

A Special Report: The Keyboard And The Songwriter

Songwriter

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Dennis DeYoung
Writing The Hits For Styx

How To Tap
Your Listeners' Emotions

Janitor Johnny Mullins,
Hit Songwriter

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Name a Top 10 and Styx, one of America's most successful rock groups over the last half dozen years, has probably been in it.

For 1979, *Billboard* gave this Chicago-based group these rankings: Sixth Place, Top Album Artists; Seventh Place, Top Album of the Year (for "Pieces of Eight"); Fourth Place, Box Office (6,000-20,000-seat arenas). In the Top Overall Pop Group category, Styx finished fourth . . . ahead of more-publicized groups such as the Doobie Brothers, Village People, Blondie and Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band.

In 1979, Styx also savored the triumph of a No. 1 song on *Billboard's* Hot 100. Although Styx had come close before—*Lady* and *Come Sail Away* were Top 10 hits—*Babe*, which hit No. 1 last November, was the group's first single to go all the way. It went all the way with the readers of *Songwriter* too, who recently voted *Babe* Pop/Rock Song of the Year.

Seemingly in charge of Styx's Top 10 Singles Department is keyboards player Dennis DeYoung, who wrote and sang each of the above songs (none of the other four members, save for guitarist Tommy Shaw, writes). Although he's a solid musician and excellent singer, DeYoung says, "I consider songwriting the most important thing I do."

Writing The Hits For Styx

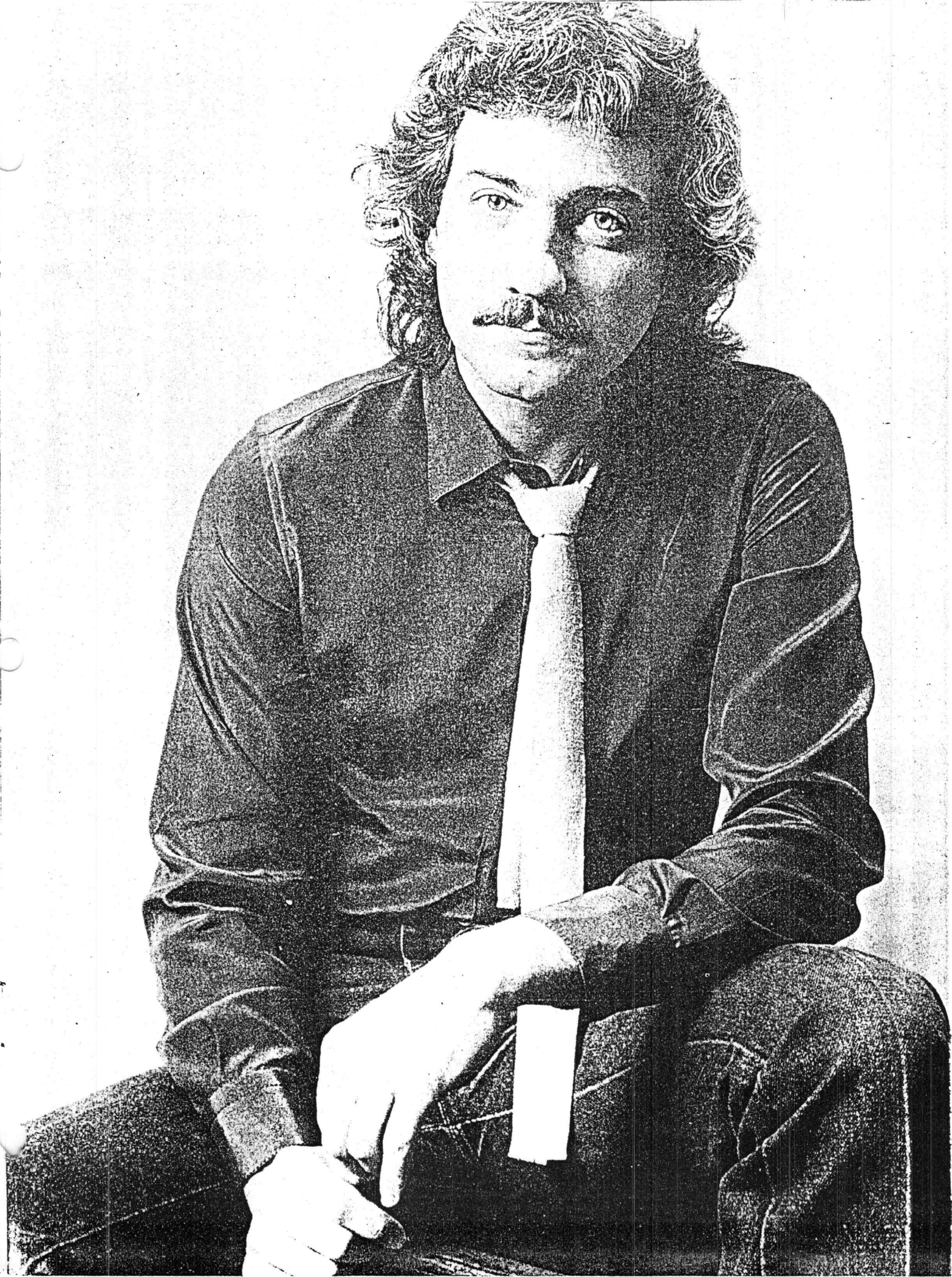
Dennis DeYoung

"Write lyrics that are really genuine to you ... something you really feel."

Dennis has been doing it since the mid-60s, after "the Beatles made it legitimate to write your own songs, sing, and play in a band."

He continues: "The reason Styx got together in the first place is we wanted to be the Beatles." It was a lofty though common aspiration for neighborhood bands of that day (the members of Styx were literally neighbors, growing up on the south side of Chicago), but Styx proved to be very serious about *being* the Beatles: "At one time we only did Beatles stuff. In fact, just before we got our first recording contract we did the whole back side of 'Abbey Road,' start to finish, when we performed."

By Rob Sanford





That recording contract, with Chicago's Wooden Nickel Records, seemingly rescued Dennis from the classroom. A graduate of Chicago State University with a degree in music, DeYoung had been biding his time as a music appreciation instructor in a Chicago-area junior high as Styx hustled a deal. When the deal came, he was relieved. "I figured it would be easier to entertain the kids with Styx than by teaching!"

But Wooden Nickel wasn't the breakthrough Styx had hoped for. Four albums came . . . and went. Outside of Chicago, Styx was nothing more than that mythical river of the underworld.

Ah, but then we come to one of those great breakthrough stories of rock and roll.

It involved *Lady*, which was featured on the group's 1972 Wooden Nickel LP, "Styx II." Dennis picks up the story from there:

"Wooden Nickel was so small in Chicago that it really couldn't promote the song. Jim Smith, who was working at a small FM station in the city at the time, heard it, however, loved it, and played it.

"About two-and-a-half years later, Jim became program director at WLS (the big AM station in Chicago). We had just released our fourth and last album on Wooden Nickel, so we went to bow down to the great people at WLS, because they had never played any of our records. Jim Smith said that he wouldn't play our new album either, but he *would* play *Lady* once a night—starting that night—until it was a hit record.

"And that's just what he did. He played it for three or four months straight."

It's been Top 10 ever since.

It's a time of change for Dennis DeYoung. While he and the other members of Styx seem committed to ride the wave of their popularity for some time to come (as this is being written, "Cornerstone," the group's most recent LP, is still in the Top 100, 32 weeks after its release), they're now pondering extracurricular activities.

DeYoung, in fact, is beyond the pondering stage: "Right now I'm trying to expand my capabilities by placing materials with artists I would like to see record my material. Stuff that would probably *not* be suitable for the

band—movie themes, main title themes, etc. I'm looking to vent this creative energy of mine." He adds that he's accumulated a "catalogue" of songs over the years that he didn't deem appropriate for Styx, softer songs like *Babe* (for the great story behind the writing and recording of that Styx change-of-pace hit, read on).

I caught up with Dennis, in fact, during a recent songplugging foray of his to Los Angeles (he, his wife Suzanne, and their two children still live in the Chicago area). He was only in town for a day, but he found time in his schedule for a chat in his room at Beverly Hills' L'Ermitage.

I found an engaging man, very much "up" expressing himself on the questions I put to him, the first of which centered around the "For Paul" dedication following the lyric to his song, *First Time*, on "Cornerstone." Is that Paul, Paul McCartney, by chance?

DeYoung: Yes it is. I don't have many people that I look up to in rock and roll, but I can say that I—I don't want to use that word "idolize"—but he is probably the only one that I can think of that I admire. I am just as happy being me as being anyone else I can



think of, with perhaps the exception of Paul McCartney. I think he is probably the most versatile singer that has ever existed in rock and roll. And what can be said about his songwriting that hasn't already been documented?

Songwriter: When did you first feel you were your own writer/performer?

DeYoung: I didn't feel I was a writer until somebody started buying our records. You can't really think you are, until somebody proves it. And the only way to prove it is to have somebody lay out a couple of dollars and say, "I'll buy that."

Songwriter: Are you convinced yet?

DeYoung: I am now. We struggled a long time. We had those four albums out on Wooden Nickel before anybody knew who the hell we were.

Songwriter: Now that you have an audi-

ence, do you feel a special responsibility when you write a song?

DeYoung: You bet! It's amazing the degree in which people become immersed in what we say in our songs. People take our songs dead seriously, more than you can ever imagine when you are sitting there writing.

Of course, whatever I say in my lyrics I want to believe. It has been my experience that the more honest I am in my lyrics, the more successful the song is. Whether I am talking about politics or religion or love or the media, if I am expressing something that I really believe and feel, people respond.

Songwriter: Have you always felt this way?

DeYoung: There was a time as a songwriter, when I was beginning, that I was less likely to make those kinds of commitments as a lyricist. In other words, I think you are initially afraid that no one has anything in common with what you think, nobody cares about your feelings, nobody has the same feelings that you do. So you try to formulate lyrics you think everyone will think are really hip or cool. When you start doing that, you are really in trouble as a songwriter. So if there is any advice to give songwriters—since that is what *Songwriter* is all about—my advice would be to cut through the bullshit in your life and write lyrics that are really genuine to you. In other words, something you really feel. No matter what it is about, try to have a real emotional response to what your lyrics are saying.

I can point to songs that I have written early on that I know are just bogus. I mean they were nice, they rhyme, they're cheery, but they did not have any real substance. Although I know when people read the words of these songs, they see something there that I never intended.

Songwriter: How do you resolve the au-



biographical nature of your lyrics when you collaborate with Tommy Shaw?

DeYoung: Generally, one person writes the lyrics when we collaborate. For instance, Tommy and I wrote two songs together on "Cornerstone," *Borrowed Time* and *Lights*. *Lights* is Tommy's words. My contribution



Styx, left to right: Chuck Panozzo, DeYoung, Tommy Shaw, James Young, and John Panozzo

was from the musical end. *Borrowed Time* is me talking.

Songwriter: Describe the collaborative process that brought about the creation of *Borrowed Time*.

DeYoung: Well, I tell you that was a bastard, that song. It was a bastard from the word go. It was originally my song and I could not get it together. I could not make these musical ideas happen. So, it is a bastardization of two different songs: one of Tommy's and one of mine. After we got the song structure down from the musical standpoint, I sat down to write the lyrics. The musical phrasing for the verses was so damn short! Because it was a bastard, there had not been any thought as to where the hell the words were going to go. It has the spirit of rock and roll, which is very important, but it was time to say something. I wanted to say something about how I felt about a guy who grew up in the 60s, was a teenager when things were really wonderful in this country, and does not know what the hell happened. He is the poor son of a bitch who is saying in the first verse "I'm from 1965, and at that point in my life I had it all together, 'cause I knew what I had to do to survive. Now I do

not know any more what I am supposed to do. There are no rules, I don't know what the rules are any more."

Songwriter: Haven't some of your fans in-

"It is so easy to write
 hard rock music.
 But it is harder than
 hell to write *good*
 hard rock music."

terpreted that song somewhat differently?

DeYoung: A lot of people have interpreted that song, and wrongly, that the guy is talking about just being a big rock star, having all this money . . . "Living high and living fine, living high on borrowed time"—doesn't that lyric tell anybody anything? I tried to draw a comparison between Americans in general and the rock star. "When the left says 'yes' and the right says 'no,' he does not know who to believe anymore." He is the

guy from 1965 who believed in John Kennedy and in America. Since that time he does not know what to believe.

Songwriter: How much of the person in that song is Dennis DeYoung?

DeYoung: That is me.

Songwriter: Excepting *Borrowed Time*, do you find it easier to write rock songs or ballads?

DeYoung: God knows it is so easy to write hard rock music. But it is harder than hell to write *good* hard rock music. You have to admire someone who can write good hard rock music, because it is so easy to be mundane. With all due respect to Burt Bacharach, who I think is a master, and others of that idiom, I think it is easier to write a meaningful ballad than it is to write meaningful hard rock stuff, because rock possesses that raw energy that a ballad never has.

I have just as much respect for somebody who writes a song like Bad Company's *I Can't Get Enough of Your Love* . . . simple, basic, but when it is on the radio you want to turn it on real loud. There aren't a lot of great rock and roll songs around like that.

Songwriter: Generally speaking now, what makes a song a hit?

DeYoung: The trick is to write something that is really memorable. I think the secret is to have someone say, "I am sure I have heard that before," when actually he has never heard it before. So you want to have a simple enough idea, so that it sounds familiar. Topic-wise, love is probably the best area. Love is something everyone can relate to, either positively or negatively.

Songwriter: Do you know when you have written a hit?

DeYoung: Not always, but occasionally I will be overwhelmed by something. Recently, I wrote something that I couldn't! As I started to sing it the words just kept on coming. I had scribbled them down on the back of a Hallmark card that was lying on the piano. I went back and resang it... and I started crying. I couldn't finish. It was a sad type of song and really very personalized. There were feelings coming out of me that I do not think I was 100% conscious of. I was startled.

Songwriter: Did *Lady* come from a similar stream-of-consciousness experience?



Suzanne DeYoung,
the inspiration for a No. 1 hit

DeYoung: No. Lyrics generally do not occur that way. Generally, it is just a lot of hard work—sitting down, getting an idea, and trying to make those words fit to those little melody lines that you have created. Before I wrote the words to *Lady* in 1971, I had the music. The word "lady" had come to mind and I just took it from there.

Songwriter: Did you sense that *Come Sail Away* was a hit?

DeYoung: When I first played *Come Sail Away*—the part that goes "A gathering of angels appeared above my head" and then goes into "Come sail away,"—I could feel, "I have got something here." It is just electricity. It just goes right through you. You start to get goose bumps and start to shake just a little.

Songwriter: Which one of your songs do you like best?

DeYoung: Probably *Babe*, although *Lady* has stood the test of time. *Babe* will too. You have to go with the one *people* like most.

Songwriter: Speaking of which, how did you come to write *Babe*?

DeYoung: It was getting close to my wife's birthday, around the time for the "Pieces of Eight" tour. I had been going on the road and leaving my wife and our first child for six years. In the beginning it had seemed justifiable, because I had that tremendous ambition. But when I'd become successful, that ambition waned a little bit; I didn't have that same tunnel vision, where I could only

I said, "Well the truth is that is the way I refer to her as. Since that's the bottom line, I'm going to use 'babe!'" So I wrote the words and I went in to do a demo because I wanted to give her the tape. It was just drums/bass/keyboard, and I sang all of the parts. I gave it to her on her birthday.

Songwriter: Did you intend for *Babe* to become a Styx record?

DeYoung: I never really thought too much about it, except that I really liked the way the studio sounded. I thought, "This demo sounds better than the goddamned albums we have been making for the past couple



see one thing. I began to see how much everything else in my life matters.

So, to make a long story longer, I wanted to tell my wife how much I really needed her and missed her when I had to travel. So I wrote *Babe* for her as a birthday present. It is a song really about separation. I call her "babe." As I found out later, almost every man calls his girl or wife "babe," which I think is part of the tune's universal appeal. I didn't know that when I did the song. Actually I questioned whether or not I should use that word because I knew about the perfume by that name, and the fact that there was a certain amount of commerciality attached to the word that I did not like. But

of years." So what it did was to get me stirred up to change studios and engineers.

So, I would play *Babe* for people that I really respected to get their opinion on the studio sound. "Have you ever heard a sound like this?" The overwhelming response was no. But in addition, they also said that is some *song*. I played it for the guys in the band some five months later and we decided to go to this studio and do the album. *Babe* ended up on "Cornerstone" and became the first single. Aside from that, exactly one year after I gave my wife the song, *Babe* became No. 1 in the United States.

Songwriter: Let's switch gears and talk a little craft. Do you abide by any specific

guidelines to give your songwriting direction or continuity?

DeYoung: Every time I sit down at the piano as a songwriter, I try to let something happen. I don't set out with a preconceived idea of what I am going to do. In other words, it is just a matter of banging on the piano. If I get a little phrase that I like, I try to elaborate on it. Now that I am going to start writing material for other people, maybe I will be thinking of another performer when I am writing.

Songwriter: Do you ever write when you're not poised in front of the piano . . . perhaps using no instrument?

DeYoung: Yes, rarely. It is sometimes beneficial to take your hands off the keyboard. If you are a singer, it can be a great asset. As a singer, I'll stop playing because there are certain things that I always do with my hands that I won't do if I take my hands off and just start humming things in my head and then onto a tape recorder . . . and then try to find out where they are on the keyboard. It can be a trick to start humming the little melody, trying to find out where there is a chord change. To me, it's like putting a puzzle together in a very peculiar way, almost backwards. But some ideas have been spawned from that process.

Songwriter: How structure-conscious are you?

DeYoung: I try to make enough changes so that my songs don't all have the same damn structure. The guys in Styx are a help in this area, because they've had an input in the arrangements. That outside input is so vital . . . it gives you a point of view that you normally would not have.

Songwriter: Have you ever experienced a dry spell?

DeYoung: I think every time you write something really good like *Babe*, you are sure you will never have another good one. I had that with *Lady*, then I had it with *Come Sail Away* and *The Grand Illusion*. Now I will have it with *Babe*. But I think that feeling is common to every creative person.

Songwriter: How do you deal with the fear of failure?

DeYoung: Well, I go to the piano and hope to God for something good. I hear about writer's block; I have never had writer's block—yet.

Songwriter: How long does it take you to bang out a song?

DeYoung: There is no time table for that. Sometimes it takes a long time; sometimes it comes really fast. I wrote *Castle Walls* on the "Grand Illusion" album and I bet it took me a year to write that. I had the idea for months and I could not get the melody to go anywhere.

Songwriter: When you write lyrics, do you have any special do's and don'ts?

DeYoung: Yes. I try my best sometimes *not* to rhyme things. A lot of times I will have a long phrase with no rhymes and then two quick phrases in a row at the end of this long phrase and those two rhyme. It is a trick *not* to make things rhyme. The easy thing to do is to make lines rhyme. "Lady, when you're with me smiling, give me all



your love. Your hands build me up when I'm sinking. Touch me, all my troubles will fade." There is no rhyme in that verse. And even the chorus is "Lady of the morning, love shines in your eyes, Lady." A tremendously successful song but no rhyme. Yet I think if you were to ask anyone, they would think the words were rhyming. I like that.

Songwriter: When did you first hit upon this technique of not rhyming?

DeYoung: Actually, I didn't realize how little I was rhyming until I got a letter about three years ago from a girl who is a songwriter. She wrote, 'I really like your stuff because . . . it doesn't rhyme.' And then I started to look at my lyrics and I said, "Well, I'll be damned, it doesn't rhyme!"

Songwriter: Well since you're not a rhymers, I guess you don't have much use for rhyming dictionaries!

DeYoung: Never used one. Nor a thesaurus. If I do not know it inside me, and I go and use somebody else's words, then it is not me any more. I try to use my own language.

Songwriter: Do you have any do's and don'ts as a melody writer?

DeYoung: I guess the mortal sin is corniness.

Songwriter: Do you spend more time on your melodies or lyrics?

DeYoung: My lyrics. There is no question in my mind. For *me*, that's the hardest part. Melodies I could write all day long. No problem. The greatest responsibility for a songwriter lies in writing the lyrics, *not* the melody. As I said earlier, our audience can really be moved by *what* we say.

Songwriter: And, as the charts show, your audience is one of the big ones. Which brings us to business. How do you deal with your songs becoming commercial commodities?

DeYoung: I know that people tend to think that artists are in it for the money. I would be the first one to say I like having nice places to stay. But I have never met anyone in this business whose first and foremost burning desire is *not* to be the best at what they do, totally apart from the money. Honestly, I think all artists don't give a damn about the money unless it interferes with what they do. They do want to sell millions

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of albums, not because it brings in millions of dollars, but because there is a certain neurotic pleasure in thinking all those people think a lot of you. There is that basic Freudian idea . . . the artist wants to be loved. In order to get what is necessary to do what we do for a living, it *can't* be money—it has to be something else. It has to be a desire to be liked, a desire to do good things, to see the communication between people.

Songwriter: Have you and the rest of Styx been able to deal well with success?

DeYoung: Success is a son-of-a-bitch to deal with, because all of a sudden you have all of these rich guys who don't know anything about being rich guys. It sounds like the easiest problem in the world. But now you no longer have anything in common with your lifelong friends from a financial standpoint. You sit around and talk about the economy or just about anything and then all of a sudden you are apart from all the people that you have loved and known all of your life. You do not mean to be—and you are not by spirit—but there is a difference now. And your success will cause your friends to either treat you better . . . or worse. But not the same. And it's like a culture shock for you. You have to undergo this whole new set of principles, even though inside you are the same person.

Songwriter: The plaintive tone of your comments makes me think of *Why Me*, off

"Cornerstone." Is it typically autobiographical?

DeYoung: I think some of the best lines I have written are in that song. I love the line

"Keep writing the
 songs and keep
 knocking on doors
 . . . The dream *can*
 come true."

"When hard times come and hard times go and in between you hope and pray the scars don't show." To me that is life. And it's the same for the rich guy and the poor guy. It has nothing to do with money, nothing to do with fame. In other words, if you are walking down the street and have a million dollars and a ladder falls on your head, you're dead just like the poor guy.

Songwriter: Was there a particular hard time that inspired *Why Me*?

DeYoung: Yeah, I got beamed by a baseball! *Real* hard. I play baseball in this league in Chicago, and it was the first day of practice. I was at first base switching to the first baseman's glove when the shortstop threw the ball. This guy can throw the ball through the wall and the ball hit me on the head so hard

that for 20 minutes I wasn't quite sure what was going on. I said, "I can't believe this is happening." And I just kept saying "Why me?" I had had the idea before, but when I got hit with the baseball, that is when I knew what I wanted to say in the song. But there is no mention of the baseball. *Everybody* goes through "why me's" constantly . . . some of them are just bigger than others.

Songwriter: Since everybody has got the "why me's," what advice would you give to the hopeful songwriter who may be suffering from the "why-not-me's?"

DeYoung: It would be difficult to give advice on how to get your songs published or some one to record them. I don't have the faintest idea, because I have always had the luxury of being an artist in addition to being a songwriter, which is a great advantage. I am sure there are just thousands of great songs out there undiscovered by people who are electricians or something. I *can* say keep writing the songs and keep knocking on doors to get your songs published. There is certainly an amount of luck involved—meeting the right person at the right time. But the dream *can* come true. I know all those people reading *Songwriter* are dreaming that dream, but we all know it will come true only for a minority of people. So what's the alternative—to stop writing songs? Your only alternative is to keep doing what you are doing. There aren't any guarantees, so accept that right off the bat. If you can accept that and still go on, then go on.

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