

Hit and Myth: Searching For Steve Forbert
By Robert Palmer
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A year ago Steve Forbert gave his first concert in Atlanta as opening act for Nicolette Larson. Tonight he's headlining at the 875-seat Agora Ballroom, and his single, "Romeo's Tune," is all over Atlanta radio and bulleting into the Top Twenty on the national charts, with his second album, "Jackrabbit Slim", not far behind. Still, the local CBS records representative has been gripped with mild hysteria all morning. Last year he took Forbert for a radio interview at powerful WKLS-FM and the lanky young singer/songwriter from Meridian, Mississippi, proved to have almost nothing to say. Fortunately, he'd brought a guitar along, and when the interview bombed, he played and sang a couple of his tunes live on the air. It was a nice touch. But despite the CBS man's earnest pleas, it won't happen again. "Steve does not play live when he visits radio stations," says Danny Fields, his co-manager, with finality. "He's learned to do interviews."

In the limo on the way over to KLS, this earlier exchange seems to have been forgotten. The young, bushy-haired, pleasantly garrulous CBS representative is pointing out local landmarks. Fields, who was an official "company freak" for several record labels during the halcyon Sixties and, more recently, a friend and manager of the Ramones, is slumped in the back. Just off a plane, his metabolism is still attuned to New York City. Fields wears his world-weariness like a badge of honor, unlike the twenty-five-year-old Forbert, who's being so enthusiastically upbeat, he seems even younger than he is. We've been chatting amiably, during lunch and on the drive over, about Howlin' Wolf, David Bowie, obscure rockabilly singles, and "Apocalypse Now".

WKLS is perched high atop a spotless glass building that's been planted, like a tube rose, in a landscaped office park. Forbert, whose faded Levi jacket, corduroy shirt and jeans stand out like a sore thumb in these New South surroundings, betrays no nervousness. The same can't be said for the disc jockey, Bob Bailey, who's taping the interview for later editing and airing but still can't seem to get beyond a rehash of Forbert's storybook success. Maybe you can't blame him; the Steve Forbert saga is irresistible. At age twenty-one, this son of the deepest South, heir to the tradition of the great songster and fellow Meridian native Jimmie Rodgers, chucks his dead-end truck-driving job and heads for Greenwich Village. Armed with an acoustic guitar, a harmonica in a rack, and a rapidly expanding sheaf of original songs, he gets his start singing for spare change in Grand Central Station. After working his way up to the folk clubs, he's discovered and makes a debut album that wins lavish critical praise. His second album becomes a best seller. Country boy hits big city, makes good.

It's a terrific American myth, and like most myths, it contains no more than a grain or two of truth. Steve Forbert is no country boy. Meridian is the second-largest city in Mississippi, and though he knows the countryside, Forbert's natural habitat is manicured lawns, modest, single-family houses and shopping-center malls. He came to Greenwich Village with his acoustic guitar and harp, not because he was a folk poet but because he was sick and tired of playing cover versions of the latest hits in Meridian rock and roll bands. One of those bands included a bassist whose grandfather was Jimmie Rodgers' brother-in-law, but the Singing Brakeman wasn't exactly a guiding light for Meridian's young rockers. "We never talked about him," Forbert admits with disarming candor. "We would talk about, say, the Monkees." In New York Forbert was discovered not by folk scene habitués but by punk aficionado Danny Fields; he was performing at the punk-rock mecca CBGB's, where his driving rhythms and sheer energy helped compensate for his lack of decibels. And as soon as he finished his first album, he set about putting together an electric backup band.

Nevertheless, that first album, *Alive on Arrival*, perpetuated the myth, and Steve Burgh's spare production put Forbert right up front. He attacked his acoustic guitar fiercely, took raw, careening harmonica solos, and sang in a manner nobody had heard before--hoarse, almost whispering at times, but with a sure command of texture and nuance and a sense of high drama. The songs

seemed to be autobiographical. In "Goin' Down to Laurel" and "Steve Forbert's Midsummer Night's Toast," he celebrated himself and his South while thumbing his nose at the dead-end jobs and insensitive people who'd impelled him to leave. On the second side of the album he chronicled his early adventures in the big city. Alive on Arrival was so convincing, many fans were shocked when "Jackrabbit Slim" appeared, with its full band sound, gospelish backup vocals, and straightforward love lyrics and third-person domestic sketches.

Even with the second album a hit, the myths linger--for example, the myth that Forbert is "the new Bob Dylan." "I hate to get into this," says KLS's Bailey, "but every time you've got an acoustic performer, the Dylan comparison's inevitable." Forbert has been giving earnest, articulate answers to the usual questions, but he meets this one with a stony "Oh..." Silence. He finally asks, "If you hate to go into it, why did you bring it up?" Bailey allows that "he" doesn't put any stock in it; it's just a cliché invented by "the press."

Forbert smiles slightly to himself. "I'm not trying to be the new anybody," he says, fully recovered and radiating the cheery finesse of a TV news commentator. "I wanted to do my own material, I didn't have any money to hire a band, and I didn't want to be a member of "a" band. I just asked myself, well, what's the most noise I can make on my own? And where can I make it? So I played the acoustic guitar and harmonica and stomped my foot and I think I was right in assuming that Greenwich Village would be the best place to perform my own material and possibly get some attention, move on to making records and all. It wasn't an effort to be "like" anyone; it seemed to me like the most practical way to go about getting things my way."

The encounter concludes on a friendly note, as "Romeo's Tune" goes wafting out over FM-96, and the guest of honor autographs the station's memorial wall "Love & Peace, Steve Forbert." He's learned to do interviews, all right. But once we're out in the deeply carpeted hall, waiting for the elevator, Mr. Practicality is a kid again. He bounds up into the air and slaps the poured concrete ceiling, and as we leave the building he takes a running jump up a narrow concrete incline and comes tearing down the other side so fast he runs right across the lawn and the access drive, where the limo's waiting. His cheeks are flushed as we cruise through thick traffic, headed for a 5:30 sound check at the Agora.

A few weeks earlier, Forbert had headlined at New York's Palladium, a theater with more than three times the capacity of the Agora. It was an extraordinary evening; there was a genuine, palpable rapport between artist and audience going from the minute Forbert hit the stage, all shivering, spindly legs and pirouettes. "It was important to me that I was able to play there and sell it out," he says to me during a break from the sound check, when I wonder aloud whether he's outgrowing the growing pains that seem to accompany any Southerner's move to New York. "Like you were saying earlier, the people who were there were feeling a part of that thing that I felt, and it kept going back and forth. I've had an advantage; I've had a sort of open public acceptance in New York that doesn't happen to just anyone trying to make the transition you were talking about." He isn't bragging; the city has taken this kid to its heart.

But Atlanta isn't New York. Here Forbert is a new artist with a hit single, and before the show Danny Fields, for one, seems a little nervous about how it will go. The band is ready. Guitarist Donny Thompson, bassist Lou Whitney, and drummer Bobby Lloyd Hicks have been playing together around Springfield, Missouri, for years. "They're bona fide cats," Forbert notes proudly, and accurately. "They know their rock and roll." Saxophonist Bill Jones, who doubles on keyboards, was recruited during the Nashville sessions for "Jackrabbit Slim"--and suggested his friends from Springfield as a rhythm section. Organist Paul Errico, an inveterate jammer, sits backstage night after night, blending his accordion with Forbert's acoustic guitar. Onstage, the five musicians--who are all older than their boss--combine country roots and urban raunch in a manner that's practiced but never routine.

Forbert, though, has his own ideas about how things should go. Just before the set begins, Fields warns "He really rankles when he's opening act and has to do forty minutes of his greatest hits. You know this is basically a night off from opening for Kenny Loggins. At this point, when he has

a headlining gig, he checks out the audience to see how much he can get away with. Sure enough, the show begins, disconcertingly, with "It Isn't Gonna Be That Way," a ballad from Forbert's critically acclaimed first album, *Alive on Arrival*. Fields looks ashen, but Forbert is right; his listeners, most of them clean-cut and in their early twenties, respond to the song's realistic acceptance of dashed hopes with screams of recognition, and more than a few are on their feet. Testing them still further, he continues with an Arthur Alexander soul oldie. That doesn't compute, so he simply cuts it off after a couple of choruses, to the band's consternation, and counts off his reggae tune, "Complications"--at a much faster tempo than the loping album version. He follows that with another ballad, "Baby," which he says later is "one of my favorite tunes that I ever made up" and which he builds to a powerful finish. Then, with the crowd wondering what on earth he's going to do next, he hits them with "Romeo's Tune," the soaring love song that's making him a star. From that point on he has the Agora in the palm of his hand.

Our "official" interview is scheduled to take place after the show, and in the dressing room, Forbert, who's been easy to talk to all day in more informal circumstances, suddenly gets cold feet. He just has to go see his friend Paul Davis, an Atlanta-based singer/songwriter who's on the other side of town. Fields protests that it's already two a.m., but Forbert brushes him off. "Don't worry," Forbert tells me, "I'm not gonna blow this off. I'll be back soon."

Around 3:30 a.m. Forbert knocks on the door of my room. He seems to have had a few beers, and I'm not entirely rational either, all of which is probably for the best. "Look," I begin, "we both know that New Yorkers think anybody from Mississippi is a country boy but . . ." He settles in a chair, scrunching up inside his jacket in the early morning chill. "I'm gonna give ya the straight story," he says. "I've never milked a cow. I had the chance one day, but I was all dressed up for Sunday. I grew up in a quiet little neighborhood, some space between the houses, not "right" downtown. My mother's mother lived out in Rose Hill, and we went out there a bit. That was my exposure to what most people think of as Mississippi. At night, it's so dark and scary, you go out and you can't see your hand in front of your face. That's the real dark I think a lot of people never know."

Despite Forbert's tall stories in previous interviews--that his father was lettuce farmer rather than what he is, a retired Air National Guard colonel, and that Steve is one of ten or eleven children rather than one of three--he seems to have had a pretty normal Southern Baptist upbringing, going regularly to church (where he developed a fairly impressive, though so far unrecorded, facility on piano) and playing Saturday night hops. A lot of his problems with interviewers seems to stem from an obsession with protecting his privacy--he admits that "Cellophane City," destined for his third album, is "a song of acute paranoia." For instance, when "Newsweek" did a piece on him and called his parents to run a routine fact check, Forbert was furious. "It really bugs me," he says, jumping up out of his chair to pace around the hotel room. "My parents are nice, friendly people, not the type to say, 'Fuck you, we got nothin' to say.' I don't want to see 'em taken advantage of, people callin' 'em and everything. . . . I just don't think it's a good thing in principle." I remind him that people in the public eye are routinely subjected to media scrutiny. "Yeah, well, I understand that," he says sulkily, "but there are certain things about it that I naturally just don't like."

Rave reviews greeted Forbert's first album, but "Jackrabbit Slim", which employs Nashville session players and much fuller, almost countrypolitan sound, has come in for fairly heavy critical slugging. I tell Forbert I've got a theory about that. Critics, who are seldom exposed to anything really fresh and innocent, praised the first album, which positively radiated those qualities, and felt personally betrayed when Forbert made the more "adult" "Jackrabbit Slim". Subconsciously, they didn't want him to grow up. To a transplanted Southerner like me, the theme of the Southern kid coping with his new urban environment isn't as interesting as what comes next--settling into place and building a life. A tension remains in this second stage that's perfectly captured in "January 23-30, 1978," the last song on "Jackrabbit Slim" and, to me, the most moving and personal song Forbert has written.

The kid, meanwhile, is circling the room as if he's about to break into a jog; it's been a long day

and night, but this is something he wants to get out. "The first album," he says, "has this walking cliché theme. People call it the America dream. This kid comes from nowhere, and everybody's sayin', 'Now, let's see what the kid's gonna do.' And they watch him, 'cause they feel like they "know" this person. But when you say the next stage is more interesting to you, really you're still talking about that same walking cliché theme. To me, that's "the theme". There are certain characters in history who are just walking clichés--Jimmie Rodgers was one, Charlie Chaplin, Bob Dylan, and Elvis Presley was the "max". I'm not trying to say that I'm like they are or make some kind of arrogant statement, but what I'm trying to say is, these are characters people can continue to see them "selves" in. That theme you saw in the first album is still there, and it's gonna be there as long as I'm alive. The criticism may get heavier and heavier, I may sell a lot of records or not sell a lot, but I'm just gonna do whatever I feel like doin' at any given time, and I wanna do my "best" at it, I want my "heart" to be in it. That's the way it's gonna "be".

Forbert shuts himself in the bathroom. I look out at the lights of Atlanta and think about it. He told me earlier that the first Dylan he paid any attention to was "Like a Rolling Stone," that at the time he much preferred Ian Whitcomb's "You Turn Me On." Certainly his music is very much his own, and much closer to being pure pop than Dylan's ever way. He's right to consider the Dylan comparisons shallow and unfair. But Forbert "is" like Dylan in one respect he has invented himself, keeping as much of his own personality to himself as he finds expedient and putting on the rest, like a closetful of shirts and coats, as he discovers more walking clichés he can relate to. And it's working. The one idea that turns up over and over in reviews of Forbert's records and performances is that he makes listeners feel they actually "do" know him. That's a rare gift, and it may help make Steve Forbert the next American superstar. After seeing two or three of his shows, it becomes evident that his lyrics do connect directly with young audiences, and he's got the bright melodies and rock & roll showmanship to back them up. Some of his lyrics, and his attempts to embroider the specifics of his ordinary American upbringing, are naive. But naivete is no barrier to great--or commercially successful--art. And as Dylan and many other artists have demonstrated, people love myths.

Forbert bursts out of the bathroom and ambles a trifle unsteadily over to the window. All day long I've watched him peering at the sky, as if trying to read it, and now it's just before dawn. I ask about John Simon's production on "Jackrabbit Slim", which was widely criticized for its high gloss. "John came in on that at the last minute," he says, "After the first producer we'd contacted backed out at the last minute to work with Barbra Streisand. The musicians and the studio in Nashville had already been booked. That record sounds like I wanted it to sound. . . Oh, it's so funny, I can't even trace it all, I don't even wanna try to figure it out."

He looks at the sky some more, turns abruptly, and says "Babies are born, and they're just tarred." Tarred? "Dipped in tar and boom, there you are. You have to walk, that's the element of time, which forces you to move and change. It's in the fall, and there's leaves and dust and dirt in the air, and things are gonna stick to you. You have some control over it, but basically you're just out there and things are blowing around."

That isn't the sort of thing a man who's consciously inventing his own myth might be expected to say, but it "does" sound like a Southern Baptist. The kid's got some deep roots after all. "Things are blowing around," he says again, "and people just love to watch that. 'What's gonna happen to this character?' Y'know?" People "are" watching; it's Cellophane City. The conversation degenerates into before-dawn babble, and Forbert heads for the door, bleary and innocent, calculating and vulnerable, every inch the mythic character he's still in the process of becoming.