

PIANO/VOCAL

BOSTON

Third Stage



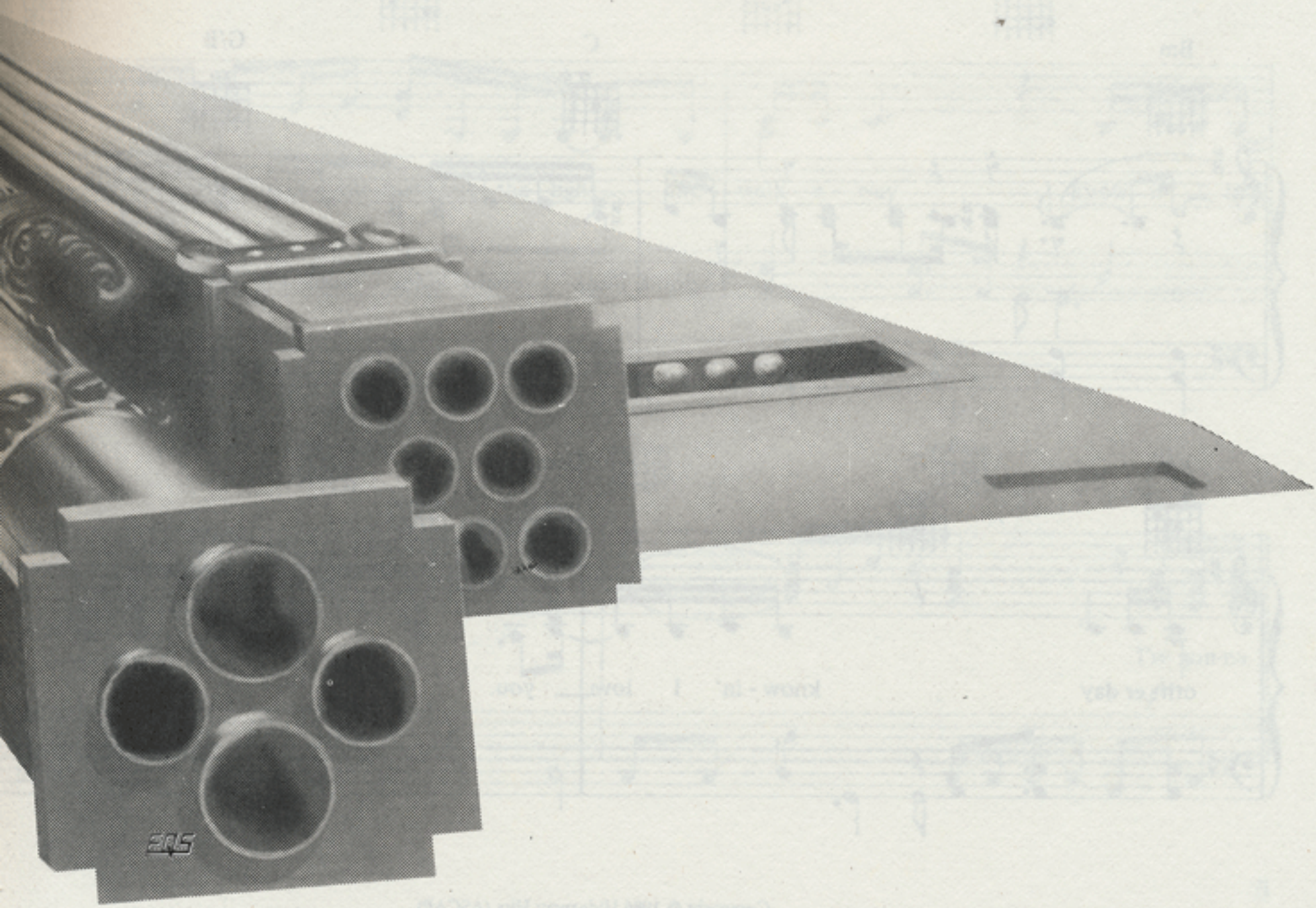
Edited by Milton Okun

INTERVIEW AND FULL COLOR
FOLD-OUT INSIDE

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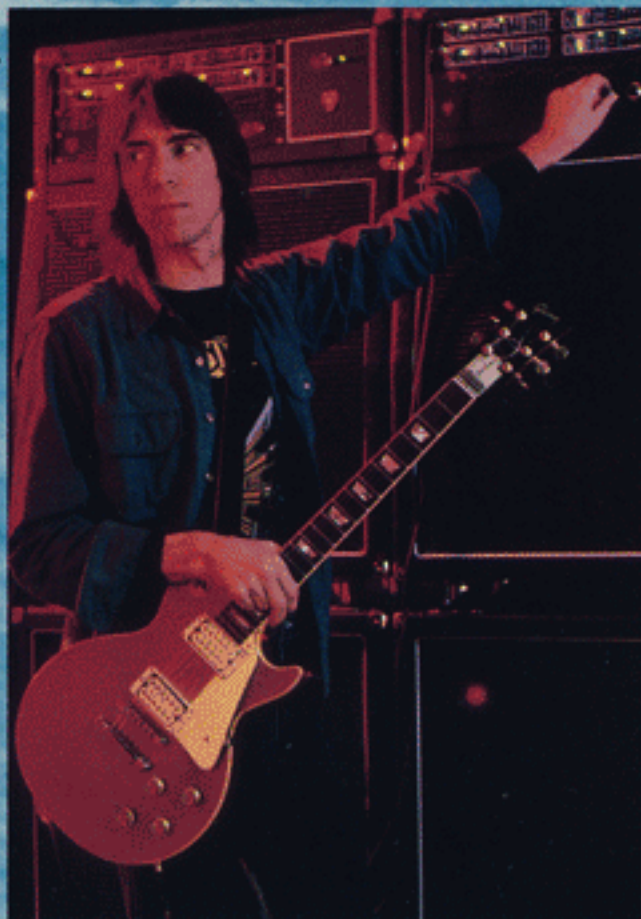
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interview

TOM SCHOLZ

Gary Pihl



Fables and rock bands have little in common and only one band, Boston, can lay claim to learning the lesson taught from the story of the Tortoise and the Hare. With three multi-million selling albums in a row, spaced several years apart, Tom Scholz, the heart, soul, composer and multi-instrumentalist leader of the band had learned to give good things to those who wait. But as the fans who celebrated the release of *THIRD STAGE* will learn from this interview, this album of first takes couldn't have happened any faster.

Do ideas for songs just come to you and get stored on tape until you need them, or is songwriting work?

I don't do them like work and sit down to write a song. I don't know how you guys that write on a schedule do that. I've never been any good at creating on a schedule or when I'm supposed to. Actually, it's a real long series of events. Somewhere along I have to have an idea which might be a chord progression or a little riff of some kind. Sometimes that may be accompanied with a melody idea, but not necessarily. I don't know how that happens and maybe if I could find a way to make that happen more often it wouldn't take six years. A lot of times I get ideas just by playing piano, organ or guitar. Sometimes I will actually have an idea without an instrument and sit down and try to play it. I've never come up with all of the fundamental pieces of a song in one sitting. I've never done that in my life. I've gone years and years between various pieces of the song before I've gotten what I'm looking for.

When a new piece clicks in do you automatically know which song you're going to use it in?

No, I don't usually think in terms of specific tunes or partially completed tunes. Usually it's a matter of a chorus and a verse working well together or a chorus finishing off a verse that I had at the time. There are occasions where I've had different places for the same song to develop into, like verses that

are very similar or two different choruses that can't be used in the same tune, and I won't know exactly which to go to. In other words, I'll end up setting a few things down quickly, all at once. On *THIRD STAGE*, "My Destination" was naturally just a variation of "Amanda." It even has the same melody line, but the instrumental in "My Destination" wouldn't work anywhere in "Amanda." The changes are different at the end of the verses and "Destination" doesn't travel the same route, so I couldn't use it on "Amanda." But I really liked it, so this one time I decided intentionally that I was going to do this thing both ways. Lyrically the song is still about "Amanda," but from a totally different viewpoint, a much more mature viewpoint. Musically I feel that way about it, too. I put it on intentionally to finish that side as sort of a wrap-up.

Do you write differently on different instruments?

In any case, it's always slow, but it shows up in the final product. In other words, if I write it on the piano, I record it on the piano. I can't think of anyplace where that isn't true.

You've always treated the vocals and guitar parts as equals.

Yes, that's an intentional arrangement technique and just natural for me. I don't favor one over the other, I think they're both important in this particular type of music. I suppose if I was a singer there would have been all vocals, because it takes forever to play the guitar parts. I never cared that much about vocals when I first started listening to music, which was all instrumental and mostly classical. I was just interested in melody and power. I didn't start to really listen to words at all until I started to write songs. Then it started to dawn on me that a vocalist could be treated like another instrument and a way to get feelings across with a lot of power. Once that finally dawned on me, I managed to start doing something about getting vocals in songs that really added something to the song. The guitar was always a natural as far as being included as a sometime carrier of the melody. That goes back to classical ideas as well. *So you're trying to bring the vocalist up to par with the instruments?*

Not quite. In my case the lyrics are always written to complete or augment

the feel of the song. What I was trying to say is that the vocal can be as powerful a tool as the lead guitar is or some other lead instrument, as long as you think of it that way. I don't just think of it as some vehicle to get my words out on the radio. The music as it's arranged is kind of a throwback to classical music and the vocal is really being used as an instrument. Part of the problem about writing the lyrics for this album was the difficulty of writing what I meant to say, making it fit in a verse form with a rather regimented rhyming scheme, and having the right sounds at every point. The vocal that's singing an E is a lot different from a vocal that's singing an A. One is right for one section and the other is right for another, and you're a slave to using that sound, and the words will have to be figured out in order to make it fit. I try very hard not to allow lyrics to compromise the sound. At the same time, once I get to that point, I'm damned if I'm going to put out something with lyrics that don't make sense or don't say what I want them to say. Consequently, that takes ten times longer.

Compounding this process is your love for vocal and guitar harmonies. Do they have any outside origins?

Yes, I really like harmony singing. It's just my taste. The Hollies and Byrds were influential for the vocal harmonies. The harmonies on the guitars, I first heard played by Todd Rundgren and by Jimmy Page on Led Zeppelin's first album. Two or three notes were done in harmony on that album. He never did it anyplace else on the record, and I stopped listening. I thought, I think that guy hit on something here.

Did you develop your musical philosophy during your bar band days before you recorded?

The task of getting up to the first Boston album was a very circuitous one. Almost nothing that I did while I was trying to play in bar bands applied. It was almost totally for naught. The only things I ever did that ended up contributing to the Boston repertoire or sound were done from recording, which goes back to '69 or '70, and from songwriting on my own. A year and a half or two years before the first Boston

album, I specifically told the people I'd been associated with, who were playing in bands, that I was through playing out in any bands. It wasn't that much fun, it was definitely getting no place, and I didn't see anything creative coming out of it. It was slowing me down. I stopped altogether to do nothing but work on writing songs and recording them, which I did largely on my own, with the exception of working with Jim on rhythm tracks and Brad on the vocals. Barry Goudreau also helped. I pretty much stuck with that formula. The very first thing I ever recorded was "Foreplay." It was in Jim's basement, on a two-track. And all the things that got us on the way to the record deal were based on that.

Was there a point when you knew you had a Boston sound?

Even after there was a deal I never really believed that. I didn't know if it was particularly original or not. At that point, I was doing something that I was just learning to put together. I had done lots of demo tapes. I wasn't listening to a lot of other music at that time, back in '74 or '75. I wasn't sure how it fit in or didn't fit it. I had a number of people telling me that I'd blown it, that disco was the thing and nobody wanted to hear this kind of rock-and-roll. I would have been very egotistical to consider what I had as a sound. I didn't know if twenty people besides myself would want to sit down and listen to it. I was quite surprised when "More Than a Feeling" took off the way it did. In fact, I never left my full-time job. I was still working there when it was on the radio.

Do you envision your songs being played by a solo performer, say a guitarist or a pianist?

I don't think of that at all. Frankly, when I'm working on this stuff, I don't care if it's impossible to play on a guitar and a piano together. My only objective is to get the sound onto the tape in the way I want. If that meant that I had to play piano notes and guitar notes alternating on every other note for five hundred beats that's what I'd do. I always figure that when it comes down

to performing the thing, in a live situation, I'll find a way to be able to make that sound. But when I'm recording it's no holds barred. I don't care what I have to do. If it means tuning a guitar up or down a half step or a couple of steps that's the least of it. I would do that at the drop of a hat. Afterwards I often learn how to play the pieces, usually for my own amusement. But, I manage to come up with some pretty good renditions playing it on a single instrument. The piano is always more flexible.

After a song has been written do you then duplicate it on tape as you hear it in your head or is the song written as you're putting it on tape?

The important parts of the song, the chord changes and the melody, are generally known at that point. However, I have been known to change both after it's already on the tape. When I work on it, it's for the first time and I'm running a master tape or I'm running a copy of the master tape, and I'll sit down, for instance, to play a lead guitar line and I will never have heard the song before. A tape deck is my band and I'm playing to it. Usually, I will have something in mind to start, but if it doesn't work out too well, then I'll start experimenting, and the first time I play something I like, that exact track is the final take. I stop, dub it onto the master, and I never play it again. Occasionally, I won't like something about it, and I'll do another one that's similar with a different twist or what have you, but the very first time I get it, it goes on. The same thing is true with the vocals. Brad's so good, he can do a line exactly the same and change just a little thing in it. But the first time he gets it so it's what I want to hear, then that's stopped and it goes on the tape. There's never a learning process where he sort of learns the song, and rehearses it, and then lays down the track. That never happens. Nobody has to learn anything. The very first time it's played that it sounds the way I envision it, or the way I like, that's the one that goes on.

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