

**Music Matters Review/Interview: Rocking Horse Head
By Michael Devlin**

What kinda guy broke into the music scene in New York, on stage with an acoustic guitar, in clubs where they were there to hear New Wave? What kinda guy writes songs that can be funny and poignant, lighthearted but powerful, topical and specific, yet don't seem to age? What kinda guy sings every word as though the thought behind it was a physical thing in the room with you? What kinda guy releases one of his best albums nearly twenty years into his career? What kinda guy remembers to enjoy his family? What kinda guy still keeps searching, and finds truth and beauty to share? What kinda guy listens to the questions you ask, and answers in a gracious and thoughtful manner? It's a Steve Forbert kind of guy, that's really what!

DEVLIN: I think Rocking Horse Head is one of your best ever.

FORBERT: I think it's real good. My feeling now is that it is the best one since a long time ago, maybe since "Jackrabbit Slim."

DEVLIN: When you play live you seem totally involved with your songs. When you record an album, do you find sharing your songs with other musicians to be distracting?

FORBERT: No. By the time we get in there I'm ready to go--I'm looking forward to it. And with these guys from Wilco who joined us, and with Brad Jones playing bass and producing, there was certainly no reservation. We didn't do any rehearsing, we just started going at it. We had most of the record done in four days.

DEVLIN: Is it unusual to do a record that quickly?

FORBERT: Well, it takes a little work after that, we had to go back in later and do another session in which we recorded "Dear Lord," and a couple of other things, so it wasn't all done that quick, but pretty near it. Everything just fell into place with these guys. Actually, the last record, Mission of the Crossroad Palms, we did in five days--I'm talking about basically. Of course there's touch-up work and the odd tambourine or something. Basically they happen pretty quick.

DEVLIN: You travel with a well-worn guitar. How long have you had it?

FORBERT: I played it on Alive on Arrival when I first got it. I've been playing it for nearly twenty years.

DEVLIN: Is that your only guitar or just the one you take on the road?

FORBERT: That's it! I risk taking it on the road.

DEVLIN: I noticed that you were having some trouble tuning it at some shows back in 1995.

FORBERT: Yeah, it got a little weird. It just needed some adjustments.

DEVLIN: There is something you do with your voice, I can only describe it as a stutter laugh, that shows up from time to time.

FORBERT: I know what you're saying. There are a few of those that show up on Crossroad Palms, maybe too many [he chuckles].

DEVLIN: Is that something that just happens?

FORBERT: Well, I like to record live, you know, and for me, almost all the time I'm singing with the players right there, and things just happen. Sometimes someone's headphones will be nearly falling off, or they'll drop their music, or they're trying to read a quick sketch of the song. Sometimes some of those laughs get on there. It's usually some kind of contact with one of the players.

DEVLIN: When you were starting out, was there anyone you aspired to sing like.

FORBERT: There were so many good people . . . Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and Hank Williams Sr. The Beatles were such great singers, the Rolling Stones, the list just goes on and on. Later on I got way into Sandy Denny. I was certainly influenced by Bob Dylan's songwriting, as well as Neil Young's, Hank Williams's, and Robert Johnson's. I don't think there was anybody whom I actually tried to sing like, because I always had my own sound and I just went with it.

DEVLIN: Did you like to sing when you were a kid?

FORBERT: Well yeah! And then I got into bands when I was ten or eleven and played in a lot of different ones for ten years. I might have stayed in bands but I couldn't get one to go up from Mississippi to New York and play my songs and starve for an indefinite amount of time. So I had to go solo then. I've been singing for a long time. For me playing guitar means singing.

DEVLIN: Are you ever surprised with how closely people identify with your songs?

FORBERT: Well that's the reward. I've got three kids, and being on the road a lot, it's a bit of a sacrifice, all that time away from home and all. And there's the work of writing the songs and the work of making the record, and getting them as right as I can. They don't always sell real well, so the reward for me is the people who seem to be really affected by it, and really seem to get close to it.

DEVLIN: I noticed that "Big New World" is from a child's perspective.

FORBERT: Right. We have a new baby who's going to be two. That's the perspective of when she was about one, that's when I was writing the song.

DEVLIN: How old were you when you recorded *Alive on Arrival*?

FORBERT: Twenty-three.

DEVLIN: The songs on that record are awfully mature for a twenty-three-year-old.

FORBERT: All I know about *Alive on Arrival*, in retrospect, is that I was a kid in New York City, and a kid growing up in Mississippi, and although I had a day job, I had the time and energy to totally focus on that record. When we did make it, it was recorded totally live, no overdubs. Everything was very focused and very much in the here and now. I think that's what came through on that record.

DEVLIN: I remember one time, a friend was having a rough time and needed to hear some common sense. I had him sit down to listen to "Thinkin'" and "It Isn't Gonna Be That Way." Do you find that your songs sometimes to make you feel better about something?

FORBERT: They're mainly coming from places where I'm at, not places of advice, but places of searching. And they turn out to be conclusions or encouragements within myself. Another one would certainly be "Search Your Heart," which was on Streets of This Town.

DEVLIN: The song "Oh, To Be Back with You" (which I had always thought was entitled "Mission of the Crossroad Palms") is such an incredibly poetic and beautiful song. The song flows easily from image to image and then on to the powerful yet plainly spoken "Lots of time to think it over/ Lots of blame to claim and shoulder." Are those seemingly easy phrases hard won?

FORBERT: It was written in 1992. A lot of it was of a piece. It really is The Mission of the Crossroad Palms, it could be called that. There's just a search there, in wishing he was back to where he'd been. It probably went pretty easily because, really, I hadn't thought about it, but "Lots of time to think it over/ Lots of blame to claim and shoulder" doesn't technically rhyme. When you have those things that say exactly what you want to say, although they don't rhyme perfectly, it's usually a case where you're just going with it and it's happening real fast. If you were laboring over it you would say, "Let's see, 'shoulder' doesn't rhyme with 'over,' so what can I do here to fix this?"

DEVLIN: You still perform many of the songs that you were playing twenty years ago. Does your experience of the songs as you play them change over the years?

FORBERT: You kind of pick up on different things in the songs after a while. To be frank about it, I sing "Going Down to Laurel" a lot because it's one of the better known songs. You know, "Glad to take a chance and play against the odds, and glad to be so crazy in my day." After nearly twenty years of making records, the music business can be a bit of a struggle and all. Each time I put out a record, I really am going against the odds. 'Cause there's just so much out there and so much high-gear competition from people who automatically do extensive, lavish videos and get tons of television promotion. Indeed I am playing against the odds. So when I sing "Glad to take a chance and play against the odds," it has perhaps a deeper meaning now, a different shade on it. So the songs do change, sometimes they work for you in a different way.

DEVLIN: Do you get tired of playing "Romeo's Tune"?

FORBERT: I don't mind. A lot of people are there to hear that and if they like it, it might bring back some memories or they identify me with it. You know, they bought a ticket and they're there, so it's really not that much of a stretch. I actually do like the song, I don't have any problem with the words and what it says. I usually save it until the end anyway, so I can say other things and new things and all.

DEVLIN: A recurring theme in your songs is the recognition of the important things in life and keeping your priorities straight. We find it in songs like "You Cannot Win 'Em All," "Thinkin'" and "It Isn't Gonna Be That Way," and phrases like, "Stop and smell the roses" and "Go home and hug your kid." Is there a particular attraction to this theme?

FORBERT: I'm just trying to write songs that I feel like I can sing, night after night. I have to feel strongly about them to say they are finished and then to sing them for people and certainly to record them. That's what I am trying to be true to--just to be satisfied with the work and say, "OK, I'm behind this song and I may be singing it for twenty years."

DEVLIN: You have the ability to nail down what it is like to be an adult in rat-race America. Songs like "Responsibility" and "It Is What It Is (And That's All)" come to mind.

FORBERT: All I can say is that the whole thing drives me nuts. So I'm always grappling with all of the input. I travel a lot, and everywhere I go it's just automobiles, and more automobiles, people

in automobiles, things looking more the same with more homogenization and less accent on the individual. These aren't strange words to you, I'm sure. There's more permeation of our lives and culture by big business and logos and things. And really, I'm not all that amused by it. These songs for me are a process of trying to distill it, and put it in some sort of perspective for myself as a person. I'm very into the American in me. I'm out there all over the country, and I'm one of them!

DEVLIN: This may be a silly question, but I noticed that the moon shows up in many of your songs.

FORBERT: Rain is in a lot of them too. I don't know why. There's a lot of moon on the new record. That I do know.

DEVLIN: Considering you have been making records for twenty years, this is quite hypothetical, but if you were not making music now, what would you be doing?

FORBERT: I really don't know. I gave up an interest in artwork and drawing during high school to move more into music. Between the two, I just went more into music. I might have done some more painting and drawing, I can really understand painting, as we all can. Everybody has paintings that really affect them. But I really can't say. I wasn't in school getting a particular degree or something. I never got that far with an alternate plan!

DEVLIN: Are there any particular artists you enjoy now?

FORBERT: I like Renoir and Monet.

DEVLIN: How about other musicians?

FORBERT: I still think Robert Johnson's incredible. I'm still really captivated listening to him, listening to him carefully. And I like work by Morrissey, his record called "Vauxhall" and I, and I still go back to John Cale's "Paris 1919" every month or so. I like that record a lot in the way it makes me feel. Elvis's "Sun Sessions" will never let you down. There's a vitality there that cuts through any day. Those records, recordings, they're just recorded live, three guys in the studio just letting go.

DEVLIN: Do you prefer playing with a band?

FORBERT: I don't want to do the same thing all the time. I've played solo so much now that I look forward to getting a band out on the road for maybe a month of several dates. I don't mind playing solo, I just don't want to do it all the time.

DEVLIN: Will you be doing the folk festivals in the summer?

FORBERT: I would imagine I'll do some of them. I'd like another crack at the Philadelphia Folk Festival, but I don't know what's planned right now.

DEVLIN: You say so many things in your songs. If you could say just one thing, and everyone in the world would have to listen to it, what would that be?

FORBERT: [Laughs] You'd have to give me about a week to think about that. Uh, maybe, "You can't roller-skate in a buffalo herd," but Roger Miller already said that, didn't he?