

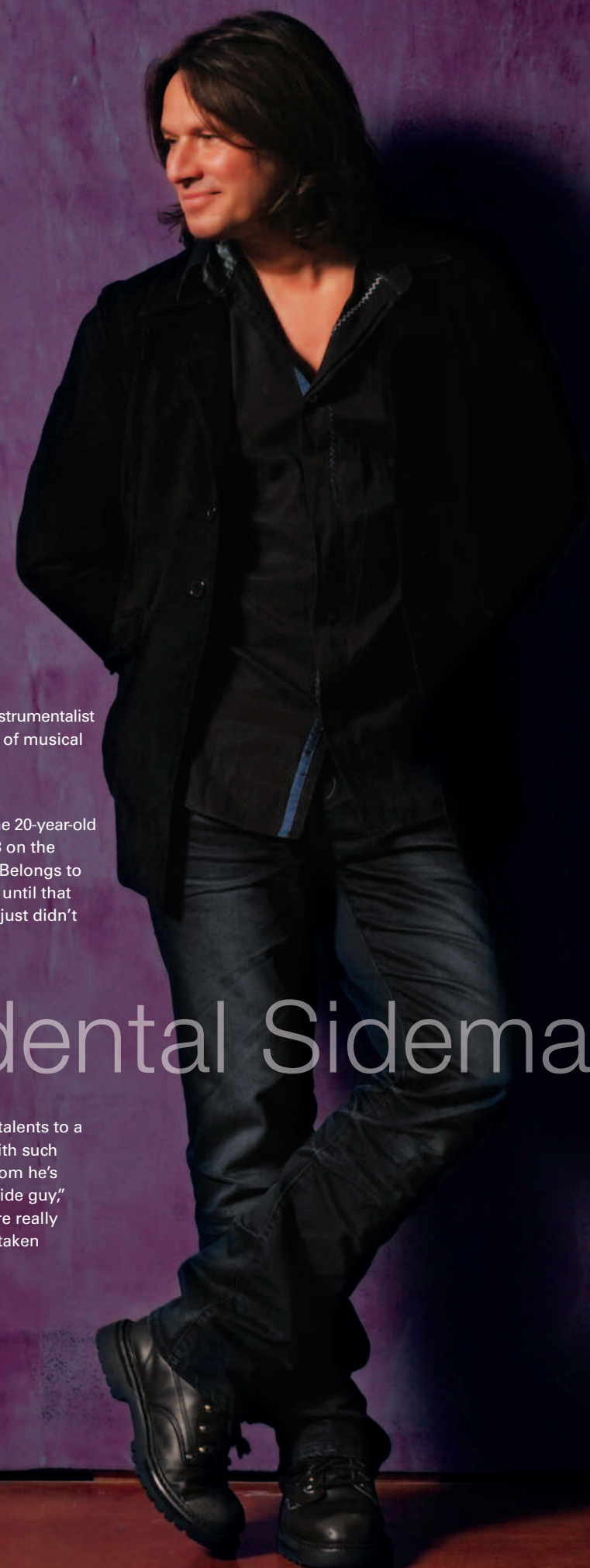


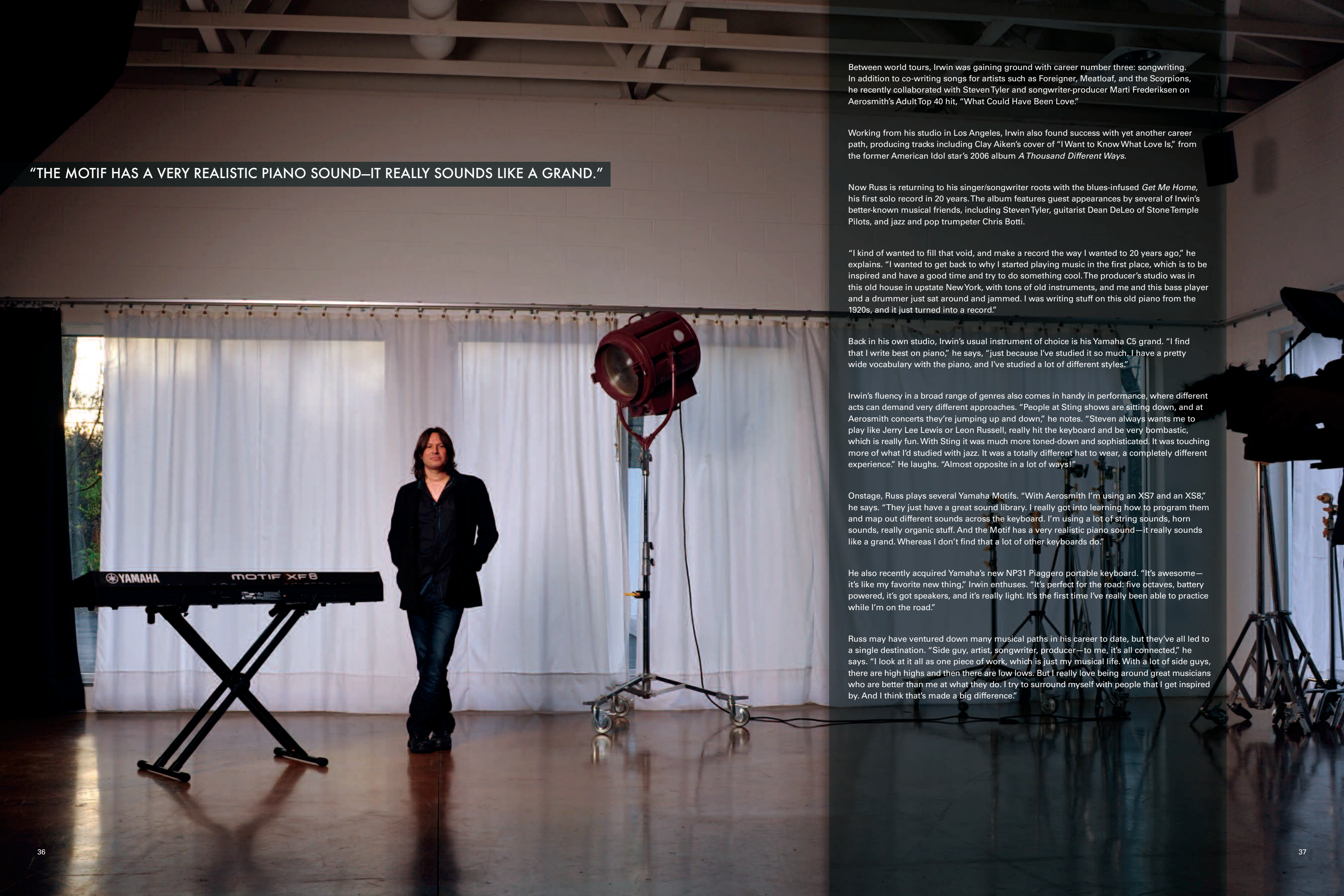
Solo artist, songsmith, sideman: Keyboardist and multi-instrumentalist Russ Irwin's musical career has been more like a game of musical chairs—one he's definitely winning.

In 1991, with a debut album produced by Phil Ramone, the 20-year-old Russ seemed destined for the big time. He reached #28 on the Billboard Heatseekers chart with the single, "My Heart Belongs to You," and toured with his own band. "It took five years until that process was finally done," he recalls. "But ultimately it just didn't penetrate. Hell of a learning experience, though!"

## The Accidental Sideman

But Russ was far from done with music. He turned his talents to a second career as a sideman to the stars, performing with such artists as Sting, Bryan Adams, and Aerosmith, with whom he's toured since 1997. "I wasn't even planning on being a side guy," he says. "I just liked working with people I thought were really talented and being part of their gigs. But this is what's taken precedence over the past 15 years."



A full-page photograph of a man with long dark hair, wearing a dark jacket and jeans, standing in a studio. To his left is a Yamaha Motif XF8 digital synthesizer on a black X-stand. Behind him is a large window covered with white curtains. To his right is a large red studio light on a stand. The floor is polished and reflects the light. The background wall is white with some structural elements visible at the top.

"THE MOTIF HAS A VERY REALISTIC PIANO SOUND—IT REALLY SOUNDS LIKE A GRAND."

Between world tours, Irwin was gaining ground with career number three: songwriting. In addition to co-writing songs for artists such as Foreigner, Meatloaf, and the Scorpions, he recently collaborated with Steven Tyler and songwriter-producer Marti Frederiksen on Aerosmith's Adult Top 40 hit, "What Could Have Been Love."

Working from his studio in Los Angeles, Irwin also found success with yet another career path, producing tracks including Clay Aiken's cover of "I Want to Know What Love Is," from the former American Idol star's 2006 album *A Thousand Different Ways*.

Now Russ is returning to his singer/songwriter roots with the blues-infused *Get Me Home*, his first solo record in 20 years. The album features guest appearances by several of Irwin's better-known musical friends, including Steven Tyler, guitarist Dean DeLeo of Stone Temple Pilots, and jazz and pop trumpeter Chris Botti.

"I kind of wanted to fill that void, and make a record the way I wanted to 20 years ago," he explains. "I wanted to get back to why I started playing music in the first place, which is to be inspired and have a good time and try to do something cool. The producer's studio was in this old house in upstate New York, with tons of old instruments, and me and this bass player and a drummer just sat around and jammed. I was writing stuff on this old piano from the 1920s, and it just turned into a record."

Back in his own studio, Irwin's usual instrument of choice is his Yamaha C5 grand. "I find that I write best on piano," he says, "just because I've studied it so much. I have a pretty wide vocabulary with the piano, and I've studied a lot of different styles."

Irwin's fluency in a broad range of genres also comes in handy in performance, where different acts can demand very different approaches. "People at Sting shows are sitting down, and at Aerosmith concerts they're jumping up and down," he notes. "Steven always wants me to play like Jerry Lee Lewis or Leon Russell, really hit the keyboard and be very bombastic, which is really fun. With Sting it was much more toned-down and sophisticated. It was touching more of what I'd studied with jazz. It was a totally different hat to wear, a completely different experience." He laughs. "Almost opposite in a lot of ways!"

Onstage, Russ plays several Yamaha Motifs. "With Aerosmith I'm using an XS7 and an XS8," he says. "They just have a great sound library. I really got into learning how to program them and map out different sounds across the keyboard. I'm using a lot of string sounds, horn sounds, really organic stuff. And the Motif has a very realistic piano sound—it really sounds like a grand. Whereas I don't find that a lot of other keyboards do."

He also recently acquired Yamaha's new NP31 Piaggero portable keyboard. "It's awesome—it's like my favorite new thing," Irwin enthuses. "It's perfect for the road: five octaves, battery powered, it's got speakers, and it's really light. It's the first time I've really been able to practice while I'm on the road."

Russ may have ventured down many musical paths in his career to date, but they've all led to a single destination. "Side guy, artist, songwriter, producer—to me, it's all connected," he says. "I look at it all as one piece of work, which is just my musical life. With a lot of side guys, there are high highs and then there are low lows. But I really love being around great musicians who are better than me at what they do. I try to surround myself with people that I get inspired by. And I think that's made a big difference."