In a career defined by risk and reflection, Phillips only just recently took on the biggest gamble of his life…and with the wager comes *The Narrows*.

For practically all of his time on Earth, songwriter Grant-Lee Phillips has reconciled widescreen mystery and wonder with his own experiences from a fixed vantage point. Not that California is such a myopic perch: The state whose very name implies the promise of reinvention and potential wealth encompasses such varied terrain as Stockton (the hardscrabble port town of Phillips’ birth), the now-fleeting bohemia of San Francisco, and the sprawling industry capitol that is Los Angeles – his home since age 19.

“Los Angeles is a desert,” he explains from the road in Oslo, Norway, “It’s a hard place to plant your roots and a harder place to pull ’em up after some thirty years.” In 2013, he did just that: The lifelong California resident transplanted himself and his family to landlocked Tennessee. Reasons why abound, but answers to the questions the relocation posed are still emerging. His last LP, *Walking in the Green Corn* was a resonant meditation on translating his own ancestral legacy into the present era. As he was listening to the past, he heard echoes of his own experience – and those of his descendants – rolling off the Tennessee hills. “It held the promise of a quieter life,” he says, “something resembling my own rural upbringing in the San Joaquin Valley. And the people of the mid-south reminded me of home – my dad being from Arkansas, my mom from Oklahoma. And the soundtrack of my boyhood was so often tethered to Nashville…”

This concentrated nexus of romance, recollection, historic struggles and tragedies, and peerless craftsmanship – coupled with the hopes, fears, and isolation that accompany transition – formed the backdrop of *The Narrows*, Phillips’ latest dispatch on Yep-Roc Records. Bathed in a woody, warmly reverberating sonic signature, the album’s thirteen songs are marked by longing and a resolute sense of purpose: As though hurling yourself full-force into the unknown is as sensible as any other more commonly prescribed course. After all, what feels unknown may be residing just below the surface – should you be willing to dig for it and be open to discovery.

“Discovery is what I love the most about songwriting,” Phillips shares. “When it comes to albums, I tend to let the through-line reveal itself as I gather a collection of songs. Recurring themes tend to arise organically, and I enjoy encountering them like fresh webs in the morning.” The lure of Tennessee, the longing for change, trusting some sort of ancient unknown and a willingness to set out onto new paths are imprinted in the subtext of *The Narrows*, with the opening “Tennessee Rain” ringing out like a manifesto: “I’ll get to where I’m going,” Phillips sings assuredly. “The sun is still plenty high.”

The power and substance so ably, tangibly imparted by *The Narrows* is humble validation of Phillips’ instincts and his subsequent decision to uproot. One of the first people to reach out to Phillips in Tennessee was drummer Jerry Roe – grandson of eccentric guitar virtuoso and songwriter Jerry Reed. Phillips had met him years before, when Roe told him, “If you ever want to make a record down here, I’m in – and I’ll help you find the right players who’ll get your stuff. But I wouldn’t move here.”

“About a year later,” Phillips recalls, “I rang him up to say that I had ignored half of his advice, but wanted to take him up on the other half.” Roe introduced him to multi-instrumentalist Lex Price, who plays electric and upright bass throughout *The Narrows*, in addition to a bit of guitar and banjo. “As a trio, we were off and running.” Tracking live, vocals and all, from the studio floor of Dan Auerbach’s Easy Eye Studio, the core trio display uncanny sensitivity – mining their unfamiliarity with one another as a virtue that lends depth and humanity to Phillips’ observations.

“This set of songs,” Phillips observes, “seem to pivot between the personal and historical – like a lens, focusing in and out. The Creek and the Cherokee, of which I’m descendent, called this land home before the removal. I’m captivated by the stories and the energy here.” *The Narrows* balances that history with Phillips’ own severance from his birthplace, his continued journey into marriage and fatherhood, and the passing of his own father. “Moccasin Creek,” delivered by the band with a daring sense of space and a vivid, clear-eyed vocal from Phillips, mines those emotional and geographical intersections. “I envisioned myself one day venturing into the Arkansas land where my father’s side of the family sprang forth,” Phillips explains. “There’s a part of the river down by the old family home known as the Narrows – the unfriendly part where you fight against the current and try to not to be pulled under. I saw in this a metaphor…”

The tension between past and present, foundations and freedom, embodies nearly every song on *The Narrows*. The elliptically rolling, marimba-laced “Cry Cry” sings out from the perspective of one who’s ancestral home and culture has been lost. “Same people said that I was godless, same people showed me how to pray,” Phillips intones wearily, but with pronounced determination, “same people with a pen or a rifle, same people took it all away.” Riding in on a mid-tempo three-finger banjo roll, “Rolling Pin” turns the focus to the more quotidian, presenting a sonic scrapbook of Phillips’ early misadventures with his wife. “Heart don’t fail me now,” he prays, looking back at the fractured exhilaration that somehow congealed into something solid.

*The Narrows*’ depth of subject matter, starkly dynamic performance, and uncluttered poetry put Phillips’ gift as a vocalist – as translator and living vessel of these ideas – to the test. His burnished tenor rings simultaneously confessional and confident, bringing an off-hand candor to his songs heaviest moments while imbuing the smaller moments with palpable awe. Occasional overdubs – keys, pedal steel, fiddle – enrich the song’s textures without detracting from the absorbing immediacy of the performances. Having access to Dan Auerbach collection of museum-quality vintage equipment (much of which has also been heard on records by Auerbach’s band the Black Keys) didn’t hurt either…and, cementing *The Narrows*’ Nashville bona fides, drummer Jerry Roe’s dad Dave, who played bass with Johnny Cash for eleven years, dropped in to add upright to the gently propulsive “No Mercy In July.”

Thus far, Grant-Lee Phillips’ new home has lived up to its promise, the change of scenery producing an evocative, profound record that extends the city’s legacy of homespun craftsmanship and off-the-cuff recording methods. “True to his word,” Phillips concludes, “Jerry Roe turned me on to this other Nashville, which I suspected might exist – the kind of creative community I was yearning for. There’s a reason that Bob Dylan and Neil Young were drawn here to make seminal albums…but wherever you’re coming from, music has a way of transcending a lot of boundaries. It needs no passport, but if it did, it would have a stamp from every place on the green earth….”