

# chris norman

*Here in his homeland, Chris Norman is best known as the former lead singer of 70s act Smokie, who racked up a string of hits before the vocalist decided to leave in order to forge ahead with a solo career. While his profile waned here, it's been very successful abroad, with the singer/song writer releasing a string of albums and enjoying hits in several European countries like Austria, Italy and particularly Germany. His latest album 'Crossover' sees him taking full control of his music, and James Gaden got in touch to hear about the reasons for that.*

Chris Norman has been releasing albums since his debut solo record 'Rock Away Your Teardrops' was issued in 1982. With over 20 solo albums to his name, 'Crossover' follows the excellent 'There And Back', which was covered extensively in Fireworks #60. Unlike that album though, this one sees Norman writing every song alone, and playing the vast majority of the instruments himself.

"I'm always writing bits and pieces, jotting things down," he explains. "I recorded 'There And Back' in 2012 I think, so by the time last year came around, I was ready to do a new album because promoters wanted me to tour, particularly in Germany. I didn't want to tour without anything new out, so I started going through my ideas. I decided I wouldn't worry about whether it was Rock, or Pop or Country. Whatever I wrote that I liked, I would record. I made a list of what I had and made demos of them. Because of that, most of the stuff I'd played myself, on the demos. I do it on a little 8-track digital thing, which is really easy, you can't spend too much time on it that way. I found on the demos I had done, I really liked the way I'd played it and the way it sounded, so I just transferred it onto Pro-Tools and started adding things to it from there. As a result, I ended up playing the bass because I kept it from the demos, most of the guitar parts are mine, some of the keyboard stuff... it is all different styles, but I don't care. I've always liked different things, that's why I was a big Beatles fan, because they were diverse, they never did a record where you could say 'That was an album full of Rock songs' or whatever, it was always a mix of styles. I write a lot and in the past I've maybe thought 'Oh, that's a bit too Country' but here I thought as long as it was a good song and I liked it, I'd put it on. That's why I called it 'Crossover', because I'm crossing over many different styles."

Personally I would say Norman usually falls into the Pop-Rock bracket with his work, but previous albums have seen him dip his toes into the waters of Blues Rock, Country, stripped down acoustic tracks, ballads, Soul and Classic Rock. I question if there was ever a time when he was tempted to focus just one specific genre for a record.

"No, there's no set genre I'm forced to work in," the singer replies. "I did try, in the past, I did a song called 'Sweet Surrender' which was pure Blues-Rock. I recorded a whole album in that style... and I couldn't get a record deal with it! They were saying 'Yeah, we like it, but it's not what people

expect from you...' As a result, that album never got released, the songs all ended up getting released eventually on other albums, but always in amongst other stuff. There's no point trying that, the audience that comes to see me are not into just one style, as long as the songs are catchy and good, they're happy with that, I don't think the genre is important."

Aware of how record company's opinions can stifle an artist, Norman didn't have this worry when he was putting together the eclectic collection of songs that make up 'Crossover'.

"To be honest with you, I had just been working with Sony/BMG," he confides, "who had put out a '40 Years Of Smokie' collection, marking our first hit which was in 1975. They put out this double CD and triple DVD set, which I was working with them on. I wrote a

*"So many huge acts that we know and love wouldn't have had amazing careers if the business back then had been run like it is now. There's no room for development, it's all money."*

## Chris Norman

new song for it called '40 Years On' and I did that while I was in the middle of recording my own album. I liked it and put it on my album as a re-mixed bonus track. However, I didn't really think the record company did the job they could and should have done. They had everything to go on. They picked some tracks from the original Smokie, some tracks from the new Smokie, and I wasn't very happy with it or the promotion. They didn't ask any of us about doing any TV shows or anything, I'd have gladly done some TV for it, to help sell the album. They clearly spent a certain amount of money on it when you see the package but they didn't really follow it up. I'd suggested maybe recording a special for the DVD package, they could have interviewed each one of us, had clips of how we started, whatever, but they didn't want to do that. As I was recording my own album, one of the label guys heard some of my songs and asked what my plans were. I said I would be putting it out later on, but after seeing them do what I consider was not a particularly good job, I decided to put it out myself. I just got myself a distribution deal. Really, these days, the job a record company does, it's not worth bothering with, due to the money they spend. Basically you get a small

percentage of the main thing, and all they are doing is hiring independent companies to do marketing, distribution, whatever. I might as well just hire those people myself. And that's what I did. As a result, I didn't have to ask anyone 'What do you think to this?' It was just 'That's the album, off you go,' and hired promoters for TV, radio and press people and sorting distribution deals for different territories and digital outlets like iTunes. It's all from my own label, Solo Sound Records.

"There aren't many record companies left now," he continues, "and the ones that are still out there are basically more like distributors. It's not like the old days, when a label was usually run by somebody who had been a musician themselves. When I was with RAK records, I was working with Mickie Most who produced a lot of hit records, but he had been a singer in a duo originally, having some success himself in the 50s and 60s. It was the same when I was at Decca, pretty much everybody was from a musical background so their heart and soul was in it. Nowadays, the people are more from a business background, accountants and lawyers, it's all about money. The fact is, most people who make records nowadays get one shot at it. They get an album deal if they're lucky, and if it doesn't make it... next! If that had been the case when I started, I'd never have gotten anywhere. Pink Floyd, their first album or two didn't really do much, there's loads of examples like that, so many huge acts that we know and love who wouldn't have had amazing careers if the business back then had been run like it is now. There's no room for development, it's all money. There's the odd one, like Adele, who have big success through a label, but not many. Even those from 'The X Factor' with all that TV exposure, they only really get one shot and if it's not successful, they end up having to find another way to make a living. I've talked to a lot of people and they are in the same frame of mind that they're better off doing it themselves. Sure, you have to use your own money to pay for everything, but you have to do that anyway. I wouldn't want to sign an artist deal where the label picks and chooses your material. You lose control of what you're doing, so you would have to go for a production deal. But even if you signed for that, they're only going to be hiring people you can hire yourself. It costs you more, but you have complete control over everything. And if it sells, you make more money anyway."

With forty years in the business, Norman clearly knows what he is doing and with technological advances, it's a lot cheaper and easier to make a record now than when he started. The new album hardly has any real drums at all, with Norman electing to use samples, but he's done such a masterful job, it wasn't until I read the credits that I realised there wasn't a drummer on the album!

"I know!" he laughs. "That was because I did my demo using standard drum samples and I was going to put real drums on the finished record. Then my drummer couldn't do it, so I

thought 'Well, these samples actually sound pretty good. If I tweak how they are played, it could work'. So I basically played the samples like a real drummer would. It wasn't like I was just using loops. The quality of the drum samples available now – it's not like back in the old days when you bought a drum machine or a LinnDrum. When they came out we all thought 'Ooh, they sound just like real drums!' You listen back now and they don't at all!" he chuckles. "The samples you can get now, and the various plugins can sound amazing. My engineer, Neil Ferguson, had these great plugins and samples and we used those to replace the basic beats on my demos. I usually play quite a bit on my records, with 'There And Back' I did use my whole band but I'm used to playing different parts when I make the demos. I enjoy it. I often put on overdubs and extra bits on all my album. I did bring in Rob Taggart, who used to be in my band, to add some keyboards and some string bits, and Geoff Carline did some guitar work alongside me, but yeah, most of it is me. I absolutely love playing bass! I said to Geoff, maybe we should start a new band and I could be the bass player! I really like being the front guy though, who does the singing."

The ballad 'Waiting' has been selected as the lead single, so I enquire if, thanks to the independent approach, that song was Norman's choice.

"Yeah, it was. When I was writing and recording it, I didn't think that would be a single, but when I played it to people, especially women, I've had really good feedback. Geoff said he played it to his wife and his daughter and they were both in tears! I spoke to my manager Ina and she said she loved it and thought it was very emotional. I thought maybe it could be a single, I want everyone to like it but I do aim for that kind of market. I like it too, my taste is obviously reflected with everything that's on the album, but if you'd asked me at the beginning, I'd have probably thought I'd have gone for 'Carry On' or something a bit more Rock, with more guitars in it."

Norman also made a video for the track, which can be seen on his newly revamped website.

"I used a company I found in Manchester, just from browsing on the internet," he explains. "I looked at some stuff they'd done and I thought they did a really good job. I'm going to be doing another one actually, I've got a Christmas single coming out so I'll be shooting a video for that with them. They came up with the idea to use drones to get those aerial shots and the images of people looking up at the sky. They have good ideas, it's good quality stuff, and they're not ridiculously expensive."

I was lucky enough to see Norman and his band showcase 'There And Back' at the Borderline and thoroughly enjoyed the performance. With so many great songs in his arsenal, it's a real shame he doesn't tour

the UK much, concentrating mostly on his big markets like Germany.

"The main reason I don't play here much is because my profile is not high enough," the vocalist states simply. "It's much higher abroad so it's a lot easier to play shows there. I did the showcase for 'There And Back' at The Borderline a couple of years back which you attended, and that sort of size club is what I'd be playing here. I really don't want to go the acoustic route where it's just me and one or two guys, because the sort of show that I do, as you've seen, is a full band show. There's six of us on stage, then there's the road crew, lights... I don't want to just turn up and use whatever is in-house, because in my experience the band can be as good as it gets, but if the sound engineer is crap then nobody will notice! I like to bring my own people so the production costs and expenses are quite high. In the UK, I really can't see it working out to be able to pay. For territories I'm trying to break, I will go in at a lower price than where I'm well known, so I do keep trying. One off shows are more expensive than doing ten day tours, because you can spread the cost out. If I could do loads of gigs in the UK, I'd do it like a shot. We are looking at seeing if we can do some shows in Ireland next year, that would be great."

With Smokie being successful, I found it baffling the Chris Norman's profile wasn't higher here, but the singer is keenly aware of the reason for that.

"It's because when I first went solo, my first hit was a hit all over, especially Germany, Italy, all over Europe," he reveals. "But they didn't release it in England. I was with Arista in Germany and they pushed for it to be released here but the English branch just weren't interested, they thought it was too European. Maybe it was. By the time I signed to Polydor, anything that was released in Europe, the UK Polydor always responded with 'Smokie? That's a bit old hat,' and never really bothered with my solo stuff. I've lived with that for years and for a while I didn't even try releasing stuff here, it was a pain in the arse. These last few years though, I've thought I should try again, try and build up England before it's too late. It's difficult, in some countries I am really well known and people think I've been doing it forever and have all these hit songs, then in

England, where I'm from, some people just know me a bit and I have to acclimatise to that. I don't mind doing smaller gigs, building things up, I've done that before, it's just having the chance to do it. I'm much bigger in Germany than I am here. Mind you, so were Smokie. We had hits in England, about fourteen I think, but if we had a number five record here, it was number one in Germany, and the albums always did well there. We'd tour theatres here, and play arenas in Germany and Austria, places like that. When I went solo, there was more interest in me there as a result. I'm almost a household name in Germany. I was offered a one off slot opening for The Eagles there once, and I've broken into quite a few other European countries, but hardly at all here."

I ponder if Norman handling everything himself will be the key to winning back some of the lost ground.

"I hope so, I am trying, I'm looking at any opportunities that come up. Some promoters, and a lot of the media, aren't aware of anything I've done since Smokie so they've only got that to work with. I'm appreciative of this interview and I'll keep working at it. My career in the UK needs kick starting so hopefully we can give it a kick up the arse!"

