



Chris Koster
 — the musician
 who could be
 rock king
 someday
 soon

Chris Koster thought he'd hit the big time when he got a deal with Sony Music — until he realized he was living the rock star life but he wasn't doing any rocking. Back in town, Koster has made a new album and he did it his way. ■ SEE PAGES 4-5

Chris Koster — Kingston prince to rock king?

**He ditched Sony and made a new album alone.
 Is the rocker crazy or a musical mastermind?**

'If it fails, it falls on my shoulders and no one else's,' he says

By Greg Burluk
 Whig-Standard Staff Writer

In Kingston, it seems like you can't have a high-profile gig without Chris Koster being on the bill.

There's last fall's benefit show, Across the Causeway, for which he was selected by The Tragically Hip; the winter concert Feb-Fest, in which he opened for Thornley; and the 2003 A Joe Show, in which he played on the same bill as The Doobie Brothers.

And now, a mature CD should raise Koster's profile even higher.

Tonight, he celebrates the release of *Secrets of the Lonely*, which took two years to make, at the Merchant Tap House in downtown Kingston.

The 28-year-old didn't scribble with his first solo CD. He'd previously made albums as frontman for the groups the Vibewell and Color.

Secrets of the Lonely has strings and a heavily layered sound. Its 15 songs were culled from 100 Koster compositions that were demoed for the album.

"I'm a fan of old-school music," Koster says.

"I remember when it used to be a religious act opening a record or a CD because you would have a personal piece from the artist or band. And that's how I wanted to make this record.

"It's a life lesson that you have to relate to other people but for this record, I wanted to be self-reliant and self-involved. If it fails, it falls on my shoulders and no one else's. I

don't have to show someone what I want on bass and drums. I do it myself. I'd say 95 per cent of the music on the album is played by me."

Koster was looking for a different kind of sound, too.

"I didn't want to sound like anyone else although it's not like I'm vain enough to think I could do something that no one else has ever done," he says.

"But I didn't want to make a glossed-over, over-produced record. And I didn't want a wall of guitars because that's what everyone does and it's so easy to multi-track six guitars. I wanted to produce it well in the '70s sense. My favourite records are far from perfect."

Still, there's a sense of vision and professionalism on *Secrets of the Lonely* that's rarely heard on local discs. It's got a striking lushness. Koster originally recorded the songs on a digital 16-track recorder at his home. "Then I dumped it all into a computer at the Bathouse [The Hip's studio]," Koster says.

"I picked 19 songs and then toiled away at the best 15 of them. Actually it didn't take very long to gloss them up."

All but one of the songs are originals, and that song, *When U Were Mine*, was first done by Prince.

"In his version, it's very upbeat and poppy which is a huge contradiction to the very sad lyric," Koster says.

"I took it and made it sound as depressing as possible to go with the lyrics."

When U Were Mine fits the theme of the CD.

"At the time I was going through some intense stuff mentally," Koster says.

"I don't believe in music as therapy but I also don't believe in camouflaging stuff. When I'm listening to a record I like to be told how the singer is feeling.

"And this record thematically encompasses recurring things. One of them is that the lonely aren't necessarily people who are alone. More of them are people like me who don't live outside their brain. I tried to make the songs as cohesive as possible so that as you're listening it's like you're reading a story."

The songwriter's state of mind at the time is perhaps why he wrote those 100 songs.

"It was huge purge for me and I didn't want to shorten it," he says.

"A lot of the songs that didn't get onto the album we play live. I figure I've got enough material now for six albums.

"I'm still writing a couple of songs a week. For a while there I was writing a song a day and that's recording it in a full demo version."

And, yes, the lyrical content is sometimes bleak as witnessed by songs with titles such as *Catastrophizing*, *The Alarmist*, *Sufferville*, the title track, and *I Don't Care (Anymore)*.

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"*The Alarmist* is a bit of a note to me," Koster says. "I tend to overthink things and worry. I love the line in *Catastrophizing* that says: 'I found out second hand, I've been catastrophizing'. It's all about a panic attack. And the title track is also about panic."

But Koster found humour even in the downer songs.

"*Sufferville* sounds like it could be as depressing a song as you could think of but I thought it was hilarious. It's poking fun at the idea that you have to be down and out to create something worthwhile," he says.

One of the songs he's most proud of is *I Don't Care (Anymore)*, the last track of three that are hidden at the end of the disc.

"It was exactly what I wanted to say at the time," he says. "And I tried something a little different in that it's half spoken over a background of just two chords."

Aside from its glistening production, another notable element on the disc is Koster's falsetto.

"I have to use every avenue I have at my disposal," says Koster, who admits he's a big fan of Prince, someone else who uses falsetto extensively. "I'm limited in a lot of ways so I have to use as much voice as possible."

When Koster left Color in 2003, he became a solo act for a while.

"I did a lot of showcasing with just piano and vocals and a lot of gigging in Toronto," he says.

Slowly he began to build a band again. There is guitarist Joe Carscallen, who played with him both Color and the Vibewell. Then there's bassist Scot Mulligan, whom Koster calls "my go-to guy."

"That was the nucleus of the band. It took a long time to find a drummer because if you have a

ONLY THE LONELY

Who: Chris Koster celebrates the release of *Secrets of the Lonely*

When: Tonight

Where: The Merchant Tap House, 6A Princess St.

Tickets: \$7 at the door

More info: www.chriskoster.ca

AND ... You can catch him again May 19 when Chris Koster and the Lonely gigs with the Golden Dogs at the Elixir Nightclub, 14 Garrett St.

good drummer you have a good band and as you might have gathered, I'm notoriously picky. And then we found Colin Blaimire who's a real musician on drums.

"And finally there was Cheri Rose who's a guitarist and backup singer. She was an amazing addition and once she joined we started sounding like a band."

Koster splits instrumental duties between keyboards and guitar.

Those high-profile local gigs weren't the only reason Koster has been touted for stardom.

Sony Music signed him to a nine-month development deal that ended a year and a half ago. Koster wasn't impressed.

"They were treating me like a star," he says. "There was a lot of first-class trains and limos but very little making music."

"I learned that it's hard to go in the door of a major label and still come out an artist. These days, not only do you not get a second record if you don't sell a lot, you don't get a second single.

"What would that have done to artists like U2, Prince and even Michael Jackson? Prince didn't become popular till his sixth record." ■



Local rocker Chris Koster says he did 95 per cent of the music on his new album, *Secrets of the Lonely*.

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