane Farm, the Genesis recording studio. And he now sees his children regularly.

On a professional level, two solo albums followed: "Hello, I Must Be Going!" and "No Jacket Required," each a bigger hit than the last, fielding a total of six top-ten singles and including the monster hit "One More Night." Sales of "No Jacket Required" have now topped 7,000,000.

Adding a few more strings to his bow, Collins also became a highly sought-after record producer. He collaborated with Philip Bailey on a number-one song, "Easy Lover," and went on to produce records for Frida, from the group ABBA, John Martyn and Adam Ant. He has been asked to produce for artists as diverse as Buddy Rich and Julian Lennon. In fact, Collins was hard at work on his second producing job for guitarist Eric Clapton when Contributing Editor David Sheff caught up with him in the Genesis studio. Sheff, whose previous interviews for PLAYBOY in the music field have included those with John Lennon, Billy Joel and Sting, reports:

"In preparing for an interview, it is routine not only to research the person through previous newspaper and magazine articles but to talk with a wide variety of people who may have insights into him, whether critics, friends, family or peers. The process of preparing for this interview was frustrating: Damned if I could find one person who didn't

end up telling me what a nice guy Phil Collins is. Throughout our sessions, I looked hard to see if I could find evidence that he was really a conniving, manipulative guy who had ordered everyone to say he was nice. No such evidence, folks.

"He was completely professional. Collins would tell me that he would call at 11 in the morning to schedule an interview session and he would actually call ten minutes early. Anyone who has covered rock 'n' roll knows that this just doesn't happen.

"At Fisher Lane Farm, Phil's assistants were cooking breakfast. It was thoroughly English: sausage, bacon, eggs, mushrooms, grilled tomatoes, baked beans. Phil, meanwhile, was going over tracks recorded the night before with coproducer Tom Dowd. After wolfing down his first meal of the day, he issued instructions to one of the assistants: 'Would you please bring my car in to have the tape deck replaced? And, while you're at it, it needs a tank of gas.' The assistant replied, 'No.' Phil shrugged, 'OK. You're fired.' The assistant cheerfully jumped into Collins' BMW and sped off. Later, he told me how much Phil had done for him. 'Phil is the nicest guy you'll ever meet,' he said. I sighed.

"I was staying at a 13th Century inn

"I've been taken less seriously because I've been more popular—I'm cast aside as some sort of Barry Manilow."

called The Crown in the tiny town of Chiddendenfold, where the proprietress asked me if I were visiting on holiday. When I told her that I was there to interview Phil Collins, she broke into a wide smile. 'Such a nice boy, that,' she said. Well, the topic to start the interview seemed inevitable."

PLAYBOY: Phil, we've all heard the rumors; are they true?

COLLINS: You mean about me—

PLAYBOY: Yes. About your being the so-called nicest person in rock 'n' roll.

COLLINS: Well, it's true that I always end up apologizing for being a nice guy. I don't understand why I have to. I do interviews and then the writers come back and say, "My editor doesn't believe you're like this and he wants more to make the story better." Like what? Sex? Drugs? Sorry. This is me. A writer in England went up to my mom and asked her what my faults were. She said, "I can't think of any of his faults." So the headline was: "FAULTLESS PHIL. MR. PERFECT, BY HIS MOM." She read it and went berserk. She doesn't need that at 73.

PLAYBOY: Then it's not true? You deny the charges?

COLLINS: I'm nice until I have a reason not

to be. I work hard and people sense that. But I'm different things to different people. To the middle-aged housewife, I'm someone who looks like a "little boy lost"; to the people who know only *One More Night* and *Against All Odds*, I'm probably this sweet and sensitive guy. But there are many other songs, many other sides. I don't like that sickly sweet image.

PLAYBOY: We've remarked that your biggest talent is being able to speak to the average listener. Do you agree?

COLLINS: I don't know about biggest, but it does seem that people relate. There's a tendency for people to be cynical about popularity, like you're appealing to the lowest common denominator, which is another term for trash. It's an insulting attitude—insulting to the audience. I mean, sometimes I feel it. Like, God, I wish I were David Byrne, with this small, tight group of fans. The critics would like me. Instead, I've been taken less seriously because I've been more popular—I'm cast aside as some sort of Barry Manilow. I find it frustrating.

PLAYBOY: How is a Barry Manilow song different from some of your ballads—*One More Night*, for example?

COLLINS: It has a heartfelt thing in it, it comes from someplace deeper, and that comes through in the songs, I think. It hits the chord of truth. People understand it because they have felt it, too.

PLAYBOY: Manilow might say that people respond to his songs for a similar reason.

COLLINS: He might, but I still believe there is an important difference. People are living with the problems that have to do with their homes, their day-to-day lives, their relationships. There are obviously more substantial problems in the world; but from the feedback I get, I think they find compassion for *their* situations in my songs. Understanding. That's different from gay little love songs. People use music for solace. Somehow, when people are miserable, they put on a miserable song; they want empathy or something. Stephen Bishop writes some of the best love songs because he loves being miserable.

PLAYBOY: We may have caught you being less than nice right at the start. Why the sensitivity over Barry Manilow's sort of music?

COLLINS: Well, it defines a certain area of music to me: soft, spineless music. I never met Barry, so I don't know what he's like, but though the music may be very well produced, polished, smooth and glossy, it has no spine, no edge, no backbone.

PLAYBOY: Critics have been tough on you for not having enough of an edge. How do you react to bad reviews?

COLLINS: If you don't want to believe the bad ones, then you can't believe the good ones, but I don't have to accept the critics who obviously just don't like me. Robert Hilburn [of the *Los Angeles Times*] just doesn't like me. He wrote a review of *One More Night*, complaining about how many times I use the line "One more night" in

the song. How many times does Bruce Springsteen say "Born in the U.S.A." in *Born in the U.S.A.*? Well, Hilburn is a huge Springsteen fan. And the point is irrelevant. There was a whole page of letters in the paper from his own readers angry with him. Anyway, some critics just respond to ballads and love songs. They think it's a little soppy to write about those things. But the stuff that really gets me is the comments about my physical appearance. I guess it's easier to write about than the kind of songs I play. I mean, I was called the ugliest man since George Orwell. What's that got to do with the music? And, by the way, how ugly was George Orwell?

PLAYBOY: Isn't that just a reaction to the stereotypical image of rock stars?

COLLINS: Yeah, I think a lot of critics saw the fans who show up for my concerts, these screaming girls in the audience, and just didn't understand it. I didn't ask for it, but it ends up with me getting all this "short, slightly bald, overweight, middle-aged pop star" kind of thing. And it does hurt.

PLAYBOY: *Rolling Stone* called you a "Cabbage Patch Kid for the pop audience."

COLLINS: Yes, and after that came out, people started to throw Cabbage Patch dolls onto the stage. Listen: I'm gonna clear up a few things here: One, I'm not short. People keep saying I am short. I'm 5'8", which in England is the average height, OK? In America, OK, so I'm not Abdul Kamal, or whatever his name is, but I'm not short. Two, I'm not bald. They all talk about the balding rock star. I have had this hairline since I was a kid, right? Of course, I am losing it gradually, but I started off with less than everybody else. Three, I'm only a little bit overweight, and that's because I have lived in the studio for the past six months and studio work is tedious. There is a lot of sitting around. I get fit on the road. I lose a lot of excess pounds when I'm on stage. On this tour with Genesis, since I'm playing drums more than when I tour myself, I really burn a lot of calories. So there. That's cleared up. But I understand the point. The traditional pop star is more glamorous. Lifestyle, clothes, a bit of arrogance. I'm not going to apologize for not being like that.

PLAYBOY: You've said, "I'm so unfashionable it's embarrassing."

COLLINS: Yes, it's true, I suppose. The other day, my friend Eric Clapton said he was going to London to buy some stage clothes and asked if I wanted to go. I said, "If I bought some nice clothes, the last place I'd wear them is on stage. I just sit there and sweat in them." I don't own a pair of jeans, so it's not that I dress like a slob. And if I did, they wouldn't be tight, because I just don't look great in them. So I like baggy suits. They're comfortable to wear. Sneakers are comfortable. They are the only thing I can play drums in.

PLAYBOY: Do you own a tuxedo?

COLLINS: I bought a tuxedo because of being involved with the Prince's Trust [a

charity sponsored by Prince Charles]. Until then, I was just wearing my wedding suit, this black wedding suit, any time I was supposed to get dressed up. I just couldn't keep wearing it. Now when I go to the Grammys and the Academy Awards and stuff, I've got something to wear. Anyway, all this has meant that I think about what I look like now. I never used to care. At least now I try to look a bit smart. It's about time, I suppose. I'm 35.

PLAYBOY: You have a thing about jackets. Your third solo album is called *No Jacket Required*. Where did the title come from?

COLLINS: I was on tour with Robert Plant and we were staying at the Ambassador in Chicago. We had maybe 30 rooms in the hotel and were paying these exorbitant prices. The second night I was there, I went to the bar dressed fairly smart—proper trousers, not jeans, and a nice leather jacket—and I was told, "Sir, you can't come in here without a jacket." I said, "I'm wearing a jacket." So Robert just pushed the guy aside and walked through. I wasn't going to do that, I was going to stand and argue with the guy. He said, "It's not a proper jacket." To make a long story short, I was livid. I've never been so mad in my life—well, maybe once.

"If I bought some nice clothes, the last place I'd wear them is on stage. I just sit there and sweat in them."

I thought of different things to do. Like maybe going down there wearing the right kind of jacket and ordering a drink and just pouring it onto the floor and saying, "Well, I've got a jacket on! You can't do anything to me." Maybe I should smash a few photographs on the wall, a bit of the Robert Plant attitude. But I did nothing, of course. I just moaned about it.

PLAYBOY: We're on a roll here; what was the other time you got that mad?

COLLINS: I'm a nice guy. We've established that, right? [Laughs] OK. We had a party at this Chinese restaurant in New York. I was leaving, walking with our security man, Ron, with my wife and two children coming behind me, and as we left, there was a pack of *paparazzi* waiting there. This one guy wouldn't get out of the way. The security man said, "Excuse me," and the guy screamed, "Don't push me, man." Ron said something about if the guy talked to him that way, he was going to have to do something, but we just sort of kept going. Then, from behind, I heard my wife say, "Do you mind? Excuse me. I'm his wife!" I thought, My kids! My wife! This guy is pushing my wife and kids around. I just flipped. I went after him like a rocket

through the street. I was held back or I don't know what I would have done. I was running down the street after this guy, swearing at the top of my lungs. They pushed me back and I got into the car and Jill and the kids were looking at me, scared stiff. They had never seen their dad like that. And then I started laughing. I said, "I feel fantastic." It was such a wonderful rush. This is the same photographer who was involved in a similar altercation with Ryan O'Neal a few years ago. It's one thing for him to try to do that to me, but when it was to my wife and kids, I went crazy. Anyway, it was wonderful.

PLAYBOY: You get your share of criticism, but you also get a lot of favorable reactions—including accolades and awards. You've led the *Playboy Music Poll* as top pop drummer for three years and were inducted into its Hall of Fame. Your song *Against All Odds* was nominated for an Oscar in 1985. There was a controversy when you weren't asked to perform it at the awards ceremony, wasn't there?

COLLINS: Well, it's been blown out of proportion. *Entertainment Tonight* had run a few things about it. In fact, I was a bit peeved, but that's life. That night, I was sitting in my seat and poor old Ann Rein-king, who was singing the song, came in. She knew I was there and knew about all the fuss that had gone on about it. And . . . well, she may be a dancer, but she can't sing. She was awful. I felt sorry for her. Kenny Loggins was sitting behind me and he said, "I can't believe what they did to your song." He wasn't performing his, either, so all I could say was, "You've got yours to come, mate." There was politics behind it.

PLAYBOY: It wasn't your night. You lost to Stevie Wonder.

COLLINS: And then, to make things worse, the next day, I talked to a *Rolling Stone* reporter, who asked me about it. I said, "I can't fight Stevie Wonder. He's been around too long. He's black. He's blind and he does a lot for human rights. He gets the sympathy vote, anyway—and he's from L.A." It's all true, but there was a fuss about that, too. Larry Gelbart wrote a scathing letter to *Rolling Stone*, saying that I was a bad loser and blah, blah, blah. . . . But after the whole thing, they sent me an application for membership. I thought it was a joke. So now I'm a fully paid-up member of the Academy.

PLAYBOY: And an actor, to boot. One of the highest-rated *Miami Vice* episodes featured you playing a game-show host. How did you make that turn in your career?

COLLINS: Well, I actually started out acting as a kid. But *Miami Vice* was great fun. The script was written for me after the writers saw this bit I did on stage introducing the members of the band. I was a game-show host. They tried to write all the English expressions I might say, and at one point, they wanted me to say, "You must take me for a right wanker." They had heard British people use the word

wanker, but they didn't know it was a word for masturbator.

In another place in the script, they wanted me to hang up the phone and say, "I hope he dies impotent." I thought it wasn't the kind of thing I would say, so I told them I should hang up and say, "I hope his ghoulies fall off." Meaning his balls. When some producer came in from L.A., he heard that and told me I couldn't say that. Even though wanker was OK.

PLAYBOY: Important question: Did you get to keep any of the clothes you wore on that episode?

COLLINS: I got a suit, actually. I was expecting maybe I'd end up with all those hip Don Johnson clothes; but the problem was that I was playing this tasteless cad who had terrible clothes, so apart from the suit, who would want any of the stuff? Anyway, the experience was a real breath of fresh air, to realize there is something apart from the music that I can do.

PLAYBOY: Why do you still sing with Genesis? Most singers with your solo success have long since left their groups.

COLLINS: We all find it interesting to sustain this chemistry that we have. It is a completely different experience from writing and performing solo. You see, Genesis began with this whole art-rock thing, and at one point, its success had as much to do with Peter [Gabriel]'s arty stuff—the costumes and other theatrics—as with anything else. The other members and I became frustrated because people were talking about what Peter wore rather than the music. It was a little bit of a step back to try to get people to realize that the band was a band, and it was around then that I began singing. I have ever since.

PLAYBOY: But now that three of the band members sing solo, isn't Genesis sort of a stepchild, getting your leftovers?

COLLINS: Genesis fills a specific role. If someone told me I had to choose between Genesis and my solo career, I'd choose my solo career; I'm totally responsible for it. But I don't have to choose. I have a mind to work with Genesis now and we made the album and we'll tour for nine months, and then we won't do it for a couple of years. In that time, I'll work on my own stuff. It's good fun to have both. I also feel a loyalty to the band. I certainly wouldn't want to be the one to say I don't want to do this anymore. But that's not the real reason I'm still in Genesis. It's because of the experience of writing with Tony Banks and Mike Rutherford, playing with them.

PLAYBOY: You also produce the records of a number of other singers and have toured with most people in your business. With that experience as a base, and since you're in a candid mood, will you give us thumbnail assessments of some of your peers?

COLLINS: I'll give it a go.

PLAYBOY: Sting, and his old partners The Police.

COLLINS: A great band. That is, I *think* they're still together. They have a love-hate relationship. Depending on who you

talk to, one of them is always leaving the band. Stewart Copeland is an amazing drummer. I just wish he didn't think he was amazing. Sting is a lovely bloke. We've become friends. I felt honored to be on stage with him at Live Aid.

PLAYBOY: Prince.

COLLINS: I'm a big fan. I just wish he weren't quite like he is sometimes. I mean, he came to some British awards here and made his way up to the stage to get his awards with a huge bodyguard who stood there while he said, "Thanks a lot." I just think it's funny to pull that kind of thing off in this business. If you're in front of 10,000 kids screaming at you, it's one thing; but inside the business, it's strange. Musically, Prince is great, though. I love his attitude. *Little Red Corvette* is a fantastic song. *Take Me with U. Purple Rain*.

PLAYBOY: Bruce Springsteen.

COLLINS: I've always liked the idea of Springsteen—everyman's music for everyman, you know; it captures the imagination of the workingman. Chuck Berry did the same thing. I don't know that much about Springsteen's older songs, but I like what he stands for. *Born in the U.S.A.* is just fantastic. It has great atmosphere and it's a great song.

"I've got a soft spot for Madonna. Maybe it's that little innocent voice and the underwear she wears."

PLAYBOY: Madonna.

COLLINS: I've got a soft spot for Madonna. She has a lot of intensity. Maybe it's that little innocent voice and the underwear she wears.

Funnily enough, I met them—Sean Penn and Madonna. I went to see John Cougar in Los Angeles when I had my kids out with me. They are fans of his, so I took them backstage after the gig and there in the corner was this couple. Simon, my son, said, "Dad, that's Madonna!" I said, "Naaaa." He said, "Da-a-ad, it is, it is, it is. Get her autograph for me! Please." I collect autographs for them—I got Lionel Richie, Michael Jackson. I finally went over to Sean and said, "Hello, I'm Phil Collins." He said, "I know who you are, man." I thought he was going to hit me. I said, "Is it possible, Madonna, that you could give my kids autographs? They won't speak to me if I don't ask." So she quite nervously, embarrassed, gave me her autograph. She didn't seem to be able to deal with it very well.

PLAYBOY: You mentioned Michael Jackson. What about him?

COLLINS: I'm a fan of Michael's. It's extraordinary that he's lived as he has lived, to have been a huge star since he was five or six. We can't have any idea of what he

thinks like, because he's never lived a normal life. I met him. He was very nice, but it was like you didn't want to touch him, because he would break, you know. His story is probably a little tragic. Now he's going around with his white surgical mask on. I can't understand that at all. He doesn't want to be recognized, so he wears a white surgical mask, so everybody says, "There's Michael Jackson wearing a white surgical mask."

PLAYBOY: You're being pretty direct.

COLLINS: I'm going to lose a lot of friends after this, aren't I?

PLAYBOY: How about Paul McCartney?

COLLINS: When McCartney has balls, he's great. There was some talk of my producing him. I liked the idea. I thought, just to get a bit of balls into the production. I'm sure he's got it in him. It's just that someone's not bringing it out. Everyone looks at McCartney and wants the Beatles, which is impossible. The Beatles were probably the best band ever. Now he wants to do what he wants to do and, unfortunately, that may not be what the public wants to hear from him.

PLAYBOY: You're younger than McCartney. Do you have a theory about where music is going today?

COLLINS: Well, we are moving away from electronic music. There were very few real musicians playing on records for a while. It was all synthesized stuff and machines and computerized sequences. Like everything, a trend comes in, everybody uses it to death, and then it fades away and you keep the good stuff.

PLAYBOY: Speaking of synthesized stuff, don't you use drum machines extensively?

COLLINS: I resisted them for a long time, but sometimes their insistence, the fact that they never change, makes them work in a way real drums don't. In a sense, it freed me. It changed the way I wrote. Also, the sounds you can create are almost infinite. The atmosphere on *In the Air Tonight* is from the drum machine. So, yes, I love drum machines.

PLAYBOY: What do you think of the influence of MTV on music?

COLLINS: Well, records that otherwise were average have been coupled with good visuals and given a lot of exposure, so some mediocre records have sunk in and become hits. Also, I don't like the idea that a video ties up someone's image of what the music is. In the old days, you used to buy a record—the old days; I mean a few years ago—and you'd listen to it, maybe look at the sleeve while you were listening. Your imagination was working. Television takes that away from you. Worse, most of the time, the image isn't even the band's idea. But videos are a necessary evil now. If you don't make a video, it cuts into your sales.

PLAYBOY: You made a huge splash on television with your appearance at the Live Aid concert last year, when you flew 6000 miles by Concorde to appear in England and America. How did that happen?

COLLINS: It all happened sort of by accident.