

HEAVEN ON EARTH

In the final episode of "Twin Peaks," the legendary jazz singer Jimmy Scott cameos as a ghost. Agent Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) has beamed out of the pine forest into some kind of purgatory, where Scott sings an ominous refrain called "Sycamore Trees" in front of a red curtain as a dwarf sashays past a Venus de Milo on a zig-zagged parquet.

Agent Cooper has to cope with a number of other ghosts as well, but they act the part, with lots of screaming and baring of teeth. Scott is just himself: an elfin yet utterly dignified figure in an oversized tuxedo, crooning in a mournfully wide vibrato, gazing aloft and sculpting the air with his hands. His voice is usually mistaken for a woman's, the result of a childhood hormonal disorder. He has the voice of an angel, and the countenance of a soothsayer. When I saw him perform last year, an older man in the audience kept blurting out: "You are *truly* a god!" That might sound like small potatoes to mass-mobilized rock fans, but this was Tavern on the Green, and Scott, then seventy years old, was singing "Embraceable You" and "Pennies from Heaven."

In this age of androgyny and generationlessness, it's not surprising that Jimmy Scott has expanded his core audience of aging blacks into a broad cult following composed largely of celebrities. His outspoken boosters include (besides David Lynch) David Byrne, Liza Minelli, Quincy Jones, Clint Eastwood, Bill Cosby, Ruth Brown, Ray Charles, Bruce Hornsby, Tony Bennett, and Madonna, who used him in a video and reportedly said he's the only singer who ever made her cry. He's an acknowledged influence on Marvin Gaye, Nancy Wilson, Frankie Lymon, Johnny Ray, Smokey Robinson, Little Anthony, and Stevie Wonder. Lou Reed hired him for the "Magic and Loss" album and tour, and still keeps in touch. Jonathan Demme paired him with Bruce Springsteen for the soundtrack of "Philadelphia." Alec Baldwin asked him to perform at his wedding to Kim Basinger ("It was a beautiful, homelike wedding," said Scott in one of our conversations). He duets with Michael Stipe on the soundtrack of Kevin Spacey's "Albino Alligator." Joe Pesci and Frankie Valli are old friends (Jimmy says Pesci "really was a good singer, but never got a shot"). And most recently, there's "Loungalooza" (Hollywood Records), a forthcoming collection produced by Flea, in which Scott covers Captain & Tennille's "Love Will Keep Us Together."

Maybe I'm just a possessive jazz snob, but sometimes I feel Scott's angelic-ghostly visage and curious sexuality are being cheaply paraded by the likes of Lynch and Flea (or myself, for that matter). Longtime fans forget any initial impression of freakishness, and are spellstruck only by the complete emotional commitment of his performances. As Ray Charles once said, "Jimmy had soul way back when people weren't usin' the word." Unlike Sun Ra, George Clinton, or Screamin' Jay Hawkins, metaphors of marginality are not central to his art. He would never cultivate a marketable image as a quaint and peculiar old relic, and presenting him that way is analogous to how promoters fetishized Billie Holiday's good looks and victimhood. Scott's bassist and musical director Hilliard (Hill) Greene echoed this concern to me: "People will ask me regularly, is he a man or is he a woman. And in the interviews I've seen, they always seem to make reference to that one way or another. It's kind of like, I'm black, it's the first thing people notice about me, but you know, I've been with myself for forty years. How much do I need to talk about it?" Scott himself feels his voice is sensationalized: "They're not getting the essence of what I'm trying to say in a song. They're looking at, well, what gimmicks can he come up



THE SURREAL SANCTIFIED SOUND OF JIMMY SCOTT

BY EVAN SPRING

with. There are no gimmicks about my expressions in song."

This question nagged at me again when I first heard Scott's beautiful new CD "Heaven" (Warner Bros.), an intimate, laid-bare exploration of his gospel roots. With the afterlife theme and the word "Heaven" in all the song titles, I thought back to "Twin Peaks," and wondered whether being obliged to play the ghost is the price of his comeback late in life. More likely that Scott, a religious man, is just more comfortable with life and death issues than I am. As he says, "Today, with many people, when you say 'spiritual,' then you're supposed to be spooky. There's nothing spooky about the truth."

James Victor Scott was born in Cleveland, 1925, with his umbilical cord wrapped dangerously around his neck. He was later diagnosed with Kallmann's syndrome, a rare hormonal impediment which prevented his voice from dropping and limited his height to five feet, even though he didn't stop growing until the age of forty-five. When he was thirteen, his mother Justine, a church pianist, was struck dead by a car. His father was unable to hold the family together, and Jimmy and his nine siblings were scattered to different foster homes, against his mother's dying wish. When Scott sings "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," a staple of his repertoire, the world never seemed "so lonely and cold."

Scott began his professional career in the mid-1940s touring with Estelle "Caldonia" Young, a shake dancer and contortionist who ran tent-show revues (and inspired the Louis Jordan song "Caldonia"). His big break came in 1948, when he joined Lionel Hampton's Orchestra and scored his first hit, "Everybody's Somebody's Fool." Hamp's combination of jazz and nascent R&B was a fortuitous setting for Scott, who has always worked *in* but is not quite *of* the jazz idiom. He went solo in 1951, but the next forty years of his career would be blighted with missed opportunities, fickle public response, shitty day jobs, and exploitative record moguls. Savoy Records' Herman Lubinsky saddled him with some of the chintziest string overdubs of all time; then in 1962, after Ray Charles gave Scott the opportunity to record with a live string section arranged by Gerald Wilson and Marty Paich, Lubinsky forced the record's withdrawal for alleged breach of contract. For several years Scott worked as a shipping clerk in a Cleveland Sheraton, and sang weekends at old folks' homes. In the late 70s Scott dropped out once again to look after his ailing father, but he never doubted his return: "You know, take milk from a baby--I couldn't stand it."

At the 1991 funeral of Doc Pomus, Scott sang Gershwin's "Someone To Watch Over Me" (a song usually performed by women) with Dr. John on organ. Sire Records president, Seymour Stein was on hand, and immediately offered Scott a five-album contract. Three albums later, Scott doesn't seem bitter about his belated recognition. He has been married four times, but now lives alone outside Cleveland, near most of his siblings.

Scott has identified Louis Armstrong, Louis Jordan and Paul Robeson as his heroes, but his musical genealogy is difficult to trace, as befits a singer who seems to have dropped from the heavens. His originality could

be a virtue born of necessity; he never could read music, and in his youth, male popular song was dominated by deep-toned blues singers and jazz baritones like Billy Eckstine and Herb Jeffries. Scott adds, "Many people thought that I was singing falsetto, but it didn't bother me, because I knew in the long run people would have to realize, well hey, that's his real voice." In performance, he seems to cradle an imaginary saxophone in his arms. "My first favorite," says Scott, "of course, always--he brought the meaning of a song to me at an early age--that was [tenor saxophonist] Lester [Young]. You'd just hear one note..."¹⁴ Scott was chummy with Billie Holiday and married her second cousin; both are known for their worldly wisdom and idiosyncratically delayed phrasing, though Holiday directly expresses physical scars, while Scott transcends corporeality. His aura carries no associations with "the jazz life."

Hill Greene has traveled with Scott for eight years: "I think Jimmy is most effective in live performance.

Word of mouth will travel, and if we've been someplace for two weeks, by the end people can't even get in the place. Some people will come for almost every performance." Everyone remembers what they were doing the moment they first heard Jimmy live. A raspy, plaintive sound is wrung from a slight frame and scrunched face. Wized and manicured hands extend operatically. Notes soar with little or no coloratura, while a wobbly, aching vibrato, spanning as much as a whole note, serves to disguise his less-than-perfect intonation. On the uptempo numbers, the voice becomes knowing and conversational. Many young women still swoon all over him, and he is reported to have had a large audience of pimps and prostitutes.

Scott sings mostly ballads, and he's the master of super-slow but unbroken time. As Joel Dorn, his record producer at Atlantic, wrote: "My man can pull some taffy." Try in vain to sing along, and you'll better appreciate his suspensefully stretched phrasing and unpredictable staccato punctuations. Michael Kanan, Scott's current pianist, says: "Sometimes it's really scary, because he stretches the melody so far across the form of the tune that I wonder, is he really going to make it back? And he does. If I lose my concentration for even a split second, there's no reference point anymore." In Flea's "Loungapalooza" project, Scott strains against an over-explicit rock arrangement which shows zero understanding of his sense of time. Scott concedes it was difficult, but adds that Flea "is a beautiful guy."

The new CD "Heaven" has a much more roomy setting, and fulfills Scott's lifelong ambition of "expressing how closely related the gospel patterns are to what jazz is about." Producer Craig Street is best known for deliv-

ering a huge crossover audience to Cassandra Wilson, by dispensing with strict jazz time and letting her smoky contralto wander sensually through a spacious acoustic backdrop. Street brought in French pianist Jacky Terrasson, a veteran of Betty Carter's trio, to provide minimal arrangements on the spot. Traditional gospel mingles with songs by Bob Dylan ("When He Returns"), Curtis Mayfield ("People Get Ready") and David Byrne ("Heaven"). Scott's voice can be impaired by air conditioning or stressful traveling conditions, so he was extremely pleased with Street's studio wizardry: "The biggest strain was that I was dealing with a laryngitis problem--I felt that I wasn't in full voice. And I was quite amazed at how it came out, knowing I had that tension in my voice, and was sitting there with throat tea."

Scott attended Hagar's Universal Spiritual Church as a child in Cleveland. "It was a great teaching, and it's carried me through these years. I don't remember



us going into afterlife so much as the philosophy that Heaven and Hell is here on earth...The important thing was man keeping himself prepared to live this life. God doesn't wait 'til you die to work for you, he guides you through this life that you live." Scott's bandmembers, without irony, describe him as a "down-to-earth guy," an experienced man of the world who remains firmly loyal to family and friends.

On the CD cover, Scott's back is turned to a shrouded ladder, which presumably represents the stages of life on up to Heaven. He seems unaware of the apparition, but it beckons him. Is this a repeat of the "Twin Peaks" episode? More necrophilic typecasting? As though the producers were gambling that this would be his last album? As I listened, my suspicions wore off, and the living voice took over.

Rumors of Scott's death have circulated since the mid-60s, when *Jet* magazine mistakenly printed his obituary. He has sometimes walked into a room and spooked people who thought he was dead. "Heaven" seems like another false obituary, but ends up dispelling his ghost.