

Tracking Steve Forbert's Last 20 Years In Orbit
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It was 1979 in the dead of winter. Sid Vicious had just finished putting himself in the cold, cold ground after girlfriend Nancy met the same fate while courting New York's infamous Chelsea Hotel. It was to be the final chapter in the Sex Pistols' bizarre romp through America, and the last hoorah for those few years of erupting hostility. When British punk was in full swing, its violent anger and fuck-you attitude sometimes overshadowed everything about the movement. The new anarchists' hate of authority, however, eventually turned on itself. Sid's was clearly a pointless and pathetic death. It signaled a disillusionment with the nihilism of punk, and the changing of the weather.

In January of that year I ducked into a record store to escape the flesh-burning winds that ripped across the St. Lawrence and throughout the winter-torn streets of Montreal. Inside the store, the walls and ceiling were plastered with promo posters celebrating the dawn of what would become "New Wave." The Police in their "blond-from-a-bottle" hairdos glanced down like young gods, while Bob Geldof and his scruffy bunch of Boomtown Rats were jumping around in their crayon-colored pajamas. Deborah Harry had her sexy, come-on gaze like she was your first older-girl experience, and Elvis Costello looked like Woody Allen pretending to be Buddy Holly. Although a smirk still laced their turned-up smiles, it was more devilish and playful than it was deviant and destructive.

Somewhat like an oddity in this promo-blast was a life-sized, cardboard prop of a guy named Steve Forbert which stood up, bold and brisk, at the store's front entrance. Dressed in jeans and a tattered Levi jacket, he looked like a young Elvis, or a coltish Dylan busking in the East Village. Stamped across the cardboard figure was the phrase *Alive on Arrival*. All I could think of was "sort of punk, but anti-punk." It was obvious by his forward-leaning stance, firmly gripping a well-worn, six-string Gibson, that Forbert meant business. Yet he didn't possess that kind of snotty, Stiv Bators attitude, nor did he remind me of a lightweight rockabilly pussy. It was hard to define what the cardboard kid was all about. All I knew is that *Alive on Arrival* was a curious anti-thesis in the dead of winter during 1979.

I bought a ton of records that day. Somewhere in the neighborhood of \$250. Many of those albums I still have, they became relics from that era. Very few of them, however, I still play. Except for one.

I was amazed to learn that Steve Forbert played regularly at CBGB's during the late '70s. This guy from nowhere in Mississippi, however, wrote a stunning autobiographical debut, *Alive on Arrival* [released October 1978], that detailed his first year in the City. On it, Forbert played for spare change in Grand Central Station "howling out words and banging out chords" as he sang about being "Mississippi with the New York blues." He also sang about slick "big city cats" and "high-heeled women with their TV blues" who walked past his open guitar case without casting him a single glance. Homesick, down on his luck, and alienated by the world he'd journeyed to, Forbert's first record saw youthful optimism tumble toward cynicism and disenchantment with his uptown surroundings. While it sometimes revealed a trampled-on, beaten-down outlook, Forbert remained the philosophical realist, urging, "You cannot win if you do not play." He possessed a punk-rock soul that materialized in folk and blues. As a confessional, *Alive on Arrival*'s simple delivery was profound and ultimately complex. He won CBGB's over, and his debut record remains a timeless piece of work.

That same year, his second release, "Jackrabbit Slim", featured the radio hit, "Romeo's Tune," along with video rotation. Forbert seemed destined to break through, and sure enough, for a while he was "famous." Two more albums then came in quick succession, "Little Stevie Orbit" (1980)

and Steve Forbert (1982), as he continued to build his reputation. Then, in the mid-'80s, Forbert had a falling out with Columbia, which ended his contract with the recording company, and consequently his short-lived fame.

On his own, Forbert joined Buddy Holly's legendary band The Crickets for a one-off tribute show at the Lone Star Cafe in NYC. There he met Garry Tallent from the E-Street Band, which resulted in a new record, *Streets of This Town*, and a deal with Geffen. It was the next record for Geffen, however, that pushed Forbert back in brilliant form once again.

The American in Me (1992) was cited as a "dark, searching record." Dealing with estranged and broken relationships, the shrinking of horizons, and opportunities forever lost, Forbert cleverly addressed American in decline. The lead track, "Born Too Late," set the tone as Forbert sketched out a country living on past glories in the wake of the Reagan-Bush administration. Although it wasn't antipatriotic or overly pessimistic, its sharp and tactful criticism cut to the core. Unfortunately, it never found the audience it deserved. Perhaps it was a record that came a little too early, one that was ahead of its time.

"Yeah," says Forbert on the phone from New York. " *The American in Me*. I like that one the best since *Alive on Arrival*. But did it really have a hit single on it? We'll never know," muses the songwriter. "We didn't have more Americana leaning stations and all that stuff then. It wasn't there in 1982. You couldn't do much. . . It remains a good record, and that's all I can say about it."

Somewhere in the last half-dozen years, alternative country became a cohesive and popular genre defined by a gritty twang, roots rock, traditionalism, minimalism, and a keen sense of attitude and insight--a lot of qualities that Forbert exerted 20-odd years ago. His talents, however, have not gone unappreciated and unrecognized. Recently, Forbert was joined by members from Wilco on the 1996 full-length CD *Rocking Horse Head*, which coupled alt-country with Forbert's fluent songwriting--an experience he found quite satisfying. "I'm all for it. I've waited for years for something to bridge the gap between pop and country."

In 1998 Steve Forbert is still pretty much the kind of guy he used to be in 1979. Despite his temporary loss in the shuffle, he's arguably one of the most gifted songwriters and performers in contemporary folk-rock to emerge from this last quarter of the century. Known for his obsessive pondering and introspective leanings, Forbert's mind is always hard at work. I couldn't help asking if, given the opportunity to go back and rearrange things, he would have done it differently.

"Oh totally," admits Forbert in his relaxed Southern drawl. "It's like a song that I frequently double back on . . . 'Regrets I've got a few, but then again, too many to mention.' You know. Sure, there are a lot of things I would have done different. But the thing is that you can think that, and that's a nice abstract thought, but I think the truth is, you are who you are. Let's say you went back and changed something in 1982, but it would still be you dealing with the change. So perhaps within six months you'd probably make some other typical mistake. So I find that thinking to be a little useless--you know what I mean."