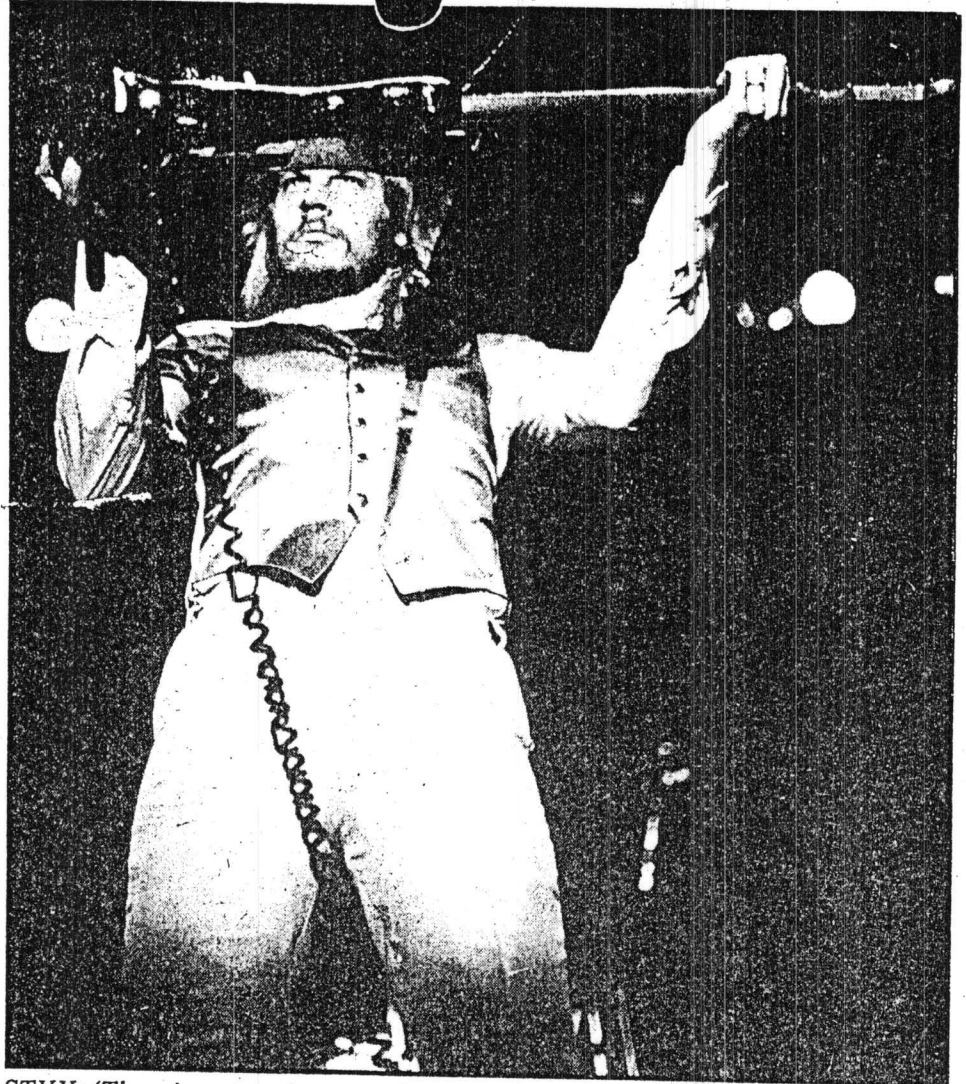


Hix nix Styx lix



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EVEN their most loyal admirers would be hard put to convince themselves, much more anyone else, that Styx's recent visit and short tour of this country was anything approaching overwhelming success.

Having anticipated the very worst before seeing them a few weeks ago as they were reaching the latter stages of yet another major American tour, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that they were nothing like the Yes/Genesis pomp rock cool that I'd feared, but instead, although perhaps the most wildly innovative of combos, had their own distinctive sound and personality.

Apart from the highly distinguished opening to their set, with a heartily different rendering of "Grand Illusion", their preparation with more ethereal textures disappeared in a pile of dust. And although the quietest overtones remain, each variety and texture merged in their work, resulting in a couple of rich and potent ballads, most notably a fine rendering of "Lady" alongside a number of highly colorful and varied songs. In sharp contrast to their

Britain may not have been overwhelmed by the recent visit of Styx, but in the States they're hugely popular. Yet they say: 'We're the best-kept secret in American rock'n'roll.' Simon Kinnersley spills the beans

Mickey Mouse status in this country, one cannot fail to be impressed by the enormous success and popularity they

STYX: 'There's got to be something between Yes and the Ramones — and that's us'

30 weeks, selling over three million copies, whilst at the couple of gigs I caught in nowhere towns there were 13,000 kids packed in.

One can't help observing that Styx's fortunes have never been particularly closely chronicled over the years, and in spite of their dates in this country their attitude remains distinctly cool, with only minimal coverage in press, radio or television.

"That's nothing new", Dennis De Young, keyboards player and vocalist, replies without the slightest hint of malice. "The American press has never taken any notice of us either. Certainly we're no better known over there than, say, Elvis Costello; yet I've got ten gold and platinum albums on my walls at home. We're the best-kept

enjoy back in the States. Their last album, "Grand Illusion", hung around the top ten for the best part of

secret in American rock and roll."

De Young is not a man to mince his words. "It's a fact. But then being this kind of secret really works in our favour, because if they don't expect anything when they go and see us, then they come away surprised and pleased. But if they expect a lot, then the best we can do is fulfil their expectations, which is okay, but we wanna do more than just that."

"But what I really want you to tell your readers is that we came before all those bands like Queen, Boston, Kansas, Foreigner and so on. Tell them they should listen to Styx "1" and "2": they were recorded in '72.

"The fact is we've been doing this kind of stuff for six or seven years, so, if anything, they copied us. It's very strange, because we never copied the band we were equated with. We've copied others of course, but never any of those.

"What really matters to us is the music, because ultimately that's what will live on. It may sound conceited to you, but I don't care, I really believe in the quality of our songs, and I believe that they'll live on. Y'know, in years to come, when everyone's forgotten about Styx, they'll still remember songs, like 'Lady'. I mean, even the kids over here recognised it—well, that was released six years ago, yet they still remember it. That's the most important thing to us."

At this point I couldn't help remarking on my surprise at the unexpectedly aggressive nature of their performance, when I'd been expecting something rather different. "I can't understand it," De Young replies, "when people compare us with bands like Yes and Genesis. We're a rock and roll band, for God's sake. When they're snuck up in the studio, or on holiday, we're out on the road. That's where we spend our lives at the moment."

"We tour about ten months of the year, doing five or six gigs a week. But from next autumn we won't be doing so many because we're beginning to find that people will travel a lot further to see us now. It used to be the case that we had to take it to them, but they'll come to us, so we'll be able to stick to much larger venues."

Success, however, apart from bringing greater prosperity for all concerned, also contributes a great many new and previously unnoticed pressures, as, inevitably, expectations run at a much higher level. Essentially you

can't trade on surprising people forever. The first tangible problem will surely come when they begin assembling material for the next album.

"One of our strengths lies in the fact that there are three songwriters in the group," De Young counters. "Apart from myself, there are Tommy Shaw and James Young (more generally referred to as JY). Sometimes we work in collaboration, but mostly separately. This means that none of us ever feels under any great pressure, like, say, Peter Frampton, who carries the can for everything. So all it needs is for each of us to come up with a couple of songs, and we've got enough for an album."

"Each of us sings our own songs at present, although we intend to switch around a little in the future. We have been criticised in the past for the lack of a single focal point and the fact that the main spotlight shifts between the three of us, but that's the way we like it. I mean, who wants to spend the whole evening just looking at one guy? Y'know, it's just so boring."

"But when one of us steps out time, we are very much a band," he quickly adds, "not a collection of individuals. But when one of us steps out for a solo there's no way any of the others are going to try and upstage him. In that respect, and I wouldn't try and compare us on any other level, we're a bit like the Beatles."

As the most recent arrival, it is likely that Shaw has noticed and been affected by their sudden and dramatic change in fortune more than any of the others. And there can be no doubting that his appearance also had much to do with providing and fulfilling what may have previously been the missing link, finally colouring the picture. He confirms that their success will almost certainly have a serious influence on their music in the future.

"There is a danger that you're expected to come up with a particular type of song, when artistically we might want to move onto something new. It'll have to be a compromise between the two, but then that's not a particularly bad thing to do. Let's face it, we're here to sell records. I'm no diehard artist—I want people to listen and enjoy my songs."

"We were criticised a lot, particularly by the English press for 'Crystal Ball' being too diverse and trying out too many things; and maybe we were. But we had to find out with that album, and the

ones before, what people liked and what suited us. But a lot of our music is more simple than it sounds, the individual parts in most instances are really quite easy. It's just the way we put it together".

One of the more intriguing aspects of Styx's career is that it has taken so long to take shape. In general, it seems that the vast majority of bands either make or break in the first couple of years of their career, or else soldier on in total anonymity. Yet in Styx's case, by far the largest proportion of their seven-year career has been masked in complete obscurity.

"That's true," De Young confirms, "there's no doubt about it. But there are some things in this business that have made us very cynical. We started out with all those wonderful ideas of being a carefree rock and roll band, but then there were business problems."

For many months they spent more time in their lawyer's office than on stage, and more days actually trying to sort out their desperately tangled affairs than actually on the road. Finally, after innumerable lawsuits, affairs were settled, and what they now regard as thoroughly unfavourable compromises made. The net effect of all this was, in the short term, to further retard their already slow-moving career.

Furthermore, they attribute their slow progress, wrongly so, I believe, to the fact that they came from Chicago, rather than some more fashionable major city like New York or L.A.

De Young acknowledges this fact: "To be honest, it's because we lack any kind of positive image, like, say, Ted Nugent or Elvis Costello, for people to latch on to; and I guess people like something in that way. On stage we're kind of nebulous; there's no single feature for anyone to follow."

"But there's got to be something between Yes and the Ramones, and I think that's us. We're a kinda happy medium between the two extremes. I think our music has soul, it's polished, and it has commitment in the lyrics. But the commitment's as near as I want to come to the new wave."

"I think people in the new wave are just louts. We don't want to be associated with people like that — they can't write songs and they can't play their instruments."

There's little danger of Styx being mistaken for a punk band.