



the black crowes

Hyperactive, beanpole rock star Chris Robinson paces around the Toronto hotel suite as his record label rep and road manager relay the latest messages. "The [trendy] Bovine Sex Club phoned and said you're all welcome there again. They'll set you up with drinks." "The Kids In The Hall [top North American TV comedy stars] phoned. I've got 22 tickets set aside for them for tomorrow's show."

Lock up your daughters! Southern bad boys the Black Crowes are back in town, and they know how to party. "Last time here, I went to all these speak-easies. I jammed at one with Kevin from Kids In The Hall," says Chris.

This time out, he and the boys enlivened their promo' trip by playing a (badly kept) secret gig as OD Jubilee. Celeb guests for a bluesy jam this time were Stones keyboardist Chuck Leavell and Ronnie Wood, proof positive the much maligned Black Crowes are now being viewed as the real deal, by their peers at least.

This is the news Chris Robinson wants to spread — that his band are serious, striving musicians, not just the motormouthed, wasted rock stars they're so often viewed as. Their third album, *Amorica*, helps support his claim, for it's an adventurous, sprawling work, that further expands their already diverse sound by adding Latin and country tinges on a couple of songs. Typically for The Crowes, however, it comes with controversy — this one over the stars and stripes bikini cover shot (taken from porn rag *Hustler*). Anyway, the volatile lad is in a good mood, so here's some of the rock 'n' roll gospel, according to Chris Robinson.

On spying a magazine with Joni Mitchell on the cover, he says: "I had dinner next to her a few months ago. She looks good. Actually, I think our record is very Joni Mitchell [laughs] — sort of *Blue*, sort of *Ladies of the Canyon*." *Amorica* does show a lot of musical growth.

"That's the weird thing. I hope it does, otherwise all this touring and trying to learn about what kinds of people and musicians we are would be a waste. You have to put some sort of tag to it, place some kind of gravity upon it rather than just: 'This is how we make our money,' or, 'You're on MTV, you're famous.' You have to put a bit more substance on it. These are real things you have to deal with as an adult. I think the pursuit of being what a musician is probably our greatest attribute, and probably our worst deterrent."

I sense you stand outside of that hit single/video quick fix mentality. Do you consider yourselves musical mavericks?

"I feel like Madagascar [laughs]. I want to be a part of other things, but I don't want to change enough to be that, maybe. It's awkward — like your voice changing. Those things go back and forth. I've got to the point as a musician, and I think we've got to the point as a group of musicians, that: 'This is what we do. If you don't like it, Okay. We're cool with that.' It used to be: 'If you don't like it, you're fucked.' Now, whether it's 100 here or 100,000 there, if these people like it, I'd rather put all that energy into a creative space. I suppose the word 'maverick' has to come up. I'm sure part of that, regardless of the medium we'd choose, would come into play, us being Southern. A few years back, if we'd done an interview and were called Southern, we might have slugged you, which is, of course, the most typically Southern thing to do — 'I will get drunk and punch you' — but we've changed. Now I think we're comfortable with our position, and the traditions that are behind us, and what lies ahead. And a lot of those traditions are living. I did a press tour in Europe for six weeks. I was in

Spain and this guy goes: 'Well, every few years there seems to be a resurgence of the blues.' I go: 'Well, I don't mean to be offensive, mother-fucker, but you live in Spain. You see American music forms and trends that come and go. You see what's popular, but where we grew up and the kind of musicians we are, that's always there, that tradition.' It's the same with popular music. We were into the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, the Faces, Muddy Waters, Gram Parsons, the Long Ryders, X, the Replacements — all this music, but, at the same time, we'd listen to Stones records of 20 years before, like *Exile On Main St.* MTV seemed like a million miles away. We'd watch it once in a while, and we'd see it as manufactured and manipulated specifically to be popular. We were suspicious of that, and still are. And, of course, we've never had a fuckin' hit record! Of course we've had good selling albums, where people like the whole album, but we've never had a hit single. 'Hard To Handle' was the closest."

Is that a blessing, more than a curse?

"Yes, but I don't have a choice [laughs]! You could get a gun and hold it to me and Rich and say: 'Write a fuckin' hit song,' and I'd go: 'Shoot me!' I don't fuckin' know. It's always been that sort of mentality, and we still come from that place. It's compounded with going around the world a couple of times, and meeting more musicians. You get a different relationship with your music, your musicianship, what you want to say and having an audience — all these things. It does keep you moving."

"We're not the same band we were on *Shake Your Money Maker*. It was so frustrating then. People say: 'How could you be frustrated? That record sold four million copies.' It was frustrating, because that's all we could play. You could feel this thing coming, this relationship, but it wasn't there. So we had to go on the road and do it. While you're trying to learn and make that connection, you're selling records, there's the business side, all the personal side and this other shit going on. People stopping every five seconds and screaming: 'You're a fake!' I'm going: 'Don't point at me man, I'm just singing. I'm from Atlanta, Georgia!' So it was a weird way to grow up, but I wouldn't change it. I don't have any regrets about that time."

You made your mistakes in public?

"And I still do, or I hope I do. From that, there's wisdom. Maybe some people call it humility. I think the most euphoric places, and the most desperate places, all add to wisdom. Being a creative person, you are your experiences, and your experiences will allow you to explore this range of emotions."

Do you feel *Amorica* reflects that range?

"Oh yes. There are songs on this record I think of as being in the blues tradition. The blues don't make me feel worse, they make me feel better. I'm not a sharecropper in the 1940s and moving to Chicago, but I do understand desperation in my own personal life. I understand segregation, humiliation. Whatever emotional landscape you can explore, lyrically and musically, as long as it's a connection, where it doesn't make you feel worse, it makes you feel better that you're not the only person. Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, that's a