



interview by **Aaron Andrews & Elizabeth Rhodes**

Chris Corner started his musical career by cofounding **Sneaker Pimps** with Liam Howe in Hartlepool, England. From 1994 to 2002 the group released three acclaimed albums of which the last two saw Corner expand his role to include that of vocalist. Corner moved on to form his own fiercely independent project, **IAMX**. Starting with an album release in 2004, IAMX has been Corner's core musical focus for his personal and **introspective** songs. Corner spoke with *Auxiliary* from his adopted home in Berlin where he lives and works in a disused German Democratic Republic (GDR) industrial space in former East Germany which he calls Turmwerk. The multi-talented and charming musician talked about the upcoming fifth IAMX album, *The Unified Field*, and his insights as an artist on topics including making it on your own and **human nature**.

Let's start with your new album, *The Unified Field*. Can you speak a bit about the title, as well as its themes and ideas?

Chris Corner : I can tell you what the title means. *The Unified Field* is primarily a scientific concept, or a theory actually, that comes from Quantum Mechanics and has kind of permeated philosophy and also meditation. It's based on the idea that underneath everything, at the very core of existence, there is an infinite plane of consciousness out of which everything is born, is created. So we have this unified field of consciousness, which creates super strings, quarks, atoms, humans, galaxies, everything that exists. What I like about that is, it's something scientists have been trying to discover for a long time, they haven't got that much solid evidence. So it's in more of a conceptual stage, but they're pretty sure that they're getting there. For me it feeds my philosophical imagination. I like the idea that everything is connected and it almost replaces the idea of god. The song, "The Unified Field", it's not so specifically talking about that but it's using the kind of glorifying reference of the unified field to connect us all and make a positive, uplifting statement about that. That concept does pop up throughout the album, it's quite a nice place to start. There's many themes on the album though.

For this album you decided to enlist Jim Abbiss as co-producer, as well as having Liam Howe (from the Sneaker Pimps) helping with some programming. It seems that in that past you've sought a creative isolation, why did you decide to seek collaboration on this album?

CC : Well, I've never been seeking isolation, it just found me. My work on my solo project came about through a bit of frustration and maybe not being so content with compromising my ideas and also wanting to find a more singular vision. But also it did come about through sheer practicality of basically not finding the people I felt I could work with, that would really understand me. I think that's also what happened to IAMX as a project in general, it became a fiercely independent project. Its very nature is bit of an left field, outsider nature. Through practicality of not finding the right people I just ended up doing everything myself. There was something very satisfying about that and you don't have to constantly please others when you write something, you don't have to think about anybody apart from your idea at the time. It can be very satisfying but over time it also becomes very isolating. It wasn't a choice. I mean, I made choices sure, but it wasn't what I was aiming for. *Volatile Times* was the pinnacle of that, not the high point but the lowest point of that isolation. It was very difficult to make emotionally. So once I'd finished that, when I was drained emotionally I made a promise to myself I'd never make an album alone again.

Do you feel like you'll continue working with these people or maybe find new collaborators for the next album?

CC : I'll definitely work with Jim again. With Liam, it was very short and very peripheral, more of a for old times sake moment. He knows Jim really well, so it was a bit of fun. It wasn't a real serious collaboration. He did add some very nice textures and sounds to a few of the tracks, but that's as far as it went. I would definitely consider working with him again, or course. I think the difference for the future is I'd like to start at a different point. I still did way too much technical work and the technical bullshit is something I'm still trying to get out of. By that I mean programming and mixing and mastering; all of the geeky computer stuff. I'd like to give that to somebody else at some point.

Was the material for the new album written after *Volatile Times* was released or during the writing for *Volatile Times*?

CC : They always kind of overlay. Each album has a few songs that just don't really fit with what's happening at the time. Generally they roll over into the next album, so it's probably me just planning my next album subconsciously. I know I already have a few songs now that didn't make it on this album that will be on the next album, it's always the same. I generally end up with eighteen songs per an album and that is filtered down to about eleven or twelve. There were a few songs that just weren't right for that time.

It felt like your mood and themes shifted from *Kingdom of Welcome Addiction* to *Volatile Times* then to the new material. Can you talk about what inspired



these changes for you?

CC : From *Kingdom* to *Volatile Times*; I had a bit of an epiphany. If I'm honest it was a science versus religion epiphany. I've always been, not agnostic, but I'd always been for evidence and science rather than religion or even spirituality. I was never particularly interested in that stuff or very suspicious of those things. When I started *Volatile Times* I did a lot of research and I started to get more interested in the concepts of politics and atheism. All of those themes that seem to be quite prevalent in culture at the moment, which is deconstructing non-evidence based ideas, which is basically what religion is. *Volatile Times* was fueled by that frustration, not just with religion but human ignorance. So that's why it became quite a heavy negative record I think, because I wasn't really happy with the world. Not that I'm happy with world now. After I made *Volatile Times* and sort of vented my negativity, I felt I wanted to make a more positive statement about humanity with this record. So it's not necessarily a positive record but it's definitely a more hopeful statement.

You made a big leap in leaving England and surrounding yourself with a new environment, culture, and network of creative people in Berlin. "Think of England" from Kingdom of Welcome Addiction hinted at your feelings of disorientation from your "home". There is a sense of isolation and a deepening of your own self-awareness in more recent albums, is this due (at least in part) to your decision to remove yourself from your country of origin?

CC : That's a very astute way to put things. I think on *Kingdom* that song is a core message of that album. That's where the escape began really, to bring myself out of London which was a very money fueled and, in my opinion, a very surface city. To go to Berlin, to go and put together my own little kingdom was a really big move for me. I had to leave a lot of friends behind and I had to leave family behind and as hard as some of that was I really had no choice. I think once this journey starts you've just got to follow it. So I think *Kingdom* and that song are kind of about that cutting the cord and moving on. Making that huge life decision; do I stay and follow the rules or do I become the gypsy? I became the gypsy. Each album, once you open that door, each time you start to think about concepts, when you write music and lyrics and when you think about things... it's never surface again, you can never really think of how the world is and how humans are and how you are as a person. It's never light again, it's never particularly easy. You can't just switch it off. I think if I wanted to stop that, it's a bit like a juggernaut and I can't stop this way of thinking now. If I wanted to do that I'd probably have to stop doing this project and maybe work on other things. But for now I enjoy it. It is my therapy. It is a way of releasing all of those complicated thoughts.

Where do these feelings of melancholy and self-questioning, and maybe some resentment towards humanity and England come from?

CC : I don't know why it became so visceral in my head. It was just a point where I started to see a lot of negativity in the world. I'm not an unhappy person, in fact I'm very happy most of the time. That may be a result of being able to exorcise these ghosts through my music. It allows me in my private life to forget about these things. But where did it come from? I don't know, I think I was a really sensitive child. I grew up more in the shadow of women than of my dad. My mom and my sister were huge characters in my life and very strong, their hypersensitivity, I think, rubbed off on me. I don't want to blame it on them but because of my more... feminine side? It comes up more often, this strong emotional way of thinking.

With a new album to tour and promote just in time for the initiation of spring do you feel a sense of excitement for emerging life, growth, and creative energy?

CC : Yeah, that's a nice way to look at it. I'm still gearing up to it. I've just come back from LA; I was in LA for a month and half. I felt almost rejuvenated by that place because winters in Berlin are pretty grim. Every year now, I've decided to get away and inject myself with a bit of light and smiles and positivity. That seems to be a good place to do it because I can also work and I have a few friends there. That was sort of the beginning of the year for me, now I'm preparing for the live shows. Building up to kind of the animal coming out, which is what the live performance is about. There's a very sort of slow curve into the first show and I have to remember where the beast is, try and find him. I know he's still there inside.

It seems that in a lot of ways you're a very introverted kind of person, when we see you on your weblog and in interviews. Then this creative force comes out when you're doing shows and you have this extroverted presence. How do you deal with that and do you have to conjure up the performance aspect of IAMX and Chris?

CC : Not really. It's very second nature to me now, I don't question it. It just happens. It's quite difficult to explain because it sounds a bit schizophrenic and to an extent it is. I do feel like a switch is turned on and that side of my personality just takes over. I think that's what the music does to me. Most of the time I have to control the music; sit in a studio, construct it, deconstruct the concepts, and make product out of it. On stage is the only time I can feel it and that's what IAMX music does to me on stage and it's a pure truthful moment for me.

The life of an artist is typically full of ups and downs. How has your decision to pursue a career as an artist impacted your life in the ways of compromise and sacrifice?

CC : Well, it's shown me that money's not important in a lot of ways. Being okay is important, having enough money to get by is important, but being rich isn't important. It doesn't really change the way I feel. In a general sense of working with others; what it's allowed me to do, and I think I'd have done this in any job that I'd chosen, is to be quite a private person in my private life. To be a bit of monk, a bit of a hermit in my day to day existence. That I find has been a huge benefit to this lifestyle. I've avoided some points of society that I don't like. That's a nice thing about this job you can have irregular work times and a bit of flexibility in your routine. Compromise. Yeah, okay stability is not so good because basically every year you have to look at where you are and there's no security financially. Every year you look at where you are and how you're going to get through next year. In some ways it's quite appealing, again the gypsy lifestyle and it drives you keep working and work hard. It's allowed me to be very selective with the people in my life. Also I get a lot of interesting and positive feedback about who I am as a person and that can be hard but also really amazing. You live life in an accelerated way, there are big highs and big lows. I think I need that to feel completely alive. I'm not really a balanced person anyway so it suits my personality.

What made you want to take on and explore the cabaret influence you manage to channel so effectively in your live performances? Is that part of the reason you chose Berlin as your new home?

CC : I think it was one of the attractions, yeah. That whole vision of the 20s was very attractive about Berlin. Something that had gotten under my skin a few years earlier but I never really had a chance to explore it. The first time I really touched on that was with the second album, *The Alternative*, with [the song] "President". Once I immersed myself in that idea I realized how comfortable it was for me. What I love about cabaret, is this tragi-comic nature of it. It's quite poetic in its expression and it's not necessarily about beauty, it's about these characters. It's about the crying clown, it reflects human nature in such an uplifting but still very emotional way. It's also not very clean, I like that it can be very trashy... and sweaty and dirty. That's really what human nature's like in a way. It's really quite tribal to me, painting the face and singing songs and dancing is what we've been doing for thousands of years. I guess that's what I like about cabaret. It also brings up ideas like Foligni and filmmakers like that where there's a deep philosophy behind it but with a face of fun and positivity.

Why Berlin? Many music lovers cite David Bowie's time living in Berlin as his exile from England and consequently one of his most potent creative periods. For example, Bowie's famous statement that Berlin is, "the greatest cultural extravaganza that one could imagine." How has the zeitgeist of Berlin and its rich art and cultural history impacted you?

CC : I actually moved just outside of Berlin now, so I don't regularly visit the city anymore, besides I'm just so busy. When I first moved there it was just a very psychologically freeing place, money is not so important so you can indulge your artistic freedom and also your hedonistic desires. Everything is there that you really need and nothing closes. Everything is flexible, people are flexible. Clubs and music and art and eating, everything really crosses over, so if you find a place it's a

real mixture of cultural influences. It's not just about music, you can go to a gallery and there's some bizarre cabaret fucked up performance. You'll go to a restaurant and there'll be some music in there. So what I like about Berlin is it's so mixed up, it's a force, it's a mission. The Berliners mission is to stay true to art and it's still there. It's becoming a bit more gentrified these days, which is disappointing, but the underlying attitude is about art and music more than anything. For that I think the city will thrive for at least another ten years. It's just fucking sexy too. There's a real sexuality to it and a freedom in sexuality that I just don't know in other cities really.

How's your studio space filling out? Are you using it to explore new directions and inspirations, different art?

CC : Yeah, where I live just outside Berlin I have a mini factory. It's an old East German GDR fucked up building that I bought a couple years ago. It's a lifetime project this place, that's the part of the fun of it. I developed a studio downstairs and that's been very inspiring for me, I always wanted a studio where I could look out of the window into a garden and I now have that. I don't have much equipment in there but at least I can look out at the garden. I did most of the preparation and preproduction with Jim in that studio and its developing slowly.

What themes and ideas do you feel compelled to explore and revisit in both the Sneaker Pimps and IAMX?

CC : Human behavior is fascinating to me, every aspect of that. Where do we start? It could be love, it could be sex, it could be politics. What's interesting to me is layer of truth and reality behind the social rules and the constructed society rules. There's so much that we talk about in private is never really public I think it's really fascinating. So many things that artists or musicians or, definitely, politicians don't admit to. It's almost our duty to expose every part of human nature, for artists anyway. My mission is to observe and write about it.

On Kingdom of Welcome Addiction there was a more personal focus, especially the last song, "Running". That was really honest. It must have been very scary to record that. I really appreciate that in songs where your voice breaks, because its brimming with emotion, you don't clean it up. It gives me chills when I hear those moments because it's so honest. You could produce it out, but I think it goes back to what you were saying about the cabaret and just being real. There's a lot of sacrifice that goes into your music and you're very unique.

CC : Thank you, I'm very honored. You're pretty much spot on. It's funny you choose a song like "Running" to begin with. There were a couple songs on *Kingdom* which were a turning point. Some psychological door opened for me and the rawness of truthful everyday emotion hit me. I couldn't switch it off, so I had to put these things into the music. It's almost on the edge of embarrassing, it's sometimes painful to listen to these things because they so rawly describe exactly how I was feeling at that time that it's difficult to hear. Sometimes I feel sorry for the people listening.

Please don't. That was a big deal for me, that album, I listened over and over. I loved the lyrics, loved how sexy the music was, and then how painfully open and honest you were. That really connects to our humanity. I can understand not wanting to go back and tap your foot knowing the emotional background. That's probably part of the compromise that you discussed earlier.

CC : There is a psychological and emotional compromise that happens. But to be more positive

about it, the sexiness that I try to put into music is the other side of that. The celebratory side of being human, it's almost a distraction for me to think about sex because it takes me out of that emotional state. It focuses my mind on physicality instead of emotion. There's something about that, perhaps that's why there's so much sex in the music, it draws me back to reality.

Your personal style is a major point of interest to IAMX fans, especially at your live shows. What historical period, in politics or fashion, is perennially inspiring to you? What fashion moments are you taking in every time you're putting yourself together?

CC : I have no idea. I've never thought of this before. My drive is to find nice things and put them on. I don't care where they come, what time they come from. What I like about that is if you get too caught up in the concept of what's good, or what people think is good, you pass on things that are good. It's like music. My first impulse is, does it fit well? Secondly, do people expect it? I don't mean it as a controversial thing but if they do maybe try something else. Maybe that's where the mixture comes from. It really does go back to, does it fit well? I like times when people actually gave a fuck in general. I don't just mean people in fashion, I mean when normal people wore things that made them look interesting or smart. Apart from going to a club or something there isn't an everyday sense of occasion or dressing up. Maybe in the Victorian era there were times when everybody would wear a suit or a big dress. Obviously the political and human mind at the time were very conservative, but something about that style is quite nice. The tight corsets and over exaggerated shoulders. So I guess Victorian is something I like. I also like military because it makes you wear things you wouldn't normally wear. It gives a sense of occasion it gives a sense of pride in clothes. It makes people feel different, even though it's connected with violence, which is a different thing, there is something sexy about a uniform. So I guess Victorian meets military.

The evolution of Chris Corner as a musician has gone from band member and ensemble player to front man, creator, and center of attention. Did you desire this outcome or find it along the way?

CC : I think it was my masochistic impulse. To discover more about myself, maybe to feel better about myself, to challenge myself awareness. I've always been way too self-aware and full of self-doubt. I think IAMX helped me with that, to become a more confident and stronger person. I always knew it was in there and I just had no idea how to get it out. I was almost forced into doing a solo project because at the end of Sneaker Pimps I was putting so much energy and drive into that project that it almost felt like a solo project. I was still compromising my ideas and lyrics and it didn't feel right, so it naturally took me into IAMX and I realized that was my therapy. It felt natural. There was no life question with it, it felt practical. I really went back to roots with IAMX, there was a big commercial success with Sneaker Pimps and I felt uncomfortable with the plastic side of commercial music. I don't mean the actual music was plastic, but there were many negative things that came along with that and they were out of my control because I wasn't really running that project. So when IAMX came along, on every level from booking... I began by having no managers so I'd book the shows myself and I'd play everything myself and try and get deals and try and release the records myself. It was a real back to roots thing and it was healthy, I really learned to stand on my own two feet. It's still going in that independent DIY way.

