

Steve Forbert plays the Narrows Center April 2
By Rick Massimo
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Journal pop music writer <projo.com>

Fans of singer and songwriter Steve Forbert are used to his taking several years in between albums, but nowadays they have more opportunity than ever to hear his new work through the Internet.

On Forbert's site — www.steveforbert.com — you can hear Internet-only releases of live shows, demos and new stuff as soon as he's laid it down. It's not a substitute for the every-few-years physical CD, but a supplement to it, he says — “kind of like having your own radio station.”

He could have used that kind of outlet a few decades ago. The sad tale of Forbert's brush with fame is well-known: After the former busker's promising 1978 debut “Alive on Arrival,” he exploded at age 23 with the “Jackrabbit Slim” album and the top-20 hit “Romeo's Tune,” recording two more discs before his label refused to release his fifth album, but also refused to cancel his contract, which would have freed him to record for someone else. The gap between his 1982 self-titled fourth record and 1988's “Streets of This Town” did no harm to his plainspoken yet profound artistry, but it killed whatever popular momentum he was building.

But he never stopped performing — his live shows are legendary — and even now working on the road is “part of my ordinary life.” And the new Internet releases function as a kind of newsletter, he says: “These are things we do to stay in touch with people and keep things interesting.”

He's also branching out: Forbert's latest work is the photo exhibit “Highway of Sight,” an exhibit of 51 of his cell-phone photos taken on the road. “It's just a different type of self-expression that I'm getting into for some reason in my mid-50s,” he says. “I really do some miles, so it's kind of nice to have something to show for all the travel.”

Even with the Internet releases, he's still working on a new CD “that is taking years.” Physical records are still important to him and, he says, his audience. “Downloading something into your iPod, that's OK if that's the way you're accustomed to thinking about it. But it's still worth it to me to make it a package, and create some sort of statement with 10 or 11 songs about what you feel.”

And last year saw Forbert release “Down in Flames,” a collection of demos and, yes, that fateful fifth album that never got released. Forbert says that even a small-scale release on his website was gratifying. “As we went through the tapes and remixed the things, I realized we had worked really hard on it, like making a real record for Columbia Records. It was gratifying to get it all in one place in a presentable manner.”

And while it's pretty much obligatory for anyone writing about Forbert to complain about the raw break he received in his career, Forbert isn't having it.

"Look, it's all relative. I don't think Jimi Hendrix is very happy with the way his career turned out. Then again, he wouldn't know; it's done really well without him.

"I'm looking forward to a show tonight, then I'm coming back your way. I came out of Meridian, Mississippi, when I was 21 and I'm still an artist. That's where I'm at. I'm not really a limousine type. I had a taste of that in my 20s. You'd always like to be playing civic centers or larger auditoriums; I'm like that. But this is pretty real, and I enjoy it."

If he has any bitterness, it hasn't been reflected in his music, his art or, it seems, his life.

"Well, good. What value would that have for people? I'm trying to make a contribution here, and that wouldn't be one."

Steve Forbert plays a solo acoustic show at the Narrows Center for the Arts, 16 Anawan St., Fall River, Saturday night at 8. Call (508) 324-1926 or go to www.ncfta.org.