

The Chill Factor

Getting Closer to Chrissie Hynde

Frita Zemke was staying in the Grand Hotel, Washington. Chrissie Hynde, alias Frita Zemke for anonymity and privacy, wasn't expecting the call. Somebody had slipped up — not a good start with a woman often cast as the aloof high priestess of cool.

A woman born in Akron, Ohio, who moved to London and worked for the *NME* for a year, almost formed a band with Mick Jones in 1976, knocked around with Lemmy, formed the Pretenders, lived with the Kinks' Ray Davies (the father of her first daughter) for four years, married Jim Kerr, had another daughter and made 'I Got You' with UB40.

All that in 35 years; not bad for a woman described by Mat Snow in *NME* (Nov 1) as an "earth mother in the making." Any comment Chrissie?

"It's the first I've heard of it. I guess that's the way they see things. I think the *NME*'s a crappy paper. I couldn't make a comment on their assessment of me, but I've always been very concerned with environmental issues anyway."

That side of your personality has certainly been underplayed by the press until recently:

"I don't know how I'm perceived by other people as a public figure so I don't know how to comment on that. When and who did the interview?"

Mat Snow, late last year ... A bad start, she's sounding stiff, bored, unfriendly ...

"Yeah, I remember. I don't think it's a very good paper. I wouldn't buy it. The last time

I picked up a copy I didn't find it very interesting to read, the writers aren't very good. There was no humour, it was cynical and sarcastic. No one seemed knowledgeable about music."

But it was cynical enough when you wrote for it, what with writers like Ian MacDonald and Nick Kent.

"We had a completely different staff. I did think Ian MacDonald and Tony Tyler were very responsible — they loved music, they knew a lot about it and they were well researched about the musical aspects. Now people there seem more interested in haircuts. I can't relate to it anymore."

In that same article you described yourself as a "mess," philosophically.

"I can't comment on something that I did six months ago that is out of context. But philosophically I feel intact."

Part of that philosophy is your belief in the sanctity of life and conservation, and so you're against nuclear power?

"Yeah, nuclear power plants produce plutonium, the deadliest substance known to man. I'm also using candles at night. Anyone who knows how those nuclear power plants work would be pretty frightened by them."

Are you aware of New Zealand's anti-nuclear ships stand?

"Yeah, New Zealand seems to be hip all around."

Don't Get Me Wrong

Musically Chrissie Hynde seems to have dropped the tough leather facade over the years and replaced it with a more vulnerable approach. On *Get Close* songs like 'My Baby,' 'Tradition of Love' and 'Don't Get Me Wrong' seem to bear this out?

"I don't feel more vulnerable, so I don't know, and the first album had songs like 'Kid' and 'Lovers of Today' which show a soft side lyrically. I don't know why I've got this reputation for being aggressive. I think some of the things on the *Get Close* album are much more aggressive."

Such as?

"Look, I don't want to get into the finer points of comparing the albums, I just don't feel more vulnerable and less aggressive. But a lot of people have said this about my music. The first album was made eight years ago and I haven't listened to it in years and I don't go out and buy Pretenders' records."

On *Get Close*, 'Remember You' was obviously dedicated to Jim

Kerr ...

"No it's not, where have I dedicated it to him?"

By using "cannae" in the lyrics instead of "can't" ...

"I used that because it scanned better than 'can't.' I've never dedicated a song specifically to someone. Everybody told me that 'Back on the Chain Gang' was dedicated to Jimmy Scott, but in fact he and I had been rehearsing the song together. I didn't write it about him."

"I can't go around telling everyone who the song was about and why I wrote it, as it would take all the fun out of it. It's not important,

Rhine has been destroyed and nothing can live in 40,000 rivers and lakes in Canada. And there's the Chernobyl thing which everyone seems to have forgotten about already, and no one seems to know about Greenpeace. And billions of animals are being slaughtered so that someone can buy a Mercedes Benz for his wife at Christmas."

"All that stuff really bums me. I'm very tender and affectionate with my children and I'm a real fan of life."

Do you like Simple Minds?

"Yeah, but I only started

"I'm a real traditionalist for rock and roll, to me it's a guitar based thing. I can appreciate other forms like Simple Minds are keyboard based. I've always dug singles and that's the kinda thing I've leaned towards but I don't know whether I'm so good at it."

The Pretenders' career has been stop-start, largely because of Chrissie Hynde's maternal commitments and the tragic death of Jimmy Scott in 1982 of an apparent drug overdose.

"I felt shitty about that, really sad. They don't know whether he drowned or died of a heroin overdose or what. With Jimmy I never knew exactly what happened. But he was taking drugs."

Could it have been avoided?

"I don't think these things can, all the time. Especially when you're on the road with your first band and you have to sleep on the coach at night and you do this show and you have to travel on the coach at night and it's really hard to sleep on the bunks and everyone's drinking and then you start taking drugs and people come backstage and they offer you all sorts of drugs cos that's like their calling card and you can easily get sucked into all that."

"And often you need something to get you through the day because life's pretty depressing sometimes. Whether or not you personally are suffering, you notice a lot of suffering and if you're at all sensitive that can affect you."

"How can it not affect you that animals are being mistreated or that kids are being beaten up. Whatever personal cross you're bearing, people just to get through the day, get home from work, and they really wanna drink. They want to change their consciousness."

How do you get through the day?

"I might have a drink once in a while, and if I have a drink I might have a cigarette. I don't indulge in any intoxicating things, I might have a joint once in a while if I'm out with my friends or after a show or something. I might have the occasional binge, but I'm not habitual in any form."

Change My Life

How has parenthood affected your lifestyle?

"You've got to clean up your act there too, you can't be a slob and raise kids. I'm taking it in my stride amazingly well considering I never even held a baby before I had one. It's good to have them around, they seem to help you grow up, it seems to aid in your development."

Have they made you less selfish, less vain?

"Maybe you're living your life in whatever is your devotional service to the Lord. That's how I feel. Maybe you're living for someone else or for a company. I see life as a much bigger picture than my own self, which is why I'm very affected by global starvation and animal slaughter. As far as my own personal comforts go, I'm set up — I've a cool husband, beautiful kids and a great job. But that's not what it's all about."

How does your marriage fare with both of you on the road so much in different bands?

"It's kinda neat to know that there's these two happening bands out there, but it's weird that we don't see each other much, but he's got to do his thing and I've got to do mine. He's

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Pretenders (L-R): Blair Cunningham, Rupert York, Robbie McIntosh (front), Chrissie and Malcom Foster.

they're just songs."

The marriage of Chrissie Hynde and Jim Kerr appeared to be a marriage of opposites. What attracted you to Jim, if that isn't too personal a question ...

"Yeah it is. What has that to do with music? I wanna talk about the music a little more. Hold it, you're not a New Zealander, what accent is that?"

Scottish.

"How long have you lived over there?"

About 20 years, minus a couple for good behaviour. *Shit, this bitchiness is catching.*

"Yeah, I didn't think your accent was quite kosher. Actually I've got quite a few New Zealanders around me at the moment. The women who're looking after my kids are both from New Zealand; Malcom Foster, our bass player, his wife's from there, as is the guy that does my monitors. A small but impressive country."

The curt, icy tone has dropped; the ice-woman is melting. Back to the Hynde-Kerr marriage ...

"I know what you're getting at, for people have often looked at me and looked at him and thought, 'Wow, what's a nice guy doing with her?' But he's not complaining. And don't forget I'm from Akron, an ugly place, and Jim's from Scotland, a real beautiful place, and my perspective of things is older."

And more cynical?

"I don't think so. I'm certainly not cynical about beautiful things. I'm cynical about man's ignorance, greed and hell-bent insistence on ruining the environment and destroying the planet. I know that sounds like a hippie cliché."

"Scientists have come back from the Arctic and they believe we've destroyed 30 percent of the ozone in the last eight years, the River

listening to them since the *New Gold Dream* album. Jim asked me not to listen to anything before that."

Having been a critic, have you ever tried to make music from that point of view?

"Let's get one thing straight first of all, I was a critic but not by choice. I was scraping around in London, I had no money, I got fired from this piddly little job and someone said that I should write some reviews because I was so opinionated about music. And I just went to the *NME* and they said, write some stuff for us. But I never took it seriously, I never considered myself a journalist."

"I was lucky because I knew how to type. I did the minimum amount of work I had to, and mostly I went to record companies and got albums and I sold them to second-hand shops and that was what I lived on."

The Single Life

The Pretenders have released four albums over their nine-year lifespan, the first being their best. What is probably overdue is a Greatest Hits, because Chrissie Hynde has the knack of crafting sumptuous little singles like 'Talk of the Town,' 'Kid,' 'Back on the Chain Gang' and 'Don't Get Me Wrong,' as opposed to sustaining interest through an album.

"I don't think I've got the knack for writing singles. I don't want to be a critic of my own songs but I've never felt 100 percent successful after writing a song. When I hear singles now, my songs don't seem to be great singles because they don't have a disco beat. I don't know where my stuff fits into the scheme of things now. I've always appreciated the three-and-a-half, four-minute thing."

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