

UNSUNG HEROES: CHRIS THOMPSON

Interview by James Gaden

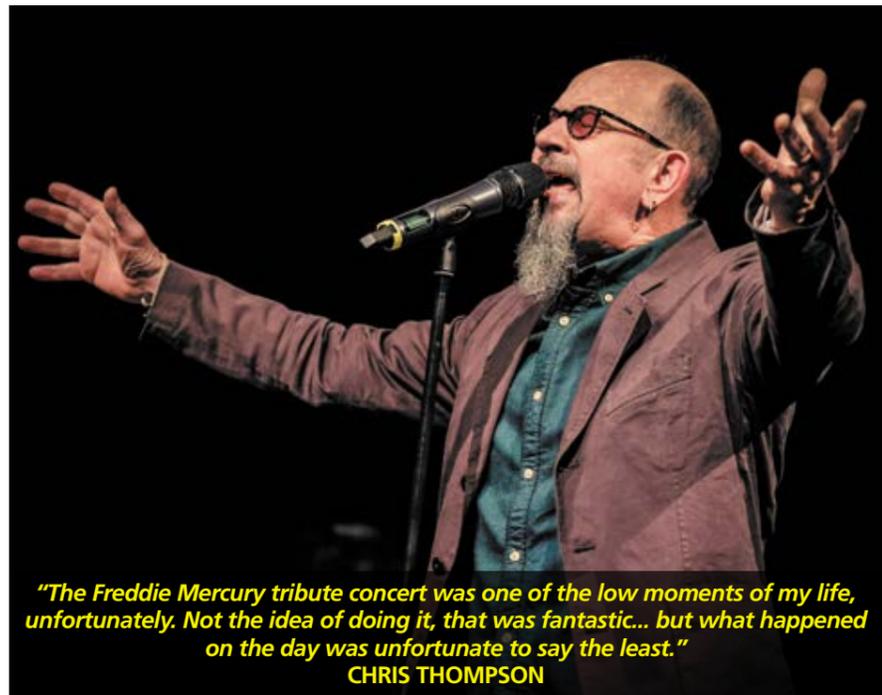
He's fronted Manfred Mann's Earth Band, appeared on one of the biggest selling albums of all time, co-wrote a song that has become part of popular culture and was involved in one of the biggest concerts ever staged. Chris Thompson is a man who has an impressive history in the music business.

While he was born in Hertford, England, Chris Thompson was raised in New Zealand and it was here that he made his first foray into the music business, performing in college bands before getting serious.

"My start as a professional musician came while I was playing clubs in Hamilton, which is about two hours away from Auckland, N.Z.'s capital," the singer explains. "The band was called Mandrake. We had a horn section, playing mostly Blood Sweat and Tears and Chicago music. We got a visit from Tommy Adderley and Dave Henderson who ran two very successful nightclubs in Auckland. They asked us if we would like to come and play for them, so that was it, my first real professional gig! We stayed together for about a year and a half, but a couple of guys got homesick even though we were only two hours down the road from where we started! New Zealand is a funny place, people don't like leaving their comfort zones too much. So we played five nights a week for a year and a half and I then began playing with Billy Christian, who I would work with later in a band called Night. He and Mike Walker were probably the top session musicians in New Zealand and they had just gotten rid of their singer. We played at this huge pub, which had an international floor show every week, but it closed at 10pm, so we'd play there from 7 to 10pm and then go across town to a private club and play there from 11pm until four in the morning. As it was the only place that served alcohol after 10pm, a lot of people came to see us. Keith Richards, Bobby Keys and Jim Price got up and played with us when the Stones were in town. We played a lot, pretty much seven days a week. That, I consider, to be my real musical grounding because we played everything from Jazz standards to classics like 'Papa Was A Rolling Stone' to whatever was in the Top Forty. We didn't do originals, but we would do new arrangements of these songs."

It's a long way from Auckland to London but that's the trip Thompson had to make in order to get his first big break.

"A drummer called Trevor Morais, who played in The Peddlers, played with us when he left that band in New Zealand and we kept in touch when he went back to England. He sent me a telegram telling me to come to England as he had a gig for us. I'd been thinking about going over so I packed up all my stuff and headed that way. For me, a gig meant seven nights a week. To Trevor, I found out a gig was just one show! So I came over and stayed at Trevor's house, and Trevor had a rehearsal studio where we used to jam. Dave Stewart and Rick Wakeman rehearsed there,



"The Freddie Mercury tribute concert was one of the low moments of my life, unfortunately. Not the idea of doing it, that was fantastic... but what happened on the day was unfortunate to say the least."
CHRIS THOMPSON

so I met a few people. I got a few gigs here and there as a result and then realised I really had to move to London to get more work. So I went there and trawled the 'musicians wanted' advertisements in the Melody Maker and NME, even going for Butlins jobs – anything to make a living. I met some more people and played clubs and answered an advert for Argent. I didn't get that job – the audition was strange. It was at a studio, I walked in via the back door and was taken straight to a microphone, not to the control room, not to meet anyone, nothing. There were some headphones on the microphone, I put them on and someone spoke to me through them. I had been told to learn 'Hold Your Head Up' and the track just started! I wasn't ready, I hadn't counted how many bars needed to go by so I screwed the beginning up, but I sang it and that was it, I was ushered out by a doorman and never met a soul. However, when I got called back by their manager, at the time I was a rather large guy, I was about thirteen stone, too much good food! The manager said, 'Well Chris, you had the best voice but we already have one fat guy in the band.' That was funny!

"I saw another advert saying, 'Band with a record deal need a guitar player and singer, no time wasters,' he continues. "I called the number and they asked for a cassette of me singing. I was given an address on the Old Kent Road, and I lived a long way away in NW9, so I had to bus, tube and walk to Old Kent Road. I knocked on the door and it opened a crack and this big guy took the

cassette, said thanks and shut the door. So I walked, tube and bussed it back home, nearly two hours, and as I got in, the phone was ringing. I answered it and this guy asked if I was Chris Thompson, I said yes and he asked, 'Is that you singing on the tape?' I said, 'Of course it's me singing!' and the voice said, 'Okay, can you come to my house?' and he gives me this address in Greenwich. I asked who he was and he said, 'I'd rather not say.' So the next day I get the bus, tube and walk to Greenwich, find this house and Manfred Mann opens the door! I knew who he was of course, it was quite an experience. He didn't play me demos, he sat at the piano and sang me some songs. 'Blinded By The Light' was one of them, but he has a really nasally voice, kind of whining away like Bob Dylan, but giving me an idea of the melody. He handed me a lyric sheet and I sang a little bit and he said, 'See you tomorrow then.' So I came back, but I was pretty broke; I was spending all my money on public transport going to and from his house. After a few days he said we'd do a session with the full band. I came close to losing the gig because my guitar playing wasn't up to scratch. But he never actually said I *had* the gig. In the end I said, 'This is costing me a fortune. We're rehearsing, can I have some money for travel?' and I was put on £50 a week which was, to me anyway, a huge amount of money in those days. Next thing we are rehearsing to go out on tour across the United States promoting 'Nightingales And Bombers',

which of course I had nothing to do with because that had Mick Rogers singing. A very weird situation!"

The first MMEB album Thompson sang on was 1976's 'The Roaring Silence', containing 'Blinded By The Light' which was issued as a single. It was a huge success, hitting number one on the Billboard Hot 100 in the States, number six in the UK and helping the album go top ten in the UK, Canada, US, Norway and Austria.

"I was used to turning up, learning three or four songs and a floor show and playing them that night, whereas with MMEB we rehearsed songs for months and we only played about six songs live over the course of an hour because there were long instrumental parts. But learning it all paid off, I was lucky to have hits on my first two records with Manfred. Not bad for a boy from Hamilton, New Zealand!"

While Thompson was enjoying this success, little did he know he would soon be part of one of the biggest selling albums of all time, 'Jeff Wayne's Musical Version Of The War Of The Worlds'. With a cast that contained Justin Hayward, Phil Lynott, David Essex and Richard Burton, Thompson acknowledges he wasn't first choice to be 'The Voice Of Humanity'.

"It was because of Gary Osbourne that I ended up singing 'Thunderchild'. He was the lyricist and was working with Jeff, who had a jingle business. I sang a couple of jingles for them, as Gary had suggested me. Originally 'Thunderchild' was going to be sung by John Lodge, Justin Hayward's band mate in The Moody Blues. Jeff wasn't happy with it so Gary suggested I try. It was two days of singing the song; Jeff was a very hard taskmaster but brilliant, he knew exactly what he wanted, the phrasing etc, I found it very difficult, so I spent two days doing the vocal until Jeff thought I'd nailed it... then he said, 'Can you come in tomorrow and double track it?' Which I did!" he laughs. "It was painstaking but Jeff knew what he wanted and I was really lucky to be involved because that record was a monstrous hit. It just keeps on going and going."

Thompson was back to his day job after that as the Earth Band issued 'Angel Station' in 1979. By



Thompson performing with Manfred Mann's Earth Band

that point, the singer had decided to try his hand with a new group.

"I just got tired of things taking so long to do. It wasn't exactly my kind of music really, which might sound strange, but I didn't feel I could really put my stamp on things as much as I wanted, I wanted to write my own stuff. So I formed Night, which was a disaster to be honest. We had a couple of minor hits but we were unprepared, we didn't have a decent manager, nobody in the band wrote good songs – I thought I did at the time, but I didn't. We were thrown in at the deep end with producer Richard Perry in Los Angeles, we were out of our comfort zone and we had to produce a record to try and compete with the likes of Fleetwood Mac. We were on Elektra Records, we spent too much money, Richard spent too much and wasn't focused... I couldn't get to grips with making a record that way. We toured with the Doobie Brothers for nine months but we never made back what we spent. I funded some of the stuff myself and that was a big mistake. We had a song called 'Love On The Airwaves' that was actually going up the charts and



Thompson in Night

getting loads of radio play, but it suddenly stopped, which was when I discovered we had been dropped by Richard. I actually ended up going back to sing with Manfred while the second Night album came out, because Manfred couldn't find another singer and I realised how lucky I was to be in his band! I appeared on 'Chance' but the dynamic had changed. He was working with different people – we made the 'Somewhere In Africa' album, which was a great record and tour, but the album was way ahead of its time I think. What's crazy is I now really enjoy playing the MMEB songs. Life is strange!"

Thompson's connection with the Doobie Brothers would see him help out with the creation of the Doobie's ever present Patrick Simmons' solo album, 'Arcade'. The vocalist would then try his hand next as a solo artist in his own right, releasing 'Out In The Night' in 1983, with both Simmons and Michael McDonald chipping in with song-writing contributions.

"Richard suggested to me, after the success of 'If You Remember Me', that we should do a solo record as he had access to some great writers, but I turned it down because I believed the band had a future. Then we got dumped anyway so maybe I should have done it! Frankly at that point I still don't think I was a good enough songwriter, Punk was around and I think I missed the boat a bit. But who knows, I might have ended up like a Barry Manilow style artist so maybe it was for the best! I also got to do more writing of my own which helped hone my writing chops."

In 1985 he released 'Radio Voices' which featured a high profile guest in the form of

Queen's iconic guitarist Brian May and would lay the foundation for a long working relationship with the members of Queen.

"I met Brian when the Earth Band were playing Cardiff Castle," Thompson reveals. "Queen were there too and Brian and Freddie came to watch our set. When they were on I wanted to watch them but we were stopped by security. Brian saw me and said it was okay. I thanked him afterwards and we stayed in touch. I called him up and asked if he'd play on a song and I sent him a cassette. He loved it and he said, 'Sure, pick me up and bring me to the studio because I don't really like driving.' So I go round to get him in my battered VW combi and his wife wouldn't let him travel in it! So I put his gear in it instead and his roadie drove him down! Brian played on the track, and put this solo down. We were mixing it and it was sounding fantastic, then he calls us and says, 'Do you know what, I'm going to come back because I think I've got a better idea' and he came all the way back and played a bit more. He's such a nice guy."

Thompson would issue 'The High Cost Of Living' during the 80s while also working on his songwriting, co-penning 'Blaze Of Love' which would be used by Starship on 'Love Among The Cannibals', 'Secrets In The Dark' which Eric Martin covered prior to joining Mr. Big and the song that has become part of popular culture, John Farnham's 'You're The Voice'. It was never planned for Farnham though.

"I was thinking that 'You're The Voice' would absolutely be mine, to appear on the 'High Cost Of Living' album," Thompson sighs. "I played it to the head of the label and said, 'Y'know, I really think this is a hit' and he said 'People don't want to hear protest songs anymore.' So it got shelved. That album was another drama; Atlantic signed me but they didn't believe in me. John Farnham took it and we all know how that worked out. It revamped his career, everybody knows the song, it's been covered by Celine Dion, and Michael Ball and Alfie Boe put it on their album over in the UK, which went to number one, Coldplay did it when they came to Australia... it's huge. I really felt I could have done something with that... but it would probably have been buried with that record. I

actually think my writing is much better now, I've learned so much since. It was a confidence builder. It wasn't a hit in America though... because they remixed it! Bob Clearmountain remixed a song that was a hit all over the world. It ended up like a dirge. It didn't work like the original and only got to number 70, and John Farnham told me they were going to have another go and put it on his next album because they thought it would be a hit. I was lying in bed and I woke up and thought, 'Shit, has anybody told RCA there is an Australian mix and a US mix?' Of course nobody had, so when they put it out the second time they used the same dirge mix that failed the first time! But we know it's a hit, so someone will do it right one day."

Thompson's relationship with Queen would see him feature as a backing singer at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert, but this was another experience which is not fondly remembered.

"The Freddie tribute concert was one of the low moments of my life, unfortunately. Not the idea of doing it, that was fantastic, and singing all those songs was brilliant, but what happened on the day was unfortunate to say the least. Here is the story. Roger Taylor called me and asked if I would rehearse the band, because obviously they couldn't have all of those guest singers around all the time for rehearsals. He also said I would get to sing a song at the show as well. We got together and I had to learn every Queen song that was in the concert. I had to be the singer for everything in rehearsals. Annie Lennox and David Bowie were to duet 'Under Pressure' but they were never at rehearsal together, so when Annie was there I had to be David and when David was there I had to be Annie! I was supposed to sing 'A Kind Of Magic'. It was also my job to organise all the background vocals too. During rehearsals, other than the three members of Queen themselves, I was probably the most important person there. The only guest who was there all the time was George Michael, he was always there because he wanted to make sure his bit was good. Bowie was great to work with, Lisa Stansfield too, everyone was really nice. The concert was in two halves; the first half had different bands on like Def Leppard, Extreme and

Metallica, and the second half was going to be all Queen stuff with guests. The first half ran over, and this is the most absurd thing I've ever heard – because it overran, the management were panicking that the second half might cut off Liza Minelli, who was closing the show with 'We Are The Champions'. She was a last minute replacement because it was going to be Monserrat Caballe with Freddie on a screen, but she turned out to be double booked. So Queen decided to call Liza a week before the concert, as Freddie was a huge fan. She agreed and Spike Edney and I worked with her for her song. But because it was running over and it was on worldwide TV, people were panicking Liza might get cut off, so Roger told me they had to cut something from the second act. They cut my song, because I wasn't an Elton John or



Promo photo of Thompson for the 'Beat Of Love' album, 1991

a David Bowie, so I missed out on a chance to sing for 50 million people. Even worse, Brian was doing all the introductions and he was going to introduce me before my number and thank me for all the work I'd done. He'd written this page long speech thanking me – I saw it. It was lovely, but because the song got cut he never did it, and he even forgot to introduce me when he acknowledged the band. I know that sounds a bit precious, but it was incredibly sad for me. My mother was watching in New Zealand, and I never got a mention. I was so upset, as you can imagine. I was gutted, it was like missing a penalty at the World Cup! Brian, bless him, he must have left twenty messages on my answer-machine the day after when he realised. I just disappeared off the planet for about a week afterward.

"I got to play with Queen later in South Africa for Nelson Mandela, I got to sing 'The Show Must Go On' at a stadium show there. I spent three weeks there with the Soweto Gospel Choir and we had some guests there that I worked with in the same way. A few members of the choir asked me why I wasn't singing all the songs on the night, which was nice.

"I'm really pleased Queen carried on, I think the latest connotation with Adam Lambert is really good, Adam's a showman and he has a great, great voice. It was good with Paul Rodgers and Paul brought some great songs from his own career to the set, but I honestly never appreciated how great Freddie was until I had to sing all those songs. I realised if you don't sing them like he sang them, they just don't sound right. The Tribute showed that; I

think only George Michael and Lisa Stansfield could walk away and say they nailed their song. Everybody else... Robert Plant doing 'Innuendo' was just... he didn't put in enough effort to learn it in my view."

Thompson's profile as a solo artist in the nineties was quite low. "After the 'Beat Of Love' album I did in 1990 with Harold Faltermeyer, I spent most of my time writing or back working with Manfred Mann's Earth Band again. We toured and made another record. I actually heard a bootleg of a show we did in Holland in 1977 and I had forgotten how unbelievable Manfred was as a solo player. In that period he was in the genius bracket. He had a Moog, that was his instrument, it was made polyphonic and he was just out of this world."

It would be 2001 before he reappeared with a record under his own name in the form of 'Won't Lie Down', a Hard Rock effort done with the assistance of Mike Slamer.

"It took a long time to get to that one because I was in the frame of mind where I thought 'What's the point of making another record?' I met Mike Slamer, because I was living in America at the time and he asked me to sing on a couple of projects he was doing, he was doing Steelhouse Lane and he asked if I'd write a couple of things too. We found we wrote well together, he's a wonderful guitar player and he suggested we make a record. He's a genius at recording and mixing so we did it in his studio. I think the guitar is a bit loud in the mix, but he's fantastic. We wrote some really good songs for that record. 'Dust In The Light' is one of my favourites, I loved working with Mike. He worked me hard, not as hard as Jeff Wayne, but he really put me through my paces, which is a good thing."

Thompson would contribute to albums by Alan Parsons, guitar player Mads Eriksen and Manfred Mann along the way, before releasing a couple of curveballs in the form of an acoustic album in 2011 and 'Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me' a year later, a marked shift in style toward Jazz.

"Yeah, the acoustic one was basically a live album recorded at a radio station unplugged session. I'd done some touring with Alan Parsons and made a record called 'Try Anything Once'. That had another great song that got buried called 'Turn It Up'. It had this waffle intro that lasted nearly a minute and I said 'Cut that out for the single, or it won't get played' – and it didn't. As for the Big Band/Jazz record, that took me back to when I was 16 when I used to sing with a big band and I'd do stuff like that. A producer in Belgium asked me to sing some songs in that style for a project. I did and he asked me if I wanted to do a full album of music like that. I was happy to work on it. I love those songs and it's helpful as a singer, it uses another part of your voice, which I need, because I'm 71 and everything gets a bit tighter as you age!"

Thompson's most recent effort, the excellent 'Toys and Dishes',



Thompson rehearsing with Queen in 2003

came in 2014 followed by 'Jukebox', a double CD career retrospective.

"We were going for an authentic, rootsy Rock album with 'Toys...', we wanted it to sound real. It came out on Cherry Red in England. It's really hard to sell CDs nowadays unless you're Sting or someone like that, but I'm really proud of that record. And then I put out the 'Jukebox' compilation which covered a lot of my career – I did an acoustic version of 'Thunderchild' with Chris Spedding which was great fun, and I feel captured the essence of the song."

As well as playing extensively with his Norwegian band of seventeen years, and frequently appearing with Spike Edney's SAS

ESSENTIAL THOMPSON

5 releases which any true fan of the artist's work should experience...

Chris Thompson 'Backtrack 1980-1994' (1999)

As the title suggests, this is a compilation of material rather than an album in its own right, but 'Backtrack' is included as an indicator of Thompson's writing abilities, while at the same time giving listeners the opportunity to hear how the singer handled 'Blaze Of Love', 'Secrets In The Dark', and the iconic 'You're The Voice'. Also included is a superb version of 'Dr Rock' from his Night era, as well as 'Shift In The Wind', which features Brian May on guitar.

Band, the singer has been busy with another project of late, a labour of love which has been a long time coming.

"When I was writing 'Toys And Dishes' I was working with a guitar player called Arno Krabman. He didn't really write lyrics or melodies, he basically interpreted my terrible guitar demos. He's a great producer and he can play everything from BB King to the hardest Metal you can imagine. So we worked together and anytime I hit a blank spot lyrically, I'd talk to my wife. She is a music buff and Queen fan, and she'd always come up with exactly the right words, so we started writing lyrics together. We did five or six tracks that came out great.

"I'd also had an idea for a Musical, for a long time. We had a whole lot of music for it and tweaked the story a little and pitched it to a company in Germany, which is probably where my name means the most. After our presentation they said, 'We give the music 8 out of 10, it's really good, but the story is a 2 out of 10, it won't translate to the stage.' We talked about it, they put us in touch with an agent for Musicals who then put us in touch with another writer. We've written a totally new story and ended up writing seventeen new songs for it. I think we kept seven from the original pitch, and now we're presenting it again to see if we can get it onto a stage to see what it looks like. I'm really excited. My dad loved Musicals so I'd love to see it come to life, but these things take such a long time. It's

Manfred Mann's Earth Band 'The Roaring Silence' (1976)

The seventh album by Manfred Mann's Earth Band was Thompson's first, replacing Mick Rogers. His introduction was one that garnered immediate impact, with the Bruce Springsteen penned 'Blinded By The Light' becoming a huge hit. Thompson's vocals and Mann's distinctive played meshed so well, Thompson would be utilised on several more of the Earth Band's studio and live albums over the next twenty years.

Chris Thompson 'Won't Lie Down' (2001)

In partnership with Mike Slamer, 'Won't Lie Down' boasts a wealth of great songs. There are rockers like the title track, 'Wasting Time' and 'Girls Kick Ass', bluesy workouts like 'One Man Mission', the funky groove of 'Get Up And Dance' and more emotive fare such as 'Like Dust In The Light' and 'You / Me'. 'Till The End' would also have fitted beautifully on a John Farnham album. Slamer's guitar work and Thompson's voice are a sublime pairing.



Thompson still loves playing his hits live

a good mix though, it has traditional Musical themes, a hero, heroine, bad guy etc but the music is a mix – it has traditional elements, Rock music, all sorts in there. You never know, maybe it'll end up in the West End! It would be nice to leave something like that as a legacy."

Speaking of legacies, Thompson is grateful for the reaction to his, to date.

"When I go out and play and see the smiles on people faces as they sing along with 'Blinded...', 'Davy's On The Road Again', 'Mighty Quinn' and 'You're The Voice', it makes me feel great and warms my heart. Thanks to all of you out there for that."

Jeff Wayne's Musical Version Of The War Of The Worlds (1978)

While Thompson only appears on one song on this timeless classic of an album, the fact it sold millions of copies, was voted 40th best selling album of all time in the UK and fills arenas every time it tours, means 'Jeff Wayne's Musical Version Of The War Of The Worlds' has to be mentioned. Portraying 'The Voice Of Humanity', Thompson's spirited performance of 'Thunderchild' remains the definitive version.

Chris Thompson 'Toys And Dishes' (2014)

Less polished and more rugged than 'Won't Lie Down', 'Toys And Dishes' is a terrific record with the catchy 'Million Dollar Wonder Hit', the fun 'Eddie Wants To Rock' and infectious 'Talk To Me' all demanding repeat plays. Rockers like 'Dark Side' and 'Hey You!' nestle next to the gentle 'Dream Away Little Girl' and the cheerful 'You're The One I Love', with the Delta Blues of 'Woe Is Me' bringing things to a hugely satisfying close.