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NEW DOGS, OLD TRICKS

HAVING MORE IN COMMON WITH LEGENDS LIKE WILF CARTER, HANK WILLIAMS, IAN TYSON AND STOMPIN' TOM CONNORS THAN CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY STARS, THREE LOCAL MUSICIANS — TOM PHILLIPS, TIM HUS AND MATT MASTERS — ARE ADDING NEW CHAPTERS TO CALGARY'S MUSICAL HISTORY

CALGARY IN JULY can be a tough time to find anything authentically western. For 10 days, folks who normally wouldn't be caught dead in Wranglers shine up their buckles, throw on their cowboy hats and do a tipsy two-step through a city overrun with hay bales, rustic pine planks and pancake breakfasts. But if you listen closely, a high lonesome country sound rings across the Bow Valley year round. It cuts through the din of construction and commuter traffic with an acoustic precision and story-filled lyrics, drawing on a style that's been evolving since Europeans first brought folk music to North America. And while the Stampede is a great time for any cover band with a handful of Garth Brooks songs to earn a little extra dough, it's also when the demand for the genuine sounds of these three musicians is at its highest.

However, in a modern city that for most of the year tries to shed its cowtown image, playing traditional country music is in itself a bit of a rebellious undertaking, which is probably just how these outlaws like it. Give it any label you want, alt-country, roots country, honky-tonk or even y'all-ternative, it continues to captivate old fans while drawing new ones to its familiar rhythms and stories of life, love and loss.

Tom Phillips, 47, whose band Tom Phillips and the Men of Constant Sorrow performs Friday nights at the Ironwood Stage and Grill in Inglewood, meets a lot of people in the city who tell him they hate country music.

"No you don't. You just haven't heard the good stuff," Phillips usually replies to such comments. >>

Left to right: Tom Phillips, Tim Hus and Matt Masters at the Palomino.

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—TOM PHILLIPS



"I think that country music is like any kind of music, I never used to like jazz until I heard 'Kind of Blue' by Miles Davis," said Phillips. "I think that there is a huge depth of stuff out there but you don't really get a chance to hear it. The only thing that people do hear is really just pop music."

Phillips, who grew up in the Bragg Creek and Calgary area, was first exposed to country music by his father, whose fondness for acts like Lefty Frizzell, and Wilf Carter rubbed off. "Even when my friends were listening to Led Zeppelin I was listening to Hank Williams," he said.

Phillips' band's style is reflective of these early influences. The seven-piece outfit plays what Phillips call "Texas-style Honky-Tonk" and also draws inspiration from Ian Tyson, Buck Owens and the Buckaroos, and Bob Wills

and the Texas Playboys among others. Phillips has always leaned toward songwriting, and the band mixes original material with some of their old favorites.

"To be able to play our own music, in a style we love, in a city we love — it's great," said Phillips. "I always wanted to have a honky-tonk band but never dreamed I could actually have one."

Phillips feels that Calgary has reached a crucial size to support the music scene. "A guy like me can play the same bar every Friday night and still draw a crowd," Phillips said. That wasn't possible 10 years ago."

But it's not only the lifelong fans of country who come to kick up their heels at the Ironwood who are showing their roots. A whole new generation of fans and performers is emerging thanks in part to the

city's swollen population and the simple fact that country is hip again.

Following the trail blazed by Taber, Alberta-native Corb Lund, whose album *Hair in My Eyes Like A Highland Steer* captured the 2006 Juno award in the Roots & Traditional Album of The Year: Solo category, are two Calgary performers, Matt Masters and Tim Hus, each travelling different roads to becoming the roots troubadours they are today.

The 30-year-old Masters, a Calgary native, found country via rock and roll. He began hanging at the now-defunct institution of Calgary indie-rock Rock Central as soon as he was able and this past March he hosted a Much Music special "MuchDoesCalgary" featuring up and coming city bands. Despite his rock pedigree, Masters, whose given name is Matt Burgener, found that when he started