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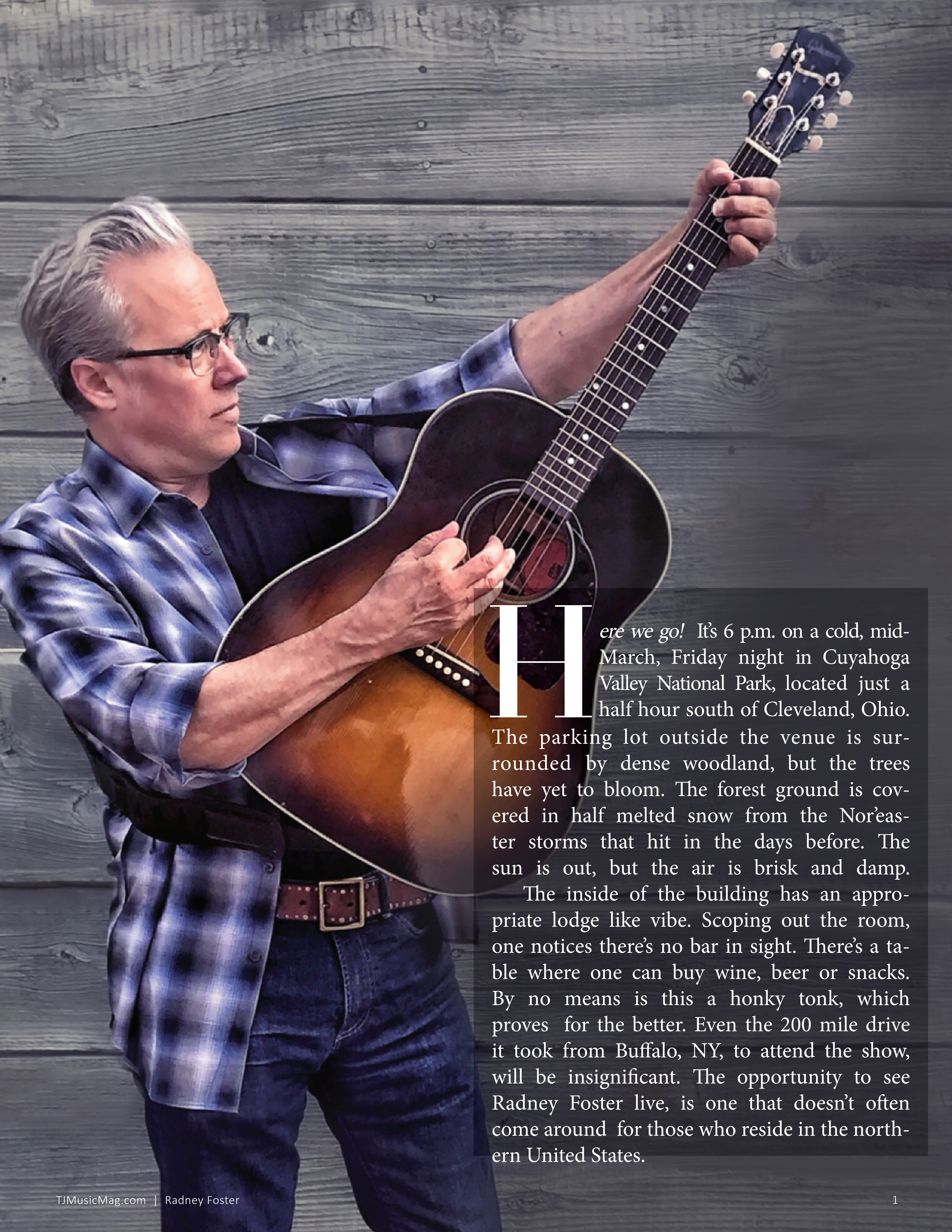
Radney Foster
SONGS, STORIES
& THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

By Courtney S. Lennon



H*ere we go!* It's 6 p.m. on a cold, mid-March, Friday night in Cuyahoga Valley National Park, located just a half hour south of Cleveland, Ohio. The parking lot outside the venue is surrounded by dense woodland, but the trees have yet to bloom. The forest ground is covered in half melted snow from the Nor'easter storms that hit in the days before. The sun is out, but the air is brisk and damp.

The inside of the building has an appropriate lodge like vibe. Scoping out the room, one notices there's no bar in sight. There's a table where one can buy wine, beer or snacks. By no means is this a honky tonk, which proves for the better. Even the 200 mile drive it took from Buffalo, NY, to attend the show, will be insignificant. The opportunity to see Radney Foster live, is one that doesn't often come around for those who reside in the northern United States.

The Del Rio, Texas native, who is best known for his hits, "Just Call Me Lonesome," "Don't Say Goodbye," "Closing Time," and "Easier Said Than Done," (to name just a few), is at the end of sound check, a couple hours before his show. He's sitting on the stage floor, playing an acoustic guitar. It isn't his guitar. After fully inspecting it, he determines the action isn't right for the "bluegrass style of playing" he does.

Foster's hair is slicked up into a white pompadour. He's wearing semi-rimless, 1950s style glasses, which he's had a variation of for the past decade. One would be hard pressed to picture him without glasses, or to find a photo of him without them, save for the 2017 play, *Troubadour*, which ran at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Ga. This occurred because he was playing a character. Still, as far back as the '80s, when he was in Foster & Lloyd ("Crazy Over You, "Texas in 1880"), he combined the wavy shoulder-length rock star hair he had at the time, with gold wire framed glasses.

After Foster left Foster & Lloyd to embark on a solo career in country music, suddenly, in the 1992 video for "Just Call Me Lonesome," he had a side swept, short haircut and switched to a pair of oval, brown, acetate and metal frames.

Back in the 1970s, Nashville turned their attention to mainstream appeal, rather than putting artistry at the forefront. They developed a formula for this and tried to force Waylon Jennings to play watered down, polished music, telling

him how to act and look, in order to appeal to everyone and make more money. But, Jennings rebelled, fired the studio musicians they gave him, worked with his own band and recorded Billy Joe Shaver's songs on *Honky Tonk Heroes*, an album that was deemed 'too raw.' So they called him an outlaw.

In 1992, wearing glasses in a video shown on CMT, **that's outlaw**. Releasing *Del Rio, TX 1959*, a pure country album, when Garth Brooks was filling arenas and Billy Ray Cyrus' "Achy Breaky Heart" was the biggest hit on the radio: **that's outlaw**.

Foster's attire is undeniably Texas and what he wears most days. He grew up chasing sheep and riding horses with the ranchers' kids he was friends with. His shirt is a faded, well worn, grey denim snap button. Underneath, a black t-shirt tucked into blue, straight leg jeans, just barely wide enough at the bottom to fit over the brown cowboy boots with Mexican crosses, he has on his feet; a religious symbol that often comes up in his songs and stories, having grown up just a mile-and-a-half from Mexico.

As a teenager, his mother would send him across the border with a grocery list, money for the bridge fare and say, "Now, you can eat a half a plate of nachos and listen to the mariachis." By studying musicians playing Marengo melodies in the tourist town of Ciudad Acuña, he learned how to finger pick. He was fascinated by the complexity, but today, he's mastered it.

To show him the respect he deserves, I introduce myself and call him Mr. Foster, which he doesn't correct. Rightfully so.

He suggests we go to the back stage area. "Should be quieter there," he says.

Walking in, one notices his sunburst, Gibson flattop guitar sitting in the corner. He sometimes plays a blue telecaster, but doesn't have it with him. There's pedals sprawled out on a table, along with bottles of water and his book, *For You To See The Stars*, which has Post-it notes in an array of colors, sticking out of it. His latest project, of the same name, consists of both a book and an album.

They work in concert, telling the same narrative in two different forms. The best way of going through the process is to read the short story, then, listen to the song it is based on. For example, the ending of the story "Sycamore Creek," is found in the song of the same name.

His path as an author, came about in the midst of an existential crisis; he lost his voice. Unable to sing to write a song, he turned to short stories and excelled at writing them, becoming one of the best Southern authors around today. The book is a collection of sharp, beautifully descriptive Southern Gothic tales, with elements of his life evident throughout. They are written with heart and honesty. The characters, well defined, with distinct voices. The book hits all the emotions that make for great fiction. He takes the reader from laughter, to tears to introspection.

Since releasing *For You To See The Stars*, in Sept. 2017, he's been on the road, hitting book stores and concert venues along the way. Today he's playing a concert, the next day, he'll be at a book store in Indiana.

"How's your book tour going?"

"It's going great," he says. "The fall was tough. I was doing shows and readings for six weeks at the same time. I'd be home on Monday, get on a plane Tuesday and go do it again. I was ready to collapse by the end of October, but I had a week and a half off. So that's when I told my book publisher, 'Ok here's what we are going to do for now; I'll give you a week a month to go visit book stores.'"

Raining On Sunday

For the album, Foster re-recorded "Raining On Sunday." Co-written with Darrell Brown, it was originally released on his 1998 album, *See What You Want To See* and included background vocals from Darius Rucker. Rucker, who recorded a live version of "A Fine Line," with Hootie and the Blowfish, credits Foster's songwriting as his gateway to country music. The story, "Isabel," from the book is based on "Raining on Sunday."

The narrative is driven by the main character, David Caldwell's route to self-discovery and spirituality, which is spurred by a recent divorce. He abandons a lucrative career as an attorney (the profession of both Foster's grandfather and father), on a quest to find deeper meaning in life. His sense of urgency, elevated after meeting a mysterious and some-what mystic Latina woman. He combines skepticism and understanding with fly fishing.

"I'm a nut-case fly fisherman," Foster laughs. "I've been doing it since my oldest son moved to France [after a divorce]. I've fished all the world. So that's why he goes fly fishing to solve his issues. That's his search for the Golden Fleece, so to speak. He thinks he's going to go fish, but he's really on a journey to find god."

"But in the story, it's never Sunday and it doesn't rain," I kid.

"No. It doesn't," he laughs. "But on the back of the door to [Isabel's] garden in Denver, she's made the iconography that's in the second verse. 'Your love is like religion, a cross in Mexico,' which is *a* cross," (he outlines a cross with his hands) 'or, it can be *across*.' In Mexico they have these. It's described in the book. [Isabel] made a cross out of Milagros, which you see a lot, where I grew up. She's taken that..." He looks around and pauses.

With only a thin, uninsulated wall between the room and the stage, the sound check for the opening band bleeds in, making it difficult to have a conversation. Upon this realization, he gets up and shuts the door, but it doesn't help much.

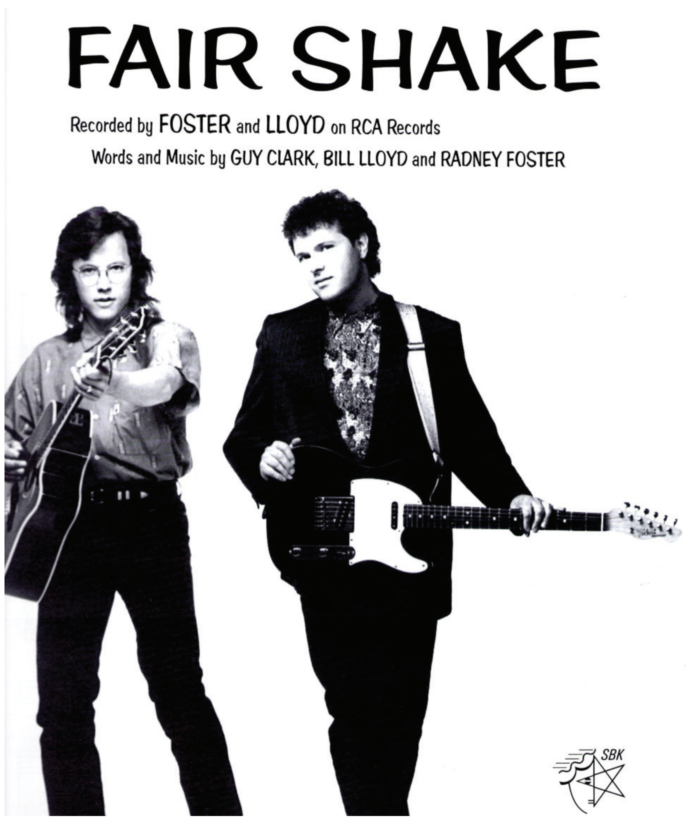
He sits back down. I move the recorder closer, hoping it picks up his voice clearly. He continues, "That's the only connection. So that's a pretty far leap from the song."

"Raining on Sunday" came to popular culture prominence as a hit for Keith Urban, who recorded it on his 2003 release, *Golden Road*. Urban also recorded the song, "I'm In" on the album. The commercial and mainstream success of Foster's songs, is due in part by other artists performing them. Dirks Bentley recorded "Sweet and Wild," from Foster's 2012 album, *This World We Live In*.

Back in 2009, Keith Urban brought Foster on stage to play with him at the American Airlines Center, in Dallas, Texas, where there was an audience of 22,000 people. Urban begins preforming "Raining On Sunday" and stops mid-song. He says,

"It's come to my understanding, the greatest songwriters are born and raised in Texas. In 1959, in Del Rio, TX, this boy was born. One day, he went on to write this awesome song."

"It's been an amazing blessing," Foster says. "Anytime someone respects a song they didn't write, enough to record it, when they are perfectly capable of writing a great song, I always consider that a huge compliment. You realize that you've made an impact that is stepping outside of your own shoes."



The black moleskin journal sitting on the table, is never picked up. There is no taking notes, no reading questions, one must simply listen to Radney Foster. He's one of the Lone Star State's finest storytellers. Sitting on top of the abandoned journal, is a Palomino Blackwing No. 1 pencil, the name taken from Guy Clark's first album, *Old No. 1* and based on his blue denim shirt and work bench.

Foster notices the pencil. "Is that a Palomino?" he asks.

"Yeah. This is the special edition, Guy Clark Blackwing. Do you have one?"

"I have Blackwings. Guy turned me onto those pencils. I have a box of the black ones at home, but they aren't the Guy Clark ones. They're great for writing. And I've gotten addicted to certain pens for signing books and writing with. The book made me more appreciative of how you put it to the page."

This is true. Even when asked to sign a copy of *For You To See The Stars*, he goes through his bag, determined to find his pen, which he does. It's the particular one he must use to sign it with.

The pencil spurs a conversation about the first time he went to write with Texas songwriting legend, Guy Clark, a few decades ago, when he was in Foster & Lloyd with Bill Lloyd, who he met as a staff writer in Nashville. Lloyd's background was rock 'n' roll, Foster's, country. They combined the two genres. In 1987, they got a recording contract with RCA and released their debut single, "Crazy Over You," the same year, which became a no. 4 hit on the U.S. Country Singles chart. It brought them notoriety as songwriters, and they made their Grand Ole Opry debut the same year. On their 1989 album, *Faster & Louder*, they recorded a co-write with Guy Clark, "Fair Shake," which was a no. 5 hit..

When Foster was called and asked if he knew who Guy Clark was, he responded, “Don’t insult me, I’m from Texas.”

“Guy liked to smoke a little weed before he wrote. Not a lot. If you smoke too much, you’ll never get anything written. Bill smoked a little bit, but I thought, ‘That doesn’t work for me, I’m too cluttered.’ Which was fine. I probably had some what of contact high just from being around both of them,” he laughs.

When he laughs, he does so deeply. He has a loud, drawn out laugh. It is infectious and one of the best parts of his personality. And he can bring himself to laugh at just about anything.

Back when he toured with Bill Lloyd, Foster had a surplus of idle time. He solved that by reading books. Everything from Ernest Hemingway to Cormac McCarthy. It shows. His high level of intelligence, fully evident and he has a vocabulary that challenges even that of William Faulkner. It’s natural, not pretension. His vocal inflections and drawl are typical of the region he’s from, but it’s the juxtoposition of wordliness and twang, that gives him the ability to narrate his life, in such an engaging and entertaining way, not dissimilar to Terry Allen (“Amarillo Highway”).

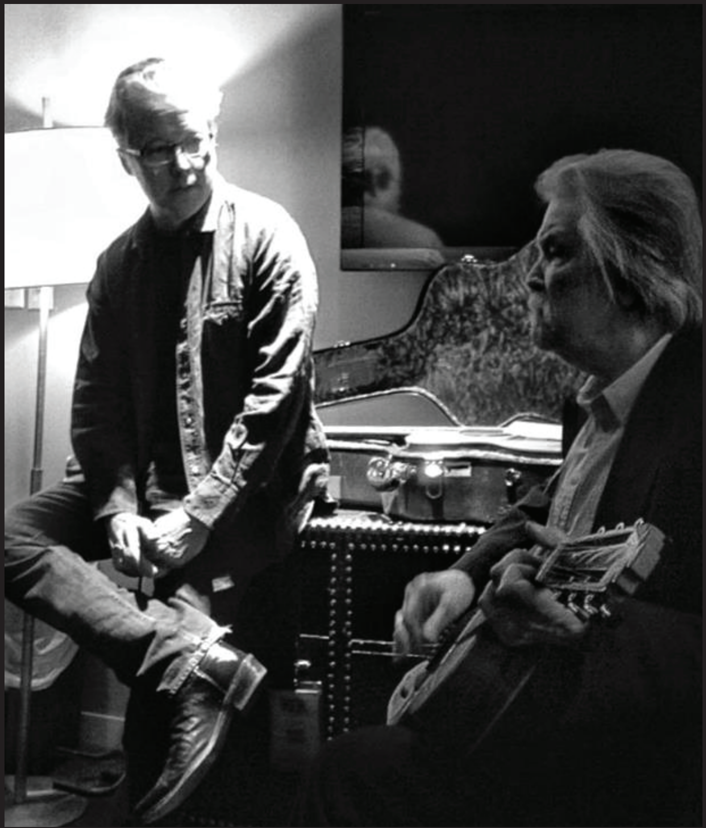
Foster recalls the process of writing “Picasso’s Mandolin,” with Clark and Lloyd. The song appeared on Clark’s 1992 album, *Boats to Build*, but Foster & Lloyd didn’t record the song until their 2011 renuinion album, *It’s Already Tomorrow.*

“Bill and I naturally gravitate towards that, when we play guitars together.

We just started working with verses, but only got half way through it, because Townes [Van Zandt] showed up,” he laughs.

“The next week, we went back and finished the song by about 1:30. And then, [Clark] put on a [tape of the song].

This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen anybody do. He had written it all on graph paper, very neatly. Then, he took a straight edge and an X-acto blade and sliced up every single couplet. He said, ‘Now we get to play with it.’ He put it on his desk where there was a big book and said, ‘Well what if this couplet goes here, instead of in that verse? And what if this verse goes here instead of that one? This will fit logically, meter wise with what we sang on the bridge, even though it’s different.’ So we moved stuff around. Then, finally, we said ‘Ah, that’s it!’ And it made it better. A lot better.”



"It changed my trajectory in a way. You aren't just after writing a hit song, you are communicating a part of the heart and soul of the human condition."

Before he ever wrote with legends, Foster was already an adept song craftsmen. His talent must have been fully evident for Clark to call upon him as a co-writer in the first place. From the early days, he was of the understanding that "good songs are written and great songs are rewritten." This mindset came from being a staff writer in Nashville, where he started his career in 1985, working for MTM Publishing.

"I know people like to, belittle that," he says. "There's that quote unquote 'It's not written from the heart, it's written in a cubical.' Well, 'Solitary Man' by Neil Diamond, which is an amazing song, was written in a cubical by a guy trying to figure out how to write a great song. A lot of the writers who wrote some of the best songs in the world, wrote 'em from that perspective. But there's a discipline to it that really helped me as a writer in general. You shot for a song a week. I might not always get there, but I still shoot for a song a week."

The Muse

Foster often refers to his inspiration as 'The Muse,' the driving force that leads him creatively. The song "Whose Heart You Wreck (Ode to the Muse)" from his 2014 album, *Everything I Should Have Said*, is a parallel to that. The muse is represented by a woman he is in a nagging relationship with. She intrudes on his life and thoughts at any given moment.

"Has a song ever woken you up out of sleep?"

He leans forward in his chair a bit, puts his elbow on the table, and turns pensive, fully thinking through the question. Then, he sits back, goes into a relaxed state and answers, "California."

The song, which is also from *Everything I Should Have Said*, began to form while in Oakland, Calif., in the middle of a party he was attending with his wife, journalist, Cyndi Hoelzle. They were discussing her parents' WWII story, which led her family to stay on the pacific coast, for better opportunity, upon her father's return from Japan.

"She said, 'That's the whole notion of the state, going back to the Gold Rush. Everybody came out here to reinvent themselves, or to be somebody else or to strike it rich or hide from the law.' When I heard that, I excused myself from the party and went to a little side bedroom and wrote down the first half without any melody. When we got back to Nashville, I put a melody to it, but I didn't have all the images for the rest of the choruses.

I was about half way through the second verse and it woke me out of a dead sleep around two in the morning. I couldn't get it down fast enough. I went to the basement and finished it completely. Boom! There it was. I sat and wrote it down, put it together by about 5 a.m. and took a really big nap around noon," he laughs.

and the blood of all your children is

All That I Require

The song "All That I Require," is the basis of the story, "Another Dragon To Slay." In writing the prose, he took citizenship laws from countries around the world. He combined them, developing an apocalyptic war between two newly established nations in the former United States, which crumbled because of conflicting beliefs. The story concentrates on the perspective of a Sgt. and his troops, some of whom are considered second class citizens due to their Mexican heritage, even a few generations removed.

Foster took an interesting approach in communicating his feelings toward extreme ideologies in writing the song. He found the slogans of despots from the 1930s and onward. They were from Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and Peron. He strung the slogans together in an allegorical manner, as if these infamous figures are the singer. He has previously written about the subjects of racism and bigotry in songs that include "Went For A Ride," (which is based on the real story of a slave), and 2014's "Not In My House."

"All That I Require" is also featured as part of a Nashville Resistance compilation, *Strange Freedom: Songs of Love and Protest*, put out on the Sally Jaye, Brian Wright owned record label, Café Rooster Records.

"So where did the song come from?"

> "It came from anger. It came from really seeing the threats to democracy that are abounding in our country right now."

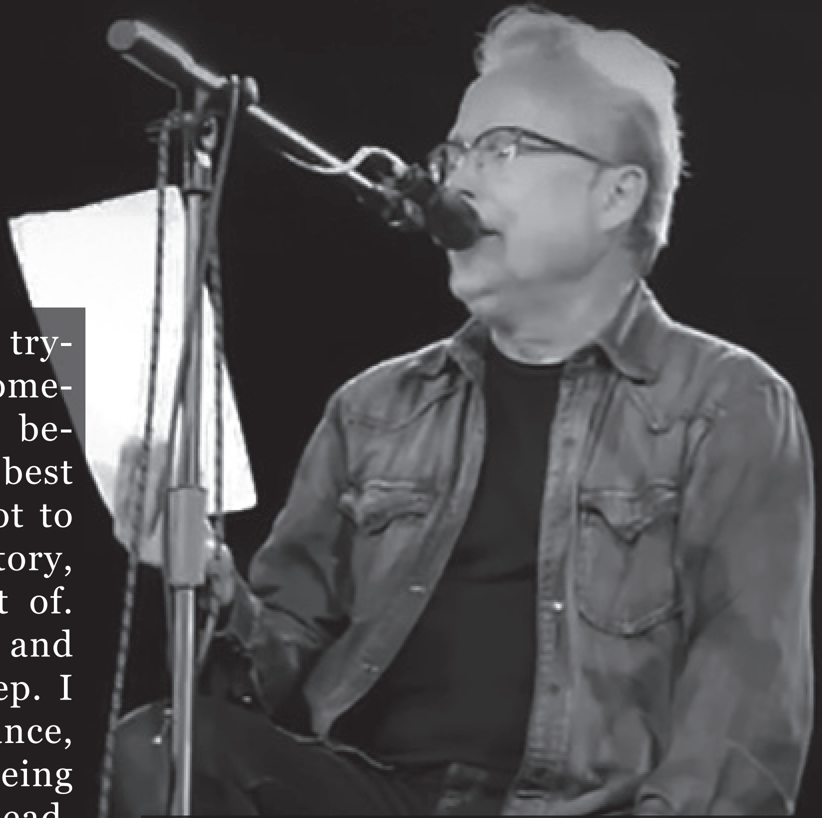
"I realized that if I wrote from just my own perspective, I'd just be preaching to the choir. I really thought, 'How do you challenge someone to think about how destructive some of the things that are going on can be for a democracy?' And I can point to both the right and left.

So whether it is college students shutting down a conservative economist like Bill Kristol at a university; that's fascism, just as much as the president belittling, absolutely belittling a free press is.

Tearing down both of those things is really dangerous for democracies. And the Spanish Civil War for example; I don't think Spain's ever gotten over it. It's a mess. It's ugly and it leads to despotism and it leads to authoritarianism. Without good checks and balances, that's why the framers extraordinarily, wisely, built a living constitution. We weren't a nation of strong men, but of laws.

My comeuppance, my speech about it was, if you hear these things in our current political discourse, it ain't my fault. Those are all statements from over 50-years years ago. Take it for what it is. I felt like that was the best way to challenge the listener. And if I lost some fans in the process, I think there are certain things that are more important than if I sell another record or not."

For You To See The Stars



"For You To See The Stars," finds a son trying to cope with the loss of his father. Something that happened to Foster, shortly before writing the story. His father was his best friend and had passed away. It's hard not to get chocked up reading parts of the story, understanding the pain it was born out of.

He writes, "The plane touched down and it jarred me from a deep, exhausted sleep. I felt those brief seconds of peaceful ignorance, those first waking moments of simply being before remembering that my father was dead. Daddy's gone. I blew out a breath and the physical sorrow that follows death laid down next to my soul and began gnawing at me again."

"When my father died, my wife was this saint that lived with me through the first year after he had passed. I knew that I needed the story to be about reconciliation and love.

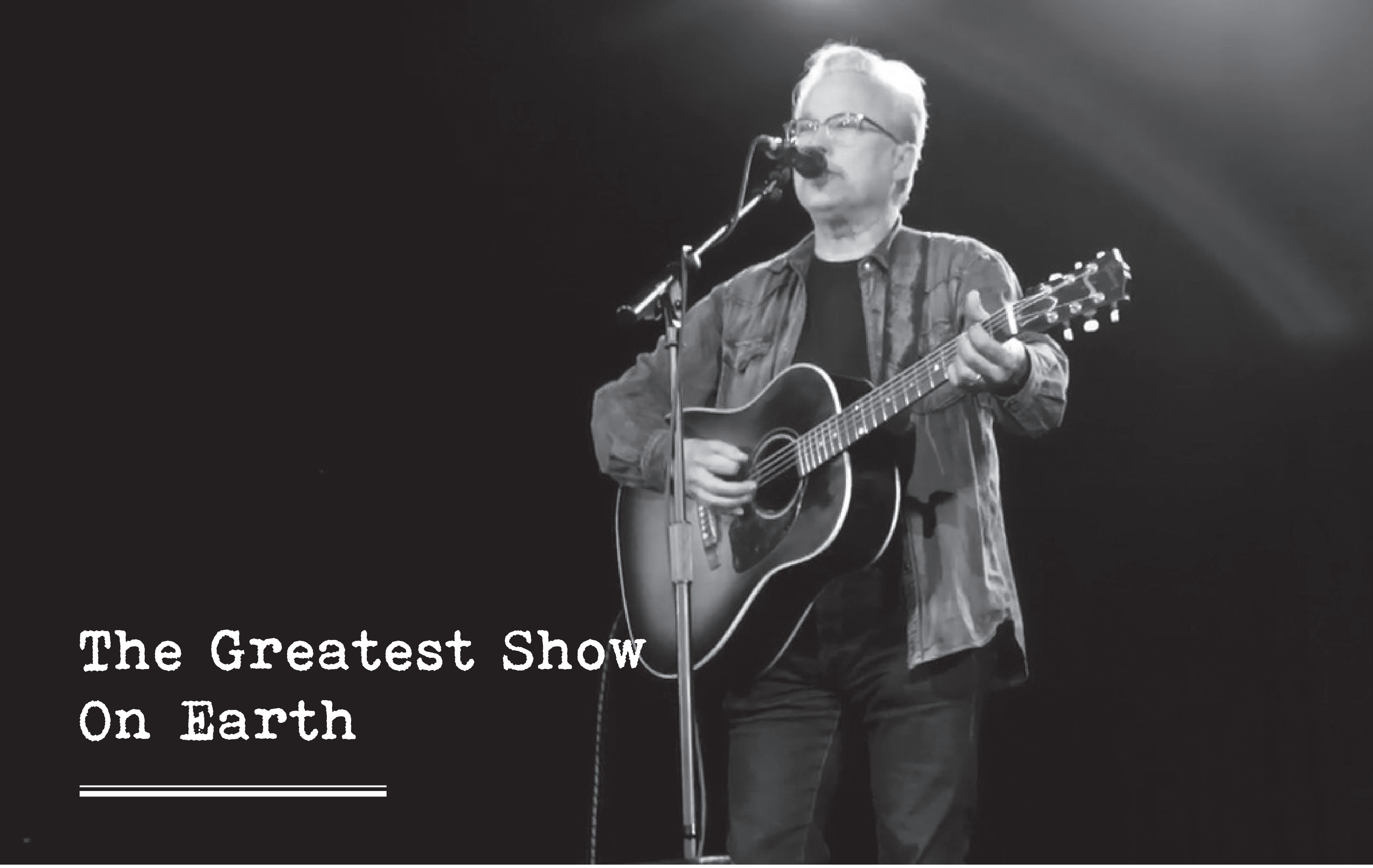
I'm not wearing it today, spoilers alert," he laughs, "but I wear my great grandfather's pocket watch. It was given to me by my father right before he passed."

In the story, generations of a family are torn apart when the grandfather marries another woman soon after the death of his first wife, the mother of his daughter. The daughter doesn't speak to him for years, but through twists and turns, that watch brings about a budding relationship between a grandfather and his grandson.

"So the song, was it born out of grief?"

"Sure, but it also came from being drunk on a dock in Alaska," he laughs.

"I was sitting with Jay Clementi who is like a brother to me. We've written a lot of songs together over the years. He and I, Scott Larent and his brother own a fishing lodge in Bristol, Alaska. We were standing on the dock, drinking Bourbon. I said 'It's so light outside at midnight, you can't even see the stars. Jay, just out of his mouth comes, 'It's gotta get dark enough, for you to see the stars.' And we all go, 'That's what we're writing tomorrow. And boom! It was on."



The Greatest Show On Earth

Radney Foster walks out on stage with his acoustic guitar and book. He introduces himself, saying "Now I don't like to be rude. My name is Radney Foster and I'm from Del Rio, Texas."

Then, he tells the story of how he lost his voice, his path to becoming an author. He reads his book at shows, plays guitar at book readings. He opens with the song "For You To See The Stars." Starting a show with a song other than "Just Call Me Lonesome," is a rare occurrence. He always plays it first. This time, it's second. Even after hearing the song dozens of times over the years, it doesn't get old. It's just that good. However, unlike in the 1992 video for the song, the dizzying, yet captivating spin move in which he completed a 360, guitar in hand, in under a second, seems-to have been retired. Understandable. His songs are powerful, no need for distraction.

When he plays "Raining On Sunday," he proves that even though others can do a fine job interpreting his songs, no one can sing a Radney Foster song like Radney Foster. Not even close. The same holds true when he does "I'm In." When he sings his songs, it's clear they come from the heart. Even the best performer, can't mimic that.

Watching him play for just a few minutes, his stature becomes more noticeable. If someone said he's 5'11 or 6'4, either would be believed. He has broad shoulders and long legs. And his voice resonates in the same deep tone as his guitar. His presence is as assertive and powerful as the songs he sings.

Before he plays "The Greatest Show on Earth," Foster reads the corresponding story, "Bridge Club," in its entirety. He pulls out a few pieces of paper, not the book.

He says, "Try as I may, I can't get my publisher to print the book in the elder font, she refused. So I just printed the damn thing out in the elder font, so y'all don't have to see me change glasses seven or eight times."

The story “Bridge Club,” he says, is the truest thing he’s ever written. It is about a little boy’s conflict in determining where he ought pee; outside or inside. He comes to the realization that he cannot make it inside and chooses to go on a pecan tree his daddy told him he could go on in an emergancy. Unfortunately, his efforts fail; instead of the tree, he goes on most of the ladies at bridge club. After that, all hell breaks loose.

Foster takes an innocent memory from childhood, to that same child’s loss of innocence and first brush with grief. The story, like the song, shows the importance of music, bringing together people of all generations, even in the midst of a shocking tragedy. It is intended to be read as though one is sitting on a back porch with a bourbon late at night, listening to someone tells stories about their mama and daddy. But on stage, reading the story, Foster doesn’t have a bourbon. Bourbon comes up often in his songs. A quick search in the e-book finds it’s mentioned 11 times to be exact (excluding Bourbon St.) and is referred to as ‘whiskey’ an additional 14 times. He seems to like Woodford’s in particular.

When he performs or before doing so, he doesn’t drink. He likes to be clear headed. Same goes for writing. In his own voice, as he reads the story, the emotions and humor in it truly come to life. He’s a talented narrator.

As he reads, there is laughter. A lot of it. By the end, there is a solemnness in the crowd, some gasps from the twist at the end, a historical event that most of the people in attendance witnessed on TV. growing up at a certain time. Everyone has lived through a tragedy that makes them remember the exact time of day and place they were when they saw something horrific unfold. Like music, it isn’t something that is particular to one generation. “No one gets through life unscathed,” he’s said.

Then, he plays “The Greatest Show On Earth,” a rootsy song with a bluegrass bounce, that is as catchy as anything he’s written and shows the ageless impact of music. Since releasing, *Del Rio, TX 1959: Unplugged and Lonesome* in 2012, the songs he records, for the most part, have had sparser instrumentation than some of his previous work. No loud drums or guitars. Letting the music breathe, brings his songwriting to the forefront.

“Belmont And Sixth,” is the second to last song he plays. It’s about a homeless veteran he saw nearly everyday. Foster would give him a few dollars when stopped at a light where the man was selling newspapers to make a little money. But one day the guy wasn't there anymore. He never found out what happened to him.

"I think that's partly the way life goes. We have lots of people pass in and out of our lives and you go 'Oh, I don't know where they are now. I don't know what they're doing.' It was a good life lesson, to pay more attention."

He closes the show with "Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)" which was a hit for the Dixie Chicks. He usually ends his set with it. He tells the sweet story about how it was written, for his son, who lived in France with Foster's ex-wife. He wrote it so he could be with his son, if even a continent away, but without the intention of ever recording it.

"What does it mean, to be a Texas songwriter?"

"It's an honorable tradition. I don't think songs come from one place, in the same way that being able to write doesn't come from one place. And, yet I consider myself a Southern writer and a Texas songwriter. That sense of place runs so strong through everything I write, either lyrics or prose.

One of the reasons there is such a strong sense of Texas songwriters, is because storytelling around a campfire is valued culturally. You can combine that with the fact that from age nine to 90, people still get dressed up on a Saturday night and go see original music all over the state. Remarkably so. Almost more than just about any other place I've been, other than Ireland. I think that might have something to do with it.

TJ EDITOR, COURTNEY
WITH RADNEY FOSTER

I count it as an honor, because some of the greatest songwriters the world's ever known come from that soil."

Three words were scribbled in a useless journal, right at the beginning of the show, in order to communicate one's level of disbelief when he walked out alone. 'Holy shit. Solo?' Just a few feet away, was one of the best singer-songwriters of their generation, playing to an audience who were there to listen. No distractions, just songs and stories.

It was the greatest,
the greatest show on Earth.

LISTEN TO RADNEY FOSTER.

READ RADNEY FOSTER.