

Urbane cowboy

Phillips out to prove country is thinking man's music

When it comes to traditional country music, Tom Phillips can't help but preach the gospel.

"I'm a country music evangelist in many ways," the 41-year-old local musician says over coffee the other morning.

"It's amazing to me more people aren't blown away by it. But when I get to play some of the records to people, they are blown away by it."

All you have to do is see Phillips and his band, **The Men of Constant Sorrow**, play live and you'll realize the native Canadian is more than just a purveyor of country music.

He remains a committed student of the genre and fills his concerts with tales from its colourful and often-tragic past.

He could probably teach a university course on the subject.

"I'd love to!" he replies excitedly. "I am fascinated by what happened to (country music's pioneers) — against great odds and through terrible adversity, the unbelievable songs that they wrote floor me."

Right now, though, he's busy playing the role of recording artist, as his group's self-titled debut CD is expected in stores this week.

On Friday, the band will be hosting a CD release party at Quincy's, 609 7 Ave. S.W.

The record's 12 Phillips originals harken back to country's classic period and reflect the songwriter's love of old-time honky-tonkers, such as **Hank Williams Sr.** and **Lefty Frizzell**, as well as more contemporary Austin, Tex., songwriting legends such as **Steve Earle**, **Joe Ely** and the late **Townes Van Zandt**.

The accordion, pedal steel and mandolin work gives the music authenticity, while special guest **Jane Hawley** is to Phillips what **Emmylou Harris** was to **Gram Parsons**. Hawley's harmony vocals are exceptional.

And then there are the songs.



DAVID
VEITCH
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Phillips may stick to country's unholy triumvirate

— whisky, women and the highway — but he makes the music his own thanks to a simple and direct writing style capable of conveying both profound emotion and wry humour, as well conjuring wonderful imagery ("There's an ashtray in my ash ...

There's an angel on my dash.")

It's not surprising that Phillips was drawn to traditional country music because of its wordsmiths.

"I come to it from a lyric-based point of view and, to me, the best of it is absolute poetry," says Phillips, a published author who works as the book manager at a local Chapters outlet.

This love of literature explains why Williams is one of Phillips' most deeply ingrained influences.

"He taught me a ton," Phillips says. "In 10 lines, he can knock you out. I realized if I'm going to continue doing this, I got to get myself in that same league somehow."

Williams' turbulent and troubled life — he died of a heart attack in the back of his Cadillac at age 29 — also taught Phillips about the hardships of playing this music.

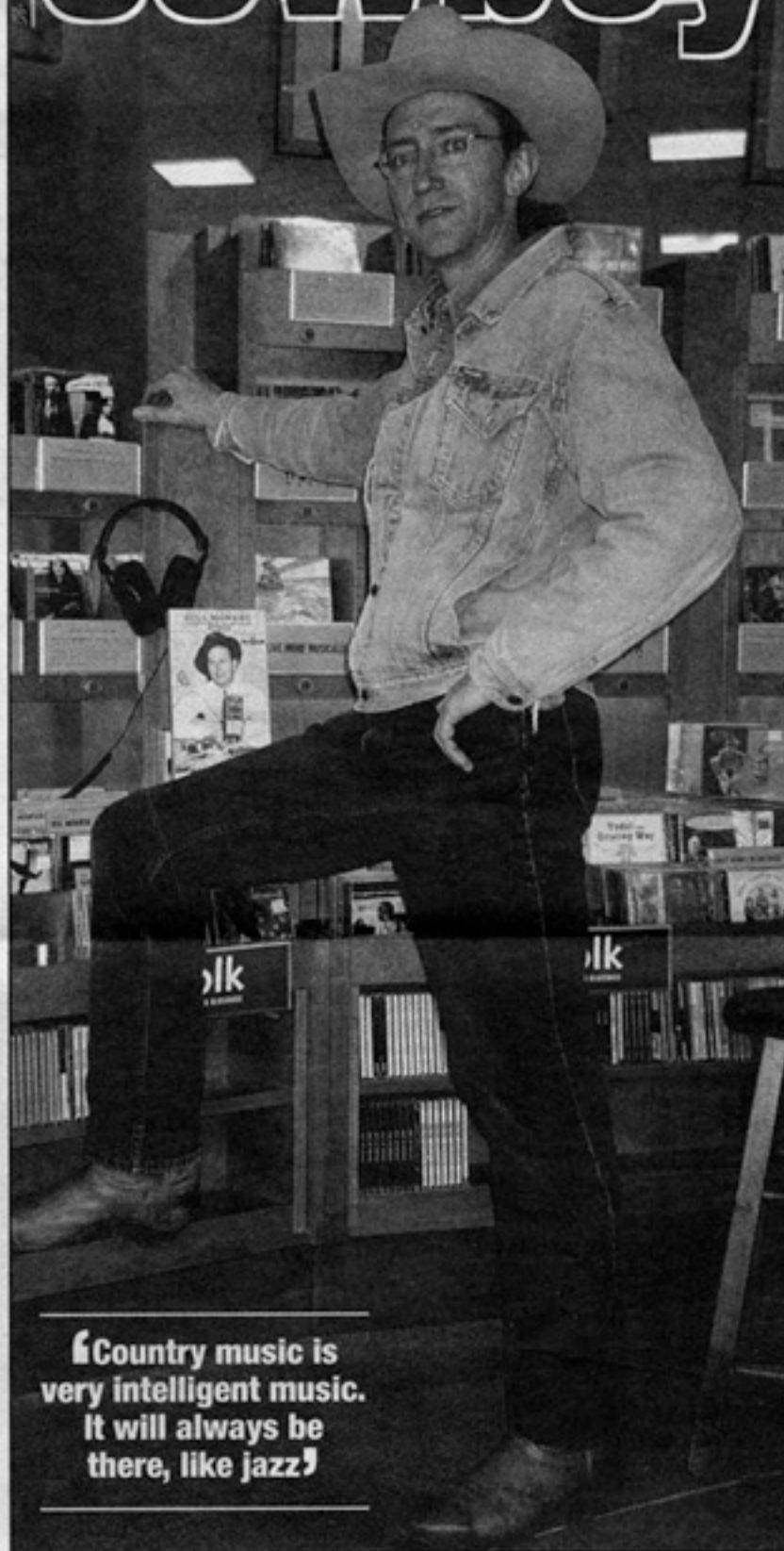
The singer-guitarist may not be living in the back of his car — "Normally I am, but there's too much (garbage) back there," he jokes — but admits the country music lifestyle has exacted a toll.

"It's dangerous playing country music," the father of three says.

"You play in bars all the time, alcohol is always around, you're staying out late at night. It's easy for families to split up and that absolutely happened to me and absolutely due to country music."

Still, he says: "I'll never give up this music. I can't." And he'll never stop promoting it, either.

"A lot of people think country music is stupid. I don't think it is.... Country music is very intelligent music. It will always be there, like jazz will always be there and great music will always be there."



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— DAVID VEITCH, Calgary Sun

NEW ALBUM OUT SOON ... Tom Phillips and his band, **The Men of Constant Sorrow**, host a CD release party Friday at Quincy's.