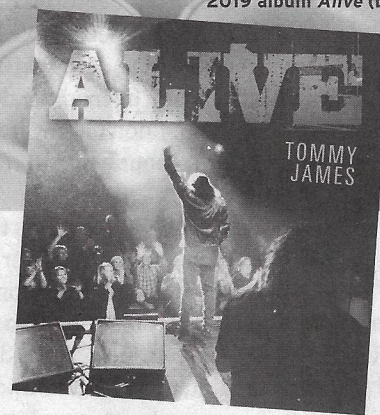


TOMMY JAMES... 'ALIVE'



Tommy James before a concert at Ryder College, NJ, September 1968, and his 2019 album *Alive* (below).



AMERICAN POP ICON TOMMY JAMES RELEASES HIS NEW ALBUM, *ALIVE*, AND IS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT GAINING FANS FROM A NEW GENERATION OF LISTENERS. **BY MIKE GREENBLATT**

It's been over a decade since the last Tommy James album. *Alive* is his aptly titled new CD wherein this giant of pop music (since 1966) totally and completely rewrites the rules and goes far out on an adventurous limb. And it's on the charts. When you think of James' body of work, you think of great songs like "Crystal Blue Persuasion," "Crimson and Clover," "Mony Mony," "I Think We're Alone Now," "Hanky Panky" and "Mirage"; you think of the list of artists who have covered his songs like Prince, Springsteen, Billy Idol, Joan Jett, Cher, Tom Jones and The Boston Pops; you consider that he stood up to mobster Morris Levy at Roulette Records in pursuit of his rightly-due royalties without getting his skull fractured and being left in a ditch dead like one of his label mates who dared ask; you realize that this one man, and his music, is inextricably bound up in the mosaic of popular

culture like the DNA of American Pop music itself.

Now add the 60 movies and the 53 TV shows that have used his music, plus the 21 million times his music has been heard on the radio (according to BMI). You can also throw in his 23 gold singles, 32 Billboard "Hot 100" hits, nine platinum albums and 100 million records sold worldwide.

His autobiography (*Me, the Mob and the Music*) is being made into a Hollywood movie. There's also talk of a Broadway musical. His SiriusXM Radio show, "Gettin' Together With Tommy James," broadcasts Sunday evenings from 5-8pm on the '60s On 6 channel.

Can you spell L-E-G-E-N-D?

GOLDMINE: *You're back on the charts after over a decade.*

TOMMY JAMES: *I was very pleased with that, yeah. It's been awhile.*

GM: *Alive is a very challenging gamble of an album. You're obviously not the kind of artist to rest on past laurels. With such a great body of work, others in your position would have recycled riffs to play off their past. Not you.*

TJ: *And it's on my own label. I'm proud of that. And we're even on the radio again! I'll tell you, this one felt really good. It took two years to complete. And you never know how it's going to be received or if you'll even be accepted again. There's a new generation of radio people out there that I had to be introduced to.*

GM: *Yet you traversed a multitude of genres from doo-wop, gospel, country, hip hop and pop to rock and roll, soul and even comedy. The mash-up of "Buzz Buzz" (1957, Hollywood Flames), "Little Bitty Pretty One" (1957, Bobby Day), "Rockin' Robin" (1958, Bobby Day), "I Do" (1965, Marvelows) and "Over And Over"*

(a 1965 Dave Clark Five cover) is so much fun!

TJ: I had wanted to do that for a long time. It had been in my head for about four years.

GM: It's a similar construct to what The Beach Boys did in 1965 with the 1961 Regents song "Barbara Ann" but the furthest out there has to be "The Last Time" (1965, Rolling Stones) with rapper T.O.N.E.-z and a total inside-out turnaround on your own beloved 1971 hit "Draggin' the Line," your first solo success after disbanding the Shondells. You use T.O.N.E.-z again rapping his heart out as well as a gritty Stevie Van Zandt electric guitar solo. Wow, that's reach, my man!

TJ: I've always believed that it's my job as an artist to break new ground.

GM: True artists always change...

TJ: ...with the risk of falling on your ass if it doesn't work. When we contacted the Stones' publishing company prior to putting it out, we didn't know what they would say or think. I had heard they were notorious when it came to cover versions. I actually didn't think they'd accept it. People kept telling me that. But they were so cool.

GM: You haven't lost an inch of your voice at 72. I recently saw you perform acoustically at The Friars Club in New York City and you sounded better than ever! You even jammed with Rascals lead guitarist Gene Cornish, who had to be helped onto the stage. But you looked fit as a fiddle. It's a human frailty for artists to have to sing their songs in lower keys when they age. But not you.

TJ: I stopped smoking and drinking over 30 years ago and one of the first things that happened is I gained nearly an octave in vocal range that I hadn't had in years and not just falsetto but in actual bulk. So that was one of the benefits of living a straight, clean life.

GM: Says the guy who gave presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey some uppers at a rally.

TJ: Oh, don't remind me. I should've been in jail for that. I can't believe I did that. He told me later he was up all night.

GM: Instead of jail time, you went on to amass 23 gold singles.

TJ: It's been a long road since 1966.

We got the bulk of those gold records in the first 15 years, starting with "Hanky Panky" and ending with "Three Times in Love." Amazing, huh? And, of course, the fun part is watching "I Think We're Alone Now" cross so many boundaries, cover versions and, of course, my new *Alive* acoustic version, 52 years after the original came out. Music keeps changing underneath you. I think one of the most fascinating things in my life is being able to watch everything. The only constant in the music industry is change. I don't even know if rock and roll, as originally conceived, would be successful today. When I think of the technology in recording studios and such, I'm mystified. I tend to see things in a historical perspective. I've actually been thinking like that for a very long time. And the funny thing is that everything has changed except change. That and performing live. There's still that same exact magic when it goes right on a stage. It's the ultimate "now experience."

GM: You must've loved when Prince covered "Crimson and Clover" in 2009 on his *Lotusflow3r* album.

TJ: I was very proud. It's the same feeling I get when we do those songs today and I hear the response they elicit. Pride. It's amazing to hear those songs have lasted as long as they have and still generate the kind of excitement they always have.

GM: You even reached the teenybopper market when teen idol Tiffany, the so-called "Mall Queen," covered "I Think We're Alone Now" in 1987.

TJ: I ran into her a few weeks ago. She said she wanted to re-release it.

GM: And Billy Idol covered "Mony Mony" (live) that same year of '87 so you had two of yours climb the charts simultaneously all the way to No. 1.

TJ: I didn't realize he had covered it. I was planning on redoing it right around the same time until I heard his version. It's like my two songs were holding hands. That had never happened before when two covers of the same artist by

two different artists replaced each other at No. 1.

GM: You've had nine platinum albums.

TJ: The only thing I can say is that we've been very lucky over the years. Keeping the attention of the public is very difficult. And I'm so glad our fan base has gone with us through all these changes. And you know they're there. They're what keeps the car engine going. I count my lucky stars that these are the folks who have put food on my table for 50-plus years. That's the way I look at it. To me, it's a very blue-collar kind of thing as far as longevity is concerned.

GM: It is estimated you have sold 100 million records worldwide.

TJ: I think it's actually up to 110 million, but who's counting? Yeah, it's wonderful. It's also unfathomable. It's because everybody who had anything to do with those records were all on the same page. A lot of young musicians come up to me today to ask about sustaining success. And it's very difficult because it's so hard for young groups to get noticed. We were very lucky when we made it. Everybody in positions of power was looking for the next big act. AM Radio blanketed the country with only about 12 stations coast-to-coast, huge monolithic 50,000-watt signals where if just one major city jumped on a record, that would make it a hit nationally. And when the smaller stations started playing the songs, it seemed they were all playing the same music. But when FM came in, the bubble burst. The science of broadcasting changed because FM changed the rules and broadened the horizons to the point where hundreds of songs never broadcast before were being played. That's when we started to get pushed to the side.

GM: Your music has been heard in 60 Hollywood movies and 53 TV shows.

TJ: Producers knew when you hear a song, you think back to a certain era. They knew there are particular songs that would instantly transport the viewer to a time in their own lives. What comment could I possibly say about how this music fared so well in the stories and the imaginations of Hollywood scriptwriters and directors? I've been incredibly

fortunate to have had the attention of the public for this long. The music has never really come off the radio. The movies have bolstered almost the entire catalog. When Morris Levy sold the company, that's when we really started picking up attention on the big and little screens. I think a 1991 movie called *Don't Tell Mom The Babysitter's Dead* started it. I seem to remember that all of a sudden after that the sky fell open and we just started getting one movie after another and it's been that way ever since. Sony owns all the music now and they've been consistent in continuing to place it in Hollywood productions, including 13 movies so far this year and a commercial for Hewlett-Packard. They license all the Roulette stuff. I must admit, this blows my mind, almost as much as when I look out at our crowds these days and see three generations of people.

GM: *It's like your music is inextricably bound into the DNA of America itself.*

TJ: And don't think I'm not totally grateful and thankful for that. I don't think I can get a greater compliment than to have my music become part of the landscape for so long. I really don't think you can be honored any more than that in this business of ours.

GM: *Rolling Stone magazine listed your memoir, Me, the Mob and the Music, as one of the Top 25 rock books of all time. And now it's being made into a movie produced by the woman who produced Goodfellas, Casino and Cape Fear, Barbara De Fina.*

TJ: Yes! It's coming along beautifully. I recently spent the day with director Kathleen Marshall and she's really got a great grasp of the story. I think we're going to make a hell of a movie.

GM: *She's won numerous Tony Awards for her work on Broadway. But the burning question is who will play mobster Morris Levy and who will play Tommy James? I nominate Robert De Niro to play Levy. He's worked with her before.*

TJ: Those are the two characters who have to be right. Actually, all they have to do is find somebody who plays guitar as badly as I do. I have a few ideas about the Levy character but I can't name names at



Tommy James re-signing a contract with Roulette Records president Morris Levy (1927-1990, second from left) in July 16, 1969.

this point. The problem with casting—and I must tell you that most of the other roles have already been cast—is that they not only have to be the right actor, but they have to be good box office. That's what I keep getting reminded of every time I throw a name out. I intend to be heavily involved in the production.

GM: *Are you going to appear in the film in a small cameo? You must want to, no?*

TJ: (laughs) I think I'd like to be a corpse.

GM: *Better yet, you could play pop singer Jimmie Rodgers who hit No. 1 for four weeks straight in 1957 on Roulette Records with "Honeycomb." He had the gall to demand royalties from the label upon being stiffed and ended up in a ditch on the side of the highway with a fractured skull. He survived, and is 86 today.*

TJ: Well, I have to say, if I'm a corpse, the lines are easy and I don't have to worry about missing my mark. I'll probably be in the movie for a few seconds as a bartender or in an elevator with a crowd of people.

GM: *I've heard that the movie will one*

day be made into a jukebox Broadway musical like Jersey Boys.

TJ: There's been talk, yeah. They didn't want to do the show first because if the show stiffs, the movie never gets made. I'd love to see all those mob guys dancing around, though.

GM: *Just don't make the movie like that awful 1989 Jerry Lee Lewis movie Great Balls of Fire.*

TJ: I was offered a part in that movie! They wanted me to play his cousin, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. I turned it down simply because I knew deep down in my heart, there was no way I was ready to take on anything like that. I don't think I would be today.

GM: *Oh, wow, I didn't know that! It would have been a great role! Damn! You could've had all that bluster, that hellfire and damnation stuff. I don't know, man. I think you made a mistake. Just like when you turned down playing the Woodstock festival in 1969. I think the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame has its head up its ass by not inducting you years ago.*

TJ: I think it'll happen after the movie comes out. ●