

Christopher Cross made history with his 1980 self-titled debut album, winning five Grammy Awards, including—for the first time ever—the four most prestigious awards: Record of the Year (for the single “Sailing”), Album of the Year, Song of the Year (also for “Sailing”), and Best New Artist.

Now, 30+ years after his extraordinary emergence into the music business, Cross continues his recording and performing career with a new album, *Secret Ladder*, that evokes the artistry of such great singer-songwriters as Joni Mitchell and Randy Newman while addressing contemporary concerns head-on – a combination which is sure to please his loyal fan base.

Indeed, the 13 tracks, mostly written with his longtime collaborator Rob Meurer, continues the exploration of adult subject matter broached in his preceding album *Doctor Faith* (2011). “My passion and commitment to music haven’t diminished a bit, and I make no apologies for exploring mature subjects,” says the San Antonio native, now living in Austin after decades in Southern California.

“Of course, I’m still a romantic at heart,” adds Cross, whose classic hits – including “Ride Like the Wind,” from *Christopher Cross*, and the Oscar-winning “Arthur’s Theme (Best That You Can Do)” from the film starring Liza Minelli and Dudley Moore – remain staples on radio to this day.

This romantic side is readily evident on *Secret Ladder* songs like “Simple,” in which he elicits the tuneful sense of love and serenity that marked “Sailing.” But from the album’s first song, Cross evinces a sharpened focus in addition to his magic melodic touch.

The bluesy “Reverend Blowhard” “is an unvarnished commentary on TV evangelists,” says Cross. He acknowledges a definite cynicism in this opening song that bears the influence of both

Newman and Steely Dan's Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, "who are lifelong influences on the songs Rob and I write."

There are other hard-hitting songs on *Secret Ladder*, most notably "Got To Be a Better Way," which rails against a man "seething in his world of carbohydrates and TV" while lacking any empathy for his fellow man, and "Island of Anger." "We look back at our lives and see the idealism when we were kids," Cross reflects, "and then look at the way things are now and see how so many are disillusioned and almost immobilized with outrage."

Yet Cross remains a spiritual, if not religious, artist, and the *Secret Ladder* album title manifests this. The conceptual album cover art, by photographer/graphic designer Sandrine Lee, expressly suggests a Magritte painting in its depiction of human figures climbing the fretboard of an upright acoustic guitar surrounded by a blue sky filled with clouds, at the same time invoking Joni Mitchell's lyric in "For the Roses"—"And pour your simple sorrow / To the sound hole and your knee."

"I write my songs on the guitar, and that's how I realize my spirituality" says Cross. "Music is the source, the wellspring. The people coming out of the guitar's sound hole on the cover are climbing the ladder to a higher plane."

Cross also notes that *Secret Ladder's* "I Don't See it Your Way" is a Joni Mitchell-influenced track. "I dedicated my last album to her," says Cross. "She remains my biggest influence, musically. She's a hero to both Rob and me. This song is about the end of a relationship, and we tried to write it in a very Joni-like feel and style."

As always, Cross enlisted the finest support musicians, including bassist Will Lee (of the Fab Faux and *Late Night with David Letterman*), drummer Keith Carlock (Steely Dan and Toto),

guitarist Eric Johnson, saxophonist David Mann, and vocalists Michael McDonald and Jeff Foskett (Brian Wilson's musical director).

"Eric and Michael are usually on every record I make," says Cross, and in McDonald's case, he joins Cross vocally on the poignant and uplifting anthem, "Light the World," which also features an African chorus alternating the lyrics in Swahili.

"I have travelled to Africa with my kids, my daughter was a youth AIDS ambassador," explains Cross. "She helped with testing in a village in Tanzania and spent another week in Kenya. I was very touched by the people I encountered there. I wrote the song with Stephen Bray who is a close friend and a wonderful collaborator. He worked with Madonna early in her career and composed music for *The Color Purple* on Broadway. For the Swahili chorus, we enlisted the assistance of the interpreter we had in Africa who was the head of African Studies at UCLA. It is really a magical component to the song. You feel like you know what they're saying, even though you don't."

"The Times I Needed You" employs a vocal chorus, arranged by Meurer, intentionally reminiscent of the Beach Boys. "It's very much a tribute," says Cross. "Brian Wilson's writing was a big influence on me and Carl Wilson was my No. 1 vocal influence growing up. Years later, we became very close. Carl sang on my second album (1983's *Another Page*), and we did a lot of touring together and vocal sessions for other artists. He'd always say, 'We make a nice sound'—I just treasure that."

While Cross is an avowed pacifist, he is a big supporter of those who serve in the armed forces. *Secret Ladder* includes the late-added track, "We Will Remember You," as a means of honoring their service.

“My father was an Army doctor and my mother, a nurse,” he says. “I feel strongly that returning vets and those who made the ultimate sacrifice deserve to be recognized and never forgotten. The song itself is neither pro- nor anti-war. The children’s choir really enhances the message. We recorded it after the album was finished, but I felt that it definitely needed to be included.”

Cross’ own children influenced the instructive “Wonderland,” a dreamy, lyrical take on reality which is enlivened by Johnson’s rock guitar play. “It’s a general thesis on where things are, a way of looking at life,” says Cross, “and how we’re wishful for our kids and their future. At the same time, it’s hard not to be frustrated and cynical.”

Secret Ladder ends with the loving, lushly orchestrated “A Letter to My Children.” “It’s a very personal song,” says Cross. “I wanted to make a lasting statement for my kids that reflected both the wonderful mystery of their births and my deep feelings for them now that they’re grown.”

This verse from “A Letter” poignantly encapsulates the gift that is *Secret Ladder*:

*Now you’re young men and women of the world
Fly the winds of kindness
Let your wings unfurl
I wish you peace
And that sad times turn to pearls.*