

"Give Us An Absolute, Songwriter"
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Steve Forbert is a hardcore troubadour who, artistically speaking, continues to fight the good fight by releasing one excellent album after another and working his ass off show after show to earn every single fan's loyalty. True, this is his job and how he earns a living, but he doesn't have to be this good. The world is, sadly, full of talented artists who toil in relative (or total) obscurity and you could even argue that this anonymity frees them from the golden handcuffs of celebrity and unreasonable expectations. The albums that Forbert has recorded and released since falling off the pop culture radar - starting with 1988's *Streets of This Town* (the cover photo of *Streets* features a crumpled, neglected concert flyer of Forbert, wryly commenting on his status) and all the way up to last year's superb *Just Like There's Nothin' To It* - certainly make a compelling case that his art has flourished away from the spotlight. And yet, it all seems so unfair because Steve Forbert is more than talented and his body of work should have long ago earned him the same arena-sized audiences and gold-to-platinum sales that some of his less talented contemporaries enjoy. "Jimmie Rodgers should be better known," Forbert stated plainly to me during our phone interview when I asked him about the singing brakeman whom Forbert recorded a fine, spirited tribute album to a few years back entitled *Any Old Time: Songs of Jimmie Rodgers*. And while lack of musical talent prohibits me from unleashing *What Kinda Guy? That Kinda Guy! Songs of Steve Forbert*, I ask your indulgence for a few paragraphs to tell you why Steve Forbert deserves to be better known.

Guy Clark is rightly hailed as the consummate craftsman songwriter. He takes his time, pares down the language until each song is a model of economy and structure, all the while cannily sidestepping the trap of overworking the material until it is bloodless. Although Forbert has said in interviews before that he doesn't consider himself a craftsman, it is easy to see why people keep wanting to give him that particular handle. From "It Isn't Gonna Be That Way" off his 1978 debut album *Alive On Arrival* to *Just Like There's Nothin' To It* and "What It Is Is A Dream," you could teach a master class on how less is often more and marvel at how worlds of humor, humanity and hard-earned uplift are rendered so vividly in a single, precise verse. When I asked him about "What It Is Is A Dream," Forbert made the revealing observation that "Songwriting is like trying to tell a joke well." Steve Forbert tells jokes very, very well.

Although he was unfailingly polite and straightforward in answering every question I put to him about the songs off his latest album, I felt a bit boorish in asking them after awhile. Forbert doesn't seem to overanalyze where his songs come from and while he wasn't evasive or cagey in the slightest, I got the impression that he didn't want to give away the magic and mystery of where truly memorable songs come from. "The Change Song" for instance is "a little surface level analysis" that is about "casting a flashlight on different parts of marriage." But any explanation of that song can't possibly convey the fist-pumping euphoria you feel listening to Forbert sing "I've seen some of the best minds of my sub-generation marry the same girl twice." While I don't agree with the famous adage that writing about music is like dancing about architecture, I will say that asking a truly great songwriter where his songs come from is a bit like throwing a rock through a Rembrandt.

Among the great songwriters of his generation, Steve Forbert is perhaps the least showy. Where Dave Alvin is the truckstop poet, Elvis Costello the brainiac wordsmith, Lucinda Williams the chronicler of sexual obsession, Steve Earle a larger-than-life firebombing political gadfly and Tom Waits the boogeyman forever weeping in dark corners, someone like Forbert is almost defiantly foursquare. Of course, the above is a laughable oversimplification of what these gifted artists have accomplished through their music and I am not suggesting that one approach is superior to the other but rather that Forbert's lack of attention getting "edginess" seems to have contributed to the notion of him being a mere talented journeyman when he is arguably the best of his

generation, certainly among its pantheon. It is tempting to call him a throwback to the earnest folkies of the Gaslight and Gerde's era, but he's too sharp for that. In song, Forbert might wear his heart on his sleeves but he is no dewy-eyed sap, and while many of his songs are autobiographical or at least feel that way, he never, ever comes off as whiny or self-absorbed. Trite as it sounds, the man truly does make the personal universal.

He's also damned funny. When I began a question about his singing with "Steve Earle made a comment" he good-naturedly cut me off by saying with mock surprise, "Steve Earle made a comment?!" This was a playful jab at Earle's outspoken nature and it took me awhile to regain my composure as it caught me off guard and, basically, cracked me up while I was on the job.

"Wild As The Wind (A Tribute To Rick Danko)" is a boisterous salute to a towering figure that clearly addresses the late Band member's enormous personal charm as well as his unfortunate drug use:

"Rick would take some cocaine
Didn't need a straw
He could just swoop down and sniff some
Anytime he saw
If he saw
If there'd be some that he saw"

Forbert delivers this verse with such good-spirited wit that you might miss the gravity of what he's actually talking about the first couple of times you hear it. It's a great, tragicomic observation of the personal appetites that helped take the man who sang "It Makes No Difference" to an early grave. When I asked him if he thought it was possible for another group like The Band to come along and make that kind of impact on music, Forbert was skeptical. "All things happen in their time," he said before adding about the era of The Band, "It was a time where people could appreciate people who had an encyclopedic knowledge of American music."

Forbert shares that same backwards and forwards understanding of American popular music and it shows in his work just as it did in The Band's earliest, best albums. In talking with him, I was struck by how often Motown, as a genre unto itself, came up. In almost the same breath that he dismissed my question of whether or not The Band could exist and thrive in the current musical climate with "What would be the public interest?" he also stated that Motown's sound would probably work now as it did thirty and forty years ago.

Motown came up again when I asked if he felt he could drop "Romeo's Tune," his best known song, from his live shows. "Not really," he said. "It's not a thing I gauge to see if I can get away with not doing," and added that the song is "like a Motown song....not 'Dead Skunk In The Road' (the unfortunate sole hit of the wonderfully gifted Loudon Wainwright III)." His assessment of "Romeo's Tune" - which is dedicated to the memory of Florence Ballard, the late Supremes singer - as being akin to the music of Berry Gordy's Hitsville U.S.A. is entirely accurate and much of Forbert's work is drenched in blue-eyed soul. This is another aspect of the man's music that sets him apart from many of his contemporaries. Simply put, folkie singer-songwriters just don't sound this damn soulful. Songs like "Runnin' On Love from Streets of This Town" and "Good To Feel Good Again" off Mission of The Crossroad Palms could well be highlights from the great Holland/Dozier/Holland songbook. There's hardly an album in Forbert's entire catalogue that doesn't have fairly pronounced roots in R&B and soul as well as the more obvious connection to, say, The Byrds or early Neil Young.

Steve Forbert has always had an endearingly raspy singing voice that time and experience have given a certain gravitas to, which more than makes up for any so-called vocal limitations. When asked if he's developed any tricks as a vocalist over the years, Forbert demurred. "No, no I don't. I don't have a lot of thoughts about my singing. I try not to damage it with any smoking or

screaming or out of hand partying." Although the bulk of his commercially available material is from his own pen, he is also a fine interpreter of other people's songs. Young, Guitar Days, an essential collection of previously unreleased material, features two outstanding covers that are worth the price of the album by themselves. One is the Doc Pomus/Mort Shuman chestnut, "Suspicion," that is blessed by a jaw-dropping, fuck-it-all vocal that must be heard to be believed. The other is Jimmie Rodgers' "In The Jailhouse Now" which is rendered with such charm that you can't help but grin like an idiot once he starts yodeling. Forbert would revisit Rodgers' catalogue more extensively several years later with his underrated tribute album to the father of country music who, like Forbert, was born in the small town of Meridian, Mississippi. "Everyone in roots music owes Jimmie Rodgers a debt," Forbert said. He also observed that Rodgers' celebrity was unique for his time because "he was the first person people thought they knew as a person."

That's a feeling that fans of Steve Forbert can easily relate to. Although he may never catch another comet like "Romeo's Tune," pop culture's loss for allowing such a treasure to go hidden in plain sight is the gain of those who have their ears to the ground. I cannot imagine getting through the initial, and scariest, phase of my divorce without songs like "One Short Year Gone By" and "Born Too Late" to keep some semblance of hope, some shard of light going through months of darkness. I discovered Steve Forbert's music last year just as my private world disintegrated and while it is an exaggeration to say that my life was saved by any one thing during this time, his music helped me make sense of the pain. Where I might have rejected uplift or optimism from another artist, Forbert's honest handling of complicated emotions gave me comfort when there was very little of that to be found.

"When you say 'What it is is the truth' you're asking for trouble," Forbert noted while talking about "What It Is Is A Dream." "People go; 'Ok, give us an absolute, songwriter.'" In many ways, that song is a grand summing up of his entire life's work. Augmented by some absolutely stunning pedal steel courtesy of the great Dan Dugmore, Forbert distills the hard work of living a life into a series of zen koans.

"What it is is a spin
'Round an old stretch of track
In the skin that you're in
And the clothes on your back"

His weary, unhurried vocal adds almost impossible heft and conviction to these lyrics, which might sound maddeningly vague and oblique coming from anyone else. But the weight of the man's experience is felt in every syllable, making it all sound like, well, the truth. Just Like There's Nothin' To It finds an artist who was once on the wonder boy fast track now reporting to us as a mature, middle-aged man, although still a brash, southern-style wiseass whose warmth and humanity remains in tact in the face of life's little ups and downs. It's not strictly an album about getting older, but it has the burnished, unashamed confidence that can only come from a full life. Whether he has given us an absolute or not is for someone else to decide, but for right now, Steve Forbert continues to remain a relevant, vital artist in spite of the music industry's indifference. And that is more than good enough.