

Steve Forbert Escapes From Hell
The frighteningly true story of a rock 'n' roll singer/songwriter who endured
the musician's worst nightmare

By Bill Flanagan
Musician
October 1988

It's January 1988 and we're in Long Branch, New Jersey--at Garry Tallent's Shorefire recording studio. Steve Forbert and his band have driven up from Nashville with a new song. "Running on Love," that came to Forbert in a burst of inspiration while he was driving home from a show. Now Steve is performing the song on one side of the glass while Tallent thinks "dynamics" and engineer Jan Topoleski thinks "levels." Keyboard player Paul Errico tries all sorts of sounds, from roller rink to foghorn. Something is keeping the song from taking off. It could be the cross-stick C&W drum pattern Bobby Lloyd Hicks is playing--it's making the song lope where it should kick. But nobody's asking my opinion. Halfway through the take Tallent gets up from behind the board and walks over to the corner of the studio window. At his right, behind one glass, is Hicks in the drum booth. In front of him, through the bigger window, is Forbert and the rest of the band. Tallent moves to where only Hicks can see him and starts playing a straight-ahead rock pattern on air drums. Hicks switches in mid-song, to the confusion of Forbert, who starts mouthing, "What are you doing?" But Tallent's right, Hicks sticks with it, and "Running on Love," the last song for Streets of This Town, Steve Forbert's first album in five years, is finished.

People assume Steve Forbert was dropped by his record company five years ago. What a joke. This is the story of a guy who couldn't get himself dropped, no matter how hard he tried. Forbert has spent the time from 1982 to 1987 fighting business battles on two fronts. First he jumped from Nemperor Records--where he made two successful albums and two flops--to Columbia, where his position deteriorated from rough to tense to under siege. During the same time, he went through four sets of managers, leaving piles of animosity and lawsuits in his wake. Only in the latter part of 1987 did Forbert wrap up all the litigation and become a free agent, and he's renewed an old acquaintance with Tallent, the E Street Band bassist who's lately established himself as a smart, no-frills producer with Evan Johns & the H-Bombs. Tallent and Forbert have recorded all of Streets of This Town at Shorefire with Forbert's road band--and no label. Now that it's done, the bidding will begin in earnest.

It's March. Forbert's mixing at Manhattan's Power Station. These days Tallent is flying back to New York to mix on his days off from Springsteen's "Tunnel of Love" tour. Forbert is coming up from Nashville for each burst of work. Steve and his wife, Jill, have new twin sons, Sam and David. Both Forbert and Tallent are bearing down hard to get the album finished. Around 3 a.m., when Forbert leaves the mixing room to get a soda, I mention to Tallent that I'm surprised the album does not include "All the Mistakes I Once Made," a melancholy country song Forbert wrote at the depth of his exile. It's about a no-longer-young musician who sits in the corner watching the latest Next Big Thing do all the silly things he used to do. "I never heard that one," Tallent says. "He's real careful about what he plays me. He keeps a lot to himself."

Forbert later confirms the song's absence is definitely intentional "The guy singing that song is "removed," Forbert insists. "He's an older person, maybe of Waylon Jennings's or Guy Clark's generation. It wouldn't have fit into this album. He's looking back. I'm "in" it. I wrote a lot of songs, all kinds of different things, but there were certain ones that were particularly autobiographical, regarding the past few years. They were the same style, basically folk rock, and I knew they were the ones I wanted to use. Then we got out there playing little places way off the beaten path and--not to be too arty about it but--I began to see what was going on out in Kansas and Louisiana, and I felt it would be justified to bitch about these things and try to draw a conclusion, that it was more than just my personal story, that it wouldn't be entirely self-indulgent.

"Hopefully the album's not just my little problems. 'On the Streets of This Town' is the low point of

the narrative. I'm really happy with that song. I got real lucky on the internal rhymes on that one 'I fit your crazy norm and wore your uniform where you told me to go/And got back in return this here feelin' that I've learned what the Indians know.' The way people are living in some of these places is a far cry from sitting here in New York worrying about which sushi restaurant to go to tonight."

A month later Forbert, Tallent, and engineer Topoleski are squeezed into a tiny room at New York's Sterling Sound, mastering the record--now successfully shipped to Geffen--with high-tech wizard George Marino. Artist and producer are now so deeply into the project that they seem to be able to finish each other's sentences. They're arguing over a fractional difference in the speed at which to press "Running on Love" with the obstinance of two campers who've spent a whole summer together in a small tent. Forbert insists on the marginally faster version, Tallent thinks it makes one note sound out of tune. No one else can tell the difference. Finally Tallent orders both versions repeated again, and while they are playing Forbert starts chatting with a visitor. Tallent, cold-eyed, lets Steve talk, lets the track play out, and then says, "Okay, what did you think?" Forbert looks up like the kid caught passing notes in class. "Uh--sorry, Garry, I wasn't paying attention." "Okay, let's do it again."

That evening Forbert, Tallent, Tallent's girlfriend, Chris Eriksen, and Topoleski convene at a Mexican restaurant to celebrate the completion of the album. The tensions of the day--and of the last nine months--are buried in nachos, beer, and jokes. Some preppies at the next table are pontificating in loud voices about the meaning of the "Tunnel of Love" tour, and everyone hushes to eavesdrop. "You know what," one of them concludes. "Someday we'll be old, too, and we'll care about marriage and all that stuff, and then I'll bet these songs will sound as good to us as his old ones." Tallent and Forbert look at each other and bust out laughing. "God," Chris smiles, "I can't believe this album is really finished."

It's now June. I meet Forbert in his New York apartment for an interview. He's been talking to the press for two weeks and has his rap down. His new album is not even in the stores yet and already the critics are salivating, calling it Forbert's best record. Forbert and I are in an awkward position; we're friends. I can't rave about his work; I'm not objective. But I do know all sorts of things about his five lost years that I'm determined to get on the record. He views that approach the way a small boy views a trip to the dentist."

It's just that some people come back and all they do is complain about everything everybody "else" did that messed them up," Forbert says. "I don't want to do that. Even if some people were maybe not the best, "I" decided to work with them, "I" made that decision. I wasn't 14. And that is the truth. "I" signed those contracts."

Well, I say, it's an important story, an insight into how the music business really works, and someone should tell it. Besides, I'm not going to print anything libelous. The magazine's attorneys wouldn't let me. So don't worry, if anything comes up that could get us in legal trouble . . . "You'll protect your ass and throw me to the wolves," Forbert laughs. But he means it. Five years with lawyers has had its effect. Still, he motions to the tape recorder and says go ahead.

MUSICIAN: A fellow at MCA told me that they tried to sign you for this album and lost out. Suddenly everybody loves you.

FORBERT: They're all saying so. Some of the stations here in New York have started playing a sampler CD Warners sent out. So it's very promising. I have reason to be optimistic. But I also have the experience to be cautious.

I'm so glad we've done something people seem to think is as good or better than my accursed first album. Not to be arrogant, but it's been like "This Side of Paradise," F. Scott Fitzgerald's first book; after that they hated everything he did by comparison until "The Great Gatsby." When we made that first record I insisted on no overdubs. There was a lot of pressure against that. A lot. I

thought at one point there I was going to have a nervous breakdown just to make a record! I'm still proud of that record. I got a CD player a couple of weeks ago and I heard it again. It was good, I liked it. But I had no radio or, dare I say, "competitive" spirit about the record. The bass sound was very un-bassy, not a round punchy sound by any means.

Not to sound like I've sold out, but I was able to make this record with more of a realization that trying to survive in the music business is something I want to do my whole life. I couldn't have known that at 23, that just wasn't my concern. In 1979 I told "Rolling Stone," "From now on I'm just gonna do what I want to do." I've seen that article lately and it's like ["laughs"] okay, I did--and a lot it got me! "Great, do what you want to do. Just do it somewhere else."

MUSICIAN: Your third album, "Little Stevie Orbit" (1980), was your first failure.

FORBERT: We put too much stuff on it for vinyl. We couldn't get any volume out of it. It was a very mixed bag; some of it worked, some of it didn't. Some of it I recorded in too high a key. It was a point of reality really hitting. "The last record did "that" but this one only did "this!" We'll have to stop the tour." It was very bewildering! It was a hard dose of Something's Not Right. You realize you don't know as much as you thought you did when you were young and saying, "I'm just gonna do what I want from now on." It can throw you into a sort of whirlpool. And it was around then that I started to get into a management problem, a legal thing with Danny Fields and Linda Stein, who actually had accomplished some good things. Undeniably.

MUSICIAN: They were your first managers?

FORBERT: In a sense Danny Fields discovered me. I think he's said that. He was at CBGB one night when I was playing and started talking to me about management. I liked him and I still like Danny. He was one of the most entertaining people and a caustic dry wit. I haven't talked to him in a while, but I have good feelings toward him.

MUSICIAN: What went wrong?

FORBERT: The "Orbit" thing started a whirlpool. It was like, "Wait a second, we did particularly well for a new act. The first record sold quite respectably and created a good little buzz, we toured Europe and did well. The second record had a hit! Third record--"nothing." And it began to set in, I got a little paranoid, a little confused. It was funny to me that it should just be over that quick! "Aren't we gonna put out another single?" I'm not saying the record was perfect; I'm not saying we did everything we could have done. In fact, when we finished the record I had a chance to tour with Sonny Terry for three weeks in a van and I jumped at it. We went to some blues festivals and I got to live with Sonny Terry for two or three weeks! I had to take that opportunity and I don't regret it entirely. It was great. But it might have done me better to be listening more carefully to the mixes.

When I started making the fourth record, I switched managers. The people I went with were managing Pat Benatar, who was getting a lot of things done at the time. His name was Rick Newman, his partner was Richard Fields [no relation to Danny]. I went through an out-of-court settlement with Danny and Linda. I was always very "jumpy" in my youth. A different producer every album! Boom! Jump! I would advise young musicians against that. Try not to get too jumpy. When there's not a whole lot of time left on contracts, try to stick it out till it's over. It's such a hassle getting out of them and it's not a good thing to make a habit of.

Anyway, the fourth record (Steve Forbert) was released in 1982. I had new management and some good expectations. And it was worse! For all I went through and what was accomplished, I felt I went from the frying pan into the fire. Well, word was that it was Epic's fault [Epic distributed Nemperor Records]. That's the word I was getting. Managers are the liaison between you and the record company and they have to do that well, and you have to understand that everybody in this business is putting their life, their time, their energy into what they're doing. You can't, with a

blanket remark, say all record company guys are this or all radio guys are this or even all rock 'n' rollers are the other thing. You can't! I feel like that was a problem at that time not establishing and nurturing a good rapport with the record company. And I'm not so sure that there was so much wrong with Epic Records "at all." Let me just say that. But then came the suggestion that we switch to Columbia.

MUSICIAN: Was that your idea or your new managers?

FORBERT: I think it's accurate to say it came from management. [pauses]* This is very difficult for me to talk about. For one thing it's painful, and for another thing I just don't really want to say a lot about it. It's not real constructive and it's very much in the past. [*Richard Fields denies this and claims Forbert's relationship with Nemperor was "already unwinding" when they became his managers.]

MUSICIAN: But you know, for the last five years you've been in limbo, and nobody wrote about it. Maybe music magazines, including "Musician," do players a disservice; we always write about winners. Everybody we interview is doing well, and that does not represent how things really are for most musicians. If you're a young player coming up and looking for information about how the music business works, you can read 20 books about the careers of the Beatles and the Stones, but you can't read a book about the career of Jesse Winchester. And there's a lot more Jesse Winchesters than there are Beatles and Stones. So I'm glad you're doing well and want to put all the problems behind you, but forgive me for wanting to get this story told.

FORBERT: "Everybody loves a winner and when you lose, you lose alone." No one wants to know the story 'cause there's no way it can fit into the industry machine. But when you're back and you have a record that everybody's interested in, then you can fit into the whole multifaceted complex. If we didn't have a record coming out on a major label it wouldn't be worth your while to write any more about the record than maybe a small review. And I understand that. It's like touring without an album. I keep saying in these interviews, "Harry made a bareback rider" [a line from Dire Straits' "In the Gallery," a song about artists who die unknown]. You can paint and paint but until you're in the gallery you're not "really" a painter, are you? That's the way it is. The dead-end stories are never told. No one wants to write them because they can't really help sell records or radio advertising time or magazines. You learn that it's all a big working engine, and you've got to have a record to fit into that engine--then everyone else can get involved.

MUSICIAN: Then let's use the fact that you have a new album on a major label to tell the whole story.

FORBERT: Then we're going into it in a lot of detail. [sighs.] "Frying Pan into the Fire" would be the next chapter. We went to Columbia Records and talked to a few producers. We decided to work with Neil Geraldo [husband and collaborator of Pat Benatar, who was managed by Newman and Fields]. I brought my own band in and we worked real hard again, doing the mixes and some vocals.

On the one hand, I'm a guy who's real jumpy, but I can also stick with things. I got into this thing with Neil Geraldo and I just thought, "Dammit, we'll complete it." It was work, you know, but we completed it and we sent it to the record company. Anyway, things turned into a stalemate. The record company, CBS, was not pleased about our process. They had said, "Cut nine things and let us listen to them before you do any fleshing out. Don't cut any more than that, and we'll listen and see how they sound." Well, we didn't do that! I'd always just made my records and turned them in, and Neil Geraldo--working with Pat Benatar--certainly didn't know from a limited budget. That just wasn't one of his concerns. We were working and working, and the dish ran away with the spoon. It just wasn't handled properly. In all fairness, I can understand CBS's disenchantment with that element of the project. It creates a very definite prejudice. They're running a business and they asked us to adhere to certain guidelines. But I really wasn't aware of those guidelines! That's the truth. [Richard Fields says he did inform Forbert of CBS's guidelines.]

The thing that made me mad with CBS was that when it all hit the brick wall, I said to the person I was dealing with, "Look, you're not happy with the record, you don't want to put it out, suppose I write some more songs? Suppose I demo those songs and see what you think and add to the record? Let's try to agree, to work it out." I spent a long time trying to do "that." It meant remixing some of the things we did, writing new songs, singing demos of those songs to the company, to the guy who signed me, Rick Chertoff. He was busy with other things. I'm just saying this for the benefit of the people who are reading this who are in this rat race/snake pit that they call the music business. It's the way things are handled. You can't make people mad and then expect to have their undivided attention! I was just the little engine that couldn't!

So we remixed a thing that we thought was the single and paid for that. We mastered it and I paid for that. We sent them an acetate. Couple of weeks later we hear a reply "Nah." We sent 'em songs. Very little comment, very little guidance, very little interest. That's when the whirlpool began to carry me further out into the ocean.

I began to realize that not a damn thing I was doing was right. It's just not working, nothing's working out right, and I didn't think it was the "songs." I was being very flexible about recording new material. I didn't want out, I wanted to get a record together, I really tried--honestly--to be as helpful as I could. Well, no way! The next thing I know I'm running into a situation where I can't record anymore . . . [pauses] I don't really want to talk about this a lot, because certain artists right now complain too much about their record companies and their problems! I've been through it; I did it with lawyers pretty much all by myself; I deserve an introductory music law degree and diploma. I do! But I don't want to harp on it because it's in the past and I did it and I feel good about where I am now. If I were 65 years old that might not be so cool, but I'm 33, my dreams are intact, and I've still got a lot I want to do and feel I can do it. I feel good about now! I don't want to talk a lot about the mess.

MUSICIAN: Am I too hung up on this?

FORBERT: It was terrible! CBS said, "We won't release what you've delivered, we won't record anymore, and we won't release you!" A no-win thing. Record companies can put you in something called "suspension," which means time is going by but "not by their clock." Your hands are virtually tied. Talk about "I want the heart, I want the soul, I want control right now!" It was "Badlands," absolutely. My version is "Don't Tell Me (I Know)." "Sometimes you feel so weak you want to explode." I completely understand that emotion.

Management became a problem. I can't harp enough on how badly an artist needs his manager to be his liaison with the record company. "Coordinate, help, make everybody understand what I'm doing! They think I'm being disagreeable! If they only knew! Call me!" These people had my phone number. I didn't get free from CBS until late '87, okay? This is '84, '85, '86, '87. Not a phone call! "Are you alive? Have you written anything you like? What's happening?" Nothing!

MUSICIAN: At one point someone at CBS [not Chertoff] said, "If you insist we'll put your album out--but we won't promote it"?

FORBERT: Yes, they said that very early on. Having had two albums that didn't do well, I really thought that was the last thing I needed. That would just be another step away from a good beginning. So I said no, and I tried to find some way that we could all begin to get enthusiastic about a record.

Some people may read this and think, "Well, for one thing, Steve Forbert and Pat Benatar don't have that much in common! Didn't anybody think of that?" Well, they're right. But I was just coming from a very frustrated situation, thinking, "Things aren't getting done for me, who's getting things done?" That became my criteria. I still had a lot to learn at that point. I went from having a record that didn't do well to having records that didn't even come out! Okay, the fire was getting

hot!

MUSICIAN: There was a point when you told me that you said to CBS, "Look, neither of us are happy, if you're not going to put out my records, you have to let me go," and they said, "Go ahead and sue. We're CBS, we've got a lot of lawyers, we can tie you up for "years." [Chertoff insists he was not the person who said this.]

FORBERT: Well, you know . . . Paul Simon sued them for a couple of million dollars. He finally settled, but it took him a long time to get his two million. Do you know how much interest a million dollars makes in a year? Forget it! They probably wish the suit had taken longer. What's it to them? They've got "so" many people. I dare to say that at points they've had people on that label they didn't know they had. We got in that kind of mess.

MUSICIAN: Let's put a little blame on you. When you quit Nat Weiss's Nemperor Records after the fourth album failed, did you feel bad about deserting Weiss, who had signed you in '78?

FORBERT: Yes.

MUSICIAN: So to be fair--you saw what you thought was a chance to do better by switching to Columbia, the mother label, and you went for it.

FORBERT: Yeah, I was confused, angry. I was like a blind snake, striking at anything. And one of my managers had a very good relationship with Rick Chertoff, on a friendly basis, and it looked like we would get some personal, first-rate, in-house treatment, as opposed to things I was thinking about being on a satellite label. But there "are" no blanket rules--some things work great the way they are. That's important. A lot of people think, "Let's move to the major label," but maybe they got to where they could make that move because of certain good things that are happening that they're not looking at. They're not seeing that the glass is half full.

MUSICIAN: So you had reached an impasse with CBS, and you decided to leave Fields and Newman.

FORBERT: They split up. I began to talk more with Richard Fields. I trusted this guy. That's all there is to it. I trusted Richard Fields and it didn't work out. It was unproductive. And after we tried a number of things it still wasn't working. "Years" were going by. Please don't think, "This fickle guy Forbert is just leaping around." I really just stuck with this guy as long as I could hold my breath. But then I had to come up for air.

MUSICIAN: Did anybody at CBS suggest to you that Richard Fields was part of the problem?

FORBERT: This is getting tricky. I can't answer that.

MUSICIAN: Anyway, you said to Richard Fields, "Look, we have to go our separate ways."

FORBERT: That was in November '85. It had been pretty near two years since I knew the record was not going to be released. That's a long time! I do not want people to think I'm just a leapfrog.

MUSICIAN: How come when you said to Richard Fields, "This isn't working, let's part ways," you couldn't just shake hands and walk away clean?

FORBERT: I would have liked to. But what happens is, people make certain efforts on your behalf, whether they succeed or fail. And they feel, "Hey, you may talk to so-and-so next week, but I spoke to him last July! I could have planted a seed in his brain, man!" "Well, how come we didn't get a record deal?" "Well, I don't know, but he may still just be thinking about it! You don't know! He could be calling me Tuesday!"

These are some of the thoughts that go through people's minds. Legally it will hold a bit of water. I think it'll hold four teaspoons. It's not that tidy. Especially if your name is on a piece of paper somewhere. Or a 70-page document.

[Fields replies "Not only were we functioning as his managers, we were trying to keep him alive. We were responsible for insisting that he move out of New York City. I sent somebody full-time with him down to Nashville. We spent an enormous amount of time and effort introducing him to every record company, every publisher in Nashville. We put him in the studio. We secured a record deal for him, and I spent over \$100,000 of my own money to save his life. You're talking about a kid that was going down the drain for the count. So I felt he had a responsibility to us. My suggestion was, find another manager. We'll take a payout of the money that's owed to us over years. We'll take a reduced fee, we'll take an override. But his position was, because he was really on the edge, 'I want to end my relationship with everybody.' He fired his lawyer, he fired his agent, and he fired us. That's your prerogative. But I think you have certain moral obligations. So we wouldn't just walk away. Finally we kept a very small override, a small amount of money. It was a matter of principle."]

MUSICIAN: An odd thing happened after you fell out with Richard Fields and before you hooked up with Praxis, your current management team. You were briefly managed by Ira Fraitag, a Woodstock intellectual who worked with the Persuasions.

FORBERT: It was part of going back to square one, another drastic swing of the pendulum. I looked at the people with the big corporation, big name, big acts, and a big office on 52nd Street and said, "It's real cold here; I think I'll go to the equator." It was a sort of reactionary time for me.

MUSICIAN: My impression was that Ira was a gentleman, a great guy--but not the one to send into battle against the CBS lawyers.

FORBERT: But I never asked him to do that. He knew about it, he looked into it a little bit, but I handled that stuff. The whole thing was my problem and I felt responsible for it. It was "my" mess. I didn't ask my new managers to get involved in it. I had to take care of it and get free of it. I got free. No, I didn't come out unscathed, but I did better than a lot of people have.

MUSICIAN: When you were in the middle of this, you quoted a line from Lou Reed "Heroes all learn to swim through mud . . ."

FORBERT: ". . . and they got boots caked with dirty soles from squashing bugs." Yeah. Lou's a little more . . . frank. [laughs] I'm Southern. To get into the music field you not only have to love it--and I mean "love" it--but you also have to really feel you have something to contribute. I myself doggedly believe that, and a few other people do, but there's been no great following. It's not like I could sell out the Garden for a few nights. But I just felt I had something to contribute and I think that's a lot of what kept me going. Just a stubborn feeling that, "Yeah, it's terrible and all but I don't think I should quit. I really think I have something worthwhile to contribute."

MUSICIAN: How'd you hook up with Praxis, the Georgia Satellites' managers?

FORBERT: Andy McLennon and Jack Emerson [of Praxis] were friends of mine. I moved down to Nashville in the spring of '85. I was ready for a break from the city; I had been here nine years. Well, it was all country music down there, there weren't many people who listened to "Sunny Afternoon" or "Music from Big Pink." I met these guys who actually liked the Kinks a whole lot and we hit it off. They would finish a hard day of all kinds of terrible hassles in the management field and actually go home and listen to a doggone Mitch Ryder record. So we became friends. That was all well and good but I was certainly going to make a thorough search of what my next management thing would be. I sent tapes out, made phone calls. This was probably the lowest point for me, because my self-esteem was not very good. I thought I had something to offer but I didn't really think that anybody else felt that way. I was able to call certain people and, "Wow!

They got on the phone! Now what do I say?" In a shaky, uncertain way I'd say, "I've got some songs and a tape and I'm looking for management." It was some pretty rough demos, I might add.

And it turned out of the people who were interested, my friends in Nashville were the most perceptive about it. And they already had my records, it wasn't like I had to buy a few down at the store and ship 'em out. They knew what that record did and what that one didn't do, and they had some thoughts on why. And frankly they started doing real well with the Georgia Satellites and some other things. Aside from being my friends, I began to see that they were getting it together, too.

My band is another element in this picture. I was playing solo all of '86, paying the rent and taking it back to square one. I had a nice little following that would come to these clubs and it was great fun. But I began to hear that backbeat. I had a tape of a five-week tour I did in '81, after the "Orbit" record flopped. I started thinking about the guys in that band and how they were very simple, supportive players. Clay Barnes has played guitar with me off and on since we were kids. Danny Counts played a good simple bass. I got in touch with these guys and they were up for it. And you had to be there. Forget all this other stuff! [laughs] We got in my van with our entire crew--Amos Jones--and we did what work was there. Even if we could have afforded a keyboard player we didn't have room for him. We had our equipment, our luggage and ourselves in a van. We would get to the place and pull into the cheapest motel we could find. We never knew where we were staying. It didn't matter; no one wanted to reach us anyway, there were no interviews or photo sessions or radio IDs. No way! We're playing Greenville, Mississippi, in the corner of this bar/restaurant. Then we'd get a good gig, maybe play Tipitina's in New Orleans. But then it would be up to Ruston, Louisiana, and "Okay, this is ordinarily a disco, just set up right here in front of the mirrored wall, under the big chrome ball." Fine. I'm playing road manager and the whole bit.

But we probably enjoyed it. I know I did. It was a challenge. I felt I had to do it. It wasn't like this is it for the rest of my life. I had a plan in mind and I felt we should "earn" some good luck. Everything happened so quick when I started out that I wasn't at the time feeling really secure in it, justified that I'd earned a place in this thing. At the time of my second album they even talked about putting my picture on the cover of the "Rolling Stone" and I said, "I don't know who else you can put on there that week instead, but it shouldn't be me." I just said no, because, man, I was a little uneasy. So they put Bob Hope on. I know he's not uneasy.

Clay says the worst gig was the Rodeo Clowns Dressing Room and Beer Bar in Billy Bob's Complex in Fort Worth. It wasn't the big room, it was the beer bar. The whole room's covered in dust. You couldn't put your jacket down in that room! We got consistent work at a restaurant in Florida. They had a deck out there and a little tiki hut where they featured live music. They said, "Sure, we'll have you!" So we played time and time again in the tiki hut. We liked that. At least they were real nice to us and, you know, it was Florida.

I've been working every day on this for the last five years, be it talking to lawyers, putting a band together, writing songs, road managing, booking the dates or whistling "Romeo's Tune" into the phone to some club manager in Birmingham, Alabama! Then I got a call asking me to do a couple of nights with the Crickets at the Lone Star in New York. My Buddy Holly stand-in wasn't that great, but it was fun to meet those guys and I met Garry Tallent again at that gig. He said, "What are you doing? I have a studio, I'd like to hear some of your songs, I'll call you." I figured, "Yeah, sure. Back to the tiki hut." But he called a couple of weeks later. He was really sincere. So I sent him a tape and he said, "I like it. I like these particular songs, let's do it, bring your group in."

Everybody was happy with what we got, so we started going back. We weren't doing "demos." We had a 24-track windfall, gift horse, great thing courtesy of Garry. Bob Clearmountain did us a favor and mixed a couple of things. We could take this around to people and if they didn't like it, they didn't like it, but if they did it wasn't a case of "These are the demos, we'd like to work with this producer and have this guy engineer." This was "it" and if you liked it, you liked us. That was a luxury, especially in this day and age when it can get so complicated. A nice demo becomes a never-heard album.

MUSICIAN: Okay, you were a free agent, you finished your record. MCA was interested, Capitol wanted it. Capitol said let's put this out, you said okay, nothing was signed. Then while you and Capitol were flirting, you turned around and jumped into bed with Geffen.

FORBERT: Those were the three main bites. For a while I didn't know if it would come out on a small independent label. I was proud of it and I wanted to put it out. I figured, I'm working toward a goal and if that's the next step, so be it. But I had good representation and a few people heard the tape and one made us a better offer than the others, in a very serious situation. That's all there is to it. And it was a "lot" better. It wasn't just a few minor details. But we don't know what will happen; this record might not sell any copies and it won't be any skeleton in the closet of anyone who let it go. Or maybe it will.

MUSICIAN: For today, the hard luck story has a happy ending.

FORBERT: It has a "natural" quality to it. Jack and Andy were my friends, it began to look more feasible that we work together professionally. Then we ate humble pie for a year. Luckily when I met Garry again he made good on his offer and meant what he said. And luckily I had a group together that was ready.

It's real hard to sit on the sidelines and watch cats run touchdowns and make 90-yard returns and 60-yard field goals. And yes, I've been jealous of certain people and I've always got my own opinion of music and who I like. But when you go through a lot of this stuff you begin to develop a certain kind of respect for anybody who can stay in this, with all of its potholes and pitfalls, and keep it together and move along. Whatever kind of music they're making, at a certain point you've got to hand it to them. You may not like Conway Twitty but holy smoke, you have to respect that. And I didn't used to. What did I know?