



Chris Bliss

For comedian and commentator Chris Bliss, life has been a study in contrasts. The youngest son of a Washington D.C. attorney, he majored in comparative literature at Northwestern University and the University of Oregon before dropping out at the end of his junior year. The reason? To pursue a career in juggling. And what did his argumentative father think about the choice? "He told me I was ruining my life, which I can understand in retrospect. Your son comes home after his third year of college - where he's on the dean's list - and says he's running off to join the circus . . . what would you say?"

But it wasn't the circus that Chris had his eye on. His act was pure rock 'n roll. Using music ranging from the Beatles to Peter Gabriel, and augmented with custom lighting and special effects, he transformed juggling into aerial choreography. Chris quickly became in demand as the perfect concert opening act, eventually sharing the bill with superstars as diverse as Eric Clapton, Julio Iglesias and Willie Nelson (who called him "the best damn juggler I ever saw"), and culminating with being chosen as the sole opening act for Michael Jackson's Victory Tour in 1984 ("during his beige period", Chris explains). Did he ever meet the Gloved One? "Just once. One of his band members introduced us, and Michael said the oddest thing: "It must take a lot of rhythm to do what you do." So I said: "You, too, Michael."

The Jackson credit brought him offers to be the featured specialty act in big production shows in Las Vegas, Paris, and even one from Japan. But all had the same Catch-22. "Imagine", Chris recounts, "finally getting over the rainbow, and the pot of gold is there. And all you have to do to get it is perform the same 12-15 minutes a night. forever. That was it for me."

Taking the advice of many friends, he decided to try his hand at stand-up comedy: "The hardest part was going from something where I was one of the best to something where, basically, I wasn't even at the bottom of the list. Hell, I wasn't even on the list." Putting all his energy toward learning his new craft, Chris honed his comedy skills with relentless road work ("40-45 weeks a year").

It paid off. Rediscovering long-lost writing skills, Chris's comedy took on the same innovative edge his variety act was known for. Soon he was headlining top clubs around the country, and appearing on a slew of cable comedy shows. Then came an offer to write for the short-lived "Jackie Thomas Show" on ABC.

Finally his big break came: The "Tonight Show" called - they wanted to take a look at Chris. After his third audition, the spot was approved. Following an auspicious debut, he soon became a "Tonight Show" regular, receiving the ultimate accolade from Jay Leno, who called Chris "one of the brightest comedians around" , adding "I really enjoy this man's work".

Other career highlights include the release of Chris's first comedy CD, *My Act With Your Eyes Closed*, which has received airplay on over 100 radio stations across the country (a follow-up is slated for recording and release later this year). His first one-man show, an autobiographical monologue play titled "Walking On The Moon", debuted in late 1999 and has since been produced in both Minneapolis and Los Angeles. Told with compelling honesty and surprising humor, "Walking on the Moon" explores peak experiences and transformational moments, suggesting that ultimately it's our questions, not our answers, that define us.

In the last few years, his talents as a comedian have received the same international recognition he first achieved as a variety artist. In addition to performing in concert in Singapore and across Canada, Chris was chosen to appear at the prestigious Kilkenny Festival in Ireland, and was honored by his selection to perform at the 20th anniversary of the Just For Laughs Festival in Montreal, the largest and most prominent international comedy festival in the world.

Capping it all off, Bliss recently re-introduced juggling to close his stand-up performances. "It's like icing on the cake", he explains. "I start by telling them I once toured with Michael Jackson - and they're just not buying it. They're waiting for the punch line. And then - wham!" Bliss laughs. "I love how totally shocked they are that I'm actually good at it. It's the same thing I love about comedy - that joy of the unexpected."