

# Robert Francis: Arising from Emptiness

BY ANDREW FISH PHOTOGRAPHY ASTOR MORGAN

A serene hush sweeping over an entire crowd at the Roxy is an uncommon thing, yet as Robert Francis played his final song at the venerable Sunset club, there wasn't a murmur or clink of a beer bottle. Francis has breathed new life into the rustic heart of folk, and mesmerized the room — a reminder that quiet simplicity can still hold sway. At 22, Francis has already shown an impressive range, with a pronounced shift in sound from his first album to his latest. His self-produced *One by One* (2007, Aeronaut Records), which took a year to complete, flows with intertwining instrumentals and swirling complexity, alongside vocals tinged with a weariness far beyond his years. And on *Before Nightfall* (2009, Atlantic), he scaled back to a few instruments, and recorded it over several days. The new release brings Francis' voice to the fore, in a wistful remembrance of lost love that relies more on emotion than arrangement. Laced with notes of heartbroken country and bluegrass, Francis' tranquil sadness somehow leaves one looking up.

The accomplished tunesmith grew up in a home filled with music. Slide guitar maestro and family friend, Ry Cooder, along with Francis' sisters, singers Carla and Juliette

Commagere, contribute to the new record. And it was Francis' father, a pianist, who ensured that music would always be a presence in his life. "I come from a bit of an eccentric family," the crooner relates, "and my dad would be blasting classical music through the night and into the wee hours of the morning. Music was the only thing that tied together the entire family. It was the last thing I'd hear before I went to bed, and the first thing I'd hear when I woke up." And it was his mother, who hails from rural Mexico, that first encouraged him to learn the frets. "I got into guitar," he recalls, "so I could accompany her and her sisters while they gather around and sing these traditional Mexican folks songs. I was doing it two nights ago, where everyone was around the table, making tamales from scratch, and singing as loud as possible. Now I can make her happy and make her proud."

Francis' starkly haunting falsetto on "Junebug" echoes with loss, and his timeless "Nightfall" brings to mind the melancholy of Chris Isaak and the warm lows of Bob Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* days. "When I write a song that I'm proud of, there's no better feeling," he expresses. "There's nothing like it. It's almost a spiritual feeling, like

you're able to gather it from some unknown place. And to harness that and put it into a song, that's kind of what I live for." As to the healing touch of a grieving melody, Francis points to the power of emptiness. "When one loses something," he muses, "or perhaps when you're at the point where you have nothing, there's a kind of beauty and hope in that situation that you would not otherwise find. What comes to mind is *Nights of Cabiria*, this Fellini film, where at the very end, she's lost everything and she manages to pull a smile across her face. That sort of parallels the way that I've looked at my music. For a while, I was going through a very, very difficult time, and I really felt like I didn't have anything. But in those moments came these songs, and the songs uplifted me in a way that I was able to get out of those negative, dark places. And when I hear them now, they do the same thing. So I would hope that when other people listen to these songs, and are in a similar place, that they might feel the same way." ▼

*Francis plays The Wiltern with Brett Dennen and Grace Potter and the Nocturnals on December 12th. For more information, visit [www.myspace.com/robertfrancis](http://www.myspace.com/robertfrancis).*

