

Chris Rodriguez

A NEW GIG FOR A NASHVILLE ACE

Chris Rodriguez has an unusual vantage point in the music business. As a vocalist, he's appeared on albums by Glen Campbell, Faith Hill, Dolly Parton, and Billy Joel. As a guitarist, he's played with the likes of Kenny Loggins and Michael McDonald—and he's released a solo record, *Beggar's Paradise*, on Sony. He's also Vice President of A&R for Word Entertainment, Warner Music Group's contemporary Christian imprint.

SO WHAT'S THE VIEW LIKE UP THERE? "I'VE BEEN doing the A&R thing for about two years now," Rodriguez says, "and it's been really good so far. When I came on board, I'd already been an artist on Word and had done lots of sessions, songwriting, and production for other artists on the label. I already had relationships with many of the artists who were assigned to me, so I kind of zoomed right in. During my first hundred days on the job, I was probably in the studio the entire time, producing acts."

Still, some aspects of his dual position didn't come naturally, Chris admits. "A lot of it has been administrative work, and I have to say, the paperwork end of A&R is more foreign to me. It's everything from doing budgets to giving artists feedback on why certain songs need more work. And being on the phone incessantly, trying to line up writers and players. It's definitely more of a corporate thing, which is not in my natural DNA—I'm the epitome of the 'dreaming artist.' Before this, my whole life has been more about connecting chords and writing tunes. So I do feel like I'm stretching."

In his A&R role, Rodriguez has had a front-row seat to the music industry's recent turbulence. "Word is Warner Music Group's Christian division, but now Time-Warner has sold WMG to an outside group of investors," he comments. "I tell you, I've never seen more of a scratch-your-head music-business bubble than the one we're in right now. It seems

almost from the moment I took this job that the music business has done a free-fall spiral downward!"

But unlike many music industry execs, Chris can afford to be more bemused than alarmed. "Word's fortunate position is that we've actually made money," he says. "In a hostile environment, Word has come out looking pretty good! We're not a gigantor label or anything, but we're in the black—and that's no small feat in the current environment."

Best of all, Rodriguez says, "I still get to play guitar all the time. I play every day! I play in the studio, in my production work, and in other situations as well. All this week I've been on a promotional run with Billy Ray Cyrus, playing acoustic and slide. And last week I was in San Diego working with one of our other acts, a hip-hop trio called The Souljahz. They're great songwriters. Great programmers, too, but at the core of it they write really solid tunes. I met those guys my first day on the job in A&R, and we really clicked."

Chris is a longtime fan of Yamaha guitars. "One of my favorites is a hollowbody AES1500. What a beautiful guitar! I got it from Yamaha about five years ago for a Christmas tour with Vince Gill. It was a big-band Nat King Cole production, with a different orchestra each night in whatever town we were in. I brought that guitar out with flat-wound strings. I was amazed by how it doesn't lose any bite on the high-end, even strung with flat-wounds."

It's also great for *Revolver*-era Beatles tones. It really gets that spunky British tone."

For most live situations Rodriguez relies on his two single-cutaway Yamaha Pacificas. "Those are my workhorses," he says. "It's a very comfortable body style, the way it's contoured. That, and the fact that I've got strat, tele, and humbucker tones at my fingertips, makes it the ideal guitar for me."

Despite his music-business responsibilities, Chris says he continues to play guitar with Kenny Loggins, as he's done for more than a decade. "Even after going into this A&R position, I'm still doing 15 or 20 gigs a year with Kenny, just because he and I are buds. And it's so good for me as a musician. With him, I get to play nylon, acoustic steel-string, slide, dobro, mandolin, and electric. It's a great gig for my guitar chops!"

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