When nothing is off limits, you can reach your full potential.

Toothgrinder realized this fact while making their 2017 full-length, *Phantom Amour* [Spinefarm Records]. While retaining the slippery schizophrenic spirit that turned them into a critical favorite on 2015’s *Nocturnal Masquerade*, the New Jersey quintet—Justin Matthews [vocals], Jason Goss [guitar], Matt Arensdorf [bass, vocals], Wills Weller [drums], and Johnuel Hasney [guitar]—dramatically augmented their unpredictable creative palette through expanding the grasp on melody, incorporating cinematic electronic flourishes, and even going acoustic, to name a few evolutions.

As hypnotic as they are heavy, these thirteen tracks signify *“progress”* through and through.

“Everybody calls us *‘a progressive metal band*,’ but I think the most progressive thing you can do is surprise your audience and keep yourself happy,” says Wills. “I feel like that’s exactly what we’re doing here. From jazz and classic rock to metal and experimental, everybody brings different flavors to the table. Then, we pour them into the same pot. That’s Toothgrinder in a nutshell.”

It’s also why the band quietly made a palpable impact with *Nocturnal Masquerade*. As *Revolver* dubbed them *“A Band to Watch*,*”* it earned acclaim from *AXS*, *Metalsucks*, *New Noise*, *Metal Hammer*, *The Aquarian*, and more as the single “Diamonds for Gold” [feat. Spencer Sotelo of Periphery] generated over 300K YouTube/VEVO views and “Blue” cracked 384K Spotify streams. The group went on to support Killswitch Engage, Periphery, Sikth, CHON, and more on the road. Meanwhile, Wills made a hilarious cameo in the Martin Scorsese-produced HBO series *Vinyl* tearing shit up with an oceanside show as frontman for the fictional Pink Fairies.

As the boys commenced writing in 2017, new inspirations crept in…

“There are a few things that inspired the direction of this record,” explains Justin. “As a lyricist, I decided to take a more melodic route. I wanted to be more honest and tell stories. I had to talk about personal things that are difficult to communicate with such an aggressive platform. We took it down a notch and got more intimate. Another huge influence was Stephen King’s *On Writing*. I read it four times before I went into the studio. I took his concept of being fearless into consideration. That translates into the music. A lot of the things I sing about are sad—not so much angry. We needed to soften the sound just enough for it to work. I think it did”

“We were so open-minded,” adds Wills. “We have your normal Toothgrinder songs, but we’re generally all over the map—which keeps it exciting.”

First single “The Shadow” introduces this evolution. Propelled by gnashing and gnawing guitars, the song slips in and out of hypnotic verses before snapping into a hard-hitting hook punctuated by off-time rhythms and shimmering electronics.

“The concept of *‘The Shadow’* was created by philosopher and psychiatrist Carl Jung,” says Justin. “It’s about the dark parts of the subconscious and how every man has the opportunity to be good or evil. You choose your side. Most people aren’t inherently evil; they decide which path they tread.”

Elsewhere, “Let It Ride” hinges on a distorted groove before snapping into one of the band’s biggest chants to date, *“We’re gonna let it ride*.*”* Driven by hushed clean guitars and pensive lyricism, the airy and artful title track “Phantom Amour” mounts into an expansive refrain hinting at a larger theme.

“When I was really young, I liked *The Phantom of the Opera*,” recalls the frontman. “It was the first play I saw on Broadway, and it stuck with me. I bought the Andrew Lloyd Weber score. The eeriness of the music spoke to me on a deep level. I have some family in France, so there’s always been a French influence too. I translate *Phantom Amour* to ‘Ghost Love.’ It imagines an illicit lover who’s a little evil and sadistic. There’s a lot of dark romance on the record. It encompasses the whole body of work based on a few experiences with girlfriends that led me down a dark road. You could say I’m making amends with those.”

The centerpiece remains the acoustic *“love song”* “Jubilee,” which ends with banjo plucked by Wills. The name references the group’s elephant mascot, gracing each cover since their *Schizophrenic Jubilee* EP through *Phantom Amour* and aging along the way.

“His growth symbolizes ours,” adds Wills. “It’s like a visual representation of where we’re at.”

In the end, *Phantom Amour* signals a moment of progression for both Toothgrinder and the genre at large.

“When people listen to this, I want them to feel what I felt picking up a really emotionally heavy album,” Justin leaves off. “That feeling lasts.”

“I hope this pushes some boundaries,” concludes Wills. “It’s a breath of fresh air for fans that love the heavy shit and something aggressive for fans of lighter music. It’s the best of both worlds.”