

Like There's Nothing To It
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While many listeners of rock radio remember Steve Forbert on the strength of his heavily praised 1978 debut, *Alive on Arrival*, and the follow-up, the next year's "Jackrabbit Slim," a lot of those same people wonder what happened to the Southern minstrel. Mississippi native Forbert—who was signed by Columbia Records subsidiary Nemperor after a couple of years of busking in New York—went on to record a few more albums for the Columbia family before finding himself in "label limbo" after his 1982 self-titled release. It took Steve six years to extricate himself from that situation and sign with Geffen. While Forbert's work for Geffen, Giant, and a variety of smaller labels has always garnered strong reviews from the critics, he has never tailored his music to suit radio trends, making it challenging for programmers trying to fit the sounds of their stations to ever-narrowing formats.

Fortunately, Forbert never stopped touring and continued the relationship with his existing audience, while building an even bigger fan base through word-of-mouth buzz. When Triple A stations started to spring up in the early '90s, Steve had a new radio home for his music which helped him continue to reach new fans.

That leads us to 2004, when Forbert and Koch Records are readying for release his strongest studio work since 1979, *Just Like There's Nothin' to It*. The album is an extremely personal collection of songs written over a number of years and boasts contributions from talents as formidable as Viktor Krauss and E-Street Band member Garry Tallent. Forbert was nice enough to take some time out from a recent tour to chat with pro.qb, talking about how a musician that follows his own muse has managed to survive in a hit-driven industry and—of course—the new album.

How have you managed to survive—career-wise—under the radar of the "mainstream" music industry for the last 20-plus years?

A lot of it's about the songs, trying to keep the songs good. Fortunately, there are a lot of places out there where you can play. The midsize club thing went away when they changed the drinking age, but I play solo a lot and that's really helped. I can keep working without a lot of the expensive heaviness of a band and crew. But the people that come out to hear me are pretty discerning. They're the people that will be interested in this kind of presentation. A lot of times they're seated and it's a quiet kind of thing. So that's part of it, and radio is very important. You know, the WXPNS, WFUVs, and other public radio stations. The people that are interested are listening to those stations.

You had an early experience with the politics of the industry that kept you from recording for a few years. What happened and what did you learn from that?

It was just that I moved from Nemperor to Columbia proper. That situation changed and the people involved changed. We didn't manage to keep the communication as strong as it had been on the smaller label. So various things happened, and I made a record that wasn't pleasing to Columbia. It was really just a brick wall. I've really felt that a lot of that was my fault. I'd gotten a little too crazed with tour-record-tour-record, on a yearly basis. There were some reasons that I was perhaps not in the best of focus creatively. You need some good advice when you're that busy touring and working. You need some good guidance because you're really running hard. There's not a lot of time for introspection, or analysis. It gave me a sense of the team involved and how you really need to know what your major people are thinking, and keep everybody abreast of it as well as you can.

The last CD of new material you released was 2000's Evergreen Boy. Since then you've put out a couple of records of older, unreleased recordings and covers.

Well, Young, Guitar Days was 20 songs of outtakes and B-sides from when I was recording for Nemperor. I was aware of all of this extra material that I had written and spent time recording, and I knew what kind of shape it was all in. It wasn't like the stuff had suffered being dated after 20 or so years. I felt like it held up good, and I still like the songs. I wanted it to see the light of day. Then there was More Young, Guitar Days, because I had even more things than I thought. Then I wanted to do this Jimmie Rodgers thing. I kind of felt an obligation to do it ever since I started making records, because he was from Meridian, Mississippi, and so am I. I grew up around his music. When Nolan Porterfield released a biography of him, it was just so informative, it made my feelings about Jimmie Rodgers a lot stronger. A very heroic person, and a very important American. Koch Records was interested in the idea. That was nice. [Producer] Garry Tallent was interested in the idea; that was real nice. So we were able to get some players I knew who would work well together and go in and have a pretty good time. I sorted through all of Rodgers's catalogues, 110 songs or so. Garry and I picked about twelve to really go for, so it was a lot of fun.

Let's talk about the new album, Just Like There's Nothin' to It. I understand you took a fairly unconventional approach to the record, starting with demos recorded in New Jersey. Tell us about the process.

I met Marc Muller, who plays guitar with Shania Twain, in New Jersey, and he had a home studio and some time on his hands. He said, "Let me flesh out some of the guitar and vocal tracks. Let me show you what they might sound like if I was to flesh them out a bit." And to my surprise, he put on a lot of instruments—played them all himself—and so suddenly things were more serious. He brought in Shawn Pelton on drums, and I knew [bassist] Hugh McDonald. So they came in and played on the thing. They made it sound even better. But then Marc had to go out on the road with Shania Twain. So I had to look around for someone who could take what might have been halfway done, add some songs and finish the ones we had with another vision and some objectivity. I spoke to Kyle Lehning, who I'd wanted to work with for years here in Nashville, and he was really busy. But he said maybe we could bring in his son, Jason, and we could all do it together. The next thing I knew Jason and I were off and running. I really liked his ideas.

As I listen to Just Like There's Nothin' to It, I feel like I'm listening to a schizophrenic. All the tracks seem deeply personal, yet there is a huge swing of emotions with the only constant being a theme of change. Do you write from your personal life?

The "swing" is that it's written over three years or so, so you go through a lot of different things in that time. Obviously—listening to the record—I've been through a divorce and the aftermath of that. Anyone who has been through a divorce—and there are many—they know that you really go through some various colors; that affected things. You also hear songs about a girlfriend in New Jersey, so you've got things that have happened over a length of time. This record's totally personal, I don't know how it could be more personal. Maybe Alive on Arrival seems more personal—it may be the only example because it was so autobiographical. I don't know how this one could be more personal.

Do you think the intimacy of the songs is what forms the bond between you and your audience?

Yeah. If you look at my particular audience, that's important and the material also has to grow. And there have to be new songs. This kind of audience would never be interested in a Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons revival show, and you just couldn't bring that into these clubs that have sustained me. It's not what they're looking for.

So how do you apply those values when you go back and sing something like “Goin’ Down to Laurel” or “You Cannot Win (If You Do Not Play),” that have been around for 25 years?

Well, I like those songs, for one thing. They don’t seem particularly alien to me; it’s not like I just don’t feel them anymore. That helps. Sometimes I’ll go into some cover song I like that’s in a similar tempo or mood, so I can kind of ambush some of the ones that I’ve played a thousand times. I’ll start with something else and then race on into it. It works as a vehicle to hit it with some freshness.

There’s a fairly literal tribute to Rick Danko on Just Like There’s Nothin’ to It. Talk about his influence on your music and your personal relationship with him.

Well, I don’t mean to imply that I hung out and did cross-Canadian train tours with Rick, but I did know him up in Woodstock, and the rest is really all in the song. It was just so great that he would be so friendly, and then the next time you saw him he would be the same. He was a real character, kind of a walking musical entity. When he died suddenly, I just felt like that he’ll never be replaced, and that there aren’t many people like that. I know a lot of fellow musicians who have said the same thing.

When you put out your first album you were compared to many singer/songwriters that came before you, including Bob Dylan. How did that affect your psyche?

I don’t think it affected my psyche a whole lot. I was kind of a wildcat back then and I had a slightly reckless tangent going on my own. I certainly wasn’t looking for any identity or label for myself. I had enough pressure just trying to make a contribution and write the best songs I could. And that remains the same, so nothing like those tags made me feel a new sense of obligation. They’re just labels, a simple thing to say—a magazine article sort of thing.