

Blurring the lines

Radney Foster is one of the first to blur the artistic lines by combining fiction stories with songs.

By Jan Sikes

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN AN INCREDIBLY talented songwriter decides to try his hand at writing fiction? You get, *For You To See The Stars*, a book of short stories with an accompanying CD of music that you can't put down or stop listening to.

Radney Foster has long been known for his songwriting skills, having produced eight number one hits in his career. But, taking his storytelling prowess in a different direction is gutsy and ingenious. While many music artists have written memoirs or biographies, to my knowledge, Foster is the first to blur the artistic lines by combining fiction stories with songs.

For You To See The Stars is an eclectic collection of short stories that are filled with extensive imagery and emotion. At the end of each tale, the reader is encouraged take a moment to listen to the song that goes hand-in-hand with it.

In all honesty, I picked up the book rather late one night, thinking I would read a chapter or two before bed. Wrong! I couldn't put it down. I found myself laughing, crying, holding my breath and running back and forth to the CD player to listen to the songs.

In the Foreword of the book, Foster explains how this idea was born. In November 2015, he got sick, so sick that he lost his voice and had to cancel all bookings. He could only communicate through writing notes. For a singer to lose his voice is truly a crisis and he had to come to grips with the thought that he may never sing again. After soul-

searching, Foster came to the conclusion that first and foremost he is a weaver of yarns. But, how could he tell stories if he couldn't sing? The result was a short piece of fiction written the following January, entitled "Sycamore Creek." That was the beginning. With encouragement from his wife, he continued to write. After a publishing deal offer, this project took wings.

I had a multitude of questions for Radney Foster about this entire unique and creative process.

Early journals

WAS THIS REALLY SO NEW? Turns out, it wasn't. Foster said, "I had journaled early in my career and then life, and babies and other things got in the way, so I quit for about twenty years. Then, as a point of trying to keep my soul together, I started having a daily quiet time. About five years ago, extemporaneous writing became a part of that.

Thinking it would end up being a song, whether it was a poem or a character or little essay about the first band I was in when I was in junior high school, I started writing these things. I'd pick out a piece and flip it into a song, never thinking I'd do anything past that. And, I think that's the untold part of this whole thing...that it was a slow process. But, really an unbelievable

blessing because I realized after the first one how much I loved extending a story and putting words to the page."

After reading these stories, I'd say that Foster has something that can't be taught in writing classes. He has a "voice." Not the voice he sings with, but the voice he writes with, mastering the art of painting through words. Finding that and owning it is special indeed.

In this creative process of joining two different writing mediums, which came first, the story or the song?

First song

"IT VARIED," FOSTER SAID. "For the most part, the song came first. It was my wife's idea for me to go back and revisit some of my journaling from more than a decade ago and see what nuggets I could dig out in the way of a story.

That was how I found "Raining on Sunday," and I wrote the song first. But, I wrote "The Night Demon" before the song, "Howlin'," solely because I remembered being a little boy myself listening to Wolfman Jack on a transistor radio under covers. Age-wise, I am about ten years younger than that character and my challenge for that one was to stay in a nine-year-old boy's voice the whole time. I had to be careful not to get too adult, including misspellings and misuse of grammar on purpose."

Foster continued, "I knew that Wolfman Jack got his howl and his name from Howlin' Wolf. Believe it or not, we are just music junkie knuckleheads enough in this household that there's a whole lot of Howlin' Wolf, Lightnin' Hopkins and Muddy Waters records here. So, I went back and listened to them. Then I found on YouTube, a live performance of "Smokestack Lightning" and I thought, 'Okay, here we go.' I pulled out my Telecaster...and that's a rarity too. I normally write on an acoustic guitar, almost to exclusion.

"I might end up playing electric guitar on the record and live on the song but rarely do I write on an electric. But, I did. The song needed that to make it work."

Having that kind of flexibility is a strong definition of a true artist.

How much truth is woven throughout these eleven tales?

"Sycamore Creek" is the last story in the book, yet the first one Foster wrote.



His new *For You To See The Stars* is an eclectic collection of short stories: Radney Foster

"Well, the main character is a boy in the seventies who lives in South Texas and plays guitar and tries to write songs," Foster chuckles. "So, I'd be really stupid to tell you there's nothing but fiction. But, I never had a bandmate that killed himself."

And that's just one facet to this complex tale.

Foster continues, "I am Anglo, but I grew up in a bilingual household, living so close to the Mexican border. My father believed a man could not make a living if he couldn't speak both languages. My first girlfriend was brown, and even though barriers were beginning to break down, it was a big deal. I lost friends over it. I had a lot of discussions with many friends back home, particularly on that story. I also wanted to make sure that the ranching components rang true. I knew the struggles my own self about faith, my whole life. I wanted to paint what I thought were human flawed characters who lived their lives with mistakes. And, my goal was to do that in each one I wrote...to make up characters as complex as I could in a short range of time. Short fiction is a Polaroid as opposed to a movie. You really have

a limited ability to build that character and I think that was the toughest part."

There is no way I can tell you about every story in this book because it would take pages. But, I can tell you that each one touched me in some way. "For You To See The Stars" brought tears as a man seeks out his grandfather after the death of his own father. Up a winding hardly traveled road to the top of a mountain outside Alpine, Texas, he finds more than just an estranged grandfather. He finds the stars.

"Belmont and Sixth," tugged at my heart strings when a homeless man is shown kindness and generosity, then disappears only to leave the reader wondering what happened. That song is currently getting a good amount of radio airplay and I hope people stop and really listen to the words.

Short Stories

THESE SHORT STORIES cover variety of topics from a retired spy in New Orleans to a post-apocalyptic parable of a world in endless war. But, one thread runs true throughout. The care and attention given to each detail in each story is unwavering. Foster explains. "I needed to

treat every paragraph with the same respect that I've treated the second verse of every song I've ever written. Kristofferson said that the second verse is the most important part of any song. The first verse sets up the story for the chorus and the chorus is something everybody needs to be able to sing along and the second verse is where you actually get to speak to life, truth, love, yearning or sorrow or whatever emotion it is that you are really trying to get down to the human condition."

The music on the CD, *For You To See The Stars*, is done in true Radney Foster fashion. Imagery painted through words is a special gift he delivers without flaw.

Christmas is around the corner. If you have someone on your gift list who loves great emotion-filled stories and excellent music, this is perfect. And, Foster is autographing every book that is ordered through his website at radneyfoster.com.

Will Radney Foster continue to write fiction? "People have asked and I say I have no doubts that I have a novel in me," he says. So, there is more to come from this incredibly talented writer. ■

"For the most part, the song came first. It was my wife's idea for me to go back and revisit some of my journaling from more than a decade ago and see what nuggets I could dig out in the way of a story. That was how I found 'Raining on Sunday,' and I wrote the song first."

—RADNEY FOSTER