

Monday, June 2, 1980



## Tommy James on the comeback trail

How an idiotic but infectious tune called "Hanky Panky" became a hit is one of those great rock 'n' roll success stories that warrants repeating.

The story ranks right up there with the time a disc jockey pulled Elvis Presley out of Suzore's No. 2 Theater in Memphis, to interview him on the air just to prove the singer wasn't black. Presley's unreleased record, "That's All Right Mama," ended up being played and replayed due to unprecedented listener response.

Tommy James, who was in Canton Township a few weeks ago to perform at Center Stage, cut a record called "Hanky Panky" in 1961 with his junior high group, the Shondells, on an obscure Michigan label called Snap Records. Tommy had just turned 14. The record got some airplay around Niles and Dowagiac but soon settled into the dust of the bargain bin.

BUT 4½ YEARS later, right after Tommy graduated from high school and right around the time he fathered his son, Brian, a screaming rhythm and blues disc jockey named "Mad Mike Metrovich" out of Pittsburgh plucked a copy of "Hanky Panky" out of a stack of oldies and slapped it on the turntable.

As the cliché goes, the switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree. Within the week, the out-of-print record was the most requested song in Pittsburgh. A smart but unscrupulous businessman sold 80,000 bootlegged copies of the song in 10 days.

Tommy James (real name Jackson) was unaware of his new-found fame until he got a call from someone in Pittsburgh who told him his 4½-year-old record was the rage in Pittsburgh.

"To this date I don't know how he got my number," James said. "I thought the guy was yanking me."

James bolted for Pittsburgh with the master disc under his arm. He lost touch with the old Shondells after leaving junior high school and told people in Pittsburgh he needed a new group to be the Shondells. They directed him to a local bar where James hired the group on the spot.

That detail accomplished, James took the master disc to Roulette Records, which re-released "Hanky Panky." In just four weeks, the international rock 'n' roll community was nasally singing along with the No. 1 song "My



Craig Piechura

baby does the hanky panky."

THE SONG that knocked "Hanky Panky" out of the No. 1 spot was another goofy tune, "Wild Thing" by the Troggs — the only rock song ever with an ocarina solo. And James claims "Hanky Panky" was one of the few tunes that kept a Beatles record ("Paperback Writer") from reaching "the top of the pops."

As the king of up-tempo pop in the '60s, James followed "Hanky Panky" with million sellers such as "I Think We're Alone Now" (the definitive teen-age lust anthem), "Mirage," (the follow-up to "I Think We're Alone Now" that used the same chord progression backwards), "Mony, Mony," "Crystal Blue Persuasion" (Tommy's favorite), "Crimson and Clover" and finally 1972's "Draggin' a Line."

To date, he's sold a staggering 65 million records. Critics have categorized Tommy James and the Shondells' music as "bubblegum" rock. James says that's a misnomer — that it was happy music in a time of turmoil, not some dippy formula.

"After 'Mony, Mony' and 'I Think We're Alone Now' hit it big, an outfit called Kestanes-Kata formed the 1910 Fruitgum Co. and everything they did sounded like a combination of 'Mony, Mony' and 'I Think We're Alone Now,' but a bad copy."

"They perverted the sound till it sounded demeaning. And that's where the term 'bubblegum' came from. I started changing direction at that time. Immediately I came out with 'Crimson and Clover' and, fortunately, I survived the change on the charts."

After his hit in the early '70s, though, the rest of the decade was a lean time on the charts for Tommy James.

BUT THAT'S ancient history, you say. So does James. He's currently riding the crest of a comeback career, after striking gold with a Number 1 record in the "adult contemporary" market with an unintentionally autobiographical song called "Three Times In Love." James thinks the song's message would make a great movie about a guy who falls in love first when he's 18, then when he's 22 and again for good when he's 32.

"Adult contemporary" is a radio industry term for music listened to by housewives and junior executives. It's one iota wilder than middle of the road, or MOR, encompassing Barbara Streisand and the Knack.

James says he gets the biggest kick out of seeing his loyal fans ("the mamas") coming to his latest concerts with their teenage daughters ("the chicks") and watching both mough the words to his old and new songs.

James' set is about half-oldies, half new stuff. While he feels his new material is more mature and technically superior, he isn't ashamed to play his old hits.

"I couldn't tell you how many times people have come up to me and said a certain song is 'their song,' and I respect that," James said. "A guy will say 'I met my wife when that was playing, it was our song.' And they'll remember everything about what was going on when it was playing."

"It's like a frozen moment in time, better than a photograph. It's like your old friends are out there even before you walk out on stage."

WHAT'S AHEAD for the "Hanky Panky" kid? Hopefully, he says, movies and television roles and ultimately directing movies.

"I want to take ideas I've used in songwriting and do more with them. At 33, I've done all there is to do in the recording industry except have more hits. Frankly, I'm a little bored with it."

He doesn't want to spend many more years staying in places like the Knight's Inn of Canton, a motel that looks like it was built in a week, sandwiched between a Bob Evans restaurant and a Burger Chef.

It's tough to keep the creative juices flowing with all that grease around.

## Open your door, open your wallet

Everybody's got a sad story these days. The economy is down.

Unemployment is up. But despite the grumbling, most of us know we'll muddle through somehow.

Some folks have problems over which there is little control. In one such group are the young victims of muscular dystrophy.

Their hope is that all the effort toward research, a cure or a preventative for muscular dystrophy will come from the efforts so many good people put forth.

From 5-9 p.m. Tuesday, June 3, an army of volunteers will mount a "March Against Time" for MD.

When they knock at your door, be sure to welcome them in, dig down deep and do your bit for the victims of MD, really a group of some 40 muscle diseases.

The dollars you donate will help provide diagnosis, lab tests, physical and occupational therapy, braces, wheelchairs, prosthetic devices and miscellaneous services.

These are available to MD patients free of any charge. This year's poster kids, Shawn Mellinger and Christopher Rush, are getting this kind of help on a continuing basis.

SHAWN, 12, has been diagnosed as having chronic myopathy. Christopher, just 3, has spinal muscular atrophy.

The thousands of volunteers who will ring doorbells Tuesday are kind of an advance army for summer activity to fund MD research and help its victims.

Soon, the carnivals, bike-a-thons, swim-a-thons, ping pong tournaments and bowling and tennis matches will be announced. And good-hearted people of all ages will ex-



Shirlee Iden

tend themselves once more to help people faced with a cruel affliction.

The man in the MD campaign is Joe Glover, WJBK-TV news anchorman who is the honorary chairman for southeastern Michigan.

For Glover, the battle against MD has become a 12-month activity culminating in the annual Jerry Lewis telethon on Labor Day.

"Your Help Is Their Hope" is one of the themes of this year's door-to-door march.

Although no dramatic cures have been effected up to now, procedures have been perfected that help in early diagnosis and in treatment.

Some children can be kept on their feet longer because of the past efforts of volunteers.

HOPEFULLY, even greater advances may be made possible through research.

The nicest part of being involved in efforts for muscular dystrophy is that it is such a complete team effort.

From celebrity Jerry Lewis down to the kids in your neighborhood, people seem to be able to make a super

effort to really give part of themselves.

Through the years on the telethon and publicizing the carnivals and other events, I've met lots of those people.

First, there are the media people who give so generously of their time, year after year, for the telethon and other events.

Then, the unsung volunteers who swim those miles, ring those doorbells, man the carnivals and do hundreds of unglamorous jobs at fund-raisers and the telethon each year.

Best of all I remember the two brothers I met at last year's telethon.

John and Ken Lysczak participate in the telethon because it belongs to them. They are victims of MD and both have been in wheelchairs since the age of 5.

Now they are 22 and 26 and students at Macomb Community College.

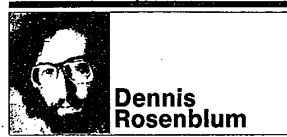
Despite their handicaps and the study load they carry, they spend most of their time raising money for the fight against MD.

Last fall they brought a check for \$18,000 to the telethon. They told me they were already planning for the next fund-raiser.

When the doorbell rings next Tuesday, there may be those who answer with a sad story or an excuse of some kind.

Try to remember the tremendous need for the funds that may someday help little kids like Christopher Rush walk again or millions yet unborn face life without the threat of being struck down with muscular dystrophy.

Excuses just won't help. So, open the door and open your wallet.



Dennis Rosenblum

## Twilight zone

If in fact there is a sucker born any minute, the evidence could rear its head at any moment.

For instance, you're heading for a shopping center carnival, looking forward to a few minutes of escapism on the dodge-em cars with maybe a ride or two on one of those contraptions that gives you the feeling of impending death.

All in all, you expect to have some fun, but nothing kinky.

YOU'RE STROLLING along, taking in the sights. And then comes the pivotal moment. If this were television, everything would stop and Rod Serling would explain how the cosmos has fated you to enter the Twilight Zone. Something out of the ordinary is about to happen but none of us know what.

What happens is that a man running a game motions you over to the booth. Your curiosity gets the best of you.

Here's the deal: You get this cup with eight small balls. You toss out the balls and they roll into various numbered holes. You add up the numbers of the holes the balls fall into. Depending on what numbers you get, various numbers of points are added to your score. It's easy. Give it a try.

If you get at least 100 points, you win the big prize or \$20. Here, try it once on the booth.

NOW YOU'RE the kind of person who maybe plays poker with friends, maybe heads to the track occasionally, gets in the football pool at work. A few bucks here and there, but nothing to make you consider Gamblers Anonymous. So what the heck, let's do it.

A hundred points to make \$20. First roll for free. You toss out the balls. Hey, 50 points.

Roll 'em again for \$1. Another 20 points. Again, another luck. Five points.

Again. This time you hit the magic number. 100 points, but you'll win another prize (or another \$20) if you make the 100 points.

Again. But now it's \$2 a roll. Ten points. With 15 points to go for \$40 and \$5 invested so far, you keep going. Two dollars, but you get a bad roll; no points on this one.

Again, and again. You make it to 99 points. By now, you're paying \$5 a roll and you stand to win \$120. You've gone this far. The odds are that you're going to get that one point soon.

Again, and again. You win an enormous stuffed dog and a few trinkets.

Again. A small stuffed frog. After selling out some amazing amount of money — more than you would ever drop at a poker table or the track — you give up, walking away with your toys and wondering how to pay the rent.

IN CASE YOU'RE wondering, I was the guy in the Twilight Zone. It was last week at a carnival at Wonderland Mall sponsored by the Livonia Jaycees.

I still maintain that if this whole thing is on the level, then I'm satisfied to have tempted my greed and lost the gamble.

But it seems a couple of folks from Westland who played the same game had exactly the same experience, which leads me to wonder.

"We went over to Ward's to buy some paint," says Deborah Viculis, who was with her husband. "We were going to let the kids on the merry-go-round."

They got 50 points on the free throw to start the game. "The guy was adding points too fast to keep up with him," says Ms. Viculis. "He picked the balls up as he added, and he kept doubling the cost of the throw."

"I don't think it was fair at all. It was really mental intimidation. It wasn't like armed robbery or anything. The guy was really talented at what he was doing."

JOHN BRYAN, president of the Livonia Jaycees, is more than a bit bothered by all this.

"That carnival does carry our name on it. We're very careful," he says. "We're the ones who get the bad image. We're very concerned about that."

Bryan says the contract between the Jaycees and Amusement Corp. of America includes a clause limiting the amount of money a person can place on any one game. One person who complained about his losses got a quick total refund from Buddy Miller, the operator of the concessions.

Miller says he doesn't want anyone to feel cheated. People who spent much more than they intended and got into a bind always complain. But they can get a refund from him. He wants to eliminate the bad image of carnival workers.

The odds are obviously against you but the games are honest. He's open to suggestions for how to make the rules and operations of the games more clear.

IS THERE A moral to this story? I'd suggest watching reruns of "Twilight Zone." And sticking to the dodge-em cars.

## Talk before Indy race brings a haunting chill

"In your long journey along the journalistic trail, you must have experienced many dramatic and emotional moments. Is there any one which stands out in your memory above all the others?"

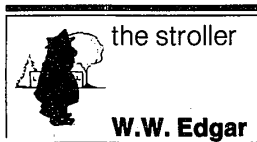
This question came from a young lad who had just received his high school diploma and was looking ahead to what was in store for him as he entered the workday world.

By strange coincidence, we were listening to the finish of the Indianapolis 500 automobile race when the question was asked — because it was there on the edge of the famed oval that The Stroller experienced a moment that will live with him always.

IT WAS IN 1935 when he was assigned to cover the big race for the first time.

"When he arrived at the track, he placed himself in the hands of Steve Hanagan, the public relations man who long had been considered one of the best in the business."

For two days Steve took The Stroller around the place, from one garage to another, then to lunch with officials



the stroller  
W.W. Edgar

and owners and with some of the mechanics who were getting the cars into condition for the race.

In fact, The Stroller was getting an education while viewing the behind-the-scenes activity for the big event, which draws more than 300,000 people each year.

Then came the Sunday afternoon before the race. "I am going to let you in on something different," said Steve. "It is something you may never forget."

"I am going to slip you in as a visitor at the driver's

meeting, and I think you will find it a treat to listen to old 'Pop' Meyers as he gives the drivers their instructions."

At the given time, the drivers sat in a huge semicircle when old Pop, a trim, white-haired gentleman, moved to the front. He was the general manager of the event, and his word was law around the track.

THE SUN was shining brightly. There wasn't a sound when Pop, who long since has gone to his reward, took his position in the middle of the semicircle.

"Fellows," he began, "I want to talk with you today, because chances are that all won't be here tomorrow."

A cold chill ran up The Stroller's back. Here was a man talking about death on the day before the drivers would be given the green flag to get started on the bid for fame and fortune.

"You know you are taking not only your life but the lives of others into your hands when you go speeding around the track tomorrow. There will be danger with almost every turn of the wheel. So I want to talk to you

about the rules with the hope that we can avoid any fatal accidents."

"I want you to be careful, not only for yourself but for the other drivers along the way. One little infraction of the rules could result in a crash and possible death. So I do want you to be careful."

"Sure there's a lot of money and sweat and blood invested in your cars. But your life is at stake, too, and that is the biggest investment you have. So boys, let's not break the rules. Let's be careful, so we'll all be here tomorrow night."

In all his years along the sports trail, The Stroller has had the good fortune to listen to the appeal of football coaches before the big game. And he has had the emotional experience of walking with Joe Louis on his way to the ring to meet Max Schmeling with the heavyweight title at stake in 1936.

But never has he experienced an emotional moment to equal that provided by old Pop Meyers on the day before the Indianapolis 500 some 45 years ago. He'll never forget it.