

VOLUME 1. SONGS OF THE SOUTH

ARTIST STATEMENT

Forest Chump wasn't born in a blaze of glory — he was carved out slowly, in the quiet, with scars for ink and a piano for witness. This is where the story begins — not with a hit record, but with a busted past, a battered heart, and a second chance.

Volume 1: SONGS OF THE SOUTH is a collection of reinterpretations — not only of Southern blues, folk, and country songs, but of memory, identity, and grief. These are songs that have weathered time and transformation, and so have I.

As a fifth-generation Texan, having lived just 300 yards from the old Imperial State Prison Farm in Sugar Land — the same prison that once held Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter — the connection between music and survival runs deep. The midnight train still runs past those fields. Its whistle cuts through the air like the memory of a song, and of what it meant to survive.

Some of these tunes, like "Trouble in Mind," "Texas Flood," or "In the Pines," carry a long tradition of sorrow and defiance. But within that pain, there's also motion — a slow churning toward freedom. These are songs for anyone who's had to endure: heartbreak, betrayal, hospitalization, humiliation, or the quiet ache of starting over.

This record was born from isolation — just one man, one piano, one mic, and one cabin. There was no production crew, no fancy gear — just the will to keep going and the need to tell the truth, one note at a time.

This is *The Birth of Forest Chump*.

ABOUT THE ALBUM

Volume 1: SONGS OF THE SOUTH reimagines a set of iconic American tunes through the lens of a solitary piano and a lived-in voice — stripped down, slowed down, and steeped in the soil of the South.

These aren't cover songs. They're recoveries. Each arrangement is a reclamation — of space, of agency, of the emotional weight buried in the original versions. What once strutted is now swaying. What once wailed now whispers. The swing has a drag to it. The gospel leans blues. The blues lean Southern Gothic.

Drawing from folk standards, prison songs, and electric blues classics, the album doesn't chase authenticity — it returns to it. Not in fidelity to the original recordings, but in fidelity to the feeling behind them: betrayal, despair, guilt, grace.

The piano speaks like an old friend who's seen too much. The voice doesn't decorate — it testifies.

Together, they don't just revisit the American South — they haunt it.

TRACK NOTES

These ten songs weren't chosen for nostalgia — they were chosen for their honesty. Each one carries a different shade of survival: the loneliness of exile, the bitterness of betrayal, the stubborn hope of a new morning. In arranging them, I didn't want to replicate them. I wanted to reveal. What emerged is a collection of Southern ghosts, each summoned through the voice and the piano — no frills, no filter, just feeling.

“TROUBLE IN MIND” *by RICHARD M. JONES*

A prison blues standard recorded by everyone from Bertha Hill to Nina Simone — and once played on the Sugar Land prison yard where Lead Belly was locked up. I recorded this after surviving a suicide attempt, during a time when I couldn't see a way forward. The lyric “but I won't be blue always” isn't just a line — it became a lifeline. I slowed the tempo and kept it bare.

“IN THE PINES” *by LEAD BELLY*

Also known as “Where Did You Sleep Last Night,” this Appalachian ballad has been passed down like a whispered warning. After finding a message on my spouse's phone during the final months of our marriage, this song took on a new kind of ache. It's about silence, shame, and what's left unsaid in the dark.

“NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU'RE DOWN & OUT” *by JIMMIE COX*

A classic of the Great Depression and every depression since. It's about friends who disappear, fortunes that vanish, and the humiliation of needing help. I recorded this one slowly, almost as if I was talking to myself — because sometimes that's the only one left to talk to.

“TEXAS FLOOD” *by LARRY DAVIS & JOSEPH SCOTT*

Originally made famous by Stevie Ray Vaughan, this song always felt bigger than just weather — it's about being overwhelmed by something you can't control. My version leans into that helplessness, not with a guitar solo, but with quiet desperation in the piano and voice. The storm here isn't outside — it's internal.

“PRIDE & JOY” *by STEVIE RAY VAUGHAN*

I reimagined this one as a slow, piano-driven lament. It's not the strutting love song you might expect — it's a postmortem. When love becomes currency in a controlling relationship, even joy can feel like debt. This version mourns what should've been sweet.

“HOUND DOG” *by JERRY LEIBER & MIKE STOLLER*

Before Elvis made it famous, Big Mama Thornton growled this one into existence. I slowed it way down and brought it back to the blues — the way she intended it. It's no longer a breakup anthem. It's a warning to anyone who's been lied to for too long.

“EVIL GAL BLUES” *by LIONEL HAMPTON & LEONARD FEATHER*

I rewrote this one from the ground up. The original was Dinah Washington's, but this version is mine. “She's an evil gal, took everything from me” — that's how it starts, and it doesn't let up. It's not a metaphor. It's about being used, drained, left hollow. There's nothing playful about it. Just the slow realization that love, when weaponized, can ruin you.

“ACE IN THE HOLE” *by HANK THOMPSON*

A Western swing staple from the dancehalls of postwar Texas, “Ace in the Hole” always had a grin behind its swagger. I slowed it down and gave it a laid-back groove — less poker table, more back porch. It's a wink and a warning: everybody's got something up their sleeve, and not all of it's good. Mine just happens to be a piano.

“MIDNIGHT SPECIAL” *by LEAD BELLY*

A traditional prison song that Lead Belly helped bring into the American consciousness. I heard the train whistle nearly every night while living in Sugar Land, just like the inmates once did. That whistle meant hope — the possibility that someone, somewhere, was still moving. I let that rhythm guide the entire arrangement.

“HEARTBREAK HOTEL” *by MAE AXTON & TOMMY DURDEN*

There's something surreal about how bouncy this song sounds in its original form — considering it's about loneliness so complete, it borders on madness. I brought it down to earth. Slower. More hollow. Less Elvis, more echo. It's not a hotel. It's a holding cell.

RECORDING CONTEXT

This album wasn't tracked in a studio with glass walls and golden plaques. It was recorded in a quiet cabin with just one man, one mic, one piano — and **James Viega** behind the board, helping capture it all.

I played on a modeled Bosendorfer 280VC using Modartt's Pianoteq plugin. That may sound technical, but it matters. It gave me the weight and warmth of an acoustic piano without leaving the room I was trying to heal in.

Everything was tracked live. No overdubs. No edits. No fancy tricks. Just voice, piano, and the space between them. The goal wasn't perfection — it was presence. To sit with these songs and let them speak without interruption.

A PERSONAL NOTE

I didn't plan to make this album. I just needed something to hold onto.

Most of these songs came back to me while I was in the middle of losing everything — my marriage, my sanity, my reputation, and for a time, even my will to live. I didn't set out to reinvent them. I just sat down with the piano and let them speak the way they needed to.

There's no polish here. What you hear is what I had. But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that even in the dark, music has a way of carrying the truth — especially the kind of truth you can't say out loud.

Thank you for listening.

— Forest Chump

