

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

ITS IN HANDS

Chris Carter, the ingenious creator of THE X-FILES, tells the whole truth about his infectious tv series

BY SARAH STEGALL

Like Fox Mulder, his alter ego, the creator of *THE X-FILES* says from his editing room in Los Angeles last summer, as he is putting the opening reels of the third season of the award-winning Fox series, Executive Producer Chris Carter talks about his beliefs, faith, trust and *THE X-FILES*.

"I think it's all about religion, really," he says, referring generally to the TV show he created in 1993. "Not necessarily Christian religion, but it's about beliefs—and meaning and truth and why are we here and why are they here and who's lying to us. It's religion with a lower case 'r.'"

Certainly a near-religious fervor has swept *THE X-FILES*' ever-growing viewing audience in the past year, with the show climbing from the "cult" niche to become one of the top-rated shows on the Fox Network. It still surprises the man responsible.

Carter, 39, looks like the very antithesis of the show's male lead and hero, FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder. Tall, tan, blond and possessing a smile out of a toothpaste ad, Carter seems the embodiment of the sunny southern California where he grew up. Reinforcing the image are the facts that he was once a professional potter and remains a passionate surfer. Indeed, for several years after graduating from Cal State Long Beach with a degree in journalism, Carter rode waves around the world for a living, writing for and eventually editing *Surfing* magazine.

Carter finally stemmed his wanderlust in 1983 when he met screenwriter Dori Pierson, whom he married four years later. Besides getting him to settle down, Dori also

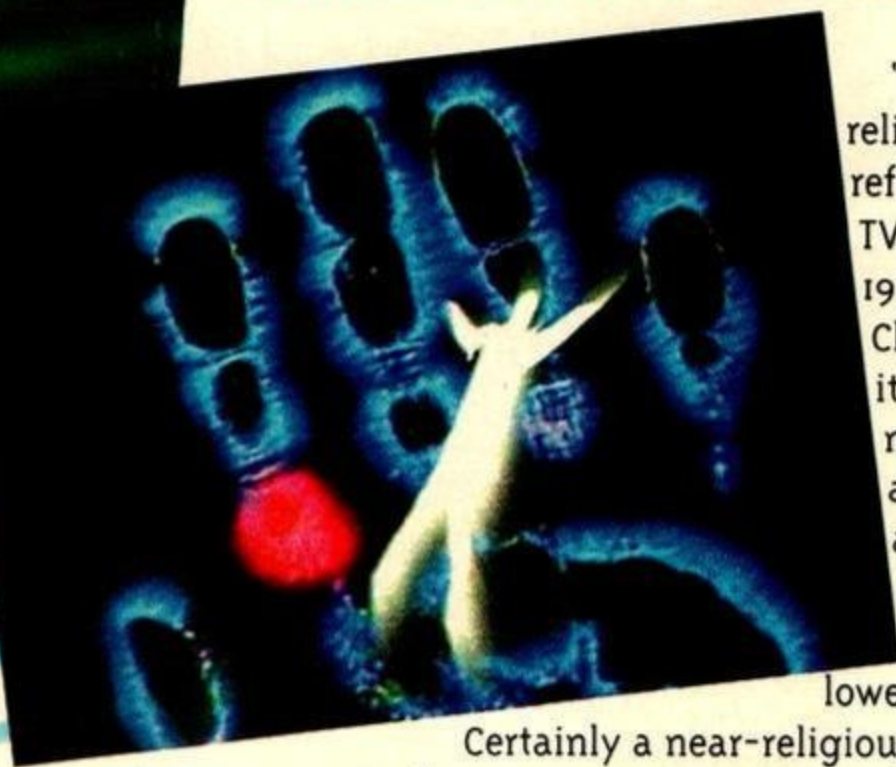


PHOTO: LINDA OKAMURA

Carter looks like the antithesis of Mulder: tall, tan, blond and possessing a smile out of a toothpaste ad... the embodiment of southern California

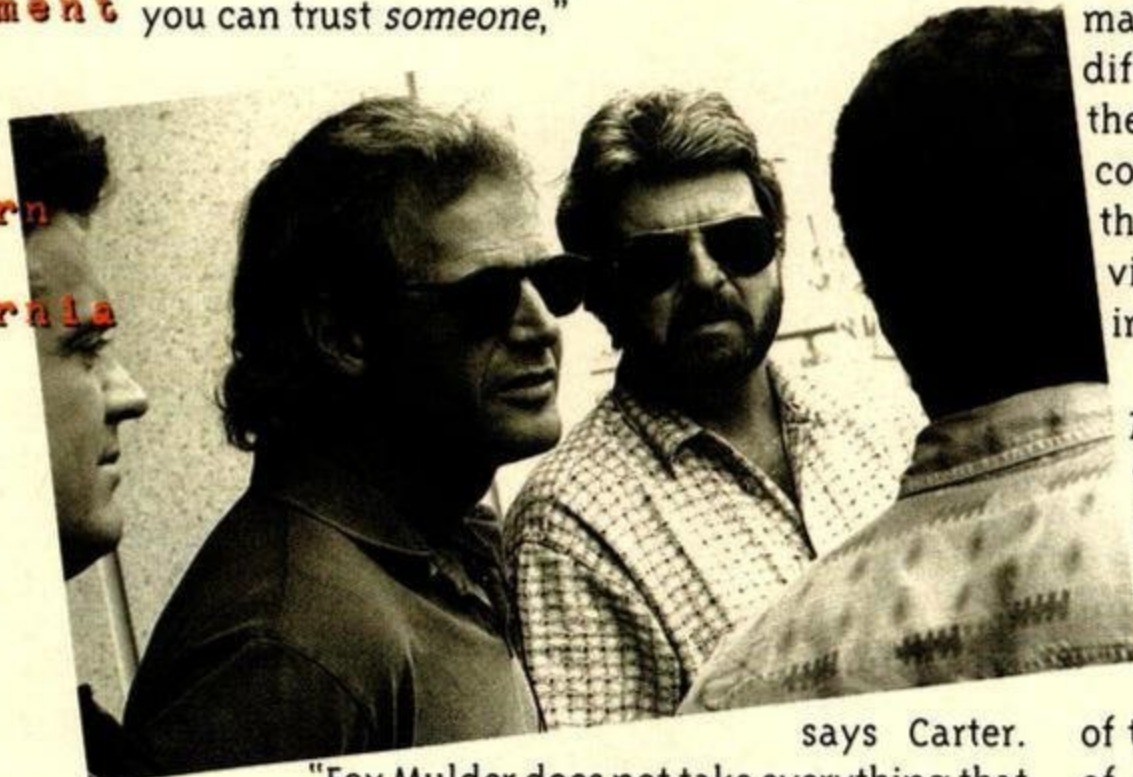
got him to act on another passion: She encouraged Chris to submit his first film screenplay, to Jeffrey Katzenberg at Disney, in 1985. That move landed Carter a three-picture deal at Disney and launched his career as a screenwriter.

Nothing in that part of Carter's background leads you to believe that he would someday be trying his best to fascinate, infuriate and frighten TV viewers every week. However, he admits that despite making several family-oriented TV movies for Disney, his heart was always in the wrong place.

"When I went to Disney, I actually became known as a feature comedy writer," he says. "So that was what people thought of me as, a person who had a certain handle on the voices of contemporary youth and the comedic voice. That's what people kept wanting me to write. I like that [style] very much, and think I can do it, but *THE X-FILES* really is more where my heart is—in scary, dramatic, thriller writing. I think a good writer has many voices and many arrows in his quiver."

Today, Carter is the William Tell of television. His right-on-target voices are the two FBI agents he created, largely from his own internal bag of arrows. Agent Dana Scully is his skeptical side, while Mulder is the part of him that wants to believe. Although it is *not* true that Carter is addicted to sunflower seeds, it is true that his personal philosophy is the basis for the show: "Trust no one." And even that is less harsh than it would first appear.

"The truth is that when you 'trust no one,' there's a tremendous amount of hope there that you can trust *someone*,"



says Carter. "Fox Mulder does not take everything that comes down the pike at face value, but he's definitely looking for the truth. It's really the government versus Mulder and Scully, and what they know, what the government's trying to keep from them and ultimately what they are scratching away at in terms of the truth."

That said, Carter is careful to point out that the purpose of the show is not anti-government propaganda, but rather uncovering the truth. "I think we are feeding into government paranoia. Anti-government paranoia? No. This is about 'trust no one; question authority, don't bomb it.'"

He admits that *THE X-FILES*' eerie, apprehensive atmosphere is a big part of the show's appeal. His intent, from the beginning, was to scare people. "There's nothing else like it on TV," says Carter, who has admitted that one of his influences was *THE NIGHT STALKER*, a seventies TV chiller surrounding the truth-seeking Carl Kolchak. "*THE X-FILES* scares you in a smart way. I think that the mood is interesting to people."

The mood, though, Carter adds, is one that emanates from various sources of distrust. "It's really a cross-genre show. It's got a sort of paranoid, subversive quality, which I think is something that appeals to everyone. It's got a conspiratorial feel, in a couple of senses of that word."

While Carter has always enjoyed a good scare, *THE X-FILES* doesn't draw on his own nightmares to create ours. "I think my nightmares actually are quite like everyone else's, and I'm afraid of the same things everyone else is, which is why I think I can do this show. It's not like my nightmares are that weird or different. If anything they are much more common." He's stated that his fears include violent death and incurable diseases.

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As frightening as *THE X-FILES* can be, it's perhaps more so because the themes are timely and topical: genetic testing, animal rights, sexual predators. Carter has his fingers on our pulse—or maybe at our throats. And he's not afraid to tighten his grip.

"I wrote an episode," he says, "episode five of this season ['The List'], that should create a lot of discussion because it involves black men on death row... a very loaded subject. But," he's quick to add, lest fans think he's going mainstream, "we're not *Picket Fences*, we're not *NYPD Blue*, we're not *LA Law*. We don't seek to become the issue-of-the-week show."

So then just what *is* Carter seeking with his show?

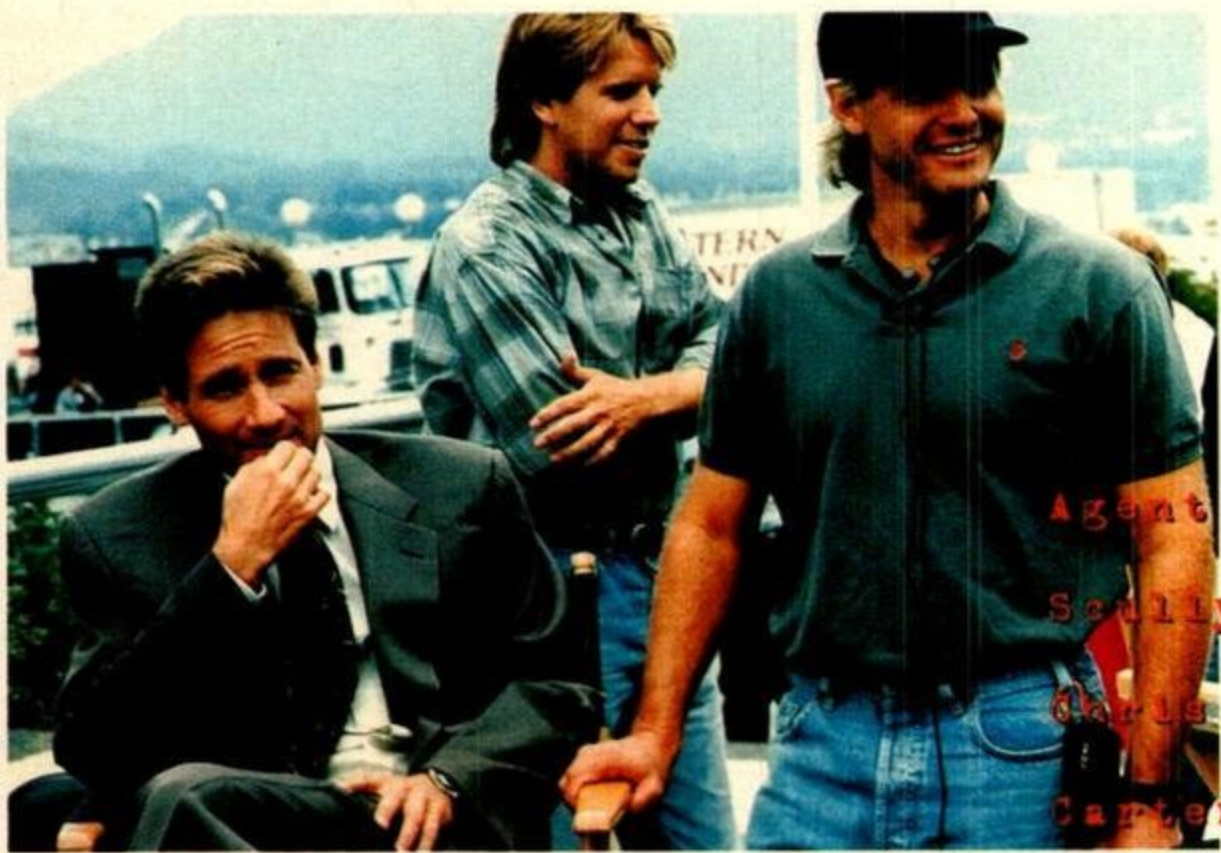




"Much of *THE X-FILES* comes from our imaginations, as well as a keen understanding of what scares us. We don't seek to be controversial. I find a story, and we approach it in the way that seems most interesting. If it's controversial, so be it. I'm not looking to challenge any kind of institution or philosophy or religion."

Carter's hit show, meanwhile, has challenged some tried-and-true Hollywood institutions, such as the dictum that a Friday night time slot is doomed to failure. Why does he succeed where so many have succumbed before? Faith in himself, he says. "Everyone's always hedging their bets, because this is a business of failure. Most things fail, and so you are always working with a tremendous amount of hope that your instincts are right."

Carter's instincts led him to go against some of the accepted wisdom of the TV industry. "They say you should redo the pilot six times for the first six shows of a series, so people really understand what the show is," he says as an example. "I don't think that's so smart. I wanted to make sure that, two



Agent Dana Scully is Gunn. Mulder is Carter's

episodes past the pilot, we did something that was completely different. Which is why you got 'Squeeze.'" That third episode of the premiere season, written by the since-departed team of Glen Morgan and James Wong, was the first to feature Eugene Tooms, the liver-eating mutant. Carter works without a net, trusting his own memory and vision of the show to keep it on track.

impressionistic images, rather than literal images," he says. "You're going to see vampires, but they're not your run-of-the-mill vampires." Sort of an urban punk bloodsucker? "Exactly. The tendency for everyone who is not creative is to make something look like everything else."

Yet making *THE X-FILES* different requires more than hip vampires and fluke men; it requires unique characters, whose grounding in reality keeps the show believable, even as it deals with the fantastic every week. Their chemistry glues together not only the story elements, but the solid partnership between them, too.

"Mulder came first because he was the key to the series, in that he was the person who wanted to believe in this phenomena," Carter says, harkening back to the show's inception. "You need that before you can move ahead. Then Scully came second, as his counterpoint. It's the nature of any interesting relationship. When someone forces you to justify what you believe in, you take that person more seriously. You want that person around to make you think harder. That person really turns you into a better, clearer thinker, which is what Scully does for Mulder. I felt that the series was always from Scully's point of view."

Always?

"It's not *always* from her point of view now," Carter clarifies. "But this series originally was told through Scully's eyes."

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In that spirit, *THE X-FILES* does not have a requisite "bible," the Hollywood term for a predetermined, written guide to the characters and their universe. "I think a bible is a limiting idea. I'd rather be the bible than have it written," says Carter.

And the TV gospel according to Carter is uncomplicated. "The formula for creating a hit series actually is quite simple: Have an interesting show that is well-written, with interesting characters played by interesting performers."

Even though the series also draws interest through some wonderful science-fiction elements, aided by crafty physical and visual special effects, Carter wants them to be more subtle than special. "I prefer to see more obscure, vague, almost

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