

PERFORMERS

FOREIGNER

THE HITMAKING BAND'S TIMELESS,
UNFORGETTABLE SONGS MADE IT ONE OF THE
BIGGEST-SELLING GROUPS OF ALL TIME.

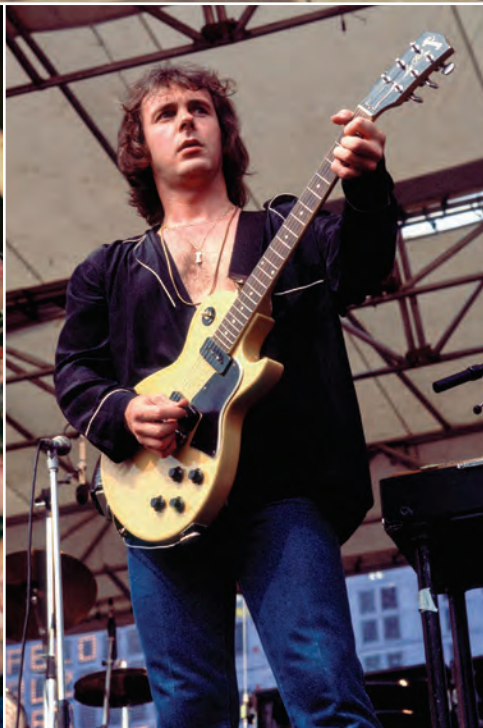
BY ROBERT BURKE WARREN



**Foreigner: Lou Gramm,
Ed Gagliardi,
Ian McDonald, Al
Greenwood, Mick
Jones, and Dennis
Elliott (from left), 1977**

Fronted by rock's odd couple – songwriter/mastermind British guitarslinger Mick Jones, and Rochester, New York's golden-voiced Lou Gramm – Foreigner burst onto U.S. radio in 1977 with their powerhouse self-titled debut. It quickly yielded two Top Ten hits: Jones' "Feels Like the First Time" and the Gramm-Jones cowrite "Cold as Ice," both now classic-rock radio evergreens. Foreigner's

infectious, hooky tunes, wrapped in meticulously crafted sound – crunching riffs, melodic leads, stratospheric vocals, sly synthesizers, and a driving groove – set the airwaves afire. That debut, also featuring drummer Dennis Elliott, bassist Ed Gagliardi, keyboardist Al Greenwood, and multi-instrumentalist Ian McDonald, would ultimately go five times platinum in America, and remain in the Top Twenty for a year, peaking at Number Four.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Original bassist Ed Gagliardi, 1978; Elliott in Rosemont, Illinois, 1981; Jones, recording the band's debut, 1976; Greenwood in 1978. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Jones (left) and Gramm in Germany, 1978; McDonald in 1978; Gramm onstage in Binghamton, New York, 1981.

Foreigner's massive initial success is even more remarkable considering the band arrived at the height of disco – indeed, the year of *Saturday Night Fever*. Up until the mid-seventies, rock music had thrived on Top Forty radio, but starting around 1975, guitar-based acts with singalong melodies and impassioned vocals had fallen dramatically from favor, scorned by programmers. Nevertheless, Foreigner's unquestionably rocking early releases soared, placing them on the charts alongside KC and the Sunshine Band, the Commodores, Andy Gibb, and the theme from *Rocky*. For a time, the distinctively accessible yet undeniably aggressive sound of Foreigner seemed to keep rock alive on the Hot 100.

It was all just beginning. Ahead of the band loomed even more historic achievements – alongside heart-break, drama, and triumph over extreme adversity – and eventual worldwide sales of more than 80 million

albums, making Foreigner one of the biggest-selling bands of all time.

The Foreigner story begins in 1976, speeding from inception to mega-success. By the mid-seventies, Jones was already a music business veteran, having spent much of the sixties in France playing guitar with and writing songs for Johnny Hallyday, "The French Elvis." Back in England in 1972, he'd joined Spooky Tooth (featuring American vocalist/keyboardist Gary Wright), relocating with the band to New York in 1974. After Spooky Tooth fell apart two years later, Jones recorded an album and played a handful of shows with the Leslie West Band. During all these rock & roll adventures, Jones had beavered away on songs for his dream band, which he envisioned as "a British take on American music." Jones recalled, "I had gotten into R&B and also loved soul music. I was very comfortable with the idea of doing rock



Elliott, Jones, Gramm, and Rick Wills (from left), backstage in Binghamton, New York, 1981

with a soulful feel.” His chance came when the Leslie West Band abruptly imploded in the spring of 1976. Leslie West manager Bud Prager liked what he heard on Jones’ demos and encouraged the ambitious guitarist to remain stateside and form a band to showcase his material. Such was Prager’s belief in Jones’ work that he provided studio space for auditions and rehearsals, eventually hocking his pension for seed money to fund the fledgling Foreigner.

Needless to say, Prager’s investment paid off. After lengthy, arduous auditions – including fifty candidates for lead singer before rock tenor phenom Gramm signed on – the band lineup solidified in the middle of 1976. Jones initially named his group Trigger, but soon found that moniker was taken. He renamed the band Foreigner, explaining that because he, McDonald, and Elliott were British, and Greenwood, Gagliardi, and Gramm were American, no matter where they were, someone would always be “a foreigner.”

After six months of intensive rehearsals, the sextet recorded demos in New York. Every major record label passed. Even the band’s eventual home, Atlantic Records, rejected them. But upon accidentally hearing a demo of “Feels Like the First Time,” erstwhile writer/photographer/publicist and rookie Atlantic A&R man John Kalodner persuaded his bosses to reconsider. (Kalodner would go on to become an A&R titan in the eighties and nineties.) Although Jones’ songs got the band signed, Gramm soon stepped up as a cowriter on five of the debut album’s ten cuts, setting in motion a

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Foreigner
1977 (Atlantic)



Double Vision
1978 (Atlantic)



Head Games
1979 (Atlantic)



4
1981 (Atlantic)



Records
1982 (Atlantic)



Agent Provocateur
1984 (Atlantic)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Jones (left) and Gramm with saxophonist Junior Walker, ca. 1982; Gramm performs “I Want to Know What Love Is” with a gospel choir, Memphis, Tennessee, 1985; Wills (left) and Gramm, Atlanta, 1994.



Gramm-Jones writing partnership that would flourish in the band's peak years. British producers John Sinclair and Gary Lyons (with Jones and McDonald coproducing) booked time at New York's Atlantic Studios and set a release date for March of 1977.

That summer Foreigner exploded, surpassing everyone's expectations. Evidently, Top Forty radio listeners had been starved for rock without even knowing it. *Foreigner* became the fastest-selling record in Atlantic's history, beating out labelmates Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones. The band's first eight singles would chart in the *Billboard* Top Twenty, a feat not achieved since the Beatles. Although it had not played a single gig before recording its debut, the band soon graduated from clubs to theaters to arenas, performing on March 18, 1978, for 200,000 attendees at California Jam II, sharing the bill with Aerosmith, Heart, and Santana.

Foreigner initially thrived on the road, wowing fans, selling out arenas, and taking in stride the attendant ex-

cesses of the rock & roll lifestyle. And their second effort was no sophomore slump. In fact, *Double Vision* (1978), produced by Keith Olsen (Fleetwood Mac, REO Speedwagon), peaked at Number Three, spawning three hits: "Hot Blooded," "Double Vision," and "Blue Morning, Blue Day," all Gramm-Jones cowrites. On its first week of release, *Double Vision* sold a million copies. To date, with the exception of the 1982 compilation *Records, Double Vision* remains Foreigner's best-selling album, racking up seven million units in the U.S.

Perhaps predictably, even as the concerts sold out and the royalties poured in, music critics of the late seventies were mostly unkind to Foreigner, tossing out phrases like "macho posturing" and "artistically vapid." Clearly, millions of record buyers disagreed, and the band seemed unstoppable, touring extensively in North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia.

With the release of 1979's *Head Games*, cracks began to show in the Foreigner enterprise. Prior to recording,

citing “personal differences,” Gramm and Jones fired founding bassist Ed Gagliardi, replacing him with Rick Wills (Roxy Music, Small Faces, Peter Frampton). For *Head Games*, Jones had landed his dream producer, Roy Thomas Baker (Queen, the Cars), and although the album yielded two hit singles – the Gramm-Jones rockers “Dirty White Boy” and the title track – it sold less than its predecessor.



By 1980, more serious tensions in Foreigner had developed, and Al Greenwood and Ian McDonald departed. Both have gone on record saying they deserved more songwriting credit, with McDonald stating flatly in 1999: “Mick and Lou decided they wanted to be the focus of the band.” After the dust settled, Foreigner headed into New York’s Electric Lady Studios as a quartet augmented by studio musicians to record its fourth album, the aptly titled 4.

The 1981 release of 4 saw Jones, Gramm, Elliott, and Wills joining forces with Robert John “Mutt” Lange – who’d produced AC/DC and would soon work with Def Leppard. He created a tighter, tougher, ready-for-the-eighties Foreigner: more prominent keyboards, big reverb drums, and, in place of a guitar spotlight on the hit “Urgent,” a now-iconic, incendiary saxophone solo courtesy of legendary Motown musician Junior Walker, who would tour with the band. A then-obscure young British new-waver named Thomas Dolby was also on hand, creating and laying down distinctive synthesizer sounds, and playing the now-classic synth intro to “Waiting for a Girl Like You,” Foreigner’s first power-ballad smash. Sales-wise, “Waiting for a Girl Like You” would surpass all previous Foreigner singles, staying at Number Two on the Hot 100 for ten weeks – a record. (Olivia Newton-John’s “Physical” and Hall & Oates’ “I Can’t Go for That (No Can Do)” would keep “Waiting . . .” waiting for the top spot.) Lest fans forget Foreigner were still very much a rock band, Gramm-Jones’ cinematic story song “Juke Box Hero” held nothing back, with Jones’ power chord prowess and Gramm’s undiminished, sky-high vocal chops on full display. All of it contributed to a Number One album, Foreigner’s first global success, which eventually sold more than six million copies in the U.S. alone.

After their wildly successful 1982 compilation album *Records*, Foreigner began to slow down, taking more time between albums and tours. With 1984’s *Agent Provocateur*, the band would finally score its chart-topping single – in both the U.S. and the U.K. – the power ballad “I Want to Know What Love Is.”

Jones says the song came to him – or through him – almost complete at 3:00 a.m. in the early days of his



Jones (left) and Gramm perform on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, 1995. INSET: Jones and wife Anne Dexter-Jones, who inspired “I Want to Know What Love Is,” 1986.

relationship with future wife Ann Dexter-Jones. With the inspired addition of the New Jersey Mass Choir on the chorus, “I Want to Know What Love Is” would dethrone “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” in the U.K. and “Like a Virgin” in the U.S. Arguably Foreigner’s most well-known song, it would chart repeatedly.

Despite the massive success of “I Want to Know . . .” the making of *Agent Provocateur* took much longer than previous Foreigner albums and exacted a toll on the band. Initial sessions with producer Trevor Horn (who’d played in and produced Art of Noise) were abandoned, and Alex Sadkin (Thompson Twins, James Brown) finally pushed the album over the finish line in nine months. “I Want to Know What Love Is” would essentially mark the end of Foreigner’s heyday.

By 1987, both Gramm and Jones had successfully branched out – Gramm with critically acclaimed, best-selling solo album *Ready or Not* (featuring the hit “Midnight Blue”) and Jones with production duties on Van Halen’s *5150* (and later, Billy Joel’s *Storm Front*). Foreigner’s *Inside Information*, issued in December of that year, would yield another hit ballad, “I Don’t Want to Live Without You,” but Gramm, increasingly dissatisfied with



“
**FOREIGNER’S INFECTIOUS, HOOKY
TUNES, WRAPPED IN METICULOUSLY CRAFTED
SOUND, SET THE AIRWAVES AFIRE.**
”

the band’s direction, quit in 1990, then rejoined in 1992.

Foreigner continued to tour and record into the nineties, but the band’s trajectory ground to a halt with Gramm’s 1997 diagnosis of a benign, egg-sized brain tumor. After successful surgery, Gramm was back on-stage with Foreigner in 1998. He would finally depart the band for good in 2003, with various Foreigner iterations – some with Jones, some without – carrying on. A final tour is scheduled to complete in November of 2024.

Although Gramm and Jones have weathered ups and downs as friends and collaborators, and endured health setbacks, the two were both on hand for their 2013 induction into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Today, in

addition to recalling those heady years of Foreigner’s record-breaking success, the pair can enjoy hearing their work in films like *Rock of Ages*, *Bad Moms*, *Angry Birds*, and *Magic Mike*, to name a few, as well as television shows *Orange Is the New Black*, *Stranger Things*, *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, and *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

While the Foreigner story contains ample riveting details of world tours, shattered records, and living the dream, it all began with the songs. While the original band itself is no more, those timeless, unforgettable songs will endure. Tonight, we welcome them as Inductees into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.