

Phillips puts heart in his country

Tom Phillips and The Men of Constant Sorrow CD Release Party Nov. 27 at the Ranchman's

by **Mike Bell**
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To some people, there are few words in the English language more offensive than the “C” word.

Tom Phillips isn't one of them. And, despite the fact that it appears nowhere on the press release for his new CD *The Essential*, he has no problem using it to describe what he and his band The Men of Constant Sorrow do.

“I'm not scared to say ‘country,’ ” the local singer-songwriter says before draining the pint glass sitting in front of him. “I think we use the term ‘honky tonk’ in our press material to differentiate ourselves from pop country.

“But, you know, I like Alan Jackson. I like a lot of those guys.”

Phillips and the Men sound less like Jackson and the stadium players and more like the other side of country that produced artists such as Merle Haggard, George Jones and even Glen Campbell.



Credit: Todd Korol

ESSENTIAL ... Tom Phillips and The Men of Constant Sorrow keep their country simple.

It's those artists he references when asked to describe what he would consider to be the elements of the perfect country song.

“It would be absolutely heartfelt, and there'd be no way to think it wasn't — by anybody,” he says. “It would also have all of the elements of really good poetry in it. And for sure it would have a steel guitar in it. To me those are the elements that make a great country song.”

He could very well be describing many of the tracks that make up *The Essential*, which he and his seven-piece celebrate Nov. 27 with a party at the Ranchman's.

The 10-song CD is one long, sweet, drawl, that showcases the band's stellar musicianship earned through hundreds of hours gigging in places like the since-gone Mecca and inner-city honky tonks such as King Henry VIII where they found each other several years ago during regular afternoon jam sessions.

More importantly, the album features Phillips' songwriting — nine of the cuts are his originals and one was penned by Billy Cowsill who also sings on Phillips' recording — which has over time become as simple yet affecting as a sunset on the horizon.

“As I get older and the more songs I write, I make them more simple,” says the musician from underneath his trademark cowboy hat. “I'm not sure why. Maybe so I can get more heart into them that way.”

The best track on the record is the autobiographical *20 Long Years*, in which Phillips lovingly pays tribute to his late father, who so long ago turned him on to country music. Dad was a closet country fan who would yodel to his son while driving and taught Tom his first chords on an old guitar he kept in his den. The song is a timeless tears/beers ballad that perfectly captures the relationship of father and son, and more specifically, the path one life travelled and the thanks he now wants to give to the man who sent him down it.

And as to whether or not his dad would approve of what Phillips and co. have come up with on *The Essential*, the musician nods as another pint glass is placed in front of him.

“Definitely. My dad would totally dig what I'm doing,” he says before half-joking, “He might not dig certain other aspects of my life, but ...”