

The ROCK STAR as next door neighbor

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Cable TV shows usually exist to push buttons and create controversy — whether it's the bed-hopping of "Sex and the City" or the frankness of "Queer as Folk." So when Showtime readies a series set in the world of rock 'n' roll, you might expect a scathing satire of record companies coupled with an orgy of groupies and drugs.

But the sweetly amusing "Chris Isaak Show" (which premieres Monday, March 12 at 10 p.m.) is closer in spirit to "The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet" than "The Larry Sanders Show."

According to Isaak, that's all part of the plan.

"I told the writers right at the beginning, 'You know something? If I just portray myself as realistically as I can, as who I am — not only will people not like the show, they'll hate me. So we have to clean my act up. I want my language nice and I just want me depicted as a much kinder, warmer person. And next year, if we do another season, I want to have a little puppy that's really cute that I carry and pet a lot.'"

Basically, Isaak plays himself performing at the real-life club Hunbo's and surrounded by the musicians he's been playing with for the last 16 or so years. His buddies are the same, his house is the same, and even the car is basically the same, "though mine's not a convertible, 'cause where would I tie the surfboard?" he asks.

Beautiful women constantly cross his path — whether it's waitress Minnie Driver playing herself, a cop attracted to his music, or a sexy accountant — but true to the music of heartbreak that made his name, Isaak is hapless and alone at the end of every episode.

"You know what I noticed?" says Isaak. "I make out a lot of times. But just when I start to get anywhere, the phone rings or the doorbell goes off or something. I've got to talk to the writers about this."

Unlucky at love? Romantic at heart? That's not the rock 'n' roll lifestyle.

Enter Isaak's keyboardist Anson (played to squirrely perfection by Ted Rees), who isn't nearly so sensitive as the crooner but constantly scores with the babes.

"Yeah, what are they, crazy? That is so unrealistic," jokes Isaak, who's so handsome that fashion photographer Bruce Weber tracked Isaak down to offer his services before anyone had even heard of the musician. "I think the audience will balk. They'll get a bevy of handwritten letters — probably in my handwriting."

Further rock 'n' roll verisimilitude comes from Isaak's charmingly neurotic manager (played by Kristin Dattilo) and cameos from the likes of Joe Walsh, Shawn Colvin, Stevie Nicks (mocking her New Age image), and model Bai Ling (playing herself as a hyper-sensitive diva prone to tears and flirtation).

One surprising turn comes from Driver, who delivers a spot-on



rendition of "Ma Vie En Rose" before dumping her dog on Isaak when she goes away for the week-end.

"Doesn't she sing great?" Isaak enthuses. "I'm glad you said that, because it's nice when somebody goes and puts themselves out and takes a risk. One thing is, on our budget and the way our show is done, most of what you see is done quick."

"We don't go fix the sound in the studio. There ain't no double-tracking. What you saw was her in the room singing with the guys all at one time. And she did great. That's hard to do for anybody, and she nailed it."

Just as much a kick for Isaak is featuring lesser-known musicians

like Junior Brown. "I don't think everybody knows him," Isaak says. "You don't see him on McDonald's commercials. He's just an underground legend. I love the idea of taking cool people and saying, 'Look here he is!'"

"Ally McBeal" will have Tina Turner, and my show will have Junior Brown."

Of course, not everybody knows Isaak's music either. Despite recording seven albums that range from good to great (including standouts like "Chris Isaak" from 1987 and "Forever Blue" from 1995), his Top 40 smashes begin and end with "Wicked Game," a moody ballad that was featured (as an instrumental, no less) in David Lynch's "Wild at Heart"

Even with his own show, singer Chris Isaak can't get the girl

long after the record company had given up on the album it came from.

In fact, though critically acclaimed from the start, he's always had more press clippings than hits.

His music is catchy, exuberant rock 'n' roll in the vein of Roy Orbison and Elvis Presley, but he's received more airplay on TV shows and in movies than he ever got from radio.

Tellingly, that support didn't come from a marketing strategy to tie in to blockbuster movies. It came simply from other artists like director Stanley Kubrick, who loved his music and unexpectedly used the bluesy rocker "Baby Did a Bad Bad Thing" in his final film, "Eyes Wide Shut."

Director Michael Mann made Isaak's music the centerpiece to "Private Eye," a stylish LA.-based detective show that fol-

Beautiful women constantly cross Chris Isaak's path — and keep going. "I make out a lot of times," he says. "But just when I start to get anywhere, the phone rings or the doorbell goes off or something."

lowed his hits "Miami Vice" and "Crime Story." But the show came and went in a matter of months.

Many other series followed suit, with everyone from daytime soap "Days of Our Lives" to "Beverly Hills 90210" giving his some prominence.

Isaak even appeared on the "Friends" episode that followed the Super Bowl. Other acting gigs include a quick cameo in "The Silence of the Lambs" (he plays a SWAT team leader), a role that was cut from "Married to the Mob" (you can see him in the end credits) and a leading part in Bernardo Bertolucci's "Little Buddha."

So it would be perfectly appropriate for his music career to get a big boost from a successful show. And if "The Chris Isaak Show" doesn't come back for a second season, he's already got an exit strategy.

"The TV house is way better," points out Isaak. "My friends came in and said, 'Wow, your TV house is like... big.' The TV house is literally twice as big as my house, and the rooms are twice as nicely furnished. So if this show gets canceled, the good thing about it is I'll have better furniture because I'm gonna buy it."