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Tommy James and the Shondells to rock Foellinger Theatre

He'll play hits, a song or two reworked for upcoming film

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Tommy James, who will perform live Friday night at Foellinger Outdoor Theatre along with his group, the Shondells, and special guest Herman's Hermits featuring Peter Noone, has had one of the more interesting careers in rock 'n' roll.

James, who was born Thomas Gregory Jackson, hails from the Midwest and spent most of his young life in South Bend and in Niles, Mich.

At the tender age of 19 in 1966, James, along with the Shondells, hit the big time with a massive No. 1 hit called "Hanky Panky." It was released on record label Roulette Records, which was run by the infamous Morris Levy, who was heavily involved in organized crime activity.

In his autobiography, "Me, the Mob, and the Music," James details the eight turbulent and wildly successful years he spent at Roulette Records, creating such well-known and well-loved hits with the Shondells as "I Think We're Alone Now," "Mirage," "Mony Mony," "Crimson and Clover," "Sweet Cherry Wine" and "Crystal Blue Persuasion," among others, as well as the top-10 solo smash "Draggin' the Line" from 1971.

FULL INTERVIEW



More Information

Rock greats

WHAT: Tommy James and the Shondells perform in concert with special guest Herman's Hermits, featuring Peter Noone.

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday

WHERE: Foellinger Outdoor Theatre, 3411 Sherman Blvd. in Franke Park

COST: \$39, \$49, \$59 and \$79, plus \$5 per ticket processing fee. Tickets are available in advance at 427-6000 and the Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation Department office, 705 E. State Blvd., or buy after 6 p.m. Friday at Foellinger Theatre or by calling 427-6715.



The News-Sentinel

Tommy James talks with The News-Sentinel

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Though Roulette Records and Levy helped make James an international recording star, Levy's strong-arm tactics, violent and illegal mob activity, and penchant for not paying James what he was owed (in his book, James said Morris underpaid him to the tune of nearly \$40 million) finally took its toll on James, and he left the label in 1974.

The passage of time and the deaths of Morris and those involved with his business and crime activity have enabled James to look back, tell his story and celebrate the wonderful music he created.

James said during a telephone interview that his book is being made into a major motion picture due to be released in a couple of years. It will detail his life amid the hurricane of success and Levy.

"It's (the film) being produced by Barbara De Fina, who produced 'Goodfellas' and 'Casino' and Martin Scorsese's 'Hugo' a couple of years ago, and, oh, God, 'Cape Fear,' 'The Color of Money,'" James said.

After the film is in production, there is talk of putting together a live Broadway show, James said.

"The next couple of years are going to be real interesting," he added.

Concertgoers at the Foellinger Theatre show will get a sneak peek at a song or two that James has redone for the upcoming movie.

"We want to do at least one of the songs from the film," James said. "It's a brand new, very different version of 'I Think We're Alone Now.' It's going to be actually the closing credits to the movie. It's slow and acoustic and totally different from the original record.

"In fact, the whole meaning of the song has changed," James continued, "because in the last scene (of the upcoming movie), Morris Levy, the head of the record company, dies. And so we're alone, so 'I Think We're Alone Now' has a very different meaning than the teeny-bop love song from '67.

"There's another song called 'Distant Thunder' from the movie that we may do that's new," James added.

Most of the concert will be filled with the hits he made famous with the Shondells, he said. He's anxious to get back to the Midwest, where his love of music began, to perform these songs with the people of Fort Wayne.

"So we'll be coming out into the audience at one point, probably during 'Mony' ('Mony Mony'), and we'll be signing autographs after the show," he said. "So it's going to be a fun show."

James said he is also anxious to work with Noone of Herman's Hermits.

Tommy James and the Shondells toured with Herman's Hermits in the 1960s, and they were one of the first big groups he had the opportunity to meet.

"Pete and I have known each other for a very long time — since, wow, '66," James said. "He was one of the first major acts that I worked with once we started having hits. I don't work with him that much, and so, when we get together, it's always great."

One of the things that James enjoys when looking back at his career is that Tommy James and the Shondells' music included both Top 40 hits on AM radio and survived through the FM radio, progressive-rock era when a lot of his contemporaries fell by the wayside.

"When I started producing the group myself, of course everything took a quantum leap up," James said of the change in music that happened in the late 1960s. "In '68 and '69, radio really took a giant step up with FM, so records had to sound better; plus the fact that album sales increased right then by a factor of 10."

"Up until that point, of course, Roulette was basically known for selling singles, and so were we," James continued. "The 'Crimson and Clover' album really changed all that for us."

"In fact, the single 'Crimson and Clover,' which was the first single that I took credit for producing, changed our life — changed everything about the way we did business," James said. "It opened up a whole new world.

"It allowed us to make that jump from AM Top 40 singles to FM progressive album rock and allowed us to start selling albums, (and) Roulette to start selling albums, which was incredibly important and allowed us to have the second half of our career."

With new generations discovering his music through covers of his songs in the 1980s that were major hits by Billy Idol, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, and Tiffany, plus original Top 40 AM and FM fans of his music, James says the most satisfying part of his career is its longevity.

"It is so amazing to look out at our concert crowd and literally see three generations of people," James said. "It's almost a religious experience. It's really amazing.

"I never in a million years thought we'd be doing this for 50 years, but next year it'll be our 50th year," James added. "I just thank the good Lord and the fans for the kind of longevity we've had, and I mean that."