

Tony Christie

Biog

“I can’t tell you how, but I always knew I could sing.” – Tony Christie

Early Days

Tony recently celebrated 50 years in music, but it all began with his primary school choir in Conisbrough, South Yorkshire. The school music teacher heard young Anthony Fitzgerald (as he was then), and promptly moved him to the front row of the choir. From then on singing was part of Tony’s life.

As a teenager Tony and a friend worked on their own version of the Everly Brothers, calling themselves The Grant Brothers, and taking their act to entertain in hospitals and working mens clubs. At the same time Tony was studying accountancy during the day - “my dad wanted me to have something to fall back on, so I did accountancy, but I was hopeless. I didn’t have an accountant’s bone in my body.”

It wasn’t long before The Grant Brothers parted, and Tony moved on to join northern club sensations The Counterbeats. One afternoon in 1965, before a show in Leicester, he popped to the cinema to see the film Darling, starring Julie Christie.

“Back then Fitzgerald wasn’t really a suitable pop name. So I needed a stage name. Like every young man of the era, I was smitten with Julie Christie and so I became Tony Christie.

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The Counterbeats didn’t last and in 1966 Tony Christie, now a solo act, moved to London where he was talent spotted by mod-guru and Who producer Shel Talmy. A single was cut: “Life’s Too Good To Waste” which featured Jimmy Page on guitar – sadly, it wasn’t a hit and so Christie moved back home, and back to clubland.

Times were hard but luckily the northern clubs took Tony to their heart. Soon he was winning awards and, at one such ceremony at Blackpool’s Winter Gardens, he met Harvey Lisberg, the manager of Hermans Hermits and, eventually, 10cc. “I’ll make you a star”, Harvey promised.

Success & Setbacks

After a slight setback when ‘God Is On My Side’, was banned, Lisberg was right. Once ‘Las Vegas’ sped to Number 21 at the start of 1971, the international hits flowed: ‘I Did What I Did For Maria’ (Number 2), ‘(Is This The Way To) Amarillo’, ‘Avenues And Alleyways’, (the theme to The Protectors), etc, etc. These were big songs for a big voice, and they were followed by big tours.

“I didn’t have time to enjoy it. I was working 52 weeks a year 7 days a week. I was forever on the road, forever away from my family.”

Eventually, music trends changed and the hits began to peter out (despite a splendid turn as Magaldi in the recorded version of Evita), but those years on the road ensured there would always be a Tony Christie audience.

“I was always a performer who made records, rather than the other way round. I thought I’d have another 20 years doing this and become an all-round entertainer like Sammy Davis Jnr.”

When the British nightclub circuit disintegrated, he simply concentrated on West Germany, a country which adored him more than any other after his enormous hit, Sweet September (“a Belgian song with a Greek feel”). Unable to get a British record deal (“that really hurt”), he sold his Sheffield house and, with his European career blossoming, went to live in Spain.

By the early '90s according to Piccadilly Radio in Manchester, he had died.
“One of our friends rang them and said they’d just had dinner with me and my wife in Spain and I looked quite well.”

Comeback

But Christie hadn’t been forgotten in his old Sheffield stomping ground, where a new generation lauded their pre-punk hero. In 1999, out of the blue, old fan Jarvis Cocker sent him a new song with the same title as an old Christie album track, Walk Like A Panther.

“The lyrics were great. My son Sean said ‘do it dad, it’s quirky, it’s got something about it’. Next thing, blow me, we’re getting Radio 1 plays, it’s a Top 10 hit and I’m back doing Top Of The Pops after 25 years. Amazing, absolutely amazing.”

In 2005, he’d booked a rare British tour and was about to release a greatest hits album when the funniest moment of Phoenix Nights saw Max and Paddy singing (Is This The Way To) Amarillo to some bemused Asian elders.

“I nearly fell off my chair laughing. Then the phone started ringing...”

It never stopped. The tour sold out, ‘The Definitive Tony Christie’ reached Number 3 and then (Is This The Way To) Amarillo – the original 1971 version, not a remix or a re-recording – found itself as that year’s Comic Relief anthem. After seven weeks at Number 1 (one of which was spent with the triple platinum ‘Definitive Tony Christie’ topping the album charts), everyone remembered Tony Christie.

“It was mental, but nice mental.”

Soon after, Tony moved back to Lichfield, 200 yards away from son Sean and his family.

Father and son – now artist and manager – heard a track by Richard Hawley called Coles Corner. The song was great and so was its production. “Dad,” said Sean, “do you remember that Richard Hawley sent you Coles Corner a couple of years ago? But you couldn’t record it as you were busy with Amarillo?”

Hawley, like Jarvis Cocker, was a big fan, so much so he didn’t just want to produce a version of Coles Corner, he wanted to produce a whole album.

The result was 'Made In Sheffield, a collaboration with Sheffield's finest music makers. Arctic Monkeys, Jarvis Cocker, The Human League and The All Seeing Eye were contributors. The making of the album was filmed by award winning director Don Letts.

'Made In Sheffield' was a major commercial and artistic success, leading to the next and most recent project;

Now's The Time!

Tony Christie is revisiting his musical roots with Now's The Time. He explores the soul side of his early career, bringing together the sounds of northern soul, British beat, and filmic sound-tracks. There's a nod to Johnny Cash, some wonderful, poignant ballads and some mod-stompers. Quite simply, it's the best album of a long and impeccable career.

Beautifully conceived, and movingly delivered.