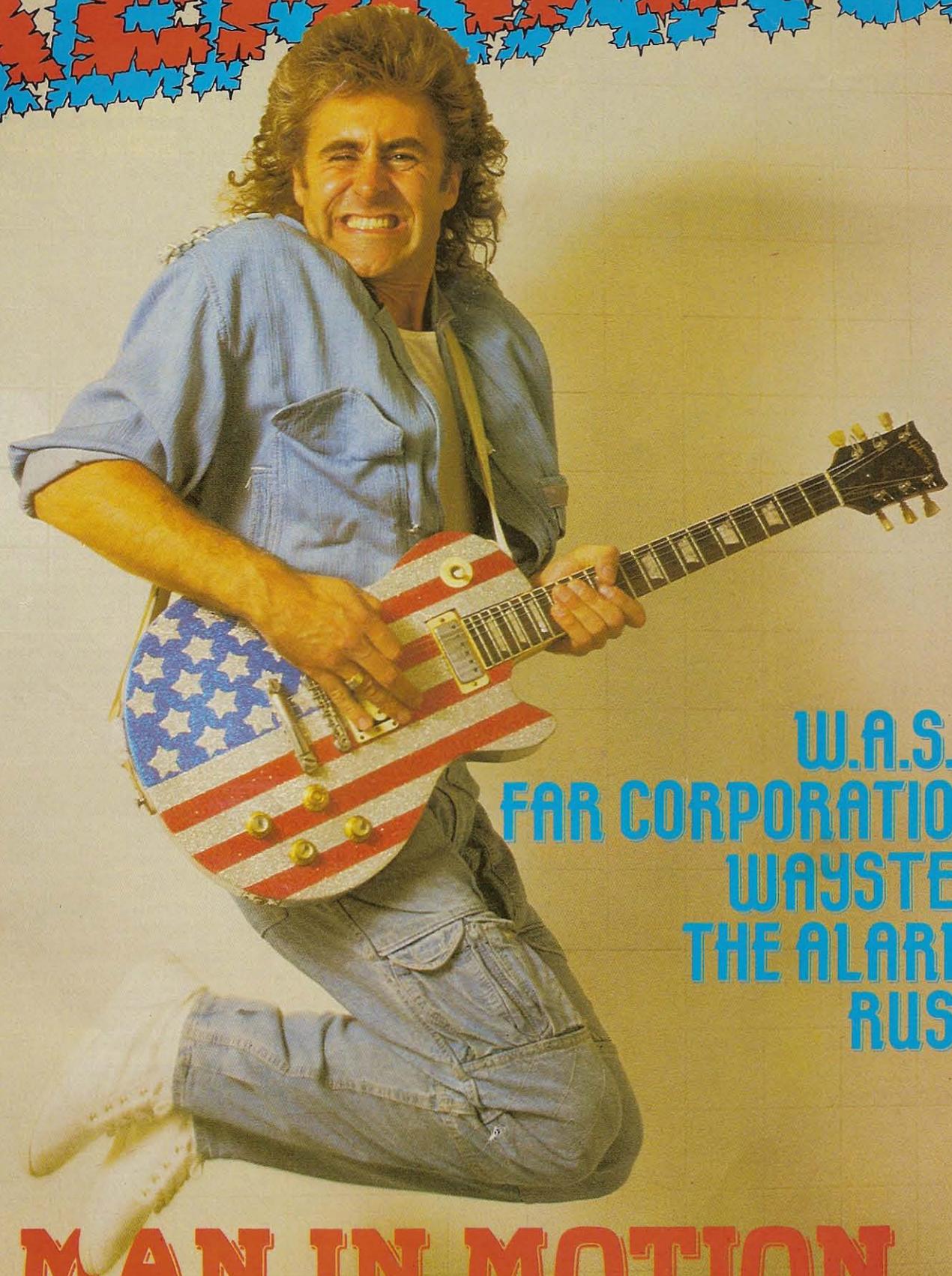


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PAIN AND PLEASURE...

After the trials and tribulations surrounding RUSH'S last 'Grace Under Pressure' album, the recording of the new LP was a "pleasant dream". MARK PUTTERFORD meets up with guitarist ALEX LIFESON (below) and together they take a peek through the . . . POWER WINDOWS!
Pix FIN COSTELLO

IT'S NOT that I really want to know that sterling's trading rate with the Canadian dollar has risen from 1.945 to 1.947 since the market's close on Friday night, but the information is but a finger-tip away in any case. Personally, I'd much rather scan the latest football news, assess the availability of jobs in my area (in case I don't get this feature finished in time!), find out what the weather is going to be like tomorrow and check on train cancellations before leaving home. It's all there, in a black box the size of a fag packet; a black box studded with multi-coloured buttons, embedded with multitudinous powers, working in computerised conjunction with the 'window' through which I peer intently.

Marvellous, really. Expressionless, motionless and yet the favourite member of the family, the 'window' stares unassumingly at us from the corner of the room with a vase of chrysanthemums perched on the top of its wooden casing, reporting the latest worldwide news, reviewing the latest books, films and records, showing me how to cook a delicious *soufflé*, discussing the current international issues, telling me the rights and wrongs, explaining what's good and bad, urging me to vote for a certain political party.

I don't have to listen to it, of course, the little red button on my black box can wipe the 'window' clean in a second. But it's always there. It's there when I wake up in the morning, it's there when I'm eating my dinner, it's there when I go to bed. And it's always so . . . charming. I like it.

Another thing I like is Rush's new album. Drawing on the good points of its two immediate predecessors, 'Grace Under Pressure' and 'Signals', the LP has won me over with its fresh fusion of experienced musicianship and exciting new ideas, proving yet again that few bands – if any at all – have progressed further along rock's Yellow Brick Road in just over a decade than Rush. The album is called 'Power Windows'.

ALEX LIFESON, Rush's guitarist, is in London to chat about 'Power Windows'. Lounging opposite him in his posh hotel suite on a sofa so soft that it moulds to the shape of my body in seconds, he appears to be a nice, normal bloke. Honest, polite, thoughtful, level-headed and very friendly, he's willing to chat about anything, is always ready for a laugh (even if it's at his own expense) and shows no signs of slipping into the security of an imaginary shell, unlike his two close friends, bassist Geddy Lee and drummer Neil Peart.

Several slurps of Earl Grey later, I decided to open the interview by flinging a quote at Alex, one made by Peart. I remember him saying: "Our records tend to go in cycles, some of them are exploratory and experimental, others are more cohesive and definitive."

Which category do you think this album falls into, Alex?

"Well yeah, I think it's true to say that we go in cycles, five year cycles in fact. 'Moving Pictures' was probably the end of the last cycle which took in the several records before it, and I think this record is the end of our latest cycle – one which has taken in 'Signals' and 'Grace Under Pressure'.

"Looking back at those last two records, I believe we can now take an objective view – which you can't do when you're working on them – and I think that there are a few things which we'd like to have changed. This record takes the best parts of the last two and kinda capitalises on them, so in that sense I think this one is definitely more cohesive and definitive. If you listen to this record right through to the end, I think you can detect a certain feel, and it's that consistency which makes this album more cohesive. It's quite dynamic, too."

How would you define the thread of the album?

"Here we are dealing with different aspects of power, from the power of science and how we use it ('Manhattan Project') through to the power that we have over each other in our day-to-day relationships ('Emotion Detector'). It covers a broad spectrum of things, but power is the theme which runs throughout."

So 'The Big Money' concerns

the power of money . . .

"Yeah. 'Big Money' deals with the power of money – good and bad – and it was certainly a lot of fun to record, because we were trying out different effects – like dropping in the sound of money jangling for instance."

'The Big Money' is also the first single from the album, of course. Do you actually write a single, or do you just deliver a set of songs and let the record company choose?

"No, we just write the album, record it, then deliver the finished package to our record company, complete with jacket and everything, and say, 'You want a single? You find it!' We don't really concern ourselves with that side of things, but I think that 'Big Money' is probably the most single-like song on the album, so maybe it was a good choice."

Still pursuing the power

theme, 'Grand Designs' presumably deals with the power of designs and how they are used. Am I right?

"Yes, this was the first song that we started work on and it's about the power of ideas and what people can do with ideas – like turning them into reality. We also touch on what happens when those ideas and designs fall into the wrong hands."

Talking of power falling into people's hands, does it frighten you that one person can command an enormous amount of power on his own, like the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, for instance?

"Yeah, that's real frightening, but it's just the way things are and there's absolutely nothing you or I can do about it. There's a lot of power in a lot of hands – good and bad – and, in fact, everyone has their own little bit of power, even down to the

power your wife or girlfriend may have over you and vice versa. This is something we discuss in 'Emotion Detector'. But yes, to think that one person has enough power in his hands to destroy the entire world... phew!"

'Manhattan Project' seems to tie in with this idea of man creating something too big to handle...

"Yes it does. That was a difficult song to do, actually, we had a lot of trouble with it. Neil especially had problems, because he wasn't writing from an observer's point of view; rather he was taking facts – and he really researched it thoroughly – and turning them into an objective point of view.

"But the song is about the power of science and technology, and how we use it. It's also looking forward optimistically and trying to take the good with the bad; trying to use science to our advantage in securing our future."

Yes, because this is the first time in history that man actually has the means to destroy his own existence...

"...A few times over as well. What can you say? It's a very unfortunate situation and it's too bad that we can't all live together in peace as one global family. 'Territories' deals with that in another way, by saying that if we could loosen the boundaries between us a bit, then perhaps we would all get along. Why can't we be universal citizens instead of separate people stuck in our own little countries, apart from other human beings as if they were a different species? We may all be different, but we're all the same as well."

AS THE apartheid situation in your minds when you were writing 'Territories'?

"Well, we weren't specifically thinking of that, but yeah, that is very much a part of it. We have territories in the sense of our own countries, but we also have territories within territories, like the apartheid thing, and we are saying, 'Why does there have to be these dividing lines?'"

"That song was also a difficult one to work on. Neil brought the lyrics to us – it's always important that he and Ged go over the lyrics, after all, Ged has got to sing them! – and we found that they were very wordy and more story-like than usual. Neil likes to be as complete and succinct as possible when he writes, but this time he had written in more of a drawn-out way and Ged had real problems when he tried to sing it. So Neil took it away and came back a few days later with a re-written version which got the message across directly, had the right verbal pacing for Geddy to sing and was generally better all round."

How about 'Marathon' – was that a marathon to record?

"We thought it was going to be a marathon at first, because it's made up of so many parts and each part is so different. But oddly enough, we just went Bang! Bang! Bang! and flew through recordings. All the parts locked together like a big jigsaw puzzle and it was great... Whereas 'Emotion Detector' was the opposite – we thought it would be easy to do and we ended up having real problems.

"Again, this song deals with power – the power we have within us to push and drive ourselves towards the goals that we aim for. It's not an easy road, in fact it's always an uphill climb, but it depends on how much of our inner power we want to use to get us to the end of the road.

"I think this song is real close to Neil. He took up cycling during the last tour – the biggest

enemy you have on the road is boredom, and even though we love what we do, the routine of it all is tiring – and his goal was to hit 100 miles on his bike every time we had a day off. He would take his bike out at six or seven in the morning and just disappear until six or seven at night. He has this drive within him which pushes him forward all the time, and 'Marathon' really concerns this aspect of his character."

What do you do to amuse yourself on the road?

"Drink heavily, umm... ha! Well, I got my pilot's licence a number of years ago and I occasionally do some flying when we have time off. I also took up scuba-diving a year ago (I thought he said 'slam-diving' for a moment there, Geoff), but it's not that easy to do when you're touring – especially when you're playing in a desert in New Mexico or something!"

"Also, Geddy and I play a lot of tennis (you'd better start brushing up on your underhand, Janice), because that's a great outlet for energy and frustration. We can just get out there on the court and burn off anything which is pent up inside us... and we have a lot of fun, too.

"On the other hand, I've started dabbling in painting, because although you can't exactly burn off energy doing it, it's something to do where the hours fly by and you've actually got something to show for your efforts at the end of it. That's what it really all boils down to – achieving something you can look at and be proud of – and that's probably why we want to cut back on our touring.

"Now, I don't want to sound like I'm complaining, because we're the first people to realise how lucky we are to be doing what we do, but we want to have more time to pursue different things, different hobbies and different goals. For example, Neil has just got back from a cycling trip to China – it was one of those adventure trips where you go for three weeks, cycle

KONTINUES OVER

PAINE

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for 12,000 miles, sleep rough, bathe in rivers and so on – and it was very challenging for him. He enjoyed it so much, that out of a group of 35 people, he's the only one who wants to go back and do it all again!"

That must have been a dream come true for him, and as if by magic, that leads us nicely onto 'Middletown Dreams'...

"Yeah, the power of dreams and desires; wanting to get somewhere which isn't easy to get to. Again, this was *not* an easy song to record and in a way it was our dream to get the thing finished! For me personally, I was never happy with the guitar parts, and it took a number of re-writes before we actually got it together. But in the end, the number was very satisfying for me and it was well worth all the trouble."

Which just leaves the final track, 'Mystic Rhythms'.

"This song deals with more of a cosmic power; a power that we sit in frustration and look hopelessly at – like when we look up at the stars in the night sky and can't even formulate a concrete idea of how much power is there. It's such an unknown. It's an internal power which has always been there and will still be there long after we've come and gone."

DO YOU actually feel any power yourself, being part of an internationally famous and successful rock band?

"I feel a lot of excitement and a good deal of fun, but I don't feel that I'm in control of the people we're playing for. We are all in Rush because we like what we do and not because we want to influence people to

believe or do things through our lyrics or whatever. All our lyrics are to do with things we feel strongly about, but we're just observing things which we see before us and not preaching or trying to change anything. I think our lyrics could be classed as a *discussion* rather than anything else."

You say "our lyrics", yet Neil writes them in a very personal way. Do you have to agree with his lyrical opinions in order to play the song?

"Geddy and I agree with Neil 100 per cent. We always discuss everything and it's always a group effort, even though we split up when we write – Geddy and I write the music, Neil writes the lyrics – because it's easier that way. When we've got some music together and Neil has got some ideas for lyrics, we'll get together and work it out between us. 'Territories' is a good example, for when we came together we weren't really comfortable with it, so we went off and re-wrote it and finally it all locked together."

"But that doesn't just happen with the lyrics. Sometimes Geddy and I will have a piece of music that we're thrilled with and Neil will come in and say, 'That's too ordinary!'. So we'll step back from it and pursue a different avenue until we reach a point where we're all

comfortable with it. It's a team effort from start to finish."

As a team, you've been together for 11 years now. Do you ever feel the desire to get away from Rush and write with someone else?

"Not really. Geddy has worked on production for a couple of other bands and I think that's something he'd like to pursue – he's good at it and someday he'll make a great arranger/producer. But as for me, well, I have no interest in writing with anyone else right now. We've talked about solo projects, we've talked about other musicians we've worked with and enjoyed working with, but our priority is *this band*."

What about scoring film soundtracks? Would either you, or Rush as a team, be interested in moving in that direction?

"Yeah, I'd love to do something like that, because it would be both interesting and challenging. We've had a couple of offers in the past, but nothing which excited us. So maybe if someone came by with something interesting, then..."

But let's get back to the new album. Was the recording of 'Power Windows' any less troublesome than that of 'Grace Under Pressure'?

"Oh, that last album was a nightmare, this one a pleasant

dream," the amiable guitarist laughs. "Every time we make a record it's a long, tough and very demanding job – any project which takes six-and-a-half months must be!"

"On the last record, we had our fair share of problems. For a start, our producer (Steve Lillywhite) backed out at the last minute and we had trouble finding someone else, so we just ended up doing the best we could under difficult conditions. On this record, we had a good head-start on our writing, we worked with somebody we wanted to work with from the beginning (Pete Collins) and the actual recording was a lot of fun. In many ways, this one was similar to 'Permanent Waves' and 'Moving Pictures' in the sense that they were both really enjoyable and satisfying records to make."

"Part of the reason why I think this one was more enjoyable than the last is because we paced ourselves differently this time; we went to a couple of different countries to work and we took one day off a week – which we've never allowed ourselves before. Taking time off really made a difference, because it's so nice to get away from it, relax and think about something else for a while."

WHEN YOU'VE actually completed the ordeal of recording an album and it's finally in the shops, do you really care what people think about it, or are you already a step ahead and looking forward to the next one?

"Oh no, we always care what people think, but by then it's done and you can't change anything, so you *do* set your sights on the next one. I think there are already things bubbling for our next record..."

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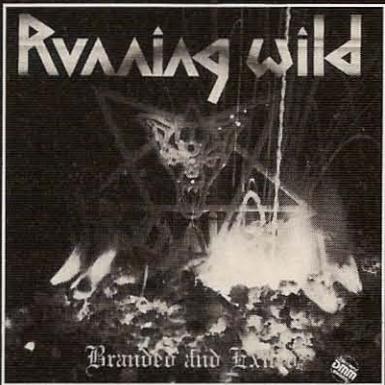
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...AND PLEASURE

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"This album was really an eye-opener for us, because we pushed back the boundaries that have been there in the past, we tried different things, we put things on the record which we wouldn't have before, and generally, we opened doors that were shut to us before. Now we're looking forward to recording the next album because we know we can do whatever we want and not feel restricted by anything at all."

That alone must give you a feeling of power - knowing that you can do anything you want in a recording studio.

"Yes, it does in a way. In the past, we toured so much that we always felt it necessary to be able to produce live what we'd done on record. Now, after 11 years of touring, we're laying back a bit and pacing ourselves more, so we can look forward to recording and trying out new things.

"But, for all our apprehension, we know that we can produce the sound of an orchestra or a choir with synth lines or whatever, so it's not going to be that big a problem."

When you decided to use the orchestra and choir, did you really think it was going to work, or was it a hit or miss thing?

"It was definitely an experiment," Alex grins, boyishly. "We decided that we could use an orchestra on possibly three songs, but we were quite conservative and looked at it from all angles - even down to considering whether or not it was going to be worth the cost. In the end, we thought we'd try it because we knew that if we didn't like it, we didn't have to use it - and, in fact, on some of the stuff we didn't like the way it sounded at all.

"But working with the orchestra was hilarious, because it just looked so ridiculous watching all these people playing along to our music. They'd all be sitting there with their cans on, fiddling with their violins or whatever, and our song would be going BAAM! BAAM! BAAM! We'd be in hysterics!

"When we got back to mixing, we shelved the idea for a while and continued with what we were doing before, and then when the time was right we brought the tape of the orchestra back out and kinda liked how it sounded. It was so different and refreshing that we thought, 'Yeah, let's go with it!'"

Apart from orchestras and choirs, there seems to be more keyboards in Rush's music these days. Do you find that the more keyboards infiltrate your music, the more the guitar is

being muted?

"Yes, I'd have to agree with you there - from 'Signals' onwards in fact. On that album we tried to change the perspective a bit and I think we went too far with the keyboards. The guitar - which has always been an important instrument in this band - was pushed too far into the background, we know that now.

"'Grace Under Pressure' was reactionary to 'Signals' in the sense that the guitar came screaming to the front, but with this record I think we've finally found a good combination - the keyboards are more interesting now, but the guitar doesn't suffer at all. To me, this record is a lot like 'Moving Pictures', because I also think that album strikes a fine balance between keyboards and guitar."

Another aspect of Rush's music that seems to have changed in recent times is the length of the tracks. Was it a conscious move to get away from the 'epics' of yesteryear and concentrate on shorter, snappier songs?

"I think so. 'Permanent Waves' was really the first album where we concentrated on writing shorter songs, and because we were used to writing long numbers we found that we wanted to get that same musical interest compressed into, say, a four-and-a-half minute framework. So, in a way, it became more challenging to write shorter songs.

"The thing was, we'd done the 'epic' thing so many times that there was just no interest on our part in doing it all again. I mean, there's 'Fountain Of Lamneth', '2112', 'Hemispheres' ... that's enough - NO MORE!"

Do you still enjoy playing the older songs onstage?

"It's still a lot of fun to play bits from '2112', but you have to balance it out by dropping some older songs and playing some different old songs instead occasionally. Anyway, I just love playing onstage no matter what."

ARRIVING HOME after the interview with Alex and cursing the fact that us Brits will have to wait at least until next Spring for Rush to tour here, I sink into the settee and automatically reach for my little black box. A press of a button later and I'm watching BBC2's 'Whistle Test' when, through that 'power window' in the corner of the room, I see Alex once more, promoting Rush's new album to the viewing millions.

I did feel dizzy, but now I feel OK. The wheel must have turned full circle.