

LOU DIAMOND PHILLIPS

FROM MOVIE SET TO CONCERT STAGE

By Julia Ann Charpentier

A tall man with long dark hair and an Indian mystique enters the noisy confines of his tour bus, then turns with good-natured humor to the tape recorder and remarks, "You can't see sweat on audio tape."

He strips off a perspiration-soaked T-shirt with a rock band emblem on the front and shows off a tanned, trim physique that hasn't been camera-shy since his portrayal of Agaguk the Eskimo in *Shadow of the Wolf*. He dons a light blue gas station shirt with cut-off sleeves and slips a beaded Native American necklace over his head for good luck.

Though an actor by profession, 32-year-old Lou Diamond Phillips has made his mark in the music world with an original rock group called the Pipefitters. Most of his fame is still fueled by his acting career, such as recent credits in *The Dark Wind* and *Extreme Justice*.

Onstage he moves comfortably to the beat of a Texas-bred sound. He sings with a hard, driving style that surprisingly doesn't capitalize on his 1987 role as Ritchie Valens in *La Bamba*, the story of the teen legend who became famous in 1958-'59, then died in a plane crash

with Buddy Holly and the

Big Bopper.

"*La Bamba* required an intense amount of research. It was the role of a lifetime because I've done 16 films since then, and it was the most emotional one. My head was in the exact same place Ritchie's was. Ritchie was getting his big break during the time we portrayed in the film, and I was, too," said Phillips.

Phillips' interest in acting was noticeable at the elementary school level. He wrote and produced plays through high school and college, and was inducted into professional theater writing and performing in the Dallas/Fort Worth area with *The Zero Hour*, a comedy troupe that began in a punk club in 1980. After graduating from the University of Texas at Arlington in 1984 with a bachelor's degree in theater, he studied at Adam Roarke's Film Actors Lab in Dallas.

Before *La Bamba* Phillips made two Christian movies, *Angel Alley* and *Harley*, in addition to television guest appearances on "Miami Vice" and "Dallas." He was living in Dallas when the *La Bamba* casting director discovered him.

At age 24, Phillips beat 500 contenders to play Ritchie Valens. Initially, he was cast for the role of Valens' half-brother. Luis Valdez, the director, once said Phillips has the "capacity to connect directly from soul to soul through his eyes."

Phillips took guitar lessons and gained 15 pounds to more closely resemble the stocky singer. Though his

singing and guitar playing were dubbed, footage of him playing the guitar is authentic, something of which Phillips is proud.

One wonders whether Valens has influenced the actor's own career as a songwriter, a question to which he is adamant in response. "Only from the respect that Ritchie was a very pure artist and that he was trying to do what was right for him. We don't do covers from the film. We don't do Ritchie Valens covers. I think that would be an injustice to him and to his family. We can only do what's close to us."

Phillips says their material ranges from songs about looking for the real thing to the search for truth, 50 percent of which he co-writes. He disapproves of the bandwagon approach to music.

"There are a lot of people who try to fashion their sound after a certain audience. We just write what we write."

Audience reaction has been uplifting. "After the band kicks into the second song, they're there to hear the music," says Phillips. "They may come initially to see what I'm all about, but after that they pay their money to hear a rock show."

Though the Pipefitters have been together for more than four years, Phillips has been with them for only three. Since he joined they've opened for Billy Ray Cyrus on a tour through the Northwest, and toured extensively through the South and Midwest.

Despite his rough and tough image in action films such as *Young Guns* and *Renegades*, Phillips once described himself as an optimist, idealist and romantic. The screen presence may seem indestructible, but the human being is fragile.

Phillips is the founder of Winds of Life, an organization that distributes funds to Native American social service groups. He raises money, speaks with tribes on reservations, and has produced a documentary about problems unique to American Indians.

As an only child, Phillips was born in the Philippines and moved to Corpus Christi, TX soon after his birth. He was named after baseball player Lou Diamond. His father died when he was 2, then his mother married a naval officer in 1964, resulting in a military lifestyle that took him to Georgia, Washington, D.C., California and Texas.

Of Filipino, Oriental, Spanish, Hawaiian, Irish, Scottish and Cherokee descent, his looks have sometimes stereotyped him as an actor, but he's been involved in all major facets of moviemaking — acting, writing, directing and producing.

His most outstanding roles include a gang member in *Stand and Deliver*, a performance that won him a Golden Globe nomination; a deranged writer in *Ambition*, a horror picture that he wrote; a troubled teen in *Dakota*, which he co-produced; and a professional criminal in *Disorganized Crime*, a comedy.

Though he's been described as an "intense young man who rarely smiles," his manner is warm, unpretentious and down-to-earth.

In 1987, while speaking at a ceremony to honor Ritchie Valens, he remarked, "Dreams can come true — Ritchie proved that. You have to believe in yourselves and have faith in God."