

The river Styx

The gay bassist for one of the seminal rock groups of the '70s and '80s once feared where his sexuality would take him. Now, with his new autobiography, *The Grand Illusion*, Chuck Panozzo is finally on solid ground By Michael Giltz

He's been playing in bands for more than 45 years, but it's only recently that Styx bassist Chuck Panozzo has learned to enjoy the basic perks of being a rock star.

For instance, when he sees girls in the audience pleading for a guitar pick, Panozzo will single out the one with the cutest boyfriend, point to him, and bounce a pick off the guy's chest.

In imitation of bandmates who drape the bras and panties thrown onto the stage over their instruments, Panozzo recently taped a frat boy's boxer shorts to his bass. Guitarist Tommy Shaw responded to the usually reserved Panozzo, "You know, that's one of the most joyous moments I've ever experienced with you."

It's been a long time coming, according to the trials and tribulations Panozzo lays out in his new memoir, *The Grand Illusion: Love, Lies, and My Life With Styx*, in which the rocker details his lifelong struggle with being gay; the founding of Styx with his twin brother, John; publicly coming out in 2001; performing at the Gay Games last year; and living with AIDS. Along the way, he's put an end to one or two rock and roll traditions.

"I've stopped autographing female breasts," says Panozzo. "This one girl lifted up her top and said, 'Will you sign my chest?' I said, 'If you give me a piece of paper, I'd really prefer that. But if your boyfriend has a really cute ass, I'll autograph his butt.'"

Actually, Panozzo didn't say that last line. He's far too well-mannered for that. Besides, his life story is more about missed opportunities than rock and roll debauchery. Point out all the lasciviousness a gay rock star could have indulged in during the '70s, and Panozzo responds, "You want to hear me cry?"

Styx was one of the biggest acts of the '70s and early '80s, delivering a string of hit songs like "Lady," "Babe," and "Come Sail Away" as well as four consecutive multiplatinum albums. The band, whose progenitor was formed by Chuck and John at age 12, graduated from playing weddings and the occasional after-school gig to sold-out stadium concerts. Its iconic pop culture status continues to be reinforced with references to the band on shows as hip and influential as *The Simpsons* and *Arrested Development*. Adam Sandler is said to be a huge fan, and "Come Sail Away" anchored the pilot of

Freaks and Geeks, one of the most acclaimed television shows of recent years.

Speaking from his home in south Florida, where he lives with his partner, Tim, Panozzo fondly recalls the first time he realized he liked boys. He was 9 years old, living in his hometown of Chicago, and had just returned to Catholic school after breaking his leg.

"I'm sitting in school, and there's a nun who—not to disparage the sisters—says in her very deepest voice, 'Charles! We're having a fire drill today. There's going to be an eighth-grade boy who's going to carry you out,'" remembers Panozzo.

"All of a sudden I could see this guy walking up, and I thought, *Gee, that uniform looks kind of nice on him*. He was very cute. If I could have picked the guy to carry me out, it would have been him. He said, 'I'm going to pick you up, and I want you to grab me by the neck so I don't drop you.' I said, 'OK.' So after the drill was over, he dropped me back into my chair and the nun said, 'Charles, how did that go?' I said, 'Sister, are we going to have another fire drill tomorrow?'"

That was about as bold as Panozzo got. Styx was always an unusually straitlaced band; even its manager and executives ►

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at a couple of its record labels thought its members were pretty uncool. By the time the band hit it big, many of the members were married or in serious relationships. And with Panozzo not even remotely interested in the groupies, he jokes, Styx had the luckiest roadies in the business.

When it came to being gay, Panozzo was equally reserved. His father died when he was 24, and Panozzo and his mother never really discussed the subject. He began attending a seminary high school, designed to give boys early preparation for the priesthood, when he was a sophomore. One fondly remembered moment of erotic sublimation involved Panozzo and the other boys dancing with each other to a rock and roll song playing on a smuggled-in radio.

He left the seminary a year later and rejoined the band, which was enjoying some local success. When he was 20 years old Panozzo got up the nerve to go to a gay porn theater for the first time.

"One time the police came running in," he says. "There were 12 of them—almost as many of them as there were of us. I didn't do the Pee-wee Herman thing or the George Michael thing. But in those days they would take your name and put it in the paper; all they had to do was find just one guy [unclothed]. And as they left, they just mocked us. 'What the fuck are you guys watching here?' They never

asked for IDs. They just turned up the lights, they yelled, and then they left."

Despite his fears, Panozzo was determined not to be cowed. He came out to his brother and sister before he had so much as kissed a man, while his sexuality was more or less an open secret with his mother. In his early 20s he finally went on a few tentative dates, secure in the belief that most gay men didn't pay any attention to rock and roll and wouldn't know who he was.

As the band's success grew, Panozzo would discreetly go out to gay bars while on tour and was almost never recognized. His first serious relationship ended because, Panozzo says, he simply wasn't ready to be open and supportive. He even went so far as to introduce his boyfriend as a "friend" at a function he was hosting for then-Chicago mayor Jane Byrne.

On the radio, Styx had a number 1 hit with "Babe," and the group transformed from opening act to headliner. Meanwhile, Panozzo used his Catholic school training to avoid lascivious thoughts.

"There's a phrase in the Catholic Church they use for the nuns: custody of the eyes," says Panozzo, referring to the idea that nuns are to avoid looking at their naked bodies to help avoid impure thoughts. "For a long time eye contact was an issue for me. *How can I entertain these people when I'm afraid to look at them?*"

He also avoided eye contact with his

bandmates in a way. Panozzo ignored his own issues by focusing on his brother John—who fought addiction for much of his life and died in 1996—and the needs of his aging mother.

When guitarist James Young (a.k.a. JY) asked him in the '70s if he was gay, Panozzo angrily denied it. But life caught up with him in 1991, when he was diagnosed as HIV-positive. He developed AIDS in late '98, fighting illness as the band recorded 1999's *Brave New World*.

Eventually, Tommy Shaw asked Panozzo in an e-mail if he was sick, and Panozzo finally told the group everything. Everyone was supportive about his being gay—even keyboardist Dennis DeYoung, whose battles with bandmates fueled enough tales to fill a dozen episodes of VH1's *Behind the Music*. But when Panozzo was too weak to record his bass parts for the album (for which he'd participated in all of the rehearsals), DeYoung wanted Panozzo's name removed from the credits.

"It was like a punch in the face," admits Panozzo, who managed to contribute to several tracks in the end. "In all reality, [DeYoung] might have been right. But [we're talking] about someone who, when you're 12 years old, comes down and says, 'Can I play with you?' with an accordion under his arm. We weren't always the rock gods we were. He knew I'd lost a brother. He knew my mother had passed away. He knew I was on very shaky ground here.

"Where's the man who could write all these beautiful songs about 'Lady' and 'Babe'? Where is his heart at? And I really began to question what our friendship and relationship was based on."

Today, DeYoung no longer performs with the band. Panozzo, thriving on his current anti-HIV medication regimen, joins Styx often on the road and is looser and happier onstage than he's ever been. He speaks to gay groups whenever possible and is politically active. But his buddies still have some learning to do. Panozzo says the band's longtime manager gets antsy sometimes when he has gay visitors backstage. And his bandmates have yet to act on their promise to do a benefit show for AIDS research.

Once too shy even to kiss another guy, Panozzo now confidently says, "I'll make it happen." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Daily News.



Panozzo (front, left) with his Styx bandmates in 1981