

The Hot Seat

SMALL TALK WITH BIG PEOPLE

World on a string

Powerful songs, adoring fans and a new puppeteering project prove that a broken neck didn't break Vic Chesnutt's spirit **By Gabriel Cohen**

Nothing is typical when Vic Chesnutt takes the stage. For starters, he rolls on in his wheelchair, whistling. He strums a spavined classical guitar with a pick that's glued to a fingerless glove. His plaintive voice is steeped in a raw Southern accent. When you hear his harrowing yet witty lyrics, you may appreciate what some of the biggest names in music have been saying since his 1990 debut: This 36-year-old singer-songwriter is one of the finest of our time.

Chesnutt fans who covered his songs on the 1996 album *Sweet Relief II: Gravity of the Situation* included R.E.M., Smashing Pumpkins and Madonna (duetting with her brother-in-law, Joe Henry). The accolades have come to Chesnutt despite years of struggling with partial quadriplegia (the result of breaking his neck in a 1983 car accident), not to mention substance abuse and music-business hard knocks—Capitol Records dropped him after his 1996 major-label bow, *About to Choke*, failed to become a hit. In an a cappella hymn on this year's *Left to His Own Devices*, Chesnutt sings, "It may not be pretty, my life up to here / But something bold and beautiful occurred."

From November 15 to 18, Chesnutt appears at Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse in *Josiah Meigs and Me: A Song Cycle for Puppets*. This "multimedia shebang," a collaboration with puppeteer and filmmaker Janie Geiser, is based on the life of the University of Georgia's first president and features 11 new Chesnutt songs. **TONY** recently phoned Chesnutt at his Athens, Georgia, home to discuss the new project. Coincidentally, one of his songs features the lyric "I'm on the hot seat, sweating it out."

Time Out New York: Michael Stipe once said he most wanted to write a song that would impress Vic Chesnutt. Whom would you want to please?

Vic Chesnutt: Mostly myself, but impressing Michael would be gratifying. And Wallace Stevens, Leonard Cohen, Cormac McCarthy, Nina Simone, Erik Satie, Tom Waits, Charlotte Mew, Charlie Chaplin and David Letterman.

TONY: David Letterman?

VC: Yeah. I've always loved him, since he was a weatherman back in Indiana.

TONY: You've collaborated with a lot of different artists, including Bob Mould, Kristin Hersh and Fugazi. Whom would you most like to add to that list?

VC: Styx.

TONY: Are you kidding?

VC: No. That was my first concert—the *Grand Illusion* tour.

TONY: What's the best cover anyone has done of your work?

VC: The one I'm most proud of is Mary Margaret O'Hara doing "Florida" on *Sweet Relief*. Also, hearing Smoke cover "Independence Day" made tears flow out of my eyes.

TONY: And how did you feel about Madonna singing your song "Guilty by Association"?

VC: I couldn't quit smiling—a pinch-myself smile. It seemed so freaky, like having the Pope come to your house. I'm sure I didn't attract many Madonna fans, though; our musics are almost direct opposites.

TONY: You've had lots of ups and downs in the business. What do you wish you'd done differently?

VC: My biggest regrets are signing a horrendous contract as my first deal

"When I heard Madonna singing my song, I couldn't quit smiling a pinch-myself smile. It seemed so freaky, like having the Pope come to your house."

and not making a gigantically over-produced record when I was at Capitol. I should have gotten a fancy-schmancy producer when I had the chance.

TONY: Why?

VC: It might have made me more commercially viable. There are lots of middle-of-the-road-sounding records that can break your heart—like Lucinda Williams's.

TONY: Your new project sounds cool, but puppetry isn't exactly a popular art form. Did you have doubts about associating with it?

VC: No. I was adopted, so the story of Pinocchio always spoke volumes to me. Also, puppets are good for metaphor and symbolism because

they're not constrained by gravity and other physical laws. I like Janie's puppets—they're so personal, understated and evocative.

TONY: Why the fascination with Josiah Meigs?

VC: He was a smart man with deep convictions, and he was surrounded by political opponents. I had a dream in which he was talking to me. I don't remember what he said, but it was my [late] father's head he was talking with. That's what really hooked me—he'd climbed deep into my psyche and

hooked up with my father. This song cycle is about me finding Meigs and what that led me to discover about myself and my country.

TONY: How does that relate to more current events?

VC: That research gave me insight into America's heart, what we're all about. Not in jingoistic terms [*In a sanctimonious voice*]: "They hate our freedom." That's not the real deal. If you sponsor despots, you're gonna get bit.

TONY: So, will you write about what's going on in America now?

VC: I've got a couple of fragments of songs specifically about September 11. That night, I was so shocked, and I kept thinking about when Kennedy was

shot and how much more horrible this is in many ways. I kept strumming sad minor chords and singing about how smoke went up and papers fell down.

TONY: In "Look at Me," from your latest CD, you sing, "If you look at me as a tragic figure / One frivolous moment / I beg to differ." How?

VC: It's difficult for "normal" folks to see people with my physicalities in a natural light. They must either feel sorry for us or see us as inspirational, just because we continue living. They say to me, "You're so sad because you



FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES
Vic Chesnutt counts some of music's biggest stars among his fans.

can't walk." But life is very complex; if I'm sad, it's for many reasons.

TONY: In hindsight, do you think anything positive resulted from your accident?

VC: I didn't start reading literature until I broke my neck. Before, I was too hyper to finish one book. Also, it changed the way I see the world, as a songwriter and as a citizen. I was a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and then suddenly I was a member of a minority. That was enlightening.

Josiah Meigs and Me: A Song Cycle for Puppets plays at St. Ann's Warehouse Thursday 15 to Sunday 18.