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Grand Illusions & Breakfasts in America: Conversations with Styx's James "J.Y." Young and Supertramp's Roger Hodgson

A Conversation with Styx's James "J.Y." Young

Mike Ragogna: JY, how does it feel to be a repeat offender on the show and HuffPo?

James "J.Y." Young: Well, sometimes it sounds so nice, you have to do it twice.

MR: (laughs) Okay, let's chat about your new DVD, *The Grand Illusion / Pieces Of Eight Live*. What inspired you guys to celebrate this period with a

live series of concerts and DVD release?

JY: Well, it was a concert promoter along with our manager that hatched up the idea of us doing this. Rush had just done a two-hour show where they put their 2112 album in the middle of it, so other people were doing it as well. It was just our notion to try to mix it up and give people a little instead of giving the traditional "playing the hits" thing that we do. When we toured with Journey in 2003, they had a giant video screen and we were able to start creating content to actually go along with some of this music. As the years have gone by, we've gone through different screens and visuals as things begin to get less expensive and it gets easier to make it all happen. In this, there's some incredible content behind the band on the video screen and we had sort of a mini-Pink Floyd version in terms of the visuals. We were able to create visuals that resonate with the emotions and feel of the music. All of that is combined with the fact that there are about three or four songs on here that we'd never performed live, and there are tons of songs on here that we hadn't performed in decades. It was an interesting experience. I was actually a bit lukewarm on the idea when it was first brought up, but everyone else seemed to warm up to it. I've been wrong about things in the past, and I find that there can be a certain wisdom found in group decisions. We needed to do something different anyway, and the response we got just about knocked me over. People were raving about the show. Recently, we were number two on Amazon.com in the musical DVDs category right behind Adele's live DVD. It was definitely worth the effort.

MR: This was recorded at the world famous Orpheum Theater in Memphis. Did it add a different vibe to the show to be playing these albums in this venue?

JY: Well, I think there's always something majestic about a beautiful old proscenium theater. There's a sense of history about it and an energy from everything else that's taken place on that stage, particularly in a place like

Memphis. Memphis has such a big rock, soul, and blues music heritage. There was a great energy there that day, and the venue certainly contributed to that. We're very pleased with the results.

MR: Can you share a few of your musical influences for some of our readers who may not already know?

JY: The first album I ever bought was *Bo Diddley Is A Gunslinger*, which is guitar driven r&b. Pretty soon thereafter, it was the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton that really moved to the top of my list. There are a host of other guitarists that have impressed me and that I've learned from. I never got to meet Jimi, but I met Eric Clapton a couple of years ago at the Crossroads Festival in Chicago. I told him that I learned to really step up my guitar solo chops by listening to his "Crossroads" solo from the *Live at the Fillmore* album. I was slowing it down because back then on some LP players, they had some spoken word LPs that ran at a much slower speed. If you knocked it down, it would be the same notes an octave slower, so I could figure out what notes he was playing. When I told him all of that, he said, "I made some mistakes on there," and I told him that I didn't hear any. (laughs)

MR: Nice. What kind of guitar are you playing these days?

JY: I'm still very much a Stratocaster man. I've got a lot of personal modification that I've done to my own personal Strats. I've played all kinds of guitars, but the Fender Stratocaster is my guy.

MR: What guitars showed up on *The Grand Illusion* and *Pieces Of Eight* albums when they were first released? Same guitar...Strats?

JY: When we recorded both of those records, I did almost all of it on Fender Stratocasters. I was the second owner of a '65 Strat that I took possession of in about 1967--that was thanks to Jimi Hendrix's influence. After that time frame, I went to play other guitars, but the Fender '65 was

my child, and that's still the one I grab when I go into the studio.

MR: Did you guys consider *The Grand Illusion* and *Pieces Of Eight* to be concept albums when they were first released or is that how everyone labeled them later?

JY: Certainly, T*he Grand Illusion* was. *Pieces Of Eight* didn't nearly have the thread running through it that the other did because that one was an inspired topic that was conceived by my former colleague Dennis DeYoung. The band was able to rise to the occasion, and I think that's what made *The Grand Illusion* our best-selling record by millions of albums.

MR: Do you often wonder why those albums did so well?

JY: I sort of look at that as the Baby Boomer generation coming into its own. They all had money and jobs now and they wanted music of their own. When I say "they," I also mean "me" because I was a part of all of that. *The Grand Illusion* was the seventh album for Styx, so it took a long time and a member change for us to have the skill set, ability, and mindset to make that particular album. There's not a bad song on there, and I don't think that can be said for too many records. Of course, there are only seven actual songs on the album, then "The Grand Finale," which is kind of the reprise of some of the themes in some of the other songs. It's our best record and out biggest seller, so it made obvious sense for it to be a part of this DVD. "Renegade" and "Come Sail Away" are easily our two biggest songs, and they're both on *Pieces Of Eight*, so it just made sense to do those for the live DVD. Our manager even told us he did a poll on the website...I don't know if he actually did it or how scientific it was, but ultimately, we decided that these two albums were the best choices. It was an amazing time.

MR: Another memorable song from *Pieces Of Eight* was "Blue Collar Man." Can you tell us about that song?

JY: The true irony and amazing things about some of those songs is that they were inspired by real life. My friend Tommy Shaw wrote that song about a friend of his who had just lost his job. He was starting to feel the shame of being unemployed and he was having a hard time standing in the unemployment line. We pride ourselves on the ability to go out and make ourselves valuable and get a job, but when there are no jobs to get, it's a very hard thing to deal with. That was going on then and, unfortunately, it's been going on in this country for a number of years now. Everything old is sadly new again in that aspect. The relevance of things written 30 years ago is uncanny. The title track, "Pieces Of Eight," was a song that we hadn't played since around '79, but it resonates so much with what's currently going on that it's scary. Europe is in financial crisis, we've had a rough 10 or 12 years, and even Japan has been going through a deflationary depression. They were the second largest economy on the planet, though I think China has overtaken them. It's just tough out there in the world and there are very greedy people who have made things too unscrupulously big that they have no choice but to fail. But that's a whole other story. (laughs) The true irony is that art does seem to go in and out of fashion. Some songs seem to have profound meaning based on recent events. That's what happened with some of the songs on *Pieces Of Eight*.

MR: I wanted to comment quickly on something you said, and mention that with the economic climate being what it is here, a lot of Americans either forget or are unaware that these problems are happening all over the world. Do you have any further thoughts on that?

JY: Well, there was a Russian who did a study in the '30s during The Great Depression to see if there was a cyclical nature to these types of problems. He determined that there was a sort of worldwide depression every 50 or so years, and that it could be characterized by the idea of the expansion of debt followed by the cycle of the reputation of that debt. So, we are profoundly indebted, as is almost every other nation. My home state of Illinois is the second most indebted state following California. There's debt

everywhere and that's not healthy. What we've ineffectively done is borrowed against the future. This didn't need to happen, but it's human nature and it's a part of life on planet earth. I was actually expecting this 20 years earlier than it happened, and I think we managed to remove the safeguards to prevent this from actually happening when we repealed The Glass-Steagall Act in 1999. People who forget the lessons and mistakes of history are doomed to repeat them.

MR: Yeah, the famous saying. JY, what do you think needs to be done so that we can get out of this mess?

JY: I think we just have to take it a day at a time and recognize that this is going to be painful for a while. This is the hangover after the long cash-fueled-by-debt high that the world has been living off of. Now it's back to reality. Everything is finite--there are some animals on this planet that are going to be extinct very soon because man has just expanded so far beyond his reach. Ultimately, there's got to be some stepping back done and it's going to be painful for virtually everybody on some level. Some people more than others, obviously. But these lessons that were learned for generations that were then quickly unlearned in the '90s are being relearned the hard way. They'll probably be remembered for another 40 or 50 years, then God save them after that. (laughs)

MR: (laughs) JY, let's get back to the DVD. What were the crowds like for the shows you preformed while recording it?

JY: It truly was incredible. I mean, six million people bought *The Grand Illusion* and around three million people bought *Pieces Of Eight*, so there are a lot of people that own those albums on vinyl or 8-track. And the song, "Renegade," has even taken on a life of its own thanks to Adam Sandler and the Steelers. (laughs)

MR: Chemistry at work.

JY: Well, you can never know how people will react. Eric Clapton once said when he was interviewed by Martin Scorsese for a piece that he did on George Harrison and he said that when it all came together and worked in the group, it was magical. But when that wasn't the case and they were disagreeing about everything, it became this ugly hellish thing. I think whenever you have a group of people that have to work together that closely there are bound to be moments of intense joy and moments of furious fighting and great emotional difficulty.

MR: There are so many songs in the Styx catalog would you mind going into a little story about a handful of them, starting with, let's say, "Grand Illusion"?

JY: That was the phenomenal title track to the Dennis DeYoung concept album that we did. The music sounds like you would expect a song by that title to sound, and we open pretty much every show with it. It's a great song.

MR: "Come Sail Away"?

JY: That's a song of escapism at a time when the likes of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* were coming out in the '70 and early '80s. Escapism to the open seas became escapism to the open skies. It's a song of hope and it's great. It's also, obviously, one of our two biggest hits.

MR: "Fooling Yourself (The Angry Young Man)"?

JY: It's an inspirational song to many, many people. Dave Kreig, who set many records as a quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks, has become a personal friend of mine. He used to play that song to inspire him before he went out on to the football field both in college and as a professional football player. It's a very inspirational song and it makes you feel like, no matter what has happened, you still have the chance to get back on your feet again.

MR: Which naturally leads us into "Renegade."

JY: Right. (laughs) A Tommy Shaw song that was kind of inspired by an Alan Parsons song, a very dark song called, "The Raven." We didn't know exactly how it was going to turn out, but I thought we needed a big arena rock anthem at the time instead of a sort of complex symphonic sonata that went on. So, one day, I asked Tommy to let me lay all of these heavy guitars to it and see what it does to the song. Then, next day, he came in and he loved it. The rest is rock 'n' roll history.

MR: "Blue Collar Man"?

JY: That's just an incredible song by Tommy Shaw that really captured the angst of a friend of his who was in the unemployment line. Unfortunately, that song is more relevant today than we would like it to be.

MR: Yeah. And one of my personal favorites, "Sing For The Day."

JY: That song shows the softer side of Tommy. He comes from Montgomery, Alabama, and played all sorts of music when he first started. He's kind of an r&b guy, but he's able to play just about any style of music. "Sing For The Day" is just a really great acoustic piece. Tommy is an amazing acoustic guitar player. He could play circles around me. The song just has a great sweet voice that sort of celebrates the beauty of being alive and wants you to find the joy in each day.

MR: And finally, sir, "Great White Hope."

JY: Dennis DeYoung actually suggested the title of that song to me. I could see that it had potential because it was a crazy thing from history. Jack Johnson was, of course, the heavyweight champion at the time and the number of people that they put up against him were the great white hopes, but no one could beat this young African-American man. That has, for the most part, been the case in the heavyweight boxing ring ever since. The

crazy thing about that song was that I kind of wrote the fact that no matter how much you succeed, there's always someone to contend with. After that, I ran into Bill Wennington who was a center on one of the Michael Jordan Bulls teams, and he came up to me and said that that song was one of his favorites.

MR: I also wanted to talk with you about your *Regeneration* project, can you tell us a little about that?

JY: Well...to go back and go through the effort of trying to recapture magic that we had already captured once seemed daunting. We were sort of forced to, though, because there was a lot of pressure to get into the gaming platforms *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*. They wanted to work from the original multi-track masters so that all of the individual instruments were on different tracks. But, of course, no one could find the original multi-track masters from our *Pieces of Eight* album. So, we were forced to go back in a re-record this stuff. But once we did it, we realized that it gives the new lineup a chance to shine and be a part of this thing. It was worth it. So, we just kind of took off from those two gaming platforms and kept going with it. Personally, I feel that my original lead vocal on "Miss America" was a one take thing, and I feel like I did much better on it 30 years later. "Snowblind" and "Queen Of Spades" had good guitar solos on the originals, but I feel like I went in and beat those guitar solos this time around.

MR: How's your brother Tommy Shaw these days?

JY: The blonde leading the blonde? We call ourselves "The Alpha Dog Tag Team." He is doing phenomenally well. He put out a bluegrass album this past year that he recorded with Alison Krauss in Nashville. He's a big admirer of hers and vice-versa. They got some of the best players around and wrote some bluegrass songs. It didn't really get the kind of traction he'd hoped for, but he really had fun making it. We're all out having the

time of our lives with our favorite rock band.

MR: Very nice. JY, do you have any advice that you would like to share with new artists?

JY: There's a football player on The Patriots named Danny Woodhead. This guy's like 5'9", but he's tough as nails, he can run fast, and he's hard for a big guy to get a hold of. That guy was in the Super Bowl when everyone around him said that he was too small and too slow. But he's smart, savvy, and tough. In order to be a musician in the current industry, you have to be that tough. It's all about patience, persistence, talent, luck, and capital. You've got to believe in yourself and be willing to go out of your way to find the pathway of opportunity, it's not going to come by your door if you're just sitting there waiting for it. There's a line from the movie Shawshank Redemption that goes, "Get busy living or get busy dying." You've got to get busy living!

MR: I vaguely remember you being a fan of solar-power.

JY: I am. In 1983, I donated about $75,000 to a company called The Center for Renewable Resources. They created something called Solar Jenny 1, which powered a bunch of concerts around Southern California. We even recorded one track in our studio in Chicago using Solar Jenny 1.

MR: Sweet. Are you guys touring again this year?

JY: No, not any time in the near future. We did a one-month tour with the release of the DVD, and there was some talk of doing more, but we have other things lined up now. I think we're kind of waiting to see what the response is to the DVD. I'm guessing there'll be a hole in our schedule at the beginning of next year where we might want to go out and do this tour. We only did *The Grand Illusion / Pieces Of Eight* Tour East of the Mississippi, so there's a whole lot of God's green earth west of the Mississippi that we still have yet to visit. We will get there eventually.

MR: Anything else coming up with you guys in the future?

JY: Well...we just got out of doing all of the re-recordings and everything for the DVD, but we also have a lot of writing ahead of us. We'll eventually get around to doing it.

MR: JY, thank you so much for taking time to chat with us.

JY: Thanks so much for having me.