

**Sittin' In With Steve Forbert
By Jason Wesley
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Steve Forbert was born and raised in Meridian, Mississippi, which also happens to be the birthplace of the "Father of Country Music," Jimmie Rodgers. Forbert's latest release, Any Old Time, is a personal tribute to Rodgers. Steve keeps up a heavy touring schedule and is once again slated to perform at the Jimmie Rodgers Music Festival in Meridian on May 10. FolkWax caught up with Steve Forbert on the road to ask him about Jimmie Rodgers, his new album and more.

Jason Wesley for FolkWax I want to talk a little bit about your new album, which is really terrific.

Steve Forbert Thank you.

FW I listened through some of your repertoire today and was looking back at your first album which seemed kind of country boy goes to the big city and your experiences in doing that. Then you came around with American in Me, which I have heard called the "bookend" to your first album.

SF Yeah, I could see that.

FW Where do you see this latest album fitting into that progression?

SF Well the Jimmie Rodgers tribute is, being from the same hometown, I felt that it was sort of an obligation sometime during this process of recording American music and being a part of Folk Rock and all. I'd released a few Jimmie Rodgers songs over the years here and there, but I just thought that it would be good to do a proper tribute. I kind of felt that it was a requirement, you know, I'm from the same hometown and it's not a big town. I'm glad that it has been done and I think the timing is good. The guy was so heroic and I hope people will...I don't know about blasting up the Billboard charts, but it might give him some visibility. I've done a lot of interviews about it during this last tour. It may get him back into circulation a little bit.

FW Jimmie Rodgers is referred to as the "Father of Country Music" and a lot of people don't even know who he is, even Country fans. The number of Country stations that play his work you could probably count on both hands.

SF Yeah, it would be a wild card even for an Americana station to play much of him. A little bit of that is because the records are pretty low fidelity; they're from the other side of the wall, which I call World War II. You know it's sort of a sound quality wall. So there's a little bit of a barrier there, but people need to make the effort if they're interested in a really influential great talent. He had a lot of soul and a lot of heart.

FW Even Blues...I would make comparisons to Mississippi Fred McDowell, maybe even singing-wise, maybe a little like Lightnin' Hopkins.

SF Totally. He was open-minded, he got around on the railroad in his early twenties and he heard those people. He could conceivably run into Blind Lemon Jefferson along the way. He might have possibly even heard Robert Johnson play somewhere, or Son House. He might have heard Charlie Patton somewhere, but he was a person who'd have done that and he would've brought it into his world. He had a weird way of blending those influences with so-called "Hillbilly music." Even show tunes. I have found that the blue yodels are tricky, you don't just pick up a guitar and

say "It's a Blues song right, what are the words?" It's not like that. They're kind of closer to Country music, those melodies; you know he changed them a bit. He adapted them...

FW And he was kind of at the crossroads of a time and place where all this music was coming together and he was one of the forces that brought them together.

SF Yeah, no doubt.

FW Where would you see Jimmie's role today? If you turn on the radio or a CD, where do you hear him?

SF Well, he certainly was a big influence on Waylon Jennings. And I think Jimmie could turn around in a heartbeat and do a fabulous version of "Honky Tonk Women." When you talk about today, well, the music that Hank Williams III tries to make, Jason and the Scorchers, all of that is not that far away from Jimmie Rodgers. He was a Rocker; he had a lot of joy in his music. Furthermore, the material he chose that made up the expanse of his catalog still pretty well defines the parameters of what can be recorded as a country song, whether its the Dixie Chicks or Kenny Chesney.

FW So how much Jimmie Rodgers are you playing in your sets these days?

SF I do quite a bit. I'm doing at least six songs of his per night. It's fun to put them in here and there and use them to add a different angle and style to the show. It kind of gives me some additional variety to work with.

FW Which songs do you see the audience getting, whether they know it's Jimmie Rodgers or not?

SF They like 'em all. I've picked them very carefully and I still have fun playing them and they have stayed in the show because people seem to like them. I may add some more next year that aren't on the album. Like I said, they're a little different and they add another color and variety to the show.

FW Well, it's important work. And it's a step aside for you because you usually have done your own songs. In your career it seems to me that you have agonized during different parts of your life and it has taken awhile for you to put out songs and to get them together. What's your songwriting process like these days?

SF It's rather meticulous. I take a pretty good while with each one and I'm about ready to make another record. But that's OK, if it takes a while that's fine, I want to get them to where I think they're finished and then try them out in front of the crowds. That's fun and I can do that playing solo.

FW Do you write on the road?

SF Yeah, I kind of chip away at it all the time.

FW How about co-writing?

SF I don't do any of it.

FW Is there anybody you'd want to work with?

SF Well, I have written some lyrics when people gave me music. I did something with Marshall Crenshaw and something with Pat DiNizio of the Smithereens. I prefer to just get music and then put words to somebody's music and just do it at my own sort of pace, on my own time. I don't really feel very comfortable doing on-the-spot collaborating.

In a way songwriting is so private and strange that I'd just rather do it at my own pace in private.

FW You've certainly done some Rock, or at least Rock-driven stuff, do you see yourself performing with a band in the future?

SF I will probably play with a band again; we'll just see where it goes. There's a girl in Canada named Kathleen Edwards who's got a real good band. You might look for that, it's on Rounder.

FW You had to work when you got signed the first time. If we walked down the street here and heard a couple of guys in a coffeehouse, what kind of advice would you give them?

SF I always say the same thing, just play, play, play. Just play. If it's a freebie, if it's an open mike and you have to wait an hour and a half to play to do twenty minutes, do it. If you have to drive forty miles, whatever, take every opportunity to play, you're not going to be worse off for it. That's the thing; if you're really good I think you'll draw an audience to yourself, wherever you are. And then who knows where it can go from there.

FW Any new artists, up and comers that you're listening to?

SF I think this Kathleen Edwards is good, it's sort of a Neil Young, Crazy Horse meets . . . well, it's pretty dark, it's Rock 'n' Roll, it's Folk Rock is what it is. It's sort of from this group of people in Ottawa. It seems that something may be springing out of Ottawa, Canada.

FW How would you describe your audience? What's the target market for your records?

SF I just find that at this point it's people who have heard it and sought it out and are inclined that way. Those are the people that really want to be there and I have a lot in common with them. What's my audience? I find that they're a lot like me! That's fine because that's who I write songs for, people that I think are in my same boat.

FW You're a wonderful songwriter and I am surprised that more of your stuff isn't covered by other people. I think that maybe it's so personal...

SF Well, thank you, yeah, maybe

FW I have seen you several times over the years and your performances are always...heartfelt, how do you do that night after night, week after week?

SF Well, I really like it, I mean, I'm incorrigible!

And we hope that Steve Forbert stays incorrigible and on the road!