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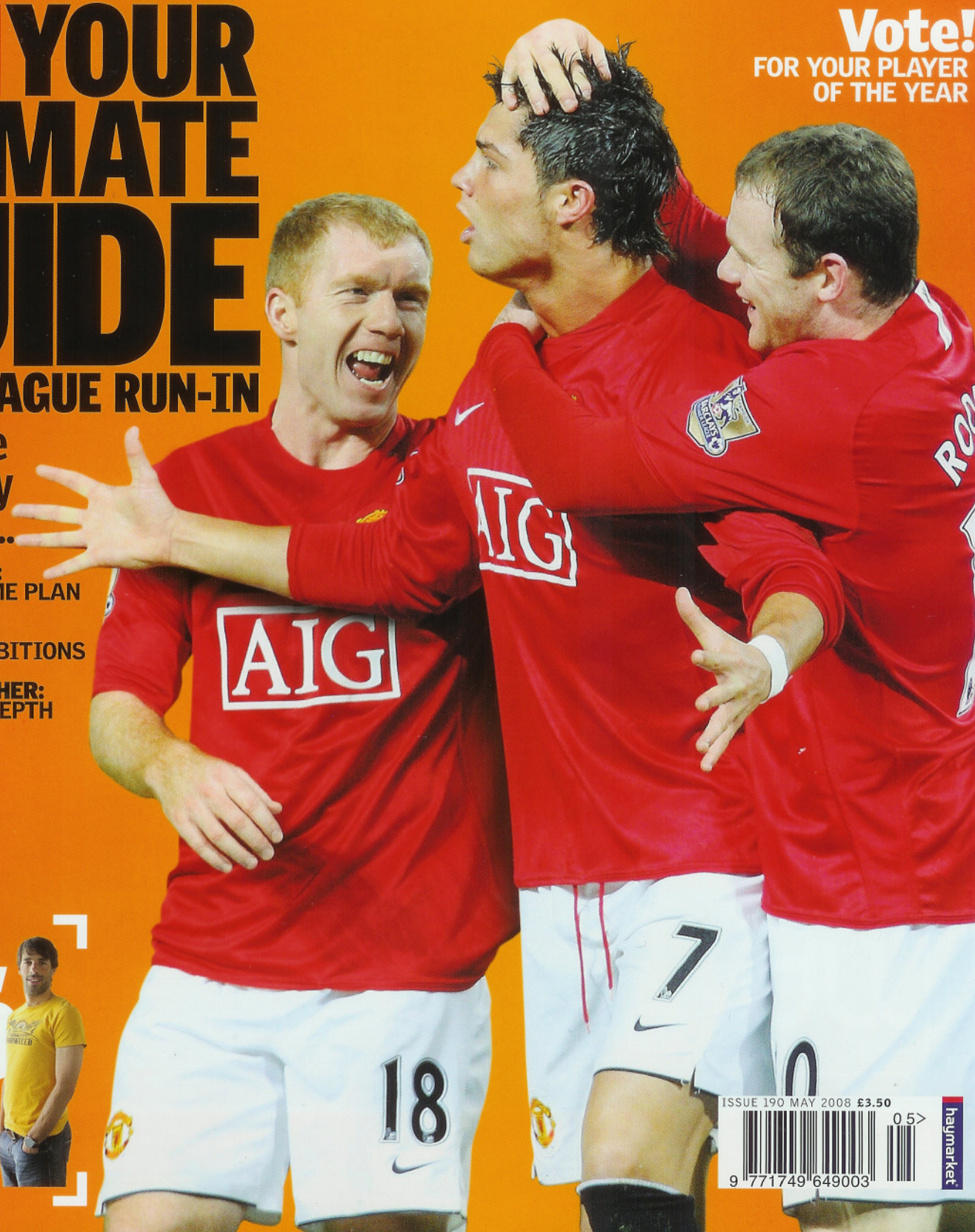
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RUUD
ON ROONEY, RONALDO & WHY UNITED WILL ALWAYS BE IN HIS HEART



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ASK SIR ALEX  RIO FERDINAND  BEN FOSTER  UNITED'S EUROPE  GORDON HILL  CHOCY

Magic man



Before Ronaldo or even Giggs, there was Gordon Hill, aka Merlin, the Cockney wizard who possessed a magical left foot

Words: Sean Egan Photos: Colorsport, Empics, Offside

The ball is sprayed out to the left touchline, where the slender, brown-haired 21-year-old takes it in his stride. A huge cheer erupts from the Stretford End's collective throat, and not for the first time on this afternoon in late 1975. Flares are all the rage and Queen are top of the pops, but few are offering more width or a more rousing Bohemian rhapsody than Gordon Hill, aka 'Merlin'. In the BBC commentary box, broadcaster Barry Davies declares: "This crowd have really taken him to their hearts." You can say that again.

Ask any schoolboy, or indeed, overgrown ones of that era about Gordon Hill and watch the wide grin play across their faces. The adulation of Hill – a £70,000 signing from Millwall that November – was the closest thing Old Trafford had seen to hero worship since George Best, and equal to that of modern left-sided marvel Ryan Giggs. His lightning pace, exquisite control and fiendish dummies shredded defences. Even more remarkably, this winger scored as many goals as he laid on and many of them were spectacular.

All this, allied with good looks and an endearingly chirpy demeanour, made him the darling of the terraces for the two-and-a-half precious years he hugged the Red touchline. His was the style in which Tommy Docherty managed, the panache that epitomises what Manchester United are all about: pure

entertainment. Hill was born into a large family – he had eight siblings – in Sunbury-on-Thames, Middlesex, on 1 April 1954. By his own admission, tackling and keeping a high work rate were not part of his genetic make-up. Dribbling, however, was another matter. "I just did what came naturally to me and it happened to be that I was quite good with the ball," he says. "I never developed tackling because I didn't want to kick someone to get the ball. I was very fortunate that I could score goals as well as cross and take people on."

South London club Millwall first showed faith in his talents and those denizens of The Den dubbed him 'Merlin' on account of his dribbling wizardry. Hill also played in America well before it became fashionable. Then Docherty pounced.

"I was the last piece of the jigsaw, then the boss could start building," says Hill of his recruitment. The Doc had wanted to play classic 4-2-4 football since his arrival in December 1972. By pairing Hill with the right-sided, similarly tricky Steve Coppell, the ingredients were in place for a return to the kind of swashbuckling football that was made unfashionable after Alf Ramsey's 'wingless wonders' won the World Cup in 1966.

The Doc's orders worked a treat. Hill was in large part responsible for United's miraculous first season back in the top flight after 1974's traumatic relegation. The FA Cup semi-final ►





Hill celebrates with his team-mates after scoring in the 1975/76 FA Cup semi-final against Derby County at Hillsborough

of 1975/76 cemented his reputation. In the 12th minute, he received the ball with his back to the Derby County goal. He flicked it up to team-mate Gerry Daly, seamlessly spun and ran on to the return before curling the ball beautifully around keeper Graham Moseley from 20 yards. He also scored the other goal in the 2-0 triumph; this strike was a long-range free kick that received a deflection, but always seemed bound for the net.

At one point, it seemed United's youthful team might even achieve that ultra-rare feat of winning the Division One title immediately after promotion, but the team faded and finished third. More heartache came in the FA Cup final at the hands of unfancied Southampton of Division Two. For Hill, the day was doubly disappointing. Expected to shine in Wembley's wide open spaces, he was substituted, which was a big deal in an era of single replacements. "I had

pitch. And Alex Stepney asserted in his autobiography that, "over the season he was a liability. When we were struggling, Hill would go into hiding on the left wing".

Hill insists such criticisms did not go unheeded. "I'd accept what was said and then try harder next time," he says. Certainly, he was no football cliché: his apparent cockiness hid a "shyness underneath". He was a teetotaller, and also spurned the betting-shop culture loved by many of his fellow professionals.

In the 1976/77 season Hill helped to make United championship contenders again, but once more he was at his most exhilarating in cup competition. Having helped dump the mighty Ajax out of the UEFA Cup, Hill scored an unforgettable winner in the second round, first leg match against Juventus; a flick-on found him on the far side of the box, where his clean, powerful volley crashed past the legendary goalkeeper Dino Zoff. A week later, Hill bagged a hat-trick in a 7-2 demolition of Newcastle in the League Cup.

But it was the FA Cup that had United's and Hill's names on it. Ironically, having again been a key factor in realising his team's presence at Wembley, Hill had a stinker in the final. But not even being replaced again at Wembley could dampen his joy as United defeated Treble-chasing Liverpool 2-1. Hill finished as the Reds' top scorer that season with 22 goals.

Those substitutions and disappointing form for England – with whom he won six caps – led some pundits to claim that he struggled to perform on the big stages. However, he says that those displays against Ajax and Juventus disprove their argument. "As time would have gone on, I'd have been more confident," he says.

Joy turned to despair when Tommy Docherty was sacked six weeks after securing the Cup. Dave Sexton initially promised to stick to the successful 4-2-4 formula, but Hill sensed his time was up. "He was methodical, and I knew for sure he would try to ▶

“I just did what came naturally to me. I was fortunate that I could score goals as well as cross and take people on”

an absolute horror," he admits. "It was one of the hottest-ever days at a Wembley cup final. That's no excuse, but I felt as if my energy had just gone."

Not all his team-mates were as enamoured of Hill's mercurial talents as the fans were. Skipper Martin Buchan once boxed Hill's ears on the pitch for dribbling in the United half of the





Top: Juventus keeper Dino Zoff is beaten by Hill's shot in the 1976/77 UEFA Cup. Bottom: Hill walks off the pitch after scoring a belter in the 1977 Cup Winners' Cup triumph over St Etienne. Right: Gordon poses during a photocall in 1975

change the way that we played. And once that happened I knew that my days at Old Trafford were numbered."

Many consider that Sexton neutered Steve Coppell with his methodical tactics. Hill was a beast less easy to geld, and he kept coming up with the goods. His strike in St Etienne in the first round of the European Cup Winners' Cup in September 1977 was sublime. Another Exocet that season, against QPR – a right-foot half-volley from outside the area – showed that while his left foot was more powerful, he didn't just use the other for standing. None of this cut any ice with the pragmatic Sexton.

When Sexton accepted a £275,000 offer for Hill, still just 24, in April 1978 from Derby – now managed by Docherty – Hill left, complaining he had been forced out. Sexton retorted that, as a player, he was "very selfish". The fans made their feelings known with graffiti reading "Sexton out – Hill in". Although he departed five games before the end of the season, Hill was United's top scorer again with 19 goals in that campaign.

The glory and form he'd known at Old Trafford were not glimpsed again, but Hill is convinced United's 26-year title thirst would have been quenched had Docherty remained in charge. The Doc was hamstrung by lower budgets at Derby, and indeed at QPR, where he also managed Hill. Gordon was hampered by a knee injury and while at Loftus Road switched from the wing to the centre. "I could play a ball anywhere. You have to adjust," he says. "But I'd still get up to score."

Unwanted by new QPR manager Terry Venables, Hill moved into North American football. A match against Marseilles in which he scored a brace resulted in the French side making an unsuccessful bid for him. Holland's FC Twente was his next

“ I knew he [Dave Sexton] would try to change the way we played; and once that happened my days were numbered ”

port of call before he called time on his career at non-league Northwich Victoria, which was managed by old United colleague Stuart Pearson. He briefly took the reins at Chester where "there was no money, so it was like kicking a dead horse" and was then boss at Hyde United and Canada's Nova Scotia Clippers, before moving into media punditry.

He now watches United from Texas, where he manages a youth team and plans to set up a centre of soccer excellence. He enthuses over Sir Alex's development of youngsters. "When Ferguson had Giggs, Beckham, the Neville brothers, Scholes and Nicky Butt he had spent hardly a dime and they were worth a fortune," he marvels. "That's like winning the Lottery."

He can also see the merits in quality big-money signings and many commentators note a resemblance to his style in Ronaldo's talents. Hill remarks on another similarity: "He'll run, but if you see him beaten he won't chase back and tackle."

On recent returns to Old Trafford, the low noise levels have surprised Hill. "If you wanted the ball, you had to shout at the top of your lungs," he recalls of his own playing days – a fact not lost on Sir Alex at times this season. Those privileged enough to have seen Hill electrify the Stretford End will be delighted to know he still considers himself a Manchester United footballer above all. Oh, and the name of his youth team? United FC. 