

Front men for prog-rock supergroups Styx and Supertramp bemoan harsh industry

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Roger Hodgson, right, and Dennis DeYoung look at old photographs of themselves on the set...

By Cassandra Szklarski

TORONTO (CP) - Today's music industry has become less human and much harsher on budding artists in recent decades, the front men for prog-rock supergroups Styx and Supertramp said Thursday as they spent the day mentoring the kids from Canadian Idol.

"Young artists of today are burdened with the sad responsibility of having to be successful immediately," Styx singer Dennis DeYoung said before heading into a rehearsal studio with Roger Hodgson and the seven remaining hopefuls.

"They don't have as much opportunity to grow as artists as I believe people like Roger and I did from our generation and that's a shame. I got better as I got older and, had I not been afforded the opportunity to do that, a lot of those songs never would have been written."

The Chicago native said he and Hodgson hoped to impart a few words of wisdom to the young hopefuls, who range in age from 16 to 28 and already find themselves in an intense world of public scrutiny and media spotlight.

The show itself has come under scorn from some members of the Canadian indie music scene, who questioned earlier this year whether the contestants are adequately prepared for the cutthroat industry.

Hodgson complained of an industry that pressures artists to strive for mass appeal, in effect creating an environment that seems more focused on payback and sales, rather than artistry.

"It doesn't help to discover and build and find and invest in true young artists who have some depth and calibre and are allowed to develop and become more mature artists," said Hodgson, who at 56, still performs Supertramp hits such as The Logical Song and Take the Long Way Home.

"That's a shame in a way, because it's taking young talent which has all that freshness and vitality and enthusiasm and distorting it in a way and not allowing it to develop and mature. That is the cost."

DeYoung called this the age of "life on demand" and declared that people today have too many choices in their lives.

"We are entertaining ourselves to death. No waking moment cannot be without some sort of diversion, which I don't think is healthy."

Hodgson and DeYoung - who hit the charts in the 1970s and '80s - spent the day guiding the Idols through performances being prepared for next week's classic rock episode.

They include renditions of Bob Dylan's Knockin' On Heaven's Door, (She's) Some Kind of Wonderful by Grand Funk Railroad, Life on Mars by David Bowie and Queen's Who Wants to Live Forever.

The Idols have already worked with '80s favourite Cyndi Lauper and chart-topper Nelly Furtado. Country star Martina McBride is also set to meet with the contestants.

DeYoung, who taught music in public schools outside Chicago for three years before signing a record deal, also dispensed advice on the Quebec talent show Star Academie last October.

He said he enjoys Canadian Idol because of its focus on singing, something he says has been devalued since the '80s.

"It's about singing. And it's a soap opera. It's a singing soap opera. That's what it is," said DeYoung, whose group is known for hits including Lady, Babe, Come Sail Away and Mr. Roboto.

As for sage advice, the 59-year-old was playful.

"My secret has always been to wear thong underwear two sizes too small," said DeYoung.

"That'll help with the high notes.