

**With new songs both personal and political, Steve Forbert coming to The Ark
By Kevin Ransom
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At the moment, Steve Forbert is a “topical” songwriter.

Indeed, he definitely has current events on his mind, particularly the Wall Street meltdown of 2008 that devastated the U.S. economy that is still causing so much suffering all over America. And he is fairly unflinching when it comes to who is most responsible.

He recently released a single on his website, “Set the World Ablaze,” that confronts the topic head-on, and it’s fair to say that it qualifies as a “protest song.” It takes a hard-eyed look at who profited the most from the events leading to that meltdown, and who have reaped the benefits of the taxpayer-funded bailout of the big banks that followed.

It’s a topic that Forbert, now in his fourth decade as a roots-minded singer-songwriter, keeps track of. He’s a well-informed follower of Rolling Stone’s Matt Taibbi, who has written a series of probing, take-no-prisoners stories that uncovered the various underhanded—some might say criminal—schemes that the big banks perpetrated.

“And I just saw just the other day that Chase got fined \$150 million because they had hired an outside management company to recommend certain investments that they would bet against—investments that they then turned around and recommended Chase to push when advising their clients,” says Forbert in a mid-June phone interview from the road.

“I was also reading a story in Time about ‘the five myths of the recovering economy.’ So many people, at so many levels of life, have had the rug pulled out from under them because of this runaway blank check that Wall Street maneuvered itself into receiving,” says Forbert emphatically.

The song will be on Forbert’s next album, which he has already recorded, and is presently in the process of mixing.

Forbert comes to The Ark on Saturday.

Despite some of the scathing social criticism he offers up in a few of the songs, a la “Set the World Ablaze,” Forbert says the new disc is “a pretty upbeat record, and fun to listen to. I co-produced it with Charlie Chadwick, who also plays upright bass. Oddly enough, a lot of the songs—about half of them, actually—have titles that are girl’s names. But it was really a coincidence. The record doesn’t have a specific theme or anything.

“One song is about my 15-year-old daughter, but it’s more generally about teenaged girls in general, and how extreme their different moods can be, which I guess is something any parent of a teenager can relate to,” says Forbert genially. “And another one has some fun with the joys of winter weather, because we have had a couple of eventful winters the last few years.

“And one song is about the day that John Lennon met Paul McCartney.”

Musically, Forbert uses the Grateful Dead’s “American Beauty” as a reference point for the new disc, which he expects will be released late this year or early 2012. “As time goes by, that album just sounds better and better,” he says. That disc was one of the Dead’s first forays into country-folk:

“The new disc has a fair amount of mandolin, and some pedal-steel,” says Forbert. “Although, some of the tracks might fall more into the country-rock category. “But, overall, it’s all-the-way Americana.”

Forbert’s latest release, the three-disc “Down in Flames,” from 2009, was an ambitious overview of Forbert’s “lost years.” One disc was the album he recorded in 1983, and which would have been his fifth album. But his record label wouldn’t release it—but at the same time, refused to let him out of his contract, resulting in a long legal wrangle that led to him going six years between albums.

“I was only 27 at the time, and that could have been pretty debilitating for me, creatively,” recalls Forbert. “Ultimately, it wasn’t, because I kept writing songs, and kept touring, but I never really did get my visibility back to where it was,” he admits - a visibility that he had earned largely on the strength of his 1979 smash hit “Romeo’s Tune”—from his now-classic album “Jackrabbit Slim.”

That was back when Forbert became a member of the “New Dylan” club—those up-and-coming ‘70s-era singer-songwriters who kept being anointed thusly by critics, and whose membership also included John Prine, Bruce Springsteen, Loudon Wainwright III, etc.

“Romeo’s Tune” was a ubiquitous presence on the radio for a few years after its release, and still holds up today, both in terms of the sweetly seductive melody and the evocative imagery Forbert created in his lyrics.

“That legal battle really did interrupt me, though, big time, in terms of maintaining my exposure to my audience,” admits Forbert.

The second disc is “NYC Studio Demos, 1983-1985,” a collection of songs that Forbert penned and laid to tape to keep his writing and recording chops in shape until he was freed from his legal tangle. And the third disc is “Live Recordings, 1983-’85.”

“The live disc shows people that I was still active and out there, despite the fact that I couldn’t officially record, and was sort of ‘frozen’ in that respect. I’ve always been more about the live show, as opposed to the studio, because it’s more of a spontaneous experience, so I definitely wanted to keep on doing that while I was in legal limbo.”

“At the time, I was listening to a lot of rockabilly,” says Forbert, which would account for the straight-up rockabilly jump of “Samson and Delilah’s Beauty Shop” and “You Gotta Go,” which show up on both the studio disc and the live disc. He also conjured some classic-R&B styles, with songs like “Get Out Tonight” and “Because My Heart Says So.”

He also reworked a Ventures tune, tweaking the title into “Rambunkshush”—“which we had a lot of fun with,” and had some more fun with a Bob Dylan song title, with “Lay Down Your Weary Tune Again.”

As for his preference for roots styles: “I’m from Mississippi—I grew up in Jimmie Rodgers’ hometown (Meridian). I do like other kinds of music, like David Bowie for example, but where I am most comfortable, when it comes to making my own music, is something that doesn’t have a lot of veneer to it. I think reality is fantastic enough, so I don’t do much in the way of creating a fantasy world, like ‘Ziggy Stardust’ or ‘Sgt. Pepper’s.’

“There’s plenty to write about that’s happening right down at the local park, in the gazebo, and that’s what I’m most comfortable with.”

Kevin Ransom is a freelance writer who covers music for AnnArbor.com. He can be reached at KevinRansom10@aol.com.