



Peter Mazell

Dennis DeYoung, leader

Styx Strikes Gold

But Will 'Pieces of Eight' Sustain Their Platinum Popularity?

by Brad Balfour

Dennis DeYoung, the musical mastermind of Styx, is as mid-western as his Chicago accent. Yet, the bushy-haired front man comes on like a British rock star. When he hits center stage, he's not another boogier in blue jeans, but a silk scarf-clad rocker strutting about like an English crown prince. And judging by the sound he's created for this quintet, Styx is the embodiment of his image—a classically-tinged, British-sounding rocker in mid-America.

The bearded DeYoung was born in the tough blue-collar suburb of Pullman on Chicago's south side. The band is thoroughly American: there are two Italian-American twins (bassist Chuck and drummer John Panozzo), a pixieish Alabama lead guitarist (Tommy Shaw) and a lanky, blond guitarist (James Young). The 'British' tag on the Styx sound seems all the more inappropriate in light of their frank anti-European feelings. "I hated Europe with a passion," DeYoung has said. "You don't realize what you have here until you miss it. There are absolutely no conveniences there. We went to hotels—I remember one—and the toilet paper was like a brown paper bag. The phones didn't work and I couldn't wait to get back."

DeYoung proved the effectiveness of his musical fantasy when the elaborately crafted tune, "Come Sail Away," became last summer's runaway top-10 hit. With soaring synthesizers, lush Beatlesque harmonies and marching riffs à la the Who, DeYoung's songs sound like a catalog of most popular British rock. And with his fascination

for romantic classical modes that rivals Emerson, Lake and Palmer, DeYoung makes Styx sound as European as Westminster Cathedral.

Pieces of Eight, Styx's seventh album (and third on A&M), is, in DeYoung's own words, "the next step. This is the one which will put us over the mark. It turned out just the way we wanted it—as a great rock & roll album." So DeYoung's classical leanings are balanced out by Tommy Shaw's burning guitar licks on their current single (penned by Shaw) "Blue Collar Man (Long Nights)" and Young's clean guitar lines (mixed with some battling power chords) on his tune, "Great White Hope."

The Styx Surprise: Anglo-Rock from America's Heartland

But DeYoung's love for flamboyant and frilly keyboard flourishes still dominate *Pieces of Eight*. "Lords of the Ring" (a tune which, engineer Barry Mraz says, DeYoung steadfastly denies has any connection with Tolkien) and the title track, "Pieces of Eight" are perfect examples of his obsession with meshing obvious classical references with rock in the same way Yes has.

It isn't really surprising that 31-year-old DeYoung, a former high school music appreciation teacher and a Chicago State University graduate in instrumental music, would be inclined to incorporate European classical forms with rock. And the thought of being a

performer—someone able to act out his fantasies on stage—goes all the way back to his keyboard playing at 16.

But it wasn't as simple as that. They put in their time on the ramshackle mid-western rock circuit building a following and refining their sound. "They used to pack the big Chicago rock clubs where drunken kids would stand elbow to elbow to see them," remembers regional rock booking agent Stan Hertzman. Then Styx, which had changed its name from TW4, began seeing their dreams realized when the Chicago fans forced a single written by DeYoung onto WLS, Chicago's major top-40 AM station.

Though DeYoung's fanciful rock notions have run through Styx from the beginning (aptly illustrated by the weird album jackets they've used since the first release), the elaborate sound didn't really crystalize until the band signed with A&M Records in '76. "I like their theatrical sensibilities," says Kip Cohen, the A&M executive who signed them. "And Dennis used his imagination to bring an exotic flamboyance to the stage. I was more interested in a band which was more imaginative than pretending it was a bunch of cowboys."

"The time was right for Styx," adds Cohen. "I was convinced that English bands which had an arch name, skinny legs and high-heeled shoes couldn't get away with murder like they did in the late '60s and early '70s. American fans were turning their attention towards American bands."

And that really sums up DeYoung, too. Cohen describes him as "having a stage persona of paté and caviar, yet



Guitarists James Young and Tommy Shaw trade flashy licks. 'Grand Illusion,' Styx' previous LP, was their first platinum.

you're more likely to find McDonald's in the dressing room." DeYoung is acting out his romanticist fantasies—incorporating Debussy with rock as he has done—while remaining a sensible, successful craftsman with a house and wife in the Chicago suburbs.

DeYoung is getting the best of both worlds—acting out his foreign stage persona while defining a sound as a midwesterner. As DeYoung joins the ranks of the rockers he's long admired, he is becoming a model for the rock dreams of the young generation of fans listening to him.

Styx, a mix of America and Europe: Dennis DeYoung, Tommy Shaw, James Young, Chuck and John Panozzo.

