

Leslie Lee: Hi, my name's Leslie Lee. I'm the executive director of the Jimmie Rodgers foundation, festival and museum here in Meridian, Mississippi. Thanks for tuning into our podcast. Our mission is to preserve the legacy of Jimmie Rodgers. We started this podcast to showcase the influence and reach of Jimmie Rodgers music and to highlight the creative talents of the singers, songwriters and musicians in and from Meridian, Mississippi.

Todd Tillman: Hey, I'm Todd Tillman, winner of The Voice inviting you to take a road trip to Meridian, Mississippi. If you had been to Meridian lately, it's like you haven't even been, we have amazing historic theaters and museums. You've got the best Southern food and little dives that you could find. And we've got outdoor spaces that you can just lose yourself in. And all of it's just a hop, skip, and a jump away. Go to visit meridian.com to check out my playlist. Stay safe. And I'm looking forward to seeing you real soon.

Leslie Lee: Hey, it's Leslie Lee and in the studio with me today. I am so excited to have my guests. Mr. Frank Foster. Hey Frank, how are you?

Frank Foster: I'm good, Leslie, how are you?

Leslie Lee: Good. Good, good. Thanks for coming to Meridian today, you've come in town for the Jimmie Rodgers Festival. We're so excited to have you, and you're kicking off the big outdoor festival that we haven't done in years. And so you're the one that's gonna headline it tonight.

Frank Foster: Yeah, I'm excited about it. I didn't know y'all, hadn't done it in years, but I wondered when this came through, I was like, why have I never heard of that?

Uh, you know, we, we run up and down. I-20 now for 10 years and never heard of the Jimmie Rodgers Festival. So I'm happy that it's back and I'm happy to be headlining tonight. It's gonna be a lot of fun.

Leslie Lee: I'm excited that you're bringing it back. You're the one doing it with us. So thank you. So Frank you're from Louisiana.

Frank Foster: Absolutely.

Leslie Lee: Grew up up there, right? Yes, sir. So you're a Southern boy. Mm-hmm so tell us a little bit, I, I guess the big thing about you, you started out in the oil fields, right? Yes. Ma'am singing to the guys on the rig. Yes. Ma'am.

Frank Foster: That's where I got kicked off. I was out there, uh, working in the Gulf of Mexico and I've told this story a thousand times, but, uh, it's the truth. When you get off in the evening, you can't go anywhere. You know, you work 12 hour shift and you're 30 miles out in the Gulf or whatever you are at the time. So I started bringing a little guitar out there and, and playing songs that I had written to those guys out there on the rig. And it started to become, you know, if not a weekly, a daily thing out there mm-hmm um, and those guys, honestly, I, I tell people this

all the time, playing those songs out there to those guys, especially stuff that you've written, those guys really gave me the confidence. You know, jump off the ledge is what I say, you know, that's awesome. They were like, you know, man, this stuff is good. You know, this will be here forever. You need to go try this, you know? So they were a big part of, uh, my move to Nashville. That's for sure.

Leslie Lee: Well, that's awesome. So, I mean, with the oil rig shift, it's two weeks on two weeks off, right?

Frank Foster: That's what I was working. There's a lot of, there's a few different hitches. You can work. I, I did two weeks on two weeks off. A lot of guys that work out in deep water mm-hmm um, they'll do a 21 and 21 just because that makes more sense with the travel and everything, but nothing about it's easy. You don't realize how long 14 days are until you're out there, away from your family and everything else.

And it never failed. The whole time I worked off shore seemed like everything cool that went on. Like, if there was a concert you wanted to go to, or a ballgame or somebody's birthday or a wedding, you were always offshore every time that happened. So I'll never forget. Those days had a lot of good times, but I miss the guys out there, but I don't miss the work.

Leslie Lee: No, I bet not. I bet not. You've got it much better now. but, uh, how are those, some of those early songs, I mean, you know, what, what were you writing about then? I mean, sitting on rig, looking at the water

Frank Foster: Yeah, honestly, that's the truth though. I was writing stuff that was reflections of the influences of the stuff I listened to all my life. Obviously, Hank Junior, Wayland Jennings, all the old outlaw stuff is kind of the route I always wanted to take. But like you said, when you're a songwriter, a true songwriter, I feel like you're writing what's going on around you. And, uh, on my very first album, uh, I had a song on there called Gulf Coast Cowboy, cuz that's what I was doing.

Leslie Lee: That's what you were. Yeah.

Frank Foster: And that's what we were out there. And that song really took off for me along with a lot of other songs on that album, but that song right there, I think kind of solidified to people that, Hey man, this guy's really doing this and he's really out there, you know, living that life.

Cuz I, you know, I was talking about things in that song and on that record that unless you was living that life, you wouldn't know anything about. And I think for, you know, the blue collar guys, you know, that was wearing them red wing boots that was out there doing that, that gave them a sense of authenticity of what I was doing. And they really got behind it and, and believed in it and started pushing it to everybody they know, and they still do that to this day. And it's amazing.

Leslie Lee: That's awesome. And you know, really the best songwriters they write about what they know. Yeah. And that's what Jimmie Rodgers did, you know, back in his day, he wrote

Tuberculosis Blues. Yeah. I mean, cuz he had it, you know, I mean, who was writing that stuff, he wrote about the jailhouse. And so I think that was kind of his claim to fame and definitely yours. You're writing about what you see and what you know that so many people can relate to. Yeah. So that's cool.

Now your career has taken off though. You quit that oil rig, you did moved to Nashville um, but I guess. What I love is that you decided to do it on your own, right? Yeah, I did. Why not with the management company, the record labels, all that? Tell me how that came about.

Frank Foster: Well, I mean, I would be lying if I, if I said I went to Nashville, not wanting that.

Leslie Lee: Mm-hmm.

Frank Foster: Now I say I went there warning that, but I didn't know what all that entailed, I was green as grass.

Leslie Lee: Gotcha.

Frank Foster: You know, it was just like me walking on, uh, into another planet. Mm-hmm , you know, walking into Nashville. I didn't know anyone. I'm not the greatest guitar player in the world at the time. I didn't know how good my songs were.

So he just mosey on into town, starting doing anything and bumping into people. And, uh, I got told no a lot at the beginning and honestly, for a year, I didn't, I never even talked to anybody. I didn't even know what to do. You know? So I finally started going to songwriters nights and meeting people and networking a little bit. And I found out very, very quickly that walking up and down music row begging people for, to listen to me was not what I wanted to do.

So, uh, guy, that's still in my band now, Topher Peterson, uh, met him. He was like, Hey man, I got a guy that's got home studio it's out in this garage behind this house. It ain't ain't much to it, but why don't you go over and cut some of your songs? They're awesome. And so that's what I did. And soon as I got that album done, I was like, man, let's just, let's take this on the road. You know, I already kind of had a built in following from playing on the rigs to those guys, cuz they would go home and tell everybody, Hey, there's this guy out on my rigs. So by the time my first album came. There was people waiting on my album, which was mind blowing. I'm imagining

Leslie Lee: these rig concerts like, oh, they're tough. Yeah. It's like nine o'clock everybody's done. And Hey, Frank's gonna play. That's like, I sit around you

Frank Foster: room- room full of cigarette smoke and I love it, chew. It was, it was a, it was a scene I tell you, but I got on the road and I just didn't stop. So we're three, four albums in. Yeah. And. Getting really, really hot, you know, having, having top five albums and stuff like that in country music and you sell out everywhere, right? Yeah. And people are, you know, then the record companies, they're opening up the charts and looking at like this, guy's not on our roster.

Who is this? So your phone starts to ring, obviously. And to be honest with you, Liz, I've gotten really close to signing deals. But everything just always seemed to come back to, "you know what? I don't need that". Yes. I could be a lot more, probably rich and a lot more famous, but at the end of the day, that's not what I got into it for.

I got into it to make a better living than I was making on a rig. I'm doing that. And I got in it to do the kind of music I wanted to do. And not have anybody tell me how to do that. And I'm getting to do that. So why change anything? And then you look around and I'm old school, I'm a family guy, you know, I'm married. I got kids. I don't wanna lose all that. Right. And, and I'm a weekend guy. I'm coming down here to see y'all tonight. And guess what? Tomorrow morning, I'll be back on the couch at my house.

Leslie Lee: Exactly.

Frank Foster: I don't want to be gone for three or four months, you know, so there's a lot of things that go into it, but I just, uh, found that doing it my way was the way I wanted to do it and social media and things like that. And the way things are, allow you to do that now. So I'm, I'm happy about it.

Leslie Lee: Well, you said you followed the outlaw, so you are that outlaw. There you go. You are-

Frank Foster: Maybe the last one left, but here we are.

Leslie Lee: You got it. Let's talk about a little bit about your songwriting. I mean, you're off the rig now. You still have number one hit songs. So obviously you got something going on. What's your process when you write?

Frank Foster: Well, I mean, it's, it's changed over the years, obviously. Still, like I said earlier, you, you write what you're seeing. So what I was writing about Gulf Coast Cowboy, when I was on the rig come the fourth album, I'm writing a song called Flying Down the Highway, cuz that's what I'm doing every weekend.

Me and the boys is hitting every honky talk and drinking all the beer and taking all the money and going to the next one. You know, that's what we were doing. So he was writing about that. But over the years, um, The process of how the song begins. Hasn't changed that much. Now that my kids are around, you know, they're five and two, the greatest blessings in my life, outside of my life. I just have to take a night, you know, once a week or once every two weeks, it's always on a Wednesday. I don't know why. And I go out to my shop behind my house, get outta everybody's way after the kids and the wife are down at night and just, you know, kind of strum along until something comes along. So that's kind of where I'm at with it now.

I've gotten to the point as well, where I trust guys in my band enough to, you know, send me a guitar riff, you know, or something that they've recorded at home. Cuz they're not songwriters, lyrically, but they can do anything they want to on that guitar. And they're just doing that stuff all the time. So they're recording it and sending it to me and like, "Hey man, can you put lyrics over

this?" And that started to happen for us too, over the last few albums, which is really exciting, cuz it takes me places that I can't go on the guitar. Yeah. So which makes me write stuff that I would never have gotten to write without that. So it's pretty simple. We keep it simple. We keep it all in house, but songwriting's still my favorite part of it. It always has been, there's nothing like that feeling when you get done with a song and you're like, man, that's gonna be a good one right there. You know? So I love that.

Leslie Lee: I don't know if it's for you, like asking, you know, what's your favorite kid, but what's your favorite song that you've written?

Frank Foster: You know, I know it's really, that's too hard. It's really, really tough. I tell. And you've got the, you've got the perfect analogy for, cause I tell people that all the time, they're all like your kids, you just really like the one that's doing really good the time. But it would probably surprise people. You know, some of our biggest songs, uh, the ones that really, really pay the bills. You know, I love those songs. Obviously I wrote 'em and they're a lot of fun, but not always been my favorites. I lean toward things that are what people would probably consider B- sides on the album. Mm-hmm, a little bit more obscure stuff, but, uh, I've got a song called Pete and John that I wrote about my dad and his brother that I really, really love.

There's a song called Romance in the South that I wrote few albums back that I just love. And those, both of those songs are just, you know, the whole album's jamming and then those songs come on and it's just me and the guitar. Yeah. And it's unfiltered. And however, it came out, we did it one time and that's it.

Leslie Lee: Really?

Frank Foster: Yeah.

Leslie Lee: Wow.

Frank Foster: So those songs like that, who I am old, man, and me, there's so many of those slower, more meaningful things that are, that I'm most proud of when you listen to the lyric. And you're like, man, I, I love listening to a song and, and looking back, like, man, I wrote that, man. I, I did. Okay. You know, and there's one.

We did a full blown acoustic album, two albums ago that I really, really love. I wanted to do that for years and I'd done that for me.

Leslie Lee: Mm-hmm.

Frank Foster: But you know, then again, our fans being what they are made it a top five for us. Um, that's awesome. So, which was amazing and there's a song on there. Caught a Few More Miles that we shot a video for and everything. And, uh, I didn't know what that song would do, but I'd done that whole video and everything. I'd done it for me.

Leslie Lee: Mm-hmm.

Frank Foster: And it ended up being a huge force, but I love that song. And it's my favorite video that we've ever done. It may put some people to sleep. But, you know, as a young kid-

Leslie Lee: I actually watched that video this morning and I like- I did, I did@

Frank Foster: Young kids say it might get you in your feels, is that what they say?

(Caught a Few More Miles plays) Down home and put a few more miles on amusing, man.

Leslie Lee: Well, I love it. Thank you so much. And. Know what you give yourself a hard time about not being a guitar player first off you are, but you know, I'm gonna relate you back to Jimmie Rodgers. He always said that he wasn't the best guitar player either. Right. And he's known for his riffs so I know. Right. You know?

Frank Foster: Right. Yeah.

Leslie Lee: So I just wanna bring a little bit that, you know, back into it, you're in the hometown of, of the, the father of country music and yeah. You've seen the documentary with Ken Burns, right?

Frank Foster: Absolutely.

Leslie Lee: So I guess being in country music and. Any relation there about how, I guess, you know, like Marty Stewarts, he's always said that a lot of music wouldn't exist still without Jimmie Rodgers, you know? And he's still, and it's Bob Dylan just played here a little bit ago and, and his last album was a tribute to Jimmie Rodgers. Yeah. And so he is so relevant in music. Do you find that at all in your music?

Frank Foster: Well, the thing about people like Jimmie Rodgers, mm-hmm and, and Hank Williams mm-hmm , um, and there, what the thing is about people think that Hank Williams, senior, some people consider him, you know, the father or the grandfather of country music.

I love Hank Sr. To, to this day, he's top three for me. But if you really want to dig deep, mm-hmm you gotta go back to Jimmie yeah. You know, he's he was the first, I feel like, you know, the Blue Yodeler and like, like the songs you're talking about earlier, the stuff that he wrote about he's writing about his life.

I've always been a Waiting on a Train guy. Mm-hmm you know, so I thank my dad, first of all, for introducing me to Hank Williams and cuz my dad listened to Hank Sr in. 1988, like it was 1950. Yeah. I thought that was what was going on. So he, he got me attached to that old sound. And so when I got older, it made me dig around in those old sounds and, and finding the Blue Yodeler himself, you know, that's, that's amazing. Mm-hmm um, and to be back here doing it in his hometown, pretty cool. You know, this is one that you, that you call your dad about, you know, and, and he appreciates that, you know, my buddies who are my age might not. But if I call dad and say, I'm playing the Jimmie Rodgers festival, he's like, yeah, I don't you'll know. Yeah, yeah. Go ahead. you know?

Leslie Lee: Well, awesome. Well, Frank, we thank you so much for being a part of the history of the Jimmie Rodgers festival. Now you're in it. You're fam. So-

Frank Foster: I am, uh, I'm excited.

Leslie Lee: Thank you so much. And we look forward to, to just watching you grow.

Frank Foster: Thank you so much, Leslie. I appreciate y'all having me down and we're gonna have fun.

Leslie Lee: All right. Thanks again, Frank Foster. Go check him out. Spotify, iTunes. You're everywhere. Right everywhere. He's everywhere. Just turn on the radio. You'll find him. All right. Thanks Frank.

Frank Foster: Thank you.

(Blue Collar Boys by Frank Foster plays)

Frank Foster: Hi. Thanks for tuning into our podcast. This podcast is from the Jimmie Rodgers Foundation Festival and Museum. Our mission is to preserve the legacy of Jimmie Rodgers. You'll hear from myself, Leslie Lee, the executive director and Ken Rainey. Who's worked with the foundation for over 35 years. We started this podcast to showcase the influence and the reach of Jimmie Rodgers music, and also to highlight the creative talent of all the singer songwriters musicians in and from Meridian, Mississippi.