

RUSH



Twenty-one years ago, Rush released their eponymous debut album; in hindsight a somewhat straight ahead hard rock affair compared to the material that was to follow. Original drummer John Rutsey quit the band soon after its release, unhappy with bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson's experimental and increasingly more progressive musical direction. The empty drum stool was soon filled by skinsman Neil Peart, whose arrival brought the band not only powerful and complex drum parts, but also a much needed boost to the lyrical content of the songs. With the burden of lyric writing lifted from their shoulders, Lee and Lifeson concentrated on complex, catchy and sometimes very intense music compositions, always progressing and altering the direction of their music along the way.

In recent years Rush have returned to a more guitar dominated sound after the heavily keyboard influenced period during the mid 80s, something for which many of their fans have been patiently waiting.

Once again the Rush recording wheels are beginning to turn and alongside this is a long awaited solo project from Alex Lifeson.

"I guess we started in late October," he begins in his softly spoken Canadian accent. "Geddy and his wife had a baby in May at the end of the tour; perfectly timed, it was a week after we finished. We took the summer off and he really wanted to have a long break to spend time with his daughter and I can't say that I didn't mind being home. Then I got a little edgy after a while and I just mucked around a little bit. There was a friend of mine who was another guitarist. We'd been playing on and off with each other for quite a time, so we thought it would be nice to get together and mess around in the studio and this project turned into something from there.

"We are about eight songs into it so far but I'd like to have about 10 or 11 tracks on the final version. Most of it is written and arranged, we'll probably start laying down tracks in the next couple of weeks. Where it goes from there I don't know."

Will this solo project feature any other well known artists?

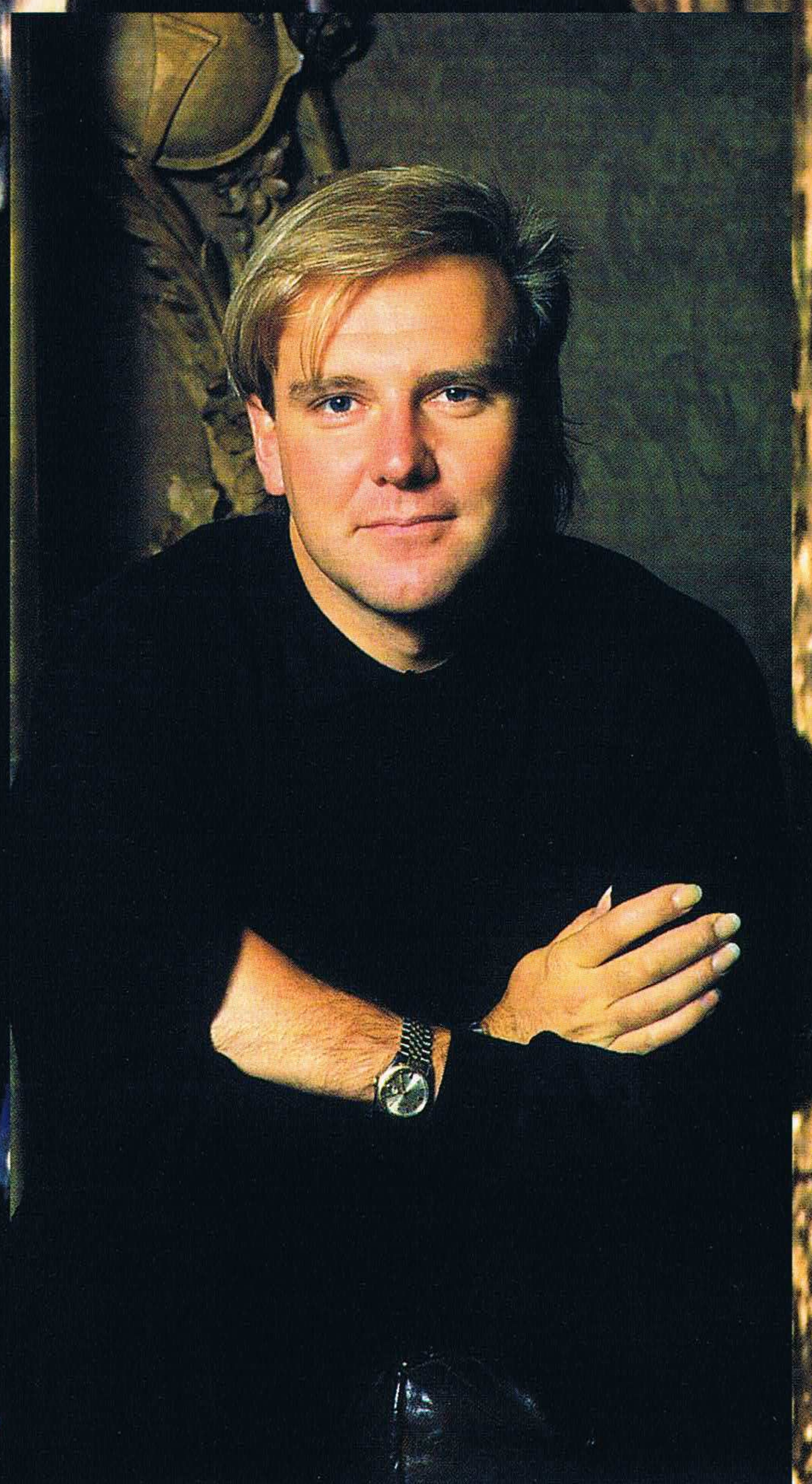
"There are a number of people I have thought about working with," he confesses, "but the only other person who has committed is Les Claypool from Primus; he's going to play bass on a few things. Although his schedule is beginning to get quite busy and in the last few days I thought that if this is a *solo* album, then let's make it a solo album and I'll play everything myself. I love working on my own; I enjoy working with other people, but there is something else that happens when I'm working on my own. I come out of the studio at the end of the day kind of shaky, nervous and spaced out, but I sort of like it. I feel like I'm alive."

Always one to experiment with style and direction, Alex's album will feature a wide variety of musical moods.

"It's different from Rush. I've been fooling around with programming and getting more of an industrial feel with loud guitar and so the whole thing moves around all over the place. Until we get about 12 or 13 songs down, I'm not really sure about the overall direction, but I'd like to keep it fairly varied. I don't want to get locked into one particular style of music and I don't want to be perceived as jumping on a band wagon. I certainly wouldn't want to sound like a Seattle band, which is currently the only thing that record companies in America look at at the moment. I'd like to have something that reflects my experiences."

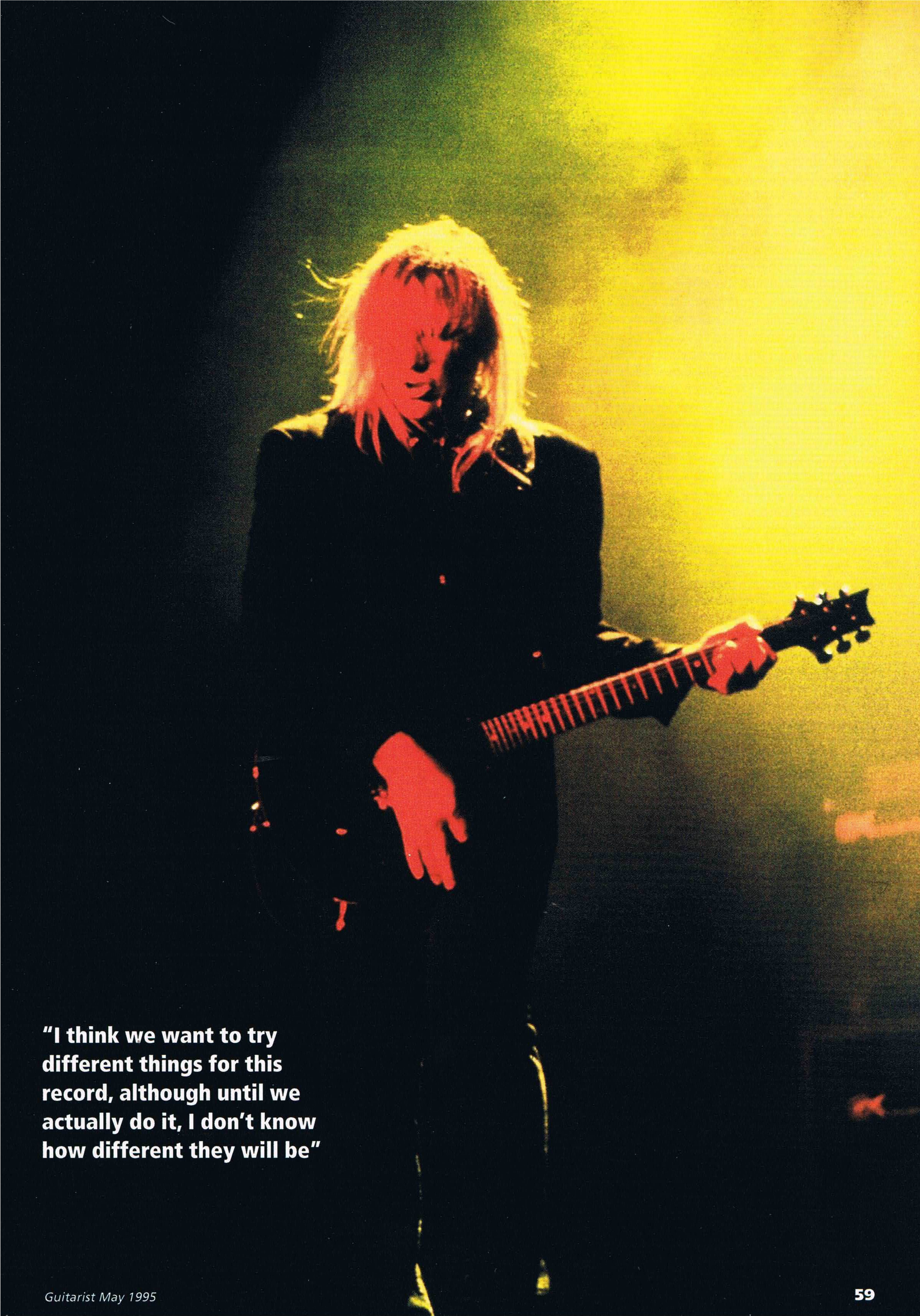
Is the album going to be an instrumental affair or will Alex be braving vocal duties?

"Maybe, if I'm really, really drunk," he laughs. "I don't have a great deal of confidence in my vocals. I might try some specialised vocals, through the amps and a distortion unit, but I haven't given that much thought to it yet. I hope to have the album done by June. Part of the problem is that the songs get better and better and I go back to the earlier stuff and I'm not ➤



Attention All Planets of the Solar Federation..

**...Alex Lifeson
has assumed control!
Gareth Smith steps into
the limelight for a
meeting with Canada's
finest export**



**"I think we want to try
different things for this
record, although until we
actually do it, I don't know
how different they will be"**

- happy with it. I've already dropped a couple of the early songs that I originally felt really, really good about. That is the other thing about doing it on my own, there is a greater responsibility; you only have yourself to throw ideas off and judge what you have created."

With all this time spent on his solo project and Neil Peart having just released his own record, it is a wonder that they can find any time to pen a new Rush album.

"Well the last time we spoke we were going to get started around now. Neil had a couple of things that he was doing and he wanted to push it back a bit and Ged really wasn't ready. He loves being at home with his daughter so he wanted to push it back to May. Ged and I have been getting together weekly – sort of hanging around together, talking non-stop. We shall probably begin writing new stuff through April and May, at least trying to get half the album written. Neil will write lyrics over the summer, so when we get together in September we'll be halfway there.

"We are starting to get really, really excited about it. We wanted to take a long break, because we haven't ever done that. It's been really important and good for our collective souls to do this, because we are a lot more enthusiastic about getting back to work. I think we want to try different things for this record, although until we actually do it I don't know how different they will be. That's how our records are, we have no idea about what we are going to do until we start writing.

"I'd like to see a change of direction next time. Personally, I'd like to hear it much heavier and maybe a little darker. I think there is room for the guitars to be up front even more. I listened to 'Counterparts' the other night for the first time in almost a year and there were a lot of holes in it for me. There were many places where I thought the songwriting could have been stronger. I wasn't very happy with that record, but I was glad to hear the guitar up front, rather than have that mix of keyboard and guitar. I just want to stand out a bit more, not only in the mix and the overall feel of the record, but in my playing as well. I think I need to work harder."

That may come as something of a surprise to Rush fans who revere Mr Lifeson's playing.

"I just think that there are parts in a song where I take a step back and settle for something that is okay, rather than pushing myself and coming up with guitar parts that are very unique and very active. I'm talking here about lead work in a rhythmic sense. Eric Johnson and Tom Morello from Rage Against The Machine are great players with what they do and the interest that they create; melodies, harmonies and just little guitar items that come in and out. I just think that there is room for me to make the guitar sound more *interesting*."

Rush's music is very complex, with key and time signature changes in abundance. But after years as a writing partnership, the band has its own formula.

"I like to work a lot on my own in my studio at home, so I'll come in with a tape full of bits and pieces and occasionally complete songs. So for the first few days Geddy and I will listen to those ideas, then we'll say, Okay let's start writing. We'll just jam together and maybe 20% of the original material will be used and everything else will be written together.

"Most of the complex timing seems to happen right at the start. I naturally gravitate to that style – even if it's a simple time shift it does something to the song. It also pushes the player to come up with more interesting parts. A little movement here and there, dropping a beat every now and then, to me is more interesting to listen to."

For the past few years Alex has been rarely seen without a PRS at his side.

"Yes, I'm still using PRS guitars. On 'Counterparts' I used my Les Paul a lot and I always use my Tele; I love the combination of the thickness of the Les Paul and the edge of the Telecaster. I also used a Strat and the PRS and a whole bunch of things."

What about the trusty ol' Gibson semi-acoustics?

"I've recently got my 355 out again; I did a whole restoration job on it. I spent ages trying to get the parts for it that had gone missing and I finally got it all together – it sounds amazing! With the 335 it's the same thing; it has a particular tone and touch to it played through the Marshalls that I had forgotten about, having not used Marshalls for a couple of years."

Alex has experienced some bad luck with his guitars. Take this horror story surrounding his fabled white double neck Gibson, for instance.

"Well, we were on tour with The Blue Oyster Cult and we were doing a show at the Nassau Coliseum, Long Island, New York. One of the horns in

the PA had vibrated off the rack and fallen onto the stage right onto the 12 string, taking the 335 out with it. The 335 got chips in it, but it was basically okay, but I took that as a sign to retire that guitar for fear of something happening to it. That is when I started to use the Strat. Unfortunately the double neck didn't fair so well; it had all the strings sheared off and had one neck broken, a pickup had gone and the body was gouged. I had the neck repaired and gave it to Eric Johnson. I talked to him about six months later and someone had stolen it; I guess that guitar had a bad karma about it or something."

If he has tried his 335 through Marshalls, does this mean that...

"Yeah, I'm using Marshall amps again," he confirms. "I just wanted to get back to a tube sound. The Gallien-Krueger I was using satisfied me for a while, but when I went into the studio for 'Counterparts' I brought in a bunch of Marshalls. I have a couple of Marshall combos that I take in with me and I always get in a couple of old heads and cabinets and use those for recording. Then I thought, if I use them for recording why don't I use them live? It seemed to make sense to me all of a sudden. I wanted something compact and the GKs did that for me; I had a very compact setup, it was stereo and incredibly variable, but it was still a solid state sound. It never quite made it. With the last record, using a 5150 and Marshall, I thought, Yeah, I'm going to have to go back to tubes. So I got three stacks to use during rehearsals and I said, It looks *almost* right, but I think we need another stack!"

That said, the volume on stage must be very loud.

"As a matter of fact it is quite quiet on stage. I have two Celestion closed back cabinets in a big isolated box which we call the 'doghouse'. There are mikes on each of them and I run off a tap from the Marshall head and that's what in the house. I don't need the monitor through that, because I wear the monitor inserts and I don't really hear them. I get a level on stage that complements Ged's level on his side, which is not very loud, and we sort of bring that up to Neil's acoustic level on stage. So the stage sound is quite manageable, but it allows for a much cleaner, tighter sound through the PA."

Known for his use of guitar effects, he reportedly ousted many of them in an attempt to get back to basics. Is he using any effects now?

"I've always been a great supporter of guitar effects and I've always used them to produce interesting guitar sounds. A little less so on 'Counterparts' because I wanted to strip things down a little more. Most of the writing I'm doing here on my own is done in the same way; I'd rather get a sound that's unique whether it's a dull, flat sound or a distorted edgy kind of sound.

"I use TC Electronics 1210s for chorus, a DOD Super Harmony, but I do have a fair amount of stuff which I

don't use that much. I guess I rely on the delays and the choruses mostly, but you can get some interesting effects from the harmoniser."

So is he finally happy with his sound?

"I'm happier with my sound," he confesses. "'Counterparts' was a pure sound to me. Basically I just plugged in and played in the room and I hadn't done that for years. I had recorded all my guitars in the control room and I thought that was the most sensible way of doing it, because the input is immediate, everybody is in the room and you can talk about ideas. But the last record I recorded everything in the studio in front of the amps which were screaming loud just like the old days! There is something about the guitar picking up the sound through the pickups and feeling it. It's tough to hear on the cans. It felt like a very useful approach after we had become quite technical about the way we record. On the next record I'd like all three of us to record on the floor – something we haven't done since 'Moving Pictures'.

"We never allow ourselves the luxury of taking time to learn ➤

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► the songs together as a band off the floor like we used to. We spend a lot of time in pre-production working on our parts, but then we go in and record individually with a guide track. I'm not so sure that's really the best way. The guide track itself is not to Neil's drums, but usually to a drum programming guide. He works on his parts to the track, puts in his little feel things, moves it around the beat a bit, but the guitars, bass and vocals are not really to that groove. So it might make more sense to spend a little more time and work on the songs as we would in rehearsal for a tour and then start to record them. I really get off on playing together as a band."

How does he cope with playing the music and triggering MIDI, bass and effect pedals?

"You get used to whatever you're using. When we are in rehearsals it's usually a bit of a joke – Geddy and I are dancing around on pedals, we've got bass pedals going as well as MIDI triggers, he's got the keyboards and he's singing and he's got everything going over there... it takes a while to get settled in with all the synchronisation of all those parts and pieces. Once we're on tour it's all deep in our memories and I

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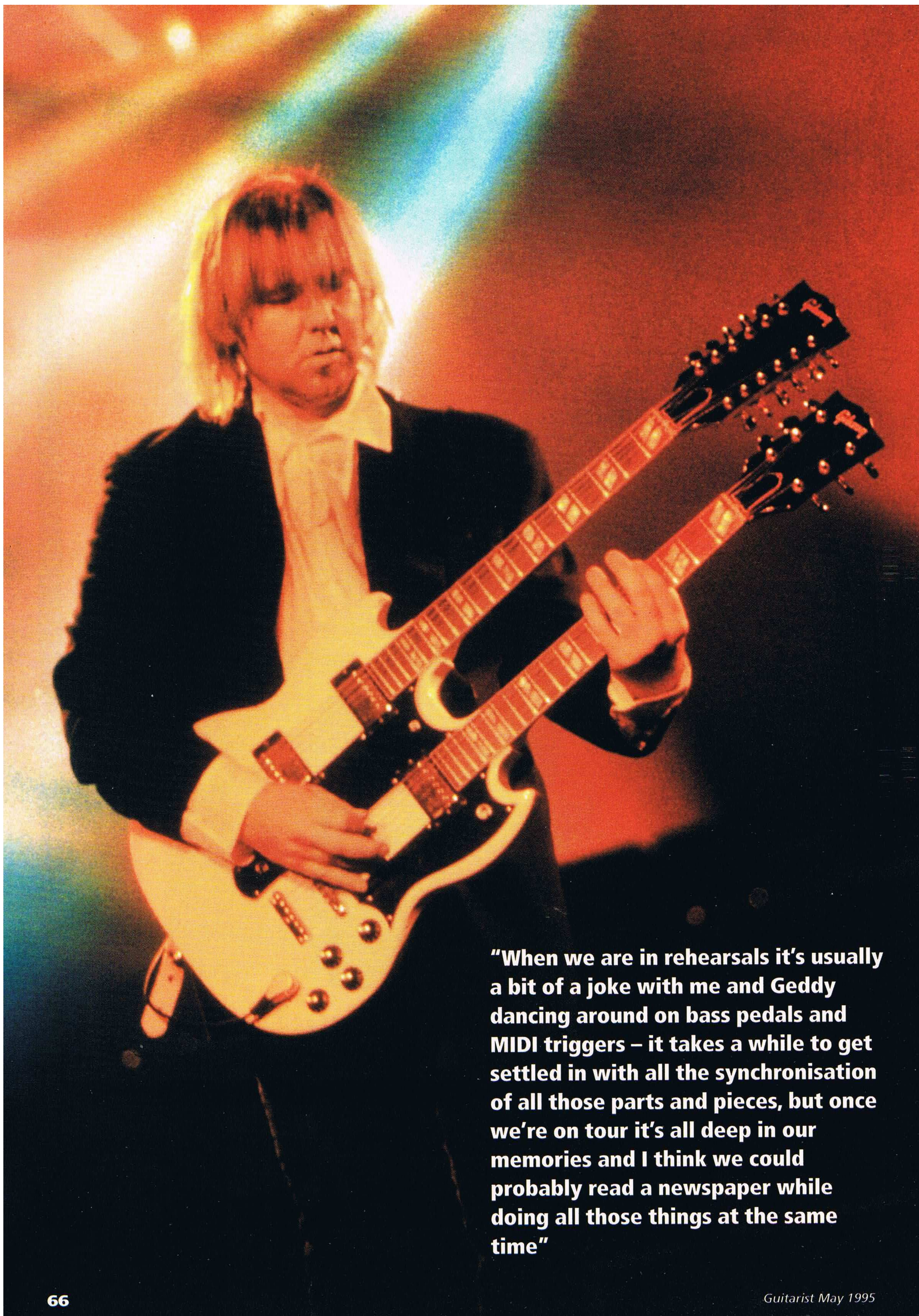
think we could probably read a newspaper while doing all those things at the same time. I'd love to have the freedom of not having to worry about those things, but I think it has become an integral part of the Rush sound and ultimately we would miss it. It is very dynamic to have all those parts come in and out. It pushes us and makes us work harder and keeps our interest going throughout

the course of the tour. I think also that the audience appreciates it."

With a multitude of material to choose from, it is very much a group decision on what songs they play live.

"Choosing what we play live is always a tough job," Alex admits. "We all have different opinions; I'd like to do a little more of the older material, Neil tends to lean towards doing the more current stuff and Ged is somewhere in the middle.

"Ged and I went into the studio a couple of weeks ago and there is some material that we have from 1978 at the Hammersmith Odeon. We played five nights there and recorded the shows. We didn't have a very good memory of it; ►



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► I think Ged thought that he'd had flu during that period and there was some problems with the recording, which of course we did discover when we got the tapes out, but they were not as severe as we had thought. On this particular night we were doing stuff like *Cygnus X-1* and *A Farewell To Kings* which was the most current stuff at the time and I thought it would be great to do songs like that again – we haven't played them in years. They have quite a bit of impact and they are a very important part of the Rush history and having not heard them for so long it would be great to do those songs again. They're the kind of songs that I'd like to bring back in, songs that we haven't played since 1980. I think with a 1995 approach to them they would be really quite powerful, certainly more powerful than they were back then. Those are the sort of things that I'd like to bring back in especially for some of our older listeners who were around back then."

Does he have a favourite Rush era?

"I don't think so. I mean, all the periods that we have gone through have had their highs and lows for me and I can't say that there is any one particular favourite. The whole period

during the early 80s around the time of 'Moving Pictures' was a very exciting time for us. We were really working a lot and doing major headline tours by that point all across America, spending a lot of time in Europe and it was a really great time for us. I have to say that over the last few years that touring has become a whole different proposition. It's not as exciting as it was when we were younger, but of course that is going to happen after 20 years of doing it, it does get tougher. It is the travelling more than anything. It just wears on you, you feel the drag on your life when there is perhaps something else that you might like to accomplish or at least try. When you're stuck on the bus or in a hotel room for 22 hours of your day and it's all focused on the two hours that you are on stage... There is no problem with that whatsoever, because you go on stage and feel like you are in your element and this is your role, this is what you do and this is what you know and that feels great! Even the last tour, which was a very difficult tour for me; I was having some personal problems and I found being away so much was making it more difficult. But I always forgot about it when I was on stage playing and it was

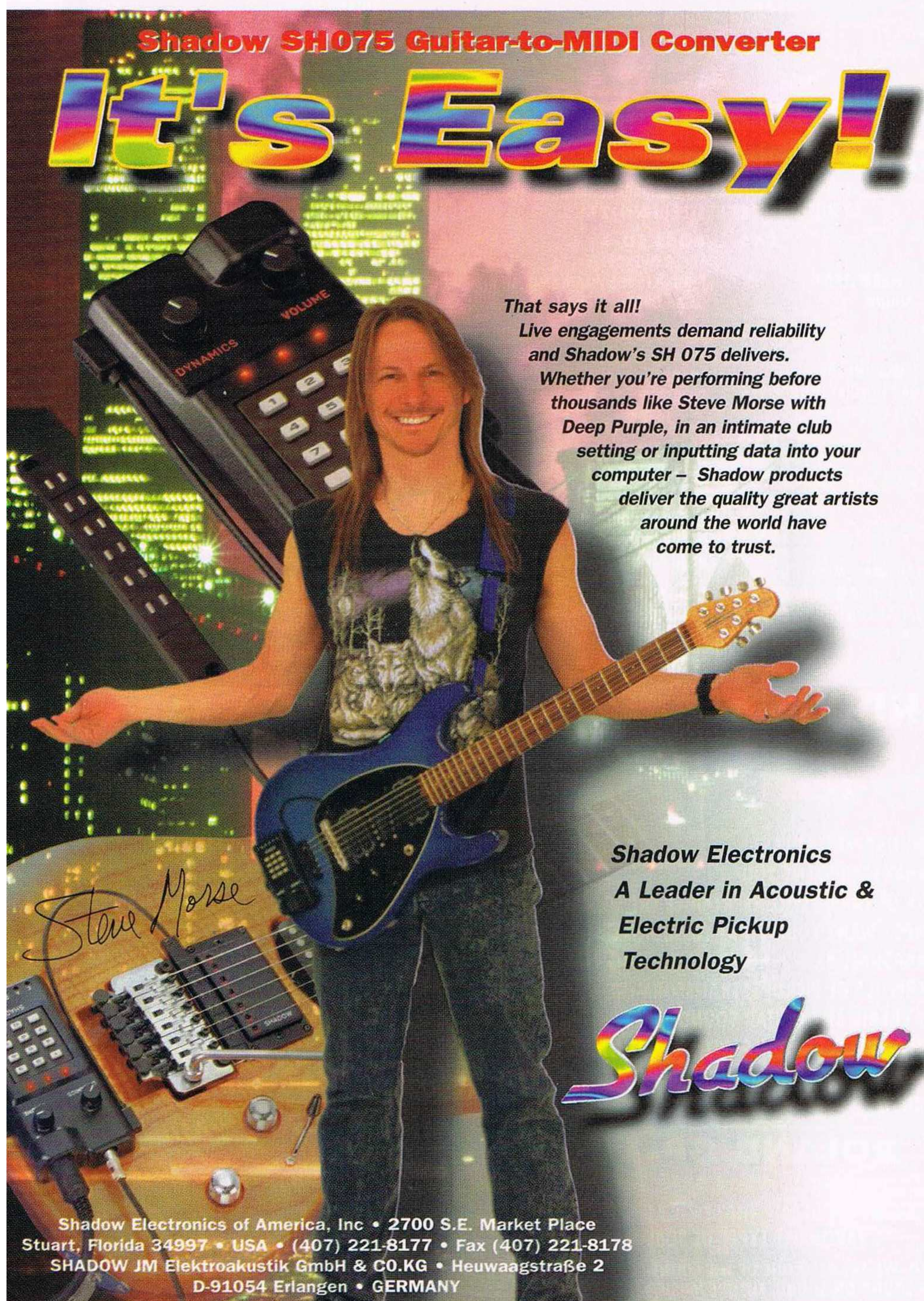
great. I came to realise that for as long as we could do this I'll always cherish those two hours or whatever on stage and I will definitely miss it when the time comes.

"When I get my solo album done, that's when I'll start thinking about touring again. I'd love to go out on the road, even if it is a short tour and play smaller theatres. As far as Rush is concerned we will go out on tour after we have finished the new record. How long that tour will be I'm not really sure. I think I would like to do a longer tour, but I don't know how the other guys feel. I know Ged would maybe like to be home more, but we'll work around it. I know that he wants to go back on the road eventually and everybody misses it in their own way.

"I'm not sure if we'll make it to Britain. The last tour we did there was the 'Roll The Bones' tour and that was a really enjoyable tour for us; probably one of the most enjoyable that we have ever done. But it's difficult for us to go across the ocean; we have concentrated on North America for so long, quite frankly there is not as great as support from the record company over in Europe as we'd like. Perhaps that's because we don't come as often as we need to. So it's a little bit difficult to come over and work really hard and not get the support with all the promotions, especially when the tour is so short. With an eight month tour that's no problem, but it's been a lot of fun coming over. And I know that there are some really die-hard Rush fans in Britain especially. To be honest with you, I feel very guilty about not coming over and playing more often."

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