

**Down in Flames**  
**Steve Forbert rescues a Phoenix from the Ashes**  
**by Doug Heselgrave**  
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**A conversation with Doug Heselgrave**

It's a story that's often overshadowed the music itself. Mention Steve Forbert to anyone old enough to remember and you're likely to get two responses. The first is 'Didn't he sing that song, Romeo's Tune?' And, the second is 'Wasn't he supposed to be the new Dylan before his record company pulled the plug on him?' Understandably, these are perspectives that Forbert would rather distance himself from. It's not that he doesn't like Romeo's Tune – he still sings it almost every night he's on the road – or that he doesn't occasionally rue the mechanisms of fate – who doesn't? But, for him, it's all old news. Life didn't end for him in the early eighties when things went awry with Sony; he's issued nine studio albums and just as many live releases since then. Of these, the late nineties discs 'Mission of the Cross Road Palms' and 'Rocking Horse Head' stand up as admirable - though often overlooked - examples of the Americana-alt. country style that was emerging at the time. Recent releases such as 2004's 'Just like there's Nothin' to it' and last year's 'The Place and the Time' reveal an artist who loves what he does and still has something to share with his small, but dedicated audience. I recently caught up with Forbert as he was driving home from weekend gigs in Jacksonville and Atlanta to discuss the release of 'Down in Flames' - an album that had been languishing in the Sony vaults for over two decades until he secured the master tapes back from the corporation last year.

DH: Hi Steve. Did I catch you on the bus driving back from your shows?

SF: (laughs) I don't have a bus. I'm glad I don't have to take all of that on and have a bus on my brain as well as everything else. I drive myself on these trips. I drive a lot of miles by myself. It's been over a thousand miles this weekend, but I love it and wouldn't have it any other way. It's my time to process and go through things. I do a lot of listening. I make my way through a lot of music this way.

DH: What do you listen to?

SF: Well, it would surprise you. I still just love music you know. There are a few artists I'd like to check into more that I've listened to on this trip. An old blues player named Johnny Acey for one. Speaking of the blues, I played with Taj Mahal on Friday night and it was good to hear him. He plays with a trio these days and like me, he has to fill in a lot of the sound himself. He really does play a nice guitar you know, but you probably do know that.(laughs)

DH: He does make it up to Vancouver fairly often, so I have seen him in a lot of different configurations over the years. How about you? Are you playing with a band these days?

SF: Well, I do have people that I play with, but that's the exception. Most of the time it's strictly me.

DH: Is that your choice?

SF: Well, yes. I love it. It's just me getting up there and singing. It's simple and yes, it's still a thrill. I do feel grateful. You know, playing music is what I do. I have a lot of creative energy. I'm always writing something. It's not like I pump one out every day, but I work at writing songs all of the time. They can take quite a while to write. My mind gravitates to working on songs when the distractions calm down around me. So, I mostly work at night when the phone doesn't ring and everything quietens down. My sons are both twenty-two and my daughter is fifteen and she doesn't want much to do with my music, so it's a good time in my life for me to be creative. If I

didn't do this, I would have to do something like paint or write. It just feels good and right for me – this life I've got.

DH: Do you have a home studio where you play around with new music?

SF: I don't, and I never will have a studio. Doug, I can't even turn on a tape machine properly.

There are people who are really good at that kind of thing, but for me, it'd be a whole other distraction. It would be a whole other can of worms and I think I'd record even less. You know how things are these days. The web has given me a presence and things are really good for me in that respect. People know where to find me and I sell my own CDs online. It's worked for me like it has for a lot of other artists who don't get the attention they may have received before. Bruce Springsteen doesn't have to sell his own CDs online, but quite a few of us do. I remember it was Fairport Convention who I first saw selling their own CD. It was called 'Morris On!' – a kind of play on 'Rock On!' of course. They were selling this record from the stage at their concerts because it was all instrumentals and not commercial enough for the record company to release.

DH: So, the story of your dismissal from Sony is very well known. And now you've gotten the masters back from them for a record you did in the early eighties. How does it feel listening to those songs more than 25 years later?

SF: To me, it's not the great relief you might think it would be. It was so long ago that I was angry about all of this. It was a lot of effort to get the tapes back from Sony, and then it was a lot of work to put the whole thing together. I spent six years trying to get a workable agreement with them so that I could release it. It's only been since hard disc sales have deteriorated that groups like Sony are willing to open their vaults and talk to artists about their master tapes.

DH: They must have a huge treasure trove of unreleased albums in their vaults.

SF: Of course. In some ways, they're waiting for the periodic resurgence of an artist. It's a long view approach to see if someone like Nick Drake has a resurgence and they can release something they've been holding onto.

DH: It makes me think of how Columbia Records is releasing every performance by Leonard Cohen they can get their hands on now that he's so popular again.

SF: Right. Sometimes it may be as simple as they may return rights to you simply as a tax break for the company. With 'Down in Flames', I worked it out so that I have hard copy rights and Sony has digital rights. You could say that they've given me a car with no wheels as digital is what people are choosing now. They're not doing anything with it now, but that's fine with me because Sony releasing it as an MP3 while I'm selling it as CDs would put me in the position of competing with myself. But, a lot of my audience is of an age that they want to have a hard copy three CD set that they can hold in their hands. It makes it real for them. Some of them don't even feel it's real until they're holding vinyl, but that's another story. So, at this point I'm just taking it in that it's finally out. When I listen to it, I can honestly say that I think the performances are really good. I worked with RobbyTurner to put it into shape.

DH: Were you tempted to play around with it and re-record anything?

SF: Not so much you know. I remember how hard we worked on it originally. But, you know Robbie is a great bass player and he re-recorded some of the bass on different tracks. He told me if he was going to do the other work, he'd like to get a little Fender bass in there. We did refurbish one new lead guitar on 'Come with me' and add a few colours on keyboards. But, mostly it's what it was left intact from the original sessions.

DH: Has working on getting this disc out given you any perspective on your career? Directions you'd like to go in your work?

SF: That's a hard one. I'm kind of looking forward with it rather than back. As you know, Down in Flames as I released it isn't simply the lost studio album. It's a three disc set. I really like the songs on Disc two because no one has heard any of them. They're demos and they sound spontaneous and full of potential directions to explore. They're totally unheard songs and it would be interesting if they -by their own merit, took on a life of their own. It would be a hilarious kind of vindication if one of the songs was used in a movie or TV show.

DH: One of the songs is called 'They're out to break us.' Is that a reference to your situation at the time?

SF: No, not really. It was really more of a straight up historical song. I was envisioning Paul Revere and the British fleet off the Boston harbour. Invasion is imminent. In fact, I used the music from that song with a completely different set of lyrics about whether or not to stay married – when I was going through all of that. That song appears on 'Rocking Horse Head.'

DH: Have you been singing any of the songs off the record in your live show?

SF: I've been doing 'Come with me' and I'll work some others into the show.

DH: Working on this record must have been quite a trip for you in terms of reminding you how everything has changed in the business from sound to marketing since you first started out as a very young man.

SF: It's hard to know where to start with that one. I could talk about the sound of the two inch analogue tapes we used to use. They sound great. Those old microphones were so good. When I think of recording, way back in the fifties the sound was perfect. You can't tell me that Buddy Holly records didn't sound good. They sounded great. It was just different than things sound today. But, other than sound, there were still a lot of things that I preferred back then. When I started out, a person had to go through something to get a major label contract. There was a screening process. Like I said, no one would take you seriously if you put out your own records. It wasn't possible. You usually had to go through a small label like Tomato or Alligator to get noticed. You had to have an invitation to the party. Now, you can be your own party – for what it's worth. Even though I ran into a stalemate with the A and R at Sony, I liked it better then because you had to earn what you got. The only other way was to be a songwriter and have an established artist sing your song, and maybe someone would let you make your own record. Or, you could be introduced to a label like say Jesse Winchester was 'discovered' by Robbie Robertson on the Band. But, basically, getting into music was a trial by gigs or a trial by tears. You ask how much has changed – too fucking much has changed.

DH: So, when you go out and perform are you conscious of trying to attract a new audience or are you pretty much content with the crowd you've got?

SF: No. I don't hope to relate to young people in a musical way. It's not that they can't enjoy my music, but they have their own, sometimes very worthy artists. I respect my audience. They are a group who already have a certain mind set, so that when I choose to play 'Middle Age' or 'Thirty more years' or songs like that, they won't be put off. It means something to them. What I do feels good and right to me. I have a personable or a shared experience with my audience that is a lot of fun to be part of. It's a lot more fun than doing the county fair circuit. It's just not where I can be truest to myself.

DH: What's truest to you these days?

SF: The same things as always. I'm going home and I have three or four songs I'm working on. I've been thinking about my next record, and after all the hard work it took to get this one out, I'd like it to be a little more carefree and a little messier. I'm hoping to keep it loose and fun.

DH: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me, Steve.

SF: Always a pleasure. Hope to run into you soon.