

Unsung Singer
By Jonathan Yardley
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For 3 1/2 decades my working days--and not a few nights and weekends--have been spent keeping a weather eye on American culture. No doubt I have learned a few things over all those years, but one question remains as mysterious to me today as it was to the callow 25-year-old who published his first book review in the fall of 1965 Why it is that some writers and artists find large and remunerative followings while others, equally gifted if not more so, spend their lives neglected and unknown?

The mystery has little to do with makers of assembly-line products for mass entertainment such as John Grisham, Stephen King, Danielle Steel and Judith Krantz; the secret of their success is easily detected. It has to do, rather, with why Paul Theroux, an accomplished writer if by now a rather dyspeptic one, has found readers by the hundreds of thousands while Raymond Kennedy or Craig Nova or William Maxwell is lucky to find a few thousand. Why are new books by Anne Tyler or Jane Smiley eagerly awaited while those by Doris Betts and Valerie Sayers, though often greeted enthusiastically by reviewers, make barely a dent in the stores? Why was Frank McCourt's memoir a monster bestseller while Elizabeth Spencer's was nothing even close to that?

It beats me. Each of these in his or her own way is a good writer, yet four have tasted success in generous portions while six have gotten only occasional whiffs of it. Maybe it's all part of a giant scheme by the powers above to remind us that John F. Kennedy was right when he said, so pointedly, that "life is unfair"; maybe it's just proof positive that the finger of fate is, as axiom has it, fickle. Whatever the case, it's almost as hard to sit on the sidelines while fine work goes unrewarded as it must be for the creator of that work.

All of which is an elaborate way of getting around to today's question Why is it that almost nobody out there has heard of musician Steve Forbert? Yes, he has a following, or a cult, and the loyalty of its members is fierce, but the impression he's made on American culture is so small as to be almost invisible. To put it another (and quite deliberately provocative) way If Bob Dylan were any good he'd be Steve Forbert, yet while Dylan is (as the hackmeisters put it these days) an "American icon," Forbert travels the back roads, appearing before small audiences at small places Hal & Mal's, Eddie's Music Hall, Bodle's Opera House, the Birchmere.

This last, the music hall in Alexandria, is where Forbert showed up the other night. As in his previous appearance in the Washington area--at the Barns at Wolf Trap in January 1998--he was solo, accompanied by his own guitar and harmonica. The only previous time I'd been at the Birchmere, the place was packed to the rafters for Merle Haggard, who, alas, went through the motions; for Forbert, who gave his audience everything he had, the place was a quarter, perhaps a third, full.

Forbert, who is now in his early forties, may be a case of the wrong guy from the wrong place at the wrong time. Dylan, who is a decade and a half older than Forbert (and whose influence on him is self-evident), came along just as the folk music craze was heading to its peak and helped steer it into what is now called folk-rock; along the way he wrote some wonderful songs, but too often he settled for muddy, arch, self-consciously enigmatic and "poetic" lyrics that were exactly suited to the temper of the 1960s and '70s, in which empty, logorrheic protest carried greater weight than artistic substance.

For all his eccentricity and reclusiveness, Dylan has always had a keen, cold-eyed sense of the market; he climbed aboard rock at exactly the right moment and anticipated (with "Nashville

Skyline") the country boom just as it was about to take off. Forbert is every bit as much his own man, and he persists--with a perverse and deeply admirable stubbornness--along his own path, the market be damned. He came out of Mississippi at a time (the late 1970s) when that was unfashionable, and Mississippi is still right at the heart of everything he writes and sings, whether his own compositions ("Goin' Down to Laurel," "Song for Katrina," "Honkytonker") or those of others whose stamp on him is unmistakable Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country music, and the giants of blues and rhythm and blues who came out of the Mississippi Delta.

Forbert has a touch of the poet but he doesn't overindulge it; his lyrics can be elliptical but they're always accessible; he has a wry, self-mocking sense of humor ("Complications," "Steve Forbert's Midsummer Night's Toast," "Thinkin' ") and an unabashedly romantic side that, with "Romeo's Tune," got him as close to a hit as he's ever come. But it wasn't close enough. Though he's the embodiment of the central truth about American music--it is, like the country itself, a great hybrid--he hasn't gotten through to the American public.

Sorry to say it, but that's just further proof that more often than not vox pop is as wrong as wrong can be. Sitting in the Birchmere the other night with a couple of hundred other dyed-in-the-cotton Forbert acolytes, "all I could think was: The rest of you don't have a clue about what you're missing."