

Oil and Music: A Conversation with Steve Forbert
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In 1979, Steve Forbert released the album Jackrabbit Slim which featured the hit single "Romeo's Tune." Though the track became Forbert's signature song, an equally enduring composition from that package was included on a bonus 45 titled "The Oil Song."

Originally, its lyrics documented early oil spills, one more horrific than the next. But with each passing decade, the song's topic has continued to be relevant, and it sadly gets updated by its author every few years to include the latest litany of petrol disasters.

The following is an interview with Steve Forbert who discusses the evolution of "The Oil Song."

During this conversation, the artist touches on related topics such as better energy sourcing, electric cars, coal, and a strong suggestion that James Cameron at least be consulted regarding this latest crisis. Also included is a chat with Tift Merritt about her career, her early years spent in North Carolina, and her new, very personal album, See You On The Moon.

A Conversation With Steve Forbert

Mike Ragogna: Steve, let's go over the history of "The Oil Song," your commentary on oils spills from the seventies and on.

Steve Forbert: That's right, it originally came out as a bonus single with my album Jackrabbit Slim in 1979. That first version was about the Argo Merchant and The Olympic Games, then there was one called the Amoco Cadiz. That was the first installment of the song, it ended with the Cadiz. Then the song started growing with that Mexican oil well Ixtok 1 on into the Exxon Valdez in 1989 which was like version number three or so. The song is like a true folk song because you have to keep adding things to it and it has a life of its own, and unfortunately, it grows with the particular topic.

MR: Can you give a recap on this latest, updated version?

SF: The easiest thing would be to just tell you the latest verse: "We're pumpin' out petrol no matter what cost, and now that eleven men's lives have been lost, the price is as high as rig workers can pay, payin' the price for the U.S. of A. A deep water rig called "Horizon" went down, no way to seal off the pipe has been found, so South Louisianan's all wait for to see just what the landfall of this spill will be...and it's oil, creepin' in the sea..."

I decided when this happened that I would do a complete overview of the whole history of "The Oil Song" since it started, like I said, with the Argo Merchant and The Olympic Games. It's turned into thirteen minutes of verses.

MR: I think the last big folk hit that used a narrative style this explicit was Gordon Lightfoot's "The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald." Your recording follows the tradition of true folk music, despite its production that doesn't stay within that format's stereotype.

SF: Well, I never thought it would become such a textbook case of a folk song, but it certainly has.

MR: It's unfortunate that this story has to keep growing. What was the worst spill?

SF: I think the worst incident we ever had was when Saddam Hussein just opened up all the Kuwaiti oil wells. I think technically, that's the worst incident. But, you know, this is looking pretty bad.

MR: Do you feel there was any way this could have been prevented?

SF: Well, I'm hardly an authority on this, and in my humble opinion, they might have asked director James Cameron what his opinion was a couple of weeks ago. This is the guy who did the film on going down and exploring the inside of the Titanic, and the very nature of his job with these blockbuster movies he makes is constantly solving technical problems. So, I wonder what his thoughts would be.

MR: I'm surprised the technology wasn't there to prevent the very thing everyone feared might happen.

SF: Look, they thought they had something that would work, that was designed to respond to a problem and shut it all down. In this case, it didn't. So, okay, if it keeps going after those shutdown systems fail, what do you do? This is a whole new experience. I know they tried, there's no reason why they wouldn't. There's nothing but bad publicity for them every day, and it's their industry.

MR: In a way though, it has that same vibe of incompetence that the Bush years had.

SF: The public is baffled. We see the bad pipe, we see the footage, there it is. Why has it been so hard to stop it?

MR: Right, it seems like we're still going to the mouse about problems with the cheese. It seems that we need input from other industries and strategists when it comes to potential planetary disasters. For example, we've certainly had the ability to at least try and run our cars using other sources of energy.

SF: You know, that's a huge subject. The electric car is said to be a viable option, but what do you run it on? Fifty percent of our electricity comes from coal. You know, that's not so wonderful, unless we have the technology in place to really clean the emissions from burning coal. What coal mining often does to a landscape isn't so appealing either. Don't forget, nearly 30 men were killed in that recent West Virginia mine explosion.

MR: That's a terrific point, that's not an efficient solution either. But let's take the case of the electric car. California killed it dead through the politics and greed of the obvious industries that were vying for keeping gas-guzzlers as the status quo to maintain huge profits. Perhaps it wasn't the answer because of the point you just made, but it might have been a forward looking enough action that might have led to exploring even more diverse or inventive sources to meet our energy needs. There's wind power, solar power, geothermal...

SF: ...and we need the combination of all of them is what I understand. But yeah, go ahead.

MR: Instead of looking at this as a national initiative like going to the moon, we're still entrenched in such a pigheaded "profit trumps all" mentality that seems to prevent what I would consider a more patriotic approach.

SF: Mike, you know, gasoline is around three dollars a gallon, and we actually think that's a reduced price since we had that big scare a few years ago. One could look at it this way--in terms of dollars, it's as if Wrangler Jeans were able to sell every household in the country two or three pairs of jeans every week without fail. If you had that kind of business going, you'd probably be willing to go to great lengths to keep it functioning.

MR: That's where we need all our inventors and entrepreneurs to finally step up, more folks like Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates to understand how dire this is, if not for the planet's

sake, then for our survival. But more likely, solutions will probably have to come from the little guy.

SF: I have a friend that's working on an engine that runs on a combination of Borax and water. It makes hydrogen gas, and he's moving right along with it, it's very interesting. He's got a little prototype, and he's been told--no pun intended--that if he can get it to run for sixty minutes, they'll put it on the show 60 Minutes. What happens next could be real interesting. The only way to get around the entrenched industry is to get everybody in America to say, "We demand to know what's up, what's out there, and why what's out there won't work." You've got to wonder, with the weeks that have gone by with this spill, how bad will a problem have to get before people get really activated about something and "organize." I mean, we're just talking about public opinion.

MR: The whole debacle really goes beyond incompetence or faulty machinery. This is also about the bigger issues involved.

SF: I myself am really ashamed about it. We could talk about having a sense of outrage, but I feel a real sense of shame. I mean, I'm driving a car, and we're supposed to be in a country of, by, and for the people. So, what are we all doing? I don't want to sit around and talk about British Petroleum. We know what they're doing, but what are we doing?

For more on Steve Forbert: www.steveforbert.com

Lyrics Courtesy Of Steve Forbert...

THE OIL SONG
© Steve Forbert

"Oh, the engine's gone dead!" cried the men who were there
And she passed up the dock on the wide Delaware;
Then the ship ran aground and the oil got away
And they did not report the big spill on that day.
It was hundreds of thousands of gallons galore
Stretching thirty-two miles down the Delaware shore;
There were geese in the marshes out looking for food,
They got stuck where they stood in the oncoming crude!

And it's oil, oil,
Drifting to the sea;
An' it's oil, oil,
Don't buy it at the station,
You can get it now for free,
Just come on down to the shoreline
Where the water used to be.

In the well-charted waters of the Nantucket shoals
Was a ship run aground, full of oil we were told;
In a week's worth of rough winter weather and waves,
The boat started cracking and it could not be saved.
It was seven point six million gallons this time---
Consider the danger and think of the crime
As it poured out a slick stretching into the tide
Over one hundred miles, it came deep, it came wide!

It was oil! oil!
Pouring in the sea;
Oil, oil,

Don't buy it at the station,
You can get it now for free,
Just come on down to the shoreline
Where the water used to be.

One of these ships was the Olympic Games;
The Argo Merchant was the other one's name.
It's sad but it's true, things got worse for the seas,
Along came a craft called Amoco Cadiz---
Amoco Cadiz between England and France,
Big supertanker out taking a chance
With his one hundred thousand black tons of the slime,
Amoco Cadiz spilt the most of all time!

People, oil! oil!
Creeping in the sea!
It was oil, oil,
Don't buy it at the station,
You can get it now for free,
Just come on down to the shoreline
Where the water used to be.

Gallons of sludge, sixty million and more!
Sleazin' and easin'; towards many a shore;
A Mexican oil well went leaking its goo---
At that time the worst things had ever come to!

REPEAT CHORUS

It was oil, oil,
Creepin' in the sea;

Hey, the captain's now free and his case it is closed,
The Exxon Valdez wrecked itself I suppose;
What's left of the life in the Prince William Sound
Might not condone what our court of law found!

And it's oil! oil!
Creeping in the sea!
Oil, oil,
Don't buy it at the station,
You can get it now for free,
Just come on down to the shoreline
Where the water used to be.

Saddam Hussein was a pretty strange man,
Look what he's done for his trusting homeland,
With sanctions and bombing he'd no way to sell
Crude from his captured Kuwaiti oil wells;
He sat down to think and came up with a scheme---
One that he thought might protect his regime;
Covered the Gulf in a blanket of black
Thought it might hold a few battleships back!

REPEAT CHORUS

It was oil, oil,
Creepin' in the sea,

Registered in through Liberian doors,
Passin' the Shetlands near Scotland's cold shores,
A single-hulled ship with his engine broke down
Drifted five hours and then ran aground
Right where the wildlife preserve chanced to be
And twenty million more gallons got free.
But don't worry, folks, "It's light crude!," they did say,
"It'll prob'ly break up and be gone right away!"

REPEAT CHORUS

They're banning those single-hulled tankers we hear,
Phasin' 'em out in the next sev'ral years;
There's one called The Prestige won't be junked in that heap,
It stalled off of Spain and it sank down the deep;
One million gallons of fuel reached the beach,
Nineteen more sank in some tanks that weren't breached;
If air's trapped inside 'em they'll burst any day,
If not, they'll just sit there to rust and decay...

Till it's oil! oil!
Creepin' in the sea...