

HANDS ON

PURSuing THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE

SO YOU WANNA BE A ROCK 'N' ROLL STAR → → → STEPHEN POOLE

SURPRISE, SURPRISE: FANTASY CAMP BECOMES A TRANSCENDENT REALITY.

When I first read the press release for the 2006 Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp, it sounded like the chance of a lifetime for anyone who'd ever harbored dreams of rock stardom. Forming a band with die-hard fans from across the country and working in a first-class studio for five days...being tutored by musicians respon-



The writer (in white shirt, center) plays for his audition

sible for tens of millions in album sales across five decades...taking the stage at the House of Blues in Hollywood as part of a band fronted by rock legend Roger Daltrey or members of Cheap Trick. Could a frustrated jukebox hero ask for anything more?

But the cynic in me had doubts. Staring at the \$8,500 price tag, I envisioned a camp loaded with self-important moneybags who'd probably be satisfied to shake the hands of a few stars and cobble together a C-plus version of "Louie, Louie." How would rock stars deal with a "challenged" camper after years of working with first-class musicians? And how could anyone expect a disparate group of musicians with unique tastes to agree on anything in such a short period of time?

There was only one way for a jaded rocker like me to find out answers to those questions: I'd have to drag my electric guitars out of retirement and my butt out to Hollywood to find out if the camp really was as "incredible," "amazing," and "mind-blowing" as the testimonials claimed.

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Elliot Easton of The Cars
signs guitars



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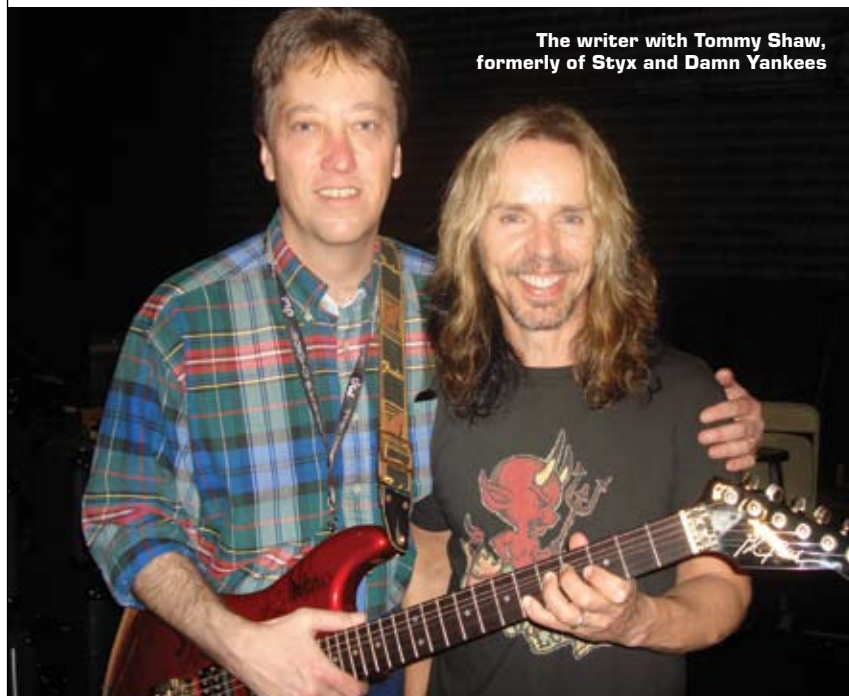
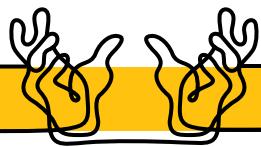


As I lugged my guitar case through the loading dock of S.I.R. Entertainment Services on Sunset Boulevard on the first day of camp, my heartbeat quickened. It was audition day, when campers would show off their chops to the counselors, who were the rock stars responsible for selecting the campers they'd like to work with in a band and then helping them with everything from song selections and arrangements to equipment malfunctions.

After having my photo ID made and being assigned an audition number, I hurried to the cavernous main stage of

S.I.R. to await my turn — and in just a few minutes I realized I'd been sorely mistaken about the talent level of the "moneybags" who'd come to the camp. Nearly all the guitar players were far more skilled than I was. My confidence sank and my nerves grew more frayed with each passing performance.

But then I noticed the rock stars were working feverishly to make sure everyone who took the stage was at ease, and that the campers were doing everything in their power to bolster the confidence of their fellow rock 'n' rollers. A palpable sense of camaraderie was spreading through the studio, and as I finished my turn on stage I saw many of the people I'd met during the



The writer with Tommy Shaw,
formerly of Styx and Damn Yankees

day smiling and cheering for me. Only then did I fully realize what they'd already figured out: This was supposed to be about *fun*, and everyone was welcome. Kelly Keagy, Night Ranger drummer and second-year counselor, hammered home the point. "I don't feel that there's *anyone* that wouldn't be able to contribute," he says. "That's what being in a band is all about, finding the right fit for each person. Everybody that comes into this camp loves music, and that's all you really need."

At the reception held that night I met Sonny Quintanilla, a drummer on "sabbatical" from his job at a major computer manufacturer, and discovered he too had arrived with misguided notions of what to expect. "I'm really surprised at how many cool people I've met," he said. "I thought it was going to be a bunch of tightly wound



The winning band:
Heads We Lose

executives and doctors and stuff, but I've run into a lot of really good people who genuinely love music. It's refreshing."

Equally refreshing was the way the counselors made themselves available to us campers. Whether it was talking shop with some of the serious musicians or reassuring someone who might be having self-doubts, they always seemed to truly care about the people who'd come here to get a taste of the rock 'n' roll life.



When entertainment promoter David Fishof produced the first Rock 'n' Roll Fantasy Camp in 1997, he wanted to give people a taste of what it takes to make a rock band click and to let them meet their favorite musicians upclose.

That philosophy defined the next three-and-a-half days of activity. Mornings were spent in rehearsal sessions at either S.I.R. or nearby Swinghouse Studios. Lunch breaks featured guest speakers involved in the music industry, followed by Q&As and short performances. Then it was back to the rehearsal rooms for more practice until dinner; on two nights, master classes hosted by the counselors gave us a chance to pick up playing tips or simply talk one-on-one about, well, just about anything you can imagine. Each night found all of us exhausted, yet abuzz with excitement, not over our own progress, but our respective *band's* advancement.

For some, meeting the artists they'd listened to for years was in itself worth the price of admission — and doing it in such a laid-back setting made it even



Roger Daltrey

more memorable. But with each passing day, it became clear that most campers were reveling in the work with their respective bands and the friendships that were being forged. Charlie Pierce, a guitarist/business executive from Cincinnati who was a member of the band headed by Keagy, echoes the sentiments of many of the campers. "I thought what I would remember most was meeting the various big-name rock stars," he says, "but the absolute highlight was our band experience. It was intense, fun and exhilarating." Bill Fay, a bassist/movie producer from Hollywood who played with Pierce, says, "Rehearsals were an incredible amount of fun. I haven't been able to just sit around and play with a real band in a real studio in 20 years."

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As the campers filed into the House of Blues to showcase the songs they'd worked on so diligently over the last four days, the sense of excitement was unmistakable. Some were returning

to the stage after years spent in the "real" world, while others would be standing in front of an audience for the first time ever. All were jazzed with anticipation.

And then it happened: The glorified talent contest I'd been expecting turned into a real knock-back-a-few-beers and

clap-your-hands rock show. Some bands were decidedly better than others, and though winners and runners-up were announced, it was obvious that everyone who left the stage felt like they'd won first prize. Hugs and high-fives were given all around, and more than a few tears were shed as we realized this unforgettable one-night stand meant no more rehearsals and no more bands.

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DETAILS

Want to learn more about the annual event? Visit the Web at rockandrollfantasycamp.com.

That evening at House of Blues, I sought answers to the question that had brought me across the country in the first place: Did the campers who'd ponied up the hefty fee think the camp was worth it? From my admittedly small sample, nearly everyone answered with either "Yes!" or "Absolutely!" Alan Jenkins, a drummer/real-estate developer from Alabama whom I met on the flight out to L.A., was even more emphatic. "It was the single best investment I've ever made," said Jenkins.

"When I started this camp, I had no idea that it could have a life-changing effect on people," said David Fishof, "but something magical seems to happen every day." That sounds like hyperbole, but keyboardist/entrepreneur Dan Wise of New York wholeheartedly agrees. "We got to be a team of people in a working environment, and the result was an unbelievably satisfying experience," says Wise. "I've applied the lessons learned at the camp to my music, my personal life, and my business — my fantasy has translated into some valuable insight for my reality." ✎

STEPHEN POOLE, a contributing editor to *US Airways Magazine*, plays his guitar every day.