

The *Pop Culture Press* FIRST LISTEN
By *Luke Torn*

STEVE FORBERT
Down in Flames
ROLLING TIDE RECORDS

Song-by-song through Steve Forbert's crucial reclamation of history . . .

As 1978's *Alive On Arrival* continues to dazzle three decades down the line, anyone familiar with Steve Forbert's story knows that his career was seriously derailed in 1983, in some of the most peculiar record company shenanigans of the era, when his record company held him ransom for essentially producing music they deemed not commercial enough. The story goes much deeper than that--one for the books as they say--but Forbert to his credit has gone on to produce a seriously underrated body of work ever since. Having already produced two superb outtake volumes covering his early years--the *Young Guitar Days* discs--Forbert now rescues his long-buried session tapes for his fifth album with the deluxe *Down in Flames*. Here's *PCP's* first impressions:

Disc 1: *Down In Flames* [album proper]

Get Out Tonight (and Try So Hard)

A bit of stutter-step funk, vocals slipping in and out of a bullhorn, "Get Out Tonight" is Forbert in bubbly, optimistic mode. "I wanna go out tonight, I wanna find out what I got," a wise Bruce once said, and Forbert picks up that baton.

Take A Message to Mary

A gorgeous take on the Boudleaux and Felice Bryant chestnut, this is certainly a left-field choice for a cover circa the early 1980s. But given a gentle, sympathetic arrangement, with poignant guitar fills from John Leventhal, "Mary" is a *Down in Flames* highlight. A sad prisoners' tale, kin to Johnny Cash's similarly grim "Give My Love To Rose," the song was a Top 20 hit for the Everly Brothers in 1959, but feels as if it connects with a much older folk tradition. Forbert gives it a haunting, and appropriately lonesome, yearning vocal.

You Gotta Go

In a return to his southern roots, Forbert cut some spirited rockabilly at the *Down in Flames* sessions. "You Gotta Go" literally blasts out of the speakers, carrying a rare momentum, with a

ferocious backbeat and some fiery fretwork. Amid urgent rhythms and spidery piano, Forbert leans into the kiss-off lyrics with the relish of Jerry Lee holding forth at 706 Union.

Underwatertown

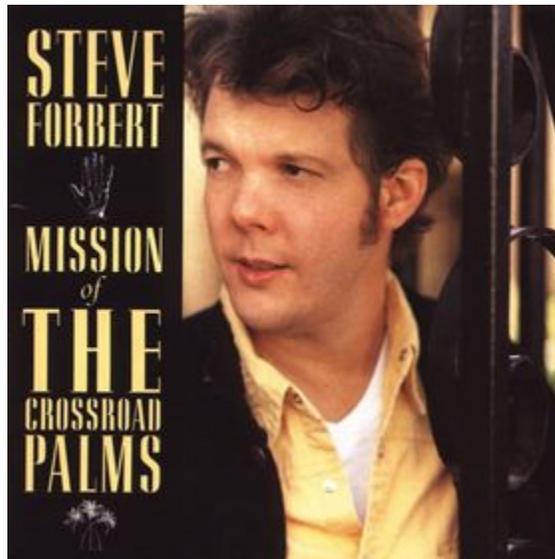
Written in 1983 but universal enough to hit listeners with a rueful truth (especially in post-Katrina New Orleans), Forbert released this poignant ballad as a download a few years back, donating the proceeds to Hurricane Katrina victims. It's a beautiful song, the flipside in tone and pace of Dylan's "Crash on the Levee" or Springsteen's "Lost in the Flood." "Underwatertown," tellingly (and terrifyingly) written first-person from the point of view of a child, builds tension as the narrative rolls on, finally achieving a resigned, heartbroken melancholy.

So Many Mistakes

Bright young artist, meet the ways of the world. Delivered in a breathless rush, "So Many Mistakes" has a slight hint of ska in its herky, jerky rhythms and a series of character sketches worthy of the cinema.

Lay Down Your Weary Tune Again

One of *Down in Flames*' major compositions, Forbert must've known this one belonged in his upper echelon--recutting it for 1995's *Mission of the Crossroad Palms*. Borrowing its title from one of Bob Dylan's (then-unreleased) masterpieces, "Again" is restless and self-referential, funny and poetic, flashing images original and borrowed (e.g., the bits about "wooden soldiers" and "Jane she is a clerk," appear as surprise tribute to the Velvet Underground's "Sweet Jane") like an expansive but world-weary Tom T. Hall. Essential!



Because My Heart Says So

Superb, '60s soul-inflected love song, with a lean melody and a catchy, bouncy chorus. It might be unrepresentative (think Graham Parker's also uncharacteristic "Next To You," a 1985 hit), but this was a radio hit waiting to happen, potentially launching Forbert into easy-listening MOR-land. Why couldn't this have been the single from these sessions?

Sampson and Delilah's Beauty Shop

More teeth-rattling rockabilly, the lone song to previously slip out onto CD from this era (appearing on Columbia/Legacy's 1993 anthology *The Best of Steve Forbert: What Kinda Guy?*). This song never fails to bring a smile, and might nestle right in there with your Carl Perkins and Warren Smith sides, though the Sun stars rarely packed the kind of dense imagery and streetwise jive Forbert manages to put down here. Later cut by the great Webb Wilder for his stunning debut, *It Came From Nashville*.

Come With Me

A fine is somewhat monotonous rhythmic rocker, this is Forbert in "glass half-full" mode, kicking off the dust. Nice, snaky John Levanthal guitar solo.

His Was the Sound

More pop history, Forbert style. It's hard to imagine a better tribute to the great Ritchie Valens than this intricate, upbeat piece, which really takes off on the bridge ("only 17 and he had it *down*," Forbert growls), and eventually dissovoves into Valens' signature song, "La Bamba." This song jumps and moves.

Rambunkshush

Triplet-style blues, Forbert the streetcorner crooner. A pleasant throwaway.

What's So Hard About Being Alone

Another peppy number, and one that seems a tad tossed off. This time the song's sunny tone masks the protagonist's denial and emotional pain at an affair gone wrong.

They're Out to Break Us

Perhaps *Down in Flames'* highlight, "They're Out to Break Us" sets a gorgeous melody to martial drums and Forbert's most defiant lyric. One could read the sentiment of this song many ways, personal and universal, which is essentially the key to its effectiveness. "God knows good from evil, baby what more can I say?" Forbert cries as the song plays out.

Disc 2: New York City Demos 1983-85

Rough studio sessions, recorded with Forbert's core band.

Go Ahead and Start

Some piquant political commentary for the Reagan years (and beyond), taking into account some stars-in-their-eyes voters. Another Dylan echo in the line "The times are always changing . . ."

Music of the Night

A rambling, get-out-of-the-city tune here, reminiscent of the early '60s Greenwich Village sound. A measured Forbert vocal, and some delicate piano/guitar interplay, add plenty to this atmospheric cut.

Situation Love in Vein

Easily one of Forbert's most-blistering rockers ever, hinging on some pumping Chuck Berry rhythms and John Leventhal' feral guitar leads. An infectious song, reminiscent of something Joe Ely might come up with, and one wildly deserving of resurrection.

Don't Look Back

With its slow-moving rollercoaster melody and a fevered vocal, "Don't Like Back" resembles Springsteen circa *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, both in sound and feel. Like "Come With Me" and "Get Out Tonight (and Try So Hard)," and the set's next cut, "Welcome Back to the World," and even the great "Goin' Down to Laurel," this song celebrates living for the now.

Welcome Back to the World

A beautiful full-bloom ballad, Forbert cradling the melody like a newborn baby, that sounds like something the Everly Brothers might've come up with in their prime. This one could've really developed into something, but is still great even in embryonic form. Levanthal is spot-on with a spine-tingling guitar break.

I Wake Up Each Day (With the Light of My Life)

Straight Nashville-style country shuffler, a Valentine card one might say. With its rambling melody

and ramshackle guitar, it sounds like a momentary whim in the studio, no more. That is, except for its unique and bizarre internal rhyme: "vice-versa" with "reimburse her".(!)

I've Got Charisma, I've Got the Hootchie Coo

Kind of a Latin-flavored thing going on here. A joke, maybe, or a sly come on? Whatever, it doesn't really work.

All Her Words of Love

A hushed country ballad of love-gone-wrong. Some ponderous observations on the verses lead into a darkly bouncy chorus and a sterling harmonica break.

I've Got News For You

Some more Memphis rockabilly, Forbert hiccupping like a latter-day Buddy Holly. It's an infectious track, with a Paul Errico/John Levanthal piano/guitar break lifting the song up to the rock and roll heavens.

Lifeline (Take Me Back)

Bright young artist tires of the fast lane. A bit of nostalgia, almost like something from the Carter Family catalog. "I got lost in this bad time," he avers.

Come With Me

Second take of this boot-scootin' bit of escapism.

Fighting Under the Clouds

In true demo style, Forbert's whispered vocals are kinda buried in the mix of big jangling guitars on "Fighting Under the Clouds," another overcome-the-odds ballad that shuffles along at its own unhurried pace.

Take Me Back

Another variation on a theme of getting the hell out of here. Levanthal offers big Duane Eddy--style fills on this genteel ballad.

Everybody Likes My Party

With its E Street-style piano intro and cascading melody, "Everybody Likes My Party" feels like a summing up, an it's-time-to-move-on number. Finally, Forbert is afforded the opportunity for apropos closure to the classic New York/Nemperor era.

Disc 3: Live Recordings With the Flying Squirrels 1983-85

Strong, if raw and unsweetened, recordings from the time when the record deal went south. For anyone who saw Forbert during this period, you know he was a rock and roll juggernaut, pouring it all out on the stage night after night with a great band. This 12-song set picks up some of that flavor, drawing on rare material and a few stray cuts from his eponymous 1982 LP.

Don't Look Back

One of the highlights of the unreleased sessions, introduced to the audience as a "slow dance tune."

Those Were the Lonely Days

A nice mid-tempo rocker with some gorgeous keyboards. From the sound of its melody it might be an early draft of "Running on Love," the lead masterpiece on 1988's **Streets of This Town**.

Don't Stop

An odd, loping quality marks this pleading song, the narrator imploring his love to not give in. The warmer, more personal angle of themes explored with the great "They're Out to Break Us," a disc one nugget.

It Takes A Whole Lotta Help

Revved-up, rockabilly Steve reappears here, the band positively cooking on a song that made a slick studio appearance on the eponymous 1982 Nempereor album.

You Gotta Go

Thrilling roadhouse piano from Paul Errico (pictured below, on stage with Forbert 1985) highlights Forbert's most urgent vocal performance on this set. The band heads out into rarified air on the break, crackling with electricity.



On the Beach

Another stray cut from the **Steve Forbert** album resurrected, and delivered with a touch of regret, if not bitterness. Levantahl's at his chiming best on the fills.

I've Got News For You

Fluid rockabilly workout, Forbert Elvising up the place.

Rambunkshush

Channeling Doug Sahm.

My Mistake

Another very fine lost song, this one has classic feel of some of the **Young Guitar Days** material, ala "House of Cards."

They're Out to Break Us

A spellbinding, tension-building live take on the set's best song, the singer leaning into the defiant lyrics, Levantahl flinging little bits of silvery guitar shrapnel around Forbert's voice.

Samson and Delilah's Beauty Shop

A storming, echoey, chaotic, lo-fi take, Forbert maneuvering through the verses with aplomb, and adding some ably impeccably-timed stutters and exhortations.

You're Darn Right

Down in Flames closes out with more blistering Levantahl guitar, Forbert breathless to catch up in a rush through this rocked-up country pounder.