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By Tom Geddie

Radney Foster considers himself lucky to make a living in music because he says, modestly, that it's all he can do. While he may be able to do other things well, it's for sure that he can write and deliver a good song no matter how fickle the music business might be.

With a track record of his own dating back to the mid-1980s, Foster also wrote Sara Evans' recent #1 Billboard hit "Real Fine Place to Start" and has written songs covered by artists as diverse as Guy Clark, The Dixie Chicks, Rosie Flores, The Mavericks, New Grass Revival, The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Poco, The Sweethearts of the Rodeo, Keith Urban, and many more.

"I don't think I could do anything else," Foster said. "When I was first starting out, somebody told me that the best advise was that when you wake up in the morning and you can do anything else, then you should do that because music is going to require just about everything you are." The music business "is not a meritocracy," he said. "You could write the greatest song in the world and nobody might hear it, or a mediocre one that could be a hit. But if you really work at it you can figure out how to make a living at it, and it's given me a lot of joy. People pay me to play music for a living, and to write songs and sing."

Foster's new CD, *This World We Live In*, due to hit the streets April 4 from Dualtone, is a radio-ready collection with half a dozen or more songs that could find their way onto the mainstream or Americana charts and into barroom jukeboxes. On the CD, he "lives" in a soulful, country-blues world of cotton dresses and beer-can pyramids, of come-on lines and the price of sin, of mistakes and road maps. Foster and his co-writers turn familiar themes and images into personal moments that can touch us where we hurt.

Foster and Darrell Brown co-produced the CD, doing most of the work in two days with a pedigreed band of guitarist Waddy Wachtel and drummer Charley Drayton from Rolling Stone Keith Richards' side project, The X-pensive Winos; keyboardist Rami Jaffe from The Wildflowers; and bassist Bob Glaub, who's worked with Jackson Browne; Warren Zevon; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young; and more. Later, Foster added a little bit of guitar and smoothed out some of his vocals.

"I wanted some guys to play with that slosh," he said, coining a new word. "The music these guys make just kinda encourages you to move – the groove and twang and splash. They played fearlessly and with a lot of soul, like standing on the edge of the precipice." Nine of the 10 songs are co-writes. "I've always written with other folks and by myself, and most of my records have always been kinda a 50/50 blend," he said. "We tried to pick what I thought were the 10 best things to go together as an entity for *This World We Live In*. Some of the best songs in the world are written with a guy and guitar by himself,

and some of the best are written by teams that consistently write together. Both ways are really very different experiences, and I value both. “One is kinda like group therapy in a way. You get to hang out with somebody and come up with something that fits your heart and soul. And sometimes I personally have the need to go off and be alone for a little while and see what comes out on the other side,” he said. “There’s a certain level of songwriting being personal that’s necessary, but it’s also important to step back and ask yourself how to communicate in a heartfelt but straight-ahead, conversational manner. Songs are short stories to me. In a song, you’ve got to express one thought.”

Foster said he’s never worried – “not one bit” – about whether people think he’s a country artist or a rock artist or whatever. “I love country music and I love rock and I love swing and jazz and bluegrass. I take all those influences and try to come up with best song I can come up with. Sometimes I accomplish it, sometimes I don’t,” he says, laughing. “I don’t like any sort of cookie cutter mentality in music. I applaud guys like Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Costello – guys who always try to do something really different, something cool and extraordinary.”

The Texas native had his first successes writing for other folks, before teaming with Bill Lloyd as Foster and Lloyd to chart with “Crazy Over You,” “Texas in 1880,” “Fair Shake,” and “What Do You Want from Me this Time” before going solo with “Just Call Me Lonesome” and “Nobody Wins.” Then came “Everyday Angels,” his response after 9/11 recognizing the qualities of heroes in ordinary people. “Like everybody, I was affected by Sept. 11,” he said. “I wrote the song not even knowing I’d ever record it because I didn’t want to capitalize on tragedy. But I kinda thought to myself that at some point this was going to be history, not a current event. And it needs to be remembered.”

He thought of the song “Abraham, Martin, and John” that is “just as potent today as it was 40 years ago. I was kinda hoping I could write something kinda like that. After Sept. 11, we all started talking about people who are everyday angels in our lives, who go unsung.” The song included verses inspired by a woman named Laura McCray who Foster and his wife, Cyndi, knew at their church who had been heavily involved in the civil rights movement in Alabama during the 1960s, a childhood memory about his attorney father inviting an abused woman to move into their home after representing her in a divorce case, and about New York City firefighter Dave Fontana, who died while helping others. “I kinda wrote it about people I personally know. I didn’t know the fireman, but had a couple of friends in the World Trade Center who are alive and well and who owe their lives to the firemen,” Foster said.

Foster said that when he first learned to write songs, he used the commercial approach he was taught: to find a “hook” and then build a song around it. “But more and more, I don’t write songs that way. These songs were born out of telling stories about life. That’s what I’m always trying to find – a little piece of the truth.”

Foster is glad that he “gets to wear a lot of hats” in the music world he lives in: writing songs, performing, recording, and producing for acts like the Randy Rogers Band. “I get excited when I hear somebody who’s a tremendous singer like Sara Evans take one

of my songs and make it her own, and I get excited hanging out with young bands with so much heart as they figure out how to do what they love and watching songs come to life. I'm pretty fortunate that I get to enjoy that myself."