

Rooted in cowboy culture



NICK LEWIS &
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PLUGGED IN

Tom Phillips inspired by dad

Tom Phillips comes by his cowboy sensibilities honestly.

The frontman of Tom Phillips and the Men of Constant Sorrow, he has emerged in recent years as one of Calgary's finest roots country artists and remembers being immersed in cowboy culture as a child.

"My dad was an oilpatch lawyer, but really, he was a cowboy at heart," says the lanky, long-haired singer-songwriter.

"We lived in Calgary, but Dad bought this place up in Bragg Creek, this weekend acreage, and he got us all horses. Every weekend we'd drive up there in this old International truck and he'd yodel all the way. He had a beat-up guitar and he'd play old western songs by Sons of the Pioneers and people like that. He was like a closet country musician."

The 44-year-old Phillips also had his first exposure to the rodeo world in those days.

"Bragg Creek was so different then," he says. "It was just farmers and ranchers and they'd be hanging out in the old general store, sitting around this big pot-bellied stove. I was like six and I'd go there and hang out, too. I thought it was so cool."

Those early experiences would shape Phillips' life. They certainly shaped his artistic vision.

The Essential, the latest disc from Tom Phillips and the Men of Constant Sorrow, is a soulful slice of traditional cowboy music, full of honky-tonk bars, rodeo kings, desert roads, worn saddles and, as one of the songs puts it, Beer Stained Memories.

The Essential will be released Nov. 27 at Ranchman's, where Tom and his six-piece band will be playing a barn-burner of a gig to celebrate its arrival.

The song 30 Long Years, featured on The Essential, is a tribute to Phillips' father and the im-



Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

His father's love of traditional country music "flooded" Tom Phillips and he hasn't looked back.

pact he had on his son's life and music.

"My dad died when I was quite young and that's when I started writing songs," Phillips says. "Music can help get you through times like that."

When he was in his early 20s, Phillips moved to Toronto, where he carved out a meagre living on the city's folk circuit. He became a regular at the dingy basement coffeehouse Fat Albert's, where he honed his craft alongside aspiring songwriters Ron Sexsmith and former Blue Rodeo member Bobby Wiseman.

Neil Young played there, too, before Phillips' day. "The guy who ran the place told me whenever Neil would play, he'd have to leave the room," Phillips says with a laugh. "He just couldn't stand his voice."

By the end of his seven-year stint in Toronto, Phillips says, he started moving away from coffeehouse folk, back to the traditional cowboy songs his father

loved. "I don't know if I was getting homesick or what it was, but it all started flooding back to me," Phillips says. "I just started writing songs like that and I haven't looked back since."

When Phillips became a father, he moved back to Calgary, where he gradually became part of this city's rich music scene. Ultimately, it was a better fit. The singing cowboy had come home.

By the late 1990s, Phillips found his dream band at open jam sessions at the King Henry VIII pub in downtown Calgary. His Men of Constant Sorrow — Ronnie Dyck on the squeezebox, Charlie Veilleux on pedal steel guitar, Dave Hoffart on mandolin, Dwight Thompson on electric guitar, Scott Lauchlan on drums and Richard Erickson on bass all frequented the sessions.

Phillips also counts such Calgary-based roots music legends as Ian Tyson, Tim Williams and Billy Cowsill as friends and peers. Phillips recorded an old

Cowsill song, Vagabond, for The Essential. Cowsill joined him in the studio for the song, and he'll be joining the band onstage March 27, when they perform the number at Ranchman's.

Phillips is proud to be in tight with Calgary's roots country elite and he's fiercely protective of the city's cowboy heritage.

"Sometimes country music in Calgary gets a bum deal," he says. "Everyone relates it to the Calgary Stampede, where you'll get these cheesy bands coming into town and it's not always the greatest country music. That's the stigma now... That's a shame."

"We try to stay true to the roots of country music and I think Calgary is the place to do that because that's really what this city is based on, culturally. It's good to be part of that culture — Calgary's real cowboy culture."