

# STYX



## NOT DEAD YET

By John Everson

Styx was driving music before there were car keys ("Lorelei," "Crystal Ball"). Styx was a lovingly bombastic goalie in the net of disco ("Renegade," "Blue Collar Man"). Styx was the paradise hoped-for in a new decade ("Rockin' The Paradise," "The Best of Times"). Then after a flash of moral majority snubbing ("Mr. Roboto"), the river of music stopped.

The solo albums followed -- leader Dennis DeYoung hitting big with *Desert Moon*, but failing to find a loyal

audience with his next two long players; Tommy Shaw finding marginal success with *Girls With Guns*, and then falling victim to the same wanting interest with his next two albums; and James "JY" Young, the wild rocker of the group, hooked up with Jan Hammer for *City Slicker*, an LP that received as much fanfare as his album cuts with Styx.

But now it's seven years since the release of *Kilroy Was Here*, and I'm driving down the highway (there are car keys now) with a brand new Styx album playing in the car stereo on my

way to talk with DeYoung about a reborn band.

Still a stolid South Sider, DeYoung calls Frankfort home, faithfully attends Sox games (Styx sang the national anthem at the last Comiskey Park game), and damns the Dan Ryan. He meets me at the door of his secluded home and leads me to an appropriate interview spot -- his music room where the walls are lined with gold albums and singles awards. In the center of one wall hangs the first single DeYoung ever bought -- an autographed copy of Jerry Lee Lewis' "Great Balls of Fire." That song has become his concert staple -- a sort of musical reminder of where he comes from. The last time I spoke with DeYoung (a year and a half ago), he said he would reject Styx "when the time is right." Well, made *now* the right time?

"We were talking at that moment about putting something together," he says, adding that he doesn't want to say anything premature. "Things did fall apart in some way because the original intent was to have all original band members. But four of us, John [Panozzo], Chris [Panozzo], JY and myself, after we gotten in a room and discussed what was we wanted to accomplish with music -- and our lives essential because being in a band is a collecting thing, it's not just making music, sharing lives with people -- we decided that we were going to proceed because we had such a good feeling about four of us. I know if I didn't get that feeling from what was going that I wouldn't be involved in it just make a record. I could make records anyway. But the feeling was very special; it was like in the beginning again."

The beginning of Styx goes back to DeYoung and the Panozzo brothers jamming around the South Side of Chicago. Early on, John Curulewski and JY came on board as guitarists, creating the sound that Styx has always been known for -- dual guitar and three-voice leads and harmonies. The only position in the band that changed since they switched their name from Tradewinds 4 (or TW-4) to Styx has been the second guitar spot. The late Curulewski filled in the group's first five albums (*Styx II*, *Serpent*, *Man of Miracles* -- on Wooden Nickel records -- and *Equinox*, Styx's A&M debut). When left, Tommy Shaw came on board with *Crystal Ball*, the group's breakthrough LP *The Grand Illusion*, *Pieces of Eight*, *Cornerstone*, *Paradise Theater*, *Kilroy Was Here*. Somehow it's only fitting that, with a new phase in the band's history beginning, there should be a new second guitarist. A&M rocker Glen Burtnik now fills the blank.

But it wasn't supposed to be that way. DeYoung says that originally Shaw had agreed to rejoin the band, but it was his decision to go solo during the group's Kilroy tour that caused the band to split up) before DeYoung finished his 1988 *Boomerchild* album. The making of the video for the album dragged on for months, delaying the album's release and the Styx reunion by almost a year. During that time, Shaw decided not to wait any longer and formed Damn Yankees with Nugent. Enter Burtnik.

"I wanted someone in the band who would, in fact, fully make this a band, which to me is a balance of three writers with the emphasis on writers," DeYoung says. "We didn't do any auditions out, nothing like the

# STYX

and DeYoung does a rave-up cover of The Bad Example's "Not Dead Yet." In addition to "Love At First Sight," "Not Dead Yet," and two other standard DeYoung ballads, the album closes with DeYoung singing a big band, jazz-influenced number (complete with timpani!). Aside from the ballads, it's not your usual "safe" comeback album.

"I could tell this wasn't a quick cash-in thing," Burtnik says. "They wanted to move into a new decade; they wanted to make real records. There are a lot of bands that have kind of recaptured their own sound, done impersonations of themselves, but this wasn't about that. It's not about imitating or revamping some old ideas.

"From my perspective, I'm thrilled to death that the first single is a song that I sing, that I wrote. It didn't have to go that way, but I really have to respect the decision the band made. I think it shows overall where the band's head is at. They've got the balls to try some new stuff and do a Ralph Covert song ["Not Dead Yet"]. I think it's a pretty pertinent song to the situation. Styx records have always been extremely versatile; there's been all kinds of music on each one, and I think this is no different. That's the formula for Styx -- not really doing what's expected. Let's hope it still works!"

Probably the biggest question fans will have about the new record is why do a cover song? In the band's previous 11-album history, there was only one cover -- "Lies," which appeared on the original version of *Man of Miracles* and was omitted upon the record's re-release.

"Lies" was a mistake," DeYoung says. "We were desperate to have a hit single -- it was our last chance with Wooden Nickel, and we would do anything. [It was with the release of *Miracles* that "Lady," a song from *Styx II*, suddenly exploded nationally, getting



Glen Burtnik

the group a deal with A&M.] That was a stupid thing to do and really it's not a good cover, I'm embarrassed by it. But this one ["Not Dead Yet"] is a killer."

DeYoung points out that Styx's comeback is not like the hodge podge-reformations of many other big-name

bands. "One thing should be clearly understood: Styx stopped on a very high note. We were very successful. We didn't make a bunch of lame albums after a peak of success, like many of these



Styx -- circa 1983 with Tommy Shaw (R)

bands who've come back who've had a real ebb and flow to their career. Ours was simple. We had an incredible valley and an incredible peak and then we quit. We have not, as a group, annoyed people with rotten records [where] one minute this guy's in the band, the next minute that guy's in the band -- we didn't make a series of records where you couldn't really understand what was going on.

"How do you avoid [bad comeback albums]? I don't know. I don't know what process those bands went through to make the albums that they made. But I know in our situation, it was the best Styx project that I've ever been involved with since the first album. I've never had a better time, a more relaxed time in the studio ever, under any circumstances, because everybody wanted the same thing at the same time. The problem with groups is, people want different things at the same time. That's why they always break up."

Styx "Mach III" should be around for a while though, DeYoung says. While recording this album at the Chicago Recording Company, the band already began writing songs for the next album. And with the number of immediate radio adds for the funky metallic "Love Is The Ritual," there seems little question that *Edge Of The Century* will add some significant numbers to the group's "Records Sold" tally, now numbering upwards of 22 million.

"When you're in this thing, this monolith called Styx that does things this way, you're really in some ways confined by that," says DeYoung. "Everybody gets nervous if you try to do something different. Well, all that's washed away. It's a new beginning. The fun about this was saying 'We'll bring in Burtnik and we'll rewrite the rules.' We're not gonna try to be anything other than what we are right now at this moment."

What they are, even with the addition of a new player, seems to be much the same as what they were: a strange amalgamation of pop balladry, an occasional slam of metal riff guitar, and

some boot-stomping, R&B-influenced rock.

Stepping into an established band is always difficult, but filling the shoes of Tommy Shaw, recreating the radio rock side of Styx, turned out not to be such

a daunting task for Burtnik.

"I'm kind of like the drummer in *Spinal Tap* that keeps exploding or something -- I'm in that seat," Burtnik jokes. "Once I got working in the band, I started to realize that looking back at JC's and Tommy's contributions, I really do fit in. Tommy, he was kind of the rock radio guy. I'm a lot like him in that way. I'm not out-and-out heavy metal, I'm somewhere between that and the great pop thing that Dennis has."

"I feel really confident of my role though, because I do have a background that I'm proud of, and I think I'm a great songwriter and I'm not ashamed to say that. I think this is exactly where I belong. And hey -- nobody twisted these guys' arms. This is something that we both want together, so the audience is just gonna have to make up its own mind."

It probably won't be too hard to accept Burtnik, whose range echoes Shaw's and whose left-handed, "backwards and upside-down" guitar playing ought to intrigue six-string aficionados. Burtnik continues Shaw's legacy of guitar rock and acoustic guitar balladry, and like Shaw, is the only non-Chicagoan in the group. His pedigree is sound, having played with Marshall Crenshaw and written songs with Tonio K., and with Patty Smythe and Cyndi Lauper for upcoming albums. He was even asked to join Bon Jovi when the band was formed.

The addition of Burtnik's guitar and songwriting strengths, as well as the wise decision to simply write songs rather than try to force another "concept" album like *Paradise or Kilroy*, makes it look as though Styx will be pursuing a course opposite in direction to the river they're named after. Whatever musical styles they go up against on the charts in this decade, they're sure to rock Chicago proud.



said Jan Hammer, who he had worked with, had told him about Glen Burtnik. Jan thought he thought Glen was not only a musician and songwriter but a wonderful person, which is important -- you don't wanna work with people who are idiots. He was on A&M, and I was somewhat familiar with him because I remember his record came out right about the time of my second solo album on A&M.

"So I went out and bought the albums and I thought, 'well, this guy knows what he is doing, he's very competent.' So I told JY to contact him and have him send us some tapes. JY did that and he sent us a demo tape that just blew us away. It was filled with wonderful songs. He was just the right balance for my songwriting yet had overlapping musical tastes."

In a separate interview, Burtnik, a long-time Styx fan who comes from the stomping grounds of Bon Jovi, Skid Row, and Bruce Springsteen, recalls the first time he sat down with the band to see if he would fit in.

"The first thing we did was to see if we could sing together in harmony some of the famous moments that I remembered, like 'Come Sail Away' and 'The Best Of Times.' That was the first thing we did to see if we could capture that Styx sound of three-part harmony. It felt great and it was a blast for me. It seemed to be real easy right from the get-go. I knew I would just kind of have to change hats, because I had been the center of attention in my solo career. But I think it was a thing for me to join a band of the stature of Styx.

"I was driving down this road one day after my second solo album [*Heroes and Zeroes*] kind of came and went, and I was looking through the rock radio stations on my car radio, and I just sat back and thought 'Boy, I should just join a classic rock band! I was feeling very sorry for myself, very frustrated, because it was such a bad time to try to break a new act. The time now is for classic rock acts. About a year later I got the call from Dennis!'"

The collaboration seems to have been a fruitful one. "Love Is The Ritual" and "Edge Of The Century," the first two songs on the demo Burtnik sent the band, are, respectively, the first single and the LP's title track. Burtnik and DeYoung co-wrote "..." the 11th hour" the record's best tracks, the "Eleanor Rigby"-ish "All In A Day's Work" and "Love At First Sight," a song that wouldn't sound out of place on *Cornerstone*. There's a standard JY heavy rocker (co-written with DeYoung)