

Marc Ford's first day as a Black Crowe got off to a flying start. The former guitarist for Burning Tree arrived early at Chris and Rich Robinson's Atlanta garage to begin rehearsal for what would become *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*, the Crowes' eagerly awaited followup to their multi-platinum debut. The first surprise was that the Robinson brothers had completely rewritten the album they'd sketched out for Ford at the audition a couple of weeks before. The second came as they began working on a new song called "Sting Me." They began the song

as a slow ballad, then revved it up to a full tilt rocker. Which was better? Lead singer Chris Robinson began arguing with his younger brother Rich; suddenly Chris' mike stand was arcing through space—directly at Rich. "It hit him right in the head," recalls a still amazed Ford. "So Rich threw his guitar down, lunged across the room, and grabbed Chris by the shoulders, throwing him up against the wall. Glass, candles and books went flying everywhere." Bassist Johnny Colt and drummer Steve Gorman had been through this before, but even they seemed shaken. Meanwhile, Marc Ford stood clutching the gold-topped Les Paul Chris had given

him for Christmas, wondering what in hell was going on. "It was complete insanity," he confesses. "That was my first weekend with the band. So I just figured, 'Okay, this is basically what we have to deal with.'"

"It was a perfect shot," asserts Chris Robinson with a mixture of pride and regret. "God, I thought Rich broke my arm after that, and then of course I stomped upstairs to my bedroom, slammed the door and raged for a while." Thirty minutes later he was downstairs hugging Rich and all was forgiven.

"It's 'cause Chris won't shut up, basically," grumbles Rich, "but it's so superficial, I really don't remember what it was about five minutes later."

"Musically, my baby brother is an enigma," responds Chris with obvious admiration. "But because we're brothers, whatever I want, he's going to do the opposite." He pauses for a moment, then grins sheepishly. "Do Angus and Malcolm beat the crap out of each other like this?"

So are the Crowes the brawling, arrogant bad boys of legend? Well, not exactly. Running a hand through his

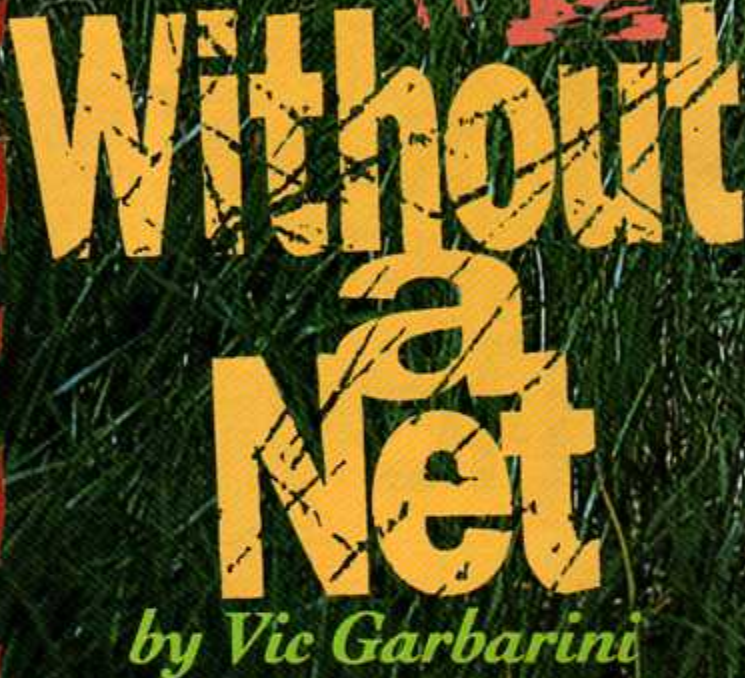
hennaed hair, Marc breaks into a gentle, bemused smile. "Chris and Rich are actually fiercely protective of each other. Really, I haven't seen them fight, except for a few words, since that day. Maybe they just did it for my benefit," he muses, adding that "They do seem to have a way of getting to the core of each other's nervous systems, if they need to." There's a thin line between creative friction and self-destructive craziness, but the Robinsons seem to have things under control. "Besides, we knew you needed a headline!" Chris chides.

But the rehearsals were nothing compared to the recording sessions. The Crowes charged into the studio with their brand new material (and new guitarist Ford, hav-

ing replaced Jeff Cease) and proceeded to knock out in a week what it took Def Leppard five years to do. Every cut was done in one or two takes, with songs evolving and mutating, literally up to the moment of recording. "Chris and Rich were counting down the intro to 'Remedy' when they stopped and said, 'Okay, we're changing this part right now' and the rest of the band is going, 'are you serious?!'" Ford became so confused by the rapid-fire changes in songs and parts that "it took all I had to concentrate on where to put my hands and just get through the songs." But the experience was exhilarating, and out of this cre-

ative chaos came a remarkably coherent album that debuted at #1 on the *Billboard* charts. "This whole band is done on a wing and a prayer, really," asserts Ford. "In fact," he insists, "that's the secret to their success. You're really forced to stop thinking about it all so much and just trust your initial instincts to groove. It's not a question of following any trend or trying to be like anybody else. It's about keeping things very alive and on the edge. And it either works magically or it all falls apart. I think it worked out pretty well," he adds with obvious relief. "That's the key to the band."

It's also the key to why those critics who can't get past the bellbottoms and open tunings—and so cavalierly dismiss them as Stones clones—are missing the point. The Crowes are about extending, not copying, the traditions they draw from. They're not just copping a sound but struggling to stay hotwired to the spirit and energy that made all those Stones, Zep, and Free records so resonant to begin with. They're on a crusade of sorts to recapture the spontaneity and risk-taking and bring it crashing into



Without a Net

by Vic Garbarini

the present moment.

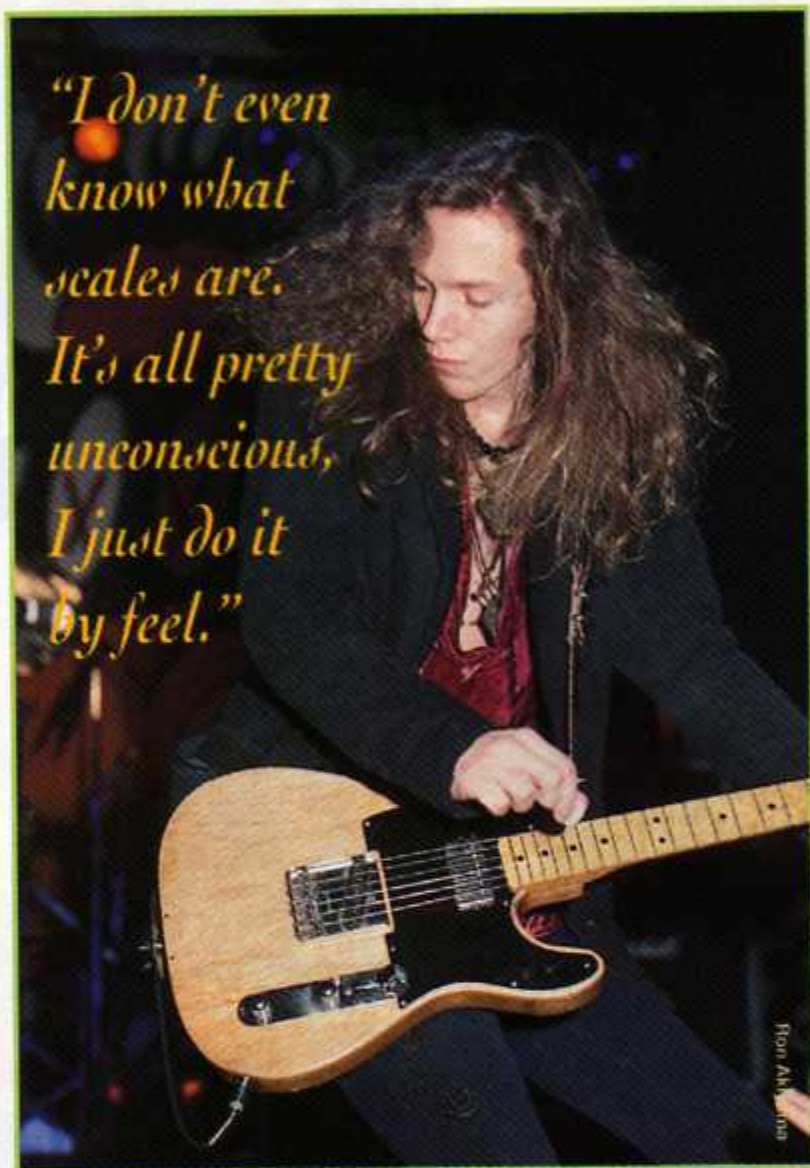
In jazz, Wynton Marsalis picked up the lost thread of '60s post-bop and carried it forward, as Robert Cray has attempted with the blues. The difference being that Marsalis and Cray are praised, not persecuted, for re-connecting with their traditions and expanding them. "I guess we're just not politically correct," Rich Robinson deadpans.

A few minutes later Marc and I rendezvous with the rest of the band in the lobby of L.A.'s Sunset Marquis. We pile into the group van and head off to the band's first post-album rehearsal for their upcoming world tour. Chris bounces around the van like a bad check. Long hair flowing, jeans featuring more patches than denim, he's the skinniest humanoid on the planet. Also one of the wittiest, he rattles off opinions on everything and everyone, from politics to pop culture, skewering certain bands (usually ones that have knocked the Crowes). Meanwhile, Rich radiates a quiet, smoldering intensity. Talk to them sincerely about their music and they both switch gears into passionate overdrive. The arrogance and defensiveness flash by, but usually as an honest response to attacks on them as "Retro" or the hypocrisy they sense around them. They care desperately about the music they're making—and how they make it.

"Everything on the new album is unconscious," claims Rich. "Sometimes I'm afraid to go back and analyze how I wrote something 'cause I'm afraid I'll start to subconsciously try to repeat some formula, 'How did I write that hit?'" Chris has the same take on the lyrics. Yes, he'll agree, there's a theme running through the new record that revolves around hurt and healing. There are Stings and Illness and Thorns and Disease, countered by the positivism of Salvation, the liberation of "No Speak No Slave," and the transcendence of "My Morning Song." But he prefers to not get too specific, and rightly so. Most great music comes from a place deeper than conscious thought. Something integrates all those elements and transforms craft into something ineffable that can resonate with each person in an individual way. "That's part of the mystery of it all," asserts Chris. "How can you stay real and in touch—and out of your own way? That's the way the Stones wrote 'Sex Drive,' isn't it?" he laughs. It's also the unspoken philosophy that permeates the writing, recording and playing on the new album. Keep that line open to the subconscious so creative surprises and fresh energy can keep flowing, putting craft at the service of something higher. "It's like the difference between spirituality and religion," says Chris. "To me, religion can

be a form of manipulating something personal and sacred, like government does. And in a watered down way, so does the music business. If there's anything that the Black Crowes have nothing to do with, it's manipulation."

sively. "I mean, HELLO!, you *don't* love everybody, get real. Just play some music that takes me somewhere and shutup!" There's more heart than heat in Chris Robinson's diatribes. "During the '60s and early '70s the counterculture,



Seen through the looking glass of the press, the Crowes have often come across as aggressive and touchy. In person, they're certainly opinionated—but not in a negative, mean-spirited way. Unlike many bands who say "correct" things in public, and are bitter behind the scenes, the Crowes' bark is worse than their bite. Chris Robinson flashes a goofy smile as he does his imitation of certain "corporate" bands: "Hi, we're all just so happy that our album's #1 and we just LOVE everybody," he oozes. "Then they're back in their tour buses grumbling about how they hate this or that band, blah blah!" Chris snorts deri-

and even the way you looked, were at least a statement about your values. Our music is nothing but an extension of our lifestyles. As manic and as seemingly desperate as that music is sometimes, that's the way our lives are. It's all there, the ying and yang, the euphoria and the hard times," says Chris. He worried about keeping himself, and his band, in touch with their creative spark—and expects no less from others. "That's why we're afraid to analyze what we're doing too much," he continues earnestly. "What if we start second guessing ourselves too much? 'Uh, how did I write that hit? What's the formula?'" He shud-



"If there's anything that the Black Crowes have nothing to do with, it's manipulation."



Chuck Pullin/Starfile Photo

ders. "Look," adds Rich quietly. "The reason Chris gets so defensive—the reason we all do...well," he hesitates, "it's because we're all scared... you know what I'm saying? We're scared of the ultimate..." He shrugs, lost for words. "This music is our baby, we put our souls into it. And then some jaded asshole from the press or some other band says, 'Oh, just a Stones ripoff,' or 'the record Rod Stewart never made.'" He grimaces. "They don't know us or where we're coming from. I didn't even learn that open G tuning from the Stones," claims Rich. The brothers have been trading records for years, everything from Gram Parsons, Otis Rush and Little Feat to Thelonius Monk, and old blues. "When did the Stones ever write a song like 'Black Moon Creeping' or 'No Speak No Slave'?" Good point.

At rehearsal, the instinctive chemistry Marc Ford spoke of kicks in as Rich slides his capo up the neck of his Telecaster a few frets and breaks into the awesome, climbing riff from "No Speak No Slave." The band swings in behind him in perfect synch, John and Steve's elastic rhythmic pocket creates an exquisite tension for the guitarists to play off. Marc Ford kicks in with a dirty, raucous wah-wah solo that lifts the song to a new level. It may sound clichéd, but Ford's replacing Jeff Cease really does echo the Stones replacing Mick Taylor with Ron Wood. But Ford adds Hendrixian fire and Page's angular riffing to Wood's rawness, resulting in a volatile hybrid of blues-rock styles that lends an edge and fullness to Rich's chordal vamps. Still in open G, Rich slips off the capo and slides into the gnarled intro to "Sting Me." Chris grabs the mike and sings "I've got nothing up my sleeve 'cept this heart and a chip on my shoulder," neatly summing up the band's philosophy amidst a roaring wall of sound

as Rich cranks out those Stonesian chords. "Black Moon Creeping"'s ominous chunk n' funk maelstrom owes as much to Lowell George and John Lee Hooker as it does to Led Zep and Keith. Marc and Rich end with a duet solo in different tunings. They pull off the tricky interplay perfectly—even though it's only the second time they've played the passage together. Rich gives me a blank look when I ask about soloing in open tunings. How does he keep track of scales? "I don't even know what scales

are," he shrugs. "It's all pretty unconscious, I just do it by feel." Marc Ford, who plays in standard tuning, adds that "Rich doesn't even know the names of the chords or keys he's playing in. He has to turn around and ask me and Johnny. There's the obvious chords you play in an open key, but Rich always tries to stretch them and get into other, stranger note clusters. It opens up amazing harmonic possibilities for me to weave in and out of," agrees Ford. They end with a soaring rendition of "My Morning Song," all searing slide crescendos and wiry riffs—think of Zep's "When the Levee Breaks" filtered through the Clara Ward Gospel Singers.

Contrary to legend, Mrs. Robinson didn't mix melted down copies of *Exile On Main Street* and *Physical Graffiti* into her sons' baby formula. Chris and Rich grew up in suburban Atlanta, the sons of a '50s singer who weaned them on folk music and country. "He was like a Bobby Darin, Brill Building type who became a real folk purist. Doc Watson and Jimmy Driftwood, Flat and Scruggs—he wouldn't listen to Dylan or the Byrds," says Chris, "that was a bastardization." Saturday mornings at the Robinsons' ranged from "Sly and the Family Stone and Joe Cocker to Vassar Clemons and the Clancy Brothers," recalls Chris. It wasn't until he was 19

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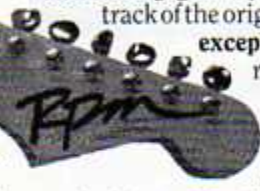
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that Chris and Rich discovered the Stones, particularly *Exile On Main Street*. "I'd spent the first night of my life on mushrooms, it was about six in the morning, and somebody put on 'Torn and Frayed,'" recalls Chris. "Suddenly I didn't feel so isolated from everything." Having unconsciously digested and integrated the same blues and country records, Robinson felt an odd kinship with the Stones based not on Classic radio, but on shared sources. Rich absorbed a lot of his musical tastes from listening to his older brother's records, but his early inspirations would surprise even his most ardent fans. "The first two records I bought were Prince's *Dirty Mind* and AC/DC's *High Voltage*. When I listen to 'Down Payment Blues,' there's a kind of desperation there that makes you want to gasp for air. That got to me."

Though he became an *Exile* devotee shortly after Chris, Rich still bristles at accusations that the Crowes copped everything from Keith and Co. "Of course the Stones inspired us, along with many other bands. But we didn't copy or steal from them," he asserts. "To me, art is something that comes from inspiration. Well, to certain jaded asshole critics I'd say this: Where do you expect us to get inspiration from—the future? You get it from the past. Are you going to call Dali a rip-off artist because he occasionally painted a landscape?" In fact, the Stones have admitted to slavishly copying their blues heroes note for note in the early days. "People are going to accuse us of theft? Well, let me play you *Exile* or *Let It Bleed* and show you where Keith and Mick took credit for writing 'Love in Vain' and 'Stop Breaking Down.'"

What the Robinsons really loved about the Stones, besides the music, was their attitude. "They didn't just have a career, they had a relationship with people—fans, journalists, whoever." And those open tunings that have pegged Rich as a Keith disciple? "I didn't get into open tunings because of the Stones," he insists. "Keith didn't even invent that tuning. He got it from Ry Cooder, I think. The rumor in the industry is that that opening riff on 'Honky Tonk Women' is actually Ry playing. I got into open G because I heard Nick Drake, this English songwriter, singing 'Pink Moon.' He always seemed to have a place to go lower, and you couldn't do that in regular tuning."

Rich, who just turned 23 the day of our interview, thinks he may do a reverse Keith and "discover" regular tuning when he's 30. "I think in terms of chords and songs, though I do like to play solos sometimes." On the new album, Marc and Rich traded solos on



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"Thorn in My Pride," and on "Hotel Illness" Rich plays both the dobro part and the solo. Which brings us to the touchy question of what happened to Jeff Cease, the original lead guitarist on *Shake Your MoneyMaker*. As usual, Rich is characteristically blunt. "Jeff didn't even play some of the stuff on that record. He didn't play any guitars on 'She Talks To Angels.' On a lot of his solos, our engineer and myself showed him what to play." Rich sighs. "After 10 months on tour, he still couldn't play them and we needed him to catch up and it wasn't happening." But what about Cease's comments to the press that implied the Crowes didn't approve of his lifestyle? "Think about that for a minute," counters Rich. "Why'd the Black Crowes kick you out? 'Well, they didn't want me to play basketball.' Come on, what are you talking about!? I read that and I wasn't mad, I was just stunned."

"Look," Rich adds wearily, "after 22 months on the road and a half million records sold, I wanted to write another record and play with a guitar player I could work with."

Chris Robinson agrees that "it's all about the songs. *Shake Your MoneyMaker* was not that great of a record as far as the playing goes. We were a baby band." The brothers wanted the second record to still reflect where they were coming from while stretching their boundaries. In a sense, the new album's evolution began as soon as they started touring behind *MoneyMaker*. "Our first arena show ever was opening for Aerosmith, who were one of our idols. Our manager, Pete, was ecstatic." Rich smirks. "So we got out there and start playing new songs!" Needless to say, Pete was no longer ecstatic. "He was standing on the side of the stage screaming 'Play your damn record!'" Opening later for ZZ Top, the Crowes kicked off with a new tune, "Words You Throw Away," that generally went on for 14 minutes. "And we only had 45 minutes opening for ZZ Top," laughs Rich. "We'd barely get in five songs. But we thought that was so cool—keep it fresh." Their daring paid off in the end. "Words..." eventually was boiled down to a little number called "Remedy," which became the seed for the new album. But the Top tour was also where Chris began to earn his reputation as the Mouth of the South, delivering homilies from onstage about the evils of corporate sponsorship as a Miller Beer logo flapped in the breeze above him. Eventually, the beer suits had them axed from the tour.

"We got along with the band alright, at least at first," asserts Rich. "I was always an AC/DC guy, never a ZZ Top

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cisely why they felt compelled to take the leap. The Crowes knew that for them, playing it safe would be a threat to their creative spirit. "See, the first record was about reflecting our influences," says Rich. "This record was totally written by just Chris and I alone in his house, with no music around—nothing. There was no net underneath us. We just knocked it out in two weekends. 'No Speak No Slave' was written in 10 minutes based on that ascending riff. 'Morning Song' was the same thing, but done in a Dallas hotel room one night when we were bored. 'Hotel Illness' was written, literally, the first time Rich played it, as was 'Thorn in My Pride.'"

The Crowes were determined to record their new material in the same spirit of spontaneity and freedom. "On the first record we were told to 'Play it straight.' This time we said, 'Screw you,' we're keeping what we want in terms of arrangements, like on 'Black

Moon Creeping,' our producer wanted to cut that slow passage at the end—we weren't supposed to stray too far. But we said, 'We like it and it stays.'" If some of the songs on *The Southern Harmony...* seem like jams, rest assured, they are. "Thorn" and "Morning" evolved a bit between writing them and the studio. But all the others had only been played three or four times by the band before recording them, usually in one or two takes. Needless to say, there were few overdubs. For Rich, Marc Ford's last minute hookup with the band "was the

it, 'cause I knew Marc would have it covered." The two would talk briefly about a part, with Rich giving Marc a sense of where he wanted him to go. And Marc did the rest, usually in one take. "Marc's solo in 'No Speak No Slave' was a single take, as was the one in 'Sometimes Salvation.'

"I like it when two guitarists play complementary parts that make interesting chords and mesh like a wall of sound," says Rich. "Like on 'Black Moon Creeping.' That's me at the end just playing three notes and him playing some weird thing, but it sounds so full." Marc used his Les Paul on most tracks, though for the solos on "No Speak No Slave" and "Remedy" he reverted to his Strat Plus armed with Seymour Duncan pickups. Rich used his Gibson 335 for "Sting Me" and a Gretsch White Falcon for both the intro and slide work on "Morning Song." The rest of the time he switched between a brace of old Les Paul Juniors, vintage Telecasters ("one with a B string bender on it that I used on 'Black Moon Creeping'"), and three Gibson Dove acoustics.

Rich fought for the slower version of "Sting Me," but "our manager was like, 'Come on, if you're going to let me have any say, let's do the fast one.'" The 14-minute opus was chopped into fragments and rearranged as "Remedy." Like many of the Crowes' compositions, "Remedy" features Rich's trademark descending chord patterns. "I remember George, our producer, talking about how when Chris would sing it, it just kept going down," says Rich. "George wanted to change the chord progression but we didn't let him." Some of the slower tunes were written in open b and b₇ tunings Rich says he picked up from Keith's ex-roadie Alan Rogan. Rich sees "Thorn" and "Morning Song" as the two songs on the record that take you on internal journeys, lyrically and musically. "Thorn" has this little Nick

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*"This whole band
is done on a wing
and a prayer, really."*



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Drake-like intro and then the drums kick in. Finally, there's this amazing, huge part where the piano comes in. It's like a rollercoaster ride. "'Morning Song' is gospel," says Chris, "that uplift is intentional. That's why people like the Swans and Nick Cave get on my nerves," he continues. "It's like they're into that obvious dark side—and wallowing in it rather than cathartically processing through it, like Lowell George," he adds, or "'Tears of Rage' from Big Pink. That's what gospel means, that's what the blues is all about." Chris has an ancient autographed promotional copy of an early Dylan album where Bob talks about singing the blues to help get out of them, not to masochistically marinate in them. "Some of those English bands seem to think oppression and alienation is exclusive to them," Chris sneers. "Please!"

By now, if you think the Crowes used some high tech studio wizardry to achieve the hot immediacy of *The Southern Harmony...*, you obviously have not been paying attention. "I mixed 'Thorn in My Pride' with our engineer Brendan at the Record Plant—and I hated it," says Chris. "They had this huge board with digital computers and shit, which Brendan loves. Forget it, I went over to Hollywood Sound, got on that little Neve board, and hot-mixed the



whole rest of the album in one evening. What else do you need?" According to Chris, that's why their records sound different on radio. "I don't have an ear for

hit records," he admits. "That's the only reason we're any good—we don't know what the fuck we're doing, we just do it. You can analyze it all later." For the Crowes, structure and discipline has to come from inside, not from some codified set of rules or formulas. This is a band that thinks with their hearts and feels with their heads.

Obviously they're on to something. The next morning at breakfast, the band gathers in the hotel lobby to check out the new *Billboard*. *The Southern Harmony...* enters the charts at #1. The guys are pleased but subdued, even a bit somber. After all this, they don't want to lose their sense of themselves. "You know, Woody Guthrie, he never separated himself from folks," reflects Chris. "Maybe the Crowes are going to be one of the bands in the next five or six years that brings it around to what's important, I don't know." And what is important to the country's newest #1 band? Rich Robinson looks pensive. "Maybe if I still have a vital relationship with my music, the audience, my band in 15 years or so I'll have the right to talk about 'success,' and what it means."

Chris Robinson pauses, then breaks into an impish grin. "When the critics start saying that Mark Farrow of Grand Funk is cool, then I'll know things have really changed! I don't care if he is a born-again whatever, 'Nothing Is The Same' from *Closer To Home* is a bad song," Chris chortles. "And you gotta admit, the guy had great bellbottoms!"

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