

BOSTON



Boston: men on a mission, but not in a hurry.

LABOUR OF LOVE

WORDS: KEN SHARP

Driven on by one man's perfectionism, **Boston's** first album took seven painstaking years to complete. Then the band got a major-label deal - and were forced to record it all again. The result was *Boston*, one of the biggest-selling albums ever.

A notorious workaholic and perfectionist, Boston guitarist, visionary and sonic architect Tom Scholz spent years honing and perfecting the songs that would later appear on the group's debut album. Undeterred by a stream of record company rejection letters and the rapid depletion of his finances, Scholz forged ahead, stubbornly focused on bringing to life the ambitious and cinematic sounds in his head.

Signed to Epic Records in the mid-70s, Boston hit the airwaves with their quintessential self-titled album, electrifying rock fans with a juggernaut of gloriously melodic and radio-friendly songs including the hits *More Than A Feeling*, *Peace Of Mind*, *Long Time* and others. An instant smash, *Boston* quickly put the band's

name on the rock landscape, sparked by Brad Delp's operatic vocals and the sublime orchestrated guitar of Scholz (occasionally augmented by bandmate Barry Goudreau).

In the wake of the unprecedented success of their first album (still one of the best-selling debuts of all time) and 1978's follow-up, *Don't Look Back*, Boston underwent a series of personnel changes (Scholz and Delp remaining the nucleus of the line-up) while releasing a string of acclaimed releases including *Third Stage* and *Walk On*.

While Scholz and company have gone on to create more spectacularly crafted rock-pop songs (*Don't Look Back*, *A Man I'll Never Be*, *It's Easy*, *Amanda*), 30 years after its release *Boston* remains their crowning achievement, a dazzling

tour de force of brilliant songwriting, fiery musicianship, virtuoso vocals, taut arrangements and near-perfect production.

Today, with more than 17 million copies sold, *Boston* continues to be championed as a seminal touchstone in classic rock. Recent reissues of the band's key first two releases, *Boston* and *Don't Look Back*, sound spectacular, thanks to Scholz's painstaking remastering efforts.

Classic Rock sat down with Boston mastermind Scholz for a look back at the group's monumental career.

Take us through the many years it took for Boston to finally land that elusive major-label record deal.

I started around 1969. That was when I wrote my first song, which was *Foreplay*. It was an instrumental

piece. It's ironic that the first piece I ever wrote appeared on a best-selling 17-million-plus album. From there it was a long, long string of doing everything from buying time in so-called professional recording studios.

Back in the 70s that was incredibly expensive. It's not like today. Today anybody can make a recording. Everybody's got their own home eight, 16, 24, 64-track computer set-up. You can buy multi-track tape recording mixing systems for nothing off the internet. Back then it typically cost \$75 to \$100 for eight-track time in a studio. We're talking 1970s dollars, so that was approximately maybe \$250, maybe \$300 an hour. Now picture that: somebody spending \$300 an hour today to try and put down an idea they have for a demo. That's some pretty serious pressure.

I worked at Polaroid, and the money I made at Polaroid went into recording demos. Then after I had blown enough money doing that and realising that this was just gonna cost too much, I decided I would put my own little demo studio together. I cobbled something together from a few tape machines, some that I had bought as junk and got the parts. I learned all about the technical part of tape recording at Polaroid, from a couple of friends I had there in the electronics department and some of the work I was doing. I built my own little cheap demo recorder to start with, and gradually put a better studio together over the years. This was where I did most of the work and developed *Peace Of Mind*, *Rock & Roll Band*, *More Than A Feeling*, all of the songs that I wrote that appear on the first album and a couple from the second album. That whole process took until 1975.

The culmination was finally completing this last demo tape. I'd been spending money for six years in

pretty large quantities – as much as I could make, basically. You graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [M.I.T.] with a master's degree and go to work for a company and have a good job, you're expected to do a little bit better than I was doing. Being married and looking at 30 coming up, it was time to throw in the towel. So I was gonna finish this last demo, sell the equipment and stop pissing away all my money doing these stupid recordings.

There were numerous demo tapes. I made so many tapes and sent them out, and I'd get all the rejection slips back. This started in 1971, maybe 1972. There were six songs on this final demo tape. It was *Rock & Roll Band*, *Peace Of Mind*, *Something About You*, *More Than A Feeling*, *Hitch A Ride* and one more. All of these demos were done in the same way. My friend Jim Masdea played drums and I would overdub all the instruments, Brad Delp would overdub all of the singing parts.

I wrapped it all up, and in the meantime some of

“I GOT A REJECTION LETTER SAYING: ‘THIS BAND HAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING NEW TO OFFER.’”

- On sending out demos of the Boston album

these songs had been heard by a few companies. I had sent out a portion of that demo and suddenly got a reaction from three major labels; RCA was one, A&M Records, and possibly Columbia, but not Epic. In fact I got an incredibly terse rejection letter from a guy in the A&R department at Epic, saying: “This band has absolutely nothing new to offer” [laughs]. It was quite funny. I think later that same guy claimed that he had discovered Boston. But we still didn't get a deal. I still had two more songs to finish that weren't quite complete at the time. I finished those up, put the six songs together, and within a matter of a few weeks Epic came in with a good offer to make an album.

The funny thing is they wanted those songs on that demo plus some other ones, but they didn't want that demo; it had to be recorded in a real studio. I knew I couldn't record in a real studio. I'd gotten used to working alone. There was nobody else there when I was playing my parts. It was me running the machines and playing the guitar and the organ and the bass. I got so used to that isolation. It was the only way I could work. The only time there was someone else there was when I laid down a basic drum track with a drummer or if Brad Delp was singing his parts and I was engineer/producer. I knew that I couldn't make that album in a so called ‘professional’ studio.

John Boylan, the producer Epic chose, offered me a deal. I would make the record in my basement and wouldn't tell anybody, and he would take Brad and Barry Goudreau – my old friend that used to play guitar with me – and a couple guys he knew out to LA. They would record some songs out there, and Epic would think all the recording was done in LA. *Let Me Take You Home Tonight* was the only song that ended up being included that was recorded in LA. I think they worked on three of Brad's songs out there. Brad had written a few songs on his own, and of course he had co-written several songs with me over the years.

Meanwhile, I would make a master with all the instruments on it back in my basement. I had to record all the songs exactly the same as they were on the demo. And not only did I record it exactly the same, I recorded it on the same equipment. It was still done in a basement studio by the same person. So it was really crazy.

We took the instrumental tracks out to LA, and Brad overdubbed the vocals. Then John Boylan and I mixed it. So the album wasn't the actual demo tapes, it was a re-recording done exactly the same way: all the instrumental parts, with the exception of the drums, which were done by Sib [Hashian] and Jim Masdea, were done in my basement.

Having recorded the songs on your demos, did re-recording the final tracks come together more quickly?

Just the opposite. Usually when I record the first time I play something that I like and that's the one I keep. I'm working on a tape and it's gonna be what goes out there. It's very easy afterwards to listen to a song and learn to play a part that you hear on the tape. I could play the parts on these songs with my eyes closed any time. But doing it the first time is very difficult. What I had to do in this case was exactly duplicate these parts that appeared on the demo. I had only played them once when I played them for the demo, so I had to learn not just a guitar part or a lead part but everything: the bass notes, how I played each one of the rhythm chords, the sound, the touch, everything had to be the same because these people [at Epic] were expecting to hear what they'd heard on



Brad Delp (front) and Tom Scholz were Boston's key members.



Sharp-dressed in the 70s: (l to r) Tom Scholz, Fran Sheehan, Brad Delp, Barry Goudreau and Sib Hashian.



the demo but not the same recording.

It's a bizarre story, but that's how that first album came to be. They got basically another basement recording done the same way. The only thing that had changed was Sib Hashian played a lot of the drums instead of Jim Masdea. I preferred the demos, but there were minor improvements technically in the mastering.

You're known as a guitarist, but you started out as a keyboard player.

I played keyboards from a very early age. I started playing piano, and then started playing organ when I was at M.I.T. in Boston, just for the fun of it. I played in some local school bands. Barry [Goudreau] and I played together under lots of different names, never for more than a few jobs. I was never able to find work. I realised there was absolutely no future in trying to play in bands in bars if I really wanted to do this and enjoy it from an artistic sense. What I really wanted to do was play music in a band and have somebody listen to it. So I stopped it all together.

Starting with the first band I was ever in, I decided that I had to learn how to play guitar, because I really liked the instrument and the way it sounded. I usually didn't like the way that people were playing it. Slowly, over the years, I picked it up. And I'm still trying to figure out how to play that thing. Eventually I got good enough at it to get my ideas down on tape. I found that the only way that I could really get the ideas on tape that I was hearing in my mind was if I did the parts.

How did Brad Delp come into the picture?

Brad is one the best singers I've ever heard. How he happened to stumble into my musical life is as much a mystery to me as to everybody else. Barry had heard about him from somebody else. Brad came to a studio where I was finishing up a recording and laid a vocal track on an early attempt at a song. From that moment I knew he was the singer. He could sing high. He was awesome the moment he opened his mouth. As a musician using his voice he had an incredible born talent. He can do a vocal line and change one little thing in it and do it over and over again. He can sing four harmonies to it and go back and do the original line and change one little thing in it. He

hardly ever makes a mistake; two or three times in 30 years I've heard him miss something or do something wrong on stage. It's been so shocking that nobody knows what to do, because it never happens.

Boston's records are immaculately recorded and produced. Who were your role models in that respect?

The first person I ever heard do harmony electric guitar parts was Todd Rundgren on *I Saw The Light*. He was without question one of my biggest influences as an arranger. He was also the first person I knew of who could go into the studio by himself and make a record. Jimmy Page also was an influence. Very briefly on *How Many More Times* he played a little harmony guitar part and I thought: "Why didn't he do that for a lot longer?" I mean, it was like two notes long. I wore that 10 seconds of vinyl out on my Led Zeppelin album almost immediately. So that also inspired me. That's all it took, I heard both of their pieces, totalling 20 seconds, and I knew that was what I wanted to do. And of course I had to do it playing with my own parts on tape. I'd lay a track down, and I would try a part over it and I would go back and erase it and play a different part over that.

Beyond that I would have to mention Jeff Beck, who I still think is the greatest lead guitar player of all time, and Joe Walsh because he was the funkier; not the *Hotel California* stuff, I'm talking about when he was back with The James Gang. Those were my guitar influences for arranging. But it was really the classics – and I don't mean classic rock. I'm talking about Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky and Beethoven. Those people were power brokers in the music world. Amazing stuff. Kids don't listen to it seriously.

For some reason, when I was a little kid I used to park myself in front of this big speaker and my parents had some classical music that they let me play. To this day I recognise the parts of great musical compositions. I don't know who wrote it, I don't know which symphony or who did it, but I know it. It's part of me. It's ingrained. It got in there at a very early age. So most of what I write when it comes to melodies, and especially arranging, comes from classical music.

Your guitar solos on Boston records are marvellously melodic and orchestrated, and they're not flashy.

First of all, the reason that they weren't just excuses for flashy playing is that I wasn't a flashy player [laughs]. The notes that you choose when you try to play a guitar solo, a lot of guitar players didn't seem to think the notes were very important; it was more important how many of them you could fit into a millisecond. It was almost like a sport activity, as opposed to a piece of art you were trying to do. So I didn't really ascribe to that kind of playing.

I didn't know what I was gonna do on the records. I kind of knew where I was gonna put some guitar playing. I would listen to the song – the chords, the rhythm – and then I would start experimenting with it. Almost always those experimental paths took me through classical melodies. I'm not saying that everything was lifted off of Mozart or something, because it wasn't, but I think I automatically thought in the same vein that the old-time composers thought in. So they turned out to be melodic instrumental parts. I was into the power part of it. Music, to me, was a feel-good thing, and I wanted it to take me some place other than where I was; higher was better.

When the first album, Boston, was released you were still working at Polaroid.

Yeah. I took a leave to re-record the album in a 'professional' studio. Which turned out to be the same basement the demo was done in. It was even a step down, because a few of the tracks on that original demo had been recorded at a studio where I had some

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Delp and Sheehan rock out with (more than a) feeling.

equipment. I used to work there in the middle of the night. But that studio closed down. So everything was totally recorded in my basement. It took maybe three-and-a-half, four months. Then I went back to work at Polaroid because I wasn't expecting anything to happen with this music. I never thought it would be a success. I certainly didn't think I was gonna be able to make a living off of it. I didn't leave Polaroid until we were heading out on a headlining tour the next year.

While I was working on demos and working at Polaroid during the day, I remember once, a year or two before I got the album deal, my department manager came around and said: "Tom, listen... I've got to lay off a few people. We're cutting back a little bit. You're not on the list and I don't want to lay you off, but I've got people here with houses and families and kids that I'm gonna lay off. I heard you're making recordings in a studio, and if you're gonna be leaving here to become some kind of rock and roll musician..." I said: "Ed, that's like a million-to-one shot. There's no chance that this is gonna amount to anything. I just do that for a hobby." He said: "Okay, I'm just checking." As I'm leaving Polaroid a year-and-a-half, two years later, I'm in the elevator waiting for the doors to close. He comes screaming into the hallway, stops the elevator door and says: "A million to one?" [Laughs]

What are some of your memories behind some key Boston tracks, starting with *More Than A Feeling*?

"IT MADE ME FEEL GOOD THAT NIRVANA LISTENED TO BOSTON AT ALL."

- On Smells Like Teen Spirit 'borrowing' the More Than A Feeling riff

It's something that happens to everybody: that déjà vu feeling, or suddenly reliving something from the past because you hear the same song or the same sound that you heard on the radio at that time.

I'm not the kind of writer that has something happen and then goes and sits down and writes about it. It was just something that occurred to me as I was listening to the tracks for *More Than A Feeling*. I always finish the music first, and sometimes I would listen to the music for quite a long time before anything would pop into my mind. For whatever reason, this idea of writing a song about that music pulling you back into a memory got to me. Marianne was my cousin who was older than I was by a bit, and I had a crush on her when I was 13. 'I see my Marianne walking away...'

A kid's grade-school crush, and her name fitted, and it worked out perfectly.

What inspired the music?

Any ideas that I have for music are basically spontaneous. It usually happens when I have an instrument in my hand. A lot of times I do it purely by accident. Only rarely do I actually hear an idea in my mind. Once I have some chords and a rhythm, then I start to hear things – lead parts, bass parts – and all of it starts to come in a flood.

The initial inspiration for the rhythm part that starts off *Don't Look Back* or any of those is really hard to pin down. I'm always experimenting, whether it's on a keyboard or a guitar, and virtually everything that I ended up recording was something that just kind of happened. You start off trying to play something and end up with a song instead.

How does it feel knowing that Nirvana borrowed the *More Than A Feeling* riff for their grunge anthem *Smells Like Teen Spirit*?

It made me feel good that Nirvana listened to Boston at all and ever wanted to mention it. I didn't hear anything that I thought was a lift at all. It's a very awesome tune by a good band.

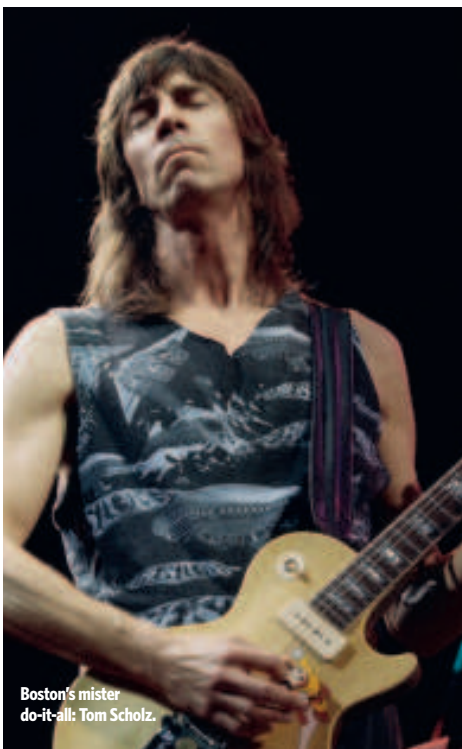
What about *Don't Look Back*?

That was the last song I did before the album was wrapped up. It was a lucky, last-minute idea →

BOSTON



Brad Delp: "One of the best singers I've ever heard," says Tom Scholz.



Boston's mister do-it-all: Tom Scholz.

that I got. That was definitely the single that made that album work. When we're on stage and doing fairly recent Boston songs and old songs, that one fits right in. It still sounds good when we start it off, and it still works.

Was *Peace Of Mind* written about people you worked with at Polaroid?

It's not specifically about my experience at Polaroid or people around me. It was about the American experience of having to keep up with the Joneses and go up the corporate ladder and all that bullshit that people in this country buy into.

The music that sticks in my mind, whether it's past or present, are those few gems that each of us composers comes up with once in a blue moon that are so catchy that everybody wants to hear it and everybody remembers it. And that's the great part. Writing the stuff that goes on the B-side is easy.

The reason that I had more luck with it on that first Boston album than most writers or performers is that I spent so many years doing it and being completely ignored. After six years of experimenting and coming up with ideas, I had a pretty good backlog of songs. It wasn't like this was some corporate band that got thrown together and stuck in a studio and then a bunch of money was put into promoting it.

This was an effort that had gone on for years and years with absolutely no recognition. I mean less than no recognition. We were scorned for the entire six years. Even when we got the deal there was this local music publication and they told all about what local musicians were doing. It went on and on in this one issue for three pages, and at the bottom, on the very

"All we were guilty of was stumbling onto the secret of success."

- On accusations of Boston being a 'corporate' band

last line it said: "...and the band Boston was signed by Epic Records." [laughs] That was it. That was all the press we got in six years. We got signed to a class-A deal. It didn't happen very often to a band from Boston. We were absolutely ignored.

Boston were slammed by the critics for being what they saw as a 'corporate' rock band.

That was later. We were a totally experimental band. We played in a basement. We had no success and we weren't expecting any. We got released by a company that didn't know what to think, and suddenly, bingo, the thing goes crazy. All of a sudden people were listening to the *Boston* album, and there were tons of bands that happened afterwards that had harmony guitars, harmony singing and involved arrangements. Everybody wanted to cash in on what we had stumbled onto. We totally stumbled onto the secret of success in the late 70s, and we did it at a time when disco was the thing that was supposed to make money and be successful. All we were guilty of was

stumbling onto the secret of success. We had no intention of doing so, it just kind of happened.

Epic Records promoting the band with the slogan 'Better music through science' rankled you.

The idea of bringing science into it seemed a little silly, because it was probably the only recording they'd released that year that had been done in somebody's basement.

It's often said that you're a perfectionist. Where do you think those qualities in you come from?

I don't know what's wrong with me. Whatever I do I'm driven by this desire to make it as good as I can. I'm not saying I'm some wonderful person who has all these lofty goals. It doesn't matter what it is. If I'm cleaning out the kitchen - which I rarely do - I gotta do it right.

Hasn't that sense of perfection worked in your favour?

Well it has with the music. It's just part of me. It's what I do. Maybe that is a facet of my personality that has made this work for me. When I was putting songs together and I'd play a guitar part to it, I would sit back and listen and go, "Well, I don't know. Maybe I'll have some better ideas." I'd do it again the next day and next week and rewrite the lyrics three different times. I've spent six months making a recording of a song that I've thrown out. I've done things like that over and over again. It's just something that I have to do. I have to do it the best I can do it. I never claimed that anything I did was better than anyone else or even that great, it's just that when I'm doing it I feel incomplete if I haven't given it my best shot.

How did you approach performing the songs from the first two Boston albums live?

It's not supposed to be the same thing as a studio performance. A studio performance is like a piece of art that you put together like an oil painting. A live performance is more like a basketball game: you go out and do the best you can, and you never know what's gonna happen.

Looking at it now, why do you think the *Boston* album is such a classic record?

I didn't expect the first album to sell. But I think that's what happens when you put somebody in a basement and let them experiment with something for six years, and then you only take the best things that happened and put them on one record. You end up with a lot of good music that people like.

At the time of the release of the follow-up, *Don't Look Back*, in 1978, you suggested that it was unfinished.

I believe the album was only 32 minutes, and I felt it was always a song short. Perhaps I should have waited to see what other songs I could have come up with. It was very rushed along, finishing the album. I'm not particularly happy with the mixes on that.

Part of that was the enormous pressure I was getting from the people that wanted to make money off of it. That was the last time I let that affect anything that I did. The individual acting as manager was out of my life from that point on. As far as music was concerned it was the last time I did anything for CBS Records [of which Epic was a subsidiary].

I decided that wasn't gonna happen again. If they were gonna get pushy about it, the deal was I would make the records and when they were done they could release them. Now I love *Don't Look Back*, because I remastered it and got it the way I like it. X



BOSTON WRANGLERS BARRY GOUDREAU VS TOM SCHOLZ

You released a solo album in 1980, which led to Tom asking you to leave Boston.

Barry Goudreau: At the end of 1979 we [Boston] had finished two albums and two tours, so Tom got us together and told us he wasn't going to be working for 1980, and if we wanted to do any outside project now would be the time. I hadn't really thought about doing a solo record, but because Tom had put the thought into my head I started writing some songs.

After I had written about six songs I took them to Tom at his studio, but he didn't particularly seem interested in using them for the next Boston record - which would have been my first choice - so I continued on from there. Eventually I had enough songs to do a solo record.

Tom was unhappy with the way the record company had promoted my record, because he thought the ads made it look as though I was responsible for the success of Boston. So Tom got us together in a meeting one day and said Barry's out. And that was that.

You later brought a lawsuit against Tom.

When Tom had got us together in that meeting and told me he wasn't going to work with me any more, he also offered me a settlement to leave the band. But several weeks went by and I never heard from him. Then several months went by and I still never heard from him. I wasn't getting any calls returned and nothing was happening. So I really needed to cut the ties and know that I was free to go on and do something else. So I felt I had no choice than to sue in order to get some closure on the matter.

We eventually settled everything out of court afterwards. Looking back now, that probably wasn't the best course I should have taken.