On an icy February day, backed by some of the Midwest’s finest musicians, Greg Gilbertson entered Pine Hollow recording studio in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, a setting both silent and vibrating, to make a new full-length record, released May 4, 2018.  "The record is called Surviving the Echoes,” Greg says, “and is an exploration of how our best ideas and intentions have bitten us in the ass. At the same time, it’s redemptive; what I imagine Kurt Vonnegut might write if he had been able to hope in something.”

Gilbertson’s new project expertly balances dark themes of war and depression with a promise of hard-scrabble grace in the face of cynicism. His warm tenor singing voice complements the clear notes of his guitar playing, which is at once smooth and complex, and lends itself well to the subject matter. It feels at times like a spiritual handbook, at times like a love note through the ages, and is embedded with a dark hope. It is layered with biblical imagery and haunting storytelling that explore a longing for better days, while refusing to look away from the darkness. The songs suggest that, once our eyes adjust, glints of light might be enough to guide us through.

In the seat of his minivan, Greg rather looks the part of the quintessential hunting, fishing, midwestern family man. Residing in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, the town he was born in, he is now raising a family of his own. His wife and three daughters are priority one, and no thought is ever given that it would be otherwise. When not in the woods or at work, he can be found teaching his daughters to play music or attending a Packers game with his wife. His enthusiasm for life is contagious; his eyes flash when he describes his artistic influences, his countenance shifts abruptly as he interrupts himself, adjusts his baseball cap, and bounces up to grab his guitar. But his lyrics belie this easy-going demeanor.

Long intrigued by the work of the soul, Greg reflects on the promises we make and break, and often seeks both inspiration and solace in literature. The themes of this project feel timely. “We are going to need people to help us see and make sense of the world,” Greg reflects. “What I really want is for us to see who we really are. This is who we are as a nation and as a people. It’s not who ‘they’ are. We need to look beyond politics, and I think it’s going to be up to our artists to help us do that.” There is an agony that can come from trying to hope in our modern society, and Gilbertson’s music presses us to think and feel simultaneously, but refuses to tell us outright what or how to do so.

Gilbertson credits his grandmother with introducing him to music. “She must have seen something in me,” he said. “She used to sing on the radio with her sisters, Andrews Sisters–style. She insisted that I take music lessons; paid for them and everything. When I was young, she taught me a bunch of her favorite piano duets, and we’d play the same songs over and over when I would go to her house. We even played them together when I was grown up and she was dying.” Thus Greg was trained, as is often the case with this caliber of musician, beginning at age three, in Suzuki-style violin. He built on those early skills with piano lessons beginning at age nine and guitar lessons in middle school.

But it wasn’t until 2004, at the age of twenty-seven, that Gilbertson was inspired to take up fingerstyle guitar after seeing Phil Keaggy perform at the State Theater in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He would soon become an expert player in this style, and in 2007 Gilbertson released Limited Vocabulary, an instrumental album of all-original guitar compositions. The following year he went on to win national recognition at the prestigious International Fingerstyle Guitar Championship, and the album succeeded in pushing him into high demand for acoustic sets. He began to play at churches, theaters, wineries, and supper clubs, gathering enthusiastic listeners along the way. He’s since shared the stage with such influential musicians as fingerstyle giant Doyle Dykes, Music City’s darling Tim Thompson, and the late Pete Huttlinger.  All of this while inexplicably reserving his clear singing voice for open mics.

Gilbertson enjoys keeping his audience off balance. “I love how the same tune can grab people differently,” he says. “You write a song, but you never really own it. You just release it and let it do its thing. Songs are like kids; you raise them more than you create them.” With his genuinely pragmatic “It’ll be okay” approach to life, he will smile disarmingly right before launching into a song so packed with evocative melodies and layered with lyrics that it invites intense contemplation and reflection.

Listeners who are only vaguely expecting to be entertained will have to reorganize their thoughts, pull their jaws closed, and pay attention.  As is true of all absorbing music, the world is brought into sharp focus and then melts away