



Roy Forbes

His first album of original material in two decades feels as natural as his first recording. By Pat Langston

Edge of Blue, the new album by Roy Forbes, glances backward while simultaneously speaking to the present.

The record is a tasty blend of soul, old-school rock 'n' roll and country, with Forbes's high, quavering voice—a voice that, decades ago, gave us the definitive cover of Hank Williams's *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry*—positioned front and centre.

When he decided to make the album, the West Coast artist quite consciously dipped into the past.

"I wanted to get back to the spirit of *Kid Full of Dreams*," he says, referring to his debut album, released in 1975 when he was performing under the name of Bim. Back then, "I dug my heels in and said, 'I want to sing everything live (off the floor).' That's the way you want to get me."

Over the years, he's taken advantage of technology for some records but for *Edge of*

Blue the basic vocal tracks are live. There was some overdubbing and a couple of fixes along the way but not the autotuning and other tricks that make some singers sound so perfect it's almost scary.

Making the album was "like it used to be. For the most part, what you're hearing is what I was feeling. The vocals aren't perfect but they are heartfelt."

Even his pre-studio technique has an element of times past. When he's working on a new song, for instance, he often uses a cassette recorder. He says it sounds terrible but he likes the tactile quality of the recorder's buttons.

And though no one would accuse Forbes of living in the past, he mentions that most of the music he listens to comes from an earlier time, when today's multi-track recording technology wasn't available. If you've ever listened to the collection of 78s, 45s, and LPs he plays on his Sunday afternoon CKUA show *Roy's Record Room* you'll know what he means. Add it all up and this album feels like a first album to him.

"I can't explain it, but it does," says the man who has recorded 14 of them, including a couple as a member of UHF with

Shari Ulrich and Bill Henderson. "I've kind of come full circle."

It's not surprising it feels like a first record. It's been 22 years since *Crazy Old Moon*, his last album of all-new material. He's casual about the gap, saying it just happened that way and, while he didn't completely stop writing, he did "slow down a bit."

Most of the music on the new album is recent but he says the songs feel old, as though they've been around for a while, and he likes that.

In the case of *Don't Let Go*, the joyous paean to resilience that opens the album, the hearkening back is clear-cut. The song's opening chords could have been lifted right out of the traditional Mexican folk number *La Bamba*, a top-40 hit for Ritchie Valens in the late 1950s. Forbes says he was fooling around with the chords and scating over them when the melody of his own song suddenly started emerging, followed by the lyrics. The song's intent is at once simple and profound: as Forbes says, "You've got to deal with whatever's going on in your life and grab the joy."

He's been performing the song with its 1950s rock 'n' roll echo since 2016 but,

as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and political polarization, its celebration of hope and tenacity takes on a present-day resonance.

Rumble Strip is another song for the present. The rock/soul tune is about hitting a highway's rumble strip—that rough line of pavement at the edge of a road that warns a driver to get back in the lane—and was inspired by an event in Forbes's own life. Because of an accident in 2015, Forbes, who had already lost an eye to glaucoma when he was young, is now legally blind. So his partner, Lydia, was driving them back from a gig when she hit the rumble strip and had to veer back into her lane.

"I had driven that road many times and could see it in my mind's eye," he says, and the incident became a song with a chorus about swinging the car back on the road because life is already too short to be winding up in a ditch.

"It's a song about survival," says Forbes. "It sums up the whole album: you don't have time to mess around; you've got to keep moving forward."

Not that he saw the event as a metaphor when Lydia hit that rumble strip. That came later, he says. "Writing a song is like solving a puzzle."

Songwriting, for Forbes, is in fact partly a matter of non-intentionality. He says that's true of what he calls the "web links" (think of those hyperlinked words in a digital text) buried in the album. The country tune *The Beating of Your Very Own Heart*, for instance, talks about being lost on the river and drifting too far from the bank, which Forbes says he only later realized was a reference to a couple of old songs, including *Drifting Too Far from the Shore*, which he knew from the Monroe Brothers.

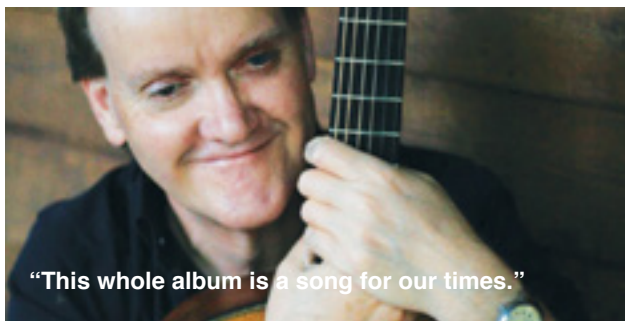
Buried references increase the potency of a song, according to Forbes, and, "the more you've absorbed as a songwriter, those things slip out, not necessarily intentionally."

There's much more to relish on *Edge of Blue*.

In the same vein as Buddy Holly's *Peggy Sue* and other mid-20th-century songs, *Lydia Anne* is a rocking tribute to his partner, who he's been with since high school (Forbes is now 67). Another song, *Big Mouth Shut*, is a reminder to think before speaking. The title track holds out hope that the voice of someone who cares can always pull us back from the brink.

Listen to the record a couple of times and all of it, even the apparently light-hearted tunes, coalesces into a bracing affirmation just when we seem to need it most.

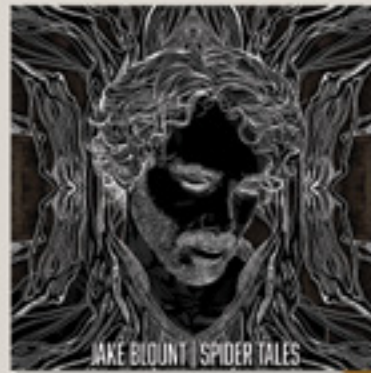
"This whole album is a song for our times. I didn't mean it to be but it's a record about pulling through," says Forbes. "You just have to be patient and see how we deal with it on the other side."



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