

# chris norman

**Finding fame as the lead singer for 70s pop-rockers Smokie, Chris Norman has had a long and impressive career in the music business. His forty five years as a professional musician have seen him rack up a string of hits with Smokie, before he left to pursue a career as a song writer and solo artist. He has written for the likes of Agnetha Fältskog and Heavy Metal Kids, duetted with Suzi Quatro and even written a World Cup anthem with the 1982 effort 'This Time'.**

**As a solo artist, Chris has enjoyed considerable success in Europe, hitting the number one spot in Germany with 'Midnight Lady' and touring frequently. With his latest album 'There And Back', Norman aims to gain some footing in his home country. James Gaden is on hand to help spread the word.**

Fans have had a long wait for an album of new songs from the vocalist, with 2007's 'Close Up' being the last offering of self penned material.

"I've been making a lot of albums over the years," Chris explains, "and in 2009 I put out 'The Hits! From His Smokie And Solo Years'. I only had to write four new songs for that, because it was a double album, a compilation, with Smokie hits on one CD and the solo hits on the other. I wasn't sure if people were ready for a new studio album anyway. Two years later, the record company said they wanted another record. I told them I didn't think I had a new studio album at that time, so they said about doing a covers album. This was 2011, and I didn't think there was any point in that. Everybody has done it, it's been done to death! They told me they thought my fans would go for it, so I ended up doing 'Time Traveller' which was okay. I really didn't feel I had anything to write about then. It's difficult for somebody like me who has been around a long time to sell albums with new songs on nowadays.

"When I did start writing again, I started recording some of the songs," he continues. "Then I decided to get my band involved. I said if anybody had any songs or any ideas for songs, bring them in and we can write them together. They all came in with a song each, I'd done a few, then I ended up writing a couple with Pete Spencer who I used to write with in Smokie. I hadn't written with him in years, so it just seemed to come together."

While the album spans a variety of styles, there are some great rockers on offer with the likes of 'Hot Love' and 'Whisky And Water'.

"The idea was to go in the studio and try and do it live. We do a lot of live work. I'm constantly doing gigs and we are fairly rocky when we play - so were Smokie in the 70s. So we have that rocky sound when we're live - people are often surprised at how loud we are!" he laughs. "So I guess

going in after rehearsing the songs and recording them like we'd play them live, that maybe did influence how it comes across."

With the rocky and bluesy feel of several tracks, the choice of 'Gypsy Queen' as the single is a double edged sword. It's certainly one of the catchiest tunes on the record, but also very different in style with its accordion backing and Romany vibe.

"To be honest, I had written most of the songs for the album before that," Chris admits. "I was just messing around and I came up with this little idea on an acoustic guitar. I came up with it early last year and I thought it would be a good song for Eurovision. I've never had anything to do

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with Eurovision before, but I thought if I put it in, maybe somebody could use it. I always think Britain goes on about the political thing with votes, which is there, but I think another reason we don't do well is because a lot of the people voting have different taste in music. They like certain styles and 'Gypsy Queen' is sort of Euro-pop. I thought it would go down really well in Eastern Europe, Southern Europe... I could see Russian people liking it. I made a demo but the UK weren't interested. I'd played the demo to a few people and they all loved it and said it was really catchy. So I recorded it myself and stuck it on the album! It's not the same as the rest of the album, it is more poppy, but still, I liked it. That's why I thought about putting it out as a single - I'm not sure it's the right choice to represent the whole album, but it does

get people singing along."

A recent addition to the fold is Pam McBeth, a skilled American born vocalist with a genre spanning voice covering country, rock and soul who makes her debut on 'There And Back'.

"Pam has only just joined the band," Chris confirms. "I have a girl keyboard player called Martina Walbeck and I had Ina Morgan - those two did the backing vocals with me. Ina then left the band just after we had finished the album. Pam's from Atlanta, she's done a lot of stuff in Nashville but she lives in Amsterdam now. A drummer I know, when he heard Ina Morgan was leaving, he told me he knew this girl in Amsterdam who was good. I brought in Pam and on 'Hard Road', which is a duet that was originally performed with Ina. I re-did the girl part with Pam, so she appears on the album on that track. It's not easy to find a girl singer who can also play guitar! I need that second guitar, the acoustic, when we're on stage and I need that other voice. There are lots of girls who can sing but not many who play guitar too. Pam's the fourth girl I've had in this band now for that role, they're like gold dust!"

The production on the album is excellent, something else which Norman had a hand in.

"I produced it with an old friend of mine called Neil Ferguson, who used to have a studio up in Castleford," Chris reveals. "He actually played in my band years ago in the 90s. He was in Chumbawamba for a bit, he's a really good engineer. I brought him in to engineer it, but I thought, as I'd be relying on him if I'm singing something to tell me if it's alright or not, he might as well come in as co-producer."

Chris still favours the older methods when it comes to making a record.

"I love analogue tape, I have a home studio which is all Pro-Tools now, but I still have my 24 track analogue too. I prefer that because I'm old school - a big analogue desk and tape is great. I've had to get into Pro-Tools, all these plug-ins. I know how to do that now, it's convenient because you can do a lot of stuff with it, but I still like the old way! Fortunately Neil is all up to speed on that stuff, so I'd be asking him 'What do I do now, how do I alter the reverb here?'" he laughs.

"There is a warmth with analogue, now there's outboard stuff you can bring in for digital, specifically designed to give back the warmth you would get from analogue! There are loads of things you can do with it, the beauty of digital is the speed at which you can edit things, and the amount of tracks you can have. However, I've worked with producers before and we'll do backing vocals, they'll stack them up and you'll have fifty tracks of vocals, and you're saying 'Well, which ones did we want?' In the old days, you'd do a three part

harmony, lay them all down together and then double track them. So even though I have all these tracks available, I still work that way now. Stacking them all up, I'd just get lost later on.

"I had the band bring in their songs, or song ideas. Quite often it was a few lines or something that sounded good and I would take it away and finish it off," Chris explains. "We then had the songs all written before we went into the studio, and we all knew them because I'd made demos. I sent everyone the demos and we went in the studio, set the drums up in one area, guitar amps in another, set up so we could play together, all at the same time. After we got the track we liked, then I'd look at overdubbing bits or replacing bits,

but the nucleus of it was done together. Like we used to do it - it's much more fun doing it that way! You might lose a bit of precision, but there's nothing like all being in a studio, getting a good sound and going for a take. It's fun, and that's what it's all about."

With Chris justifiably proud of the album and with a band familiar with all the material, I ask if that will influence how many songs he puts in his live shows.

"I will probably put in quite a few," he muses. "I'm doing gigs now, but I've only put in a couple as the album wasn't out then. In March I always do a big tour of Germany, so I intend to put maybe seven new songs in for that. Germany is

where I first broke as a solo artist when I left Smokie, because I had a hit there. I've always been known there, and there are a lot of places in Northern Europe which are a good market for me, more so than Britain unfortunately. It would be nice if I had the same recognition here, but you can't force it. I've got lots of gigs booked abroad. I just hope this album gets me a bit more recognition so I can do some over here."

Having listened to the album a lot, I suspect many of the lyrics are autobiographical.

"Some of it was from experience, some of it was just made up!" laughs Chris. "That's always the way with me and songs. Sometimes I'll write a song and three years later it will sum up something I'm going through, I must have had a premonition! That was the main reason why it's taken a while to get a new album out. Ideally you should be able to just pick up a guitar and something comes out of nowhere. If you try forcing it, you end up with songs that usually aren't very good. I went through a period where I wasn't coming up with anything particularly, but this time, maybe because I'd become enthusiastic about doing a new studio album, I came up with more song ideas than I had for a long time. I hope it continues!"

With that burst of creativity, I ask Chris which song was the first one he had for the new album.

"'I'm Gone', funnily enough! I didn't know then that it would be the opener for the album or anything, it was just me chunking away on the guitar and I thought 'That sounds pretty good'. I have a little portable studio, a tiny little 8 track thing, smaller than a laptop. It has built in drum patterns and a decent microphone, so I did a quick demo of 'I'm Gone' on that. I played it to a couple of people who thought it was great and that started me off.

"I quite like the slower ones, especially 'Wish You Well'. That one I completely changed. The demo was more sort of electric, almost like a 'Chasing Cars' kind of a track. I liked the song, but not the way it sounded. So I went back in the studio with my guitar player Geoff Carline, and we literally sat down, me on Spanish guitar and Geoff on an acoustic six string, and we recorded it. We just sat together and got that feel with the brushes on the drums. It was done late at night and it has a late night feel to it now. I also like 'Whisky And Water'. A few people said that Status Quo did a song with a riff like that, but I didn't know that at the time. I was watching a documentary on TV and they played this old Irish music and that riff was in that piece of music. I liked it and wrote a rock tune with it - it turns out Quo did something similar, but I didn't know that. 'Whisky And Water', waking up, not knowing where you are, that was like my documentary. I've done that a few times!"

