



From touring the world to recording a brand-new **CHRISTMAS ALBUM** in Franklin, the legendary band **CHICAGO** is

STILL THE INSPIRATION

BY REBECCA BAUER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY SCARLATI

Their story stretches over four decades, 32 albums, dozens of awards and a plethora of chart-topping hits. They are the highest charting American band on Billboard's ranking of the Top 100 Artists of All Time. And then there's that unmistakable sound. The band? Chicago.

This past October, at the Sound Kitchen in Franklin, they recorded their latest album, infusing their sound with some holi-

day magic. And I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to sit down with two of its members: Lead singer/bassist Jason Scheff, a Williamson County resident who joined the band in 1985 when his tenor voice earned him the spot formerly filled by Peter Cetera; and Robert Lamm, a founding member, keyboardist, singer and songwriter who wrote many of the band's hits.

As I prepared for our meeting, my memory cast clear images of putting on the 45 and

hearing it bellow "Hard To Say I'm Sorry" (if only I had kept that bright yellow plastic adapter as memorabilia) and running to hit the record button on my radio/cassette player as "You're The Inspiration" came on the local Top 40 station. Indeed, I am almost as old as this band's history.

CHICAGO IN NASHVILLE

Our conversation is a humble one. They are not absorbed by celebrity status. These

are artists dedicated to their careers and families. They feed off each other's enthusiasm for making a record.

"In today's world, in the music business, it's tough to get together and even work on a project like the old days," Scheff laments. "Then, this opportunity came up to make an album – Robert always champions us to do something – so we all thought, 'I don't care what it is, I just want to get in the studio.'"

The guys have visited Nashville in the recent past, working on solo projects or

with the band. Scheff ended up permanently "pulling the trigger" to move his family from Los Angeles to Brentwood for the more relaxed lifestyle and ease of travel from the area's central location.

Scheff is not the only one who has planted Middle Tennessee roots.

"In 2005, we recorded an album at some other studios in town," Lamm explains. "We were all California based, and one by one, the guys started drifting to Nashville; and here we are five years later and five of the nine guys in the band live here."

When it came time to find a place to record a new Chicago project, the Sound Kitchen was the band's first choice.

Scheff recalls his first time meeting the studio owner: "When I first got to town, a good friend introduced me to Ira Blonder," he says. "I didn't even know about the Sound Kitchen. I started working on projects here. I know it has a great history, (and) the big room is phenomenal."

That room is the "Big Boy" – the Sound Kitchen's pride and joy. Incorporating nearly 4,000 square feet of open tracking space,

it features hardwood floors, high ceilings and a large window that wraps around an adjoining room containing a state-of-the-art sound board. The Big Boy has a distinct vibe of the golden days of recording, when everyone would record together in one room. As they step into the studio, the band members revel in the feeling that they're living an experience akin to the Beatles.

"This is one of the best sounding rooms, not just in Nashville, but on the planet," Scheff insists.

CHRISTMAS CHICAGO STYLE

The band needed a producer to match this fantastic space, and they found him in a past collaborator - Phil Ramone, famous for his work with Billy Joel, Paul Simon, Elton John and many others. Ramone is very familiar with the era of dynamic sessions that musicians - including Chicago - long for today.

"Phil Ramone produced Frank Sinatra... there's a real feel about people playing together and feeding off of each other that's a lost art," Scheff says. "It's so piecemeal these days."

Ramone jumped at the chance to work on

the record here in Music City: "When they said Franklin I said 'Yeah, yeah, I want to be here,'" he says. "I think Nashville is an incredible city. I still feel this incredible wave around Nashville. I'm a big fan of a musical hub."

The new Christmas album captures the joys of the season, but the songs are more obscure than the traditional holiday tunes Chicago has recorded in the past. There's also an original tune and special guest vocals that add to Chicago's melting pot of style.

"The real earmark of Chicago is that there has always been a variety of musical styles," Lamm says. "This is very much like that: every song is different, has a different motif."

And yes, there's brass. Chicago's original horn players are making their signature mark on the album.

STILL THE INSPIRATION

Chicago has been going strong for over 40 years now, and the band has seen its share of ups and downs along the way. So, what's the secret of the group's longevity?

"We have changed: there have been deaths, divorces, insanity, people leaving, the whole

spectrum of life," Lamm says. "But there's a sort of spirit in the band - that we love to play music - and at some point we went from being dumb kids to being pros...we all said, 'Music is my life, not just something temporary,' so that kind of thinking has sustained us."

Scheff describes it as, "the good, the bad and the ugly. We get through it. It's been the greatest lesson, having to be a team player and learning how to share and contribute."

"I think (they're) some extraordinary individuals," Lamm adds. "There's a handful of bands that have been together a long time and (have been) productive, and they are the same kind of people that can focus when it's time to focus, and have fun when it's time to have fun. There's a lot of intelligence, a lot of soulfulness."

The band members take charge of projects as a way to stay acclimated to a changing industry.

"I love it, there's an energy. It's the reason Phil is here," says Scheff. "Nobody can rest on their laurels anymore. It's who wants to show up, and then you'll have something. I don't mind things changing, where you have to put

a bit more skin in the game, rather than 'Oh I got this pedigree and this legacy, so who's going to come knocking on my door and give me, give me?' No, no. Let me give."

He describes himself as no different than any other musician in town. His desire is to contribute through mentorship. Mentoring, he says, starts right at home.

"My 9-year-old is a bass player," he says. "He's got his grandfather in him; he reminds me a lot of my dad." Scheff's father was Jerry Scheff, the well-known session bassist who toured with Elvis Presley.

"My dad played bass on the LA Woman album, which is funny because I have that exact amp that was used on that album. We're using (it) on this record." That amp will cross generations again when Scheff's other son and his band record their own rendition of "Riders on the Storm."

MEMORIES, CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

With the recording of a Christmas album, talk of holiday traditions naturally finds its way into our conversation. "Larger than life" is how Scheff describes his home with the decorations, parties, abundance of food, and

going all out for the kids.

"My wife and I were just looking at photos of the kids," he recalls, "and now, my 12 year old, when I drop him off at school, he's like 'see ya.' No more pecks on the cheek. I'll take this Christmas and take the snapshot of where my kids are in their life... each year becomes less larger-than-life with the Santa thing."

For Lamm, the holiday becomes another creative outlet.

"My wife and I are real visual," he says, "so for a lot of years, we made our Christmas cards with a sort of high art concept. We'd send people stuff and they'd wonder what it has to do with Christmas, but it was great - puzzles, mirrors, that kind of stuff. Christmas is about joy, it's about reaching out, renewing friendships you may look past, which is really easy to do."

Lamm likes to travel during the holidays, too: "Every other year we travel to see what Christmas is like somewhere else. This year,

we'll be in Madrid to see what the Spaniards do."

Holiday down-time will end when the band resumes an international tour. They're also looking ahead to the next album, expressing a hope to again work with Phil Ramone.

"I'm hoping that I'm not the only one who feels that this is a seed that has been planted to work with Phil on a stand alone album," Lamm hints.

"I agree," Scheff replies. "We always talk about what's next," Lamm says, "so I say, what could be better?"

As for that Christmas album, have patience: it's slated for a 2011 release.



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