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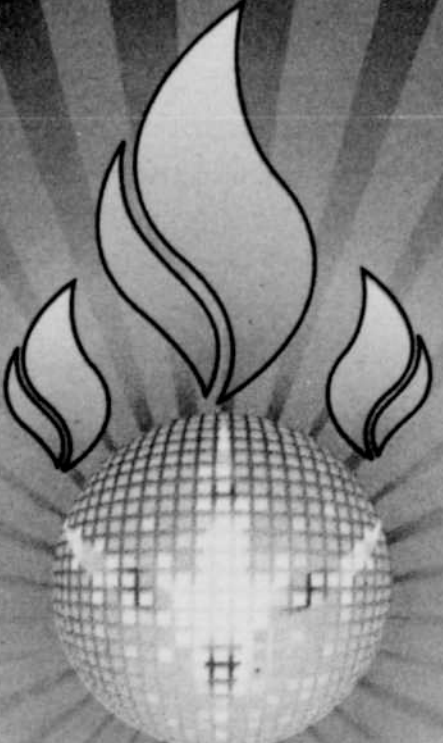
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PERSONALITIES

Life's A Friendly Garden...

Dig It at the Left Coast Eisteddfod with Welsh Super Celeb Chris Needs

By RYAN J. PRADO

"They call me the Welsh Elton John," explains Chris Needs, speaking via cell phone in his native Wales just an hour before his world-renowned BBC Radio Wales program, *The Friendly Garden*, is to air. "But I've got more hair."

It's true that while Needs remains in almost total anonymity within the pop-culture sphere of most Americans, he has certainly assumed the spirit of a rocket man, especially if you place a finger outside the pulse of the States. Needs was unapologetically described to me within the last few weeks as "the gay icon of the U.K." and "immensely famous." Clearly I was missing out on *something*.

In Wales—and in most other countries—Needs is one of the most famous celebrities on BBC Radio. His nightly program reaches about 8 million listeners worldwide. His community club, "The Chris Needs Friendly Garden Association," boasts a global membership of over 50,000, making it one of the largest fan clubs in the world.

As if those lofty numbers weren't cause enough to raise an eyebrow, Needs is also an accomplished actor, stand-up comic, musician (he played keyboard for Bonnie Tyler and has recorded several albums), writer (his autobiography *Like It Is* was the number one bestseller in Wales for seven months in 2007), and philanthropist. He's even been awarded a Membership of the Order of

the British Empire personally from Queen Elizabeth of England for charity work, including his organization, the Chris Needs Hospital Appeal, which raises money for diabetes research.

You might ask, and rightly so: Who is this man? And what is this allure he speaks of?

"I ask myself that question every single day," says Needs. "When I started the program, I didn't know what to do, because there were so many late shows, so many radio stations. It was by pure accident that I thought I'd try and create a community. I called it—and don't ask me why—the Friendly Garden."

Portland has its chance to bask in the buzz of Needs at the Left Coast Eisteddfod, a Welsh-American performing arts festival, running August 21-22 at the Crystal Ballroom. This will be Needs' first visit to Portland, and he has taken the time to study up on our fair city.

"I'm really upset I'm going to miss the Miss White Trash Pageant," admits Needs. "I wanted to see that more than anything. I've read all about your mayor and everything."

Needs even went on fellow BBC Radio Wales presenter Roy Noble's show on July 30, expressing his desire to invite and meet with Mayor Sam Adams.

But none of this explains *why* Needs is such an icon, such an immensely famous character. Welsh society is a very liberal populace with regard to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans community. The fact that Needs' show airs 10 p.m.-1 a.m. Wales' time (eight hours ahead of Pacific Standard Time) has made his program operate on both ends of the entertainment spectrum. Callers are encouraged to phone in to discuss problems, seek advice, gripe, etc., while Needs plays an eclectic array of local and not-so-local



The "Welsh Elton John," Chris Needs

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