

**Roots artist Forbert saw commercial flashes early on**  
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Even at the lowest point of his travails within the music industry, when he was stuck in legal limbo with labels and his star was fading, Steve Forbert always knew he'd keep writing and playing songs. "It never crossed my mind to stop," he says, adding with a laugh, "mainly, 'cause I don't know how to do anything else."

The 51 year-old Meridian, Miss., native, who plays Downtown tonight at Automatic Slim's, made his name as a New York City-based singer-songwriter sensation in the late '70s. He's been working on an independent track for more than a decade now, regularly releasing albums and touring doggedly. While his big-time industry cachet may have waned, his influence over several successive generations of artists is indisputable: Ryan Adams closely followed Forbert's blueprint as a denim-clad, small-town Southern boy set loose in the Big Apple, while you could argue that Todd Snider patterned much of his early career and persona around a single Forbert composition like "What Kinda Guy?"

This week, Forbert has been busy in his Nashville homebase, wrapping up work on what will be his 12th studio album. The long-germinating project is being mixed at the studio owned by E Street band bassist -- and sometime Forbert producer -- Gary Tallent. "It's taken about a year and a half just working on it as a regular project," says Forbert.

"It's kind of different from past albums where I've banged out a record in five days straight," he says. "With this one I've been writing some things, demoing them and then recording, or just adding to the demos. It's been growing like a science project."

The new disc, tentatively titled *Around the Bend*, is set to come out in June as part of a new deal Forbert has signed with the fledgling 429 Records, an imprint of the Savoy Label Group. The new label and album seem to be just part of several promising developments that may herald a popular comeback of sorts for Forbert. This fall, a pair of classic Forbert songs will be featured in the Nicole Kidman/Jack Black film *Margot at the Wedding*. "I guess somebody out in Hollywood likes my stuff," he says. "I need to find out who it was, 'cause it's pretty helpful getting something like that in such a high-profile project."

His profile reached its peak nearly 30 years ago, when the fresh-faced Forbert arrived in Manhattan from Mississippi. Discovered by punk patron and Ramones manager Danny Fields while strumming on stage at CBGB's, Forbert's sound -- a rich merger of country, roots and pop -- was an anomaly in New York's thriving new wave scene. "I guess I had a little bit more of a down-to-earth approach," says Forbert, who released his debut, *Alive on Arrival*, in 1978. "My style probably wasn't a lot different from what Gram Parsons had done before, but at that time it wasn't really in vogue. Somehow, people picked up on what I was doing for a minute."

With his second album *Jackrabbit Slim*, the public and critics took notice of Forbert. The album generated raves and spawned radio hits with "Say Goodbye to Little Jo" and the top 10 smash "Romeo's Tune."

With his picturesque lyrics and rough-hewn voice, Forbert quickly joined the ranks of singer-songwriters to be tagged with the "new Dylan" label. "Well, I had to expect some of it," says Forbert. "If you're gonna play harmonica and lean heavy on your words and come out of Greenwich Village, I couldn't say 'Oh, you guys are insane.' But I didn't take it literally or feel like 'That's right, I am the new Dylan.' It wasn't something I felt I had to live up to. I just wanted to live up to being a good songwriter and make some good records."

Unlike some of the other "new Dylans" of the era -- John Prine, Loudon Wainwright -- Forbert

seemed poised to take the mantle, having enjoyed a serious commercial success to match his critical acclaim, as well as having the backing of Dylan's label, Columbia. But Forbert's third record, Little Stevie Orbit, failed to make him a superstar and he would spend much of the next decade mired in legal woes with labels, bouncing from one major -- Geffen, Giant -- to another without replicating his early success.

Despite his aspirations, Forbert realizes that he was ill-suited for the kind of fame he'd once been tipped for.

"I wasn't really the kind of person that could make radio record after radio record on demand," he says. "Plus, what happens is that you start to learn what kind of creature you are. Part of me wanted to go for the toppermost of the poppermost, but then there were certain aspects that I wasn't cut out for. I just have never been a limousine-riding, awards-show personality, hobnobbing kind of guy. It wasn't my thing at all. I wanted to be hanging out in my neighborhood bar, I didn't want to be hassled."

Forbert says the experience of his fast rise and slow, often arduous descent down the commercial ladder, caused some serious soul searching over the years.

"It's a long process, and it never really ends in coming to terms with what you've accomplished and what you haven't," he says.

"The way our culture is, it really puts it on you. And you kind of wrestle with that for a long time, until you get to a place where you can accept and even appreciate what you have."

What Forbert has always had is a unique gift for penning direct, heartfelt narratives. "Around age 17 is when I first got serious about it, just trying to write a song or two a week and just going with it," says Forbert. "It's been like finger-painting, like drawing a swath of color across the paper, ever since. It's still the same thrill for me -- because there's a feeling of immediate accomplishment when you write a song."

Though he's lived in Nashville since 1985, Forbert has long been a regular habitue of Memphis: in the mid-'70s he scored his first publishing deal with a small company owned by Estelle Axton; in 2000 he recorded his Evergreen Boy album at Midtown's Ardent Studios with producer Jim Dickinson, and he's played the city dozens of times over the years.

His solo show at Automatic Slim's tonight will be just one of over 150 plus dates he expects to do this year.

"Last year I was on the road 210, 220 days traveling. I just love playing and the people that come out to see me. 'Cause if you're a fan of mine, you're in pretty select company," jokes Forbert. "But the people that do come out, they know what the score is and that it's going to be a good time."