

Jon Foreman

As Switchfoot's tour bus begins to rollout after the band's show at Hammerstein Ballroom in NYC this past November, the tour manager realizes that not everyone is on the bus. He quickly realizes that lead singer Jon Foreman is the one missing. But, no one is concerned. In fact, everyone knows where he is. The tour manager steps off the bus, and looks up the street. There on the sidewalk is Jon, playing his acoustic guitar for over 60 kids who have waited over 3 hrs after the show to see him play.

"I call them 'after-shows' or 'further music'," says Foreman on a cell phone from the band's tour bus in Davis, California. "You've got more songs in you and you just have to get them out. The great thing about folk music is you can carry your entire stage show on your back. I usually start with some old Weezer songs, things people can sing along to, and then I play some of my newer stuff."

The 'newer stuff' has started to come out on a series of four EPs, one for each season of the year. Not only will they be thematically linked to the seasons but Foreman is working to make them sound seasonal – dark, somber musical moods for Fall and Winter, light and sprightly music for Spring and Summer. "I try to choose instruments and arrangements that match each season," he says. "I picture myself driving at that time of year and imagine the sounds."

He feels he has been in his element with the two EPs already recorded – Fall and Winter – because he's temperamentally suited to the time of leaves falling and nights drawing in (he spent many of his early years in New England). It has given him a chance to explore themes of loss, decay and brokenness that would have made an uneasy fit in the Switchfoot catalogue. "It's hard to be broken when you've got a power stack behind you and a full drum kit pounding away," he explains. "That's a position of power. Even if you're singing about desperate times, you're still coming at it with a fist."

The results are striking for their simplicity, power and directness. The basic tracks were all recorded spontaneously in living rooms and bedrooms in order to preserve the spirit of honest self expression that had inspired the writing. "It's a lot easier recording alone," he admits. "The great thing is that there are certain acoustics that you know you'll never get a chance to capture again. On 'White as Snow,' for example, I got a kick drum sound by hitting the side of a wall with the microphone, playing in time to the beat."

Both Fall and Winter explore themes of alienation and loss of innocence. We are meant to read Fall in its theological as well as its seasonal sense. We are meant to think of a paradise that has been lost. "The main difference is that in the fall there is still some kind of a fight being put up," he says. "But in winter death has to be conceded to. There is no real argument about it."

He acknowledges that Spring and Summer with their themes of hope and rebirth will be more of a challenge, but one he's prepared for. "I have a harder time writing upbeat songs. I think to do so you first have to express an awareness of sin. You need to be aware of the existence of war, famine and all the atrocities we read about in the morning paper."

Foreman is far more thoughtful and musically literate than you might imagine the bouncing figure behind the noise of Switchfoot to be. His current reading matter is Man's Search for Meaning by the Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl along with a book about dysfunctional relationships. He studied the Japanese kodo while at college and composed 'In Love' on its Chinese equivalent, the guzheng. Some people write songs to get famous or gain respect. Foreman writes songs to understand himself.

"I write questioning songs, he says. "I'm interested in reading philosophy and trying to figure things out. The melodies come to me quite easily so it's the poets, philosophers and psalmists that help me put the melodies where they belong. The songs assist me in the challenge of knowing who I am, so the shoulders of great writers are a good place to start."

Foreman has allowed himself to become so available that his songs are now being covered before he's even released them. Many of his impromptu concerts are already on YouTube. Not that he minds. "It makes it more of a communal event," he argues. "I'm all about community. I love it when music becomes something bigger than one voice singing."

He has no idea where the venture will end. He didn't even plan for the tracks to be released. Part of his inspiration has come from hanging out with Nickel Creek and learning about roots music, part from listening to old favorites like James Taylor, Elliott Smith and Nick Drake. Another side venture is a record with Nickel Creek's Sean Watkins, a duo currently cheekily known as The Real SeanJon.

One thing that he's certain of is that the solo records won't distract from Switchfoot. "I really feel that the next Switchfoot album will be our defining record," he says excitedly. "The EPs have been incredibly liberating. I paid for everything, I wrote everything and I produced everything. There is nothing I could do that could be more personal and over which I could have more control.

"I feel that this has allowed me to face the next Switchfoot project with my arms open wider. I'm in a band with these other guys who all have great ideas and I need to be able to loosen the reins. This has been a chance for me to get that out of my system. It's been a real rebirth to be able to have both sides come out into the light."

Steve Turner, London, December 2007.