



PHOTOGRAPH BY EMI RECORDS/TOM SHEEHAN

the golden ticket

Just back from their first stadium tour of the US, where their first Grammy Award-winning album sold two million copies, the four London University graduates known as Coldplay tell **Siobhan Grogan** how breaking the US market is like finding yourself characters in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

It's 40 years since the Beatles did it. Nearly 20 since U2 managed the impossible. Since then, you only really need the fingers of one hand to count the number of young British and Irish guitar bands who have achieved the now-legendary goal that is 'breaking America'. This has been blamed on everything from workshy Brits to bad US music taste, but now one song is changing all that.

Early last year, commercials for the American TV network ABC featured a track called Yellow by Coldplay. Radio stations started playing it. People began to wonder who had made such a simple, tender love song. The band themselves – a four-piece in their early twenties – had yet to set foot on US soil, though back home they were the name on everybody's lips.

Singer Chris Martin, bassist Guy Berryman, guitarist Jonny Buckland and drummer Will Champion met and formed at university in London in 1996, pinching their name from a friend's band who thought it sounded too depressing. By the time they'd finished their finals, they were signed to Parlophone. Chris now admits he barely even listened to records before then and was clueless when it came to music.

"For all my teenage life all I ever used to listen to was just me playing the piano and occasionally Sting, and that's not the best music education," a black-clad, long-limbed Chris reflects today. "It's only really been over the past two years, since we've had money, that I've been able to buy records on a literally daily basis."

His lack of knowledge hardly posed a problem, and the band came along at a time plaintive similar-sounding guitar acts such as Travis, David Gray and even ex-Verve frontman Richard Ashcroft were already making their mark. After countless UK tours and two major-label singles that grazed the charts, Coldplay's own breakthrough hit, *Yellow*, reached number four in June 2000. From there, they'd be the first to tell you it's all gone a bit, well, strange. American success aside, Coldplay have headlined the Glastonbury Festival, had Sylvester Stallone personally ask to use their song *Trouble* in the remake of the film *Get Carter* (they said no), won two Brit Awards and count Bono – "the most quotable man on the planet", Will reckons – and Kylie Minogue among their fans.

"The most surprising thing about fame is that you realise it's nonsense," Chris shrugs. "When you're growing up and you're 15 you think, wow, one day I'd like to be in that telly world and you get there and everyone's just normal, though some of them are a bit nasty. It makes you thankful that at least the thing that you're famous for is something that you're very proud of."

Whether he likes it or not, fame has certainly taken a shine to Chris. The tabloids have already linked him with singers Natalie Imbruglia and Nelly Furtado. ("It's rubbish," he says. "But I don't care.") He is getting to grips with his unlikely status as a pin-up by refusing to take it at all seriously.

"I'll tell you about intrusion," he begins, widening his already enormous blue eyes and looking serious. "The other day, Jonny [Buckland, guitarist] had someone go through his bins..." he pauses and beams again. "He was

dressed as a binman. It was really weird. He even took the rubbish away..."

For now, the focus is back on the music anyway. In August, the band released their stunning second album, *A Rush of Blood to the Head*, and the first single from it, *In My Place*, entered the UK charts at number two. They spent September mostly touring the US, figuring out how on earth they had managed to do so well there when so few others make it.

"We have no idea how it happened there. That's the thing," Chris says. "We were already being played before we got there. When we got there, we did work our arses off, and we're nice to people we meet of course. We are the way we are. But there's still no guarantee."

"We were lucky because people already knew *Yellow* so we went in playing quite big venues," Guy adds. "We missed out that van tour when you go around playing all these weird venues where there's literally two people and a dog watching you."

"One of our first gigs in America was to about 900 people rather than four in a bar in Texas," says Will. "We haven't even done all the Idahos and Iowas and Oklahomas. I really want to see all those places though."

New-found Stateside fame has come with a whole new set of peculiarities. When Coldplay picked up a prestigious Grammy Award last year for Best Alternative Album ("It's less exciting than it sounds," Guy says somberly.

"We almost didn't bother going up to get it. It was presented between the Best Polka Album..." "And Best Tijuana Jazz Album or something," Will interjects), the celebrations backstage didn't exactly involve the champagne cocktails they might reasonably have expected.

"We had to get our picture taken with a queue of people lining up, a bit like a freak show," Guy begins. "Anyway this woman comes up and she's munching on this pear, and it's all coming out of her mouth, and she's chewing away and she stands up next to us, has her picture taken and goes [in a terrible US accent], 'Did you guys bring the snacks?' She thought we were the caterers. And it was like, so why have you just had your picture taken with us then?"

Guy shakes his head, still bewildered months on. "It turns out she used to be in *Fame*; she was the choreographer."

Obviously, not everyone in America knows Coldplay's faces just yet, but they've already fallen for their songs. With a renewed, if slightly bemused, conviction that the world is finally, firmly, within their grasp, Coldplay can't believe their luck. "We wouldn't be surprised if it all ended for us in America tomorrow because we have no idea how it happened in the first place," Chris laughs. "It's like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It's the golden ticket." ■

*Coldplay's latest album **A Rush of Blood to the Head** is featured on inflight audio channel 11.*

ETERNAL OPTIMISTS | THE WORLD IS WARMING TO COLDPLAY

BIGGEST HIT: Debut album *Parachutes* sold five million copies

WHAT THE US SAYS: "As Martin sang 'We live in a beautiful world', the audience shared that belief with him, even if only for that night. The sighs of joy and contentment from the pack of teenaged girls around me justified that fact alone. I looked around to see the audience blinking with wonder at what they'd just witnessed" www.mindjack.com

WHAT THE UK SAYS: "Their debut single, *Don't Panic*, with its 'we live in a beautiful world' chorus, unfortunately served only to remind me of another English archetype: Fotherington-Thomas in the *Molesworth* books, skipping around, singing, 'Hello clouds, hello sky'" *Daily Telegraph*



WHAT SINGER CHRIS MARTIN SAYS: "I'm a public schoolboy from Devon and not supposed to be in a band"

BEST 2002 MOMENT: Headlining at this year's Glastonbury Festival

PHOTOGRAPH BY KEVIN WESTBERG