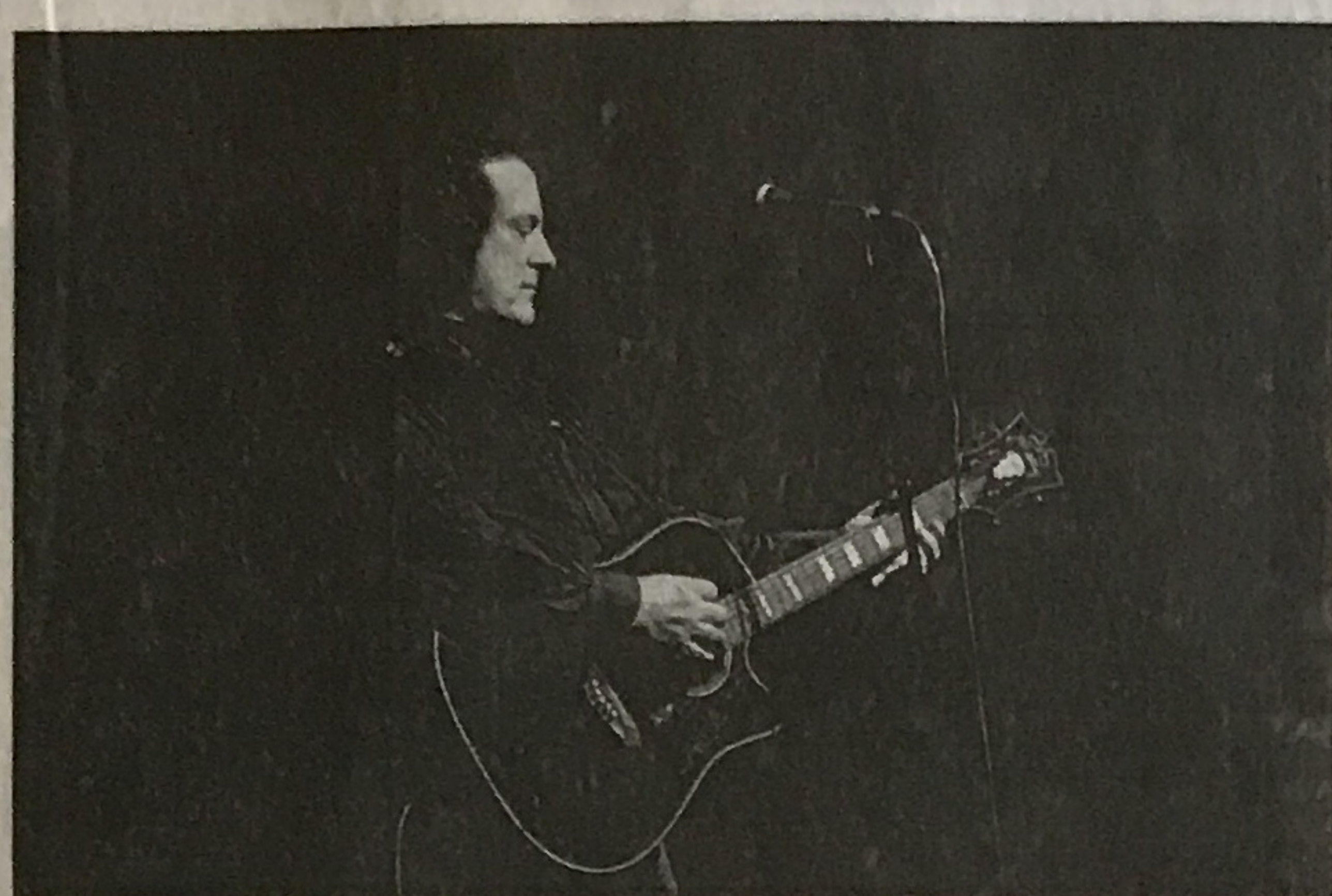


# Do the 'Hanky Panky' at East Haven Fall Festival

Pop star Tommy James & the Shondells headline in festival's 26th year Saturday night



Tommy James & the Shondells headline Sept. 9 at the East Haven Fall Festival.

By Lisa Reisman

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**EAST HAVEN** » It all started with a catchy little song with a melody that bounced up and down.

Tommy James who, along with the Shondells, will be headlining the Saturday night entertainment at this weekend's 26th annual East Haven Fall Festival, first heard "Hanky Panky" performed by a garage rock band in South Bend, Indiana in the summer of 1963. The ditty, about a hormonal lad driven mad by a girl's suggestive dance, stuck in his head. Some of it, at least.

The festival runs from Sept. 8 through Sept. 10.

"I really only remembered a few lines from the song, so when we went to record it, I had to make up the rest of the song," James told Billboard's Fred Bronson.

Evidently, it worked. James' version, recorded at a radio station in tiny Niles, Michigan, and released on a local label, took off in the surrounding region, and was wildly popular in the band's stage act.

But the label lacked the resources for national promotion. The single disappeared, as did James' aspirations for a recording career. The Shondells broke up. James took a job at a record shop.

Then, over two years later, came an invitation from a Pittsburgh disc jockey to do a concert there. A dance promoter had found a copy of "Hanky Panky" in a used record bin and had started playing it at his dance clubs, he told James. People suddenly began requesting "Hanky Panky." In response to the demand, bootleggers began producing it; as many as 80,000 copies had been

sold, he said.

James traveled to Pittsburgh and hired a house band he encountered at a lounge, the Raconteurs, to be the new Shondells, the original members having declined to reunite. They made appearances on TV and in clubs in the city.

From complete obscurity, this version of Tommy James & the Shondells was playing to audiences numbering in the thousands. When James brought a master of "Hanky Panky" to New York, he was courted by Columbia Records and RCA-Victor. Eventually he sold the song to Roulette Records, which took it to the top position of the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 for two weeks in July 1966.

"The amazing thing is we never re-recorded it," James later told Billboard's Bronson. "I think if we'd fooled with it too much we'd have fouled it up."

The next three decades were studded with similar breaks. Take the group's hit "Mony Mony," later covered by British pop star Billy Idol. As James told Hitch Magazine, the group had worked out everything except the song's title. "We wanted something catchy, but everything sounded so stupid," he said. "We were about to throw in the towel when I went out onto the terrace, looked up and saw the Mutual of New York building."

On the top of the building, in red neon letters, was the company's abbreviation. Had he looked the other way, the song, he said, "might have been called Hotel Taft."

Then there were the near misses. Following the chart-topping successes of "Crimson and Clover," "Sweet Cherry Wine," and "Crystal Blue Persuasion," all of which James

co-wrote, music promoter Artie Kornfield invited the band to perform at Woodstock.

As James, who was in Hawaii at the time, recalled to interviewer Gary James, "I get a call 6,000 miles away that a farmer in Upstate New York is gonna throw a concert in his field. I said 'Sure, I'm gonna leave Hawaii for that, and play in the mud somewhere in New York.' I said 'If I'm not there, start without me!' And they did."

It may be, as music critic Bruce Eder contended, that declining the invitation to Woodstock was a miscalculation. "The mere credit," he writes, "coupled with perhaps an appearance in the movie or the album, might have enhanced their credibility with the counterculture audience."

Still, as Eder himself concluded, "from 1968 through 1970, when artists like Jagger, Fogerty, and Morrison were in their heyday, Tommy James & the Shondells sold more singles than any other pop act in the world, many of them written, co-written, or at least chosen by James."

To think it all began with that catchy little tune that the leader of the Shondells couldn't get out of his head.

*East Haven Fall Festival hours: Friday Sept. 8, 6 to 11 p.m.; Saturday, Sept. 9, noon to 11 p.m.; Sunday, Sept. 10, noon to 6 p.m. Tommy James & The Shondells perform Saturday at 9:30 p.m. The Bernadettes (5:45 p.m. - 6:45 p.m.) and Primetime (7:15 p.m.) will also perform. Ragdoll headlines Friday night at 9:30 p.m. For more information, visit East Haven Fall Festival on Facebook.*



The Bernadettes (Shoreline band) perform from 5:45 p.m. - 6:45 p.m. Saturday. Contributed photos.