



CD Review: Radney Foster and the Confessions, “Revival”

by Jeff Giles

As a general rule, I don't have much time for country music; I developed a distaste for it during the early '90s, when its Garth Brooks-led resurgence meant any critic who wanted to stay on top of things had to listen to plenty of Joe Diffie, Travis Tritt, and Restless Heart, and that bad first impression is reinforced every few years when I go back to the country charts to make sure my tastes haven't shifted. Much of what I listen to has country *influences*, though, and there are a few country-ish artists on my short list — Lyle Lovett is one of my favorites, as is Mary Chapin Carpenter, and then there's Radney Foster.

I became a fan of Foster's music in the late '80s, when he was in a duo with minor power pop deity Bill Lloyd. They called themselves Foster & Lloyd, appropriately enough, and they had a hit single right out of the box with “Crazy Over You,” from their 1987 self-titled debut:

Dig the acid-washed denim and cocaine-fueled camera cuts! How was there not a motion sickness epidemic during the '80s?

But I digress. Anyway, success was short-lived for Foster & Lloyd, and after releasing a pair of follow-ups, they split in the early '90s and embarked (or, in Lloyd's case, re-embarked) on solo careers. Though Lloyd, as a power pop artist, never had a snowball's chance in hell of being anything but a cult hero, Foster initially seemed like he was poised for solo stardom, scoring a couple of big hits from his 1992 debut, *Del Rio, TX 1959* — but again, for a number of reasons, he was unable to sustain that momentum, and the rest of the '90s would see Arista trying to figure out what to do with him. Foster, in turn, was busy evolving; after 1995's more overtly commercial *Labor of Love* failed to strike a spark at country radio, he took a more adventurous approach for 1999's *See What You Want to See*. Partially inspired by the pain of his divorce — and his ex-wife's decision to move to Europe, taking their son with her — *See What You Want to See* is the kind of raw, heartbreakingly honest record that country radio hasn't bothered with in decades, and it certainly didn't help that, in many cases, the most identifiably “country” thing about the songs was Foster's Texas drawl. The album is a masterpiece, but it stiffed, marking the end of Foster's major label career.

He's released a number of albums since then, and I've bought them all, but none of them have registered with me as strongly as *See*. It's something I haven't really begrudged Foster — after the experiences that went into the songs on that album, his follow-ups couldn't help but be a little less emotionally resonant — but still, when I heard Foster would be releasing a new album this summer, I came close to passing it up.

As it turns out, I'm very glad I didn't, because *Revival* — released on Foster's own label, Devil's River, and co-credited to his touring band, the Confessions — contains some of the strongest work of his career. Foster does a fair amount of writing with and for other artists, and his more recent albums have occasionally felt like business cards, heavy with songs just begging to be covered by more established singers, but *Revival* feels like a deeply personal statement. This isn't an accident; in the last year and a half, Foster has had to deal with some rather profound highs and lows, from the death of his father to his son's return to the United States. Fortunately for us all, Foster channeled all those emotions into a powerful new batch of songs.

“Powerful” might be the best word to describe *Revival*, actually; from the dry punch of the opening track, “A Little Revival,” to less rowdy tracks like “Suitcase,” the whole thing hums with the energy of a songwriter at the top of his game, and with his hand firmly on his own emotional third rail. The album's centerpiece, “I Know You Can Hear Me,” combines old school Nashville songwriting savvy with searing

honesty. Its first chorus describes a moment when, as a young boy, Foster was hiding in a closet from his father, and heard him say:

I know you can hear me, you don't have to say a thing
My love is stronger, last a lot longer than your anger and your pain
You need to say you're sorry — son, you can come out whenever you're ready
I know you can hear me

And of course, you know the whole thing is going to come full circle, but hell if Foster still doesn't pluck your heartstrings with the final chorus, delivered at his dying father's bedside:

I know you can hear me, you don't have to say a thing
You've been so strong, you're not alone
And I know that you're in pain
I know that you love me
You can let go whenever you're ready
And I know you can hear me

The kicker, as Foster shared [in a recent interview](#), is “now I'm not sure he can hear me, 'cause he's gone.”

It's an emotional song, and an emotional album, but one that gives off the warmth of hard-fought experience. Foster isn't going for mawkish tearjerkers or inspirational ballads here; he's just telling his story the best way he knows how, and it feels *real*. Visit [Radney's official site](#) to sample some of *Revival* — and then, of course, [go and buy it at Amazon](#).