

Interview with ex-Talking Head and Tom Tom Club's Chris Frantz

Dec. 15, 2002

Just in time for the holiday season ex-Talking Heads turned Tom Tom Club alumni Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth are filling their fan's Christmas stockings with two new downloadable holiday chestnuts from their website, [http://www.tomtomclub.net](#).

Both Chris and Tina, along with David Byrne and Jerry Harrison were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame earlier this year, and while their work with the Talking Heads is what they may be best known for, the wedded couple have also, for the last twenty years, been busy making their own brand of uninhibited party music with their band Tom Tom Club.

Surprisingly, its their own music with the Tom Tom Club, and not the Talking Heads, that has permeated itself into so many different styles of music over the past two decades, as their 1983 hit "Genius of Love" is the most sampled song of all time, with artists such as 2PAC, Ziggy Marley, the X-ecutioners and Mariah Carey either sampling bits or recreating the entire song.

Livewire's Tony Bonyata caught up with Chris to talk about the Heads, the impact of Tom Tom Club, as well as their delightful new stocking stuffers.

Livewire: I understand that you're giving your fans a couple of early Christmas presents on your web site this season.

Chris: Yeah, we are. The first one, which is already posted on the homepage of our site, tomtomclub.com, is a very traditional, beautiful and kind of chilled-out French carol called "Il Est Ne," which is French for "He Is Born." It's very traditional, and I'm sure you'll recognize it when you hear the melody.

Livewire: I actually have heard it and it's really beautiful. You've got the old school beat with the even older school carol.

Chris: Ancient school (laughs). We're doing two. We wanted one to be kind of, you know...everybody's going through a lot of stress these days, no matter how well off you are and how many advantages you have, it's a stressful time in everybody's lives. So we wanted to do one that was relaxing and peaceful and that contained some of those old holiday values. The second song is just the opposite. It's uptempo and very festive, dancey party track.

Livewire: More in line with the music that Tom Tom Club is known for then?

Chris: Yes, except even a little more so. It's really a full-on party song. We just started mixing it today. Hopefully in the very near future that'll be up on the site too. I'd say sometime early next week. I'm really happy with it. It's called "Christmas In The Club." We just put some Jamaican 'toasting' on it last night by our guy Mystic Bowie. And we're adding some scratching with our DJ Kid Ginseng right now. Then we're mixing it. It's not a serious song at all, but if you're serious about having a good time then you'll like it (laughs).

Livewire: Does the 'club' reference in the song refer to your home / studio which you call the Clubhouse?

Chris: It's sort of like a pun, because it could be any club. I mean, we're the Tom Tom Club and our studio is the Clubhouse. It a way of making it a little more personal, but not overly personal (laughs). I notice if you listen to the R&B stations everybody's talking about being 'all up in the club.' So why not us too?

Livewire: You also recently released your latest album Live at The Clubhouse, which you recorded live in your home studio last year. From the sounds of it, that recording turned out to be one helluva party.

Chris: It was very good! It wasn't a huge party - we had about 60 or 80 people and we had a really good caterer and the bar never ran out of anything and everybody had a real good time. We played the set twice, once in the mid-afternoon then we took a little break to join

the festivities. Then we played again later in the evening. So we had two takes of each song to choose from. I'm really glad we did it that way because we have such a good band and we wanted to record while we were all still together, before anybody went off to work with some superstar, or whatever. You never know when one of your bandmembers is going to have to work for Sting (laughs). Or even, God forbid, Michael Bolton. ♦

Livewire: Has that happened? ♦

Chris: Yes, but I'm not allowed to say which one (laughs). So anyway, we thought we should record this for posterity. When we were on a little tour right after September 11th happened we thought, 'let's turn all the stress and paranoia that people have right now and spin it around into a good thing, like they do with Soca music or African musicians do in Africa when, like Fela [Kuti] did, for example, when the police and the government were bothering him, he would just have a huge party and jam for hours. So it's kind of like that type of thing. Of course we're not personally persecuted or anything like the way Fela was but...'

Livewire: It's a matter of lifting the spirits when you're low. ♦

Chris: Yes, thank you. I'm glad we did it at home, because we considered doing at CBGBs or at a nightclub in Chapel Hill, and even though they're all great places to play, they may not be the greatest places to record. Our studio is kind of built into our home, so it's a place you can ramble and we can do a pretty good recording here. The band is really comfortable here, because this where we rehearse, and its where we recorded our past few albums. The vibe is very good. ♦

Livewire: You described in your press release that although no one actual performed any sex acts while you were playing for this record, that it has happened from time to time. Now that's what I call a party band! ♦

Chris: (Laughs) We've had that once of twice. The last time was when we played in Los Angeles. Where are you calling from, by the way? ♦

Livewire: In between Milwaukee and Chicago in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. ♦

Chris: Oh, nice. It must be kind of nippy up there. ♦

Livewire: Yeah, snow, cold. Christmas season is definitely here. ♦

Chris: So anyway, we get these over zealous young men and their girlfriends. It doesn't happen all the time, but it's happened occasionally where one of them will like lean up against the front of the stage and the guy is behind her, and it starts off as just dancing and then it gets into something more. ♦

Livewire: Don't come a knockin' if the monitors are a rocking. ♦

Chris: Yeah, I don't know if it's just the band or if its the band and the Ecstasy or what. ♦

Livewire: Just before you and Tina first formed Tom Tom Club, the Talking Heads seemed to be the hippest band on the planet. What made you decide to branch out on your own back then? ♦

Chris: Well, we really didn't have any desire or feel any need to branch out but David [Byrne] and Jerry Harrison, who's from Wisconsin, by the way... ♦

Livewire: Doesn't he live in Milwaukee? ♦

Chris: He doesn't live there any more. He lives in California. He was in Milwaukee for awhile after, unfortunately, his mother died and then he decided to make a move to Marin County. But I know he's still very fond of Milwaukee. ♦

Livewire: He must like beer then, too. ♦

Chris: Oh, he's a big beer lover. ♦

Livewire: It's fun city. ♦

Chris: Yeah, I've been there. We played this funny little place called Shank Hall. ♦

Livewire: Did you know that was named after the fictitious music hall in the Spinal Tap movie? ♦

Chris: Yes, I think that's so funny. I thought maybe

that the place in Spinal Tap was named after this until I got there and then I realized, 'it's not really a hall.' (laughs)

Livewire: And they've got the Stonehenge incorporated into their logo.

Chris: Yes. But anyway, David was doing a solo project called The Catherine Wheel with the choreographer Twyla Tharp. She did the ballet and he did the music for the ballet. And Jerry decided, 'Well David's doing something, I'm going to do something.' He did his first solo album, which was called The Red and The Black. We knew that they were going to be tied up with these for some time, so we thought, "maybe we better do something." And so we did. And Chris Blackwell, the man who founded Island Records and who's a legendary 'cool' guy in the music business said to us, 'why don't you come down to Compass Point,' which is a studio in Nassau, The Bahamas that he owned - and still does. We had recorded a couple of Talking Heads albums there already, More Songs About Buildings And Food and Remain In Light. So we had met him and he liked our group a lot, and he said, 'come on down to the studio and I'll give you some studio time to do a single, and if I like it we'll release it. And if it does okay then you can do a whole album.' So we recorded this song called "Wordy Rappinghood" and it did very well in Europe and Latin America, and also over in Asia. It didn't really catch on in the United States that much, though. But anyway, he was encouraged and said, this is good. I want you do a whole album.' So we did and the album was released in the United States, but not until after he was importing copies of "Genius of Love," which sold like 100,000 12-inch singles before Warner Brothers and Sire woke up and said, 'oh, I guess we better put this record out' (laughs). A little bit later it was released in the United States, but the song that was popular here was "Genius Of Love."

Livewire: Did you have any idea of the staying power and the influence and how huge just that one song "Genius Of Love" would become?

Chris: Well, one always hopes that you're going to have influence and staying power but you never know (laughs). Fortunately it one of those things that crosses the generation gap (laughs), not that there is that much of a generation gap these days. But it's an all ages kind of song.

Livewire: Of the dozens and dozens of artists that have sampled your music, which ones really stand out for you and Tina?

Chris: Well, as much as you wouldn't think so, I think Mariah Carey did a pretty amazing job with that song "Fantasy," which is basically a re-write of "Genius Of Love." We're very grateful that she did it, to be honest, because it's helping to put our kids through school. We always loved Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's version's called "It's Nasty."

Livewire: Was that one of the earlier ones?

Chris: I think it was the first. It was like '82. There's also one from around that time called "Genius Rap," by some guys named Jekyl & Hyde. The early ones were all real hardcore hip-hop. It just continues to be used. There's a French hip-hop band that just asked our permission to use it, and we agreed because it's a really good song. I know that De La Soul was working on a song based on the "Genius Of Love" sample, with a guest singer named Sean Paul, a Jamaican guy.

Livewire: And it just goes on and on.

Chris: Yeah, it just continues. I keep thinking that someday people are going to get tired of it (laughs). But, I mean, how perfect was that song for that Kia [car] commercial. It's a good economy song for a good economy car.

Livewire: How much influence do you feel Tom Tom Club had in spreading the word of hip-hop to a broader audience when it was still a relatively new form of music?

Chris: Well, we do our best. I don't know how much influence we really had, because we never put our pictures on the albums or anything and we

never really promoted the Talking Heads connection, because we wanted to keep it separate from Talking Heads. A lot of people don't really know who the Tom Tom Club are. In fact, it's pretty much me and Tina with our friends, whoever they happen to be at the time. Musical partners, you know?

Livewire: The future Michael Bolton bass player?

Chris: Right (laughs). But I'd like to think that we've had some influence. When I listen to Destiny's Child or even Missy Elliott, I hear the influence.

Livewire: You may not be giving yourself enough credit, though, because of the many indirect influences. Maybe not that many people know who Tom Tom Club are as you mentioned, but everybody knows "Genius of Love," which came out about the same time as Debbie Harry's "Rapture." It seems before those two songs came out young white America wasn't aware of hip-hop at the time. MTV wasn't promoting it.

Chris: That's for sure.

Livewire: Then you have these two songs where Tina's rapping and Debbie Harry's rapping, and all of a sudden white America is introduced to rap music.

Chris: Yeah, I guess you're right. Being in Lower Manhattan at the time, we were tuned into what was going on - not just with the music, but also with the graffiti art and breakdancers. I remember going for the first time to a place called The Roxy in New York because you can see people breakdancing there (laughs). That's the only reason I went - to see these people who could actually breakdance. It's amazing, kid's are still doing that. I just saw on the news last night some Arab kids in Qatar doing that.

Livewire: Any plans for an upcoming tour?

Chris: We're looking for a good package to go out on, because we have a large band with eight people.

Livewire: When you say package, do you mean multi-bands?

Chris: Yeah. There's a couple of ideas floating around at the moment and I hope one of them comes to fruition soon. It would be too early to say what the package would be, but that's what we're hoping to do. As much as we love playing the small clubs and places like that, we'd really like, at this point, to get ourselves in front of a larger audience. I'm not talking about arenas or anything, but just like nice theaters and larger clubs. The things we're looking at will hopefully happen in the spring, or maybe even late winter. One is called SnoCore. It usually takes place during those winter doldrums in February / March. We're definitely down for a few festivals this summer. If worse comes to worse we'll do some little tours like we usually do, but we're hoping to take it to the next phase. The economy being what it is right now I think it's better if you're on a package with a bunch of bands - you know, sort of spread the love that way.

Livewire: Are you working on any new material?

Chris: Yes. Besides the two Christmas things, we've got a about a dozen new tracks we're working on.

Livewire: Would your spring tour coincide with the new album?

Chris: No, that would be too early. I think that we would promoting our live record.

Livewire: Congratulations also for your recent induction with the Talking Heads into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall Of Fame earlier this year.

Chris: Thank you.

Livewire: Was there still a magic for you performing together after so long?

Chris: Oh, absolutely! Isn't it too bad that we can't explore that further. But what can I say? I don't think it's going to happen (laughs).

Livewire: Your statement during that performance was well put then when you thanked the Hall of Fame for "giving the band a happy ending." Although from what I'm hearing now, it's not necessarily a closed book.

Chris: Well, I always thought that if a band is really

good and the chemistry is unique that it should continue. But I guess David is just very happy doing his solo career. You know, he's got different band every time he goes out. It's just a whole different world, then what we used to have. We used to really feel like the band was our family. We do feel that way about our Tom Tom Club band, but not everybody is a family guy (laughs). ♦

Livewire: Did ever think when you first formed this band back in '81 that you'd still be at it some 20 years later? ♦

Chris: Actually I didn't think it would last this long. When I was in college, where I met Tina and David, I studied painting. And I always thought, 'well, I'll do this rock 'n' roll thing for a few years. And hopefully do well enough to retire and become a painter.' But I just haven't done that well enough yet (laughs). ♦

Livewire: I've seen photos on your website of you and Tina surrounding by some paintings. Are these your work? ♦

Chris: Some of it is, yes, and some them are paintings done by a friend of ours. And then there's one that's a imitation of Jean Michael Basquiat. ♦

Livewire: They're very attractive. ♦

Chris: Well, thank you! We did the Basquiat one ourselves when we were doing a song called "The Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta," which is the title of a Basquiat painting. So while we were recording the song we did the painting too. Sort of an homage. ♦

Livewire: How long have you and Tina been together? ♦

Chris: We are celebrating our 25th year of marriage. ♦

Livewire: Congratulations! That has to be one of the longest marriages in the history of entertainment! ♦

Chris: I think it might be, yeah. Although George Burns and Gracie Allen were married a pretty long time (laughs). ♦

Livewire: Let's just say rock 'n' roll then. ♦

Chris: It's remarkable. It's like a miracle. ♦

--- ♦

Addendum : Both "Il Est Ne" and "Christmas in the Club" were available for download from the Tom Tom Club site back in 2002 and 2003 only. In 2007, both songs were released as Ultimate Christmas Presents on limited edition 7" colored vinyl and 4-track CD single. Both formats are still available for sale at the ♦ [Tom Tom Club website](#).