

A Little Bit Country

Stampede is the best time of year to tune into rural-influenced local musicians

By Ian Doig



Left: Tom Phillips (front) and the Men of Constant Sorrow.

Years prior to the first Stampede of 1912, Calgarians were already a comparatively urban bunch with lots of musical entertainment to choose from—fiddle concerts, Gilbert and Sullivan, melancholy western ballads. Locals had long enjoyed their share of vaudeville acts, brass bands, choral societies, and clog dances. Country was not the city's music of choice. One of the most popular tunes of the day was Baron Boynton's 1884 rendition of "Drink Puppy Drink". The Calgary of today is even more diverse and cosmopolitan in its tastes. Come the month of July, however, Cowtowners have long donned Stetson and pearl-button shirt and cranked up the cowboy music.

Dozens of hired musicians perform country hits at Stampede events throughout the city, making it an especially good

time to sample Calgary's original country bands. From straight-ahead traditional and country gospel to so-called alternative country rock and cow punk, country music has taken on a diversity of its own. Local alternative rockers are picking up acoustic guitars and banjos, joining country veterans in taking the music scene back to its hayseed roots.

THE REAL DEAL

It's Saturday night at King Henry The Eighth pub. Tom Phillips and the Men of Constant Sorrow are setting up their gear, as they do each week, in front of the big screen TV and a row of dart boards. A Union Jack is tacked to the ceiling and the walls are lined with a clutter of books, old radios and sports pennants. Band leader Tom Phillips likes the friendly atmosphere of the place. He's a lanky figure with wire-rim glasses and a pinched cowboy hat. Most nights the band is a seven-piece outfit with a big traditional country sound.

"We play just 'cause we all love the same music, not for money," Phillips says in a deep rural voice. "We love the tunes.

"Live, we play mostly original stuff but we kind of hearken back to obscure honky tonk tunes from the 50s era of country music or the 60s with Merle Haggard and some George Jones. Kind of the honky tonk school which, in my opinion, was lost with the dawn of rock 'n roll."

Though the band plays "straight up" country, they feel a kinship with some of the more out-there acts. Phillips recalls a Hank Williams night at The Ship and Anchor pub during last year's Stampede. "We didn't know what we were getting into," he says. "We came in and there was a band playin'. The guitar player had a bra on and a mask. Charlie our pedal steel player who's probably sixty-something turns to me and he says, 'Tom, where we playin' again?'"

After a few sips of ale, the group gather their instruments and light into a Charlie Walker song, "Pick Me Up On Your Way Down," captivating a handful of patrons only inches away from Phillips and his big acoustic guitar. Charlie Veilleux plucks out a knee-buckling solo on a pedal steel guitar. Big-armed Ronnie Dyck plays his squeezebox like a weight lifter pumps iron. They make a big sound in the tiny room. Big as all outdoors.