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Stimulating



Has The Force

Tommy Shaw Tells About Becoming A Styx Stylist

By ROBIN SCHNEIDER

Helpless without their own sound system at their last New York appearance, Tommy Shaw says, "We're pretty much perfectionists. Next time we go back to New York, it'll be all our own gear. We'll do our own show."

■ The houselights dimmed and the rhythm of 12,000 pairs of stomping feet greeted Styx as the band took center stage. Filled with a rush by the warm welcome, Styx quickly realized that it wasn't meant for them. A majority of the sell-out Nassau Coliseum (New York) crowds had really expected Aerosmith — unaware that there were actually three bands on the bill that night. Many audience members had mistaken the opening act, Richard Supa's band, for Styx.

It was enough to give any group an identity crisis. However, Styx soon had the crowd on their side with a rousing performance. This would be

"that's when we've always come through," added Shaw. "If you can get the music from our fingers to the PA system, then we do the rest."

Styx's previous outing in The Big Apple wasn't as rewarding. Headlining a show with Bebop Deluxe, Styx was lucky to even get to the hall in time to play — or should I say *unlucky*. There were travel delays, and the truck carrying their equipment had jackknifed. Without benefit of their own sound system, they went on anyway. They shouldn't have. The music kept fading in and out because of a faulty PA, making it impossible for Styx to get through. Too bad, for



Photos: Becky Sallar

the last tour for this fivesome in a supporting role. Next time out, James (J.Y.) Young's and Tommy Shaw's contrasting lead guitars, Dennis De Young's dramatic keyboard and synthesizer work and the precision rhythms of twins Chuck and John Panozzo on bass and drums would be the headliners. Judging from crowd reaction, it seemed surprising Steve Tyler and company would want to headline over such strong performers.

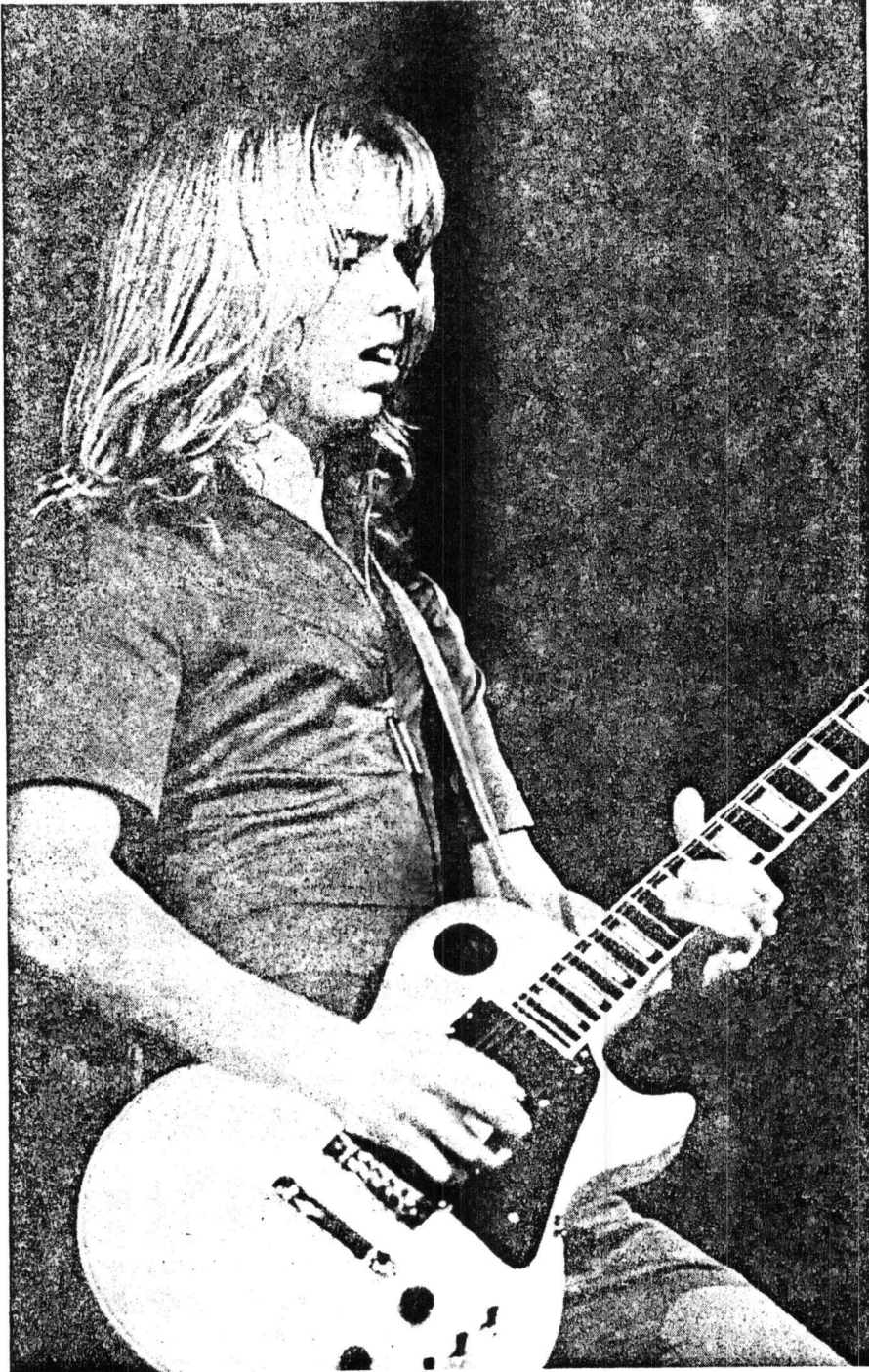
Winning over other acts' crowds has become a Styx specialty. "When we were in Providence (R.I.) supporting Aerosmith," Tommy Shaw told me, "I could tell the crowd did not want to like us. You can just get that feeling when you walk out there. But the end of the show, three-quarters of the crowd were on their feet."

That's the test of any band. And

Dennis De Young said the band was really cooking that night — only no one knew it! Tommy Shaw explained, "New York is a city where we haven't had too much exposure and so we all wanted to be real good. If we hadn't played a good show the next time we went out, I would have been real bummed out because we have very high expectations of ourselves. We're pretty much perfectionists. When we go out under conditions like when we went out in New York, we're helpless."

"Next time we go back in there, it'll be all our own gear. We'll do our own show. If we have to play for half a house, at least it'll be a good show."

With a hit album, *The Grand Illusion* (A&M), and a hit single, "Come Sail Away," on their hands, the members



Tommy Shaw

of Styx don't have to worry about filling concert halls anymore. Believe it or not, the core of this band has been together for nearly fifteen years. De Young and the Panozzos, then high school boys, were in a 'garage band' called TW4 on Chicago's South Side. James Young, a whiz Hendrix-influenced guitarist, split from a rival band to join them. Not long before they signed their first record contract, another guitarist was added — John Curulewski. But four albums later, Styx still hadn't attracted much attention. And then "Lady happened. A song from their second lp, *Styx II*, "Lady" had begun to be played

regularly on local stations when suddenly it became a national hit. Still, for all purposes, Styx was a flash in the pan, unable to follow up that first success. A change of record companies and yet another album passed relatively unnoticed. And then guitarist Curulewski split.

A desperate search for a replacement followed — Styx was scheduled to tour in a week! Thirty-six hours later, a slightly built, blond-haired acoustic and steel player from Alabama — a seemingly unlikely addition to this unit — was recruited. But, right from the start, Tommy Shaw fit right in.

"When they called me up," Shaw remembered, "we had two afternoons to rehearse before we went out on the road. They gave me the albums and said, 'These are the songs we'll be doing.' So I just skimmed over them when I got home and got a general idea of it.

"But when we got into the rehearsal hall and started playing, we hit it off from the very beginning. I don't think I've ever hit it off right from the start with musicians like that. In rehearsal, you're not trying to put on a show or anything, you're just standing there trying to work the songs up. But we started jumping around all over the place like we were at a live gig, like birds doing a mating dance. It was fun."

Tommy added, "We struck it off like that and it's been that way ever since."

Tommy Shaw turned into more than just a replacement. His mellow writing style definitely influenced the other members of Styx. "Naturally, another writing influence is going to change the band a little bit," he acknowledged. "I have a little bit different background in music than they do. I was born and raised in the South and my songs always seem to be more introspective. They've influenced me as well. This is really the first rock 'n' roll band I've ever been in."

From Shaw's scorching lead lines, you'd hardly guess he'd never been in a rock 'n' roll band before. The transition wasn't difficult for him. Rather than treating him as a newcomer, the other band members recognized his creative force and immediately began collaborating with him on their songs. In fact, the first album Tommy recorded with Styx — actually their sixth album — was named after one of Tommy's songs, "Crystal Ball." The verse, about a man trying to find out his direction in life, starts out in a soft rock vein and explodes into a 'heavy' chorus and instrumental section. Tommy was "flattered" the group named the record after it: "It was a big deal for me. It was the first album that I really had a big part in, and it's just a shame that the song didn't go any further than it did."

By the time another album was due, Styx had really gelled. *The Grand Illusion* was a total group effort, unified in theme and musical content. Where did Styx get the idea for it?

"Dennis (De Young) wrote the song, 'The Grand Illusion,' when we were

starting to get some ideas for an album," related Tommy. "When he showed us the song, it just struck a nerve with all of us. It's the old American idea of more is better, and that your success and credibility can be measured by how many cars you have in the garage or how much money you have in the bank, when it's actually not like that at all."

The concept has personal meaning to Tommy as well. "When I was coming up in my musical career, really the only thing I was looking forward to was to be good and to play. Suddenly everything is in the limelight, and so many things stand in front of that, they overshadow the musical part. Sometimes it's hard to see through all the bullshit and just remember what your original idea was."

The Grand Illusion consists of three songs by De Young, two by Shaw, one by Young, and two where all three collaborate. Most of the arrangements were worked out completely in the studio. "I think we work our best under pressure," said Shaw. "When it gets down to the wire, the wheels start turning, everybody starts writing, the interaction starts. With 'Miss America' (James Young's song), we worked it up in the studio and just played it like that. But other songs were different. What we do is, if we have a few weeks to do it, we'll work the song up, work out all the layers and the parts, and then we'll decide what to lay down first. Usually, one of us will lay off on the first part, and sit in the studio and listen, like I did on 'Miss America.' Actually, on the basic track of 'Miss America,' it was just J.Y. and John and Chuck. They played the whole song and all I played was a couple of notes on the 12-string. But, "Tommy added, "I play on the whole song live. Gee, I'm giving away all these secrets..."

The complexity of some of the musical arrangements on *The Grand Illusion* admittedly led this writer to wonder how the songs would come across in actual performance. Styx was able to recreate the studio nuances with the added dimension of a spirited live performance. "When we get into the studio we tend to be very clean and precise with everything," Tommy Shaw noted. "When we're live, there's just that added energy, with the visual and the actual music that's going on, that it just gives you that added feature of being able to see. We have a fairly energetic show.

"And another thing. Our vocals,



James Young

with the exception of a couple of overdubs that we do in the studio, are exactly the same live. That's one thing that a lot of bands can't do."

No one member of Styx dominates the live show from a musical standpoint, although guitarist James Young's stage moves are a definite visual focus. There are no gimmicks, per se, other than the lighting techniques, Young's strutting, and a few maneuvers by Dennis De Young that seem to come from the Robert Plant school of stage movies. This band could easily have been a group of three solo artists with different musical bents — Shaw, the gentle, serious balladeer; Young the macho rock 'n' roller; De Young the romantic, melodramatic classicist.

Each is an accomplished musician and singer. "I was always the lead singer in my old band," said Tommy.

"Dennis was always the front man with Styx even before J.Y. was in the band, and J.Y. was the front man for his band. We're three completely different artists; we have three completely different tastes and backgrounds." Yet, rather than being a CSN type band with each member taking a solo turn, all the members of Styx usually contribute to each arrangement.

"I think we're going on to bigger and better things ultimately, but right now we're pretty much in with both feet," Tommy Shaw summed up. "I think *The Grand Illusion* is probably our best album, and the reason for that is, well, it's taken about a year for our writing styles to really come together as a force." And now that they have, the other band members are saying that Tommy Shaw's the best thing that ever happened to Styx. Their fans would have to agree. ●