

The stuff dreams are made of

By Isaiah Guzman

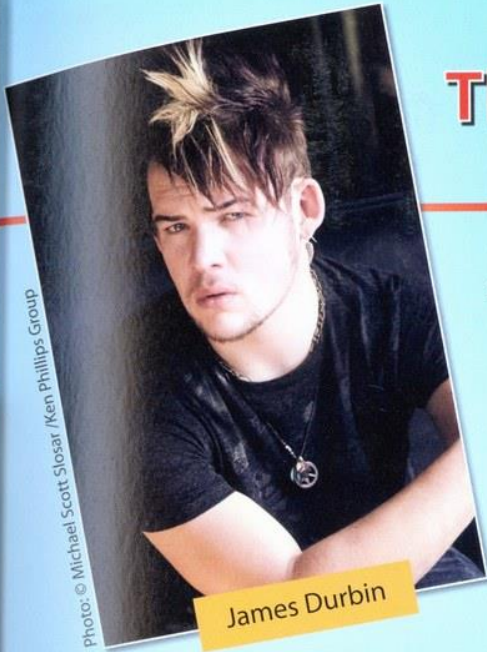


Photo: © Michael Scott Slosar / Ken Phillips Group

James Durbin

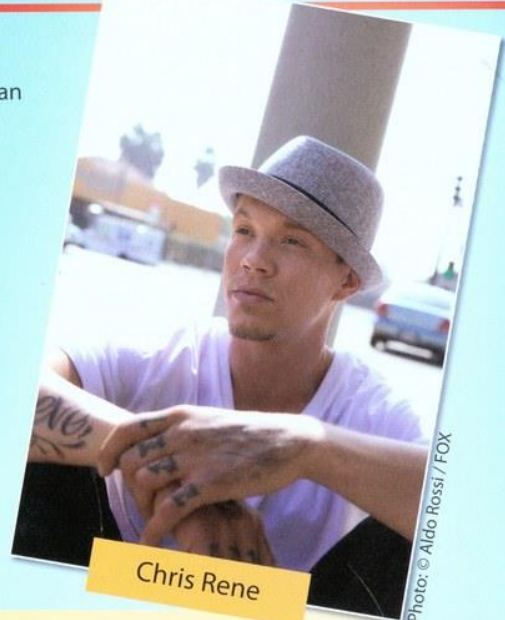


Photo: © Aldo Rossi / FOX

Chris Rene

Santa Cruz rockers James Durbin and Chris Rene take the nation by storm

When local rocker James Durbin stole the hearts of Americans coast to coast with his performances on "American Idol," Santa Cruz residents beamed with pride. A few months later, Chris Rene again captured overwhelming national support on "The X Factor," solidifying the entire community's amour-propre — serious self-respect. We recently caught up with these two rising stars and they shared a little about their roads to success.

James Durbin

If you see a guy skateboarding down Portola Drive sporting a bandana and aggressive faux hawk mullet thing, and say to yourself, "That looks like James Durbin," chances are you're right.

Despite his fourth-place finish on "American Idol" Season 10 and successes thereafter, Durbin has no plans to leave this place. Why would he? Aside from its beauty, Santa Cruz County is the place Durbin grew up, recently married his longtime fiancée, Heidi, and welcomed their two-and-a-half

year old son, Hunter.

"That's where I was born and raised," the 23-year-old said from Los Angeles, where he was doing promo work for the Grammys in February, "and I've got to keep it that way."

Of course, that's not to say Durbin's life will ever again be confined solely to these green hills and ocean cliffs. Though he is scheduled for another free beach concert at the Boardwalk on May 19, Santa Cruz isn't the only place that gets to hear him hit his metal-meets-hairspray rock high notes.

After he finished Idol, Durbin

released his first album, "Memories of a Beautiful Disaster," with Wind-Up Records, the label that once recorded Evanescence and Creed. On the album, Durbin got to work with Howard Benson, who has produced Motorhead, My Chemical Romance, and Daughtry. Durbin also teamed up with his favorite band, Swedish cult favorites Hardcore Superstar, and with Motley Crue guitarist Mick Mars. He's also planning a U.S. tour for the spring and summer, and plans to bring his family along.

"It's definitely tough not having them, definitely a lot of time lost," he said.

ernard
aker
st a



{listen}

22 | Santa Cruz Style

"You either get used to it or get out of it. That's the tough part."

If you weren't living in Santa Cruz last summer, or if you were here living in some cave up Highway 9, it's remotely possible that you might not know that Durbin made it to the final four on "American Idol" by putting his own metalled-out twist on everything from the Beatles' "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" to Judas Priest's "You've Got Another Thing Coming."

It didn't hurt that Durbin was gracious, that he was likeable, and that he had a overcome back story of battling through Tourette's and Asperger's syndromes. Much to the surprise of judges and viewers, he was voted off the show, but that only seemed to bring him more attention as he appeared on the Ellen DeGeneres show and signed a record deal in September.

Three of Durbin's "American Idol" song selections were by the Beatles, something that stems from his earlier days singing with the White Album Ensemble, a local Beatles' cover band.

"He started getting standing ovations every time he sang," said Dale Ockerman, who plays keyboard for the Ensemble, taught Durbin guitar at Musicscool in Santa Cruz, and played organ at Durbin's wedding at Mount Hermon on New Year's Eve. "I just got a good feeling before he even opened his mouth."

Durbin's debut album climbed as high as No. 36 on Billboard's Top 200 Album chart and No. 8 on its Rock Album chart. "Stand Up," the final song on the 11-track album (Durbin co-wrote five songs), was used in stadiums by the NFL last season.

With all that, Durbin sees his music career only moving upward. The rest of his life, however, he's keeping steady at sea level. He and Heidi aren't even looking to buy a house right now. They're settling into married life in a rented home near Pleasure Point, where you might see them strolling. Or perhaps, when he's not on the road, on stage or in the studio, you'll catch Durbin simply taking a skate down to the corner store.

"We're just comfortable," he said. "That's all we ever really dreamed about."

Chris Rene

A year ago, if you saw Chris Rene cruising the New Brighton train tracks, Seabright Cliffs, Jose Skate Park, or Pacific Avenue, there's a good chance he might have flying high on methamphetamines. Imagine how mind blowing it was for him — and probably for the people he ran into — when he hit those same spots a few weeks ago while filming the music video for his stuck-in-your-head-all-day single, "Young Homie," the song that propelled him to third place on "The X Factor" and has earned more than 13 million views on YouTube.

"It's about exactly what the song's saying," the 28-year-old native son said of the upcoming video in a phone interview from Los Angeles, where he's now living. "A day in the

James Durbin performs Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" on "American Idol," May 11, 2011.

Photo: © Michael Becker / FOX

gh
if you
ely
to the
ed-out
Gently
ning.”
;
tling
the
ow,
e
:cord

vere
lys
'cover

e
En-
z, and
New
red



An estimated 30,000 fans flooded Santa Cruz's Main Beach to welcome home James Durbin on Durbin Day.

bum
ie

ng
at
e
me
Or
dio,
ner

eally

igh-
is
en
g
e

r-
r-
:

Photo: © Michael Becker / FOX.

Supporting Local Businesses. We're Lending!

"Santa Cruz County Bank is the perfect partner for our growing business. They've provided financing, merchant credit card solutions and everything in between so we can manage all our personal and business banking needs. We love banking locally."

- Laurie Negro of Betty Burgers

 **SANTA CRUZ
COUNTY BANK**

Call Us Today!

457.5000 | sccountybank.com


LENDER
MEMBER
FDIC



{listen}



Chris Rene performs his original composition "Where Do We Go from Here" on *X* Factor.

The song asks, "Young homie what you trippin' on?" and these days the 10-year addict with more than 10 months sober and a contract from Epic Records isn't really trippin' on much. Rene is currently in the studio working on his first album, which is due out this summer. He's teamed up with his brother Gabriel, "The X Factor" vocal coach Claude Kelly, and Jonathan Rotem, who produced rapper Rick Ross and Jamaican-American hip-hop artist Sean Kingston. Rene also will be doing live performances at radio stations across the country this month.

"It's been a trip," said his older sister Gina Rene, who was cut early on "The X Factor" and whose music has appeared in the films "Mean Girls" and "Step Up." "It's really cool because it's positive and the great thing is people are very receptive and ready for someone like Chris. His energy is so positive and joyful."

The "Young Homie" video came out on Vevo on February 28, the same day a studio version of the song was released. Rene said almost no planning went into the video. That's the way he wanted it. He, director Jeremy Rall, and the crew drove around town and filmed a day in the life. Even Rene's 3-year-old son Ryan came along to Jose Skate Park, where hundreds of people reportedly turned out.

"I'm thankful that we got to do it here," Rene said. "Everything about it was real. We saw random people on the street downtown and said, 'Hey, can you be in this real quick?'"

Rene, with that smile and charisma, made lots of friends even in his worst days of addiction. Those things, his audition performance of "Young Homie," and his road to sobriety made the nation fall in love, and gave other addicts hope and inspiration.

"Young Homie," Rene said, was inspired by a previous run at sobriety. He wanted to write something along the theme of the Beatles' "Let it Be," which he later sang on the "X Factor" before segueing back into "Young Homie."

"It's something for this generation," he said, "so I had to keep it on my level."

But he wants to make it clear that "Young Homie" won't be the most profound song on his album.

"'Young Homie' is a deep one," he said, "but there's other deep ones on there."

There was no way that Rene, a high school dropout, could escape music at least at some level. His grandfather, Leon Rene, wrote the 1950s hit "Rockin' Robin." His father, meanwhile, was soul/jazz singer Googie Rene, who recorded on Leon's label. Googie died in 2007.

Family members, Gina said, weren't sure at times if Rene was going to survive his addiction. There came a point where they had to stop trying to help him. It wasn't until Rene wrapped his car around a tree and was ejected while driving loaded that he woke up. And though the life of fame has its own pitfalls, Gina said this run at stardom is all good for her brother. He has the order he needs: contracts, agreements, a management company.

"We had no idea if he was going to pull out so it was kind of surprising when he did," Gina said. "And it was extra meaningful because he chose it on his own in the end." ■

Photo: © Getty Images/Universal Music Group

{listen}

X
:
r
d
it
re
:
a

Photo: © Ray Mischaw / FOX.

Photo: © David LaVigne / Visuals / FOX.

Chris Rene performs "Gangsta's Paradise" on Fox's X Factor November 9, 2011