

Grant-Lee Phillips “Little Moon”

Implying a beguiling blend of paradox and wonder – a circumference of over two thousand miles appearing fingernail thin from Earth – the title *Little Moon* handily encapsulates the tiny triumph that is Grant-Lee Phillips’s new album. Uncluttered but undeniably powerful, briskly recorded but a lifetime in the making, *Little Moon* finds Phillips letting go of his inhibitions and his ego just as he approaches the pinnacle of his abilities as a songwriter, vocalist, and bandleader. “Because I so often find myself alone with a guitar, be it at home, on stage, in a hotel,” he reflects, “I’ve become more and more comfortable stripping away a lot of the artifice that comes with making a record. My albums are becoming more stark, more unguarded, and more vulnerable. This is the most unselfconscious record I have made – ever.”

Available on October 13 via Yep Roc Records, *Little Moon* was recorded in just four days by a core band consisting of Phillips on guitar and vocals, Jamie Edwards on a battery of keyboard instruments, producer and bassist Paul Bryan, drummer Jay Bellerose (most recently heard on Alison Krauss and Robert Plant’s *Raising Sand* collaboration), and percussionist Sebastian Aymans. The band gathered and rehearsed the material for one day, then entered the studio. “It all went down live,” Phillips explains. “The vocals, the guitar, it went down at once. We overdubbed a few horn parts, and a few guitars and keys, but the bulk of it happened right there on the studio floor.

“I’ve been around the block so many times with the process of recording,” he continues, “and I’ve learned a thing or two about my own strengths: mainly that there is a considerable amount of subtlety in what I do, and it’s best if it is captured in a way that is honest and direct. So this time out, I said ‘I am going to feel very strongly about these songs, I am going to make sure that they can hold their own. I am going to perform them in the studio, and not build them from the ground up with overdubs.’ It involved doing it in a very old-fashioned way, to get the most human quality and to capture what you get playing live.”

Honed over that past year at acoustic shows, most of *Little Moon*’s twelve songs had been performed so much that, in Phillips’s words, “by the time I got to record them with the band, it was almost like I was playing songs I’d lived with for years.” The resultant album is simultaneously warmly lived-in and thrillingly spontaneous, delivering its songs in a headlong rush that – thanks to the inherent quality and depth of the material – never loses focus or descends into mere histrionics.

“Since Grant Lee Buffalo blew up,” Phillips says, referring to the acclaimed trio that first brought him to national prominence, “I’ve tried a number of methods when it comes to making solo records. I’ve tried to be as self-reliant as I could, and maybe taking it to extremes: playing every instrument myself, recording it myself – and there have been some great discoveries along the way. I’ve learned that I am foremost a songwriter and a performer. There are other people who are incredible engineers, musicians, and arrangers, and this is a case of welcoming that into the process. As an artist, you have to come to a point where you trust yourself and your own abilities, and then you can trust others...”

From its most tender moments to its most rollicking and infectious, *Little Moon* has an internal consistency that is rare in the era of endless digital tracking and tinkering. Working with a fixed group of expert musicians over a condensed period of time underpins the album, giving it a classic sense of vibe and a vital, living quality. “There were no click tracks used,” Phillips explains. “It has an undulation, an ebb and flow that makes music easy to relate to: it’s dynamic, it’s human. I like hearing people breathe, I like hearing the chairs squeak...” This direct, unvarnished presentation puts almost all the emphasis on Phillips enthralled, rapturous vocals and a set of songs that rank among his very best.

Opener “Good Morning Happiness” bursts forward with a defiant sense of joy, powered by Jay Bellerose’s thumping drums. “A lot of the feel and the guiding rhythms of these songs are in the guitar,” Phillips says. “Jay always finds a way of complimenting them and bringing them out without changing them.” The title track, a lullaby at once comforting and ominous, finds Phillips’ delicate fingerpicking enveloped first by Jamie Edwards keyboards (acoustic piano and organ) and then a string quartet arrangement by bassist and producer Paul Bryan performed by The Section Quartet. The Section Quartet reappears on the reflective, evocative “Older Now,” which was cut entirely live with just Edward’s piano and the quartet accompanying Phillips’ vocal.

Like many of *Little Moon*’s songs, “Older Now” details a profound change in perspective brought about by the birth of Phillips’ first daughter. “I became a dad at 44 years of age,” he says, “My days are different now – there’s less time. I don’t have the luxury of anxiety anymore. I just have to get on with things – write a song, go with what feels good, don’t fret so much over it...that’s a part of why this album was done the way it was. For me, fatherhood also reaffirmed the necessity of play.” Indeed, a sense of whimsy pervades *Little Moon*, from the rollicking vaudeville rhythms propelling “It Ain’t The Same Old Cold War Harry” to the playful surrealism of the closing “The Sun Shines On Jupiter.”

“I was joining Aimee Mann on her Christmas show on the east coast,” Phillips recalled, “and I had to do a bunch of work out in L.A. during the tour. So I had this long day that involved me getting up at 3 in the morning to fly out to Boston. After sleeping for 15 hours and waking up in Northampton, Massachusetts, I awoke from a vivid dream. I was in a room, with fifteen or twenty other people, playing instruments – autoharps and ukuleles – and this old lady was leading the room, singing this song “The Sun Shines on Jupiter.” I thought ‘This is insane, I have to write this down.’ I sat down at the piano at soundcheck and wrote it out almost instantly.”

Surrendering to the moment and fearlessly trusting his creative impulses has reawakened Grant-Lee Phillips, introducing an unfettered delight and unflinching introspection into even the darkest moments of *Little Moon*. The restlessness that led him to experiment constantly – from the electronic backdrops of 2001’s *Mobilize* to the largely self-performed and self-recorded *Strangelet* that immediately preceded *Little Moon* – has subsided. “Often, when I finish a record, I say ‘With the next one, I want it to be completely different.’ Now, when I know I have an album’s worth of strong songs, I would get these guys back to the same place and do it again. Why didn’t I do this all along?”

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