

Drumming Legend Simon Phillips Returns with Protocol 6

Potent fusion project showcases his compositional prowess and searing band chemistry
Album release set for June 5, 2026 on Phantom Recordings

Over the course of five decades, esteemed British drummer **Simon Phillips** has racked up an impressive list of credits that includes tours and recordings with Jeff Beck, The Who, Frank Zappa, Stanley Clarke, Al Di Meola, Joe Satriani, Pete Townshend, Mike Oldfield, Jon Anderson, Peter Gabriel, Brian Eno, Hiromi and Gary Moore, as well as an extended stretch as Jeff Porcaro's replacement in Toto from 1992 to 2014. In 1989, he recorded his debut album *Protocol*, for which he played all instruments. Phillips's sixth potent offering in his Protocol series comes right out of that lineage of fusion classics like Return to Forever's *Romantic Warrior*, Weather Report's *Heavy Weather* and Billy Cobham's *Spectrum*. Crackling with the same kind of intensity as those '70s landmarks, it showcases an avalanche of exhilarating ideas.

Fueled by Simon's power-precision drumming, *Protocol 6* scorches and soars on the collective chemistry of his formidable crew of L.A. notables in guitarist **Alex Sill** and keyboardist **Otmaro Ruiz** (both returning from *Protocol V*), newcomer **Phillip Whack** on saxophones and longtime collaborator **Ernest Tibbs** (who has been bassist on board since 2013's *Protocol II*). "I feel really good about this record," said the leader. "And what's so funny is when I started writing for it last July, I didn't have any ideas. I kind of just stared at the screen and the mouse and the keyboard for a while with nothing to show for it. Then in August and through September and October, the ideas just wouldn't stop coming. It's funny how that works sometimes. And I'm very happy with the results."

His odd-metered opener, "Andromeda," is bookended by Ruiz's pensive solo piano. In between is an explosion of fusion with a capital 'F' that is sparked by Simon's throbbing double bass drum pulse and Sill's distortion-laced guitar lines. The rising star guitarist unleashes on a ripping Holdsworthian solo here and is followed in kind by an urgent sax solo from Whack as Phillips powers the off-kilter groove. "It's a triplet form," said Simon. "It starts off in basically a slow 7, but it's really 14/8. And then it goes into 13. Don't ask why. This stuff writes itself. It tells me where to go. I'm just the instrument that blurts it out."

"Unstable Grounds," co-written by Phillips and Sill, is a bit of slamming funk in the tradition of Cobham's hard-hitting opus "Stratus" from his 1973 debut album, *Spectrum*. Fueled by Tibbs's potent slap bass lines and the intricate harmonies between Alex's guitar and Whack's tenor sax, it features a Ruiz synth solo reminiscent of Jan Hammer's Mini-Moog solo on "Stratus." Tibbs also gets some solo space here, and the leader is turned loose over a band ostinato near the climax.

The dynamic "Intrepid Traveller," another piece co-penned by Sill and Phillips, opens with a steady hi-hat groove reminiscent of Weather Report's "Birdland" or "Teen Town." As the leader pointed out, "The main melody actually started from seeing a YouTube clip of the Zawinul Syndicate in concert in Italy. What I noticed in Joe's writing with his Syndicate was that he stopped using complex chords. Instead, his harmony came from the melody. It's all in one, yet everybody's just playing in the same groove. And I love that. It's infectious. So as I watched this clip of the Syndicate, I kept thinking, 'I wanna do something like that!' I've never really done that approach to writing before, just limiting myself to one chord and playing around with it. And it worked." Soprano sax and synth carry the opening melody on "Intrepid Traveller" before guitar and sax engage in some intricate unisons. Whack soars on his soprano solo, then the band comes down to a mellower vibe for Sill's warm, clean-toned, jazzy guitar solo. Near the end of the piece, Phillips traverses the kit in a solo that is both melodic and virtuosic.

The African-flavored "As the River Flows" hangs on a mesmerizing 6/4 groove, underscored by Sill's acoustic guitar work and Ruiz's acoustic piano. A beautifully melodic number, this Phillips composition swells with synth strings from Ruiz and is elevated by superb acoustic solos from Sill and Ruiz along with a soaring soprano sax solo from Whack. The three engage in some rapid-fire trading near the end (with Ruiz switching to Fender Rhodes electric piano). "That was another

old tune that was partly written in the '90s," Simon explained. "And I just updated it by adding some new things and changing the harmony around. This particular groove comes from the beautiful French island in the Indian Ocean, Réunion. They have that special groove there. It's a six feel but there's a different lilt to it. I got introduced to this groove when I was recording Trilok Gurtu's album *21 Spices* (in 2011). The French bassist Michel Alibo, who's from Martinique, showed me this rhythm. And I loved trying to bring that into my music."

Simon's fusion opus "Code 4 Kryptos" opens with Sill's sitar-guitar arpeggio before the piece explodes into a full-blown fusion romp powered by the leader's inimitable drumming skills and featuring powerful solos from Sill and Whack digging in like Frank Gambale and Michael Brecker, respectively.

The suite-like "Event Horizon" is a 14-minute musical journey bookended by a calming acoustic fanfare that reaches some energized double-timed heights along the way. A vibe-shifting opus, it travels from mellow interludes to revved-up fusillades, à la RTF's "Romantic Warrior," with some show-stopping solos along the way from Sill (on both acoustic and electric guitars), Ruiz (on both piano and Mini-Moog) and Whack on tenor sax. "This piece just wouldn't stop writing itself," said longtime California resident Phillips. "And the interesting thing about this is it actually evolved from something I started writing back in 1991 when I was still in England. The main melody from the first part is something I discovered on an old Yamaha QX3 sequencer that had been in storage for 32 years. I was surprised that the bloody thing still worked. So I started listening to this particular sequence that I had done 30-some years ago and I thought, 'Oh, I remember. Hang on a minute. Maybe I can do something with this.' And I worked it up from there. This is my point about composition. It's absolutely timeless. It's like a time capsule."

The mellow balladic closer, "Sundown in Old Town," was another co-composed by Sill and Phillips. "Alex sent that opening melody and then I added on to it," Simon recalled. "One of the things I love doing as a composer is working with other people's seed, as it were. First of all, it gives you confinement. You've got these parameters to work within so it's not like an open field with no fences. So when I did my thing and sent it back to Alex, he said, 'Oh, that's great. I never would have thought of going there.' And that was very gratifying to hear."

Simon's writing partnership with Sill has blossomed since they first collaborated on "The Long Road Home" from *Protocol V*. "To be honest, it's tough writing a whole album on your own," he confided. "So it was really nice to have some input on a couple of these tunes. Alex is a wonderful musician and I'm very happy with what we've been able to develop together."

The seven scintillating originals heard throughout *Protocol 6* are bound to tweak the sensibilities of fusion aficionados everywhere. —*Bill Milkowski*

Bill Milkowski is a longtime contributor to *DownBeat* and author of biographies on Jaco Pastorius, Pat Martino, Michael Brecker and Mike Clark.