

**Fireworks By Forbert
By Hank Reineke
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If idle hands do the Devil's work, then Steve Forbert must qualify as an angel. The past week has been an exhausting one for the 29-year-old musician. Forbert and his band have been on the road for little more than a week, and they've already performed in a string of one-night stands from Long Island to Washington, D.C.

Then, in spite of his already full touring schedule, Joe Jackson called and wondered if it was possible for Forbert and the band to open for him up in Boston, Mass. Well, of course it was, so the band made the trip up to Beantown, ripped through yet another set, then hit the road. Then there was a stop at the Garden State Arts Center to open for country singer Crystal Gayle, where Forbert played in front of a vastly "different" (as he described it) audience without benefit of a soundcheck.

And now Forbert is here in the Big Apple scheduled to do four shows in two nights in the Lone Star Cafe. Oooops, better make that five shows. Another show is added on the Fourth of July. Forbert and the band are scheduled to go on after the big fireworks display. Whew . . . !

If this was a just and fair world, Forbert would be somehow rewarded for his labors. Ah, but to shamelessly paraphrase a line from one of his best songs, "it isn't gonna be that way." Instead, Forbert comes down with a cold, and we find him sitting in the dressing room of the Lone Star, sipping at a bottle of juice and drinking mugfuls of ginseng tea.

Despite being a Forbert fan for several years, this was the first time I've ever made it to one of his concerts. Copies of his first three albums can be found on my shelves, and certainly each of the discs gets its fair share of airplay on my turntable. Still, Forbert remained one of the artists that I enjoyed listening to a great deal, but had only a minor ambition to see perform live.

His albums, especially *Alive on Arrival* and *Jackrabbit Slim*, were note perfect. I couldn't see any reason to risk hearing those songs performed live and perhaps hearing diluted, gutless renditions of the tunes that meant so much to me.

It only took two measures of the opening song to realize that all my fears were totally unwarranted. The show was fantastic. The band was simply great as they tore through hard rockin' versions of Forbert's songs without obscuring the brilliance of his beautiful lyricism. They were a compact, tight collection of musicians who left behind the usual frills and general excesses of so many rock bands, and, instead, competently maintained the driving rock-and-roll tempo required for so many of Forbert's compositions. Forbert's band was comprised of John Leventhal on lead guitar, Paul Errico on keyboards, Frank Campbell on bass, and Dennis McDermott on drums. Each musician played an essential role in making the music as enjoyable as it was. No one tried to upstage the other, or to carry the show by himself. It was totally integrated music, with each musician knowing his job, and best of all, knowing it well.

Still, I have to admit that I was a little unprepared for all of this. Listening to his albums, you are given the impression that Forbert is a mellow, laid-back folkie of sorts. Sure, there is a touch of rock and roll and country on his records, but essentially the music is easily (if somewhat misleadingly) categorized to be in the folk-rock tradition.

When I arrived at the Lone Star I expected an evening of simple acoustic music with some pleasant country-ish backing. Instead the audience was treated to a '50s rock-and-roll revival. Forbert and his band have returned to the bare essence of the music, to the earliest roots of rock and roll. Anyone expecting artsy, high-tech rock, a folk concert, or a glossy, contrived show would have been shocked. This was pure rock and roll at its foot-stomping best.

However, the question still remained. Why was an (apparent) ex-folkie fronting a rock-and-roll band? Forbert sat back on the couch in the dressing room and took a sip of juice. His voice was a

little hoarse and tired, as he had just finished the first of his five shows at the Lone Star. His cold seems to have taken a little out of him, and he looked a little weary and somber. "I write a lot of songs that can be done more rockin' than they happen to come off on record . . . as you can see now, hearing them live. And I think a lot of people know that. I've played here before, and around, and I think people know now that when they come to hear us, that's it's not going to be a folk-rock concert per se. You know . . ."

Well, actually I didn't know. But the crowd that gathered at the Lone Star on Monday night seemed to. I was amazed by the number of people there who seemed to be sincerely devoted fans. As Forbert sang, you could glance around at the crowd and watch them mouth along the words to the songs--even songs from his new, yet-unreleased album. The few people I talked to seemed to know his show and repertoire very well. Most of them have seen Forbert several times in the past and try to catch his show whenever he is performing in the area. After getting a first-hand look at the show myself, I can't say that I blame them. "The Beatles kicked me into it when I was a kid," he continued, "and I played rock and roll all the time I was growing up. But then I was sick of being in bands and tryin' to be in bands and tryin' to find a group [where] everyone thought the same way. So I just said, 'enough,' and I started playing solo. Just to avoid the hassles of tryin' to steer five people in the same direction. Or tryin' to find someone who I would agree with. So I went solo, and then was able to put together bands to back me. I just couldn't be in a band, as a member of a band. I think it'd just drive me crazy. I just like to do things I want to do. And sometimes it can be hard getting all these people to agree with you."

One of the most wonderful things about Forbert's music is that there really is such a true variety of influences in his work, and it is difficult to pigeonhole his material into a single category. I asked Forbert about growing up in Meridian, Miss., and the influence the music of the region might have had on his work. I mean, what do you listen to on the radio in Mississippi? Country music? Rhythm and blues?

"Top 40 . . . in the '60s, which was a terrific variety of terrific stuff. Plus then I started reading about things and all, and when you're from somewhere that far away you get curious about 'Who is Brian Eno? Who is the Velvet Underground? Who is Richard Thompson?' So we would have to go to places like New Orleans or Tuscaloosa to get these records, . . . to order them. When you 'discover' something it's very exciting and it means a lot to you. . . . So that's kinda a little bit of what it's like coming from that far away from a big city. You know, you really have to work to find out about things, but when you get that "Here Come the Warm Jets" album by Brian Eno . . . you listen to it a lot! 'Cause it's a big deal!"

And who inspired the haunting, funny, and sometimes biting lyricism that is literally the trademark of Forbert's compositions? "I think, uh, obviously Bob Dylan. And the Rolling Stones . . . Things like '19th Nervous Breakdown.' Hank Williams, of course . . . And, uh, all the blues singers just knocked me out."

Forbert kicked off Monday night's set with "Going Down to Laurel," the track on his debut album *Alive on Arrival*. As it was to be, with many of his songs this evening, the live version of the tune is more rockin' than in its recorded form. His second number, "Steve Forbert's Midsummer's Night Toast" prompted an enthusiastic burst of applause from the crowd when he reached that unforgettable line.

"Here's to all the shitty jobs that I despise
Here's to two-bit guarantees and other lies . . ."

Steve followed with "It Isn't Gonna Be That Way," one of the most beautiful songs in his repertoire, and certainly one of my favorites. "Complications," from "Jackrabbit Slim," was next, and as Steve delivered the line, "Yes, he decks you with a punch," the drummer hit the cymbals with an emphatic crash. Like I said earlier, it was a totally integrated performance. "Get Well

Soon," from the "Little Stevie Orbit" album, was next, and that was followed by still another firey rocker, "Samson and Delilah's Beauty Shop."

After "Beauty Shop," the band left the stage and Steve took off his sport jacket, reached for his acoustic guitar, and adjusted his harmonica neck brace. With the assistance of Paul Errico, who left the keyboards to strap on an accordion, Forbert sang "Goin' Back to Alabama," and his dreamy, romantic tune "I'm in Love with You." Before the crowd was given a chance to applaud, Forbert broke into the funky guitar riff that opens "What Kinda Guy?" About midway through the song the band members began to make their way back onto the stage. One by one, the instruments joined in, until the Lone Star was filled, once again, with freewheelin' rock and roll music.

Forbert never looked back after that, retrieving his electric guitar and singing intensely into the microphone. Despite an overworked, overtired, and hoarse vocal, Forbert seemed to be giving a 100 percent effort and the crowd apparently appreciated his enthusiasm and spirited performance. He continued to rock his way through versions of "They're Out to Get Us," "Lay Down Your Weary Tune," "You're Darn Right, Brother," and "C'mon Baby (Don't Break Up with Me)."

One of the most popular songs of the evening was "Ram-bunk-shush," a truly fantastic song that I hope will be featured on Steve's upcoming LP. Forbert closed the show with "Donna," a tribute to early rocker Ritchie Valens. Forbert's vocal style of "belt-it-out" rock and roll owes a great deal to the distinctive, colorful phrasing of Valens. Forbert's last song was, of course, "Romeo's Tune," his best-known song, and his only true bona fide hit single. It was the perfect ending to a near-perfect evening.

A near-perfect evening? Well, there was one problem. The sound system at the show was a little troublesome, and at points during the performance the sound became noticeably bass laden. At other time the sound was a little "tinny." Still, it wasn't that bad, and one can only guess at the cause of the problem. I was there at the soundcheck earlier in the evening, and the sound was perfect then. Maybe there were just some gremlins in the system. (At the soundcheck, the band ran through a hot, cookin' instrumental version of "Sweet Love That You Give," which they unfortunately opted not to do during the show.)

The concert has certainly whetted my appetite for Forbert's forthcoming LP, still untitled as of yet. Before we left, we asked him if he could share any information on the upcoming album, which I believe will be his fifth to date.

"We've got most of it done . . . Probably do a couple more tracks. At this point, 'Ram-bunk-shush' isn't on the record, and I really think it should be. So we're not quite through. It'll be on Columbia, and maybe we'll have it out, with any luck, by October. Neil Geraldo produced the cuts we have. There's some that are really rocked out, some of them [are] progressive folk rock, some of them are kinda country. Neil's busy with a Pat Benatar record, so I don't know if he'll be able to help us on the other two tracks. It might be too long a wait. We'll see how it works out . . ." We'll be waiting. It's funny, but the ad for Forbert's Independence Day show stated that the program would commence shortly after the fireworks display. As far as I'm concerned, the fireworks began on Monday night . . . the minute that the band took the stage.