

Episode 44  
**Never Too Old To Rock 'N' Roll:  
 Meet Tom "The Suit" Forst**  
 (6/3/2019)

<b>Who</b>	<b>Audio Segment</b>
Tom	<p>I'm not making this up. This is literally what happened. My wife is sitting on a chair in our living room, and she pays the bills, so she's paying the bills. She said, "Oh, this is very interesting." And I say, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Look, our last two tuition payments..." two of our children were always in college at the same time, and they were in expensive schools. And she said, "We're paying our last two tuition payments."</p> <p>And I literally said, "Well, then I'm gonna quit." She just looked up at me again and said, "Okay."</p>
	INTRO MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST OVERVIEW
Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host, Andy Levine.</p> <p>Tom Forst was 57 years old. He was a regional vice president with Cox Media, a huge communications company. He was jetting around the country on private planes. He had an army of people reporting to him. He was making a hefty salary.</p> <p>That was 10 years ago. He decided to quit his corporate gig to pursue a life-long passion – music. He put out his first blues-rock album as Tom "The Suit" Forst three years ago. And he's back in the studio now working on his next one.</p> <p>We'll share one of Tom's songs at the end of the podcast. But let's hear his story first...</p>
	FADE MUSIC
Andy	Let's start with your love affair of music. When does that start in your life?
Tom	I don't know if it was a love affair. But I was seven years old. And my parents said, "Listen, you have a choice..." In our family you had a choice, you know, "You wanna take accordion or you wanna take guitar?" And Elvis was out in those days.
Andy	The accordion was not the cool choice.
Tom	Not the cool choice. My older brother played accordion and I knew it was not cool. So that's what...but the thing in our family is once you started, you couldn't stop. So I hated it. I mean, I hated it for, I'm gonna say, five years.
Andy	Wow. Really. Wow.

Tom	Yeah. Oh, God, I threw it out the window, second story window one day, I got so mad, but it landed in the mud. And then I realized my mother, who was like 5'4", would kill me. So I ran out there and cleaned it off and continued my, you know, hourly practicing every day. And then eventually it kind of morphed into, "Hey, wait a minute, I can kind of play popular music." And from there, I was just in love with it.
Andy	After college, he hit the road as a musician.
Tom	I'd always wanted to be a professional musician. So as soon as I graduated college, I got on the road with a touring band. And we toured for about two years, year-and-a-half, two years, and then I quit to come home and said, "Gee, you know what, this is a tough life." So I said, "Gee, I think I'm gonna go back to school." So I went back to school, got my masters in education, and taught first and second grade for five years, and then quit that. I'm basically a quitter.
Andy	What is more difficult working with first and second graders or musicians?
Tom	What's the difference?
Andy	Tom left his teaching job and decided it was time to try his hand at the business world.
Tom	These are the stories that are ongoing in my family. I go to my poor wife and I say, "Listen, I'm quitting. And I'm going to get into the business world." And she just looked up at me and said, "Do you have any, you know, experience?" I said, "No, no, no, but don't worry about it." And always she asked me the same question, "You won't let us starve, right?" And I said, "No, no." So I quit. And I went into a company.
Andy	Turns out, Tom was pretty good in the business world. And he worked his way up the corporate ladder to a very senior position with Cox Media, a major cable television company.
Andy	What year did you join Cox?
Tom	It was September of 1994.
Andy	And you were there for how many years?
Tom	I'm gonna say fifteen.
Andy	And you work your way up to a VP level?

Tom	I did. I started off as a general manager for New England, all the operations. I got an MBA, they had a big job up in Atlanta and gave it to me. There were two things that I was in charge of, one where we just bought a very large cable operation, which was all over the country. And we bought it wasn't making any money. And they handed it to me and said, "Fix it," which was the most fun I've ever had. I mean, there were some situations there, certainly, but it was great.
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	And the other part was I had very large operations from Cox that were really making a lot of money. And I had to keep those running.
Andy	Did you enjoy the work?
Tom	You know what, it's a funny thing because I've told this story many times, and people always seem to wanna hear that I hated it. I actually loved it. I was lucky that I got into a job...and I even tell my children this, I told one of them that just the other day. You don't have to love your job, but if you like your job, that's damn good. And I always liked my job. And it was always different, always challenging. Yeah, I liked it a lot.
Andy	Let's switch back to music. Are you continuing to play during this whole professional career?
Tom	Yeah, I'd be in a board meeting, and I'd be looking...I'm in Atlanta or somewhere and I'd be looking and saying, "I've got to get the 6:00 flight because I got to play Joe's Bar," you know. Yeah, I still played on weekends.
Andy	So take me to the decision to leave Cox and go to music full time.
Tom	Yeah. Again, it's so funny how many times when you ask that, I just picture my wife. This is honestly...I'm not making this up. This is literally what happened. My wife is sitting on a chair in our living room, and she pays the bills, so she's paying the bills. She said, "Oh, this is very interesting." And I say, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Look, our last two tuition payments..." two of our children were always in college at the same time, and they were in expensive schools. And we were paying as we went, like a car loan. And she said, "We're paying our last two tuition payments." And I literally said, "Well, then I'm gonna quit." She just looked up at me again and said, "Okay."
Andy	How old were you at the time?
Tom	57.
Andy	I got to speak with Tom's wife Giselda about that decision.
Giselda Forst	He'd been working for a great number of years as a Vice President at Cox Media which was very time consuming and it was very stressful. And I didn't want to see him continue that way. And I always felt if it was just the two of us and we weren't responsible any longer for our children's bills that it would be fine.
Andy	So it kind of sounds like this was a spur of the moment decision. But that really wasn't the case.
Tom	I always had the idea that someday I would go back to music. And it was in everything we did. It was in the house that we bought, it was in the...you know, people who did what I did were buying, you know, Beemers and expensive cars. I think I had a Ford Fiesta or something like that. I didn't care about any of that. I cared about the idea of some choice freedom.

Andy	Okay. Okay. You're 57 and you make this choice, did you have a financial cushion that allowed you to make this choice?
Tom	Yes. And that was the idea. My boss, he said, day one, "You have to have F you money. Someday you can come in here and say, "F you and I'm out of here." And I have taught my children that and anybody who'll listen, that if you don't have F you money in this country, you have no freedom, or probably any country. So I always tried to have F you money.
Andy	Tell me about this transition. And was it a hard transition for you? Was it an easy transition?
Tom	I'm gonna say it was a hard transition. You know, you're like a little king, you know, in your own little fiefdom. And, you know, like I say, you miss the cars, you miss the planes, you miss the people get nervous when you walk into the office, you know. So that was a hard transition, the money certainly was a hard transition. I was making a lot of money. And that goes quite fast, even if you have a cushion. So there was time that I didn't know what to do with. The music didn't happen immediately. I was spending all my time practicing and trying to get back. And I was very concerned then about my age, about being 57, very concerned. I started auditioning in bands in New York City immediately. I was here almost every day.
Andy	I read the story online, but I'd like you to tell me the nickname "The Suit" and how you got that nickname.
Tom	I'm auditioning in New York. I really look very straight and no facial hair. My hair was still very short. But I was auditioning already. So my son had a punk band in Brooklyn. And he was playing this club in Brooklyn. I can't remember the name, but it was jammed. Packed of 21-year-olds, big crowd.  And my son said, "You know, this is gonna be so funny. I want you to come in, you know, your gray slacks and your blue jacket and your penny loafers. And bring your guitar and don't say a word, just sit there in front of the audience with your guitar. Don't say a word. And then I'm gonna call you up and don't even do a thing. Just stand up there and plug into the amp. And then when I say go, just rip the audience apart." And that's what I did. And the audience went nuts because here's this old guy, straight...
Andy	Totally unexpected.
Tom	Completely unexpected. And they started yelling, "Suit. Suit. Suit." I think my son started. I think he said, "Hey, suit, that was good, you know, whatever." And they started yelling, "Suit." And then he turned to me and he said, "The suit is born."
Andy	In addition to performing and recording, Tom hosts a podcast called "Chasing the Blues."

	<p style="text-align: center;">"Chasing the Blues" Intro</p> <p><i>Twenty five years ago, I sold my soul to the devil to become a corporate executive. I quit it all to play the blues. My name is Tom "The Suit" Forst. And this is "Chasing The Blues."</i></p>
Tom	<p>What we do is we interview pretty famous people, actually, and some people that are up and coming. And then we ask them, who were their biggest influences? And they'll talk about BB King. And, you know, they will talk about all the classics. And then we will talk about stories of those people. And most of those folks had a very tough life. Especially, you know, if you start to look at the '30s, down South, and that kind of thing. So that's what the podcast is about. So you hear different stories. You know, those little stories, they're inspirational.</p>
Andy	<p>Last Fall, Tom was the headliner on a month-long tour of China.</p>
Tom	<p>Started in Beijing. I ended up in Shanghai. That was a band there. I do a lot...</p>
Andy	<p>With a Chinese band?</p>
Tom	<p>A Chinese band, Chinese and American. There was one American in the band. Yeah, very interesting.</p>
Andy	<p>And is the blues alive in China?</p>
Tom	<p>Oh, yeah. Much more so than here, in my view.</p>
Andy	<p>Wow. Okay. Okay.</p>
Tom	<p>You know why? It seems that Americans are hard to get their attention. It's just a fact. I mean, if you look at even commercials, how they change the pixels now, so rapidly because they know that young people, you just can't get your attention on anything unless it's quick. And in China, that's still not the way it is. They wanna sit and listen. So yeah, I loved it. Always a full house.</p>
Andy	<p>Did you come across any talented Chinese players playing there?</p>
Tom	<p>Oh, yeah, monsters. Yeah. They're just as good. And the blues is just as real there. Yeah.</p>
Andy	<p>I concluded my interview with Tom by asking a familiar question: "What advice would you give to someone considering a second act?"</p>
Tom	<p>You have got to plan early. This is not something that just happens, you know, just happens, unless you're extraordinarily lucky. I made this plan, I had enough money that I could do it. And it was all about that. It was all about having enough money where I could take the risk.</p>

	<p>But the plan is crucial. So, you know, find something where you do make good money, even if it's not in your comfort zone. I told people this all the time, I've had so many jobs from being an account executive on, none of them which I was prepared for. But something always told me that I would be prepared for them if I just plugged away.</p>
Andy	<p>I asked Giselda a similar question.</p>
Andy	<p>Final question: do you have any advice for other spouses, that might be helping a husband or wife that might be going through this type of position?</p>
Giselda	<p>You have to have faith in your spouse, in your partner. And say as I did with Tom, I knew in my heart that no matter what happened he would always be accomplishing something. He certainly isn't the type of person who sits in front of the tv all day. So I think you have to have that confidence and hopefully your relationship with your partner is that strong that you know. From that you just have to have the faith. You just have to say, you know what...we're going make it. We're going to do this. We'll do it together. We started with nothing. What's the worst that can happen.</p>
Andy	<p>Released in 2016, Tom's debut album is called "On Fire" and if you like blues-rock – which I do – it's terrific. He's working on a follow-up album right now. You can find him and his music at <a href="http://www.TomTheSuitForst.com">www.TomTheSuitForst.com</a>. And you can also find a link to his "Chasing The Blues" podcast on the website. It's well worth a listen.</p>
	<p>OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION</p>
Andy	<p>So as an amateur guitarist and very amateur songwriter myself, it was a real pleasure for me to sit down with Tom Forst. Here are a couple of elements of his story that really stood out to me:</p> <p>First of all, the importance of financial planning. At 57, Tom was taking a leap from a stressful but stable job that paid a lot of money to a new career that at least initially paid nothing. But Tom and Giselda had planned and saved enough, that they could make it work. Or as Tom might say, "we had the f-you money."</p> <p>The second was the transition itself. At Cox, he was an important executive. He had his own little fiefdom with almost 1,000 people reporting to him. In New York City, he was just another musician trying go to audition after audition. It was a pretty stark change.</p> <p>And finally, the importance of a devoted spouse and partner. When Tom said, "I think I want to quit," Giselda said "Okay." She was 100% supportive.</p> <p>We're going to leave you with my favorite song from Tom's "On Fire" Album.</p> <p>It's called "Women of the World" and it essentially asks what would the planet be like if it was run by women rather than men.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening to Tom's song – and also to the next episode of Second Act Stories. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>

