

THE COMPLETE CHRIS BELL



CHRIS BELL



The music of '70s Memphis mavericks Big Star continues to resonate and exhilarate. Numerous retrospectives of their work, not to mention the documentation of their occasionally troubled saga in print and film, have helped achieve mainstream recognition for an act that for many years was essentially a cult. Yet, as much as they may have been discussed, the intriguing origins of Big Star, as represented by the actual aural evidence, have never been truly brought into focus in a tangible fashion.

Looking Forward is thus as comprehensive a survey of the roots of this singular institution as possible, based on the surviving reels housed at their alma mater, Ardent Studios. However, the contents should not be considered analogous to the group's official releases, for any environment that encourages experimentation in the way that Ardent did cannot, by the same measure, also guarantee consistency. Almost half a century has clouded the memories of the participants, and the recorded evidence only gives partial clues as to the exact personnel on any of the cuts included. But, as baby pictures go, this snapshot offers not only some fine music on display,

but also a palpable sense of camaraderie and innocent exploration, aspects that are in many ways a major valid contribution to what made Big Star so special.

Fellow Memphian iconoclast Jim Dickinson, who was likely a witness to the creation of some of *Looking Forward's* playlist, often referred to the likes of Chris Bell, Stephen Rhea, and the music's other progenitors as embodiments of "East Memphis angst." Residents in the birthplace of the blues and rock 'n' roll, these suburban teenaged rebels instead perversely looked to the British rock scene for musical guidance. They read *New Musical Express*, ordered import albums, and played "Shapes Of Things" at gigs to nonplussed locals who had come to dance to soul music. Solidly middle-class, they were to find their lone expressive outlet in the workspace of a similarly inclined individualist not much older than they. In a few short years, John Fry had fashioned Ardent Studios into a top-flight recording facility, but he also recognized the advantages of allowing the more responsible of these youngsters such as Bell and Terry Manning to educate themselves via hands-on experience during the studio's downtime.

Hence the fascinating cache of recordings contained herein, remarkable as much for the fact that they exist, and indeed have survived, as for the perspective they throw upon what was to come. While Chris Bell is of course central to the activities, it would be considered rose-tinted conjecture to insist that he appears on every cut. Equally, the spectre of Alex Chilton—an unavoidable presence at Ardent within this period—hangs over the proceedings; Omnivore's *Free Again* compendium of Chilton's own pre-Big Star sessions is an essential adjunct to what we have here. Band names like Icewater should be noted as amorphous; even the formalized Rock City sobriquet was originally attached to recordings by Bell and Rhea, and the Eubanks/Bell collaboration began life as "Tom & The Turtles," according to one tape box at least.

Semantics aside, we trust that both the hardcore Big Star aficionado and the casual listener will enjoy *Looking Forward* in the spirit intended: as the inspirations behind an inspirational act.

—Alec Palao
April 2017



PREFACE: LOOKING FORWARD





A TIME THAT'S BETTER THAN TODAY: THOUGHTS ON THE BIRTH OF BIG STAR



John Fry in the control room at Ardent on National Street, 1968

JOHN FRY

Technically-sagacious founder of Ardent Studios who, via his tutelage and tacit encouragement, became the true enabler of Chris Bell and company's musical aspirations.

"This early stuff like Icewater and Rock City, I didn't have much to do with. Chris, Steve, and everyone else were proceeding on their own. The apprenticeship at Ardent benefited these guys. Who wouldn't love to be in the studio and learn how to do all this stuff? But frankly, it benefited the studio too, because we were poor. We didn't have a source of extra help, so any free labor that could lend a helping hand . . . You had all of these people hanging out and interacting, a lot of whom were never likely to know each other under any normal circumstance."

STEVE RHEA

Drummer, guitarist, vocalist, and musical compatriot of Chris Bell after they met at Memphis University High School in 1967, joining forces in the band Christmas Future—of which Terry Manning later became a member.

"Once we got to Christmas Future, we threw out the window any idea of trying to really appeal to anybody but ourselves. We would consider it a success if we got thrown off the stage, or if we did something that was a takeoff on somebody and the audience didn't even recognize how tongue-in-cheek it was. We were always creating these commentaries on what was going on around us."

"The last concert I recall playing out at MUS, we used sound equipment that John Fry put together. He was helpful in

supporting us to be better onstage, and that gradually evolved into asking John if we could help. We started hanging around because Terry was over [at National Street], and we felt we had a direct line to what was going on. John realized that he could actually train us, that we were responsible. He saw us wanting to get microphones in front of amplifiers and over drums, and he started thinking, 'Well, I may as well teach these guys how to do it right.' So now we had all this knowledge, and naturally we wanted to apply it; to write our own songs and capture some of what was beginning to rattle around in our heads musically. We owe John a lot, for we had as much freedom as we needed. Jim Dickinson was also a huge influence in those early years. He thought about what was great about music, and he could communicate that to you."

"I was not as addicted to The Beatles as Chris was. I loved The Who and Yardbirds. I remember taking our [Icewater] tapes to Elektra in New York. I don't think we had given them to the guy there in advance, so he actually listened to a few cuts and then told us it sounded too much like The Beatles and sent us on our way! I don't know if we realized how much Chris was tied up in the music. You look at people on the outside and they can be doing exactly the same thing as you, but you don't know what is going on on the inside. I don't know if any of us realized just how much he had staked his entire existence on making Big Star a success. My problem was I almost always saw myself behind the scenes, and I didn't really think being out front onstage was where I would spend the rest of my life, so I chose to go to Dallas to go to college. A year later Chris went on to UT, but he only stayed

there about a year, while I stayed in school all four years. The longer I stayed down there, the more out of the loop I was."

TERRY MANNING

Erstwhile Ardent Studios engineer/producer and musical collaborator whose skills on bass, keyboards, and vocals were a major contribution to the evolution of Big Star.

"Steve Rhea and Chris Bell kept saying, 'Let's go to the studio you work at.' Especially Chris, he just couldn't wait to get in there. So finally I did bring Chris in when I was working on my *Home Sweet Home* album. He was just like a kid in a candy store. I can see him walking in with his Gibson 330 and looking at the amps and the equipment, his eyes wide open. He just knew, just as I had a few years earlier, that 'This is where I'm gonna be.'"

"That period was a lot of fun. I recall Ardent's National location as pretty buzzing fairly quickly, but there must have been a lot of downtime, because we were doing a lot of these things ourselves on our own—as long as John knew and trusted that things would be taken care of, and that we would not steal or break anything, or let people in who would cause damage. The concept of becoming a producer was starting to get defined in my mind at that point. A lot of the 'Bell/Rhea' things were recorded pretty much under the name Christmas Future. That was usually Steve and Chris and I, and we did several gigs as such around that time—the photo of me here in Jimmy Page's long Brit navy coat was taken at a Christmas Future gig in Arkansas."



The Wallabys, 1967. L-R: Alan Palmore, Bobby Maxwell, Alex Major, Glen Wilson

"Being high school kids, we had the natural teenage rebellion against authority, and the authority at that time in Memphis was the R&B music and the legacy of rockabilly and Sun. Alex was doing the same to his production team, namely Dan Penn and Chips Moman. Chris related not just to the world but the philosophical world, the universe, the cosmos; let's say, he just had an affinity. That was something I always tried to align myself with, and everyone tried to instill that into the music that we did."

Christmas Future, 1967. Clockwise from top left:
Vance Alexander, Peter Schutt, Chris Bell, Steve Rhea



ALAN PALMORE

Quirky singer-songwriter of Jackson, Mississippi, outfit The Wallabys and an enigmatic after-hours presence at Ardent.

"Recording-wise, Ardent was the place to be. John Fry was such an innovator. The Wallabys had recorded there. Later, I went to Memphis State for a semester, 1969–70, and that was when Terry Manning and I did a lot of solo work. He and I would get together at night and write tunes, from midnight to 4 a.m. in the morning. He was learning to engineer, and the studio was free. The Wallabys had been fairly mainstream British rock, but the music that I liked to write was in a different vein. I always liked to write from the inside. I don't remember Chris Bell specifically, but there was a parade of musicians coming and going. The commonality was just sitting down and playing and putting ideas forth: let's get something together that's melodically beautiful to the ear, yet has got a quirk to it, that's a little different."

JODY STEPHENS

The future Big Star sticksman who had graduated through the late-'60s Memphis garage band milieu and connected with Chris Bell and Andy Hummel after participating in the local production of Hair.

"It happened kinda fast. I think the *Hair* performances were in March of 1970, and I think maybe Chris and I and Andy, our first little jam session was in April of 1970. Big Star sort of came into focus within a year's time, after the Rock City sessions. I don't think anybody had a band, or at least performing live, in mind [when we recorded at Ardent]. It was definitely a studio-focused thing. We'd just all get together and make these recordings. It was all really cool stuff, and I thought, 'I'm getting to spend time here, with these really creative guys.' As creative as the people I hear on the radio, and certainly way outside of what anybody in Memphis was doing."

TOM EUBANKS

Journeyman Memphis singer and guitarist who collaborated with Chris Bell on the Rock City project.

"I remember how I met Chris Bell. These other guys had a band and asked me if I wanted to rehearse, and Chris was the guitar player. To work around in Memphis at that time, you had to be playing Stax-type catalog and R&B, but Chris wanted to do 'Happy Jack,' which was fine with me. Then I heard from Chris that he had Andy and Jody with him, because he'd met Andy at MUS. We did that for a while, but Andy and Chris were young and spoiled, and I was already married. I finally told them, 'I can't deal with this silliness anymore, I need to quit.'"

"We had never tried writing any songs with any of those bands, but Chris called one night and asked did I have any song ideas, because he needed to get his engineering chops together. I told him, 'As a matter of fact, I do.' I never have understood [why he approached me], but Chris and I always had some sort of unspoken mutual admiration; we saw similar likes in each other. We started cutting the stuff. It was real laid-back, as things always were in Memphis. Jody was just the drummer we knew who was kind enough to come and play for free. Andy's not on the recordings, because we were trying put down songs and didn't know if anything was gonna come of it, so we just didn't really impose upon him. I'd known [bass player] Randy Copeland [of Butterscotch Caboose] for years, and he played on a bunch of the tracks. Terry Manning got interested and would add little touches to songs like 'My Life Is Right.' I thought there was a chance with the Rock City stuff, but all they ever gave me were a bunch of 1/4-inch mixdowns and a bunch of addresses for people like A&M Records. It was literally mailed out unsolicited with just a cover letter saying, 'Hey, you wouldn't want to hear this, would ya? You wouldn't want to think about messing with this, would ya?'" *

TRACK NOTES:



Terry Manning
live onstage in
Arkansas, 1968

The title **"Psychedelic Stuff"** is gleaned from the tape box, as it's obviously an experimental demo, even though a rough mix was made at the time. It's likely the oldest recording here, dating from somewhere in 1969. Shepherded by Terry Manning, this is the first recording Chris made at Ardent, and his enthusiastic glee is palpable, even if the results have a rather chaotic air.

"Feeling High" and **"The Reason"** are essentially the work of Alan Palmore, formerly of The Wallabys. Manning was his main collaborator at Ardent, but both Bell and Stephen Rhea are believed to have participated in these recordings, if only tangentially. The pop-psych gem "Feeling `High" was taped in at least two slightly differing arrangements—one incomplete—and a mix was included on a solicitation reel from December 1970. The famously Anglophilic Palmore ingratiated himself enough at Ardent that Fry later sent him on to the U.K. to investigate a type of reverb for the studio.

ALAN PALMORE: "Feeling High" was written in L.A. when [The Wallabys] were out there. I was sitting in a park, just looking around, and those lyrics came from watching people in that park.

Terry Manning's recollection is that the intended final version of **"All I See Is You"** had more finesse, but the treatment presented here is the most complete to be found in the Ardent vault. There is no doubt that this superlative Beatlesque item, written by Bell and Rhea and guided by Bell and Manning, was the cornerstone track that those involved believed would help them get a record deal. It was not to be, but Bell's belief in the song was such he



Andy Hummel & Chris Bell, 1969

attempted a second version (heard here as a backing track), which is one of the first sessions to employ future Big Star bassist Andy Hummel, playing alongside Bell and Rhea.

JODY STEPHENS: Walking into Ardent for the first time and hearing "All I See Is You" was a remarkable omen. How do you do that, how do you put these ingredients in and get this out? It was almost something magical.

Further cuts colloquially attributed to Icewater from 1970 included a pair of novelties: an R&B-flavored retread of "Get Back," and a spoof country blues with the title "Hats Off To Hooter" that features Jimbo Robinson, Rhea's former bandmate in Memphis garage band The Strangers. As it adjoins the latter song on the 8-track session reel, Robinson is also quite possibly the vocalist on the chugging rocker **"A Chance To Live."** Once Rhea made the decision to go to college in Dallas in the fall of 1970, his studio work with Bell was less frequent, but nonetheless productive, as the completed tracks **"Looking Forward"** and **"Sunshine"** derive from this period.

STEVE RHEA: "Looking Forward" is pure Chris—that was his song all the way. The chord changes are really basic and give it this almost ominous feeling. We were experimenting with techniques: rather than just play the tape backwards, let's flip it over and then try to play it like it sounds like it's recorded backwards, so it will sound forward, but in a strange way. We thought that was really clever—nobody else did! I kicked myself for letting Chris sing, "When I'm walking down the street/ I am thinking of your feet" . . . I should have insisted he change that! I was just trying to help him get to where he

wanted to go. "Sunshine" kinda shows where I went. I came back from Dallas all into "wooden music"; Crosby, Stills & Nash, things like that. It was one of those fun kind of songs where we had Andy, Chris, myself, Andy's girlfriend Ebs Owen, maybe one or two more, sing "la la," just to kinda give it a feel.

An unfinished Bell/Rhea piece that is dateable from the same sessions, thanks to its wordless vocal interlude, the stately **"Germany"** would have probably been given a different appellation in its final incarnation, but the tape box indicates this was a possible working title. A further backing track of the period, **"Oh My Soul,"** poses an intriguing puzzle. Though in this form it bears no musical relation to the Chilton-penned lead cut from *Radio City*, the fluid groove is similar to Alex's solo sessions of the era. Yet, its presence on a Bell/Rhea 8-track reel suggests the track is solely theirs—the guitar freakery towards the end certainly being Bell's province at the time. And despite his official writer credit, Chilton later confirmed that Bell had a lot to do with Big Star's "O My Soul," by this evidence, Chris certainly contributed the title at the very least.

TERRY MANNING: I totally enjoyed [hearing Big Star develop]. It was the same thing we were already doing. It didn't start out as, "This is an album called #1 Record by a group called Big Star." A couple of tracks came from the so-called Rock City sessions, so-called Icewater sessions, Bell/Rhea. Some of the songs' genesis were from that era, then when Alex came in, he got his style and different input added into Chris's. Chris was that good, [that he was able to influence Chilton]—he really was an incredible talent.

The true precursor to Big Star in many ways originated in the Rock City sessions, which took place in early 1971 at National, while Ardent prepared their new location on Madison in midtown Memphis. By this point Chris Bell had enough confidence to engineer by himself without Fry's or Manning's assistance, yet he felt he needed more experience to prepare for the imminent collaboration with Alex Chilton. Sonically, the Rock City album—provisionally titled *See Seven States*—was an approximation of how Big Star would sound, albeit with a heavier presence of keyboards. The versions of “My Life Is Right” and the first official Bell/Chilton co-write, “Try Again,” would form the basis of those later included on **#1 Record**.

TOM EUBANKS: One needs to keep in mind that the major purpose of Rock City was for Christopher to develop recording engineering skills for the planned formation and recording of the band that came to be known as Big Star. He called me one night and told me he was planning to work with Alex Chilton, who was gonna be back in town in six months. I went over to his house and we wrote “My Life Is Right” in like half an hour.

As lead singer and writer, Eubanks would provide the lion's share of material for the Rock City project, including tunes such as “Lovely Lady,” “Think It's Time To Say Goodbye,” and “I Lost A Love.” Quite apart from Bell's parts and production textures, and the ubiquitous presence of Jody Stephens on drums, the rhythmic and melodic impulses in these tunes clearly show the way forward.

TOM EUBANKS: I already had “Think It's Time” and “Lady.” I was a really, really big fan of The Byrds. [“Lovely Lady”] is kinda influenced by that. Chris is picking stuff on top of me. If Chris hadn't put so much slapback echo on it, “Think It's Time” would have come across as more Kinks. We used a varispeed on that, because I couldn't hit the notes.

The second side of the projected album was to be a thematic suite of songs. “The Answer,” “Introduction,” “Sunday Organ,” “The

Preacher,” and “Shine On Me” were recorded more or less in sequence, with sound effects and appropriately churchy overdubs from Terry Manning. “Try Again” was added as a fitting finale.

TOM EUBANKS: The songs made up a small rock opera concerning the subject of religious faith that evolved as the album was being recorded. I suppose you could credit this to the influence of Pete Townshend upon both Christopher and me. “The Preacher” came from the fact that I was kinda turned off to organized religion. I remember Terry was semi-uneasy with it, because his father was a minister. We tried to make it sound like a worship in a regular Protestant church, and then all of a sudden the preacher comes out. I do remember that Chris liked his guitar stuff on that track so much that at one point he was going to write different lyrics with Alex to try to use the guitar solo. [Note: Although the original Rock City session tape was later transferred to 16-track, the mooted lyric rewrite did not take place. The chorus of “The Preacher” was however inserted into Big Star's live arrangement of the album track “ST/100.”] We needed another cut, and Chris had this song in open tuning by Alex. I didn't play anything on “Try Again,” but I paid for the steel guitar guy on that and “Shine On Me.” I knew [engineer] Roland Janes quite well, and I asked him if he knew anybody that could play steel guitar. I don't recall his name. The addition of “Try Again” was in retrospect a bit of divine providence, as it ties the faith rock opera up in a very nice package.

Finally, one song on the Rock City project came from outside the pool of proto Big Star players. “The Wind Will Cry For Me” was a striking and plaintive ballad written by Jimmy Smith of The Impalas/Cunzmen, a one-time bandmate of Eubanks'.

*TOM EUBANKS: Jimmy was a drummer who played with me during our high school years and had played this tune for me enough times that I remembered it. We wound up being short of material, and I remembered this thing that Jimmy had written, because I had always liked it.”**

Steve Rhea in Chris Bell's bedroom, 1969



Looking Forward:
The Roots Of Big Star

SIDE ONE:

- 1. All I See Is You
- 2. Looking Forward
- 3. The Reason
- 4. Oh My Soul (Backing Track)
- 5. Feeling High (Alternate Backing Track)

SIDE TWO:

- 1. Feeling High
- 2. Sunshine
- 3. Psychedelic Stuff
- 4. A Chance To Live
- 5. Germany (Backing Track)
- 6. All I See Is You (Alternate Backing Track)



Rock City
See Seven States

SIDE ONE:

- 1. Think It's Time To Say Goodbye
- 2. I Lost A Love
- 3. The Wind Will Cry For Me
- 4. My Life Is Right
- 5. Lovely Ladya

SIDE TWO:

- 1. The Answer
- 2. Introduction
- 3. Sunday Organ
- 4. The Preacher
- 5. Shine On Me
- 6. Try Again (Original Mix)*

* Previously unissued

AIR RECORDING STUDIOS

214 OXFORD STREET LONDON W1 TELEPHONE 01 637 2758 CABLES DISCAR LONDON W1

262 - 4521
Rm. 312

CLIENT **DAVID BELL** SUBJECT **MASTER COPY**
PRODUCER **CHRIS BELL** MODE **STEREO**
ARTIST **CHRIS BELL** DATE **APR 75** JOB
ENGINEERS **GEOFF EMEKUR** SPEED **7 1/2 ips** CURVE **NAB**

TITLES	TIME	REMARKS
'YOU AND YOUR SISTER'	*	
'MAKE A SCENE'		
'LOOK UP'		
'BETTER SAVE YOURSELF'		
'I AM THE COSMOS'	*	



AIR RECORDING STUDIOS

214 OXFORD STREET LONDON W1 TELEPHONE 01 637 2758 CABLES DISCAR LONDON W1

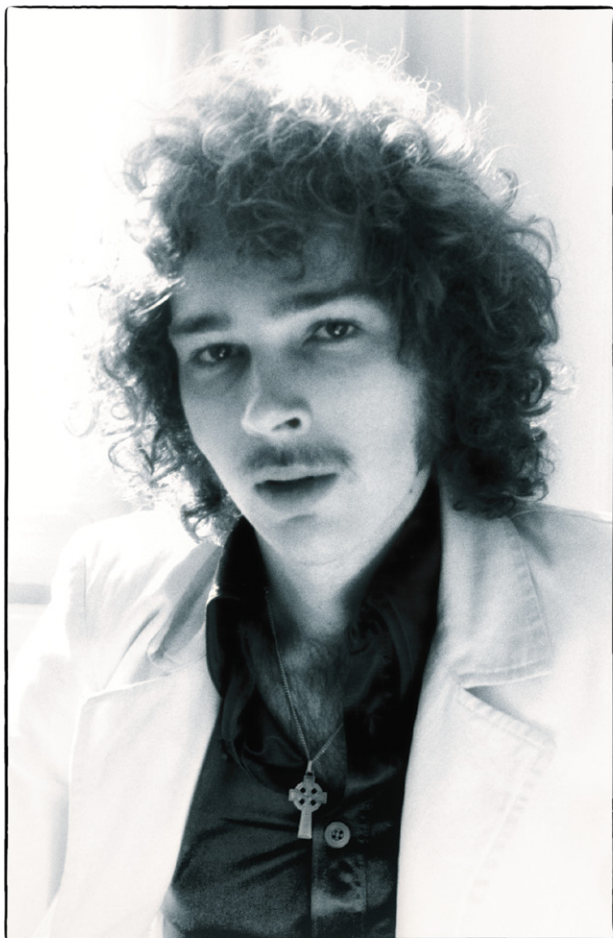
David — 229 - 2878

CLIENT **DAVID BELL** SUBJECT **COPY OF MIXES**
PRODUCER **CHRIS BELL** MODE **STEREO**
ARTIST **CHRIS BELL** DATE **23 APR 75** JOB
ENGINEERS **GEOFF EMEKUR** SPEED **7 1/2** CURVE **NAB**

TITLES	TIME	REMARKS
1) MAKE A SCENE		
2) LOOK UP ?		
3) YOU AND YOUR SISTER		
4) BETTER SAVE YOURSELF ?		
5) I AM THE COSMOS		
		POSSIBLE SINGLE TRACKS:
		MAKE A SCENE
		I AM THE COSMOS
		YOU AND YOUR SISTER



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“Let me tell you a funny Chris Bell story . . . ”

It's late December 2008 as John Fry holds court in a small, chilly conference room inside Ardent Studios, the Memphis recording facility he's owned and operated in one form or another for more than four decades. It's a few days before Christmas and just a week before another rather more somber occasion: the 30th anniversary of the death of Fry's friend and former charge, Big Star founder Chris Bell.

To most people, Bell—who died in a car accident at age 27—remains a tragic figure, his music the sweeping soundtrack to unrequited love and adolescent alienation. The lingering image of Bell is that of the sad, doe-eyed soul peering from the shadows on the back of Big Star's *#1 Record*; or the small, solitary figure lost amid the majesty of the Swiss Alps on his posthumously released solo collection, *I Am The Cosmos*.

But, for Fry, the memories of Bell that endure are fond ones: of pranks and hijinks, of musical reverie and youthful optimism. “I don't think there's a day that's gone by in 30 years that I haven't thought about him,” said Fry. “And it's often in context of hearing something and thinking, ‘Oh, this is good, Chris would've loved this.’ Or, ‘This really stinks, Chris would've hated that.’ Or, ‘Gosh, Chris would've come up with a good joke about this.’”

Even now, so many years after his death, the portrait of Bell that emerges is a mass of contradictions. To some, Bell was a creatively cocksure, comic, and open personality; to others, he was sensitive, tormented, and mysterious. Even on the subject of his final days, there is disagreement between those who claim he'd slid further into depression and drugs and those who say he'd found sobriety and salvation.

It's almost as if the inscription Bell chose to be etched into the margin of *#1 Record*—“The more you learn, the less you know”—was meant as a kind of caveat to future biographers.

What is certain, however, is this: For much of his adult life, Chris Bell led an east-west existence along Memphis' main artery, Poplar Avenue, driving from the family home in suburban Germantown over to Midtown's Ardent Studios. But the events that led to and shaped the material on *I Am The Cosmos* would find Bell engaged in an altogether more epic and transformative journey—personal, spiritual, and musical—that would take him around the world and back again.

“The thing about Chris and his love of music,” said his older brother David Bell, “is that it sort of came out of the blue.”

Born in 1951, Christopher Branford Bell was the second youngest child of a large, prominent East Memphis family. His father, Vernon, an Air Force bomber crewman, met and married his British-born mother, Joan Branford, while stationed in England during World War II. At war's end Bell returned with his wife and growing brood to Tennessee, where he became a successful entrepreneur and restaurateur with a passion for golf.

The Bell home wasn't exactly a hothouse of musical expression. “There were rumors that my father played piano as a child,” said David Bell. “But he certainly never displayed any of that to us. We never even owned a piano.”

Son Chris' musical baptism came, like so many, at the hands of The Beatles and the group's earth-shaking appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964. “That was, without a doubt, *the* big moment for Christopher,” remembered David.

As a teenager attending Memphis University School, Bell formed The Jynx, and the group became part of a fertile Memphis garage rock scene that would spawn million-selling groups, including The Gentrys and The Box Tops.

His interest eventually expanded to recording and building gear (“There were endless trips to Radio Shack to get this or that,” David recollected), which eventually led him to Ardent Studios and John Fry. A slightly older Memphis University School grad, also with a profound Beatles jones, Fry had opened up shop several years earlier in his grandmother's sewing room before moving Ardent to a more professional facility on National Street. Mature beyond his years, with a dignified stentorian manner, Fry began teaching informal classes on recording for a crew of up-and-coming local musicians, including Bell.

The friendship between Fry and Bell had a rather auspicious start. “The first time I met Chris, I walked into my office and he was sitting in my chair with his feet up on my desk, smoking a cigarette,” said Fry, laughing. “I thought: *Now, who in the heck is this?*”

But Fry and Bell would grow close over the years, a pair of Southerners who bonded over their shared passion for British pop music. A perfectionist by nature, Bell learned recording from the technically savvy Fry and spent long hours tinkering in the studio, refining his craft.

With Fry’s blessing, Bell and a group of friends (which included bassist Andy Hummel and, eventually, drummer Jody Stephens) soon turned Ardent into a kind of clubhouse where they recorded and developed a series of, essentially, studio bands—including Icwater and Rock City. Things took a more serious turn in 1971 when former Box Tops singer Alex Chilton agreed to join them as a guitarist/vocalist/songwriter.

The fledgling four-piece spent the bulk of the year recording in the studio. Ardent—which had become a satellite facility for the Stax Records label—soon struck a deal with the local soul music company to develop its own rock imprint. The combo would serve as one of Ardent Records’ flagship acts. Confident in the future, Bell, Chilton, Hummel, and Stephens cheekily decided to name their group Big Star—a moniker inspired by a local super-market chain—and christened their album *#1 Record*.

Released in June 1972, *#1 Record* had an immediate impact on critics (garnering press and praise in *Rolling Stone*, *Fusion*, and *Phonograph Record Magazine*) and underground FM rock stations. Success on the commercially dominant AM band, however, proved elusive, as did retail sales—a situation exacerbated by Stax’s increasingly chaotic distribution issues.

Faced with a stillborn album and the prospect of dashed rock-star dreams, friction within the band began to surface. That fall, relations within Big Star—who never managed to mount a national tour—finally soured following a show in Mississippi, where several people, including Bell, were arrested for marijuana possession. It would be his last gig with the group.

More than anyone, Bell had poured himself into Big Star, and the confounding failure of the project seemed to stir the dark waters of his psyche. “Depression can come on very strongly at a time of loss,” said David Bell. “And it was almost my sense that he had put such an enormous amount of effort into the band that the album’s failure was a crushing blow.”

“Chris just kind of snapped,” said Fry, who in his role as label head had become the scapegoat in Bell’s mind for Big Star’s troubles. Things came to a head between the two men at the studio one day. There were arguments, shouting, and harsh words. Later that night, Bell snuck back into Ardent and, in a moment loaded with disturbing meaning, erased the multitrack masters of *#1 Record*.

Bell then went home and swallowed a handful of pills in an apparent suicide attempt. After a brief stay at the draconian psychiatric ward in Memphis’ Baptist Hospital, he spent a couple of months recuperating at the Mid-South Hospital.

As Bell slowly recovered, there was some talk of his continuing on with Big Star, but nothing came of it (though he and Chilton would divvy up several songs they’d been working on jointly, with Bell taking “I Got Kinda Lost” and “There Was A Light”).

At age 22, Chris Bell was starting from scratch. Without the anchoring influence of a band or his longtime studio home, he was feeling fragile and emotionally fraught. One of the first solo songs he began writing—an anguished epic that had its roots in this period of uncertainty—would become his lasting obsession and crowning achievement: “I Am The Cosmos.”

Chris Bell spent most of 1973 recovering from his professional divorce with Big Star. The band would continue without him, as Chilton, Stephens, and Hummel went on to make *Radio City*. Another classic, it too failed commercially. A third Big Star album, recorded soon after, wouldn’t see the light of day for years.

Meanwhile, Bell received a formal release from his Ardent recording contract in May and briefly got a job working at the fledgling Federal Express (founded by early Ardent Studios partner Fred Smith). In the fall he traveled to Los Angeles, where he met and received encouragement from some of the rock writers who’d praised *#1 Record*, and he began gathering together a collection of songs, including the newly completed “I Am The Cosmos.”

As 1974 dawned, Bell finally decided to take his first tentative steps back into the studio, and he began looking for somewhere to record. “He needed to find out that Ardent was not the only place he could work out of,” said his friend and drummer Richard Rosebrough. “He felt like he was walking on scorched earth there, and he wanted to find a fresh piece of land.”

Bell found just the place he needed in Memphis’ tiny Shoe Productions, a homemade studio that had been modeled after Ardent and become a hub for a new wave of Anglo-pop-obsessed Memphians. In January of ’74, Bell called on Rosebrough and bassist Ken Woodley to back him for a one-night session there.

“It seemed like a last-minute thing, but Chris may have been thinking about it for a long time,” said Rosebrough. “We were set up, the mics were open, and he said, ‘Well, I’ve got this song . . .’ and there it was: ‘I Am The Cosmos.’ It was the first time I’d heard it. I remember the sound in the headphones was spectacular, just explosive.”

Bell and his band would commit two more songs to tape that night, an early arrangement of the delicate love song “You And Your Sister” and the melodically insistent “I Don’t Know.”

Despite the sterling results from the Shoe sessions, that summer Bell continued to battle his depression and bad habits. David Bell was visiting from Europe, where he was living and working in the real estate business, when he walked in on Chris injecting Dilaudid.

“Knowing Chris’s previous aversion to needles, that really freaked me out, and I realized I had to do something to get him away from Memphis,” said David. “Just to get the ball rolling, we started talking about the [Château d’Hérouville] studio in France, which had developed a reputation from doing the Elton John records *Honky Château* and *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. So I said, ‘Well, why don’t we try and go there?’”

David Bell’s efforts to save his brother and jump-start his career would evolve into a two-year odyssey that would take them across Europe, from Paris to London to Berlin and beyond. “I’d love to be able to say I had a game plan, but I didn’t,” said David. “A great deal of it was just getting him out of an environment where drugs were available, getting him into the studio doing what he loved, and seeing what he would come up with.”

That fall the Bells and Rosebrough headed to the countryside north of Paris, to the Château d’Hérouville. The sessions there found Chris’s muse and music rapidly evolving. Over the years, he’d come to absorb a range of disparate influences, from the pristine pop of the Carpenters (a group Andy Hummel had turned him on to) to the complex narratives of Van Dyke Parks (an artist whom Alex Chilton had hipped him to), as well as the finely etched folk of Joni Mitchell, whose open-tuning guitar work would become a major influence on his playing.

But, Rosebrough notes, the biggest influence on Bell’s songs came from within. “Chris’s music was about an emotional tug-of-war, a reaction to feelings that he had inside that led him to different places,” he said. “Some of them were bad places—like with drugs. Some were good places—like his spirituality.”

In the dark hours of the preceding year, Bell had started exploring his spiritual side. Sparked by his boyhood friend Earl Smith, who came from a family of charismatic Episcopalians, Bell began an intense and often complicated relationship with Christianity. Where he had once found salvation in music, Bell was now finding music in salvation.

The new songs he was writing—in particular, the cautionary “Better Save Yourself”—were autobiographical narratives colored by his burgeoning faith. “As he developed spiritually, his music adapted to that,” Rosebrough said. “He found new interests and new focuses, new things to think and feel and forces to be in touch with.”

Although Bell was enthused by the tracks cut at the Château—which included the soulful acoustic meditation “Speed Of Sound” and the brawling rocker “Make A Scene”—the greater development came when he discovered that house engineer

Claude Harper had worked at Apple Records. Harper told Bell he could secure him time to mix in England with Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick.

The following month, Bell and company traveled to AIR Studios in London for the first of two sessions overdubbing and mixing with Emerick. Although he was in the presence of one of the architects of his beloved Beatles’ sound, Bell wasn’t shy about offering his opinions. “I was amazed that he didn’t defer at all to Emerick, who was almost like this icon to him,” said David. “Geoff would make a certain suggestion about the mix, and Christopher would sort of disagree. He really enjoyed working with him, but at the same time he absolutely knew what he wanted to hear.”

While mixing with Emerick, Bell would also get the opportunity to meet Fab Four producer George Martin, and even ventured to Abbey Road Studios, where he came face-to-face with Paul McCartney. “When we walked out of the studio after meeting McCartney, he looked as though he had just come down from Mount Everest,” said David. “For a kid who’d watched The Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, that was just an amazing moment.” (Despite his awe, Chris was half-convinced that McCartney nicked the idea for 1976’s *Wings At The Speed Of Sound* LP from his own similarly titled song.)

Heading back to Memphis, Bell continued working on the tracks. He returned to Ardent and further mended fences with Fry, and also Chilton (who contributed backing vocals to the exquisite “You And Your Sister”).

After spending Christmas break with their family, the Bells decided their best option was to return to the U.K. in early 1975. Chris had already gotten encouragement from a group of high-profile industry fans there, including *New Musical Express* scribe Max Bell (no relation). Armed with a tape of his brother’s songs, David began knocking on record company doors in London, shopping the material. Decca, Philips, and Warner U.K. (headed by former Beatles publicist Derek Taylor) all listened. Charisma and The Rocket Record Company even expressed serious interest in a deal before backing out.

“I remember, at the time, the Bay City Rollers were huge. And there was some intimation from the [record company] people that pop music was heading in that direction, and that Chris should follow suit,” said David, chuckling.

Bell spent the rest of the year playing his way across the continent, gigging at folk clubs in London and Berlin, making contacts and trying to drum up interest in his music. “We were just following the string, wherever it led,” said David. But, by the end of 1975, after further label rejection, it was clear that any serious prospects in Europe had been exhausted.

“As a pop musician, the commercial side of things becomes your measuring stick,” said David. “It’s unfortunate, but that’s the way it



is. You can be the tortured genius and live off your art as best you can. But, at a certain point, it's just going to eat you up."

With money and options running out, Chris Bell gathered his tapes and came home to Memphis.

As America celebrated its bicentennial year in 1976, Chris Bell returned to Memphis and fell in with a mix of friends, old and new. He joined Jody Stephens and young songsmith Van Duren in a pair of loose-knit bands called The Baker Street Regulars, and later Walk 'n' Wall. The group gigged around Memphis for a time, playing sets filled with covers as well as Bell's Big Star and solo material. Though Duren said Bell was enthusiastic about the project initially, he left the group after a few months.

"Chris especially was hard to hold on to," recalled Duren. "He was always searching. He was trying to find some kind of . . . I don't know if I want to say peace, or understanding. It just seemed like he was a little bit lost."

Bell would go on to work as a sideman in songwriter Keith Sykes' band, touring the Gulf Coast extensively for a time. In between gigs, Bell would spend further hours at Ardent working up and reworking solo tracks. "As soon as you got close to the building, you could hear him mixing, even with all the doors closed," said Duren. "I can't tell you the number of times I walked in to him working on a song like 'Make A Scene' with that blasting at an incredible volume."

Though he continued to tinker with the material for a time, as a result of nothing happening in the way of label interest or offers, Bell quietly set his tapes aside. "At that point [Ardent] didn't even have a label anymore, so we couldn't put it out," said Fry. "It seemed like Chris could never find the open door that he wanted. I think he eventually accepted that. And while he never quit playing music, he began turning away from the idea that it was the most important thing in the world."

The change in Bell's outlook coincided with his deepening religious convictions. "He began taking his relationship with Christ very seriously," said Fry. "There was a time where he was basically witnessing to me. At the time, I was a garden-variety pagan, one of these people who had been brought up in a nice respectable family and had gone to church as long as I'd been forced to and didn't want to hear any more about it after that. But, for Chris, that was becoming the important thing in his life. It was central to his worldview."

Bell's faith also brought with it a sense of familial responsibility. After years as an itinerant rock 'n' roller, he donned a paper hat and began managing his father's fast-food restaurants in Memphis and Atlanta. "He spent a couple years there trying, for lack of a better term, to be the good son," said David Bell. "But he never really lost the desire for what he wanted to do musically. I mean, he wasn't the starving

artist, determined until his last breath to have a career, but he was also somebody who just couldn't leave it alone."

The final months of Chris Bell's life saw him pursuing music with a renewed vigor, as he'd been energized by the first stirrings of what would become the cult of Big Star.

By the summer of 1978, the collector's market and the interest among musos in the U.K. was strong enough that EMI decided to take the first two Big Star LPs—previously available only as hard-to-find imports—and reissue them in a lavish double-gatefold package. "Chris was over the moon about that," said David Bell. "Because the LP had imprinted on the back 'EMI Records: Hayes, Middlesex, England'—just like all Beatles albums."

In the fall of that year, Bell finally secured a deal to release a single of "I Am The Cosmos" b/w "You And Your Sister" through Big Star fan and Chilton collaborator Chris Stamey's Car Records label.

Bell had also begun a new writing partnership with Memphis power-popper Tommy Hoehn. "Christopher always used to tell me [Chilton] was the only person he was really able to write with," said David Bell. "But it seemed like it was going pretty well with Tommy. In fact, he was at Tommy's having a band practice on that last night."

Two days after Christmas, following a late-night rehearsal at Hoehn's apartment, Bell stopped by Ardent, then hopped into his two-door Triumph. He was heading back to his parents' house in Germantown, on the familiar, well-traveled route along Poplar, when he lost control of the car and crashed into a light pole. Bell was killed instantly.

For many close to him, Bell's death confirmed some awful premonitions. "Both myself and my sister Sara had quite a feeling that he was going to die young," said David Bell. "I can't really explain it, but I absolutely remember sitting on the stairs at my parents' house and asking myself, 'Well, what are you going to do when he dies?' This was years before he passed."

Bell's funeral was held the following day. It was a closed-casket ceremony, but the family asked John Fry if he wanted to view the body. He declined. "I really didn't want that to be my last memory of him," he said. Fry did honor a request from Bell's sister Sara to bring a copy of Big Star's *#1 Record* so that it could be buried with her brother.

Bell's tragic end introduced yet another layer of myth and mystery to the Big Star universe. Fans and fellow musicians from around the world would soon begin to gravitate to Memphis and Ardent, seeking out his story. "Whenever an artist dies young, there's an interest," said Fry, "and there's always that lingering question of what might've been."

Throughout the 1980s, the legend of Big Star grew to levels none of its principals could have imagined. There were cover songs,

tribute tracks, bootlegs, and a whole generation of alternative artists singing the band's praises. The groundswell finally peaked in the early '90s when a Chilton/Stephens-led lineup of the group re-formed and Rykodisc reissued a trio of band-related titles, including a collection of Bell's mostly unreleased solo material titled *I Am The Cosmos*.

For David Bell, the turn of events was both a surprise and a vindication. "It's a real dichotomy, because part of me could have never believed any of this was possible, and then another part says, well, of course, this is what his music deserved," he said.

"When *I Am The Cosmos* came out the first time, I was just on cloud nine," said David. "I was having great conversations with Chris daily, saying, 'See? Do you see what's happened?' It was such validation. It's this thing of 'No, your ideas were not misplaced. The timing may not have been right. But the music was worthy.'"

In the twenty-plus years since *Cosmos* was first issued, the legacy of Chris Bell has only continued to grow. His songs now feature regularly in TV shows and films, his life has become the subject of documentaries and biographies, his place in the pantheon of cult icons more than secure. It's taken decades, but Bell has finally earned the acclaim that so eluded him in life.

For John Fry—who would pass on in December 2014—the belated appreciation of Bell's music only magnified the very personal loss of his friend. "I'm glad to see Chris's music get recognized in the way it ultimately has. And, I've got to say, I am a person who has put his trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but I didn't do that until after Chris's death," said Fry. "That was the thing that sobered me up enough to say, 'Well, wait a minute—where is he now? Is he dead like a horse, or is he in the presence of God?' And when you ask that question about somebody else, you start to say to yourself, 'Hey, dummy, what about you?'"

"And, you know, we're human beings, and we're subject to missing people and to grief and all that sort of thing," said Fry—his voice suddenly choked with emotion. "But, in my heart, I believe he's passed from death to life eternal."

Clearing his throat and blinking back tears, Fry finally smiled: "Anyway . . . let me tell you another funny Chris Bell story . . ."

—Bob Mehr
Memphis, TN
April 2017

Bob Mehr is the music critic for the daily Memphis newspaper The Commercial Appeal, and the author of the New York Times Best Seller Trouble Boys: The True Story Of The Replacements.



Track Notes

Though he often referred to an “album” in interviews from his English sojourn in 1975, there was never an officially issued Chris Bell long-player until Jeff Rougvie at Rykodisc initiated the full-length *I Am The Cosmos* album in 1992—and in the process fashioned a remarkably enduring collection from Chris’s surviving 1970s recordings, the astounding title tune of which had been the lone solo release during the musician’s lifetime.

This Omnivore expanded edition updates the original Ryko and subsequent Rhino Handmade editions of *Cosmos* to offer the most exhaustive survey of Chris Bell, the recording artiste, as is possible. Unless some new studio sessions come to light in the future, it is essentially the last word on the work of this quixotic talent. Alternate versions, backing tracks, and audio snippets all showcase unused parts, arrangements, and ideas to cast a fresh and illuminating perspective on Bell’s small cadre of songs. It would seem Chris Bell lived for the studio, and one thing that is clearly communicated from all his session tapes is an infectious enthusiasm and joie de vivre that seem quite at odds with the darker portrait of Chris that has been occasionally painted elsewhere.

With access and training provided by owner John Fry, the roughly 18-month apprenticeship Chris Bell enjoyed at Ardent Studios from late 1969 on was bound to produce results from day one. His initial collaborators included future recording maven Terry Manning and past and future bandmates Steven Rhea, Tom Eubanks, Andy Hummel, and Jody Stephens: all members of an ad hoc group who hung out at Ardent’s interim location on National Street. Icewater and Rock City were but two of the theoretical group names appended to a swathe of recordings from 1970 and 1971. Later, after the formation of Big Star, Bell and Rhea—the latter now working as Ardent’s publicist—collaborated on a little-known album project with a female singer-songwriter named Nancy Bryan. Bryan was dating Tim Riley, an independent radio promoter who had office space in the Ardent building and who hired Chris to produce a demo with her. “Chris said, ‘Come to the studio tonight,’” recalled Steve. “I think they’d already recorded his ‘In My Darkest Hour.’” Nancy showed a lot

of promise, but after one or two sessions, Chris got distracted with Big Star and basically said, ‘You take over.’ Chris and I could see it because we had that Joni Mitchell side, but it’s just as much Ardent as anything else—just not the edgy guitar that most people equate with Ardent.” Some years later, Bell would declare in an interview that he intended to take Bryan’s recording of his “In My Darkest Hour” and finish it as his own, but no extra work appears to have been done on the track.

With his dramatic departure from Big Star toward the end of 1972, Bell seems to have temporarily disengaged himself from the music scene. Yet his muse was on display more vividly than ever at the beginning of 1974, when he entered Shoe Productions studio. Shoe was a small eight-track facility operated by Warren Wagner and Wayne Crook somewhat in the image of Ardent, and therefore it felt like a natural venue for Bell to commence recording in after a long hiatus. “My friend Chris loved the laid-back, comfortable feel of Shoe,” said Wagner, “and I am told that we were considered the ‘avant-garde’ facility in the Memphis area.” The able accompaniment of Richard Rosebrough and Ken Woodley, both formerly of Memphis power trio Alamo—not to mention the legendary surreptitious “loan” of a Fairchild limiter from Ardent to use on the tracks—made Chris’s return to the studio notable, but it was the material Chris brought that was truly inspired.

Of the songs taped, all would be added to in one form or another at a later date, as was Bell’s wont. “You And Your Sister” is likely the first attempt of a song Chris returned to on several occasions, and this Shoe take is noteworthy for a slightly different arrangement that features a pastoral Mellotron, possibly added at Ardent. Another song that Chris seemed terminally obsessed with was “I Don’t Know,” a chiming rocker that he would record in four separate incarnations, two of which are featured here. This initial Shoe recording sports the original intro and a tight ensemble feel: it was later transferred to 16-track at Ardent, sped up, the intro removed, and with some minor adjustments became the mix used on the original Ryko *Cosmos* release. There was



I Am The Cosmos

SIDE ONE:

1. I Am The Cosmos (Original Single)
2. Better Save Yourself
3. Speed Of Sound
4. Get Away
5. Make A Scene

SIDE TWO:

1. Look Up
2. I Kinda Got Lost
3. There Was A Light
4. Fight At The Table
5. I Don’t Know
6. Though I Know She Lies
7. You And Your Sister (Original Single)



Outtakes & Alternates, Volume 1

SIDE ONE:

1. I Am The Cosmos (Extended Alternate Version)
2. Better Save Yourself (Alternate Mix)
3. Speed Of Sound (Alternate Version)
4. Get Away (Alternate Version)
5. You And Your Sister (Alternate Version)

SIDE TWO:

1. Make A Scene (Alternate Mix)
2. Look Up (Acoustic Movie Mix)
3. Fight At The Table (Alternate Mix)
4. I Don’t Know (Alternate Version)
5. Speed Of Sound (Alternate Version Backing Track)

also an early, up-tempo arrangement of “Speed Of Sound” that went no further than some basic acoustic overdubs.

A third song recorded was “I Am The Cosmos,” Bell’s masterwork and an anthem for the ages. Though the Shoe session would form the basis of the finished version, it is illuminating to hear the first pass, with most parts of this classic firmly in place, including its heart-rending vocal. On the original Ryko release, an edited mix of this relatively unadorned take was labeled the “slow” version. The evening was recorded on a used one-inch tape that had splices toward its end, leading to the audible dropouts on the drum channel at the beginning of the solo section. “There was never any money that exchanged hands for these sessions,” noted Wagner. “I did it because of Chris and the music. I guess that explains the splice!”

As an additional insight into the creation of *Cosmos*, we feature here previously unheard excerpts from the Shoe session. The early backing track is interesting to hear not only for its faster speed but also for the prominence of a melodic piano part. This was potentially played by Woodley, but as all the constituents of the take—bass, drums, guitar, and keys—are very much live, another musician may have been present, even though the final recording of the song did not feature piano. And the “acoustic” mix of “Cosmos” isolates the vocals and acoustic guitar for a fresh perspective on Bell’s performance, with Woodley’s superb Hammond part also laid bare.

Bell was no doubt emboldened by the results of that evening at Shoe, but there remained another lengthy gap before he made unusual plans to journey to Europe to record. With the encouragement of his brother David and the able assistance of Richard Rosebrough, he booked time in October 1974 at the recording studio in Château D’Hérouville near Paris, formerly known as Strawberry Studios, and the famous “Honky Château” employed by Elton John, T. Rex, et al. Over the course of a week, recordings were made of “Speed Of Sound” and two new songs: “Better Save Yourself” and “Make A Scene,” the latter having

been considered single material by Chris at one point. Bell and Rosebrough cut basics and added a handful of overdubs. Among the several backing tracks from these sessions is a sparser, alternative “Speed Of Sound,” with again a significantly different feel. This song’s title, and part of the lyric, was inspired by the British 1950s film *Breaking The Sound Barrier*, which piqued the interest of Bell and fellow flight enthusiast John Fry.

With the aid of Hérouville engineer Claude Harper, a week later the trio decamped to AIR Studios in the West End of London for some further overdubs and mixing under the able supervision of Geoff Emerick. Fresh overdubs were added to the tracks from both the Hérouville and Memphis sessions, including the rather wobbly and dissonant Moog to the master take of “Speed,” and some mixing was undertaken, which quite likely became the final version of *Cosmos*. The abundant tinkering, the overdubs printed with compression and reverb, and no doubt the sheer physical and magnetic wear Chris put on the tapes by hauling them from continent to continent meant that the final 16-track of *Cosmos* is rather gritty-sounding. Yet, quite apart from the thrill it must have given Chris to watch the former Beatles engineer in action, in his sound balance Emerick accurately pegged the tenor of the tune. When the track finally appeared as a single on the Car imprint in 1978, Bell further vari-speeded Geoff Emerick’s mix in the mastering stage, at label owner Chris Stamey’s request. He also inscribed the matrix number ST-100-7 in the dead wax, in jocular reference to the similarly-titled track on *#1 Record*.

In Memphis further embellishments were added to the European-recorded tracks, mostly consisting of bass by Ken Woodley, and “Better Save Yourself” was boosted by a tremendous string arrangement. The period mix of this track, likely made at AIR during a return trip in April 1975, appears on Disc 1; Disc 2 features a remix with further vocal and acoustic guitar overdub completed later at Ardent. There were also additional sessions embarked upon, most likely at Shoe, that featured a re-recording of “I Don’t Know,” now titled “Get Away,” and a similar tune that

dated back to Big Star, “I Got Kinda Lost.” Jody Stephens and Alex Chilton appear on some tracks, and consequently there’s an edgier vibe to the performances that is completely appropriate for the material—which is quite obvious even on the alternate backing track included here. “Get Away” exists in two adroitly different takes. The rendition on Disc 1 was included on the Ryko CD with a drum intro and is recognizable as a period mix via the heavy delay; the second version on Disc 2 is a remix with a similar intro to the original Shoe “I Don’t Know,” but with different, and markedly bizarre, non sequitur lyrics. Both benefit from the anarchic influence of Chilton and feature Bell at his throat-tearing best, even if, as Fry noted, “when Chris had his own way, he buried his vocals.”

Chilton would also contribute backing vocals to the superb final version of “You And Your Sister” recorded at Ardent. With an impeccable string arrangement by Bill Cunningham, this would become the B-side to the 1978 Car single (like “Cosmos,” it too was sped up in mastering). There also exists a simple, plaintive acoustic reading—completists should note, however, that the “country” take, as indicated on the Ryko release, is merely a trial mix done at AIR of the single version minus most of its overdubs.

Additional items recorded at Ardent in this period include another Big Star—era tune, “There Was A Light,” and the earnest “Look Up,” both classic Chris and recorded with the assistance of Jody (“Light”) and Andy Hummel. While the singer is known to have engineered many of his own sessions and mixes, the sonic quality of the latter tune is instantly recognizable as a John Fry effort, although this tune was also worked on at AIR (a mix without the Mellotron prepared by Fry for the Big Star documentary is also included here). A slightly different approach was employed for “Fight At The Table,” with an ensemble cast that featured Rosebrough, Woodley, Carl Marsh on sax, and both Jim Dickinson and the Hot Dogs’ Jack Holder on piano (Holder plays the intro part on the alternate mix, and Dickinson is responsible for the synth bass on the master). Chris guided the players through the

piece with an intermittent scratch vocal as heard on an outtake from that date.

Chris spent much of 1975 in the U.K. attempting to pitch the tapes and stir up interest based on the growing cult of Big Star (though he had a typically idiosyncratic approach—Chiswick Records’ Roger Armstrong tells a lovely story about Chris arriving at the company’s offices to “play a tape” and showing up with just a two-inch 16-track reel). The lackluster response probably accounts for the subsequent paucity of sessions from this period. Upon his return to Memphis, Bell’s desire to get back to live work (as expressed in contemporary fanzine interviews) saw him essentially abandoning any hope of a solo career. From the evidence, his last recording would appear to be from around 1976. “Though I Know She Lies” has a muted feel, and the jazzy midsection makes it quite different from the rest of his work. This track was never completed in Chris’s lifetime—the Ryko CD features a 1991 remix by Fry and Ardent’s John Hampton. Also uncharacteristic, but an indication of Chris’ eminent role as a team player, is “Stay With Me,” written by Keith Sykes while Chris was a part of his band in this same period. The song’s brief but superlative guitar solo is classic Bell.

Finally, within the array of studio reels and Chris’s personal work tapes, there are a handful of tantalizing instrumental snippets. These include an untitled acoustic sketch from 1970 (the accompanying backwards effect may or may not be deliberate) and a languid version of “So Long Baby” that probably dates from 1977 or so. Written by South Carolina guitarist Champ Hood, this latter piece was erroneously assumed to be a Bell composition and given the title “Clacton Rag” when included in the 2009 Handmade release of the *Cosmos* set. In the long run, whether it was the blueprint for a new song or an acoustic doodle in the style of Hood or Gimmer Nicholson, simple moments like these nevertheless help clarify the purity at the heart of Chris Bell’s music.

—Alec Palao
El Cerrito, CA



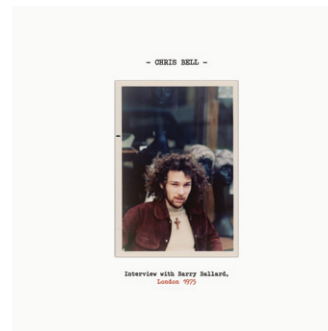
Outtakes & Alternates, Volume 2

SIDE ONE:

1. You And Your Sister (Acoustic Version)
2. Untitled Acoustic Instrumental (Movie Mix)
3. Stay With Me – with Keith Sykes
4. In My Darkest Hour – with Nancy Bryan
5. So Long Baby (aka Clacton Rag)
6. Fight At The Table (Outtake Track With Partial Vocals)

SIDE TWO:

1. You And Your Sister (“Country” Underdub Mix)
2. Get Away (Outtake Track)
3. Better Save Yourself (Outtake Track)
4. I Am The Cosmos (Alternate Backing Track With Piano)
5. Untitled Electric Instrumental (Movie Mix)



Interview With Barry Ballard, London 1975

SIDE ONE:

1. Interview, Part 1*

SIDE TWO:

1. Interview, Part 2*
2. Though I Know She Lies (Movie Mix)
3. I Am The Cosmos (Acoustic Mix)

* Previously unissued

Chris Bell's Post-London Life: An Oral History January 1976– December 1978

While Big Star had entered hibernation following the letdown of Third/Sister Lovers, by the onset of 1976, after returning from London, Chris essentially detached himself from his reels of solo material and shelved the nearly complete album. David Bell stepped down as his manager. During this era, Chris spent ample time vacationing with friends at his family's St. Martin beach house. He also indulged his growing passions for Christianity, spirituality and playing tennis. To satisfy his love of the guitar, he would join three Memphis-based bands during his final years. Only this time, he was backing other songwriters and doing it for fun. Although he spent some time exploring new sounds at Ardent Studios, recording "Though I Know She Lies" and a few other tracks, his studio output decreased significantly as he searched for a new focus in life.

David Bell: Everything involving Chris' solo music seemed to be put on hold for a year or so after he returned from England. And as far as my direct participation with his music, by the time we came back that was also on hold.

Richard Rosebrough: Chris didn't have his songs organized enough to have one piece of work he could call his album. Some of his focus changed and it needed to for his health. I am sure Chris' goal was to produce a collection of his songs, but they were done one at a time, over a long period of time. He was playing tennis a lot with his new tennis buddies at that time, so he would occasionally show up at Ardent in his tennis shorts and headband in his sporty little car. He was recreating a life for himself. He was seeking happiness.

David Bell: During his final years, he played in two or three different bands in Memphis, but they weren't centered on his music. He played with Van Duren and Jody Stephens in the Baker Street Regulars and he played with Keith Sykes for some time.

Rick Clark (Memphis musician/writer): There was a very tight group of people that were around the Ardent bunch, a nice Memphis power-pop group of bands and songwriters. It wasn't just Big Star, there was Malarkey, Van Duren, The Scruffs and Tommy Hoehn. They all worked together and recorded at Ardent and Shoe.

Terry Manning: All those guys weren't in our original Ardent group. It was kind of a second wave of British-loving local guys. They had a similar esthetic to what they liked and wanted to play. They all had a lot of talent.

Van Duren (Baker Street Regulars/Walk n Wall bassist/guitarist): The Baker Street Regulars was the name when the band first started. Chris thought of the name and we used it. In December of '75 we started to get together and rehearse a little bit. The first time I went out to the Bell's house, Jody took me for our first rehearsal at their mansion in Germantown. I'd never even been to Germantown before. The suburb was small then, it's huge now. We turned down this street and it turned into this driveway, you couldn't even see the house from the street the property was so huge.

Mike Brignardello (Baker Street Regulars/Walk n Wall guitarist/bassist): His parents were very upper class. Chris lived in, at least back in the day, a full-blown mansion. I remember turning down the driveway and driving, and driving, and driving, and going, "You've got to be kidding me! He lives on this estate? We're practicing in this mansion?" I'd grown up as a poor kid in Memphis. It was a huge piece of property. A huge two-story colonial with columns out front.

Jody Stephens (Big Star/Baker Street Regulars/ Walk n Wall drummer): We played out a few times as the Baker Street Regulars, I guess. It was Chris, Van Duren, Mike Brignardello and myself as a four piece.

Mike Brignardello: We'd also practice in a corrugated-metal storage room, not insulated or anything like that. We'd literally just roll the door up on hot, humid Memphis days. We were hungry to play. We'd sweat through rehearsals and just do it.

Van Duren: It was pretty miserable rehearsing in that 20'x10' mini storage—those things were brand new in 1976. One day,



Chris showed up two hours late for rehearsal out there. He showed up in these tennis togs with the sweater wrapped around his neck. He walks in and says, “I’m sorry I’m late, Tommy Hoehn and I had a vision on the tennis courts.” I didn’t know if I was supposed to take him seriously or not. I was a little bent out of shape but I just kind of laughed when he said that. It wasn’t the first or the last time he was late. He kind of operated on Chris time. By January of ’76, we were out playing a little bit.

Jody Stephens: There wasn’t much of an opportunity for the Baker Street Regulars to play. Not even Big Star could find a proper booking agent, or proper manager, for that matter. That’s why we didn’t play too often. There just wasn’t a demand for it.

Van Duren: Big Star was still unknown in Memphis. I just loved #1 Record. I thought it was phenomenal beyond words, but we didn’t have people showing up to our gigs and saying to Chris, “Wow, you were on #1 Record, can I have your autograph?”

The Baker Street Regulars may have not been in demand, but they managed to land multiple gigs at a number of Memphis venues, like Aligahpo’s on Highland Street by the University of Memphis, Procapé Gardens—known for its signature stained-glass windows—in Midtown on Madison, and also at the High Cotton Club, just south of Overton Square.

Van Duren: We played those three clubs about three times each, but the first gig was in the spring time at Oxford, Mississippi at Ole Miss at a fraternity party. We did originals and some cover material, but the covers were Beatles, Bee Gees, and a lot of fairly obscure things at the time, like Todd Rundgren. Things nobody had picked up on yet, especially in Mississippi. We were also playing my songs, Big Star songs, a few of Chris’ songs. I believe the only time Chris played a lot of his solo material with a band on stage was with our band. I was a bass player in that band, but I switched to acoustic guitar on “You And Your Sister.” We also played “I Am The Cosmos,” “Make A Scene,” and “Fight At The Table.” When we were learning them, we’d listen to what we were calling demos that he had recorded. Those demos emerged as the album after he died. He probably would have worked on it for ten years—I’m halfway joking about that. He was constantly re-working and re-mixing and re-recording his solo stuff. But Chris was really amazing on stage. It seemed so effortless to him. He played loud, but it was great and with such finesse.

Even in its short lifespan of a few months, the Baker Street Regulars went through a lineup change and even a band-name change to Walk n Wall. After Jody decided to step down as drummer, Ardent Studios fixture and future Grammy® Award-winning producer John Hampton stepped in behind the kit, alongside his brother, guitarist Randy Hampton. Richard Rosebrough filled in on drums for out of town gigs.

John Hampton (Baker Street Regulars/Walk n Wall drummer): At some point, Jody quit and I started playing drums. That was my official getting to know Chris. We rehearsed quite a bit together as

a band and played a couple shows. This was a great rock band, it was part Big Star blended with the best Britpop covers around.

Richard Rosebrough: There was a gig in Oxford, Mississippi—or somewhere in Northern Mississippi. John Hampton was the regular drummer but this night I subbed. It was at a Holiday Inn or a Howard Johnson’s or something. My bass drum head, the back head, broke. It started splitting as soon as we started playing. It was breaking very quickly and I didn’t have a replacement. I still had two more hours I was supposed to play on that drum loudly. We taped it up with all this grey roadie tape. I was just freaking out. We took a break and I told Chris, “Man, my bass drum is broken. I just don’t know what to do!” He said, “Have you tried praying?” I said, “No! But it’s about to break.” He said, “Well, let’s pray.” So, we got down on the floor, behind the bass drum, and we had a little prayer session.

Van Duren: Unfortunately, we never recorded anything with Chris and the Baker Street Regulars, not even a live show. I didn’t see it falling apart that quickly. The only recording session I ever did with Chris was the first version of my song “New Year’s Eve,” Jody and I brought Chris in to play electric guitar. Some of it was re-cut and ended up on my first album.

By early June 1976, Chris had quit playing with Van Duren and picked up more gigs backing Keith Sykes.

Keith Sykes: Chris played lead, I played the rhythm. He could play his behind off, too. He played everything very well. Plus, he could figure out songs off records better than me, he would show me things. We were just a rock ‘n’ roll dance band. We’d play Chuck Berry-style stuff, play some old Elvis songs, but we pretty much played all originals.

John Dando (friend/Ardent Productions employee): I saw Chris more when he was playing with other people, like Keith Sykes. He was kind of pulling himself up a bit and seemed to be enjoying playing. There was a realization on his part that Big Star was behind him. It seemed to me that he’d given it up. He wasn’t grasping as high as he had in the past, though he was still doing some recording.

David Bell: I never saw Chris play with Keith Sykes because they were always touring down on the Gulf Coast a lot, in different towns in the south—like Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Florida.

Keith Sykes: We’d play clubs about every weekend, at least three weekends a month. We weren’t making much money, but we played a lot. I bet we played between 50 and 100 shows with Chris, so we had a lot of time to sit and talk. Chris talked a lot about music—a lot about Led Zeppelin. He’s the first guy I ever met who talked about Led Zeppelin like they were some cult or something. He asked me, “Do you think Jimmy Page sold his soul to the devil?” I laughed and said, “I have no idea.” He was a cool cat. When we got together, Joe Walsh had just joined the Eagles. Chris said, “Joe Walsh can’t sing worth shit.” Of course, Joe Walsh has a fabulous rock voice similar to Chris’, so it was odd he’d say that.

The last time we worked together, we went to Mobile. We’d stay at the cheapest motel I could find because we’d play this place for two weeks at a time. So, we’re out one afternoon in Mobile, we got back to the motel and Chris was gone. After about five minutes the phone rang, it was Chris. He said, “Hey Keith, God told me to stay at the Holiday Inn.” Basically, he’d talked to either Jesus or God, one of the two, and they told him to go ahead and get a room at the Holiday Inn. He said he’d pay for it himself. Not long after the Mobile thing, Chris left the band—or maybe I thought it wasn’t working anymore and found someone else. That was it. It was very amicable. After the band, I just saw him occasionally. He asked me to come over and record a song I wrote called “Stay With Me.” He always liked that song. I played acoustic guitar on it. But what I remember most about Chris is him being a nice, gentle person who loved music.

Chris’ departure from Syke’s band after six months of gigs occurred amidst his movement into management at Danver’s, a Memphis-based fast-food chain founded by his restaurateur father, Vernon Bell.

David Bell: Taking the manager job at Danver’s was more of a spiritual decision for Christopher—he was going to stop giving his father headaches. Chris decided, “I’ll be the good son. I’m going to get an honest job.” He felt he’d caused a lot of grief to my parents. Certainly, when you’re taken to the hospital because you’ve taken a bunch of pills—yeah, he caused a bunch of grief. He was a hippie and rebellious. My father was worried about both of us, but with Christopher he was worried about what he’d become. Once he was in a responsible job and making some decent money, he could get a sports car, play tennis and do other things that weren’t just solely focused on music.

Cindy Bell Coleman (Chris Bell’s sister): I know daddy’s dream was to have one of his boys go into the restaurant business and follow in his footsteps.

Linda Schaeffer (Chris Bell’s friend): There would be times I would drop Chris off at the restaurant, he’d have to wear a paper restaurant hat and he would always laugh about it. He’d just laugh things off. He had a great spirit and sense of humor, but there was a darker side to him as well.

John Hampton: Chris’ dad threw him in one of his Danver’s locations, there was one over by Memphis State. We’d go in that Danver’s all the time and make Chris get us hamburgers. He was like, “All right guys, quit screwing with me—yeah, yeah.”

John Fry: Vernon Bell [Chris’ father] was not a hard man to get along with. I met him many times while Chris was alive and after Chris’ death. He was simply puzzled by the whole music thing.

Dale Franklin (Danver’s co-worker): One night Chris and I were working together. He looks out the window and says, “Oh man, my dad!” I said, “What are you talking about?” Chris says, “Look, he’s sitting in a car across the street watching.” Chris thought Vernon was out there making sure he was working.

Jody Stephens: I thought it was cool how seriously he was taking his Danver’s job. He took it dead seriously. Chris worked his butt off, from what he’d tell me. He took a lot of pride in doing a really good job. A lot more was expected out of him because he was one of the owners’ sons. Nepotism works both ways.

After months of hard work, Chris relocated to Atlanta for just shy of a year to open a new Danver’s location for the growing chain. While this would be an unproductive stretch for him musically, Chris used his time away from Memphis to relax and enjoy the new terrain.

David Bell: He liked it in Atlanta. He enjoyed his time there—from July 1977 to the late Spring of 1978. He went to a few Braves games, some hockey games, things he would’ve never done before. Even the tennis thing was an attempt to do something a little more mainstream. Tennis was huge at the time.

John Fry: What hasn’t come out in a lot of these articles about Chris, and perhaps the Big Star movie, was that in the last year or eighteen months of Chris’ life he was just solid in his relationship with Christ and all of this back-and-forth stuff seemed, to me, to have gone away.

Linda Schaeffer: There seemed to be a burden lifted from him in those last few years. He was really searching and developing his spiritual side and having a relationship with God.

While Chris was flipping burgers at Danver’s, the Big Star cult following had continued to swell, especially in Europe. By late 1978, the 27-year old was once again focusing on music. Chris left the family business and accepted a less stressful job at a Whole Foods grocery store while he formed a new band with Tommy Hoehn and considered a Big Star reunion tour.

David Bell: Chris left Danver’s after about a year and a half. He felt, “There’s no way I can do this the rest of my life.” More than anything, it was because he felt he’d done the good thing and made a good faith effort, but in the end, it wasn’t for him. He wanted to be true to his talent and do what he could with music. To have that “Cosmos” single, and the double-album release of Big Star’s #1 *Record* and *Radio City* from EMI in England, he was still hoping something could happen.

Jody Stephens: There were conversations about getting Big Star back together. I was all for it. I was overseas for five months, I was in London for two and a half. It seems like every time I picked up a new *Melody Maker* or *NME*, there was always something about Alex or Big Star, even if it was just in the back where people were looking to buy Big Star records. I would have done a reunion tour. I thought it was a good idea with or without Alex. I didn’t see Alex not being there stopping it. We could have done it with Chris—and Chris had new material.

—Rich Topica
Excerpt from There Was A Light: The Cosmic History Of Chris Bell And The Rise Of Big Star

YOU AND YOUR SISTER

You say my love for you ain't real
But you don't know how real it feels
All I want to do- is to spend some time with you
So I can hold you, hold you

Your sister says that I'm no good
I'd reassure her if I could
All I want to do- is to spend some time with you
So I can hold you, hold you

Plans fail every day
I'm wont to hearing you say

Your love won't be leaving
Your eyes ain't deceiving

Fears will soon fade away
Smile now, don't be afraid
All I want to do- is to spend some time with you
So I can hold you, hold you

Come let me wisper in your ear
And don't you worry they can't hear
All I want to do, is to spend some time with you
So I can hold you, hold you





**The Complete Chris Bell Produced for Release
by Cheryl Pawelski, Adam Hill, and Alec Palao**

Liner Notes: Alec Palao, Bob Mehr, and Rich Tupica.

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