

**Steve Forbert: Keeping It Organic**  
**by Seth Rogovoy**  
**Berkshire Eagle**

(WILLIAMSTOWN, Mass., Mar 05, 1999) -- When Steve Forbert first moved to New York City from his native Meridian, Mississippi, in 1976, he lived in such a bad neighborhood that he couldn't leave his guitar in his apartment for more than a minute. He had to lug it around with him everywhere he went.

"There was just no way I could leave this little Martin guitar in my apartment overnight or even in the afternoon, and expect to find it there when I got back," said Forbert in a recent phone interview from his current home in Nashville.

Downtown New York in the mid-'70s was a rough place--a world of difference from Meridian. "I was quite nervous about it. It was scary," said Forbert, who later profiled his early experience of the "rat-trap town" in the song "Big City Cat" on his debut album, *Alive on Arrival*.

But it was all part of the experience for a young, budding folk-rock singer-songwriter who pulled up stakes at age 21 for New York, drawn by the venerable folk clubs of Greenwich Village and the opportunity--still a possibility back then for a guitar-wielding folksinger--of catching the attention of a record-company talent scout.

"Of course I loved it. It's what I went to New York to do," said Forbert, who began his ascent by playing for change in Grand Central Station, an aspect of his career immortalized in the song "Grand Central Station, March 18, 1977," also on his debut album. Within two years of his arrival in the Big Apple, Forbert garnered a record deal, and two years after that, with the release of his second album, "Jackrabbit Slim," he had his first hit single, "Romeo's Tune."

From that point on, Steve Forbert was set for life on a career path which, although it has had its ups and downs, has pretty much remained the same from the beginning. That path leads to the Clark Art Institute tomorrow night, where Forbert will perform in the last of this winter's "Different Voices" concerts at the museum. Boston singer-songwriter Janet Feld, known for her dynamic guitar-playing and hard-hitting folk-rock songs--serious and comic--addressing contemporary women's issues, will warm up the crowd for Forbert starting at 8 p.m. For tickets and information call 458-2303, ext. 324.

Forbert's rock 'n' roll-and country-fueled style of folk-rock has been entertaining a small but devoted coterie of fans for over two decades since he scored his Top 20 hit, "Romeo's Tune." And from Forbert's point of view, he wouldn't have it any other way.

"I just play, and I'm always trying to write songs," he said, speaking in the relaxed cadences of one from his native Mississippi. "Fortunately, I've always played folk-rock, and it's something you can play solo. That's a big plus. And the music, as far as a type of music, it's still pretty viable. You don't see a lot of difference between the Gin Blossoms and the Byrds. Folk-rock hasn't changed much over the decades since the Byrds started it.

"Had I been part of the disco craze, it would've been a lot more expensive to put on a show, and I would've just fallen into the category of nostalgia, playing some sort of nostalgic summer disco spectacular tour.

"But I'm able to just keep going, and that's the challenge. It's the next song. And then just enjoying the shows and people who come out to the shows. It's pretty organic, really."

Forbert has followed that organic approach through two decades of albums, including "Little Stevie Orbit," "Streets of This Town," and "The American in Me," the last a dark, searching record that, as the title indicates, asked searing questions about our national identity.

"The challenge remains the songwriting, and just trying to continue with songs you feel you can sing every night, and to keep the quality of songs up," said Forbert. "You set out doing something you really love, and you know you're lucky to still have the same challenge if you love it."

Speaking of luck, Forbert considers himself lucky that "Romeo's Tune" hit when it did. Had he arrived on the scene just a few years later, when radio playlists became much tighter and less friendly to his kind of "organic" production, chances are he might never have gotten heard.

"I don't think my version of 'Romeo's Tune' would've hit, because we recorded it live and it doesn't have programmed drums," he said. "And the attitude is very fresh-faced. There's nothing cynical about it. It was the tail end of making records totally live that could be on the radio. I still like doing it that way. But by then people like Pink Floyd and Phil Collins were already way beyond that, and since then it's just taken over the craft of producing records."

While Forbert has written dozens if not hundreds of songs since the early days, he knows that older fans want to hear the songs that first turned them on to Steve Forbert, and he's glad to oblige them.

"I have no problem singing the old songs, like 'Midsummer Night's Toast' or 'What Kinda Guy,' or even 'Romeo's Tune.' I don't cringe when I think of doing old material. A lot of the people have been with me through the years."

As a matter of fact, Forbert has noticed an upswing in his box office totals in the past few years. "Maybe it's as we're told, that the economy's doing so well, or maybe it's because I have been at it twenty years, but the attendance has been really up for the shows," he said. "So maybe I have turned some kind of established corner."

At his live shows, Forbert works hard to connect with his audience, by telling stories, taking requests and being as spontaneous as he can. "That's what it's all about, especially with what I do," said Forbert. "To me the audience is definitely a big part of the show. And it's always different from one night to the other. I wouldn't be interested in just doing a show that's mapped out and choreographed with a set list. That would've been boring so long ago it just wouldn't be any fun. That to me is the fun of the solo thing--it's so flexible. I can go way beyond taking requests. You just play the evening. And that's fun."

"It's really organic. I relate to the audiences and they know me. It's pretty real."

[This article originally appeared in the Berkshire Eagle on March 5, 1999. Copyright Seth Rogovoy 1999. All rights reserved.]