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Radney Foster's Revival

Sam Gazdziak | August 31st, 2009

Radney Foster has never shied away from writing with his heart on his sleeve. When he went through a divorce that separated him from his son, he wrote songs like the gorgeous and heartbreaking lullaby “Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)”—later included on the Dixie Chicks mega-album *Fly*—and his first post-9/11 album included “Scary Old World,” advocating people to treasure every moment and hold tight to their loved ones.

The songs on Foster's new album, *Revival*, represent some of the most personal songs that he has ever written, and they were born out of both happiness and tragedy: the return of his son after 13 years in France, and the death of his father.

“You can't go through those big events without starting to either think or rethink that circle of life that's surrounding you,” says the singer, who celebrated his 50th birthday this year. “That's what I did, and I wrote about it.”

A look at some of the titles of the new songs—“A Little Revival,” “I Made Peace With God,” “I Know You Can Hear Me”—might lead one to think that this is a gospel record. It's not, but there is a theme of spirituality that's present in many of the songs. Foster says it's always been an element to his songs, because it's an element of his life. However, it's not something he's ever addressed directly, as that would feel like preaching or pointing fingers.

“I just decided to write about what was going on in my life,” he explains. As the songs, written solo or with close friends like Darrell Brown, Jay Clementi, Darden Smith or Jack Ingram, began to come together, Foster began to realize that it would turn into a different type of storytelling.

While recording these songs about faith, love, death and family, Foster decided to utilize his extended family—his road band, The Confessions. Foster and the band cut two tracks last fall, after he, Clementi and Brown wrote what would eventually be the opening track on the album, “A Little Revival.”

“After those first couple of sessions with the band, it became obvious it was the direction that this record was going to head,” he says. The band and special guests like Dierks Bentley, Jon Randall, Tammy Rogers and a gospel choir help the songs into country, bluegrass, and even some R&B. However, when the band sinks its teeth into songs like “A Little Revival” and “Until It's Gone,” the result is some of the most rocking songs that Foster has ever recorded.

Behind the scenes

Some of the songs were written well before Foster had a clear concept of *Revival* in mind. “Life Is Hard (Love Is Easy),” for example, was written about three years ago on a morning flight from Los Angeles to Dallas.

“I had been in L.A. doing a bunch of business stuff, and I was completely exhausted and thought I was going to sleep like a rock,” he recalls. “Then some guy in the line before me said something about ‘Life is hard’, a light bulb went off, and I thought, well, I’m not getting any sleep on this plane.”

Others were born directly from Foster’s experiences. “I Know You Can Hear Me” was written about a month after his father died, and it was his first attempt to write after that event. He calls it one of the hardest days of his life, but one of the better ones.

“The reason that song got written was that Jay Clementi lost his grandmother, whom he was very close to, about a week after I lost my dad,” Foster says. “Jay is a really good friend, so I thought I’d get back on the horse that way.” While they were trying to write a different song, Clementi mentioned another idea that he had which included the line “I know you can hear me.”

“It just hit me like a truck, and I said, ‘No, that’s what we’re writing today,’” Foster says. The song details a conversation between a father and his young son, and then that grown son with his deceased father. “It wasn’t difficult because it just started pouring out of both of us, but it was incredibly emotionally difficult to get through it.”

Foster credits a close friendship with both Clementi and Brown to be able to write such personal songs with them.

“Writing with those guys generally starts with some real experience, either something we went through or someone we know went through. I tend to write a lot of things with those guys that, even if they’re not recorded by me, are pretty personal.”

The center of the album is the Saturday night/Sunday morning combo of “Trouble Tonight”—a grooving R&B-influenced number that Foster says was born out of trying to convince his wife, Cindy, to go skinny dipping—segueing directly into the gospel rave-up of “Shed a Little Light.” That concept came from the mix tapes that Cindy made for him while they were dating.

“On one side would be all these honky-tonkers from country artists from Buck Owens and Merle Haggard to Lucinda Williams, and on the other side would be these gospel songs that they had cut,” he says. “She would do the same in different genres. She’d have one side that was R&B, and she’d even put in these old blue recordings with really nasty lyrics on the Saturday night side, and the Sunday morning [side] was all these gospel songs those people had cut. It’s interesting to hear Dinah Washington sing “TB Is the Thing This Year” on one side and “How Great Thou Art” on the other.”

While the recording was going on, Foster also brought in a documentary crew to record the proceedings, capturing not only the recording of *Revival* but the things that were happening in Foster’s life at the time. The resulting movie, *Behind The Confessions*, will be available on his website for purchase, but he also plans to submit it to film festivals and hold some public screenings of it.

“If nothing else, I think the fans will love seeing the insight of what it’s like for me to make a record, especially an intensely personal one, but at the same time, this film is a much bigger statement than just me making a record.”

The documentary has several scenes that focus around “Angel Flight,” a song co-written with Darden Smith. Based on some conversations that Smith had while talking with members of the Texas National Guard, the song details the airmen who carry the bodies of their fallen comrades home for burial. Foster sings that song on the album with backing harmonies from Darius Rucker, and he and Smith are donating the bulk of the proceeds of that track to the Texas National Guard Family Support Foundation. The charity lends assistance to families of guardsmen who are beset by tragedy or crisis.

“I’m really proud of that song, and it’s easy for me to steer some money and attention to a good cause,” Foster says.

Cooking up something new

After years of releasing albums on major and indie labels, *Revival* is being released on his own label, Devil’s River.

“We’ve made both a CD and a film to go with it. How many places am I going to be able to do that? Not many,” Foster explains. “I wanted to do some things differently, and it seemed the only way I could really accomplish them and do what I wanted to do was just sort of walk out into the desert, put your hand on a rock and say, ‘I am a record label’ and just do it.”

Foster and The Confessions are getting ready to take to the road to promote the album, though they have been including many of the new songs in their shows already. They’ve already been getting positive responses, with “A Little Revival” and “Trouble Tonight” doing a good job of getting the crowd fired up. “Angel Flight,” which Foster has been playing acoustically at recent shows, has been getting the exact opposite response.

“It’s a weird and cool feeling to be in a honky tonk where normally there is some kind of a din going on, and I tell them I’ve got this new song, and it doesn’t get much attention until I get to the first chorus, and then it gets quiet like church,” he says. “You can hear a pin drop by the end of it.”

Of course, recording, releasing and promoting costs a substantial amount of money, and Foster has come up with some creative ways of financing it. He has several packages available on his site that enable fans to buy *Revival* and also get some kind of bonuses, like a VIP pass or commemorative plaque, or even a songwriting session or backyard concert. And if you’ve got \$7200 burning a hole in your pocket, Foster will come to your home and prepare a dinner party for eight. He’ll even supply the wine and perform an acoustic concert.

“I learned how to cook when I became a single dad,” he says. “I had him every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and I couldn’t boil water. I called my mom and said, I can’t feed this kid scrambled eggs or take him to McDonald’s for every meal of the day, so I’ve got to learn to cook.”

Foster’s mother sent him a cookbook that was a popular how-to guide for housewives when she was a newlywed, and he started at page one. “About halfway through the book, I realized that I really liked this,” he recalls. “It was kind of therapeutic.”

He furthered his culinary education during many restless nights in hotel rooms, where he was too wired from performing to sleep and turned the TV on to the Food Network. Now, he says his favorite meals are a nice, grilled steak in the summertime, and a hearty dish like beef bourgogne in the winter. “It’s a French beef stew that’s got lots of mushrooms, pearl onions, bacon and huge chunks of chuck roast. How can you resist that?”

It was Foster’s wife who gave him the idea of throwing a dinner party for fans, and he decided to put the option on the Web site and see what happened. A couple fans have already taken him up on the offer.

While Revival may showcase a variety of musical styles, Nobody who’s listened to Foster’s music should be surprised. “Foster & Lloyd was as much a punk band as it was a country band, and that was 22 years ago,” he explains. “So I’ve had my foot stuck in the roots rock world for a long, long time.”

“Every record comes out different. *Del Rio, TX*, was stone-cold country, and this one is roots rock meets gospel meets country. All of the others are all over the map in between, and that’s okay with me.:

In spite of his expansive musical styles, Foster has no confusion over just what kind of singer he is. “I have a West Texas speech impediment. I grew up listening to Waylon Jennings, Buddy Holly and Buck Owens, and they were as much an influence as the Beatles and Stones were,” he says. “So there’s no doubt in my mind I’m a country singer.”

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