

The Place and the Time
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Remember the comparisons of a certain young folkster to a certain middle-aged Dylan? That was Steve Forbert. Remember that guy with the complicated come-on hit in the seventies, "Romeo's Tune" ("It's king and queen and we must go down 'round behind the chandelier")? Steve Forbert. Remember that guy who suddenly arrived at the party in Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" video? Yup, Steve Forbert. For over three decades, this singer-songwriter has been one of the more prolific recording artists, releasing an album every couple of years on various labels such as Nempereor, Columbia, Geffen, Giant, Koch, 429 (his latest), and others. He's amassed a ton of live albums, early rarities CDs, a Jimmie Rogers tribute, and scores of songs full of well-played scenarios, played-out relationships, general observations, and folksy wisdom.

When the young Steve Forbert arrived in the NYC's downtown folk-rock scene in the seventies, he was the wisest guy--in all uses of that expression--around. After earning his stripes playing Grand Central Station and the like for spare change, he eventually graduated to Greenwich Village clubs, soon causing a ruckus because of word-of-mouth Bob Dylan comparisons. He was signed to Nat Weiss' Nempereor Records, and the style and smarts of his first album *Alive On Arrival* (produced by Steve Burgh) and early trademark songs--especially "Goin' Down To Laurel," "Steve Forbert's Midsummer Night's Toast," "Tonight, I Feel So Far Away From Home," "What Kinda Guy" (also recorded by Rosanne Cash), "It Isn't Gonna Be That Way," and "You Cannot Win If You Do Not Play"--did seem to support elements of the "New Dylan" theory. At this time, this guitar-toting performer's fiery live shows also grew their own mythic reputations.

His newfound FM popularity propelled the folk-rocker's hit "Romeo's Tune" up the charts, and its John Simon production and Roy Bittan-esque piano intro by Bobby Ogdin evoked Bruce Springsteen's records, which was just fine with radio programmers. Its companion album, *Jackrabbit Slim* (check out the cover--man, Forbert was skinny!), also was a hit, and its followup *Little Stevie Orbit* (that featured the edgy tracks "Cellophane City" and "Get Well Soon") rocked harder than Slim as Forbert's music took on elements of the era's new wave. His Geffen Records tenure that began in the eighties re-launched him as an A-list recording artist with two solid albums, the E Street Band's Garry Tallent-produced *Streets Of This Town*, and also *The American In Me*. To this day, he enjoys packed live venues and international acclaim for each of his newly-released albums.

That brings us to *The Place And The Time*, Steve Forbert's latest effort to catch us up on what's going on in the prolific mind of one of the last remaining and still reigning princes of folk-rock. Backed by co-producer Robby Turner on bass, Paul Errico on keyboards, Bobby Lloyd Hicks on drums, Reggie Young and Steve Allen on electric guitars, and Anthony Crawford on acoustic guitar and backing vocals, the project takes a more spacious sonic approach, emphasizing its acoustic nature. Thematically, we get a feel for where the album is headed in "Blackbird Tune," a simple song apparently inspired by the artist's listening to the feathered vertebrae sing while visiting Beverly, England. It does share something in common with The Beatles' "Blackbird" in that both are simple on the outside, but still carry some weight. In his composition, Forbert sings, "I let my feet go where they want to be, they took me here to hear your sweet melody," and we're offered a contrast of simplicity versus overkill in the song's next line, "The songs of man sound louder day after day, I hope your blackbird song

will not fade away." The storm clouds that form within the verse's minor chords are dissipated quickly by the chorus' positive la-la lyrics, "Blackbird, singin' in the afternoon, blackbird, singin' like he won't quit soon."

Forbert still is searching for that sweet melody (or at least a "memory") in "Sing It Again, My Friend." In it, he would love to revisit the way things used to be, and suggests that a tune of yore will invigorate those memories. But the concept of reminiscing becomes moot with the line, "Sing it again while the old folks explain the more things have changed, they're the same." Next up is the album's Cajun-esque party track, in which someone's got a bad case of "Stolen Identity": "There ain't no tellin' where I'll be because, of late, there's two of me, and one had tons of fun for free with...", well, you get the picture. Of the poor sap's unfortunate predicament, Forbert admits, "I couldn't help but see the situation as funny--the victim being more and more personally tormented by 'himself.'" Next, the moody, jive "Write Me A Raincheck" features some jazzy guitar licks and a lot o' jazz about times being hard as the reason the dude's honey will just have to wait 'til he can come back to town. Eh, smells a bit fishy, no? And he's still trying to get back to someone in the romantic "Who'll Watch The Sunset?" (co-written with Steve Allen). This time, it seems like a genuine effort, with sweet lines like, "Once you and I watched a bonfire made of sky," coloring the whole affair.

This is all prime Steve Forbert who's writing at his best, and we get to the heart of this project with "Simply Must Move On." It's a lesson that--regardless of achievements and failures here and there--in the end, there's no choice but to move on. The theme stalks each song's subject and protagonist, such as Forbert when he becomes an enlightened attendee at a ridiculous arena concert where the rock star in "The Beast Of Ballyhoo (Rock Show)"'s tattoos contradict his gold satin jacket, and who has "a ring on ev'ry finger" yet his green eyes glow. In "Labor Day '08," the artist moves to a new town where he's "knockin' back a Bud Light on a Labor Day, thinkin' 'bout the jobs that are gone to stay." Even in Forbert's cover of East Coast folk newbie Devin Greenwood's "Building Me A Fire," the smoke from his metaphorical blaze is meant to lead his love to him. Then, another winged creature enters the picture. This time, it's "The Coo Coo Bird," Forbert's blending of Lightfoot's "Sundown" and Dylan's "Meet Me In The Morning" that rearranges an old traditional. But our hero won't get distracted by life's overall craziness since he is traveled, seasoned, and has learned a thing or two along the way ("I've played cards in England and I played cards in Spain, and I bet you ten dollars I can beat you next game...").

Probably the most poignant piece of the twelve-song collection is "Hang On Again Till The Sun Shines..." that could be interpreted as a post-911 NYC tribute.

Forget that "New York City's grown old now, its arms won't unfold now, strangers' faces all cold now, and I'm cold too" because, though all that may be true, the song's title is what Forbert is suggesting we do to get through it. He brings that message home in "Blue, Clear Sky" in which "Sometimes you glimpse that shimmering childhood sense of things, sometimes you sense that simple thing it brings." He reminds us that even though, "Songbird sail away, jet plane fly," and we sometimes can't leave behind our troubled circumstances, there's still a blue, clear sky if you want to see it. That's the way things are in Steve Forbert's world, drawn as a flexible graph on the album's front cover. Though the place is always changing, it's wherever we find ourselves; and the time is always about the now, regardless of what looks better in a rear view mirror.