



Photo: Denise Siegel

One-on-One with **GRANT-LEE PHILLIPS**, *Past Rolling Stone Male Vocalist of the Year* July 29, 2019 | By Chris Berggren, CDL Administrative Assistant

Grant-Lee Phillips came to prominence in the 1990s with his band Grant Lee Buffalo. Originally from Stockton, California, Phillips, who is a registered member of the Creek Native American tribe, traveled south to Los Angeles to study film, but instead found himself caught up in LA's blossoming Indie rock scene. He formed Shiva Burlesque, a band that released a pair of albums, before founding Grant Lee Buffalo, which doubled that output. While Grant Lee Buffalo was acclaimed among critics and artists alike (Phillips was named 1996 Rolling Stone Male Vocalist of the Year and Michael Stipe of R.E.M. claimed their 1993 record *Fuzzy* was the album of the year), the band struggled to find commercial success. Phillips disbanded the group in 1999 and shifted gears toward a solo career. Since 2000, Phillips has released eight albums of original material and another of covers, paying homage to his favorite music from the 1980s. Known for soulful vocals and intricate song construction, Phillips has a loyal following and continues to attract new fans, old and young.

Recently, I had an opportunity to talk with Grant-Lee in-depth about his musical journey. Here's what he had to say:

Q *You moved from Stockton, California to LA to study film...was music part of the journey at that point or did priorities change once you got to LA?*

A Well, film school, in my mind was a legitimate excuse to move to LA and get a real job, but let's take it a few steps back, since we're starting at the beginning. As a kid I performed magic and booked myself into venues and had my card up at the magic shop in town and that led me to a gig at a theatre that was sort of a vaudeville revival house and allowed me to do sketches, juggling, and magic. Adjacent to the theatre was a ghost town where entertainment gunfights were held, so I got a job working there on weekends, as well, falling off wagons and performing gun slinging. So my interest in art and music and theatre was going in every direction when I was in my teens and well into my twenties. When I was trying to figure it all out, it occurred to me that maybe film was an area where I could pull it all together. I enrolled at a night school in LA called Columbia and I would go there after work at my day job, which was roofing houses. I did that for a year, before I said to myself, "Man, this is exhausting and my real passion, the thing I can do without anyone's permission, without any sort of big budget, is write a song." And that's something that I'd done ever since I was 14 or 15, when I first picked up a guitar. That's when it occurred to me that I should put my eggs in that basket. So I decided to get out there and start a band.

Q *Did you actually play music with bands in Stockton or is that something that didn't come about until this decision in LA?*

A I had a band or two in high school. We'd typically get together to jam and learn a Led Zeppelin song or a song by the Cramps, but I found myself introducing new songs that I'd written, as well, and that was the thing that really excited me. Then I had a band with a friend, who was the front man; it was a three-piece band called Bloody Holly. The two of us had planned to move down to LA together to attend the same film school, but he passed away from an accident. That was a real jolt to me personally. Around that particular time, I met a boy named Jeffery Clark, from Stockton, as well. Jeff moved down to LA with me and we began trying to put together the band that became Shiva Burlesque. That was a long process—several years. Initially, it was Jeff and I and a drum machine, then we kicked the drum machine out and added a couple of other instruments. Eventually, we added the guys that I would later form Grant Lee Buffalo, Joey Peters and Paul Kimble.

Q *Tell me about the early years in LA...*

A Back then I was so young I couldn't really book myself into the clubs, I couldn't get into the clubs. Jeffery was older, so he'd go in and drop our tape off and tell me what it was like in there and I'd wait out in the car. But I was aware of that—that I was green and I was learning the ropes, and I was quite content to again, play guitar, write songs, and remain kind of in the shadows. But something welled up in me about the time I turned 24, 25 maybe, I thought, "Man, I gotta get a move on it, I've got a lot of songs. I've been writing songs for a long time and I just might be a songwriter." At that point it had been like ten years of this... habit. And that's when I really began to take it seriously and it would be maybe two or three years from that point when Grant Lee Buffalo signed a deal and I began to tour the world.

Q *And was there a transition from Shiva Burlesque to Grant Lee Buffalo?*

A Not really, they sort of overlapped. At first, Grant Lee Buffalo was just my moonlighting project, but like with many bands, after about ten years there was a fair amount of discord in Shiva Burlesque—you know with three or four young guys trying to figure out what their lives are going to be like—so I thought, "You know, I think I'm going to follow through with this thing I'm doing on my own." So that's kind of where it went. Bands are kind of living organisms and they never really remain the same.

Q *Was it frustrating to you that Grant Lee Buffalo was so critically acclaimed, yet it didn't translate commercially?*

A I think it's all relative. My ambitions were simply to make a record when we started out. I would look at a lot of bands that we knew in LA that were doing something on their own or with very Indie labels. A buddy of ours had a label called Independent Projects and he also had a printing press, so he would press up the records and letter press every cover—talk about handmade. People were doing it for the real art of it, so the notion of getting a few thousand dollars of someone else's money to make a record... that seemed pretty exceptional. And to find myself still doing this over such a long period of time and still being very excited about it, I think that's the real reward process. Commercially, that's a hard thing for me to quantify. There are those artists that have "a hit" and everything kind of explodes, but I've chosen to go about it more like a tortoise, I suppose. Songwriting, while it's kind of a dry event, or habit, has been the thing that's really been at the root of every opportunity that I've ever had.

Q *When you disbanded Grant Lee Buffalo was that a low point or a natural progression? Did you view it negatively or as an opportunity?*

A I think it was probably an inevitable moment. It's pretty difficult to keep a band together for a long period of

time. As I recall, it was a time of anxiety, but also an opportunity. I was aware of that. Part of me really wanted to move quite far away from that approach of making music with the guitar or thinking in terms of a band. One of my first solo albums, I went about writing it with different instruments and using some of the new technology that I was exploring. I don't know, I mean bands don't typically fall apart over night, it's a process—you pull one leg out of the table and it wobbles a bit, you pull a few out and there you go... you know?

Q *The first two solo albums felt like more of a progression from Grant Lee Buffalo than a departure to me, but Virginia Creeper felt like a major change in style and production. What brought on that change?*

A I think probably the change of touring on my own, where I would go out with nothing but the guitar and getting used to what that sounded like. That had an effect on how I would write and how I would hear the final product. I began to appreciate that space around my voice and how far I could push it dynamically. That's also the first record where pretty much everything you hear is live in the studio. With Grant Lee Buffalo, quite often our strategy was to get a great drum sound down first and then put on the guitars and layer by layer the album would seem to come into focus. I began to rethink that. I felt like, "You know, I want to get the spirit of this song and the spirit of that performance with the ensemble in the studio." It occurred to me that many of the records that I loved... quite a few of Dylan's songs or Neil Young's or Van Morrison's were done in that fashion, as it typically was back in those days when you didn't have the luxury to do it any other way. So I love that when a record has life on it, you really feel like you're experiencing something, like you're in the room with the players. That was a new bar that I set for myself with that record and I think that's what you're picking up more than anything.

Q *Tell me about the decision to leave California for Nashville.*

A It came about somewhat abruptly. We had a five-year-old daughter and we started looking around Los Angeles for where she was going to go to school and we weren't sure it was going to be best for her in our particular part of L.A. So we started thinking, "If we're really going to move and go through the trouble of boxing everything up, well, we could move anywhere." The idea of seasons and just some place new to be inspired by—my wife really liked that idea. It just seemed like a good time to shake it up. I had met a few musicians who would come back and forth to Nashville and I just felt, "You know, Nashville's calling and now's the time to make that move." That's kind of a dangerous thing, I think, as a songwriter, to be so rooted that you aren't picking up new information, you're not being stimulated. When I moved here it was like a little bit of a culture shock and that was a good thing.

Q *Walking in the Green Corn seems to be another important step, in which you delve into your heritage. How important was that to you to address?*

A It's one that I probably wouldn't have written at that time if I wasn't a new parent. I grew up with the awareness of my heritage. I'm Muskogee Creek, also Cherokee and Blackfoot, but I'm registered with the Creek tribe. It was something that my mom would always tell me a lot about—you know, she's from back in Oklahoma, and my grandma, as well, and we would take trips back there when I was young. When my daughter came along, I felt, "I really want to have a better grasp of all of this and be able to explain it to her, give her a sense of where this part of our family comes from." That's kind of what happened there when I started thinking about it and writing those songs, thinking about it. That album, *Walking in the Green Corn*, I think of it as kind of a reflection on my Native ancestry, what it means to be of mixed ancestry today, and it's a mediation on how we live in harmony or discord with our planet, as well. So both of those things are at play with songs like "Vanishing Song" and "Bound to This World." It was an important thing, and, you know, going back to that kind of preoccupation is why Grant Lee Buffalo is called Grant Lee Buffalo and it's always kind of been active in fueling my imagination. I love Native mythology, I love our history—it's very diverse, far more diverse than the world may know from media depictions.

Q *Okay, tell me about your connection to the Gilmore Girls TV show. How did that come about?*

A That came about because Amy Sherman-Palladino and her husband, Daniel, are huge music fans. They loved Grant Lee Buffalo and they were fans of mine. It was around the time the show got off the ground that I'd gone solo, and they reached out to me and said, "Do you want to be a part of this? Do you want to be in our show? Do a cameo?" I had no sense of it being more than that, but that seemed like a really fun opportunity. I don't know, I was in a good place. My feeling was like, "Yeah, this is a time in my life where I'm just going to dive in, I'm not going to analyze it too much. I'm just going to see where this goes." I'd done some acting when I was younger, I'd been in film school, so I felt like, "This is not totally foreign." And I'm basically playing just a version of myself. And here we are all these years later and the show continues to enjoy a really strong following.

Q *Do you find that there are fans who know you specifically from the show now when you're touring?*

A Yeah, definitely, I have a lot of fans who discovered me through the *Gilmore Girls*. And sometimes they'll come to the shows with their parents, who might know me through Grant Lee Buffalo or some other period. So it's a fascinating thing to kind of see it intersect in that way.

Q *When you're writing, do you have a basic songwriting strategy or a process that you go through?*

A It's so different from song to song; just when I think I do have a strategy I find that the song is going to demand something different. It's like trying to remember all the passwords on your computer. It's like, "What was it? How did I get in there last time? It was so easy last time, what happened?" I think it's probably healthy when you approach a song to accept that each song presents you with new challenges—that it has its own terrain. You can learn and apply some of the lessons of the past, but you really have to embrace that this is a different entity, like a child, you know? Like a person that has its own personality and you have to be willing to explore and find out what that is. And I think that it's probably true that you may not even find out what that song means on some other levels until long after it's been recorded and released into the world.

Q *Is there any advice you would give to a budding young songwriter?*

A I think if you have the desire and the passion, you know, the impulse to do it, then you must stick with it. You have to honor that. And know that it is both a job that employs your inspiration, but it also requires patience—the patience of a fisherman, to sit, knowing that you may come home hungry, but eventually the big fish, they bite on the line. My dad was a fisherman, it was his pastime. I could never figure out how he had that patience to sit, baking in the sun all day, looking at a stick that would occasionally wobble. But he would catch some big fish, frequently, as well. I think it's very much the same thing with writing a song. You have to show up, but inspiration doesn't show up if you're not willing to get up before the crack of dawn with your tackle box and your willingness to create.

Q *Okay, and circling back around, is there any advice you'd give a young Grant-Lee Phillips just packing his bags to leave Stockton for LA.?*

A Leave the ventriloquist doll behind, you won't be needing it.

The End