

# chris norman

Interview by James Gaden

**Making his name as the lead singer of Smokie in the seventies, Chris Norman left the band and struck out on a solo career, topping the charts in Germany with his hit 'Midnight Lady'. Still enjoying a large following in several parts of Europe, Norman has been continuously releasing high quality albums, the latest of which, 'Don't Knock The Rock', came out in September. Fireworks called the vocalist, who had just finished playing shows in Russia, to hear about it.**

Much like on his previous album 'Crossover', which was entirely self penned, 'Don't Knock The Rock' sees the artist taking control of much of the record.

"Yes, all of these tracks I wrote by myself except for one, 'Resurrection', which I wrote with the guitar player from my band, Geoff Carline. I did the same sort of thing as I did on 'Crossover', I have a really small little eight-track digital recorder. I bought it simply to put song ideas down on, rather than wait until I've got all my proper equipment set up. It's really simply to use, it's almost like a tape recorder but it sounds really good. So now when I get a song idea, I just sit and do a quick demo on it in just a few hours. I'll lay down everything, bass, backing vocals, the lot. I got in the habit of doing demos like that with eight tracks so it sounds pretty close to what I'll be putting on the finished record. I'll take the eight track demos into my studio and transfer them to Pro-Tools where I can add some things, take some stuff away... but because I've already laid the bulk of it down myself and I like the way it sounds, I keep most of it which is why most of the instrument credits are me. It's not like I set off thinking 'I'm going to play everything on this one', it's just I'm the only one there at the time."

'Crossover' was notable for the fact that the drum parts were created with samples rather than a real percussionist, but that is not the case here.

"I usually get a real drummer to play those parts for the finished record," Chris explains. "Using samples last time was just convenient because the sounds you have these days are so realistic it's okay to use them sometimes. Last time I didn't have a drummer available who was free. This time I used my drummer Dorino Goldbrunner. He lives in Munich, so I'd send him the files and he would record the drum parts in his little home studio and send them back to me and I'd just drop it in the mix. So it's all real drums, just done in separate studios in separate countries! It's ridiculous when you think about what is actually happening. You can email the files or use Dropbox or WeTransfer or whatever, they pick them up in a different part of the world, record it, send it back and you can just drop it in. It's crazy. But it's great."

Because of the nature of some of his hits, both with Smokie and as a solo artist, Norman is often classed as a "Soft Rock" singer, which is a misnomer considering he has recorded songs in many styles including Classic Rock, Blues-Rock, Pop and Country. I enquire if there was a genre he'd had a go at in which he didn't feel comfortable, a choice of words he isn't keen on.

"I've never really 'had a go' at anything," he replies. "I don't sit down and think 'I'll write a song in this style today'. At any time when I get a song idea, even if it's just a melody I sing into my iPhone, it can be Rock, it can be Country, I don't care, it is what it is. I'm a massive Beatles fan and one of the things I liked most about them was they did all kinds of stuff. There were Rock songs and ballads and all kinds of things. They had a Beatles sound that ran all the way through but you could never say they made an album in a certain style. So that rubbed off on me and I like loads of different kinds of music anyway. I like Led Zeppelin, I like Hank Williams... so I just write whatever comes into my head."

Norman always delivers good vocals but some of the examples on here, like his impassioned performance on 'Losing You', is really top drawer.

"All the vocals were recorded on the eight track. It's easy because you're in your own little environment. It frees you up a bit when you're doing a demo, you just sing it, you're not thinking too hard about it. Obviously if you sing something wrong, it's easy to drop in a fixed part with it being digital and I'll do that, but I don't take too much care over the sound. I know the microphone and the pre-amp is already set up so I know it'll sound okay, and you're in the mindset of 'It's only for the demo', you aren't in a studio thinking 'Oh God, I've got to get it right this time'. So you get a more natural and spontaneous vocal and usually I'll end up keeping the bulk of it."

"In the old days," he continues, "I remember being in the studio with Smokie and there was one song we were doing, I still think of it now, called 'Changing All The Time'. We took *ages* on the vocal for that one. I kept singing the first line, I must have been an hour just trying to lay down that one line.

It was driving me crazy! Mike Chapman was producing it and I kept asking 'What's wrong with it?' I thought it sounded the same every time. Mike was looking for something, some specific sound or feel and he got it in the end, but for me it was like a nightmare, stood in a studio singing the same line over and over and over again. Thankfully those days are gone, I don't do that anymore!"

There is a real mix of styles on the new record, the most unlikely being 'Straight To My Heart' which I observe I could picture Tony Christie performing, a vision that makes Chris laugh.

"I wrote that while I was out walking, and the melody I liked. When I first demoed it, it had more of a chugging rhythm. I listened back to it the next day and thought 'I don't like that, it's crap'. I was going to discard it but then I came back to it a few days later and switched it to a more Latin style rhythm and suddenly I liked it, it was quite bouncy and you're right, it's not typical me, I don't really write songs like that. Once I had that direction I got really into it and it just cried out for that brass part. Once I started producing it properly and adding in bits of piano and stuff it really worked. That was one of the new ones I played on this tour actually, I put it in near the end when I'm trying to build the show up to a Rock finish and get people moving. So if Tony Christie wants to record it, he can! I like anybody recording songs of mine."

With Norman writing whatever comes to him in whatever style, I ask how he knows when he has a finished record.

"I usually have more songs than I'll need to fill a record," he replies. "I'll demo the ones I like best first of all. For this record I had twenty-two ideas and I did full demos of eighteen of them. When I've got full versions I'll know early on which ones I think are the best songs. For the others I'll sit and listen to them all and think 'Yeah, that one isn't a strong as those'. Sometimes I'll end up in a quandary and have a track I like but am not sure whether it is a good fit with the other songs I've picked. For this record, I had twelve for the album and two I wasn't sure whether to put on or not. One was 'Straight To My Heart' which we've just talked about and the other was 'Suicide Street'. I convinced myself to go with 'Straight To My Heart' and then I sat thinking 'Should I? Shouldn't I?' about 'Suicide Street'. I played it to Geoff and a few others and they all liked it. So I thought okay, fourteen songs it is and as far as I was concerned that was it, album finished."

After telling him how glad I was that 'Suicide Street' made the cut, because its Classic Rock feel made it an early standout for me, I ask how things have been going since Chris made the decision to release albums on his own label.

"If I'm really, really honest, if I could find a major label who were willing to spend millions of pounds pushing me, I'd probably do that," he says candidly. "I'd make less

money because they obviously take a big percentage, but you end up with that promotional weight behind you which could well make you more successful. The problem was the last few albums I did before I took control were released on smaller labels. Don't get me wrong, they were good little labels, but they can't compete with Universal or Sony/BMG. Even then though, with Sony/BMG, they put out a Smokie compilation for the 40th Anniversary, it was a big package with CDs and DVDs in. Even with their weight behind it, it didn't sell that many copies. I started talking to more people in the industry and got the impression unless you're a young, trendy artist like Ed Sheeran for example, you aren't going to get the promotional weight behind you anyway. I'm not going to get a push at this stage in my career, so I don't think I'd sell more records. When I looked at it, they are hiring distribution companies and people from promotion that I can hire anyway, so I don't think there is a way on a major label where I would get a better deal than doing it myself. If I get a good distribution deal and hire a good PR company, I've got just as much chance as the record doing something than I would with a label, certainly a smaller label. And I get the lion's share of whatever profits there are. Once you've paid your distribution company and expenses, what's left is likely more than you would get from an artist's deal with a label. The other benefit is I like the control. With the Smokie stuff, us guys don't own any of that. It was owned by Rak Records and Chinn/Chapman originally, and they sold the whole catalogue to Sony/BMG who do whatever they want with it. In fairness they are not unreasonable, they talk to us and we can have meetings, but at the end of the day they own it and can do what they want with it. They keep putting out new compilations, they'll do hits, then they'll do rarer songs, all sorts of stuff and sometimes as an artist you think 'I don't want all that stuff being out there, it's too much.' But we can't stop it if that's what they want to do."

Smokie aside, Norman has plenty of his own material to concentrate on, with over twenty solo albums to his name.

"Oh, stop it!" he laughs as I must be making him feel old. "Yeah, set-lists can be a nightmare. I just wrote one for the Russian shows and I decided to make a shortlist of the songs I wanted to play. Well the 'shortlist' was so long, I'd have been on stage for about four and a half hours! It's hard, you have to be pretty brutal. I sent a load of songs to the band and said 'This is what we'll be picking from' and they were all like 'Ooh, I love that, I can't wait to play that!'. Then I've turned around and said 'Nope, we're dropping it, I'm doing this new one' and they all go 'Aw, I've learned it now!' In the UK I'm remembered for Smokie, wherever else I go I'm lucky that most people don't mind listening to some new stuff. In some countries that's what

they've come for because they've gone and bought the new album, but inevitably there are fans who have come to hear Smokie stuff like 'Lay Back In The Arms Of Someone' or 'Living Next Door To Alice' or whatever. I try to balance the set so there's new ones, songs from the past, a couple of home runs... you can feel the atmosphere change when you've got it right."

With him mentioning 'Living Next Door To Alice', I refer to the re-worked version that was done with Smokie and comedian Roy 'Chubby' Brown, which became something of a novelty hit in the UK. I ask Chris if he gets pissed off with people asking "Who the fuck is Alice?"

"It would piss me off if it happened everywhere, but it doesn't," Norman responds. "In England sure, but elsewhere most people don't even know about that version. Here, I might get a taxi driver or something who will see the way I look and say 'Are you a musician? Yeah, I thought I knew your face. What band are you in?' and I'll say I used to be in Smokie and they always say 'Oh, 'Living Next Door To Alice'...' They always say that song for a start, and then they say 'Who the

fuck is Alice?' and I have to explain that wasn't me, I'd left the band long before that happened. If that was the case everywhere it would grate on me, but it only really happens in the UK. I don't like that version, I've never been shy to tell people that if they ask me. It was a fucking waste of time, they shouldn't have done it. That was never my favourite song Smokie did anyway, so why fucking re-hash it and make it fucking worse? I thought it was a good *record*, it was well made and sounded good, but as the song itself goes, I've said this many times in interviews, we never really wanted that one to be released in the UK. We recorded it in Los Angeles for the American market because we thought it might work over there in the Country charts. When we brought the album back to the UK people were saying 'Oh, that's the single' and we said 'No, that's just for America.' But they insisted and of course the label were right, because it sold loads, but we as a band didn't think it was pushing us in the right direction. We were right too and it put a stigma on the band I think. It's a catchy hit and it was well recorded but I thought it was a bit cheesy. So to make it worse by putting 'Who the fuck is Alice?' in there was just insult to injury as far as I'm concerned!" he laughs.

