



## Blues Tour de Forst

It's June 2008. Tom Forst, a regional vice president at Cox Communications Group, is about to walk away from 25 years as a corporate suit to chase a lifelong passion. The dream to be a full-time musician had been on hold since his post-college touring days, circa 1974.

He recalls the exact moment his life changed course. "My wife was sitting in the living room. She pays the bills, and she said, 'Look at that, I'm paying our last two \$30,000 college tuition bills for our last two kids.' I looked at her and said, 'I'm going to quit.'"

"My wife simply said, 'Go ahead,' and that's kind of the way she is. Her attitude was, what's the worst that can happen?" She only wanted assurances they wouldn't starve.



So Forst, then 57, gave his six-month notice at Cox Communications. At the end of that year, he stepped away from legions of direct reports, the jet-setting lifestyle, power, prestige, and pay. Big pay. What followed is a wild ride of a second act—from boardroom to bandstand, Forst was on his way to be a successful indie blues musician.



Now 69, Forst, known as The Suit, has gained acclaim as a guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter performing and recording with well-known musicians from the Johnny Winter Band and *Saturday Night Live* Band to the Allman Brothers Band, Paul Nelson Band, *Stephen Colbert Show* Band, and Grammy-winning artists and producers.

He has played hundreds of live shows and toured China as the headliner with a Chinese-American blues band. In 2018, he was inducted into the Connecticut and New York chapters of the Blues Hall of Fame.

In February 2020, he released his second album, followed by a sold-out release party at a Hartford, Connecticut, blues hot spot. When he isn't performing, teaching a guitar master class, writing new music, or recording, Forst hosts a weekly podcast, *Chasing the Blues*. The postponement of his second China tour due to the coronavirus outbreak opens up creative space to produce yet another album in 2020.

It's an aggressive schedule, and Forst thrives on it.

Follow the journey, and it's clear that the leap from media executive to music was not as rash as it might sound. It was actually the next step in a plan that had been set in motion nearly a half-century earlier and driven with intention for a quarter-century.

## The Early Days

Forst didn't always cotton to the guitar. When he was eight years old, his parents offered him the choice to take up an instrument, with the proviso that if he did, he couldn't quit. "It seemed like the guitar was the way to go, because, you know, Elvis."

"I hated it, I just hated it," Forst recalls. He admits to flinging the guitar out a second-story window at one point. "But my parents wouldn't let me quit."

The elder Forsts were on to something. By 13, Forst had landed paying gigs. By 15, he was invited to teach guitar at a local music store.

He recalls sneaking into clubs and even playing a strip club at age 16. All through college, music helped make tuition money. A week after graduation, Forst was in a band that hit the road. "In those days, around '74, you could make good money doing that," he says.

After two years as a musical nomad, Forst changed course. He got a Master of Science degree in education. He taught first grade for five years, then changed course again. "I realized there was no money in teaching, so I went into the business world."

In the next 25 years, he would get an Executive Master of Business Administration degree from the University of Connecticut and advance to regional vice president at Cox in Atlanta, overseeing advertising sales operations across the country.

But Forst never stopped playing whenever he could.

## **Working for The Man**

“Everyone wants to hear I really hated working for The Man,” Forst says. He enjoyed his job, but clearly, for Forst, the dream of being a musician never flagged.

“I had always planned to go back into the music business, but I had a family—and I had wants and needs myself that music wasn’t going to support. I said: OK, I can put it off as long as I need to.”

Forst would do what it took to advance his earning power, and frugality would channel those earnings into freedom reserves.

“There’s luck in there, for sure, but I kind of made my own luck. I knew I needed an MBA to get up to the next step. The sooner I could get to that next step, the sooner I could make the choice to leave. An MBA takes two years out of your life. Every night, you come home from work, you’re going to work until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, but I just did it. Yes, it’s inconvenient, but so is being broke,” says Forst.

“People who make a good amount of money also spend a good amount of money,” he says. “They get the big McMansion, the really top-of-the-line car, and all that. I never did that. We got a really nice farmhouse, and I drove a Ford, then a Prius for my last couple of years. I wanted to have freedom more than I wanted any kind of status. Even if I didn’t want to be a musician, I wanted the freedom to make a choice.”

## **Building a New Career**

When it finally happened, chasing the dream was a stark change. At Cox, Forst was a prominent executive with 1,000 people reporting to him. In New York City, he was just another musician going from audition to audition.

He had given up a lot, says Forst. “The first-class life, the limos waiting—you can really get caught up in it. The transition was tough. It was the loss of some status, the loss of some security, because I really did give up a ton of money to do this. I felt a little guilty about it, because I still have a family, and I could have made a ton more money.”

Then there were the travails of building a new career. Even though Forst was an accomplished musician, he had to build his name almost from scratch, because he’d been out of the scene for 30 years. And music can be a young person’s game. He admits to being self-conscious about his age at





first.

“One time I auditioned in this place in the middle of New York City, and there were about 50 guitar players. They all looked like my kids, the perfect rock stars. I’m 57, standing there in my short hair, and I’m thinking, ‘This is going to be brutal.’” To Forst’s disbelief, he got the gig, playing in a hip-hop band of 20-somethings.

It didn’t always go so well, he explains. “Sometimes I auditioned for things and was told, ‘You’re a little too old for the person we want.’ As I gained self-confidence, now my age is a benefit. I see myself kind of as a mentor.” His young audiences are sometimes dumbfounded when he talks about listening to this kind of music in the 1960s, decades before they were born. But he relishes it. “Now I want my age.”



## If the Suit Fits



Shortly after Forst left Cox, his son, Michael, then 22, was keyboard player and leader of a hardcore punk band. Michael invited his dad to a gig in Brooklyn at a good-sized venue filled with young people, none older than 25. Michael had planned a surprise.

“He said, ‘You just sit in the front row. We’re not going to say anything. I’m going to set up your guitar and amp, and I’ll give you the nod.’ Finally, Michael calls me upstage. The punk rockers are in red long johns with the flap in the back. And there I am on the edge of the stage with a blue blazer, gray wool slacks, and penny loafers. The audience is staring at me,” recalls Forst.

“Then Michael gives me the nod where I’m supposed to do the lead, and I do, and the place is just shocked. You wouldn’t expect a guy who looks like me to do what I did.”

As the band moved on to the next song, somebody started to yell, ‘Suit, suit,’ and then the whole audience started to yell, ‘Suit, suit, suit.’ Michael turned to me and said, ‘I guess that’s your new name.’

*Tom Forst*

Known thereafter as The Suit, Forst hasn’t entirely given up his corporate persona. He has grown a neat beard and traded the executive haircut for shoulder-length waves. He still dons a jacket everywhere he goes—some with elaborate embroidery, others more subtle and classic, but always with panache.

“The stage is a temple in a way. When I get up on stage, you’re never going to see me in ripped jeans and an old shirt. I think that’s disrespectful to the art. So it’s not quite a suit, but I always wear nice jackets,” says Forst.

He has had some good-natured differences of opinion with Factory Underground, his label, that wants him to adopt a more stereotypical blues image—more ragged. “Just last week, I said to them, what you don’t understand about me is that I’m a very neat person. I like to have every hair in place, my beard has to be trimmed, I wear well-fitting clothes. I’m not going to look like the guy who just stepped out of a weeklong binge.”

For his latest video, they compromised on a brooding Johnny Cash-style look. Black hat, plain black denim suit, black Chuck Taylors. It works.

## **Bona Fide Blues Guitarist**



On Valentine's Day 2020, Forst released his second album, *World of Broken Hearts*—a five-song extended play record, or EP—of Forst originals and a unique cover of “Hoochie Coochie Man,” originally recorded by Muddy Waters in 1954.

“EPs can feel like speed dating,” wrote Steven Ovadia in a review for *American Blues Scene*. “Artists are trying to get across their essence in a few pithy moments. It’s not just a hard thing to do, it’s arguably impossible. Yet Forst has managed it here, wisely selecting strong songs that, while thematically similar, also spotlight his range. Also helping things are stellar performances, all of it making you grateful that Forst traded his suits for a guitar.”

Ovadia praises Forst’s “soulfully worn voice, huge rock grooves, and thoughtfully layered tracks.” Another reviewer characterizes Forst’s style as “a force of nature controlled with journeyman precision.”

“I definitely poured my heart out into the album,” Forst said. “It took more than a year to put it together. The whole album is about relationships, the idea that no matter how bad it is or was, the sun is still going to shine the next day, and we just have to realize this is what happens in life, and you can’t be surprised. This is what happens, and deal with it.”

The haunting video for “Late Night Train,” the first track on the EP, puts a modern-day take on the classic blues train theme, updated to the streets of Harlem and the New York City subway. The video went viral, garnering more than 225,000 views in the first 30 days and landing on YouTube’s recommended list.

## **Magic Inside the Music**

“People who know my story will say to me all the time, ‘Wow, what a wonderful thing; you’re living the dream.’ I want to say, ‘Be careful what you wish for.’ You’ve got to be realistic. I don’t wake up every day and go, ‘Oh, you know, it’s the dream.’ I wake up every day happy that I’ve got another job that I really, really like. Music is a business like anything else.”

“I always knew it would be difficult. In the music business, people aren’t quite the same; they’re loosey-goosey on things. Some days get frustrating. I still have not calmed down in that area,” says Forst. Will the musicians arrive an hour late? Will the show get a good audience? Will the sound man say there’s not enough room for the equipment? Will audiences like the new music?

According to Forst, while work and worry surround the halcyon moments of actually making music, he says that to him, “There’s a magic inside the music. It’s not just the music, it’s how you approach it and the dynamics. Music is about emotion. You have to know how to sell it, and that’s how I approach it every minute.”



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*Tom Forst*

In the opening to the *Chasing the Blues* podcast, Forst quips that he sold his soul to the devil to become a corporate executive, then quit it all to play the blues.

“Not my soundest financial decision, as you can imagine, but I am working as hard on this as I possibly can, and I'm enjoying every second of it. I live every note that I play and breathe every lyric that I write. To have others be touched by my music is the ultimate reward.”

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## **Tom FORST:** Snapshot of a Music Man

Rolling out two albums of rocking blues tunes in three years is something to boast about. Tom The Suit Forst's collection includes the 2017 album *On Fire*, perfectly sized with just under 45 minutes of soulful music and featuring 11 songs. The Suit also released a second album, *World of Broken Hearts*, on Valentine's Day 2020. The five-song EP features harmonic rock grooves with cozy rhythm, and, of course, a healthy dose of blues.

His unique story, which has been chronicled by *Forbes Magazine*, television news programs, radio, and newspapers, includes the two aforementioned albums, touring China, and induction into the New York and Connecticut Blues Hall of Fame. The weekly podcast he started in 2018, *Chasing the Blues*, just completed its 50th episode, the finale of its first season. The podcast, endorsed by the Blues Foundation, explores the history and impact of the blues as world music and features interviews with other blues artists such as Mike Zito, Anthony Gomes, and Joe Louis Walker.