

# Tommy Shaw Says...Part I

## Listen In As Styx' Young Guitarist Talks About His First Solo Outing, *Girls With Guns!*

March 1985

**RockLine!** *Girls With Guns* is an unusual album title, Tommy; what inspired it?

**Tommy Shaw:** Actually, it was the lady in my life.

**R!** How did you meet this lady?

**T:** I met her where she worked.

**R!** She inspired this particular expression? It's an interesting one. The expression is rather violent.

**T:** You think so, yeah, but there's no gun in it. It's more symbolic than anything else. *Girls With Guns* is more like girls who can handle power with grace.

**R!** OK. When was Styx out on tour with *Kilroy*?

**T:** Over a year ago. The end of the year, about October.

**R!** Tell us how you spent the year. Did you vacation right after the tour?

**T:** I went to Rome for a little while; I went home for a little while.

**R!** Home to Michigan?

**T:** Home to Michigan.

**R!** What's the relationship of your home in Michigan to Chicago?

**T:** It's right across the lake. I started working on my record.

**R!** When did you know you were going to do a solo album?

**T:** Well, I seriously started to rehearse in May.

**R!** May '83?

**T:** This past May. May '84.

**R!** But when did you really *know* you were going to do it?

**T:** After I had about eight demos done.

**R!** So all this happened after *Kilroy*?

**T:** Well, no. Some of it happened during. The first song "Fading Away," I recorded while I was in England with Styx on the *Paradise Theatre* tour.

**R!** That was a long time ago.

**T:** Yeah, and that was just writing for pleasure. But as I started writing more songs that Styx didn't want to use, after about a year of that, I started writing for a solo album. That was during the *Kilroy* project, that I started thinking about making an album.

**R!** How much dissension did the *Kilroy* project cause in the band? The album was the most theatrical the band had ever done.

**R!** I think that was the final statement as to what I had to do, because I finally realized that it was Dennis' band, not mine. Because, the more I wanted to move away from the theatrical, the more the band tended to go towards it.

**R!** Are you saying that the other members in the band were more in agreement as to what Styx should be than you? You were the only odd man?

**T:** I don't know about that, but the band has always tended to follow Dennis.

**R!** Even JY? JY is pretty rock and roll.

**T:** When JY had the choice between Dennis and me, he went with Dennis. Everybody—I mean it's just human nature to go with someone that's well known. Yeah, and I was always the new kid in town and I tended to be a little wild out there. And Dennis had a lot more calm than me, so I don't blame them for following him. He seemed to be a much more calm band leader and I seemed to be this out-of-control person.



Tommy's back singing about girls and women with power.

**R!** In terms of the creative things, the financial end of things, weren't you always an equal partner once you joined the band?

**T:** No, I sort of paid my dues with the *Crystal Ball* album.

**R!** And the arrangements were changed?

**T:** Then the arrangements were changed.

**R!** When was *Crystal Ball*?

**T:** '76.

**R!** So you come into this band, but your energies are coming from a different place and it's Dennis' band.

**T:** Well, I went to his house to get auditioned. And they gave me a lot. The first album they did, they named it after one of my songs. They let me get in and be a creative part.

**R!** But you made a lot of important contributions.

**T:** Yeah, I went to a thousand different places and I grew up in a band for all intents and purposes.

**R!** How old were you when you started?

**T:** 23. Yeah, just turned 23.

**R!** That's growing up the hard way—in the public eye, at the top of the charts. That's tough.

**T:** Yeah. There's not a lot of sympathy for that.

**R!** No. And this band never got a lot of sympathy from the press.

**T:** Yeah. All of a sudden, we were just big. And there's no explanation for it except that the people liked us, that maybe we were easy targets for shots from the press. But, I've since become friends with people from the press, and I understand a little more why they do the things they do, because I think that it's more interesting to read those sides of people than it is to read constantly how great everything is. Like the publication where on one side of the page you've got a plane crash. I think that maybe it helps to balance things out. It doesn't make it any easier though.

**R!** And again, you may have been more in touch with this being the performer and not part of the publicity, management and promotion team. But it's possible the people around Styx put a lot of obstacles in the way of the press and the press resented it and took it out on the band.

**T:** I don't know. This area is the least of my given talent. I'm much better at just writing songs and running on the stage and playing them.

**R!** Most performers feel that way and they hand those things over to other people who don't necessarily handle them with care. It's a big responsibility. Maybe that's why many performers don't get the kind of credit they deserve.

**T:** But if you last long enough, then hopefully, you sort of learn. You have to keep lasting. There was one album that we kept from the press, which we found out about after it had been done. And then the very last, we hired a publicist, a first-name publicist . . .

**R!** Howard Bloom?

**T:** Yeah, Howard Bloom, and the guy says, "So this is the band that the press loves to hate," and we thought, "Oh God, we're paying this guy to write this about us." Well, it just wasn't meant to be, I don't think.

**R!** Well, as you've said, you've learned. You've been in the business long enough and at the top long enough to see what it's all about.

**T:** Yeah, it's funny because it always has this view, just from being this uninvolved person, that the press were all these monsters, and they're really not.

**R!** They're not so bad.

**T:** They're really now. I never used to do much print, I used to do just radio. And now that it's eating everything, I'm getting to know some of these people. And it's amazing to read the newspaper and see myself being honestly portrayed. It's sort of strange—it's like hearing your speaking voice for the first time on a tape recorder. Especially when I'm taken verbatim—I appreciate the fact that I'm being treated honestly, but sometimes my own words amaze me.

**R!** Not everyone wants to examine themselves quite so closely, and you probably must.

**T:** Yeah, but that's the nature of going out and promoting an album. You open up your most personal drawers to everyone.

**R!** Literally. Tommy did you feel that you blended in with Styx right away or were you always more rock and roll while Dennis led the band in a pop direction.

**T:** What I've always done and I still continue to do it, it's been sort of uncontrollable, it's just my manner of working my way up as a musician, is I always tried to get into a group regardless of what they were playing, especially if they were playing something different than what I was playing. To learn more from guys who I thought played better and had a better idea of what was going on. And I constantly moved from one band to another. Soon as I would feel that I'd absorbed all the knowledge in the band, I would move on to something else, 'cause I would get bored with it. But when I joined Styx, it was like this library of information and talent and I stayed with that better than twice as long as I've stayed with anything else. But over the last two years I started getting itchy feet again and I thought it was time to move on to something else.

**R!** So it was after the *Kilroy* tour that you decided you were going to write more.

**T:** Well, it was during the *Kilroy* tour that I realized I had to get out, because I was violating my own rule.

**R!** How far out is out? Will you never go back?

**T:** Well, I'll go back if somebody can tell me that my material will be welcomed, then I'd be back in a minute. I was sort of forced out, because it was sort of write a song about a subject I didn't care about, or not be represented on the album. And as a songwriter, it was sort of my duty to my songs to get them out.

**R!** So you felt that what you were writing, yet the group did not make an effort to try to incorporate that into the band?

**T:** It was just a matter of taste. I liked my material like the music on this album, I was enjoying that, but no one in the band liked that stuff.

**R!** But a lot of it is reminiscent of Styx.

**T:** You think so? Which one? I was in Styx!

**R!** Well, that's what we're saying. *Your* contribution to Styx. It is clearer now how much of Styx, since *Crystal Ball*, was Tommy Shaw.

**T:** You really get to see who brings what. It's interesting. When we asked Dennis the questions, "Does Styx exist? Will it exist? Will you all come together when you're finished getting this out of your system, his response was more or less, "Ask Tommy."

**T:** See, I don't know what they want me back, especially now that I'm doing this, I'm a little more confident than I used to be. And I realize that my songs are good, even if they don't wind up on a Styx album, and so it's really up to them.

**R!** Are they still together?

**T:** I don't know—I haven't spoken to them in almost a year.

**R!** Did you play your album for any of them?

**T:** No. I offered them "Heads Up," "Fading Away", "The Race Is One" and "Girls With Guns" but they passed on all of it.

**R!** "Girls With Guns" starts off with a bang and one could say "Ok, he's showing he's really different," but then you put two ballads on the first side of the album.

**T:** I don't really consider "Kiss Me Hello" a ballad.

**R!** It's slower.

**T:** The record is pretty mature. I had songs where I could have gone just "bam, bam, bam," but I don't like albums that go like that, and I tried to pace mine more like a concert, more like what I would do. It may not have been the most commercial thing in the world to do, but there comes a point in your life where you really want to make some kind of musical statement.

**R!** Let's go back. It's the end of the *Kilroy* tour, you're vacationing at home and you really start getting into this solo project. How did you find your new band.

**T:** I like the East Coast, because it was sort of like escaping Chicago. So I came to NY and I met Peter Wood in a studio in Ne Jersey, and so I liked him a lot—we hit it off really well. So we came to New York and we were looking for bass players and drummers. And we found Steve and Brian.

**R!** Was that through audition or recommendation?

**T:** Through . . . it was a slight audition. And once again, this was my chance to get some guys who I thought were better players than I'd ever played with and that's what I wanted to do. It was just my nature to go out there and find killer players that I felt I would be challenged by and these were the guys.

**R!** Were you able to audition them once or did they have to come back?

**T:** They were auditioned for about 20 seconds.

**R!** And you knew right away?

**T:** Yeah. I've trusted my instincts on most of this. I guess that's why it was so much fun—there were no group decisions in this, it was me making a record. A lot of times you take an idea and by the time you go out there and try to run it by the committee, the idea is so convoluted by the time it's actually finished you get the idea, but you don't really feel responsible for that much of it.

**R!** So this time you really had control.

**T:** Yeah, and I was able to follow my instincts a lot more and



Tommy during a visit to Dick Clark's American Bandstand.

try things that I normally wouldn't have gotten to first base with.

**RI** How much of the album was written by the time you started to audition?

**T:** About two-thirds of it.

**RI** Was the rest written with the band in the studio?

**T:** The rest I wrote from some songs that were halfway finished and I went to a friend of mine that I grew up with, Eddie Wohlford, and then it was almost finished, and I had "The Race Is On." I rewrote it because I just felt like it. I wanted to give it a new face after having it around for a couple of years.

**RI** Eddie is a musician?

**T:** He's a singer—songwriter—I used to back him up. Let's see, what was the other one that we co-wrote? "Free To Love You" is the other one and "Come And Explain" I wrote right as we were getting ready to go into rehearsal. What's funny is, the group I was playing with right before Styx, we did a lot of three-part harmonies, we did a lot of Crosby, Stills and Nash, Eagles and that sort of stuff and that . . . Eddie Wohlford, Jimbo Jones and I were this group called Harvest and the three of us sang together, so they were the first guys I called to come do harmonies with.

And Carol Kane?

**T:** She is a singer with Heaven 17, a former lead singer of Heaven 17.

**RI** So now, you had most of this thing written, you began auditioning and you went back and wrote some more. Where did you rehearse, Chicago?

**T:** We rehearsed here in New York and we selected all the

material we were going to put on the album, because there was a lot more. I had about 25 songs, so I went through them and decided the shape of the album and went into rehearsal here in New York and learned about a dozen of them, went to Chicago, did basic tracks over there and then went to London and finished the recording.

**RI** All with Mike? Mike Stone was there the whole time?

**T:** He was there through rehearsals.

**RI** Mike was Journey's.

**T:** Yeah, he did Journey, Asia, a lot of early Queen stuff, he has April Wine.

**RI** So you went all over the place, and how long did all this take?

**T:** It took three months.

**RI** In the studio?

**T:** From rehearsal to walking out with a mixed tape.

**RI** How did you feel about it when it was all finished? Did you feel "This is Tommy Shaw"?

**T:** I was so close to it—it was like standing with your nose to a brick wall and trying to guess how high and how wide it is. I knew from my own judgement that I'd done everything as well as I possibly could, and I had to trust them with that. I knew they had good songs going in and Mike was doing a great job mixing . . . but I really didn't know until I got away from it for about three weeks.

Check out next month's **RockLine!** and listen to Tommy talk about *The Girls With Guns* tour, LP, fan mail, critics, making his video, personal secrets and lots more. That's in **RockLine!** April 1985, on sale Feb. 12