



CHRIS ISAAK'S HEART SHAPED WORLD

A hotel in central Auckland. One of the big, smart ones: the Centra — but it could just as easily be the Regent or the Sheraton, the kind they put overseas stars in to stay and be interviewed. They all look kind of the same inside: the nicer side of neutral, every floor the same — although we've pushed the lift button marked 'Suites'.

We go down the corridor, past identical doors to one marked 'Executive Suite', and open it to reveal a large, but nonetheless bland, hotel room. But inside this room is an American in an immaculate, shining electric blue suit and crisp white shirt. Around his neck are a couple of charms on chains (one is a Maltese Cross) and a cardboard circle on elastic, with a red circle and bar over a picture of an iron printed on it (a 'Do Not Iron' tag). Equally immaculate is his hair: freshly slicked into place, not as high as it has sometimes been, but unmistakably that belonging to Chris Isaak.

The singer has flown directly from his home in San Francisco today, and I'm the last of sev-

We chat a bit about some of their old songs, how it's hard to choose which ones to play when you've got five albums out.

"How does Bob Dylan decide?" says Kenny.

"Easy," says Chris, "they all sound the same," and he does a Dylan impression, strumming the guitar, running a bunch of Dylanesque lines together.

Kenny leaves and I ask Chris where he's off to next on this tour. Is it a long hard slog?

"It's long, and it's hard, but it's not that much of a slog. It's like, I better watch my whimpering, or I might get something I could really cry about. I got a pretty good job."

And there it is. Every interview, every time you hear about or see Chris Isaak, you wonder: 'Can he really be such a nice guy?' He really does believe this is a job he's lucky to have. He really believes it's his job to give every audience and every interviewer *more* than just what's expected, more than what he could get away with. If it's an act, then it's one he's committed to getting right every time.

"After this we're going to Australia and then,

"I always try to write 'em personal, but I think, in this case, it was so close to when I broke up and so clear in my mind. It's like looking back at last month and you're confused and angry... all of a sudden it's gone, and you're: 'What happened?'"

So, these songs came together quickly?

"Pretty much. Recorded the album in seven, eight months. That's pretty quick for writing and recording an album."

I asked Chris if he struggles with how to approach a new album.

"I always feel a dilemma with how to write a good song. My biggest problem is to write a melody that's got something *unique*, and to write words that really *mean* something. I'll be making the thing up and think: 'This is a clever little line, that rhymes with that, that's clever,' but it doesn't mean anything about the real world or what I want to say. Those clever things, you look at the next day and they sound like junk. What I'd like to have is real simple songs that really are sayin' something that's going on in your life. Sometimes it happens but

only got AM radio, so I listen to the Mexican channel."

Surfing seems to be a recurring motif on the last couple of record covers.

"I went surfing right before I got on the plane, and I surfed two sessions the day before that, and two the day before. I surf every day that I can. I brought my Powergloves with me. Do you surf at all?"

Aah, no.

"They have these Powergloves, they have like, webs in between. I brought those with me and I'm hoping I might get some chance to surf while I'm here. I'm not real good, but... it's one of those things like sex: you don't have to be real good to have a lot of fun."

"I almost drowned last year. I looked at the beach, and there was nobody on the whole beach out, and there was huge, *huge* surf. I thought: 'If I can get out... I'll see if I can,' and I paddled out. I got out to the outside and I got hit by a huge wave, and it held me down for... a *long* time, a little bit longer than I wanted to be held down for — to the point where I was

"I better watch my whimpering, or I might get something I could really cry about."

eral interviews, but he's immediately friendly and fun.

"They got me workin' today. That's rough isn't it? You'd think they'd give you the first day off, you been on a plane for like, 15 hours."

Chris picks up the acoustic guitar off the couch with 'Chris Isaak' laid in pearl across the front ("That's the cool thing about being famous," he says the next night at the concert, "you get your name on everything."), and calls over his long-time drummer Kenny Dale Johnson. "Come on, let's sing somethin' Kenny," he says. "Let's play an old one."

I quickly ask for my favourite Chris Isaak song, 'Heart Shaped World', the title track of his third album (that also yielded the ubiquitous 'Wicked Game'). He strums a couple of times to remember how to play it, and then starts, Kenny singing along and playing on a drum skin. I check that my tape deck is on.

I don't know about you, but I found having one of my favourite singers play one of my favourite songs to me 60 seconds after I met him... very peculiar.

"Hey, good call. That was fun," says Kenny when they finish. "We haven't done that in a while."

I just heard today, we're doing MTV Unplugged. So, as soon as we get back, we're going to rehearse. It never stops."

Chris is touring to promote his new — and fifth — album, *Forever Blue*. The songs on the album chart a course of emotions following the break-up of a relationship — all relating to one girl.

"Yeah, I didn't *intend* it to all be about that, but when you're writing, you can't escape who you are."

The order of the songs follows a natural progression of sentiments following such a break-up.

"I think it does kinda work that way. The last song, 'The End of Everything', is kind of resigned, but at the end of that is a little bit of birds. I'd done the record and I went out on my back porch in San Francisco; I had a test tape and I listened to the whole thing. At the very end, all these birds were singing — I have a big tree — and I thought: 'That's kind of appropriate... something keeps going, there's optimism.'"

The songs on this album and *San Francisco Days* seem more personal, less character based than *Heart Shaped World*.

a lot of times it doesn't.

"When I wrote 'Forever Blue' — I think that's like, my best piece of songwriting on this album. Because the lyrics, I think, really tell a story, they're based on something I really felt. The melody is a very pretty melody and it's a little different. That to me is like, I wish I could do that every time. I don't worry too much about the trend... if I can get 10 songs with the writing like that... the trend'll come over to me!"

So what current music do you listen to?

"Wilco, Pavement..."

They're from your home town.

"Yeah, they're from Stockton. I really didn't listen to them 'cause of that. I thought: 'Oh, they're from Stockton too,' but I thought: 'They're a punk band,' 'cause the album cover looks like a punk band — but they're very melodic and pretty. I listen to a lot of the same stuff every one listens to, you don't even have to try to listen to. Like: 'You listen to Cranberries?' Yeah, sure, 'cause everybody hears it. 'Do you listen to REM?' Yeah, they have some cool stuff. Other than that, when I drive around in my car, I listen to Mexican music a lot, 'cause I have a 64 Chevy, and it's

thinkin' I was gonna pass out and be breathing water. After that I came back to shore and thought: 'I'm a singer, man. What am I doing out here? Why am I doing this?'"

And he's an actor (Chris featured in Bertolucci's *Last Emperor*, but his cinematic high point has been a supercool half hour as Special Agent Chet Desmond in *Fire, Walk With Me*, the *Twin Peaks* movie). Any more of that lined up?

"We just been talking to David Lynch to see, if the schedule's right, maybe Kenny and myself go up for a part, maybe play detectives."

Chet Desmond again?

"I dunno... an ongoing character. Chet Desmond shows up again. I love that name. I said: 'Who's that named after?,' and he says (here Chris slips into a perfect David Lynch bark): "*Chet: Chet Baker. Desmond is Desmond Decker.*"

On that note, the record company wraps up the interview, so I leave Chris to get rest for the show the following night ("We need a rest in the worst way."), where he gives 100 percent of himself again, this time on stage, to a room full of people. What a guy.

JONATHAN KING