

NOW WE'RE TALKIN

By Helen Marketti

Tommy James

The Marion Palace Theatre on Friday, February 14, 2020, in Marion, OH.

Tommy James & The Shondells have been a popular band with many hits including "Crimson & Clover," "Crystal Blue Persuasion," "Mony Mony," "Hanky Panky," "I Think We're Alone Now," "Draggin' The Line," and many more. Tommy takes some time to discuss his career, current projects, and his longevity in the music business.

Originally born in Dayton, Ohio, Tommy grew up in Niles, Michigan. "My music heroes were the first-generation rock stars, of course. Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly, and Little Richard. I started digging rock and roll during the 50s when I was about nine years old. In fact, around that time my mother bought me a guitar. Prior to that I had played a ukulele since I was four," remembers Tommy. "I was always listening to the radio and playing the rock and roll songs that I could understand. I got my first electric guitar when I was ten years old. I started my first band when I was 12. We played teen dances and all that sort of thing. I had two record deals before I was out of high school. I was 16 when I got my first hit song, which was "Hanky Panky." I definitely got an early start with my career and never wanted to do anything else. I have had the same job since I was 12. It's like I'm the paperboy." (laughs)

Tommy recently had a new album released titled ALIVE. "It was two years in the making and a labor of love," said Tommy. "It's all over the place musically. It has a little bit of everything. We did a new cover of "I Think We're Alone Now" and that version will be in the movie. More on that in a moment. It will be used as the closing credits in the film."

He continues: "We did a remake of "Draggin' The Line" which has a rap in it, done by award-winning rapper, T.O.N.E.-Z., and Stevie Van Zandt lent his talents to the song, too. It's an all-star cast! We did some covers and new material. It has been doing well. The first two songs charted for us on AC radio and we are back on Billboard. It's great to be back on the charts. It's been a long time!"

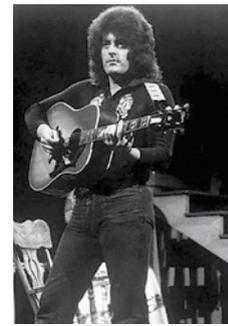
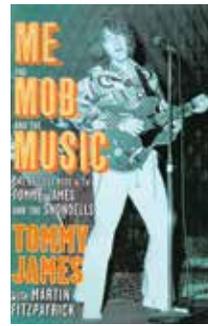
In 2010, Tommy's autobiography, "Me, The Mob and The Music" (Simon & Schuster, 2010) was released. "The book came out nine years ago and it's still selling. It has

been amazing how it has been accepted by the fans as well as the media.

It's essentially an autobiography with about two-thirds of it devoted to our crazy, tumultuous, and sometimes dangerous relationship with Roulette Records, which was the music label where I had most of my hits," said Tommy. "The reason it was tumultuous was because while Roulette Records was a functioning indie label and a pretty good one, it was also a front for the Genovese crime family. We didn't know that when we first signed with Roulette. After a while, I started learning who we were dealing with and I started seeing people in person whom I recognized from TV! Morris Levy was the head of Roulette Records. He was an associate. I would see different guys hanging out at Morris's office. It was like a social club. Then a week later I would see some of these same guys doing the perp walk out of a warehouse in New Jersey. They were being arrested and I would say, "Hey, isn't that the same guy we just met last week in Morris's office? And it turned out it was and then we realized who we were dealing with."

He continues: "Some of those guys did attend our shows. We had some pretty famous gangsters show up. We just pretended we didn't know what was going on. But I have to say Roulette Records made me a celebrity. We sold 110 million records on Roulette. The truth of it is if it weren't for those guys, I wouldn't be doing this interview right now. It's a chaotic story with a lot of twists and turns. Franky, I'm glad we all made it in one piece. There was good and bad. Morris Levy was a very human character who had many noble qualities in addition to being a bad guy."

"Anyway, the book is being made into a movie. Barbara De Fina is the producer. Her outstanding credits include *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, *Cape Fear*, *Age of Innocence*, and she produced Michael Jackson's video, *Bad*. The screenplay has been written by Matthew Stone and the director is Kathleen Marshal. Everyone is terrific. After the film, it's going to be a musical on Broadway. That's the plan," said Tommy. "Right now, the film may be released in another 18 to 24 months. That's how long it takes. Currently, they are doing the casting.



I have no idea at this point who is going to play me but what I have found interesting is that many young male actors have started out in rock bands and many of them are guitar players! I may have a cameo appearance. Who knows, I may be an elevator operator or a bartender. I'm way too old now to play Tommy James." (laughs)

When asked about his influence on the 60s generation and his many hit songs that came out of the era, Tommy replies: "The 60s was the most creative and the most explosive time for music. I have my own radio show on SiriusXM called, "Gettin' Together with Tommy James" every Sunday evening from 5 to 8 pm. It's on the 60s on 6 channel. What many people may not realize is that there was so much music being created during the 60s that there wasn't enough room for it. So, the philosophy of my show is we play the songs people didn't get to hear often or at all. We play the rarities."

Tommy was asked to play Woodstock '69 and turned it down. "At the time of Woodstock, our band was in Hawaii at the foot of Diamond Head. We were staying for two weeks at a Spanish villa which was beautiful. I received a call from my secretary at Roulette Records who said Artie Kornfeld was in touch and wanted to know if we could play on a pig farm in upstate New York. I had to ask her again to repeat what she just said. She told me it was supposed to be this huge gig that would last for a few days. My response was, "So you want me to leave paradise in Hawaii to play at a muddy pig farm? Tell them to start without us." Well, they did and by Friday of that week I knew we had messed up and missed out on something. I felt bad. I guess you could say it was the gig that never was."

"I have to say looking back, I have had a great career. I can't believe I have been doing this for over 50 years! I have a web site, Facebook, and Twitter. These are great business cards. I sincerely would like to thank the fans and the good Lord for my career and its longevity. I think it's great that fans are still interested and new fans who discover our music. They are the ones that keep the machine going."

www.tommyjames.com

ABBEY RODEO

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