

Forbert's A Fighter: From "Next Bob Dylan" To Underdog, And Loving It
by David Veitch
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Twenty years ago, Steve Forbert was being heralded as the new Bob Dylan.

He was 23, the press was praising his first two albums *Alive on Arrival* and "Jackrabbit Slim," radio was playing his hit *Romeo's Tune*, he was the Hot New Thing ... and he was overwhelmed.

"It was exciting, but it was kind of a blur. And it was a bit confusing on some levels," recalls Forbert.

"Frankly," he concedes, "I could have used some better advice at the time."

Indeed, his career hit a few momentum-halting snags early on -- including a five-year battle (1983-87) with his former record company during which time he stopped making albums.

Since then, however, the native of Meridian, Miss., has been quietly and consistently making some of the finest and most personal singer-songwriter records of the past decade.

His last studio effort, 1996's *Rocking Horse Head*, was recorded with members of Wilco and contains all of Forbert's hallmarks -- expressive, sandpapery vocals; loose, live-in-the-studio performances; and searching, vividly detailed narratives about life, love and family.

"I do want to enlarge the audience, but I have to say in some crazy way I enjoy the challenge," says the friendly and forthright Forbert, who'll perform a solo show at the Arts Centre's Engineered Air Theatre on Saturday.

"I always try to make records that are competitive and worthy of being on the radio again in their own way.

"But I've always liked folk-rock and I'm going to stick to that."

Now many years removed from the spotlight and the hype, Forbert doesn't belong to any scene -- but he does feel an affinity for the alt.country movement, spearheaded by acts such as Wilco, Son Volt and Whiskeytown.

"I wondered for years what would come of the middle ground between the country music of George Jones and, say, The Band. This is kind of that concept.

"It's primarily about songs and these people are very concerned with lyrics and are talking from their own experience.... That's what I'm interested in."

The 43-year-old father of three, who now lives in Nashville, says songwriting becomes more difficult as he gets older.

"You have to remember, when you start out, you're young and you don't have a lot of responsibilities," he says.

"But as you get older, of course you have other responsibilities and life becomes more complicated. That comes into play with the songwriting."

What about craft?

"I don't put a lot of stock into craft. I don't rely much on it," he says. "If I cared a lot about craft, per se, I wouldn't be so uninterested in the idea of writing songs by committee in Nashville."

"I just can't say 'I've written several hundred songs and I will write one for you now. Watch me!' For me, songwriting is primarily about inspiration, which is still an elusive, hard-to-find thing."