

**Steve Forbert Interview**  
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I first saw Forbert perform in 1978, opening for Tom Rush at The Main Point in Philadelphia, playing to a packed room that didn't know his material. Forbert, age 22, had just signed with Nemperor Records and was making the rounds with material from his debut LP, "Alive on Arrival." I vividly remember his impact on the crowd. It was love at first chord.

I became part of the faithful following the Meridian-born boy from gig to gig—Folk City, The Bottom Line, the better-known honkytonks across the Tri-State area. Despite being hyped as "the next Dylan" (a curse even Bruce Springsteen had trouble excising) Forbert's next LP "Jack Rabbit Slim" was well received, breaking the Top-20 with its hit single "Romeo's Tune." The poignant, romantic balladeer had convinced columnists that the American libido was about to be captured by yet another son of Mississippi. Honkytonks gave way to huge theatres.

But the next decade was a nightmare for Forbert. Subsequent LPs—though clever and charming—spawned no further "hits." Then problems with his label and contractual shackles prevented the release of more records. Nevertheless, Forbert persevered, recording songs no one would hear for years while touring incessantly. It was back to the honkytonks.

Now, a quarter century later, "Romeo's Tune" still finds its way to the airwaves. Alas, the rest of Forbert's repertoire is overlooked by radio programmers, but Forbert's fans are still faithful, and his output, like his latest "Just Like There's Nothin' To It," is still a treat to old and new listeners alike. I considered this as I sat in The Stanhope House, waiting for Forbert to take the small stage. The baby-faced "next Dylan" still packs the room at age 49, and he's better for the wear. His output may be under-appreciated, but the faithful know his songs will live on for generations. The elusive hit-single will matter little at the end of a run when legend status arrives.

The lights go down and Forbert picks up his guitar. He breaks into "It's Been A Long Time." His material is timeless. He's shed the hype and pressure—it's just him and his guitar, now—harp and comfortable-old-shoe vocals delivering those sweet, disillusioned, magically perceptive songs that elude adequate description and render his audience emotionally raw.

And if that ain't love, what is?

(conducted Oct. 25, 2004)

Clifford Meth: The first time I caught your act was when you were opening for Tom Rush at The Main Point in Philadelphia. You'd just been signed to Nemperor Records. I was 17 at the time and I think you were 22 or 23. A quarter century later, your act hasn't changed much and the new music is still right on target. I've been playing "Just Like There's Nothin' to It" all weekend. Of course, I already knew half of the material from seeing you perform them.

Steve Forbert: That could be, if you come to the shows. I do a lot of testing of material.

CM: When you say testing, do you actually change the tempo? The words?

SF: Yeah, I try them out. Sometimes the lyrics aren't finished, or sometimes they need a bridge, or something needs to be repeated and you don't really know until... When you play it for people, it puts a whole different pressure on the song.

CM: Do you ever consider the material locked or is everything in flux?

SF: What do you mean?

CM: Well, for instance, Bob Dylan will change the tempo and even lyrics of a song a decade after it's been recorded, but some folks lock down on lyric and the way they perform a song. They do it that way forever.

SF: How often does Bob Dylan change a lyric?

CM: I can think of a few...

SF: Maybe "Tangled Up in Blue." I saw him recently and he changed a line in "Standing in the Doorway" – just one line. But with a couple of exceptions... During the "Hard Rain" tour, he changed "Lay Lady Lay" for the worse. Not a good move. He played with the third person in "Tangled Up in Blue," but not an improvement, I thought.

CM: Oh, I liked what he did with that. You're referring to the "Real Live" L.P.

SF: Yeah. But generally speaking, 99% of the time, I think you'll find he's pretty true to the original lyrics. As far as my lyrics go, I think that's the case. I had to change "The Oil Song" and I update the song "Complications," but those are things that kind of grow, if you will, or different things come into them. But just to change the songs for fun or for just some sort of... I usually find they're better left alone. And I think if you really look at him [Dylan] – and he invented folk rock – he usually sticks with the lyrics pretty close. Pretty close... I don't play with mine much, and when I do, I usually regret it.

CM: Do you consider what you do folk rock?

SF: Yeah.

CM: When the Jimmie Rodgers tribute came out, I was expecting more material like "In the Jailhouse Now" – more rockabilly tunes. I was surprised by the tone of the album. Do you consider these early country songs your real roots?

SF: Well they technically are. He was from my hometown, as you know, so they really are my roots. And since making the record, I'm still kind of learning more about where he got his synthesis of things. But I don't know what to say about the record other than to tell you that I went through the whole catalog and picked tunes that I thought stood the test of time, and some that weren't overdone too much, although everyone's done "Waiting for a Train." I didn't want a lot of songs that you'd have to know a lot about the era or about Jimmie Rodgers. I wanted things that stood out in a general way and I tried to say these are really good songs. And here they are. And any time you do something like that, when you do a cover, you're looking for something that you have a feel for. There were some songs that I tried and I didn't really have a grip on them for my style – I couldn't really go there – so I picked what felt right.

CM: Your choices of covers are always interesting and different from what people might expect. I was surprised when you did "The Tide Is High" the other night. It fit right in with your material, but I wouldn't have expected to see Steve Forbert covering Blondie. Or the Troggs.

SF: Right. "Love Is All Around." I'm just about songs. If it's a good song, I don't care if it's Iggy Pop or Rosemary Clooney.

CM: Have you covered Iggy?

SF: I don't think off hand that I have, but there's several I could get into.

CM: You've been recording for about a quarter century now. Has the process changed much?

SF: Not really. I still try to do it as live as possible. I'm even thinking of doing the next one just totally live. Maybe. It's hard to make a really clean technical record on me because I usually play guitar and sing at the same time.

CM: You don't overlay your voice?

SF: I don't much. Every now and then. But I like to play and sing at the same time. It just works better for me because that's what I really do.

CM: Most of the people who attend your gigs these days are your contemporaries. There's something very nostalgic about your music, even the new material.

SF: I don't mind that it seems nostalgic. I don't think there's anything wrong with carrying a thread through... You're talking 25 years. I think we all know that life is pretty brief. Seventy-odd years and it would seem that it goes by pretty quick. So there you go. I don't have a problem with that.

CM: What I was getting to was that your current material is just as valid – in fact, it's more valid, all things considered – but you're reaching the same people who saw you in the late '70s.

SF: To me it's just all part of the same theme. My priority is not the trends or making adjustments to fit them. It's more about what you're going through and can you think of a way to say it and put it into a song that you might want to sing again and again and again? That's really it.

CM: Would you say that most of your material is autobiographical?

SF: Yeah.

CM: Kurt Vonnegut told me that everything he wrote, he wrote for his sister. He had that singular audience in mind. Do you do that? Do you have a singular muse?

SF: Well, it's really pretty out there in the open. During my last interview, the guy says, "Do you have a new group of young people coming along to the shows?" and the answer is really no. You know, I'd like to say yes, and that would probably be a good thing, but it's the people about my age who are in kind of the same boat. You can hear it in songs like "Responsibility." It's people who would know who Rick Danko was. Or people that might respond to "I Just Work Here." A 21-year-old can listen to that and might like it but, well, you know. So to answer your question, it's this age group.

CM: Were you pals with Rick Danko?

SF: I knew Rick, I didn't hang out with him for weeks on end, but we did shows together and we hung out some in Woodstock.

CM: When I first heard "Wild as the Wind" [the tribute to Danko] it reminded me of your earlier "House of Cards." Of course, I didn't know when you'd written "House of Cards" because it came out so much later. Do you feel a strong connection to the troubadours who came before you?

SF: I feel a pretty strong connection with people who keep it simple and who... The thing about Rick was he was a very giving person and performer. I hear people all over the country say, "He was so real," and every time I saw him he was the same way. And he seemed to enjoy doing what he did. It didn't have to be the full Band and, "However big or small; he played the biggest concerts and the little gigs" you know -- it didn't matter. You look at people like Spalding Gray and what have you got? You've got a desk and a glass of water. You have no effects. That kind of thing—I just like that.

CM: Was "The World Is Full of People" written on piano?

SF: I think it was, yeah.

CM: Do you ever play piano on stage?

SF: I'm still working on the guitar. I can play the song, but the guy on that track is John Deaderick and he's excellent. He's a fairly young guy and he's the best I've found since Benmont Tench for all-around understanding of song styles. He's a real find. He plays with the Dixie Chicks, so he's doing all right.

CM: How often do you write on piano?

SF: Well, I like it. Most people will tell you that it will take you different places. It's a good alternative.

CM: Your piano material comes out sadder.

SF: That could be.

CM: Your earlier material was more rockabilly.

SF: There will be things here and there like that.

CM: You turn 50 in December, Steve. Do you feel the weight of that age?

SF: To tell you the truth, I kind of do. I find you have to... This is an obvious analogy, but if you know anything about mixing records – and I think you do – you're trying to get a balance. You do your mix, and you're trying to take all of the elements and put them in a perspective that mathematically works. There may be five ways it would work really well, but you're going to find one of those five. Maybe a lot of drums. Maybe very little drums. Maybe a lot of reverb on the voice. But you're balancing the ingredients. And to me, that's just the kind of thing that you have to do all the time. And 50 is kind of a... It's not like we live 100 years even, but 50 is just a big round number and it's kind of a thing. But you always have to balance and tweak. You have to balance all the time your attitude about things, I find.

CM: You don't have a band with you much these days – you're out there alone.

SF: I toured some this summer with Mark Stuart and we'll do some shows on and around New Year's. We're going to play Joe's Pub two nights in New York City and play New Year's Eve out in Pennsylvania. I like that.

CM: How old are Sam and Dave now [Steve's twin sons]?

SF: 16

CM: Your daughter?

SF: Katherine, my baby girl, is nearly 10.

CM: We spoke shortly after your boys were born. You were living in Nashville at the time.

SF: I'm still there.

CM: How do the kids handle you being out on the road so much?

SF: It's always been like this for them. I'm gone a lot. It becomes more of a sacrifice, frankly, but

it's what I do and, well, obviously I don't sell a lot of records. I don't have Celine Dion covers, so I'm going to be traveling a lot and playing. It's just a good thing that I happen to love it. But as they get to be teenagers and all, it's a bigger sacrifice all the time.

CM: Have you written about your kids?

SF: "Big New World" was about when Katherine was little, and there's an unreleased song about the boys.

CM: Are the kids musical?

SF: Yeah. Sam is playing piano some, and David is more of a singer. I'm not sure what he's going to do, but he may wind up in some kind of a rock group.

CM: How do they feel about your music? Do they like it?

SF: No, they don't relate to it. They're typical 16-year-olds. Frankly, they respond to what's marketed to them.

CM: Does that make you feel bad?

SF: No, it's all right. I went through my Grand Funk Railroad phase and then I found my footing. So I'm not too judgmental about it. I hear the records they listen to and there are stages of it. It's so finely tuned now that there's things that appeal to 14-year-olds but not 15-year-old boys, and 16 but not 15. The music industry is very industrialized -- it's worse than ever. But if they like the music, then that's fine. It doesn't matter to me. I don't have to listen to it.

CM: Politics killed the careers of some of the greatest songwriters. Phil Ochs and Pete Seeger come to mind. Do you consciously avoid politics in your material?

SF: I touch on things occasionally, but I've never been a person that... Frankly, I'm looking for more general, basic truths. A book like *The Great Gatsby* has more impact on me.

CM: While we're on that, who are the authors that you like?

SF: My favorite is still Scott Fitzgerald. I like Truman Capote.

CM: Back to politics: Did you like Cat Stevens when you were growing up?

SF: Well, yeah. Sure.

CM: What are your thoughts on his being refused entrance into the country?

SF: I don't think it was that shocking. He's been a different sort of person. He made a big deal about his Islamic faith years ago. He's one of only two people that have ever been really successful and quit at the top -- him and Bill Berry of R.E.M. are the only two people in rock I can think of. So he's kind of in the spotlight for that and I think they're saying we need to know more about this guy -- what are his interests? For all we know, he could be very passionate about the fundamental element of Islam. But he came out and said that he's found a way to start doing pop music again, which is obviously not a very extremist attitude. He says, "I've studied Islam more and more and I'm starting to see a way to where I can be doing my pop material comfortably." So we know that now. And forgive me, but if he's going to be recording, the publicity probably didn't hurt him. All in all, the world is not going to be as free as it was. It's just not going to be.

CM: Let's talk about the new CD. One track that disturbed me -- that I had a strong emotional reaction to -- was "I Married a Girl." What was the basis of that song?

SF: It's all in there. There's nothing more to say. I put it all right there.

CM: How much material have you co-written? The only one that springs to mind – in fact the only song of yours I've seen on someone else's album – was "Groovy Tuesday."

SF: Right. I also wrote a thing with Marshall Crenshaw once. He had some wonderful music and I put some lyrics to it. I don't co-write very often. I don't really like it. I mean, Pat DiNizio and I and Mark Johnson, we were drinking and hanging out and wanted to write something just really off the wall, kind of goofy. We were talking about psychedelic groups like The Flowerpot Men and The Chocolate Watch Band and we just wanted to make up a song.

CM: I've seen Pat do the song.

SF: It's not a bad song, really.

CM: No, it's fun... When I saw Jack Tannahill open for you at The Stanhope House, he covered one of your songs. Do you find you're being covered quite a bit more now than you ever were?

SF: I run into people who are playing a song or two in bars and house gigs.

CM: How does that feel?

SF: It's fine. It's certainly a good thing.

CM: Although you're enormously respected by your fans, and even more so by the musicians who know you and came after you, your career has taken a very different direction than the one I would have guessed it was going to take in 1980. What are your feelings about that?

SF: I guess you mean that I'd be maybe more famous and more of a household name or something because I had the support of Sony and I was an unquantified substance at that time. Everybody is the New Elvis until proven themselves.

CM: But it wasn't a failure of the material, Steve. You weren't doing anything any different in '79 or '80 or '81.

SF: But you might have had a failure of the material had things gone otherwise. It's hard to say. What is success? I'm really proud of this new record, and I think it's turned out to be up there with the best records I've made.

CM: Everyone agrees on that.

SF: So, there you go. Like I said, you have to "mix" life. You have to do the balance all the time and say, this is it and this is what's good about this. And you always have to keep in mind parallel universes that you might have thought would be better but could have been a lot worse. Let's face it, Jimi Hendrix was dead at age 27.

CM: Shall we end on that high note?

SF: Well, that seems a little dark, but what I'm saying is a high note.