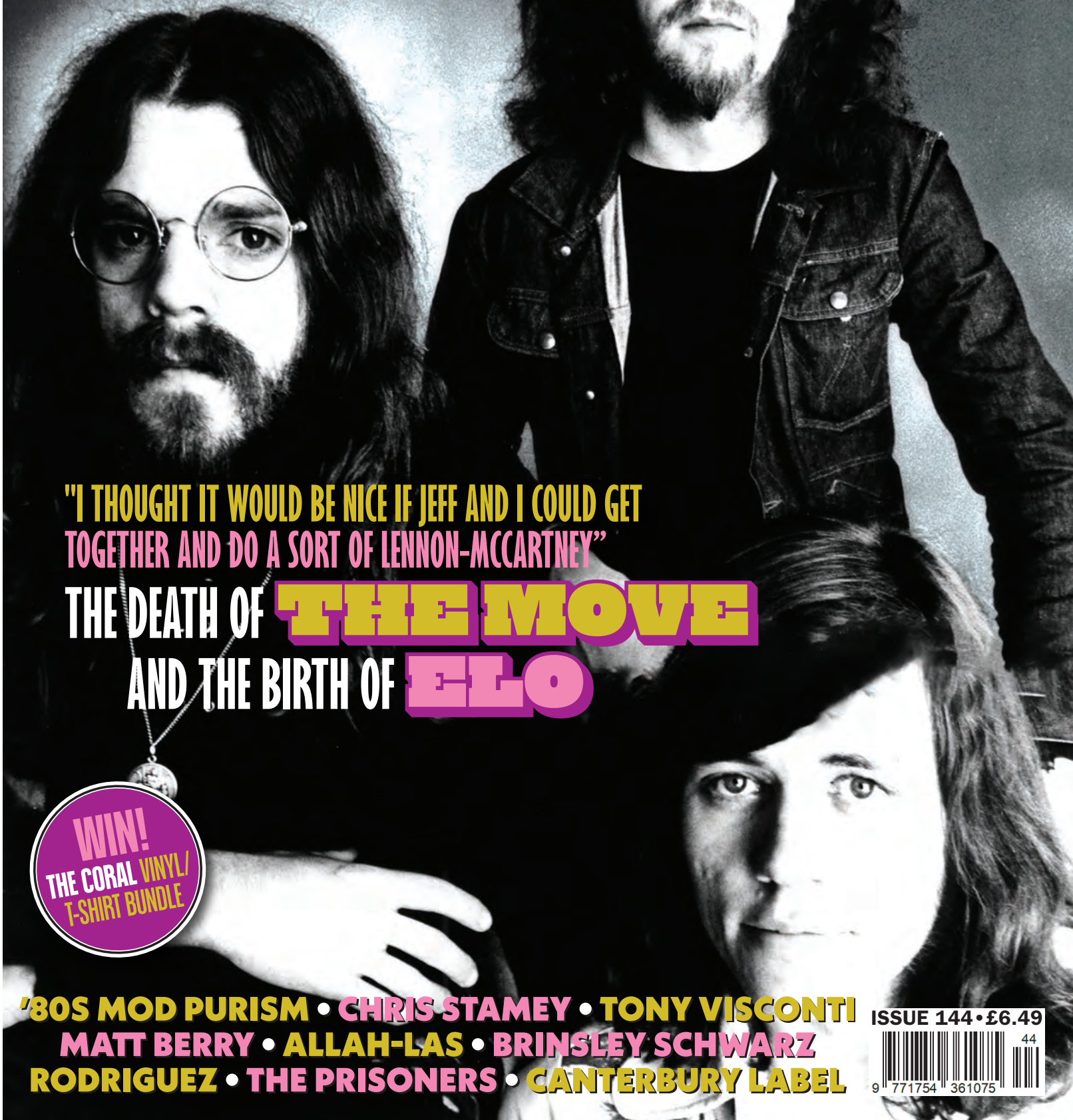




INCREDIBLE STRING BAND SUCCESS IN '68  GOAT TAKE THEIR MEDICINE

# SHINDIG!



"I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE NICE IF JEFF AND I COULD GET TOGETHER AND DO A SORT OF LENNON-MCCARTNEY"

## THE DEATH OF **THE MOVE** AND THE BIRTH OF **ELO**

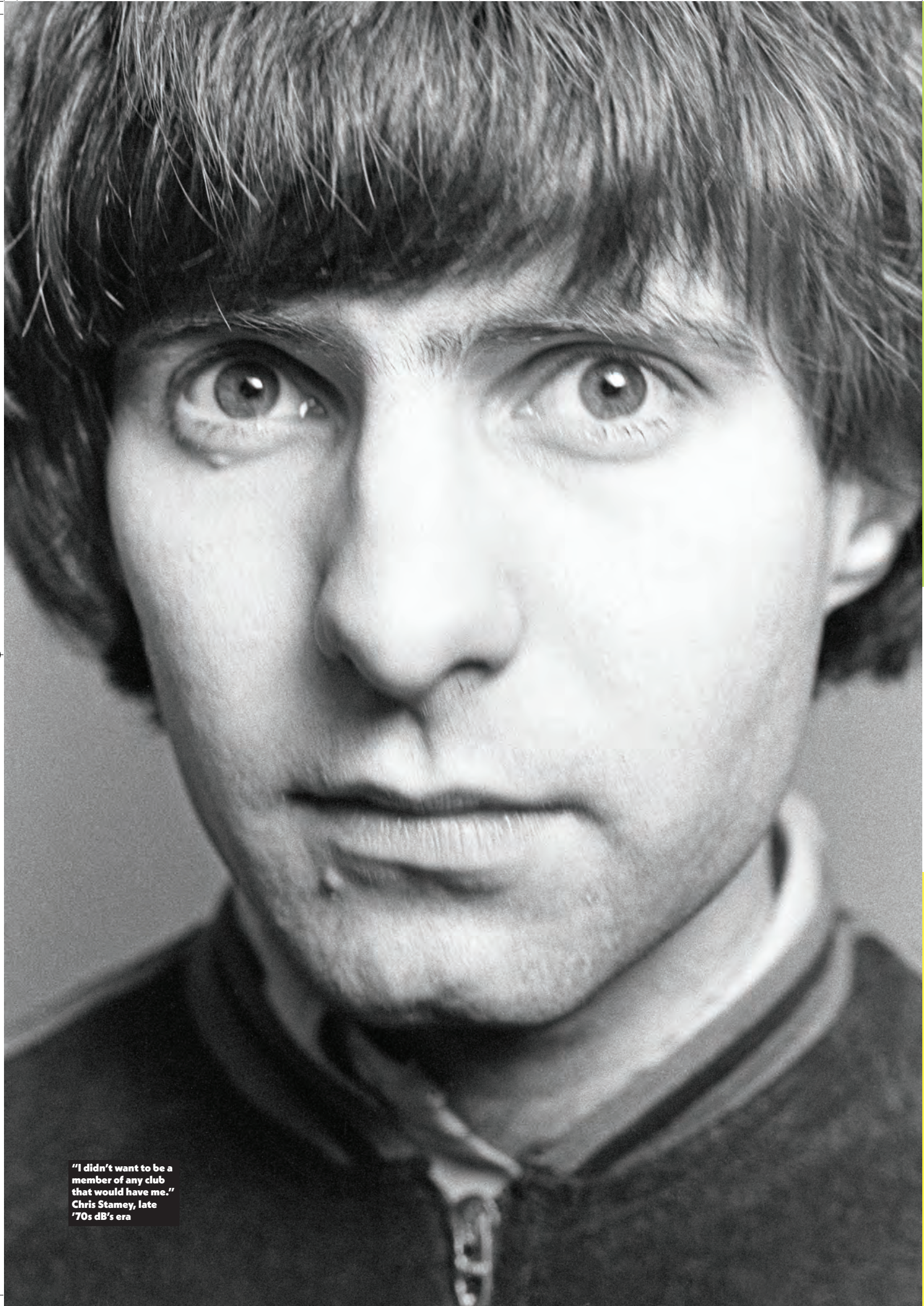
**WIN!**  
THE CORAL VINYL/  
T-SHIRT BUNDLE

'80S MOD PURISM • CHRIS STAMEY • TONY VISCONTI  
MATT BERRY • ALLAH-LAS • BRINSLEY SCHWARZ  
RODRIGUEZ • THE PRISONERS • CANTERBURY LABEL

ISSUE 144 • £6.49







**"I didn't want to be a member of any club that would have me."  
Chris Stamey, late '70s dB's era**



# cycles per second

Between his years fronting The dB's, an enduring solo career and his work as a producer for others, it seems that **CHRIS STAMEY** has never rested. Now, with a new studio album and European tour looming, he takes time out to chat to **CHAIM O'BRIEN-BLUMENTHAL** about transformative mid-70s NYC, being Alex Chilton's right-hand man, recording in The Who's studio and the sustained creative process of songwriting. Portrait by **JULIA GORTON**

**“I’ve never suffered from having a career plan,”** Chris Stamey states with a healthy laugh. **“All I do is write songs”.** Modest perhaps, considering Stamey’s rich catalogue as both a solo artist and member of The dB’s and Sneakers, along with his pedigree of working with such artists as Alex Chilton and Jody Stephens. All the paths he’s taken through the years have led up to his latest album *The Great Escape* and a career-spanning European tour this autumn. Now, looking both backwards and forwards, Stamey is ready to share his history with the world.

Growing up in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Chris Stamey’s earliest memories of music are from when he was a kid. “As soon as my parents got a piano, when I was six, I started pushing the notes together to try and imitate the classical and jazz things I heard in my household.” By the time he reached junior high school, Stamey had met fellow musician Peter Holsapple, and the two started jamming. “We started playing in a blues band. Peter was a big band of the Peter Green-era Fleetwood Mac, and we both liked

Michael Bloomfield’s *East/West*. It was a time in the ’60s where people were trying to play guitar like the great blues players, plus you could also buy skinnier strings, so they weren’t impossible to bend [when performing].”

By his teenage years, there was a thriving local music scene in Winston-Salem. “There were garage bands locally, including one called The Teen Beets. People would play dances and parties”. However, as music progressed, psychedelia would reach town soon

enough. “There was a guy named Bud Carlisle,” Stamey recalls. “He went to San Francisco in The Summer Of Love, and came back with a strobe light, LSD and a vision of where music could go. Things changed pretty quickly.” Forming a band called Captain Speed & The Fungi Electric Mothers, they became a sensation. “They would perform these amazing live shows that transformed our little music scene.”

By the end of the decade, Chris was in and out of so many bands, he lost count.



**Early inspiration Captain Speed & The Fungi Electric Mothers, 1967; Mitch Easter and Chris in their basement studio – Sacred Irony was their group at the time; Rittenhouse Square with Chris and Mitch, early '70s**



as well as covers of Nazz and Fairport Convention,” Stamey says. “I first met Peter [Holsapple] in school, around eighth grade. We had both been in some of those teenage groups together, like Ice.”

By the middle of the decade, Little Diesel was no more, and Stamey was off to college. “I moved to Chapel Hill to go to The University Of North Carolina,” he remembers. “Not long after that, I started Sneakers.” The group, which consisted of Will Rigby on drums, Rob Slater and Chris on guitars and Robert Keely on bass, began attracting a local following. “Mitch Easter was also floating in and out, and later joined as the fifth member.” With enough interest, the band decided to record an EP of their songs, though there were some complications in the process. “We started recording it at a local club, but we had to move everything to a girlfriend’s bedroom when the janitor came in to mop the floor [of the club] and threw us out!” Stamey laughs. “Don Dixon was also involved [with the EP]. He was older than us and much more savvy when it came to recording, though we did do it on my home TEAC four-track recorder.”

Despite its now legendary status amongst powerpop fans, Sneakers was a relatively short-lived group, and by 1977, Stamey had decided to move to New York City. “I’d been up during the summer of ’74 and seen this band Television play and mistakenly extrapolated that there were loads of bands in New York like this. I’d also been involved in college with The New Music Scene, post-Schoenberg writing, and thought I could hear things that [Television] was doing that translated

these influences, as well as jazz ideas. But the general idea that one could play electric guitar with a broader palette was refreshing.”

Once Stamey got to New York, however, things were noticeably different. “Once I arrived, I noticed the scene wasn’t what I’d expected it to be. Most of what was going on at CBGB was more constricted than what Television were doing. But overall, it was still very exciting.” Things got more exciting when a legendary musician came to town. “There was this guy named Terry Ork, who had his own label [Ork Records]. He wanted to put out a new Sneakers record, so we’re friendly; he also had me playing with a group called The Erasers. One day, [Terry] tells me that he’s bringing this guy up from Memphis to perform some shows, and could I put together a band for him? And it was Alex Chilton.”

Unbeknownst to Terry Ork, Stamey had long been a fan of Alex Chilton and Big Star, enough to actually cold-call Ardent Studios as a young man. “I’d called them a few times to ask about engineering details, I was really fascinated with [Ardent’s] sound. I remember when we were going to make the Sneakers record, I called them up and spoke with [producer] Terry Manning for a while, asking him specifics about their guitars, the amps, where they were placing microphones in the studio, none of which I was able to use when making the Sneakers record!” Stamey laughs. “It must have been crazy to them, the fact that the nice people at Ardent talked to this kid for 30 minutes about how their records were made.”

Chris put together a band for Alex Chilton once he arrived in New York. “I got together Lloyd Fonoroff on drums; he’d been in a Fairport Convention cover band. After a while Fran Kowalski joined on Fender Rhodes and Farfisa. Alex really liked the sound of Farfisas, and songs like ‘Let’s Dance’ by Chris Montez. Fran was a

“At the time, there were so many bands. Every summer, bands would form and then split up. We had lots of these groups; one was called Ice, where we did lots of Beach Boys songs, fairly intricate numbers like ‘Sloop John B.’” As the ’70s dawned, things eventually formulated and Chris joined a band called Rittenhouse Square, already a long-running outfit. “They were doing prog-rock type stuff, and the line-up would change frequently. I had been friends from second grade on with Mitch Easter. We would ride motorcycles together and shoot model rockets up into space. As a kid, I got really interested in recording, and got a tape recorder, which I would use to record bands around time, I guess I was the local taper guy,” Stamey says with a smile. “All of us were fascinated with recording, so [Rittenhouse Square] went into the studio to make a demo tape. The drummer in the band, Bobby, had it pressed on vinyl to sell at our high school, much to our embarrassment. We hadn’t intended it to be heard.” It’s an opinion in which he’s not alone. “I feel pretty certain that Mitch Easter will never, never agree to reissue it. More power to him”.

After Rittenhouse Square folded, Chris joined another long-running local group Little Diesel. “They’d been around for a while with different members, and the version I was in was a later short-lived line-up”. Back with friends Holsapple and Will Rigby, the group “did garagey songs



Alex Chilton and Chris in their Bleecker Street loft, 1977; Chris and Alex on stage at CBGB the same year; Chris Bell's 'I Am The Cosmos' 45; Sneakers' '76 mini-album; the short-lived Sneakers with Chris, far right



"I'd been up during the summer of '74 and seen this band **Television** play and mistakenly extrapolated that there were loads of bands in New York like this"



huge Beach Boys fan and a really good singer and musician." Things clicked, and the band started performing around town. "There's a record out of our first show (*Ocean Club '77*), and we sound pretty rough, as Alex had just gotten to town. But we got a lot better and continued performing around."

Alex Chilton spent the better part of late '77 sharing a loft with Stamey as they performed together. "[Alex] went back to Memphis in December [of '77], and then came back up at the beginning of '78. He knew I'd started my own label and wanted me to put out a record his friend [and Big Star bandmate] Chris Bell had made, called 'I Am The Cosmos'. Having my own record label just meant that I could save up enough from my bus-boy shift to press 800 copies. It wasn't really a label, but those were odd times," Stamey states, modestly. 'I Am The Cosmos' began to attract a cult following in Europe and would pave the way for the discovery of Chris Bell's solo recordings and talent in the '90s.

Once Alex came back to New York, he and Stamey began working in the studio.

"Terry had this arrangement with Trod Nossel, a studio in Wallingford, Connecticut. [Ork] was paying a very low rate per hour, so Doc [studio owner] would get royalty points on Ork's releases. It wasn't far from Manhattan; you could take the train there, but you had to watch the schedule, because the train tracks were up against the studio, and you'd have to stop recording at certain times when they sped by, otherwise the microphones would pick the sound up! Unfortunately, even at \$5 an hour, Ork couldn't pay the bills, so most of the tapes were never released. Right before Alex died, I started getting calls asking if I wanted to buy the tapes for large amounts of money," Stamey recalls wistfully, "and right after he died, Mike Mills and myself called them up to purchase the tapes. They looked in the [studio's] tape locker, and someone had taken them all." Amongst the tapes were sessions of "Alex and [Chris] covering 'Ruby Tuesday'. We also recorded 'Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window' for a Rolling Stones tribute album, of all things, with Alex singing lead."

After the Ork deal fizzled out, Alex was approached by Elektra Records. "Karin Berg, an old friend of Alex's who later signed Marshall Crenshaw and Dire Straits to Warners, was working there, and set up the demo session at Secret Sound. We did four songs with Andy Paley on drums. But Karen didn't think it was good enough to bring to the label, so it never went any further. But that's when we recorded 'She Might Look My Way', which I just re-recorded for my new album."

By this point, Chris was running Car Records, and looking for the next project. In came Richard Lloyd. "I was going to release a single by Richard of a song he'd written called '(I Thought) You Wanted To Know'. We recorded it, and I'd spent a fortune – meaning \$400 – on it. Then Elektra tapped me on the shoulder and said that because [Lloyd] was with Television, I couldn't put it out." Stamey bursts into laughter. "In order to salvage the record, and because I really liked the song, I replaced his vocals with my own. And when it came time to do the B-side, my friends Gene Holder and Will Rigby



COURTESY CAROL WHALEY (2)



Chris on stage with The dB's at Dream Palace, New Orleans, 1985; '77's Chilton-produced 'The Summer Sun' 45; '78's dB's debut 45 and '81's *Stands For Decibels* LP; Chris and Peter Holsapple listen to playbacks during the *Like This* sessions at Bearsville Studios, '84

had come up to play some shows with me. So, we took my trusty four-track recorder and worked up 'If And When'. I'm glad it was released the way it was, even if Richard's not singing on his song, and it does sound a little overblown." It also introduced the world to The dB's, billed as the backing group.

While busy running his Car label, Stamey still had time to interact and work with a number of groups, including cult favourites 8 Eyed Spy. "Scott Litt and I mixed a record of their one night," Chris recalls. "We alternated – he'd do one mix, and then I'd do the next. Live, they were very good; George Scott III was a monster on bass, very similar to Jack Bruce, in that when you'd see him, you left thinking about his playing. And Lydia Lunch has always been great. Just a dynamic group."

By the end of the '70s, The dB's had coalesced into a *bona fide* band of Chris, Peter Holsapple, Will Rigby and Gene Holder, and found themselves playing all over New York. "It seemed like we played all the time then. People put these ads from CBGB or Max's Kansas City up on Facebook now, and I'm surprised when we're not listed on one!" The group was creating enough of a buzz that they signed a deal with UK label Albion in '80. "They signed Peter and myself first, for publishing," Stamey explains. "Joe Jackson was making them a lot of money, so [Albion] decided to branch out into a record company. They offered to put out our first record. We'd already recorded a lot of it, but they offered to pay for some

remixes by Martin Rushent." That album, *Stands For Decibels*, quickly proved to be a hit amongst fans of powerpop and rock, with catchy tunes like 'Black And White', 'Dynamite' and 'Big Brown Eyes'. "We recorded most of that in New York, at Blue Rock studios, which was where Tom Verlaine was recording his debut album."

Released in England and Europe, the album achieved enough success that The dB's were asked to tour overseas in '81, as well as appear on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. "We went over a few times. We opened for Dave Edmunds on a tour, but we didn't make a lot of waves at the time. We weren't enough like Billy Idol, and we weren't enough like The Knack either... thank goodness!" Stamey laughs. "It wasn't streamlined enough into one digestible 'brand'. And I think that was partially my fault. I didn't want to be a member of any club that would have me." Even on tour, the band could be eccentric. "I remember on the Dave Edmunds tour, Mitch Easter was our soundman, and he had instructions to add in cassette sounds of insects and frogs and monks chanting at random moments during the songs, to keep it interesting. Not a big career builder, that."

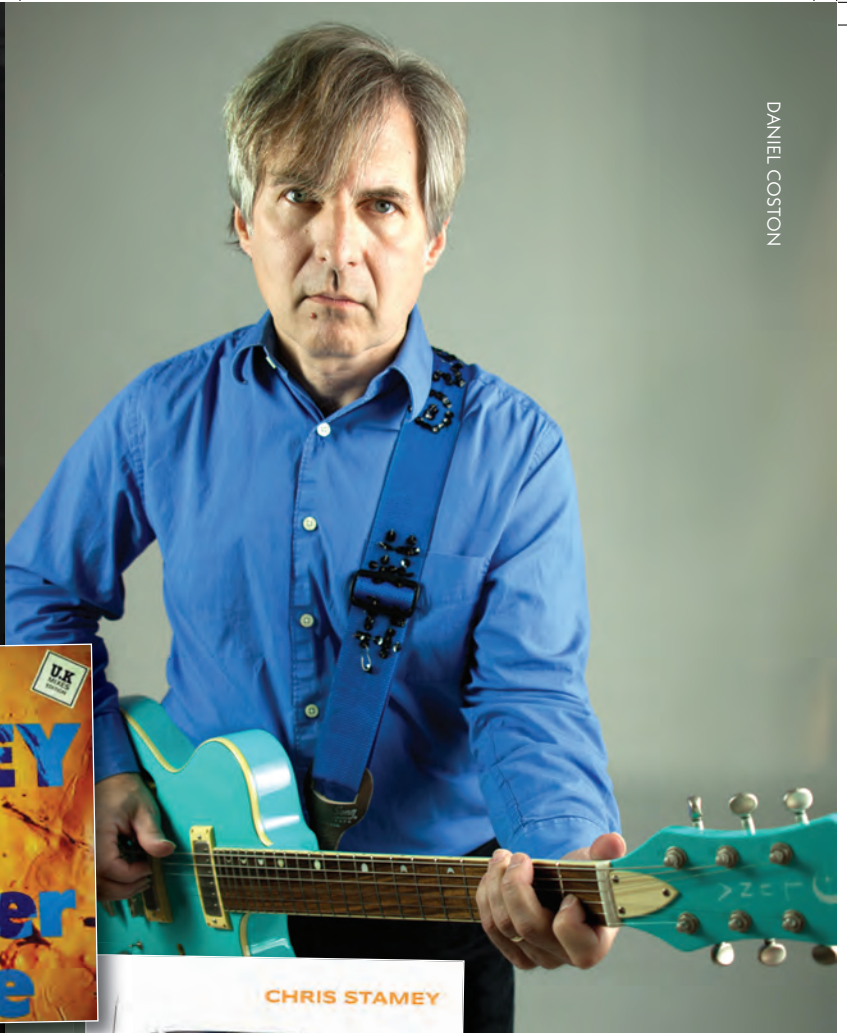
Despite their eccentricities, Albion liked the group enough to ask them to record a follow-up album, *Repercussion*. "We had a rehearsal place by then," Chris says. "[The dB's] recorded some songs on four-track cassette, pre-production. We worked most of the summer with Scott Litt in our rehearsal space in The Music Building on 38th and Eighth Avenue in Manhattan.

Some of those songs [on the album] we had already played live, so we had a feel for them." By the time to record the album, The dB's went back overseas. "In the fall, we went to London to record, at Rampart, which was The Who's studio. It was a much more formal process recording the second album than the first had been."

Despite good reviews upon the second album's release, Stamey was ready to leave The dB's, feeling musical constraints. "Peter and I were both writing a lot of songs, and by the time of the second album, there already was a backlog, so a bunch of songs didn't make it on the record. Looking at doing a third album, there were so many songs piling up. It just didn't make sense to have two talented writers in the group." Quickly, Chris recorded his first solo album *It's A Wonderful Life*, also released in '82. "Some of the songs on my first solo album were leftovers from The dB's stockpile – songs like 'Depth Of Field' and 'Face Of The Crowd'. But a lot of them were new as well."

Exiting The dB's gave Stamey more time to field production offers from outside artists. "I produced some recordings for The Fleshtones, which never came out. We did them for Ze Records, The Contortions' label. I would often get calls to help others who didn't know a lot in the studio." One such call came in a rather unusual place. "I was in Wales and got word that Danny Beard [DB Records head] was trying to reach me," Stamey remembers. "He wanted me





DANIEL COSTON

“**The dB’s** didn’t make a lot of waves at the time. We weren’t enough like **Billy Idol**, and we weren’t enough like **The Knack** either... thank goodness!”

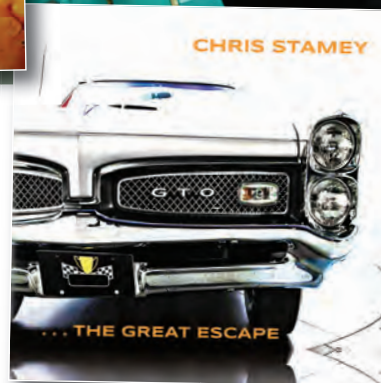
to produce Pylon, because he knew I really liked them, and had casually said that I’d be interested in producing the band. Finally, he got a hold of me – I’m at this telephone booth in a cow pasture in Wales, agreeing to produce Pylon’s second album!” And how was the band to work with? “They were very hard workers in the studio. Vanessa [Briscoe Hay], the vocalist, was in her own lyrical world, in a way like Michael Stipe.”

Back in New York, Stamey was absorbing all the studios around town, particularly one legendary studio. “My big influence at the time was Power Station,” he recalls fondly. “Scott Litt was working there with Bob Clearmountain and Bill Scheniman. It was run by Tony Bongiovi, and they were doing great things there. They were really on a mission. Scott had mixed a few things on the first dB’s record, and we really hit it off. I was attending a lot of sessions there, watching David Bowie record ‘Let’s Dance’ and Aerosmith and Hall & Oates. Chic were in there all the time. I was just absorbing it all.”

Taking what he’d learned, Stamey


decided to move back to Chapel Hill and open his own studio, Modern Recording. “Scott Litt wanted to come to town and make some records, so with his help, I found a small old house and we set up a studio. It was more Scott’s idea than mine. And we’re still active and open for recording, all these years later. We’ve got a great control room and good gear, big old-school speakers.”

Having access to his own studio helps Stamey when recording, especially with the new album. “Because I have the studio, I’m constantly writing songs. With this album, I wanted to see what it was like putting records out independently these days. The whole thing has been a real adventure.” The album, a mix of catchy pop-rock tunes, including curious fare like ‘The One And Only (Van Dyke Parks)’. How did this ode to the arranger and fellow songwriter come about? “I was housesitting for Syd Straw in LA years ago, and Van Dyke Parks called. It completely surprised me. We had this great conversation, and I was pinching myself the whole time, I couldn’t believe it. Seeing what The



Replacements did with ‘Alex Chilton’, I thought it couldn’t hurt having people everywhere singing Van Dyke Parks’ name! Oddly enough, I’ve now become friends with him, which still sounds weird to say.”

With 50 years of music to look back on, Stamey is setting off for a European tour. “I’m going to Paris to do a private concert with The Salt Collective, which is a project of Matthew Caws of Nada Surf, and then I’m in Spain before Thanksgiving to do some shows with Pat Sansone from Wilco, Mike Mills and Jody Stephens, so I thought it would be fun to put together some solo shows in Europe in between. I’ve never performed in Ireland before, so that’s exciting.”

As for future plans, Stamey is already working on another studio album. “I’m in the middle of making it, which could come out as early as February of next year, if I play my cards right.” And this time he’s got some special friends helping him. “I did a few shows on bills with The Lemon Twigs, who are just brilliant. They sing on some of the songs on the new record, which is influenced by both *Pet Sounds* and Robert Wyatt, I’d say. It’s about melody first and foremost, this time.” A new cycle begins. 

**The Great Escape is out now on Schoolkids. Chris tours the UK and Europe from 31st October**