



# Mike Massey

*A True Artist Comes Full Circle*



Rick Tvedt

*I've known Mike Massey since we were about six years old. He moved to my hometown of Mount Horeb where we attended first grade together. He would pick me up on the way to school and we used to play Wild Wild West together during recess. He played Artemus Gordon, if I recall. I have distinct memories of his mother not allowing him to leave the yard of their house by the Catholic church, but Mike tells me I'm all wrong on that. We were both infatuated with our first grade teacher, Miss Marsh, who got married during Christmas break and broke our hearts. He moved away after the third grade and I didn't hear of him again until much later. It was 1981 and I had just moved back to Wisconsin after a nearly five-year absence. I was reading something in one of the local newspapers about a great Madison band called Chaser, which was fronted by Mike Massey. Incredulous, I investigated and sure enough, it was the same Mike Massey. Artemus had transformed into Mick Jagger.*

*Massey is one of the few people I know who have made music their life. We all know many great players who give up the music business for the stability of family and other career opportunities, sometimes to the disbelief of their musical peers. Massey has family and stability now but continues to make his living playing music and in some very creative ways, as you will read.*

It's easy to forget or remain unaware of how many musicians live in our midst who almost hit it big. In the pre-digital age fame was even a bigger deal than it is now. Today we have Pro Tools and even the most mediocre talents can be made to sound like gods. (Ever hear the joke about the digital recording engineer who says, "That really sucked, guys...come on in!")? In addition, live sound engineering can ensure that you will sound as fabulous as you look in concert. Before the digital revolution, however, music fans were not so easily duped and you had to be the real thing. Mike Massey has lived most of his adult life tight-roping a line between fame and relative obscurity. Above all, he is the real thing: a skilled songwriter who savors his most precious opportunities. Massey says he has written over two hundred songs and there are probably another seventy-five or so that he can't recall.

Massey started playing piano around ten years of age, taking lessons for a short time. He gave it up because he would show up for his lesson playing melodies not remotely close to what was written. When queried by the teacher his response was, "This sounds better." At fourteen he picked up the piano again when he discovered a Lennon and McCartney songbook. He suddenly found he was playing music he could sing along to, and it was an epiphany for him.

## The Chaser Saga

In 1977 Massey helped form Chaser from a high school band named Legend, a fifties and sixties cover band that included his future longtime musical associates: drummer Tony Cerniglia and guitarist Mike Ripp. Chaser's original bassist, Pat Hines, was replaced by Steve Johnson when Hines turned down the opportunity

to go on the road in 1978. Johnson and Cerniglia would later team up in another popular band, Seventeen Rhinos. Johnson always had a keen business sense (he's currently the head of Johnson Sales and Implement near DeForest) and he owned a P.A. system.

Cerniglia's father was the head of security at the Dane County Coliseum and Massey and Cerniglia would take up positions at concerts in order to get backstage



access. At a Jethro Tull concert Massey met the Director of National Publicity for Chrysalis Records, Rick Ambrose. Ambrose was impressed enough with the exchange to stay on an extra day and see Chaser perform for a frat party at the Karakahl Inn in Mount Horeb. "He saw something that he liked in us - some spark, some energy that he thought he could mold into something," Massey says. "And so he wanted to manage us. He was the big brain-child behind Chaser. He was based in Los Angeles and gave us the coast influence. Without that we would have been like every other band here, but he gave us that edge; those things that were right on the edge of what was happening in Europe and on the coasts, both musically and stylistically. We learned songs off of the Cars' demo that had circulated to all the record labels.

We were playing "Let the Good Times Roll" before their album was released. When it came out people said, 'Did you hear them? They're playing your song!' We had a real big advantage with Rick; he's a genius and a wonderful man."

And so Chaser packed up Johnson's P.A. and hit the road in 1978. They were booked by the GMA agency in Minneapolis and played Minnesota, Iowa, North and South Dakota, Illinois, and Wisconsin almost non-stop. For many years Massey had no permanent address as he would have about three days a month at home, which meant either a girlfriend's place or his family home. "At that time it was lucrative; we made pretty good money," Massey says. "There were a lot of bands out there doing it." Although they were recording and courting labels with demos, they did not tour on the strength of an official release.

"We were writing all the time on the road," Massey says. "Here's my advice to a young band: If you want to get good, go on the road. Because on the road you live with the guys, you live the lifestyle, you create inspiration for yourself on a daily basis, and when you play five or six nights and do that one after another after another you can't help but get incredibly tight and incredibly good. What you do is you start experimenting on a nightly basis and you

keep what works and toss the stuff that doesn't and it all comes together. All of a sudden it's like a light bulb goes on."

Ambrose was working hard to get the band a deal and began to experience a conflict with Chrysalis which apparently led to the label issuing him an ultimatum. He chose to stick with Chaser. Ambrose then set up two tours that took Chaser to California. In 1979 they played their way to the West Coast and stayed in Ambrose's apartment for a month. The band was flourishing, playing in all the L.A. clubs,



**Andy Warhol visits Chaser in Electric Lady Studios during the recording of their song named "Andy."**

recording and writing new material. "We weren't pretentious. We were out there doing what we did best and the road prepared us for that," Massey says. In 1980 they went back for two weeks, a tour that was financed by Peter Leeds, who was Blondie's manager and a Chrysalis connection. This time the group stayed in the Tropicana Hotel, a hotbed of entertainers. The band played Flippers on the corner of Santa Monica and La Hacienda Boulevards. "We had representatives from eight labels there to see us that night," Massey says. "Jeff Workman, who was then Journey's producer, was also in the audience. Rick had succeeded in getting them all there for one show. In retrospect I have to say it wasn't one of our better shows. Who knows why things happen the way they do. The night before we played a show that would have kicked everybody's ass."

But they did well enough that

night to get interest from Atlantic Records and the thought of being an Atlantic act thrilled the band. In 1981 they were brought to New York for a very lucrative demo recording deal. They recorded six songs at Electric Lady Studios, the same studio in which the Stones had recorded and where Foreigner recorded *Foreigner 4*. "It went to the company and we were convinced we would be signed to Atlantic," Massey says. "It went all the way up to the highest tiers and the president of the label declined. We were devastated."

Chaser continued to play and write songs. In 1981 Jonathon Little at Madison's Z-104 began to spin one of the band's demos, "Camp it Up." The song generated a massive response from listeners and charted regionally. Ambrose was still involved, although he started coming up with some outrageous ideas in order to generate capital. At one point he wanted Chaser to perform *The Wall* as a Pink Floyd tribute band. The band didn't want to entertain that or any other such ideas and eventually, in 1983, Ambrose gave up on them. Chaser was still performing in Iowa and Illinois and at Madison institutions Headliners and the Shuffle Inn. One of their last gigs was opening for Cheap Trick at Northern Illinois University in a small, grimy club. Earlier that same day the band had shared a mammoth festival stage with Loverboy and the Go-Gos. The ups and downs were putting strain on the band and it was Cerniglia who precipitated the breakup. Massey says the Cheap Trick gig was the best show that Chaser ever played.

"Chaser was a great band," says Massey. We had the greatest chemistry. We could jam for twenty minutes on something and just with the most minute glance everyone would know when we were coming back. It was that much of a fraternal order of musicians. You take that for granted and then when you lose it you spend the rest of your life trying to find it again, and that's what I've been doing. If I had to say anything at all detrimental about the band it was that we tried to conform a little too much to what was happening in the music scene and if you do that, you're already too late. It took us a long time to realize that.

"We had disco, 'urban cowboy', punk and new wave; it all happened during the life of Chaser. We were labeled a dinosaur and everything else. And then only a few years after Chaser broke up you had the hair bands come out like Poison and Motley Crue and all that stuff that we were better than. It was the second wave of metal. We weren't a hair band but we were better than those people. We just didn't hold out long enough."

Massey readily admits he had a serious problem with alcohol that undoubtedly contributed to the band's dissolution. At that time, the late seventies and early eighties, the fans would line up outside the dressing room with every assortment of drug to offer the band. To be sure, Chaser did their share of partying, but remained remarkably sober during performances. Massey gave up marijuana in 1978 but alcohol continued to be a problem.

"I'm still really good friends with the guys," Massey says, "and let me say right here: Chaser fans unite and lobby Steve because he is the last holdout for a Chaser reunion!"

Remarkably, Chaser never released a recording. The demo masters

still exist and Massey has found a recording of a live show that was done on cassette. Other live recordings have surfaced as well. Thus far there are no plans to compile any of these recordings but Massey would love to re-record ten of Chaser's best songs now, as he believes they still sound as current and fresh as anything that's out there today.

### Boys in White

For about six months after Chaser split Massey did some solo piano shows, some of which were at Bunky's on the corner of Park and Regent Streets in Madison. Those shows went over very well and solo performances are something he still pursues with vigor to this day.

Soon Cerniglia was asking Massey if he'd like to be in another band, and Boys In White were born. The original Boys In White guitarist was Brian Kroening, who later played in *Seventeen Rhinos*, but he left soon after Massey joined. According to Massey they both were suffering from enormous egos at the time and had difficulty fitting both their heads



through the door. Mike Ripp then returned to the fold to play guitar. The bass parts were handled by Rod Ellenbecker, and Ripp's younger brother Paul joined in on keyboards. "The downfall of that band was that we conformed way too much to the electronic sounds that were happening in the eighties," Massey says. "A lot of really good pop songs came out of Boys in White, though." Cerniglia switched to electronic drums, further illustrating the band's allegiance to the technological movement of the day. One of the band's singles, "Help Me," did very well on Z-104, charting in 1983. The band's popularity spiked with a *Star Search* television appearance. "We only made one *Star Search* appearance," Massey says, "because we were too much like Duran Duran and that was already being done."

Boys in White had a good run, lasting nearly four years. The end came in 1988 as the drinking age was being raised and the golden era of the live music scene was in its twilight. "What got really tiring for me with Boys in White was all the high school gigs we were doing near the end," Massey says. "I was a major reason for the demise of the band, too. I had just met my future wife Robin and I missed spending time with her and the rest of my family. This is 1988 now and it had been ten years of making music and touring. My abuse of alcohol also led to my demise in the band. I couldn't see it then. The band had also simply run its course, though, it being somewhat contrived."

### Closing the Circle

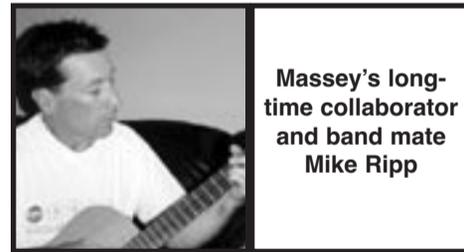
After Boys In White broke up Massey floundered for a bit before starting up a duo act with his friend Mike Widmer playing hotels and resorts for about a year. In 1990 he married Robin and took a job at

the original WMAD in Sun Prairie. That job lasted for about eighteen months and represents virtually the only work Massey has done outside of music, brief stints as a car salesman at his father's lot notwithstanding. There were other musical projects, including Mike and the Tall Boys and a duo with the youngest of the Ripp brothers, Jim. In 1993 Massey committed himself to rehab and rid himself of his drinking problem for good. It was a life-changing and possibly life-saving event, giving him a fresh outlook.

In 1994 he began working in advertising doing scores for commercials, writing jingles and working on corporate

productions. Since then he has been awarded twelve Addy Awards for outstanding contributions in the field of advertising. He is indebted to Harvey Briggs, an ad rep and one of the Tall Boys, for ushering him into that arena. He also formed a trio called Massey, Ripp & Magellan with Mike Ripp and former Georgia Satellites drummer Mauro Magellan. Currently Massey holds down Friday

and Saturday nights at the Kalahari Resort in Wisconsin Dells and has been raising his two daughters, Emily and Anna. He is also part of the Thursday-night troupe that performs at the Slipper Club with Joy Dragland, whom Massey considers an extraordinary talent. Between the ad work and his constant gigging as a soloist he still makes his living at music. "I'm a lucky man," he says. "I'm playing and making a living. But I'm ready to work at being an artist again."



To that end, he's releasing two albums in 2004. The first one, entitled *Be Careful How You Say "Pianist"* is a collection of instrumental piano compositions and is currently being mastered by Dan Geocaris at Concept Productions. The album was recorded at Randy Green's Recording about four years ago and then set aside. Last Christmas Massey was listening to the tapes in Green's facility and was surprised by the quality of the work he had done. "I'm under tremendous pressure to put this out by everyone who's heard it," he says. "It's being played in restaurants and offices all over town. People keep asking me when it's going to be released for real." Those folks and the rest of us will have an answer, perhaps as soon as August.

Massey has also written a new crop of pop songs over the last year or two. "This is the first time I've had a batch of

songs that sound like one artist," he says. "The kiss of death that I've had over my life is that I've written in a myriad of different styles. When you hear this album you will know that it's me. There is continuity. It's vital pop; it's not retro, it's now." This album is still being recorded in Cerniglia's Spike Studio (he co-owns Spike with Steve Johnson and they call themselves the Teak Brothers). Cerniglia and Massey are co-producing and a plethora of local musicians are helping out: Mike Ripp, Mauro Magellan, Mary Gaines, Chris Wagoner, and backup vocalists that include Joy Dragland, Ameerah Tatum (who toured with Janet Jackson) and Jenifer Deprez (the Gatecrashers). Tentative album titles are *Second and Dayton* and *Radioexile* and the goal is also to release it by Christmas.

"I truly believe that when you sit at any given moment in your life, everything that's come before it contributes to the way you are," says Massey. "Some of the things I've done over the last ten years have been strictly for money but doing the Thursday night gigs at the Slipper Club with Joy has completely electrified me again. I'm going back to my youth and it was an easy step to take! Every show I do I am performing now as opposed to just going through the motions."

In addition to the two albums being released Massey has contributed songs to a musical that will be presented in September at the Bartell Theater; he and Dragland will play the lead roles. It was co-written by Billy Nahn, local television director, producer and writer. He and Nahn wrote one song together and there are nine other Massey compositions. It's a drama entitled *I Do, I Did* and is a classic American love story revolving around the marital relationship.

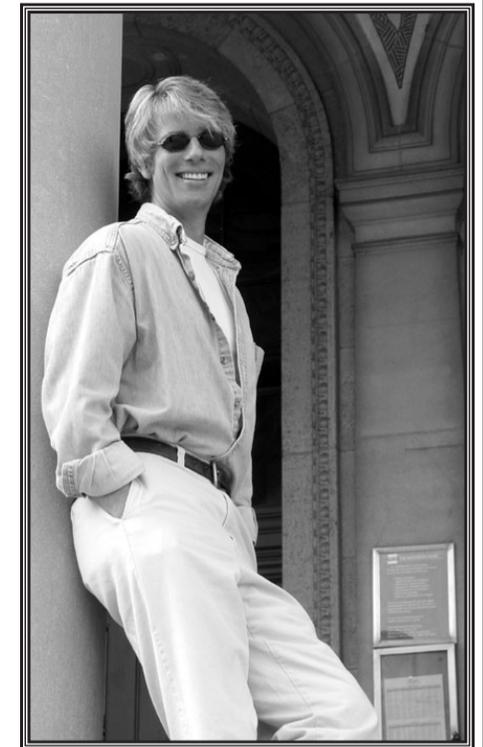
### Before The Music

"The single biggest words of wisdom I can impart to up-and-coming musicians is to just remain yourselves," Massey says. "They shouldn't try to be someone they're not. Don't ever get into a situation in a big city where you're trying to impress. Don't try to impress anybody because if you don't they'll be impressed by the lack of that. I have a story that I tell young musicians now about a time with my manager in Los Angeles in 1978. I had dinner with a young writer from *Rolling Stone*. I went to the dinner, not thinking that he would be writing about me because he wasn't, but trying to impress him by pretending to be a combination of Jagger, Bowie and Freddie Mercury. I was trying to be witty, acted like my shit didn't stink and drank too much. I didn't make a very good impression on him. After a while I asked Rick [Ambrose], 'What ever happened to Cameron?' and his reply that he was off writing a book somewhere. Well, it was Cameron Crowe and the book he was writing was *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Then when I watched (Crowe's film) *Almost Famous* for the first time it made me almost want to cry because one of the ongoing themes in that movie was that he was just looking for honesty in people. I knew I was one of those people that he probably just hated. Here was a great contact that I could have benefited from greatly and I blew it by not being myself. Just maintain that sense of yourself; draw on that un-spun, Midwestern value because it can only help you.

"Another thing would be to watch the substances. I know that it's part of it but especially when you're performing and when you're in public doing an interview or at an awards ceremony. Stay straight until afterwards. You're representing yourself every time you're in public and when you're

onstage. One night Jim Ripp and I had Wolfman Jack come into the hotel lounge we were playing in Iowa. You just never know who's going to be in the audience.

"When you're doing it, and you're achieving some success, enjoy the moment.



I go back to the awards ceremony again because when you're accepting that award and there's a room full of people, remember how that felt, because it can all go away tomorrow. And it does. Music is a very fleeting business. I'm lucky to have been this resilient in it and I'm going to make another push from a different angle and with more legitimacy. I remember looking out at a 10,000-seater and all the lighters going up and I remember savoring the moment. I can see it when I close my eyes. I remember doing *Star Search* on TV for 22 million people. I was live but the band was faking it! I can feel it now; I can remember the smell and the temperature of the lights. You need to remember the accomplishments in your life.

"People from the Midwest have this idea when they're starting out that they want to play the big clubs. But when you get to the Coast none of the clubs are big. The places where people would come to see us were all small. I literally had a two-foot space to move in at the best club we played in Los Angeles.

"My story is like one of those VH-1 *Behind the Music* stories only without the fame! – *Before the Music*! The substance abuse and then falling into the pits of hell and then coming back with the help of a good woman, crawling back out and discovering children and all of that! I thought I'd go through it backwards so I can be sober and enjoy it! I'm ten years behind in life because of rock-and-roll in terms of a family and buying a house and all of that. I wouldn't trade it for anything, though."

