

STYX

Full Speed Ahead



Styx (from left): Dennis DeYoung, John Panozzo, James Young, Chuck Panozzo and Tommy Shaw.

Pop-Rock Technicians Return With *Kilroy Was Here*.

by Andy Secher

Styx' Dennis DeYoung was pacing nervously in the band's crowded pre-concert dressing room. "Another night, another show," he sang in a slightly off-key voice much to the amusement of Tommy Shaw who sat in the room's corner, carefully tuning one of his electric guitars. Just then bassist John Panozzo wandered by, inquiring how long it would be before the group went on stage. "I'm ready now," DeYoung bellowed, striking a boxing pose and flashing a couple of quick left

jabs at an imaginary foe. "Let's do it now! Let me at 'em."

It was the middle of a seemingly endless world tour, yet from the band's enthusiasm, one might have assumed it was opening night. Such backstage scenes are customary for the group — their way of preparing for what DeYoung called "one of the most arduous live shows around. We really work our butts off up there. There's never an off night for Styx."

The group's ability to cast aside any personal or professional problems once the house lights go down has characterized a career that Tommy Shaw labeled "a real

rags to riches tale." From their earliest days on the Chicago club circuit, Styx has possessed the same fighting quality depicted in their hit, *Great White Hope*. "Yeah, we've been up against the ropes a few times," DeYoung explained. "But we've always come back stronger than before."

The Styx story begins with a group called the Tradewinds, a raw blues-based rock outfit that featured DeYoung, John Panozzo and his twin brother Chuck (Styx' bassist). Back in the mid-'60s this outfit made a meager living by playing in "every hellhole in the midwest." They seemed destined for a career of bar-hopping, until in 1970 a tiny record label, Wooden Nickel, signed the band to what DeYoung recalled "was a contract full of promises but empty of guarantees."

"We were just trying to break out of the midwestern area," DeYoung added. "Wooden Nickel happened to be there when we needed them so we jumped at the chance to sign with a record label — any record label. We were a hard-rock band, and they didn't like the idea of a group called the Tradewinds cranking out heavy metal," he joked. "So we decided to change our name. We had always had an interest in mythology, so since we had been rolling along for so long we thought the name Styx would be perfect."

The band lasted for four albums with Wooden Nickel. Their big break came with a song called *Lady*, a bolero-style rocker that had become a radio favorite throughout the Illinois-Indiana-Michigan rock belt. Eventually, the song began receiving national airplay, bringing the group to the attention of A&M Records, which quickly bought out the group's Wooden Nickel contract. "All of a sudden this big-time label was telling us that we were the sound of the '70s," DeYoung said with a smile. "After struggling for about seven years trying to make a living, it was quite an uplifting experience."

The band quickly proved that the label's confidence was well-founded. They began creating a series of hard-rocking, yet melodic albums, such as *Equinox* and *The Grand Illusion* that sold in the millions and established Styx as America's most successful mid-'70s hard-pop band. Unlike some acts which have difficulty accepting success after years of struggle, Styx took to their new-found fame like the proverbial fish to water.

"We weren't scared by it, that's for sure," DeYoung said. "We had all worked so hard that the idea of finally reaching a lot of people with our music seemed a just reward to us. Sure it was strange appearing

in arenas that held 10,000 people when we had played a club in the same town a year or two earlier. But that's the beauty of rock and roll. You can be an overnight sensation — even if you've been playing for 10 years."

The group refused to rest on their laurels, however. They released albums like **Pieces Of Eight**, **Cornerstone** and 1981's multi-platinum **Paradise Theater**, each of which introduced new elements into the intricate melodic structures and soaring vocal harmonies that have become the Styx trademark.

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"Each album is a new and exciting experience for us," DeYoung explained. "We're never content to just sit back and say, 'Hey, let's do another *Come Sail Away*.' We always want to see what we're capable of doing. That's why on **Cornerstone** we introduced the idea of doing ballads with *Babe*, and on **Paradise Theater** we attempted to do a concept album. Everything we do is unmistakably Styx," he added. "But every album is a little new and a little different."

This pattern of experimentation has continued on the band's latest album, **Kilroy Was Here**, an eclectic collection of songs that cover the complete range of Styx's musical vision. Never a group to follow trends, on such numbers as *Cold War*, *High Time*, and *Heavy Metal Poisoning*, Styx has, as DeYoung explained, "tried to push our limitations and see how far they'd go. Every album is a challenge to see how far we can expand the Styx ideal."

In addition to bringing new ideas and concepts into their music, Styx has also managed to utilize new recording techniques in the creation of their material. On **Kilroy Was Here**, the band became the first group in rock history to utilize solar power to record an LP. Guitarist James (J.Y.) Young, long an advocate of solar energy, came up with the idea of designing and building a three-ton solar device that could produce enough electricity to "power a complete rock concert or a recording studio."

"The power this device puts out is so reliable and so steady that it could run even the most sensitive computer," Young explained as he brushed back his long blond hair. "This is our way of showing that our generation can control its



Young and Shaw and Styx have created "a real rags to riches tale."

future. Solar power is not a wild-eyed fantasy. It can be a reality."

While many critics have found the group's idealistic attitudes and often "pompous" music to be easy targets, Styx has found such charges to be rather amusing. DeYoung, in particular, whose quavering vocals and exaggerated stage mannerisms have drawn particularly sharp press barbs, views this negativism with a road-weary eye.

"C'mon," he moaned. "You can't really expect us to take that too seriously. If you're a new band struggling for a foothold in the business, a negative review can be like the end of the world. But when you've been playing in bands for over 20 years, and you've enjoyed a

bit of success as well, you tend to just shrug and say, 'I guess that guy's got to make a living too.'

"I'm not saying that when somebody writes in the paper that your show is 'overblown garbage,' after you've worked on it for months, it doesn't sting a bit," he added. "That's human nature. We're in a business where we want to please as many people as possible. Our music is supposed to be enjoyable. Thankfully, the reaction that the fans have given us over the years has more than compensated for any negative press attitudes. We've been very hesitant to speak to the press over the years, but when it comes to our fans, we'll do anything that we can to please them." □