

# WAKE Living

APEX CARY FUQUAY/VARINA GARNER HOLLY SPRINGS KNIGHTDALE MORRISVILLE RALEIGH ROLESVILLE RTP WAKE FOREST WENDELL ZEBULON

## Styx Still Rocking Worldwide Audiences



By Kristy Stevenson

The classic sound of Styx is best known for melding hard rock guitar riffs with acoustic guitar, synthesizers mixed with acoustic piano, and upbeat tracks with power ballads. With 16 studio albums and more than four decades of touring under their belt, they cater to old fans and new with 100+ live shows per year. Their Twitter bio says it best: “Taking over the world, one amphitheater at a time.”

Formed in Chicago in 1972, the band’s current lineup includes Chuck Panozzo (bass, vocals); Ricky Phillips (bass, guitar, vocals); Todd Sucherman (drums, percussion); Tommy Shaw (lead vocals, guitars); James “JY” Young (lead vocals, guitars); and Lawrence Gowan (lead vocals, keyboards).

“We don’t take very many days off once we’re out on the road,” says Phillips. From a sold-out June performance at The London Palladium; to Oslo, Norway; to Swedenfest (the Sweden Rock Festival); Styx then returns to the U.S. and, eventually, North Carolina for a show at the Durham Performing Arts Center (DPAC).

“We play a few songs from the new record,” says Phillips. But there are plenty of hits on the set list each night. “We don’t disappoint,” he continues, explaining that although they have many songs to choose from, they switch up the B-sides or deep cuts when they come back to a city multiple times, keeping track of what they’ve played before.



Their latest studio album, released in 2017, is *The Mission*. Gowan says that the “album feels simultaneously comfortable and new.” And Young says it “resonates the best parts of our past, but is intended for modern day consumption.”

Phillips acknowledges the album is targeting a modern audience, but also those who have hung with the band over the years. “I think that the secret to the success of this band is strong melody and lyrics as well as the musicianship. This isn’t a band that just plays in 4/4 time. There are a lot of changes in emotion, and along with that comes different types of signature changes.” He is quick to point out, however, that it’s presented in a way that doesn’t sound like a music theory class. Most of the band’s songs are very positive. “People often come to us at meet and greets and say, ‘You guys have saved my life,’ and they have their own story of why. It’s pretty emotional, and it’s very cool.”

They try to continue that hope with *The Mission*. It’s a concept record like others Styx is known for. The band has always regarded themselves as Album Oriented Rock (AOR). The 1975 release of *Equinox* included the rock anthem “Suite Madame Blue” which gained considerable recognition and airplay on the FM radio dial in the then relatively new AOR format. “We stay true to the nature of Styx by presenting a positive storyline that is engaging, along with the big vocals and big sound,” says Phillips.

*The Mission* tries to capture the same resonance as *The Grand Illusion* (“Come Sail Away,” “Fooling Yourself [The Angry Young Man]”) or *Pieces of Eight* (“Blue Collar Man,” “Renegade”). “At Blackbird Studio in Nashville, we used two-inch multi-track analog tape machines—just like back in the ‘70s—and synchronizers so that we could record everyone at the same time,” says Phillips. By today’s standards, this equipment has gone from studio staple to remnant rarity. But many artists prefer the warm analog sound quality. And for Styx, it was a continuation, rather than a completely new and different sound.

“There’s a tip of the hat to all the great music of that era, which we made sure to highlight by my utilizing all those vintage Oberheim synthesizer sounds,” Gowan says on the Styx website. “That DNA, quite frankly, is what’s in all those great, classic Styx albums anyway, and I can see all kinds of cross-references that appear on this album.”



“We pay great homage to the way the songs were initially recorded and present a strong, action-packed show,” says Phillips. Shaw says they owe it to their fans to continually rehearse, prepare, and improve. When asked which of their songs they think have stood the test of time, they mention a surge in the audience when the band breaks into “Fooling Yourself” (a well-known hit that features a number of time signature changes), or “Come Sail Away,” or “Renegade.” These mainstream favorites always spur a response. “The Grand Illusion” and “Blue Collar Man” also speak to many in the audience, while others prefer deep cuts, like “Castle Walls,” to charted hits. “It makes it fun for us to try to keep that set changing from month to month, and year to year,” says Phillips.

“The thing I always like the most is the immediate response we get when playing live,” says Young. After so many years together, they all do. Panozzo has health issues that keep him from playing full shows. But he still tours with his bass—with Phillips momentarily switching over to rhythm guitar—and he should be appearing with Styx in Durham this month.

The band is now thinking of sticking their toe back in the water and producing more new material. They’re also testing the waters for a possible European tour. But in the meantime, they’ll continue to put on at least 100 shows per year.

“We have to stay on our game,” says Phillips. “Everybody’s got their own routine; we’ve figured out how to make it work. And we have a lot of fun—it’s a really great chemistry—not just on stage, but off stage as well.”

Styx and special guest Levon will perform at the DPAC on June 23, 2019.

*[Cover photo courtesy of Rick Diamond. Ricky Phillips photo courtesy of Styx. Band collage courtesy of Jason Powell.]*