

CHRIS KNIGHT

- the trailer tapes -

In the summer of 1996 inside a sweltering singlewide trailer outside a small Kentucky mining town, an unknown singer-songwriter named Chris Knight recorded an 'unofficial' batch of tracks prior to the release of his major label debut album. Over the next decade, through a combination of leaks, bootlegs and legend, those sessions would become something much more. "People have been talking about these tapes ever since I recorded them," Chris Knight says. "To me, they were rough and stark and I never thought they'd see the light of day." Ten years and four acclaimed albums later, The Trailer Tapes remain a remarkable moment in time less captured than cornered, a portrait of the artist as a ferociously talented young man. And for the artist *The New York Times* would soon call "the last of a dying breed... a hard-nosed iconoclast with an acoustic guitar and a college degree", The Trailer Tapes have now arrived as the long-missing first chapter of one of the most uncompromising careers in music today.

For the sessions' producer Frank Liddell, today known for his Grammy-winning work with Lee Ann Womack and Miranda Lambert, The Trailer Tapes near-mythic reputation is well deserved. "These tapes are like an amazing photograph out of an old *Life Magazine*, before Photoshop or fancy editing tricks," Liddell says. "What Chris was doing could be harsh, like coffee or whiskey, but he is the most honest writer I've ever heard in my life. The truth is not something Chris talks about. It's something that he is." Liddell had first heard Knight at a songwriter's cattle call at Nashville's Bluebird Café back in 1991. "Chris sang 'If I Were You', and I thought I was hearing John Prine and Steve Earle rolled into one," the then-struggling publisher recalls. "There was such an honesty and purity to who he was. He was a coalmine reclamation inspector from rural Kentucky who was writing these incredible songs on the side. He didn't know who to call or what to do; he just came to town to play his music. I don't know how I thought I could help him other than to give him some gas money to come back to town from time to time and play more songs."

Within three years, Knight was signed to Decca Records. "I didn't quite know what to think," Chris remembers. "I didn't feel like a 'recording artist'. I was just a guy writing songs, who hoped other people would record them. I didn't go to Nashville expecting to get a record deal. I didn't think I fit in.....and I still don't." Liddell, who had been contracted to co-produce Knight's debut album, soon decided to forego the traditional pre-production process and instead record Chris as he'd never been heard before and certainly never would be again. "I was spending a lot of time with him in his hometown," Liddell says. "It's a different time and a different way of life up there, but I knew that this place was where his music was coming from. Most of all, I knew his life was going to change. I wanted to get all these songs on tape literally where they were written, to document where he was before anything had happened to him." It took Liddell weeks to talk

Chris into the idea, finally convincing the taciturn young songwriter that they would respect Knight's world and record on Knight's terms. "Some might have called it 'pre-production'," Chris now says with a laugh. "The plan was to drink some beers, shoot some guns and record some songs."

Their 'studio' stood in the middle of a field on a horse farm just outside Slaughters, Kentucky, population 238. "I had been living in that trailer for 10 years, and it was probably 30 years old when I moved into it," Knight remembers. "The rent was cheap and it was close to any place I wanted to go. It was my home." But as a recording facility, the challenges were immediately evident. "It was August outside, and hot and smoky inside," Liddell recalls. "We were three guys, including Chris. We had two microphones and an ADAT machine, and one of the engineer's jobs was to jump up and turn off the window fan whenever we started recording. Chris refused to wear headphones. We just tried to get songs on tape before they got away." For Knight, the entire experience was nerve-racking. "I wasn't real comfortable recording back then," Chris says. "Singing into a microphone, figuring out how to get a song across, it all made me nervous. Nothing ever suited me and I was really self-conscious. I hadn't performed live much and I rarely sang or played a song the same way twice." Knight would start a song, quit halfway through, change keys, change tempo, or abandon the song altogether. But armed with only his voice and guitar, the songs that Knight ultimately delivered were – and remain – striking in their simplicity, sometimes disturbing in their intensity, and always stunning in their honesty.

Of the album's 11 original tracks, "House And 90 Acres" and "Something Changed" would be re-visited for 1998's Chris Knight and the still-startling "If I Were You" for 2001's A Pretty Good Guy. The remaining eight are heard here for the first time ever. "There's some pretty good songs that fell by the wayside for whatever reason," Knight says. "It was surprising to find there's several that really stand up." Knight's innate gifts for darkly emotional storytelling resonate here like never before, from the bitter lament of a railroad worker in "Spike Driving Blues" and the battling lovers of "Back Water Blues", to the homicidal high school sweetheart of "Rita's Only Fault". A rusty Impala triggers a bittersweet tenderness in "Leaving Souvenirs", while the raw bar room menace of "Move On" is unapologetically cruel. There's a plaintive pain in the drifter who tries to outrun heartbreak in "Here Comes The Rain", and a young woman who dances to hide her hurt in "Hard Edges". But it's the defiant final track that is arguably the most revealing on the album and perhaps of Knight's entire career. "My Only Prayer" is probably the truest song on there," Chris says. "It most defines who I was back then. I never wanted to be in the city ever in my life, and I'm basically still that way. Maybe I didn't play the game like I should have. But what I *have* done is spent a lot of time out there playing my songs. I am what I am, and I don't have many regrets."

In late 2006, the tapes found their way to renowned producer/engineer Ray Kennedy. “These sessions were recorded real primitively,” Kennedy says. “The guitar is banging on the microphone, clothes are scraping against the guitar, and rain is hammering on the roof. My goal was to clean up the non-musical issues that got in the way of some amazing performances.” Kennedy, a long-time Knight fan who mixed 2006’s Enough Rope and best known for his work with Steve Earle and Lucinda Williams, painstakingly stripped the tapes to their creative core. “It’s just two tracks, guitar and vocal,” he explains. “There’s no compression, no EQ, no nothing. It’s just straight the way it was recorded. And when you listen to it in your car, you’ll swear Chris is in the back seat. That’s the impact we wanted to get. We wanted the listener to feel that they themselves were sitting in that trailer.”

The trailer is long gone, but the decade since that summer has seen Chris Knight become a revered songwriter, a relentless road warrior, and one of Americana’s most popular performers. And much like a Lomax field recording could reveal the roots of a genre, Knight’s Trailer Tapes now expose the foundation of a singular career. “These tapes deliver all the essential makings of Chris Knight,” says Ray Kennedy. “Over the years, he’s become a little bit more sophisticated and maybe a bit more self-conscious. But the cool thing about not being self-conscious is the raw emotion it brings. It’s pure performance and absolute truth.” “I hoped these sessions would come out one day because I knew then that they were special,” says Frank Liddell. “And I know today that they still are.” As for Chris Knight, he looks back at The Trailer Tapes with a wistful self-knowledge while looking forward – as always – with a well-earned streak of fierce independence. “As I recall, I was a pretty pissed off guy back then,” he admits. “It took a while, but I can finally look back and learn not to take myself so seriously. These are songs I’m proud of even now. In fact, there’s 4 or 5 songs here I’m even gonna start playing live for the first time. All I ever wanted was for my music to grab hold of people. I never chased anything to become something other than what I am. A lot has changed, but a lot has stayed the same. And I’m proud of that, too.”

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