

# CLEVELAND SCENE

by Michael Berick

Nashville is a city stocked with professional songwriters. Some populate Music Row, plugging their tunes to country-music royalty like Tim McGraw or Martina McBride. Others go the independent route, playing their songs in local venues like the Basement and the Family Wash. A few are able to exist in both worlds. Radney Foster is one of those. His songs have been covered by the Dixie Chicks, Keith Urban and Brooks & Dunn. But his own genre-blending music has made him a popular figure in the alternative Americana scene.

The Texas-born Foster arrived in Nashville in the mid-'80s and formed a duo with Bill Lloyd that was part of the same scene as Jason & the Scorchers and Steve Earle — guys who blurred the lines between country and rock. As Foster recalls, "We loved Buck Owens and the Everly Brothers and the Clash and Elvis Costello, and we were just dumb enough to think we could put all of that together and make something work." Between 1987 and 1990, Foster & Lloyd did make it work on a trio of refreshing country-rock albums that produced a number of Top 10 country hits.

Foster's first solo record, *Del Rio, TX, 1959*, also found success in the country mainstream (including the hit "Just Call Me Lonesome"). However, a combination of record-business politics and his individualistic spirit found Foster eventually walking away from major labels. "They were moving in one direction and I was moving in another," says Foster. "So I said, 'I'm going to do something I want.'"

Over the past 15 years, Foster has released only five studio albums, but each one — to borrow the title of his second solo effort — has been a "labor of love." His latest, *Revival*, bursts with passion and fervor, and might be his finest. While the title suggests a heavy religious message, the songs never get pulpit-preachy but instead delve into personal faith and belief.

Foster describes the record as being part Saturday night, part Sunday morning. On one hand, there are songs like the playful Jack Ingram co-write "Trouble Tonight" which he admits is "about my trying to get my wife to go skinny-dipping." On the other hand, there's

the powerful "I Made Peace With God," inspired by a real-life incident where Foster saw his two-year-old son being wheeled into a hospital emergency room.

Family plays a central role on the album. In fact, Foster planned to make a record a year earlier, but it was sidetracked by two family-related events: His father (to whom the disc is dedicated) became fatally ill with cancer, and his son arrived in Nashville to go to college after living with his mother in France for 13 years. Those two incidents, reveals Foster, "made me question and doubt and rise to faith, so I started concentrating on what was going on in my life. And just trying to tell the truth about that."

"Suitcase," for example, addresses mortality and his father's passing in lines like, "It feels like Gabriel just came and blew his horn/So I can finally put my suitcase down." Foster says that "Forgiveness" is about how he and his first wife have "come to learn how to forgive each other and still be parents," while "Second Chances" deals with his current marriage and the second chance he got at love.

One of *Revival*'s standout tracks, however, has more to do with a larger community than Foster's family. "Angel Flight," which he wrote with Texas songsmith Darden Smith, offers a stirring account of the Texas National Guard's "angel flights" that bring fallen soldiers back from overseas. In voicing a pilot's feelings about these missions, Foster expertly balances the personal and political, the spiritual and the secular.

As *Revival* demonstrates time and again, Foster has a real talent for weaving intimate emotions with universal ones. The rousing title tune, which as the opening track sets the album's tone, begins with snapshots of people that "God [sent] down just to stir things up" and concludes with a very personal revelation. Foster has provided many such miracle moments in his songs by tapping into the heart of truth and transforming it into something moving and musical.

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