

'The Oil Song' keeps Steve Forbert moving
By Jim Beal Jr. - Express-News
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Steve Forbert's new single is more than 30 years old.

The Mississippi-bred, New York City-tempered, Nashville-based singer and songwriter started writing "The Oil Song," about a couple of oil spills, in 1977. It's now 13 minutes long.

"To me, it was a topical song, a folk song," Forbert said. "The first one ended with something like 'If you can't drink the oil you might die of thirst.' Then the song just started to become a job. And I don't write about every spill, but it's still an ongoing folk song. I don't play all of it live, but it's still plenty long."

Forbert will sing "The Oil Song," and other selections from his long troubadour career, Wednesday at Casbeers at the Church during a solo show.

"There are two reasons I like working solo. I like the spontaneity and it's so much easier," he said. "If I have a band, it falls on me to get it together and it's a headache. Playing with a band is fun, but it's so much easier to play solo. I like to take requests and tell stories. And my carbon footprint is kind of small."

Forbert has a considerable catalog of songs from which to draw. He left Mississippi in the mid-'70s and headed for New York City. He busked in the subways, worked nightclubs and opened for other artists. In '78, his debut album "Alive on Arrival" made waves among critics and lyric fans. The follow-up, "Jackrabbit Slim," included a Top 20 hit, "Romeo's Tune." Forbert songs run the gamut from heartfelt folk and folk-rock to rockabilly/roots rock.

"My a-ha moment was being interested in the Beatles, of course, but there was something about the Byrds' version of 'Mr. Tambourine Man' that really got me," he said. "That introduced folk-rock, the Byrds' rock 'n' roll with Bob Dylan's poetry. Something in my DNA responded to those elements. I said, 'I've got to get a guitar and learn how to play.'"

He did.

Forbert's songs have been covered by Keith Urban ("Romeo's Tune"), Roseanne Cash ("What Kinda Girl?") and Webb Wilder ("Samson and Delilah's Beauty Shop").

"The versions I've heard of my songs have been quite good," he said. "I can't see (getting covered) as anything but a plus. I do pitch things to people, but it never works. It's very different now. There was a time when people like Jimmy Webb or Harlan Howard could write a song and feel confident it would be recorded within three months. Now music is such a fine-tuned business."

Forbert's latest release is "Down in Flames," a tweaked version of an album recorded in 1983 for Columbia Records and produced by Neil Giraldo. The record was never released. Forbert and Robby Turner teamed to produce this edition. The studio album is out now. Two more CDs, one of '83-'85 studio demos, one of live recordings from that era, will eventually make for a three-CD set.

"That was supposed to be my fifth record, but apparently I didn't know how to play the game right," Forbert said. "Columbia is letting a few things go, so I'll have a three-record set for that missing time frame."

Forbert said he enjoys making music in the studio because he gets to work with good people.

“But writing songs and doing live shows crystallize what I do. That's the essence. I'm not popular like Tim McGraw or Beyoncé, but people who come to my shows are like-minded people who are not going out to the show of the weekend, but are coming out to see and hear me. ... My job can't be outsourced.”