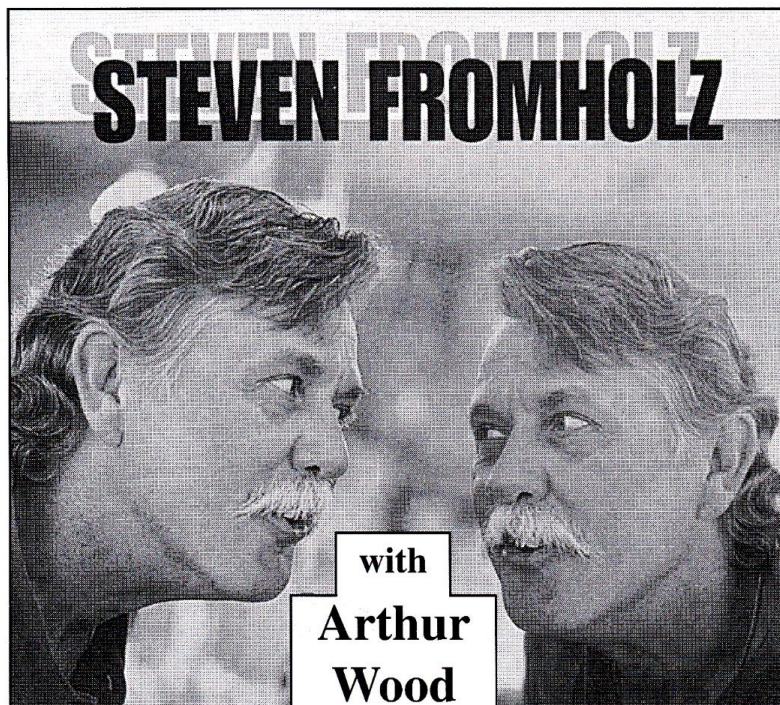


Currents



Singer, songwriter, actor, wit and raconteur, Steven Fromholz remains an undiscovered Austin legend ...

Temple, Texas is located midway between Waco and the state capital, Austin. Steven Fromholz was born there on June 8, 1945. His father worked for the Ford Motor Company and the family travelled the mid-west until Steven was 11 years old when they settled in Denton, Texas.

While a student at the North Texas State University in Denton, Fromholz set up the college folk club and fellow students with a bent for music included Michael Martin Murphey and Travis Holland.

"While I was attending college, I married my High School sweetheart. The only mistake she ever made was to give me a banjo as a wedding present. In the 1950s I was in tune with the Kingston Trio — they killed me. The Limelighters slayed me. Then I got into Clarence Ashley and Doc Watson."

Fromholz's first experience as a paid performer came when he teamed up with Murphey and Patty Lowman.

"We sang on the green bean and cold

grey meat circuit. Those Lions and Quantas Clubs."

During the opening half of the Sixties, Fromholz also played in the Dallas County Outpatients alongside Murphey, Travis Holland, Segal Fry, Donny Brooks, Ted Kak and the late John Vandiver.

Fromholz spent February through June of 1965 in New Orleans absorbing the atmosphere of that musical melting pot. Returning to Texas, he was determined to pursue a career in music, having started composing songs during his Louisiana sojourn. By July, he had moved on again, this time to California where he was pursued by a draft notice.

"I was in the Navy till 1968. I spent the last year and a half in San Francisco. I had a duo named Buffalo Chips with a gal named Judy Caldwell. I met Michael Williams out there and he was part of Frummox for a while. Then he went in the Army and later Dan McCrimmon and I became Frummox. I was singing four nights a week. I got out of the Navy early

because they thought I was crazy, but it was an honourable discharge."

Heading East, Fromholz initially spent time in Arizona and then settled in Colorado.

In 1969, Steve and Dan cut the first of a pair of Frummox albums (there was to be a thirteen year gap between the two). *Here To There* was produced by Dick Weissman, who'd been part of the Journeymen folk trio in the early sixties. Released by abc/Probe, the eight track Frummox album featured the ten minute Fromholz classic, *Texas Trilogy*.

Having also cut his *Song For Stephen Stills*, it is somewhat ironic that a couple of years later Fromholz became a member of Stephen Stills' road band. The group eventually mutated into Manassas and went on to cut two albums for Atlantic circa 1972/3.

"I think I have one rhythm track on the first record. I quit the band in the fall of '71 because I was not making sense to me. Janey, the lady who puts up with all my crap, was a lot more important to me, as was my sanity."

Fromholz retreated to the mountainous South West.

Following the disbandment of the Monkees in 1969, Texan Michael Nesmith cut a handful of critically lauded, country-rock flavoured albums for RCA through the early Seventies and also persuaded Elektra to finance Countryside, a label specialising in new country talent.

Fromholz cut an album titled *How Long Is The Road To Kentucky* during 1973 at Nesmith's ranch in Sepulveda, California. However, one week before it was due for release, a management reshuffle took place at Elektra ...

"I've got the masters. Michael sent them to me. He is a gentleman. They'll never come out. I listen to them now and again. I'd actually known Michael since '65. He was working with Randy Sparks in California. Randy had these 'farm troupes' for those singers he had — the Christy Minstrels. He had this 'farm club' called Ledbetters and I heard a lot of folk music down there.

"I rested for a while, but I needed to play because that is what I did. Janey and I took to the road in a station wagon between April and September '72. Had a little house built on the back. Playing songs in Texas and travelling around, playing clubs. Going to Arkansas to see my friend Roger Hopps from the Memphis Horns.

"Then I began to hook up with some Texas players who had wound back up in Texas. We started putting bands together, bands like Captain Duck and the Farmers Electric Co-op Boys which was a little psychedelic country band. Also a band called the Bluebonnet Plague. I moved down to Austin, Texas in '74 because the

business was there. I had a market there and I could work out of there successfully. At that time, I was making a living in Austin alone – in 1974 to 1976 with the progressive country scene. It was incredible. I hooked up with Moon Hill Management and Larry Watkins became my manager.”

In 1976, through a deal arranged by Moon Hill with Chalice Management, Steven Fromholz recorded an album for Capitol, *A Rumor In My Own Time*, produced by Roger Harris and Donald Williams. It was partly recorded in Tulsa, Los Angeles and Austin. All tunes except John Sebastian’s *She’s A Lady* were Fromholz creations. That same year, *I’d Have To Be Crazy* was recorded by Willie Nelson who took it to #11 on the country charts. In concert, Steven often refers to the song as “A medley of my hit.”

Frolicking In The Myth followed in 1977 with Joe Renzetti as producer.

“I felt like I wasn’t being treated well by Chalice. I didn’t think I was getting any support from them. I took my lawyer and went to California and broke the Chalice contract. Capitol said to me at that time, ‘You can stay with us if you pick up the debt.’ If I’d been smart enough to realise that \$50,000 was nothing, I’d have taken up the debt and stayed with Capitol. I wasn’t and I didn’t, and that’s the way it goes.”

Concurrent with the Capitol debacle, Fromholz launched his movie and acting career. In October 1976, Peter Fonda arrived in Austin to film *Outlaw Blues* in which Steven secured the part of a recording engineer.

“The soundtrack album was made during the early to middle winter after the film was completed. They put my songs on there just because they had to put some songs on the record.”

Released by Capitol, Fromholz performs three songs, none of which are featured in the film: his own *Everybody’s Goin’ On The Road*, *Little More Holy* and Hoyt Axton’s *Beyond These Walls*. Axton is credited as producer, and it’s not perhaps too ironic that in 1981 he cut an album titled *Everybody’s Goin’ On The Road* for his own Jeremiah label. This was released in the UK via the Young Blood International/Crazy Viking label.

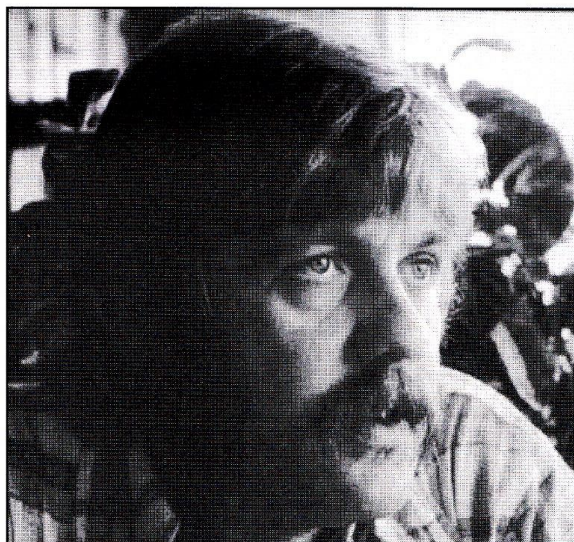
Around the same period, Young Blood released a Steven Fromholz single in the UK which teamed *Hondo’s Song* with an in-concert version of *I’d Have To Be Crazy*. *Hondo’s Song* was cut as a duet with Willie Nelson in Austin. Needless to say, it didn’t crack the British charts and is a much sought after Fromholz rarity these days.

Anyway, back to the late Seventies ...

As Fromholz already enjoyed a musical connection with Willie Nelson, it’s not unusual that Steven’s next studio

recording, *Jus’ Playin’ Along*, appeared on Willie’s shortlived Lone Star label, a subsidiary of Polygram, in 1978. Saleswise, it sank into a bottomless void. (Of course, Polygram’s lack of promotional interest could have been loosely connected with the fact that Willie signed a new recording deal with CBS.)

Fromholz concluded that the only way forward was to establish his own label. His debut on Felicity Records (named after his daughter) came in 1979 with *Fromholz Live*, recorded in front of a hometown audience at a local club, Steamboat Springs 1974. Ever the raconteur, Fromholz regaled the audience with tales about *Aunt Minnie And Bears* and sausage based products in *Dimmy Jean’s Pure Puke Sauce Linkages*.



Frummox II appeared in 1982, and guest players included Dick Weissman, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot as well as local stars Bob Livingston, Johnny Gimble and Larry Nye.

After *Outlaw Blues*, Fromholz appeared in a picture called *Clack And Dagger* and in the summer of 1983 acted in a play titled *Willie The Shake*. The following year, he starred in the movie, *Songwriter*, in which Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson had the lead roles, reprising the role of a sound engineer. Subsequently, he played Roy the barman – in reality an undercover detective – in the 1986 budget movie, *Positive I.D.* (aired on UK television in December).

Now maintaining an acting career in parallel with his musical one, during 1988 Fromholz took the part of a frontiersman in the play, *The Ballad Of The West*. (If you’d been in Austin this past Christmas season, you’d have caught him in the role of Scrooge in a new production of *A Christmas Carol*.)

I recall sitting in a Kerrville hotel room during 1988 with Nanci Griffith while

Fromholz played a tape of songs that became his *Love Songs* album. It appeared in 1988 on Felicity. *I’d Have To Be Crazy* was again included while standouts among the new compositions were *Blue Would I Be* and *Lady’s Man*.

The 1991 album, *Everybody’s Goin’ On The Road*, by Steven Fromholz and the Almost Brothers is the only Felicity release of the Nineties to date. The selections include Jerry Jeff’s *Gypsy Song Man*, Paxton’s *Ramblin’ Boy* and the Dillard’s *Hey Boys* plus a mix of old and new Fromholz compositions, the latter including *Last Livin’ Outlaw* and *Rockin’ On The River*.

In 1992, Fromholz acted as the narrator on a cassette-only single titled *Bald Eagles At Buchanan Lake*. This nine minute-long

composition written, co-produced and released by Patricia Long aka Patricia Hardin (Tom Russell’s singing partner during the late Seventies) was inspired by the eagles that frequent the lake shores.

The Old Fart In The Mirror is the latest release by Steven Fromholz, recorded during a series of appearances at the Birchmere in Alexandria, Washington during September, 1994.

Released by Jerry Jeff’s Tried & True Music, the album sees Fromholz supported by his longtime road buddy and guitarist, Larry Nye. To quote the liner notes, “*Here I am again! Steven Fromholz: Up-and-coming middle-aged, stand-up folksinger, specializing in Free-form, Country-Folk-Rock, Science-Fiction, Gospel-Gum Bluegrass-Opera-Cowjazz Music!*”

Assuming you’re already a Fromholz addict, you’ll understand this buckshot blast description of the numerous bases which he has always covered musically. All eleven songs are composed by Fromholz, the title track, the narrative introduction to *Texas Trilogy*, *No One Ever Saw Granny Nekkid*, *Lover’s Waltz*, *Train Song* and the appropriately titled *Singin’ The Dinosaur Blues* being new compositions.

Of late, Steven Fromholz has become actively involved in skippering raft expeditions through the rivers and canyons along the Texas/Mexican border. Ever the rough diamond, this pioneer of the Texas outlaw country movement has proved himself to be a longterm survivor. ■