

Sorrow's plaything

Let Tom Phillips fuel your soul

MUSIC PREVIEW

**TOM PHILLIPS AND THE
MEN OF CONSTANT SORROW**

CD Release Party

Wednesday, November 27

Ranchman's

MARY-LYNN McEWEN

When the barflies and the intelligentsia are equally hooked by what's on your mind and what fuels your soul, you know you're a man in demand. Singer-songwriter Tom Phillips is such a man.

While a woman at University of Alberta is studying his band, The Men of Constant Sorrow, to complete her thesis in ethnomusicology, the ragged regulars gather to dance and spill beer every Saturday night at the group's unpaid practice gig at King Henry VIII Pub in downtown Calgary — just as they have since the band was alchemized from dreams, Scotch fumes, tears and cigarettes at a Saturday afternoon jam there five years ago.

The band was birthed as its would-be members endured punches from a fistful of country music moments, including the breakup of Phillips's long-term marriage and the death of pedal steel player Charlie Veilleux's teenage daughter in a traffic accident.

"We all fell into each other like a support group that we all needed at that time," Phillips recalls over his customary libation of simultaneous Scotch and beer. Over the years, the band's revolving stable of musicians has included bassist Lee Shedden (*Fire Engine Red*), guitarist and bassist Tim Leacock (*The Co-Dependents*) and bassist Danny Patton (*Beautiful Joe*).

But the core, the players who still enchant sticks and strings at 2 a.m. Sunday morning, includes Veilleux, accordion player Ronnie Dyck, guitar guy Dwight Thompson and mandolin maestro Dave Hoffart, with drummer Gary Gelhorn and bassist Jeff Fazley rounding out the lineup. Infinite permutations of past and present members might be represented at any gig.

Phillips's dusty road to honky-tonk salvation actually began with the death of his father when he was 12. His early memories are like snapshots in the song "20 Long Years," recalling his lawyer father exorcizing his rebel cowboy side in a battered pickup truck while driving his young son to their Bragg Creek home.

"Sunday nights he'd drive his truck... and he'd sing at the top of his lungs old cowboy songs. It's not like he's gonna talk to me. And I learned a little bit of music, and he died, and I didn't quite get it. I went to my bedroom and played guitar and sang and looked at myself in the mirror and thought about how I was going to be a star. Music helped me so much through that shit and it's never let me down."

A core of about 300 fans shares his appreciation for country music, dedicated regulars who, like Deadheads, can be counted on to come out and dance, drink and chat every one to six weeks. So regular are these "Sorrowheads" that collectively they could qualify as an extra band member. In spite of their diverse backgrounds they, too, have become each other's support group, with many of them sharing everything from nods of recognition across a smoke-stained barroom to dancing, cigarettes, beer, band stories and romances.



PHOTO: ANDREW ROY

Alchemized from dreams, Scotch fumes and tears — Tom Phillips and the Men of Constant Sorrow

The audience also often includes other musicians, from punks to jazz players, who come to soak up and possibly capture the magic.

"Gary (Gelhorn) always says they're coming to see me, but I never had that when I was playing solo. We've got a seven-piece band so there's a bunch of instrumentation. We've got Charlie (Veilleux), and I'd be going out every night to hear him, personally. All the boys are quirky in their own right and they have their own things going on and it's interesting."

Phillips found out just how lofty his band's reputation was when he met country star Jason McCoy a few years ago.

"I was up in Big Valley doing the songwriters thing and I'd never met him before, and somebody introduced us. And he goes 'Tom Phillips and the Men of Constant Sorrow! So you didn't tell me that's your band. That's like forgetting to mention you're in the Eagles.'"

When the boys recorded their self-titled album in 1999, some of the realness of their live shows seemed to have jumped the fence and galloped off. This time around, the players saved all their money from their Stampede gigs last year to record their new album. Producer Dwight Thompson made sure the music on this record, *The Essential Tom Phillips and the Men of Constant Sorrow*, would rub shoulders with the sky — to that end he lubricated songs with steel guitar, and whipped the guitars, mandolin and accordion into a sweet froth. The result is 10 tracks that often sound just like they do at Henry's.

And despite playing there on most Saturday nights for the past five years, despite being the Friday night house band at the Mecca before it burned down, and despite also playing at least a half dozen other gigs every month, the music still thrills the band.

"One thing we've never done is have a set list and the other thing we've never done is rehearsal. We've only played live. There's nothing set. Any solo that comes up, I'm throwing a signal to that guy and he's picking it up. Nobody really knows what's coming. They have to watch and they can't get too complacent."

"Also, nobody knows exactly where the song's going to end. For everybody else it seems like were playing the same time and same place, but for us it's like, holy fuck, stop the train wreck."