

PHILLY HITMAKERS

phia slide guitar dates. For studio players, Philadelphia is a city of specialists.

Norman Harris and Bobby Eli remain, as always, the dominating force among the Philadelphia studio guitarists. Their work appears on virtually every major hit to come out of the city since the late '60s and, together, they have played on hundreds of sessions. Norman Harris has always been active as a producer and arranger (Blue Magic, the Trammps, the Drells, Lolleatta Holloway, Eddie Kendricks, Love Committee), which had the effect of making his influence even more widely felt in Philly.

"Arranging and producing made me more conscious of melodies, and taught me to stay on top of the theme," Harris says; he

and Eli were leaning against a battered Hammond organ in the refurbished second floor studio at Sigma Sound, where most of the Philadelphia hits have been cut since 1968—a familiar place ("Yeah, we used to sleep here some nights, and that's no lie," Bobby Eli chuckles at one point).

"I learned how to use melodies on the guitar as intros and melodic hooks," Harris adds, "to grab the listener even before the singer came in. Geez, we always tried to make up the violin and French horn parts on the guitar, too. You know, there were a lot of great arrangers around here at one time or another—Thommy Bell, Bobby Martin—and as producers, Gamble and Huff were the strongest I ever worked with. After working with them for a couple of months, I knew I was there to do certain things: the pretty

chords, melody lines, to create any melodic structures that would enhance the record. They went to Bobby for special effects and rhythm guitar. Man, those effects! They used to call him 'Electronic Eli'."

Norman Harris did not grow up around music. Born in Virginia and raised in Philadelphia, he remembers singing with his family, but nobody played music. While he was in high school, though, he began studying with Roland Chambers, who already was a familiar figure on the music scene in the city. "I could sing a little bit," Harris remarks, "but that guitar always attracted me. I used to go to all the shows and watch the starts at the Uptown Theatre—14 or 15 I was then. When I studied with Roland, he was in the house band there."

In 1966, Chambers was on the road with Marvin Gaye. Later, he worked with the Orlons, and Harris was called on to fill in. Through Roland Chambers, once again, Norman began playing on sessions that same year. These were generally Philadelphia singers, striding the borderline of the new Philadelphia sound: Barbara Mason, whose "Yes, I'm Ready" (produced by Philly DJ Jimmy Bishop for the Arctic label) has been called the first true Sound Of Philadelphia recording; the Volcanos, which would become the Trammps a few years later; "Boogaloo Down Broadway" by the Fantastic Johnny C., with Jesse James producing; Cliff Nobles' "The Horse"; and all the dates with the O'Jays and the Three Degrees for Gamble's Neptune Records. By 1971, he was doing charts for Philadelphia International artists like Billy Paul, the Three Degrees (again), and Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes. Barbara Mason's "Yes I'm Ready" was the first million-seller for the young guitarist.

"I'm a pop guitarist," Harris says. "I was influenced by Burt Bacharach as a songwriter. But musically, I came along with the jazz guys in the theater band. Man, I listened to every single Wes Montgomery record I could lay my hands on. Put it all together, it's a pop situation. I'm not a blues player. I'm definitely not as much R&B as I am pop. I mean, people call this music rhythm and blues, but I don't think it is. See how we jump from artist to artist—the guitar for me is like the horn in jazz. I always used the guitar mainly to state the melody. If I'm away from the guitar for two or three days, I'll grab it and start playing 'Shadow Of Your Smile' or something like that to loosen up. All these rock styles are kind of new to me. By using the guitar as a piano to hear the orchestrations, we use the guitar in another way. Guitar players now are all doing lines—guitar licks—but that's not the approach here. The level we're at is very high. We work with great melodies. We get great songs with great lyrics and lots of changes."

Bobby Eli, a mountain of a guitarist with curly long hair and a jet black beard, looking back to his youth, called himself "the last Jew in the black ghetto in North Philadelphia." He grew up playing the mandolin, and then got a Gibson Les Paul (which he still owns) for his Bar Mitzvah. "The next day," he



Threesome.

DAIGN

Handcrafted Guitars

Send \$1.00 for color catalog.

MCI, Inc. P.O. Box 8053 • Waco, Texas 76710 • (817) 772-4450