

# CHRIS ISAAK

When a cult hero turns into a major craze, people tend to start losing their heads. There may be definite signs of stress in the Chris Isaak camp these days but Isaak himself comes across as thoroughly personable, the calm eye in the middle of the publicity hurricane.

"To me and the band, the whole thing has been a party," he says of his surreal trip into the light fantastic. After three albums and years of small-time touring, Isaak has suddenly become flavour of the moment, scaling the peaks of the pop charts with both his album, *Heart Shaped World* and his ubiquitous single, 'Wicked Games' which struck a nerve with the public long after it was initially released.

"We've been playing in bars and small clubs for a long, long time and all of a sudden we're going into places that have 5,000 to 7,000 people," he says, "The guy running the place says, 'Where do you want your sidefills' (extra stage monitors)? We're going, 'We've got sidefills?' 'We've all got our own monitors?' We're used to having to find the one monitor of three that works, then huddling around that when we play."

So who is this hip cat with a fresh musical and visual take on '50s cool and a smash single that has oozed out of virtually every stop on your radio dial for months now?

To some, Chris Isaak has been a star ever since his 1985 debut *Silvertone* introduced the young Californian's achingly romantic sound to the world. But he seemed cruelly destined to remain a largely ignored hero. Sure, he could slay them on *The Tonight Show*, score a hit in France (but what do Jerry Lewis lovers know?) and hear his atmospheric music haunting soap operas, TV movies and David Lynch's bizarre excursions, as well as being covered by the likes of K.D. Lang ('Western Star'), but Isaak and his faithful band Silvertone remained out of the limelight, treading the boards on the (primarily) West Coast club circuit. He estimates that he and the band have done 3,000 shows. "We've always played, because we had to pay the rent," he explains.

When his third strong album in a row, *Heart Shaped World* came out in 1989, receiving the standard critical raves yet scarcely nudging the *Billboard* Top 200 chart, you might think they'd have begun sharpening the axe over at his label, Warner Brothers.

But serendipity finally shone on the crooner, and it was avant-garde alchemist David Lynch who held the spotlight. A longtime Isaak admirer (he used two songs off *Silvertone* in *Blue Velvet*), Lynch chose 'Wicked Game' as the key tune for his *Wild*

*At Heart* soundtrack, and directed a riveting video for the song. Some influential radio programmers then began playing 'Wicked Game', and it slowly picked up steam.

Very few songs have an appeal wide enough for both Modern Rock and Adult Contemporary playlists, but 'Wicked Game' is one of them. "My label phoned and said, 'Do you realise you're on this plus this and this?'" Isaak says, "I'm going, 'That's good, right?' I was like a dog. I didn't know what they were saying, but I could tell from the tone of voice it was good! I didn't imagine radio would be crazy enough to play it, it's so weird."

Did he ever feel doomed to cult figure status? "I always worked hard, I never had any intention of giving up," he reflects, "No matter how confident you are, I don't think you ever know if you'll make it. But I liked it even when I wasn't 'making it' — I thought I'd made it five years ago when I was in a band and had a record!"

To the uninitiated, it may seem that Chris is surfing on the crest of the Lynch wave, but that doesn't bother him. "I like David and he was gutsy for putting 'Wicked Game' out," he says, "That helped the record get back out there, so I owe him thanks."

Isaak clearly feels an artistic affinity with Mr. *Twin Peaks*. "There are both very romantic and very dark sides in David's work," he points out, "My music is, many times, the opposite of what he is doing. In *Wild At Heart* he'll take my melodic, romantic music and put it underneath a scene like a car crash or a semi-rape. He's using my music to counter his visuals. I thought it worked; I enjoyed watching it. Call me an art lover or a highbrow critic, but anything that has Laura Dern scantily clad, I'll watch!"

As for the left-field success of 'Wicked Game', Chris accepts it unequivocally. "I guess I'd worry if it was different from everything on my record," he allows, "but it's not a novelty song, it's not 'The Banana Boat Song!'"

Indeed. Anyone seduced by its charms should run, not walk, and buy all three Isaak albums. A voice as lonely as a distant train whistle on a foggy night, melancholy lyrics, spare, spine-tingling guitar, an echoing production reminiscent of the early Sun sound — these trademarks have remained constant in his catalogue.

Though he's been linked to the

Bay area scene, Chris's background isn't exactly Frisco bohemian. He was born and raised in working-class Stockton; it was an experience he likens to "growing up in Mayberry". Escape at 20 found him on the boxing team at the University of Tokyo, but he soon sensed that professional pugilism wasn't a smart career option.

"It's a real tough racket," he says about boxing, "I'd spar against guys who were almost braindead. Some were nice guys, but they'd stutter — a sign of brain damage. I'd go, 'I don't want to have to have someone explain *Family Feud* to me!'"

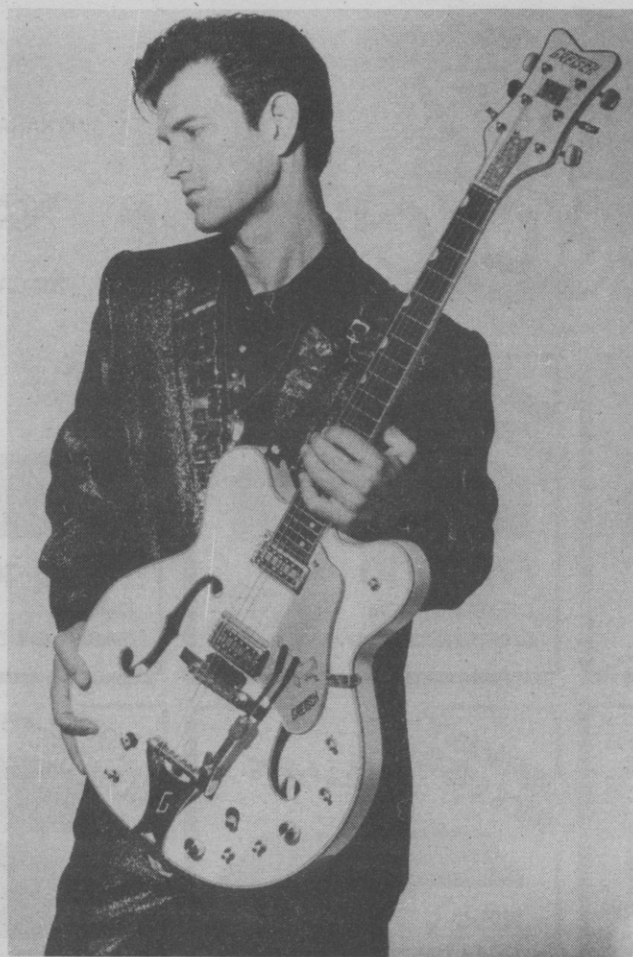
Once back in the US, Isaak set out as a soloist on the coffee house trail, then assembled his Silvertone trio, comprising guitarist James Calvin Wilsey, drummer Kenney Johnson and bassist Rowland Salley. He then linked up with producer Erik Jacobsen (The Lovin' Spoonful, Tim Hardin), who now doubles as his manager. His insistence on keeping the same producer and band helps to explain the consistency of Isaak's music. His inspirations throughout, as he's quick to acknowledge, have been country and western and early rock n'roll, with a touch of classic crooners thrown in for good measure.

"I appreciate you using the word 'acknowledge' instead of 'rip-off'" comments Chris, referring to the Sun influence, "Yes, I went to the Sun studio recently. I was really impressed, but if I stood in that room and sang at that mike, it wouldn't make me Elvis Presley. I won't sound that good. I just thought of all those guys — Carl Perkins, Elvis, Roy Orbison — coming there as kids, and just making up rock n'roll in the middle of some hot little town when the rest of the country was all Perry Como. Amazing!"

Chris is also enthusiastic about Norman Petty's studio in Clovis, New Mexico, the birthplace of early classics from Orbison and Buddy Holly. "It's not like they made it into a museum or a shrine — more like they hadn't bothered to move anything," he recalls, "Petty's wife showed me a photo of when Buddy was in there, and it showed these '50s drapes. I looked on the wall and the same drapes were there."

"It's strange to think that all those people should be alive — Buddy, Elvis, Roy, Ritchie Valens, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran. They wouldn't be that old. If there was a novel about it, it'd be *Somebody Is Telling Us Something*."

Of the aforementioned pioneers, Orbison is the most apparent influence on both Isaak's vocal style and his love-lorn lyrics, but his ego is held refreshingly in check. As he told one interviewer, "For me to copy Roy Orbison is like telling a ten year old, 'If you want to steal the Washington Monument, go ahead, put it in your pocket.' Personally, he was just a very, very nice man. When he met me I had no hits; there was nothing in it for him. When you feel that nobody wants your songs,



for someone like Roy to say 'Come over and play your songs at my house' makes you feel you must be doing something right." Other peers were equally supportive; John Fogerty, for example, reportedly interrupted his meeting at Warners to insist that the label do more to push Isaak's music.

Even Madonna's a fan, but maybe she's just trying to tap the secret of Chris's subtly erotic music. Indeed, his albums are favoured foreplay for many a midnight merger, and Isaak says he enjoys that image. "I like the idea of people making love to my music," he says. "It's kind of peaceful; I don't think there's anything violent there."

His music, his brooding good looks and his steamy videos are combining to project Chris as the thinking woman's lust object, and the new Herb Ritts directed video version of 'Wicked Game' in which he cavorts on a Hawaiian beach with a gorgeous naked girl is certainly making pulses race. Tough gig, right? "Sure was!" he jokes. "We'd get a shot done and I'd say, 'I really think we could do a little better with this!'"

The moody, melancholy protagonist in his songs is just part of the Chris Isaak story. In performance and in interviews he exhibits a quick, appealingly sharp sense of humour, and he attributes that seeming contradiction to his family.

"They're pretty serious people, yet really sarcastic, and they make a lot of jokes," he says, "you have to balance it out. If you stay serious people consider you a pill. They won't invite you to parties, you won't have any fun, you won't get to go on dates! I always do the songs

seriously, but between songs? Well, you're in a nightclub with a bunch of people, so the main thing seems to be to have fun. Do you expect me to be all dressed in black, wiping away tears between songs? Some people may like that, but it isn't me."

The titles of Isaak's evocative soundscapes (like 'Blue Hotel', 'Funeral In The Rain', 'Blue Spanish Sky') mirror their genesis. "I'll have a picture of an event, a place, a time — the feel of a place, the weather," he explains, "I need to have that in my head, then I play with them in my mind and suddenly I'm singing about it. You can't just sit down to think these things out; it's not like homework."

With mood, not explicit meaning, the key to his songs, Chris avoids providing lyric sheets for his records. "I've always felt music doesn't necessarily make good poetry," he says, "The lyrics to some of the coolest Beatles songs are ridiculous — 'I'll always be true, please love me do'. If someone gave me those I'd think, 'God, what a really bad songwriter' but with the melody it has meaning, it's real."

Expect Isaak's music to become omnipresent in film and TV scores shortly. It's already been used on *Days Of Our Lives*, which went over in a big way with his grandmother. "I never watch soaps, but I heard about it when she phoned," he explains, "Now I'd been on Johnny Carson and toured Europe but she'd never said a word. Then she called and said, 'I heard your song on my soap. Congratulations!' I guess I'd arrived."

Chris Isaak the actor has also arrived, via cameos in two Jonathan

Demme movies, *Married To The Mob* and *Silence Of The Lambs*, as well as Bruce Weber's *Let's Get Lost*. Earlier, he had declined roles in *Blue Velvet* and *Something Wild* (both as psychopathic heavies) but he now calls those decisions "a combination of my music and being stupid. I'd think, 'I can't do this, I've booked a gig and I've never missed a gig'. Someone should have hit me hard and said, 'He's a great director. What are you doing?'"

"I'm interested in film now because I've met interesting people and I find it fun," he adds, "I don't know anyone who'd turn down a job where they say, 'I want you to be in a movie, wear these clothes and pretend to do this.'" Hollywood may have to be patient, though. After his current intensive touring is over, Isaak is expected to record a new album which has already largely been written and arranged.

Chris has the dubious distinction of being named one of 1990's most beautiful people by *People* magazine, and he's done fashion spreads for *Esquire* and *Elle*. But don't dismiss him as a fashion plate masquerading as a rock n'roller. His image, reminiscent of '50s cool cats like James Dean, Montgomery Clift and trumpeter Chet Baker (with whom he recorded), still seems as spontaneous and uncontrived as the man himself. Take his photo session with fashion photographer turned filmmaker Bruce Weber, the results of which grace his self-titled second album.

"I was at home in Stockton and this guy phoned and said, 'Hi, this is Bruce Weber, and I'd like to take some photographs.' I said, 'Who are you?' My basic feeling was 'I don't want to do this, I don't know who you are, I'd have to drive someplace, there's good TV on, and my momo is cooking dinner.' But he was a nice guy, so I talked to him. Then I remembered seeing a coffee table photography book at Warners. I don't buy those kind of books, they're 100 bucks! But I thought they were great pictures. So I said, 'Do you have a book out with pictures of guys swimming, and it's big with blue tinting?' He said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Sure, you can take pictures.'"

The experience of his years in clubland will help keep Chris Isaak sane amid the craziness of serious fame. "Playing clubs teaches you a good lesson," he points out, "You see what it means to be in show-business. Basically, if you don't like to pick up your amp, haul it down to the gig, play the show and hand your amp out, then you shouldn't be in showbiz."

It comes as a mild shock to learn that Isaak is no lounge lizard on the prowl on his rare nights off. "I don't go out to clubs and bars much, because I don't drink," he says. "I actually get kind of nervous in them — I don't know what to do. That's funny, I know. Other people get nervous on stage, I get nervous offstage!"

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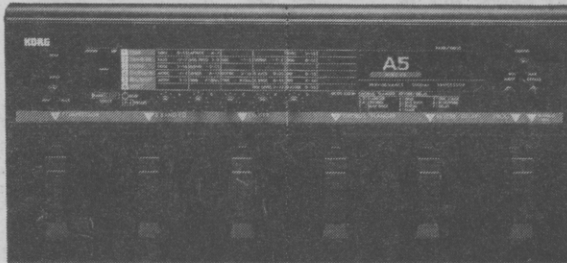
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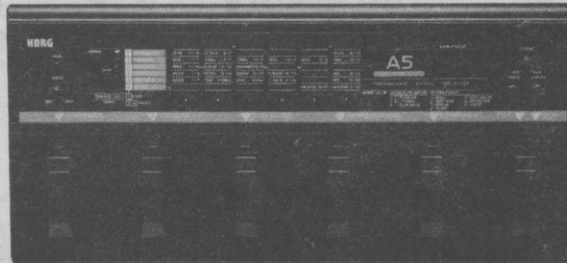
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