

**Steve Forbert: Songs From The Everyman**  
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Tell the truth, especially the basic reality of it; see life as it is without lecturing or preaching - never whining, just talk in plain English and let it roll off your tongue as fine poetry and poignant melodies. Do this, and people will listen. Do this and people will relate to your words. That's what Steve Forbert does for so many of us. He is our everyman, our common man, our man with common sense, but also with a deep compassion that urges his emotions - your emotions - to the surface so you can cry and rejoice and realize who you are, all at the same time. So many people who listen to Forbert's lyrics say it's like they were written for them. Many have been helped through the rough roads, the growing-up pitfalls, and the loves and laughter and nostalgias of our lives while listening to Forbert's songs over the past two decades.

"Maybe you wish you had money / then you might think you could live  
life is so brief you may think time a thief / better live for whatever it gives."

'It Is What It Is (And That's All)'  
(from "Mission of the Crossroad Palms")

The stories in Forbert's songs are at once personal - many of his own trials and tribulations and realizations. On that canvas are the highs and lows, doubts and demands of life; sometimes the exaggerations and disbeliefs. But also he sings the stories of people, and the list is long like 'The Trouble with Angels' about a spoiled girl stumbling, or temptation in 'Don't Talk to Me,' or the anthem ballad 'The American in Me,' which eloquently and simply describes the American mindset and situation

"I need me a destination / I ain't the kinda cat's gon' just jump in his car an' drive I'm using my  
transportation / so then when am I going to arrive?"

Steve Forbert has arrived many times. His train first pulled into the station in New York in the mid 1970s after he left his home in Meridian, Mississippi. By 1978, at the age of 23, he connected with manager Danny Fields and released his first album, "Alive on Arrival." He was off to a great career, at least for a while. And here we are now as twenty-four years have flowed under the bridge, with 17 albums of music - a record of all the highs and lows a troubadour's career could experience in the most temperamental of industries.

On stage Forbert lets his energy flow to you through his unschooled vocals that capture the vitality of life, the irony of mistakes, the urgency of love, the weight of acceptance, and the optimism of tomorrow.

There is energy in the air when he plays. The plectrum punctuates notes and his hand slides up the guitar neck sometimes like caressing a lover, or maybe like massaging tight muscles in an old friend's back . . . because "you can't win 'em all," or just hanging on to something for dear life. He sings breathy, sometimes tense words that seem carved out of hardwood, almost reluctant and a little rough around the edges. But there is clarity, every word understandable and ringing with its own vitality.

Does he have the hits? Sure, but at this point in his long and hard-working career I think he's earned other measures than just the top 20 on the charts, although 'Romeo's Tune' did go there from his second album "Jackrabbit Slim" (1979). Rather watch the people in the crowd singing along with song after song. Take the music on merit, the words on poetry, and the experience as life.

"I'm glad to be so young  
talkin' with my tongue  
glad to be so careless in my way  
glad to take a chance and play against the odds  
glad to be so crazy in my day!"

*'Goin' Down to Laurel' (from "Alive on Arrival")*

From his first album, "Alive On Arrival," in 1978 up to his just-released "Live at the Bottom Line" - some 17 albums, 6 of them live recordings, Forbert's songs chart us through the choppy waters of American life from youth to middle age.

I spoke with Steve before his upcoming concert, Feb. 13, 2002 in Green Bay.

RK You've just come out with another live album, "Live at the Bottom Line," number six, I think. How is it being received?

SF It came out not long ago, September of last year and of course by then it was a year old after all the work. That's out, and "Young, Guitar Days" (YGD) is out. To tell you the truth there wasn't a lot of expectation for it, I went along with the Koch label, and really had to get involved to make sure I'd be happy with what came out, but I'm proud of it. I have a couple of other things going.

After finishing YGD there was still a CD of more songs, and that's coming out - "More Young, Guitar Days." That may come out this spring; it's nearly finished. And then I'm gonna start another new record before long. With YGD, most of the stereo mixes were already done, so we went with those. There was not a lot of recording to do. We just had to find the best version on the old tapes. Those tapes are a pain in the butt. Problem was in that time period they took a chemical out of the tapes, so those era tapes get sticky - so you have to bake them in a convection oven for 6-8 hours to take the moisture out of them, then they're sticky again in a few weeks. Those are the things you encounter. We're done with that.

RK A lot of your songs are about the common person's human condition, like you're the everyman. Do you feel you've connected on that level with the larger audience?

SF Well it remains pretty personal. I'm not playing arenas and stadiums; it was only really popular like that for a couple of years. It's been a folk-rock cult thing all these years. That's really what it's all about, playing these clubs and the things that happen each night with these audiences, it's a personal style of music, it's as much about the lyrics as the music.

RK So it remains personal even now?

SF That's who I sing for, [the people] who shows up each given night. It's not the biggest show in town, no tour program, no t-shirts, but I like to keep doing it, that's what it's all about, the people that take the trouble to be there.

RK Is "Mission of the Crossroad Palms" something like a midlife crises album? There's a lot of heavy thought on that one. [Such as 'Sure Was Better Back Then' and 'It Is What It Is (And That's All)', etc.]

SF A lot of it was written in 1992 - not quite midlife crises brackets, I was about 38, a lot happened that year, a lot of [pause] ... a good year for writing, a lot of traveling, some turmoil, so "Mission of the Crossroad Palms" was kind of a search to get through a bunch of rubble in a way, that's what I think. It's got a lot of reflections. "The American in Me" (recorded in 1991) is more of a unified theme. 1992 was a hell of a year, lot of extremes. Just promoting the "The American in Me" in Germany, opening shows for Elton John, [the] strain on [my] marriage. It's not something

you really scheme to happen, but it produced good songs. People like your stuff from certain times, like people say they like James Taylor best from his drug days 'cause of the good music. But, well [pause] this past year [2001] was no piece of cake. [Steve is referring to his recent divorce].

RK Is the midlife crisis a myth, or is life just always like this? I kind of get that feeling from your songs, you observe very well.

SF You said midlife crisis, I think mathematically - barring any miracle drugs to offset aging, so naturally you'll reach a point where you're midway through. I think there's the practical matter of it, I've done this time [in life], here's where I'm at, and most people would have liked to have done more or things differently. You see the mistakes you've made, you have that perspective, and some objective sense of when you were young, so that's gonna happen. Neil Young sang, "Old man, take a look at my life" and "Twenty-four and there's so much more," but you know at 44 you can say that. So midlife crisis, they say it more about men than women, but that may be a cliché, a myth, you're probably taking stock of it for the first time.

Forbert has had the best and the worst of the business, from his charted hit in 1980 and then the complicated and prolonged contract disputes between 1983 and 1987. The dispute was a tough time for Forbert because CBS/Nemperor Records were not pleased with the work on an anticipated fifth album (following the two low-selling efforts, "Little Stevie Orbit" in 1980 and "Steve Forbert" in 1982).

His contract was put into suspension, which basically meant he was frozen in legal time and could not go elsewhere to make an album. This occurred at a time when he needed to rebound from the last two albums and generate another popular record. He was entering his 30-somethings era and became far more versed in music law than he probably ever wanted to be. The lessons here for young musicians are many, and focus on following through rather than jumping around, and maintaining good relations through your manager with the record companies, and so on.

He became a free agent in 1987, got a band together, toured a lot, and solidified enough songs to record an excellent album in 1988 titled "Streets Of This Town." Many believe this is when Forbert entered his renaissance period - thirty-three years old and writing some of his best material. The amazing album, "The American in Me." followed in 1992, and then a string of studio albums, including "Mission of the Crossroad Palms" in 1995, "Rocking Horse Head" in 1996, and "Evergreen Boy" in 2000.

Without exception these are fine albums and were interspersed with "The Best Of ..." and live albums, including his latest effort "Live at the Bottom Line" in 2001. No wonder he wrote about laying down a weary tune, on "Mission of the Crossroad Palms." a song that could have many meanings

"The missionary paid my way / an' put me off to sleep,  
I woke up early yesterday / an' found a place to eat"  
'Lay Down Your Weary Tune Again'  
("Mission of the Crossroad Palms")

RK Tell me about the song 'My Time Ain't Long' on the "Rocking Horse Head" album. Is this autobiographical, or just a hunch, or just a song? You sing "Fortune teller say your time ain't long."

SF It's just a weird song, it's just a short story, I can't really explain much about it, it kinda wrote itself; it has such a modest goal. It just ends up with the wife saying, how can that woman

possibly predict the future - get real. It's like a Raymond Carver story, his stories are really low key, it's almost more in the nuances than the meaning of the story, I like the way it went. I didn't try to add to it.

RK The "Rocking Horse Head" album has a few references to God, more in a searching way than perhaps some of your other albums. What's up? [i.e., the line in 'My Time Ain't Long' says, "An' check your faith in God"; the song 'I Know What I Know'; in 'Dream, Dream' the reference to "dream of a Sunday"; and in the prayer-like song 'Dear Lord' about wanting to find someone].

SF In a way 'Don't Stop' is like that. I selected those songs because they seemed to work together and make up a record. All I can say is I was kind of interested in the humility side of things, there's got to be some force a little bigger and more insightful than us out there. It's quite a set of circumstances that make life possible. I was just reading about the young universe, and how we would be inundated by radiation from all the light from all the stars, nothing but light in the sky. So you know, it's all at the very least a miracle that we're even on the road driving.

RK Your early influences, you've said in other interviews, were Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Hank Williams Sr., the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan to name a few. Now, years later with all this life experience, who has really stuck to you, remaining an influence?

SF I think Robert Johnson. He's still just as intense to me as when I was discovering him, and the more you listen, the more you hear what an amazing talent he was. He remains to the bone for me. I haven't really lightened up on Robert Johnson, he hasn't lightened up on me; he clears the deck for me. Awesome.

RK Who is influencing you now, anyone new?

SF Well, oddly enough, it would be Bob Dylan. He's rewriting the book again, you might have thought how could he do it, but he's doing it. That's pretty impressive.

RK What is your songwriting process?

SF Well, I don't have a lot to say about it, it's sort of a mystery kind of thing. For me it's, you know, you just start with something, you get the picture of the whole thing at once, or other times you're just starting with a guitar figure. It's something emotional, whether it's lyrics or just some guitar chords. The inspiration is emotional obviously. For me they take a lot of work, really, for me it becomes a matter of commitment. In the last few years they've become like puzzles, really involved, like Chinese wood puzzles. I have to make a commitment to start one of the puzzles; they take a lot of figuring out.

RK Do you write other things besides songs - short stories, keep a journal, etc.?

SF Yeah, I do. I always write down things that seem important to me - bowling with the kids, and so on. I lost one of my journals, though, so that kind of dampened my enthusiasm for ever compiling it all 'cause I'm missing a chapter.

RK Do you see your songs as sources of advice or just situations, a place that you're in at that moment?

SF Well, there are songs going all the way back to 'Thinkin' (on "Alive on Arrival," 1978) that come to mind. I don't really start them to try to give advice, but they say 'write what you know' and that's what I know. 'Search Your Heart' is another one. It is a part of what I do.

RK Do you live by your own songs? You know, accepting certain things as they are, follow your own advice?

SF Yeah, sometimes, you know sometimes when you're singing them. I don't think about them when I'm driving down the highway, but when I sing them different ones might speak to me.

RK You now have 6 live albums. This tells me the spontaneity of the crowd is really important to you. How do you see it, how does it feel?

SF Yeah, that's the way I continue to make records in the studio as well; try to catch a good performance, that's still it for me. I lost the ability to make records by overdubbing; I lost that by the time I got to New York. The more I got into the solo mentality, the more I got into the troubadour mentality, ...then it's about more of what you have to say, rather than making careful hit records like Fleetwood Mac. I'm not too crazy about doing overdubs.

RK What's the big reward in all this; I mean, if you make a mint, sure, but you don't just do music for money.

SF Well the whole process is something I enjoy. I do travel around a lot and play, and part of it is making a living. But there are so many things involved in it. It does remain fun to get up every day and do the different things that are involved, if it's writing a new song or taking tapes to be baked for "Young, Guitar Days." I think you could do a lot worse than that. It becomes a full-time thing, but personal, never just work.

RK Could you sum up the music business?

SF It is just something that's getting more sophisticated all the time. It is now the art of finding the broadest audience in the very shortest time, so you should expect the music to get less personal, less heartfelt because the marketplace becomes bigger. That's just the way it goes. At one point Ford got so much competition from Japanese cars, they said, 'We're gonna make better cars and do more to compete.' It would be nice to see that in the music business, you know, like the music business having to compete with records that are real good and really selling from Switzerland or Algeria or someplace; to have to make a better product to please customers. I don't know if it will happen, now they tend to shape the culture more. People who write songs will continue to do what they do. I like Jewel's new single, 'Standing Still'; there's good emotion in that song. The Strokes are pretty good. I like their funky sound. I like their bass player.

RK Do you have any advice to young players?

SF Actually, play a lot - play open mics, whatever, if you have to drive forty-five minutes to play at an open mic, then do that. You must be honest about the reaction you get from the audience, and then do the right thing from there. Yeah, play a lot.

"Who took your hand when I had nothing to say?  
Who brushed your tears away?  
Who heard your cries when I had no time to spare?  
Who came on wings that day?"  
'If I Want You Now' ("Rocking Horse Head")

Steve Forbert, that's who.