

# GIRLS WITH GUNS, MEN WITH BLUDGEONS

## Styx' Tommy Shaw Is Drawn To The Madness That Lies Within . . .

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by Jane Greenstein

**T**ommy Shaw, the once and (maybe) future guitarist of Styx, looks as refreshed as if he's just bounced up from a 12-hour sleep. In fact, he admits, he's been up all night partying and drinking. But Shaw, a 5'6" blond with a fading Southern accent, settles comfortably into a chair and fixes you with blue eyes that show no trace of bloodshot as he talks about his favorite subject: evil.

Now, there was certainly never a trace of heavy metal whips and chains about Styx, and Shaw's solo album, *Girls With Guns*, is plain old rock 'n' roll. But Shaw himself has a fascination with the darker side of humankind.

"I have this fetish for the criminal mind," he says. "I try to figure out what makes people turn to crime. I get strange inspirations from reading about these people.

"It's not that I like to write songs about crime," he continues, "because I don't. It's the understanding of the human mind that's fascinating to me. How such 'normal' people can turn out to be psychopaths. You could be one. I could be one. There's that turning point where someone stops being 'normal' and becomes satisfied only by some crime."

Shaw's interest in bizarre behavior is fueled by books like *Fatal Vision*, the recent best-seller about a controversial murder case. He says he doesn't have criminal impulses of his own—any more.

"I was a shoplifter when I was in junior high school," he confesses. "No one would have believed it! I was the best-dressed kid in ninth grade, but I was wearing stolen clothes."



Tommy Shaw: "I have this fetish for the criminal mind . . . that turning point where someone

More recently, he's satisfied to work out his fascination vicariously. The song on his new album, "Lonely School," he says, was inspired by a book about a rapist.

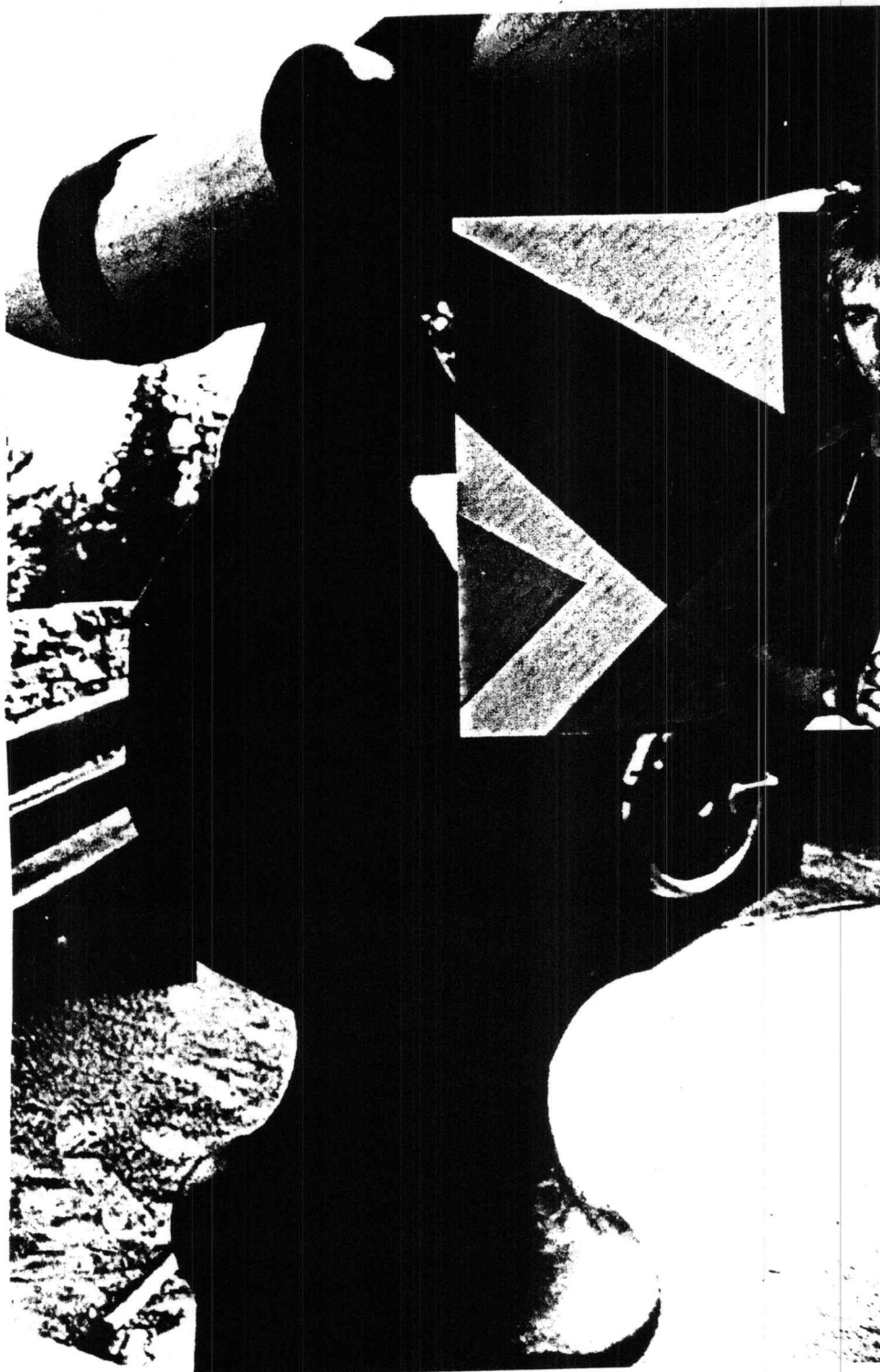
"I realized that, as I had written the song originally, it was too sick," he says. "The tune's too pretty to be about a mass-murderer. So I told myself I'd never tell anyone that that was the inspiration of the song. Oh, well."

Although his attraction to the morbid may seem unappealing at first, Shaw points out that it also has an opposite effect: It gives him an increased awareness and sensitivity.

"A lot of the songs I write say that, if you see someone who needs attention and you feel the least bit hesitant about it, don't be. Because if you give someone the attention, it can mean a lot."

You get the feeling that Shaw has known a bit of the loneliness and unhappiness that can drive the potential deviant. He started playing guitar in his room when he was 10, and it wasn't until he was 23 that he joined the madly successful Styx. And even within Styx things weren't always rosy. He says he was very disappointed with their 1983 album, *Kilroy Was Here*, and the tour that followed it. It was this

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Richard E. Aaron

unhappiness that prompted his attempt at a solo career.

"Everything was supposed to be okay, and it wasn't," he sighs. "Here I was, playing in front of thousands of people and making lots of money, yet it was the first time in 20 years that I didn't *enjoy* playing. It was enough to make me doubt my sanity a couple of times.

"My last year with Styx, I was obsessive about drinking. I was drinking for the wrong reasons. I was trying to escape, to find any happiness I could. Now I don't do that." When does he drink now? "Only when I'm awake," he jokes.

Shaw isn't ready to say at this point whether Styx will regroup for another album (singer Dennis DeYoung also made a record by himself this year), and he doesn't know whether his solo career will push him to the top of the charts as an individual—although indications seem to be in his favor. But he does know that his career is always his first priority, even at the expense of personal relationships. His first marriage ended in divorce.

"Yes, I have to put an 'X' in the 'divorced' box when I fill out forms," he laughs. "Though I do see myself getting remarried one of these days. Family is a

very important thing, but my career is still something I can't escape. I *have* to do this. I base my self-esteem on how well I do this. It's what I justify my existence by."

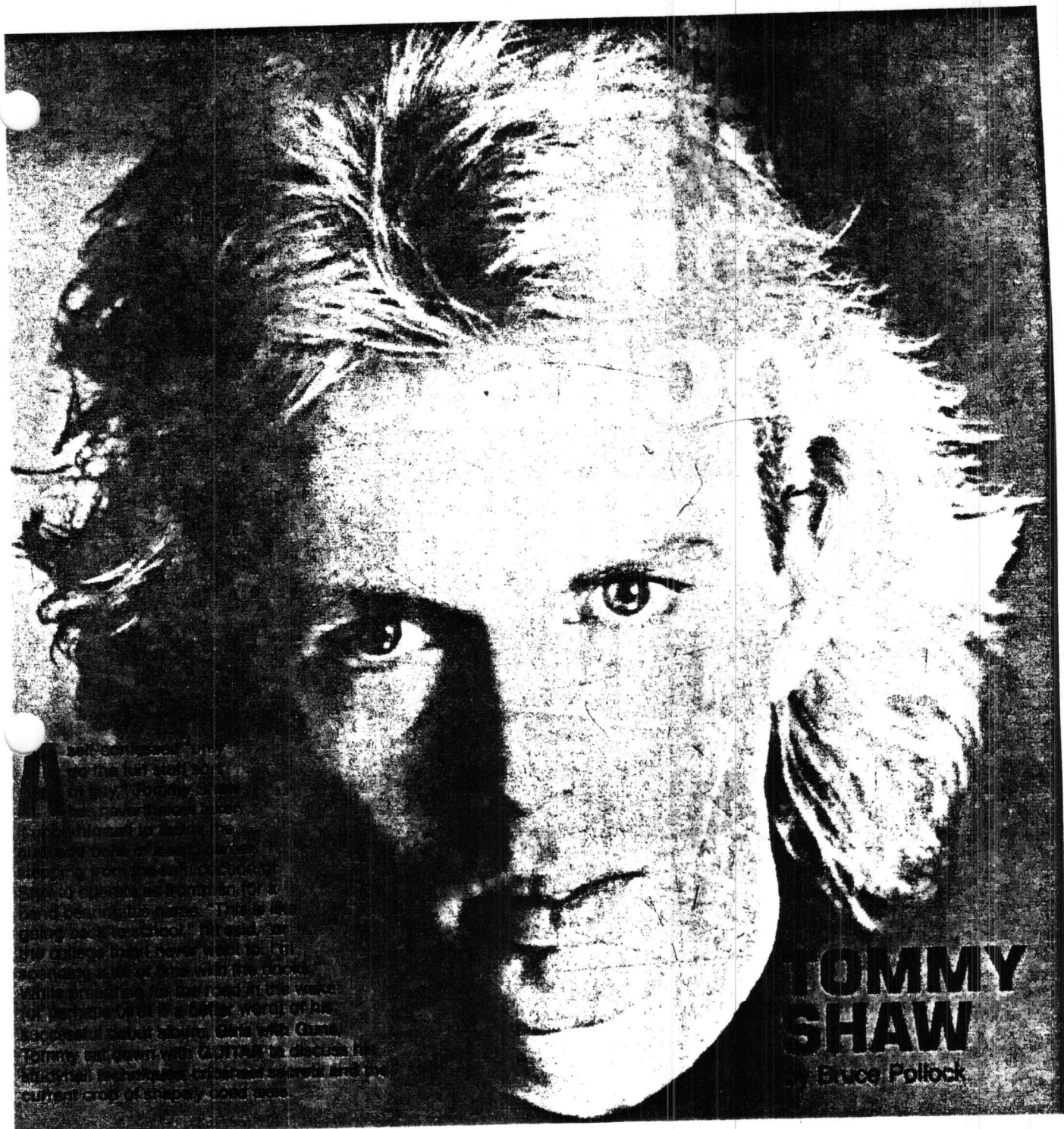
Shaw has a steady girlfriend, but because she lives and works in Chicago and he can be anywhere in the world on a moment's notice, their time together is limited. But his heart appears to be in the right place: Asked with whom he would have a fantasy affair, Shaw replies "Miss Piggy!"

Aside from playing guitar and thinking about sexy Muppets, Shaw's main hobby is messing around with the eight horses he keeps on a ranch in Michigan. He also owns a home near where he grew up in Alabama; his parents live in it.

"My parents have been my biggest supporters," he says, "and it's paid off for them. I'm the fourth of four kids, and they worked hard for years to put my brother and sister through school. When it came time for me, I decided that I was going to pursue this career. They said that my music would serve as the equivalent of college, and gave me everything they could: the right equipment, a van to drive it around in. They've put up with a lot of shit over the years!"

Still closely tied to roots and family, Shaw remains to this day a member of the Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala. He doesn't go regularly—in fact, he hasn't been to his congregation in years—yet he holds deep religious feelings that may seem at odds with his darker interests. But whatever Tommy Shaw is, he's sincere.

"I believe there is a bigger power than all of us out there," he says seriously. ♦



# TOMMY SHAW

Bruce Pollock

I always had a problem with my self-esteem. I tried to get into bands that I felt had better players and better everything than me, so I could learn from them. The first thing I did when I left my home town in Alabama, right after high school, was to go to Nashville on a whim. It was an offer to rehearse with a band. I heard this agent say to somebody that I was the best guy in the band. That peaked me out. I don't want to be the best guy in the band. So I went out looking for another band, and I found a seven-piece band. We had two guitars. We had a horn player who doubled up on other instruments, and a power drummer, who put his drums right up front. He was like a lead drummer. I

always felt like I was the number two guitarist, even though I got a lot of attention. I guess it was my Southern upbringing. Humble to death. Disco was what brought an end to that band, and our attitude about playing other people's music. We tried to do as much of our own music as possible. We stayed broke more than I ever stayed broke in my whole life. We didn't have any recording contract; all we had was an attitude. We had no regard for business or survival or anything. It was just the band and keeping it together. It was while I was in that band that I got noticed by someone in Styx.

When I went to Dennis' house for the audition, I didn't expect the band to

be nearly as good or as bright and talented as they were. They had just recorded their first album for A&M, and they had a tour booked that was going to be playing small stages in medium-sized cities in the West and Midwest. They were still driving around in a station wagon from gig to gig, all in the same car, with the luggage piled on top. They played me some of the music from *Equinox*, and I was just speechless.

I sat down at the piano and they gave me the highest part in *Lady* to sing, and I belted it out with them. I didn't even pick up a guitar. They had a guitar there, but I never picked it up. I played them a couple of demo tapes of mine and that was it.