

FREE INSIDE: 12 MORE LEGENDS OF ROCK STICKAS

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RETURN OF THE MEN IN BLACK

THE DARKEST
SECRETS OF
RUSH AND
DEEP PURPLE



ALEX LIFESON of RUSH and (inset) RITCHIE BLACKMORE of DEEP PURPLE: pic Ross Hadden

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LIFESON TIMES

Eschewing bottles of Jack Daniel's and girls in bikinis, RUSH guitarist ALEX 'Proud To Be Boring' LIFESON (pictured left) finds 'time' to plug new album 'Hold Your Fire' and discuss the meaning of life with MARK PUTTERFORD

*'I turn my back to the wind,
I catch my breath before I
start off again...'*
(*'Time Stand Still'*)

ALEX LIFESON, the pleasant and unaffected guitarist of mega-band Rush, slowly unfolds a copy of his itinerary for the day with the barest hint of a sigh. Interviews, photo sessions, meetings... there's hardly time for a cup of tea in between the appointments that have to be packed into these short promotional visits, as PRs dash around desperately trying to keep everything to schedule and cars rev quietly outside hotels and studios, waiting to whisk Alex away to his next engagement. Time is of the essence.

If only time could stand still. If only you could turn your back to the wind of change and live certain moments in your life for a little bit longer. I mean, didn't those teenage years when you discovered exciting new bands like Rush flash by too quickly? And wouldn't it be great to press some kind of pause button and savour the good things in life right now?

Right now I'm sharing a pot of tea with Alex Lifeson in his West London hotel. And 'time' is the basic concept from which the new Rush album, 'Hold Your Fire', originated.

In fact, it's been a long time since Rush released an album; it's two years since 'Power Windows'. The band, very much masters of their own destiny in both a creative and productivity sense after years of international success, like to take more time off these days and be at home in Canada with their families. Alex, Geddy Lee and Neil Peart are all married with children (Alex has two sons of 17 and 10, Geddy has a son of six and Neil a daughter of nine), and as they find themselves in their 30s they realise the importance of slowing their pace down. No, when it comes to making albums these days, Rush certainly *don't*...

"The thing is," Alex explains, "albums take so

damn long to make! A couple months to write, six weeks to get everything together before going into the studio proper, and then four to six months of actual studio time."

But it's all worth it if the end result is as strong and stimulating as 'Hold Your Fire', perhaps the natural successor to the top quality techno rock of 'Power Windows'. It's one of the most accomplished albums of the year for sure, and an appropriate and thoughtful study of 'time' (and 'instincts') in Rush's 13th year of existence.

Alex, naturally, is very pleased with the album; he grins proudly when I tell him I like it. But we don't have time to merely exchange pleasantries — by asking about the themes of individual tracks.

"Actually," Alex begins, "the first track, 'Force Ten', was written almost as an after-thought. We wanted to do one more song and we threw it together pretty quickly; Pye Dubois, who co-wrote the lyrics for 'Tom Sawyer' with Neil, gave us some lyrics to look over, and while Neil changed them around and brought out the theme, Geddy and I brainstormed for a few hours until we came up with all the others parts. We wrote and recorded 'Vital Signs', 'New World Man' and 'Natural Science' like that, and it's fun to work that way when most of the album is already completed, because there's very little pressure on you."

"Lyrically, I think Neil's talking about using all the energy that's available to us and diving into things instinctively. In some ways, 'Prime Mover' (not the Zodiac Mindwarp song!) is similar to this one in that it deals with the motivation that drives us to do things, and the instinct that we all have to achieve something in our lives."

"Instinct is also something Neil wrote about on 'Open Secrets' and 'High Water'," Alex adds. "With 'Open Secrets' I think we're dealing with the defensive barriers that we put up instinctively in certain situations and relationships, and how we try to protect ourselves from lowering our defences at the

wrong time. I think this is a very personal song from Neil, and I bet we've all been through the experience that he describes here."

"'High Water' on the other hand concerns perhaps our ultimate instinct — our return to water. We spend the first nine months of our lives in water... and I mean, even before that we evolved from life in the seas, so returning to water really has to be the natural instinct."

"Another instinct we have," Alex continues, "is the killer instinct — the ability to kill for no reason at all. We're all capable of this terrible power, so it's important to keep it under control... and that's what 'Lock And Key' is all about."

... A particularly poignant song in the light of the Hungerford massacre...

"Yeah, we heard about that," Alex gasps. "It was shocking. But it just goes to show you that it can happen anywhere if somebody is triggered off by a certain thing. I mean, you may feel, sitting here, that you'll never pick up a gun and shoot someone, right? But if someone threatened the life of your child then your behaviour would naturally change to the extreme and you would be capable of killing someone. Everyone would."

Do you agree with the opinion that violent movies like 'Rambo' can trigger off our killer instinct?

"I can see that if someone is mentally or emotionally unstable to start with, a movie like 'Rambo' will trigger off something horrific, yes," Alex considers. "But now we're dealing with censorship and... well, there are lots of people who enjoy those movies and simply look upon them as harmless entertainment. What can you do?"

"However, I do feel that violence in graphic detail on TV or in movies — like people getting their heads chopped off — isn't necessary at all. Look at Alfred Hitchcock; you never saw anyone having their flesh ripped open or anything, you just saw the curtain being pulled open and the blood going down the plug hole... the rest was left

to your imagination. In comparison, 'Friday The 13th' is just very trashy, very unnecessary."

Are Rush lyrics supposed to leave a certain amount to the listener's imagination?

"Well, Neil's writing is difficult to interpret at the best of times," Alex laughs, "even for me! We discuss the lyrics with Neil and try to understand them, because we are in the same group as him and we do have to know what we're saying! But I think his lyrics are becoming easier to understand. It's a shame Neil's not here, as he'd be able to answer that question better than me."

Why does Neil shy away from interviews?

"Neil actually doesn't mind doing interviews, but he prefers to do them on tour, when he feels it's part of the job."

"Neil is a very private person — he really cherishes his spare time, away from the spotlight — and I guess that's partly why he wrote 'Mission' on the new album. It deals with the obsession artists of any kind have with their art, and how you have to pay the price for your self-satisfaction or success. That price is usually your privacy, and it's something he touched on before with 'Limelight' from the 'Moving Pictures' album."

You say Neil is a private person, and yet his lyrics on 'Hold Your Fire' are much more personal and revealing than anything he's written before.

"Yeah, that's true. Most of Neil's writing has been from the viewpoint of a mere observer, looking at facts and opinions on facts. He never preaches, but suggests a point of view and tries to get people to think about that particular topic a little more."

"But this record is generally more personal, and deals with growing up, the importance of time and all that kinda stuff. Like, 'Turn The Page' describes how our lives are written out on a page, how each experience is written on another page, and how going through life is like flicking through a book."

"And then 'Tai Shan' was inspired by a cycling trip Neil undertook in China a couple years ago, where at one point

KONTINUEZ OVER

LIFESON

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he was up on a mountain and was amazed by the sight of this great expanse of timeless land. He looked around him and thought how in a million years time it'll all still be there, whereas no trace of us will be. It was a very enlightening experience for him, and the one thing that which really turned Neil on to the 'time' concept.

The 'time' concept is no more apparent than on 'Time Stand Still', which is really the most self-explanatory song on 'Hold Your Fire'.

"Yeah, it's really just saying that so often things go by that, in retrospect, you feel you didn't absorb as well as you could've done," says Alex. "It's about the wish for the ability to just stop things exactly how they are and absorb them a little more, and I guess it's the result of maturity."

Are you worried about getting older, then?

"Oh no, no. I mean, it'd be great to have the youthfulness of an 18 year old again, but I'm certainly a lot happier now at 34 than I was at 18. I'm a lot more stable now, and in fact every year I feel better and better about my life and how I'm living it . . . although it is a little more difficult to lose weight when you're older!" Alex laughs, referring to the fact that he's recently put on 12 pounds after giving up smoking.

"No, I don't think this record is a cry to be young again, I think it's just being reflective and regarding experiences in a different light. You know, you come up through your teens and 20s and you find yourself really ploughing through life. But when you hit your 30s you find you're not so focused; you slow your pace down a little and begin to take in a lot more. I think it's natural for Neil's thoughts to become more reflective at this point in his life."

As you do get older, do you find it strange jumping up on stage and playing to kids younger than your eldest son?

"Well, I certainly think about that," Alex tries to subdue a smile. "I think I'm astonished more than anything that we've been able to stay together this long, but because we've managed to retain such an amount of artistic and commercial success without compromising or losing any integrity, I'm very proud that we have lasted."

"But yeah, after 13 years it is a bit strange playing to young kids, and I must admit that for the first few dates of a tour I feel like an old fart jumping around onstage! But after a week or so you get used to it again and you begin to feel comfortable with the situation — especially as, if I'm allowed to say so, Rush is such a good live band. If I didn't think we were great live I'd quit touring tomorrow."

You must be good at something to have retained such a loyal following after 13 years!

"HA! Yeah, we do have a very loyal following and we're all very proud of that. I think we've been able to keep that following by progressing and trying something new with each album and tour, and I think we'll always sell a certain amount of records just to the people who're curious to see what we've done."

Do you have your fans in mind when you come to record an album, or do you simply please yourselves?

"Well, it's a bit selfish I guess, but we record stuff to please ourselves. We set standards for ourselves and we try to meet those standards with every record. If the result is popular with more people than ourselves then that's great. If not, at least we've done something we wanted to do; we have to be more artistically satisfied than commercially satisfied . . . although that's easy to say when you already have commercial success like we do!"

Are you aware of what your fans want from a Rush album, though?

"I think they want us to do what we've always done — and that's to record albums that show progression of some sort. I think it's expected of us to try something new and different with each record, and we do that even though we know some of our experiments haven't quite worked. But you learn by your mistakes and try to progress next time."

"I think our fans are critical listeners. They'll sit down and study our music, our lyrics and everything, and even if they decide they don't like this, this or this track, it's satisfying for us just to know that they've taken the time to study our work."

Does it surprise you that a lot of fans still regard '2112' as your best album?

"Well, I don't know who it is who thinks that, but it's probably the people who're in their mid-20s now and who were growing up through their teens when that album came out. Your teens are very important years of your life —

you tend to absorb everything – and I guess those people felt a great affinity with '2112'.

"We know that '2112' was an important album for us – it was a very complete album – and even the '2112' tour was special because it was the first one where we started to use back-projections and that kinda stuff.

"But we'll continue to press ahead and do exactly what we feel is the right thing to do, whatever people say of our current direction. And of course, we feel that the latest thing we've done is our best album."

It's certainly one of the most accessible albums Rush have done . . .

"Yeah, people have said that," Alex nods, "but that's totally unintentional on our part."

"Actually, I worry about becoming too commercial sometimes. I mean, for a record company or a manager commerciality is a good thing of course. But if you have hit singles and become a household name you lose your cult status, and there's an appeal in having a cult status because your audience tends to be more critical, more attentive and more serious about your music. Your music doesn't become a backdrop because your fans listen to your albums three or four times before really getting into it, and we'd prefer our audience to have to take time to 'get into' our record, rather than just hear it on the radio and hum it in the bath."

Yes, you're very serious about your music and lyrics, and can hardly be classed as a fun rock'n'roll band! Are you basically boring old farts?

"Yeah, I think we are pretty boring people," Alex laughs. "I mean, we've had our share of crazy parties and living out the typical rock'n'roll lifestyle. But our music has always been very, very important to us, and although it's always tempting to be humorous and adopt a 'don't give a s**t' attitude, we never thought that kind of approach would last the test of time. I mean, you're putting your signature on something, so you want it to have validity and be taken seriously."

"No, you don't see us holding bottles of Jack Daniel's and posing with girls in bikinis . . . but after a while that gets boring and you realise that there's much more interesting things to do in life."

Wouldn't you like to push all the seriousness to one side for a moment and do a straightforward, AC/DC-type

rock'n'roll album, though?

"No, and I think if I really wanted to be a straightforward rock'n'roll guitarist I'd make my feelings known in the band and we'd all work together until we worked something out."

"But I prefer being much more in the background with my guitar work, creating a back-drop and an atmosphere for other things to happen. It's something I've worked on very hard over the years, ever since our pre-synth days, when I had to fill a lot of space with my guitar."

As there are a lot of keyboards in Rush music today, do you ever miss the space you once had between just bass, drums and guitar?

"Well, keyboards have become an integral part of the Rush sound now, but dynamically I think we still have a lot of space. For instance, 'Force Ten' doesn't have a lot of keyboards – it's basically a three piece band rocking out – and in fact I think keyboards have taken more of a back seat on this album. We've wanted Rush to

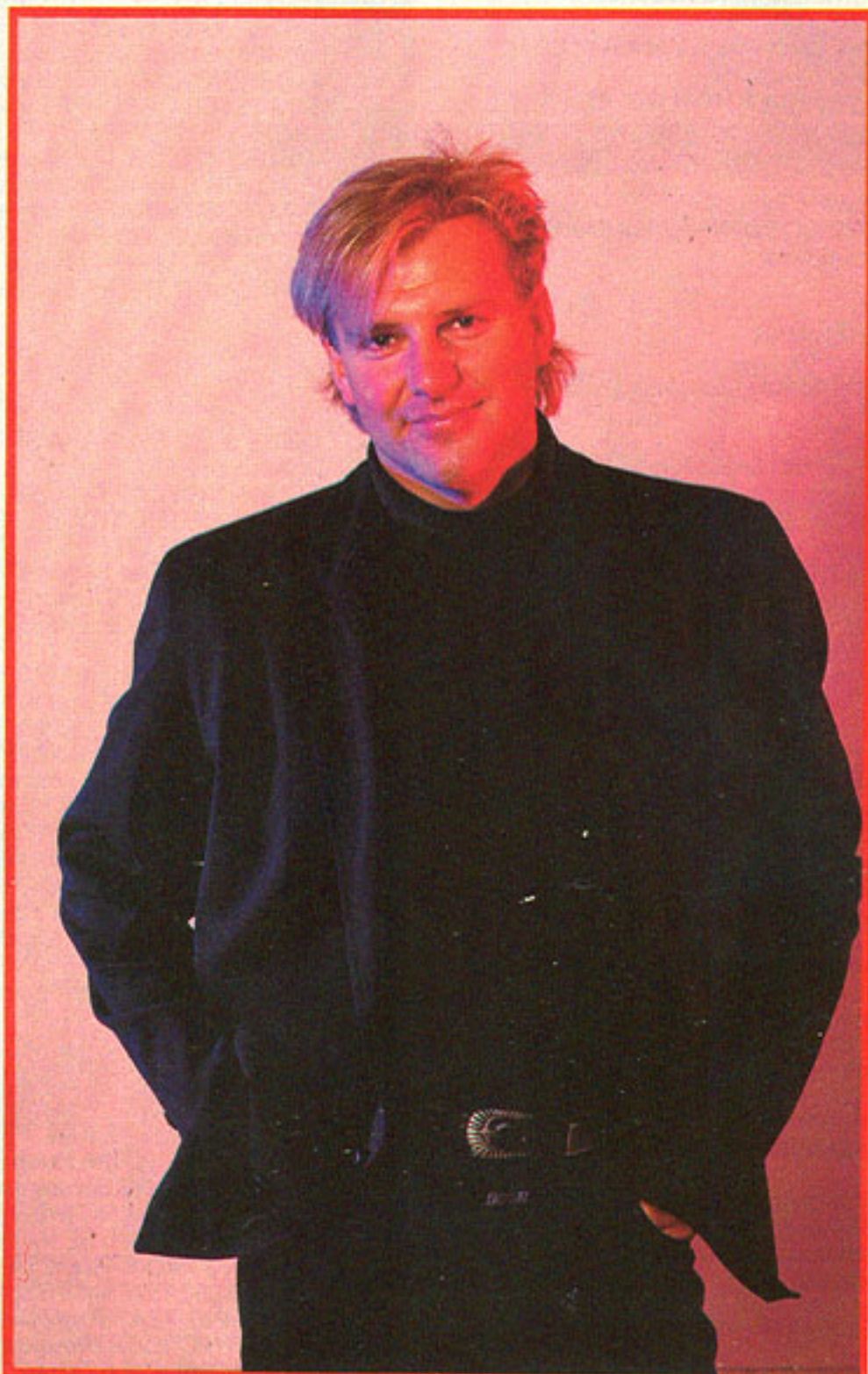
be less reliant on synths ever since 'Signals', an album I can't even bring myself to listen to now!"

Another feature on the new album (which incidentally was produced by Peter Collins) is the gal vocalist on 'Time Stand Still'. How did that idea come about?

"Well, we just thought it would suit the song," says Alex. "We thought about asking Cyndi Lauper at first, and then we approached Chrissie Hynde because we thought she'd be perfect. But Chrissie was unavailable at the time so we called in Aimee Mann who was in a band called Til Tuesday, and she worked out really well. Her voice blends with Geddy's perfectly and I think it creates the right atmosphere for the song. It's just something new for Rush . . ."

. . . As is putting ten tracks on the new album – the most there's been on a Rush studio album since 'Caress Of Steel' in '75.

ALEX LIFESON: "After 13 years in Rush it is a bit strange playing to young kids, and I must admit that for the first few dates of a tour I feel like an old fart jumping around on stage!"



"Yeah, well we just thought it'd be great to have 50 minutes of music, to give people more VFM, I guess. Plus, we were aware that actual record sales only range from between 10-20% these days, with CDs and cassettes taking over the market. So we thought we wouldn't worry about the time limitations of the traditional album and stick a coupla extra tracks on it."

How about the time limitations of your next tour; will a visit to Blighty fit into your schedule this time?

"Yes. I know we spoke about coming to Europe around the time of 'Power Windows', but when it came down to finalising dates we really didn't have the time. This time, even before we finalised the American dates, we planned to come to Europe for a full tour in April. It's 99% certain."

You won't just be doing Donington, or something . . .

"No, we've never said we'd do Donington," Alex stresses, "even though we're rumoured to be doing it every year. We don't want to work during the summer, and in any case, we don't like doing festivals because we feel our show works much better in an enclosed arena where you're not at the mercy of the elements."

What about a live album? In the past you've released one after every four studio albums . . . and 'Hold Your Fire' is the fourth release since 'Exit Stage Left' . . .

"Actually, we've been recording our shows for some time now, and there will be a live album out probably late next year," says Alex. "We recorded a lot of stuff from the 'Grace Under Pressure' tour, two or three weeks worth of dates from the 'Power Windows' tour and we plan to record a coupla weeks worth of shows from our forthcoming tour. So we should have a great cross-section of material to choose from."

"Also, I think Rush is coming to the end of another chapter in its career, and a live album will be a nice way of tying it all up. And this will be the last record on our current deal with our record company and they had the option of a live album. So whichever way you look at it, the time is right for another Rush live album."

Unfortunately, the time isn't right for any more questions. A shake of the hand, a smile, and the genial guitarist is whisked away to another interview.

Still, for an hour or so at least, it seemed as though time did indeed stand still.