

Not a Show Band

Traditionalist sticks it to country pop



Tom Phillips carries the torch for real country. B. Simm photo.

BY BRAD SIMM

Hard country. My ears prick up when I hear that. Dressed in a well-worn denim jacket and a wide-brim hat, Tom Phillips certainly fits the part. Raised in Bragg Creek and weaned on old-school country tunes, the singer-songwriter is well-versed in the history of the country music for which he ardently carries a torch.

"I kind of missed out on the rock and roll thing. We had that place out at Bragg Creek and I had horses. My dad was into Sons of the Pioneers and Lefty Frizzell, and I fell in love with it really early."

After a seven-year stint in Toronto banging around folk clubs, Phillips returned to Calgary to carve out the kind of style that comes to him naturally. While hosting jam sessions at a club downtown he was absorbed by a group of supportive musicians who voted him in as their main man. The outcome resulted in a seven-piece band complete with pedal steel guitar, accordion, mandolin, bass, drums, and electric guitar—the full-meal deal—allowing them to turn out all the elements of swing, jazz, and bluegrass, which underscore traditional country.

"Oh yeah, for sure," agrees Phillips. "I honestly believe that country music comes from one of those streams of North American music, like jazz, that you gotta know the history of it to really get into it. And we're all students of it. Everybody in the band loves that kind of music.... With a seven-piece it's fairly complex. We tend to play jazz clubs and the Night Gallery. We definitely haven't played the Ranchman's line dancing kind of thing—that's not what we do at all."

The Men of Constant Sorrow back up Tom Phillips. They've just finished recording a 13-track CD produced by the notable knob-twisting talents of acoustic bluesman Tim Williams. He's given them a spacious sound where the instruments' rustic quality stand out on their own (think of Neil Young's *Harvest* album). There's fancy fretwork provided by guitarist Dwight Thompson, the pedal steel aches and swells, while Jane Hawley's background vocals add a layer of sweetness. Up front, Phillips's smoky throat runs through a collection of love-gone-wrong ballads and hard-drinkin', honky-tonk, windshield-wiper-slappin' toe tappers.

"Yeah," Phillips confirms, "it's hard country. It's fairly traditional country, in the tradition of Hank and Merle. I've always been doing this stuff, and I'll probably take it to my grave. But that's the great thing about country music, you can actually take it to your grave. And as a matter of fact, it's going to take you to your grave."

One thing the outspoken Phillips won't be taking to his grave is contemporary country—something he despises and refers to quite bluntly as "bubble gum music" and "country pop". With Stampede just around the corner, I asked how things were gearing up for the big hoe-down.

"We're not really a country Stampede kind of band. From my understanding of Stampede week you get a bunch of rock and roll bands in to do breakfasts and stuff. They learn some country tunes in the van on the way down and do a real shitty job of them. I mean, if we've had any success it's been doing real country. But can you hear real country music in Calgary? You can hear a lot of Nashville pop bands. I don't think you get many bands doing country music in Calgary. Country music has always been in many ways ghettoized in Calgary. Due to the Stampede they get all these showbands, where you go, 'Oh God, not another country band.' So in some ways the intelligence of country music is lost on the general public, because they've been slammed with all these showbands that really have nothing to do with country music... I'm as far away from the pop-country sound as you can possibly get. To me it's pop music. I have no idea why they even call it country music."

Still, there's hope and Phillips is its living proof. Determined not to get caught up in the country-music ghetto with its smoke shows, flash pots, and massive sound systems, The Men of Constant Sorrow, guided by Phillips's honky-tonk head aim to keep it real in the tradition of Hank and Merle.

"I bought the Merle box set, which is the greatest purchase I've ever made in my life. Four CDs, I've had it for almost a year and I'm still not past the third CD. I put one in and leave it on the CD player for three or four months. Then I put the next one on... It's great stuff." ◊

Tom Phillips's CD release party is at Quincy's on Friday, June 18.