



# Alex



The  
Making

of a

Guitar

Legend

# Lifeson

**RUSH NEVER STANDS STILL.** Just as the Canadian power trio was first achieving recognition some twenty years ago with a hard-edged, Zep-inspired approach, they veered off into uncharted waters with a groundbreaking concept trilogy of albums which merged their solid British blues sensibilities with grandiose progressive/art rock aspirations. Just as audiences were getting comfortable with that side of Rush, they changed course in the early 80s into the area of tightly structured, singable radio-friendly tunes which garnered a huge AOR crossover following. In the 80s, they added keyboards and synthesizers to their sound and immediately became hard rock's foremost textural band. The point is, Rush is constantly evolving. Today, with their gyros set for a return to the crushing power trio context of their halcyon days, they are both a beloved classic hard rock band with over two decades of history behind them, and a living, breathing, growing entity with three heads and one body bent on changing the face of music. On the eve of their seventeenth release, *Test for Echo*, we sat down with guitarist extraordinaire Alex Lifeson to discuss his early musical adventures, the development of his unique style, and where Rush is going in the future.

I n t e r v i e w   b y   W o l f   M a r s h a l l



N.C.(E) (D) (A)

*mf* w/fuzz

T  
A  
B

2 2 4 5 5 4 4 2

0:00 E play 5 times 0:13 E D5 (D) (A) play 6 times 0:44

*f*

TAR

5 7 7 7 5 4 7 4 5 6

**Moderate Rock** ♩ = 144

Asus4 Asus4/F#

3:55 4:01

*mf* w/dist. & chorus  
let ring throughout

**T** 3 2 2 2 3 2 2 3 2 2 3 2 2  
**A** 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2  
**B** 0 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

**Half-Time Rock** ♩ = 77

[0:39] Bm11 Bbmaj#11 Csus4 C [0:45]

w/dist. & chorus  
let ring throughout

TAB

0		0	3	2	3	0	3	3	6	3	5
0	2			2	2			3	3	3	3
2				1				3	3	3	3

Well, I don't know if I have a style yet [laughs], but those are the players I culled styles from in the early days of my guitar development—especially in learning how to play solos. As time went on, I had a lot of other influences, including Steve Howe (Yes) and Steve Hackett (Genesis). Hackett, in the context of early Genesis, was truly a textural player. His parts in



the early Genesis music influenced me as far as the textures in this band. As a result, I always wanted my guitar presence in Rush to be quite broad and fill a lot of space in an interesting way.

### Can you cite a couple of examples?

Sure. My use of arpeggios, because of the melodic and harmonic content of arpeggios and the kind of space that they take, like in "Red Barchetta" [Fig. 3] and "Free Will" [Fig. 4]. Those, along with the broad suspended chords, have become a trademark of my style.

### What were your first band experiences?

When I was about thirteen, I formed a local band called Projection with John Rutsey (original Rush drummer) and a couple of guys on our street. We knew about a dozen songs and played all the local basement parties. Our song list included some Stones songs, Animals songs like "House of the Rising Sun," Them's "Gloria," and "For Your Love" and "Shapes of Things" by the Yardbirds. I began playing with Geddy (Rush bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee) a couple of years later. We met in the eighth grade. I used to borrow his amplifier all the time. We played in coffee shops for food—chips and gravy. We'd play British blues—mostly Cream stuff from the *Fresh Cream* period. I would pretend I was Eric Clapton, Geddy would pretend he was Jack Bruce, and we'd play "Spoonful" for twenty minutes.

### What were your later guitar influences?

I studied classical in 1972 for about a year, I guess, after I had already been playing rock and blues guitar for seven or eight years. My teacher, Eliot Goldner, was a virtuoso who started playing when he was six years old, and had studied with Eli Kasner in Toronto. We were friends and had been in school together. Unfortunately, I had to give up the classical lessons because the drinking age in Toronto was lowered from twenty-one to eighteen, and I went from playing maybe one or two nights a week on weekends to six nights a week. I really enjoyed those lessons though, and playing the pieces. And I found that, if I practiced them for an hour or two a day, my fingers just felt amazing—I could play anything. That was the real benefit.

### What classical pieces did you play?

I played most of the standard pieces in the repertoire. I remember playing the "Six Lute Pieces of the Renaissance" transcribed for guitar (sings No. 2) [Fig. 5]. And, of course, the "Bourree in E Minor" by J.S. Bach, another standard [Fig. 6]. There were also a couple of flamenco pieces.

### Did these pieces affect your playing with Rush?

Yes, in things like "The Trees" [Fig. 7], and the intro to "A Farewell to Kings" and the outro of "The Temples of Syrinx." The flamenco influence came out in the intro to "La Villa Strangiato" ("Buenos Noches, Mein Froindes")

[Fig. 8]. All these moments are not strictly traditional classical, but have the character of classical—like Steve Howe in "Mood for a Day."

### Were you ever influenced by jazz?

Allan Holdsworth really touched me. The playing he did with U.K. and Bill Bruford was so incredibly fluid, more like a sax or violin than a guitar. His solo on U.K.'s "In the Dead of Night"

[Fig. 9] influenced my whammy bar playing tremendously.

### When did you find your unique guitar voice?

I think *2112* (1976) was the turning point for Rush in general, and that was the beginning of my original style. It had a lot to do with the way the album was written and recorded. Let me backtrack a bit. Our third album, *Careless* of

Fig. 6 "Bourée in E Minor" by J. S. Bach

Fig. 7 "The Trees"

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Fig. 8 "La Villa Strangiato"

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Fig. 9 "In the Dead of Night" Solo (meas. 1-4)

**Moderate Rock**  
N.C.(Em11)

*mf* \*w/dist.

\*All bends & vibrato w/bar.

(Cmaj7/E)

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Steel (1975) was a very experimental record; it was the first time we ever did a concept piece. It was not very successful commercially and was at a fragile time in the band's development. There was concern from both the record company and management that we might be going in the wrong direction, that it was too progressive. They felt we should return to the power rock of the first album, and we felt the exact opposite. We came back with *2112*. There's a lot of aggression and anger on that record, and I think, because it was written so much from the heart, it was where we began to develop a band signature. We were writing more complex music from that point, and were purposefully aware of larger structure, the classical sectional approach to composition, especially in things like "Overture." Consequently, we developed it further in *A Farewell to Kings* (1977) and *Hemispheres* (1978).

### Which Rush solos contain the definitive Alex Lifeson?

"Limelight," from *Moving Pictures*, comes to mind immediately [Fig. 10]. I would consider that to be a solo which is very much me. It's a very spontaneous thing to me—I don't belabor my soloing. I like to do a half dozen passes, and maybe do a comp (a composite of two or more recorded solo parts), or live with a particular take. I take two basic directions in soloing. I think it should either sit in the song and connect rhythmically and melodically with the background, or it should be over the top and on the edge, like "Time and Motion" on the new record, or earlier in "A Farewell to Kings." On those solos, I want it to feel like I'm about to fall over, almost like I'm tripping over cables, and to be dangerous, even on the edge of losing it. This creates a real sense of tension and drama—like something might blow up or happen unexpectedly. Another favorite of mine is "Kid Gloves" from *Grace Under Pressure*. That was a two-piece comp, I think. It has a fluidity and a sense of humor that really stand out to me. The solo to "YYZ" [Fig. 11] is quite different; it has an

almost ethnic sound. There, I'm responding to the background, which, to me, suggested something reminiscent of a middle Eastern scene. Who knows, it may be the influence of listening to Yugoslavian music as a child creeping into a Rush song.

### What is your approach to soloing?

It's very instinctive. I don't think of arpeggios or scales. Normally, I just listen to the track a couple of times without playing anything. I close my eyes and try to get inside the music—try to get a sense of what Neil's doing rhythmically, and what Geddy's doing melodically. I'll warm up for a couple of takes, and then, I'll go for it. My strongest work is the spontaneous stuff, and I try so hard not to think when I'm playing, particularly solos. When I get analytic, I lose my sense of direction and get too focused on details and sections. The key to my soloing is to let my heart take over; I close my eyes and hope that my fingers land in the right spot.

### Which Rush riffs do you consider to be signatures?

Oh, let's see . . . "Limelight" [Fig. 12] and "Spirit of the Radio" [Fig. 13] would have to be in there. "Free Will" [Fig. 14] and "Tom Sawyer" [Fig. 15] are two in odd times. An early one would be "What You're Doing." It's a little derivative, but I'd say it's a signature riff. That one sounds, in a way, like a warped version of "Heartbreaker." From the last record, *Counterparts*, "Stick It Out" [Fig. 16], and from the new album, "Virtuality."

### What would you point to as definitive Rush rhythm guitar parts?

Well, I like to hit power chords with open strings. It gives the illusion of a second guitarist, and again, fills the space. You hear this sound in songs like "Spirit of the Radio" [Fig. 17] or "Jacob's Ladder" [Fig. 18]. I developed these textures partly as a response to working in a three-piece group. With a trio, there are certain limitations. The bass player either has to be very



grounded on the low end with the rhythm section or it can fall apart. In Rush, Geddy is a bass player that plays freer than most and moves around the neck quite a bit. When he moved around like that, I felt that I needed to develop a rhythm style which covered a lot of territory, and had higher and lower strings ringing out which were complementary harmonically to the root chord. It's a way of expanding on the basic rock 'n' roll power chord—keeping the tough sound but adding color and oftentimes suspensions. Another good example of that open sound is in the beginning of "Hemispheres," and throughout the entire *Hemispheres* record. The first chord, right in the top, is a suspended chord made by adding the open B and high E strings to an F# major chord in the second position. I really love the A# to B half-step rub in that voicing [Fig. 19]. I also like to play open harmonics as a percussive rhythm part; I suppose that would be a signature. "Red Barchetta" [Fig. 20] is another good example, and so is "Limbo" on *Test for Echo*.

### How did you develop the textural side of your rhythm playing?

It probably began with my use of effects. I've always been one to use effects quite a bit. When BOSS came out with the original chorus back in



the 70s—the big gray-green metal units—I latched onto it right away and it became a distinctive part of my sound, along with the use of echo and delay. Texturally, I like to create those dreamy sort of soundscapes. I've been doing those probably as far back as "Xanadu." The thing grew when we added keyboards in the 80s, which gave me more room to play those spacious parts. The idea always was get a broader sound than what is traditionally heard with a three-piece rock band. I think Andy Summers developed his textural playing in the Police—which was also a trio—for similar reasons.

**You've always printed with your effects on most of the Rush tracks, but lately, on this album, the last album, *Counterparts*, and your solo record, *Victor*, you've added them later, if at all. How did this affect your approach to soloing?**

Yes, I always preferred to print (record to tape) with effects on most of the Rush stuff. In the past, I looked at it more like, "How do I want it sound—*right now*?" And lately, I felt like it was time for a change. I wanted the solos on this record to be more straightforward and more direct, to be purer and not colored by effects. On the last record, "Cold Fire" was stylistically the kind of song I would never have considered recording before. It's played with a clean tone and not a lot of sustain, so you get a sense of what the hands are really doing, a sense of the string making contact with the fret and the finger making contact with the wood of the fretboard. I can hear and feel those things on something that's restrained like that. It puts the solo under the microscope, but it has a lot more character. The solo on "Totem," as well as a couple on *Victor*, is along those same lines. Personally, I feel it's challenged me musically. It's a challenge when you're not relying on your amp but on your hands for sustain. You come through it feeling satisfied with what you've done, and it's a great boost for your confidence.

### How was *Test for Echo* recorded?

We started in late September of last year at a little funky studio which is about an hour outside of Toronto. We stay there all week when we're writing. Geddy and I have a work area set up inside the studio, Neil works out of his bedroom with his computer. He works on lyrics for the day and also has a small kit there. We normally reserve about ten weeks for writing and pre-production, and we finished the writing about three weeks early—which is unheard of with us! We were so pumped and full of positive energy throughout the whole project, but especially in the early stages of writing. There was a greater and more efficient development of the arrangements right from the beginning. We had ADATs in our work area and would pop out the tapes and take them into the control room to have Neil record to them. It was a great benefit because then we could take those parts back to our work area and start rearranging the guitar and bass to what the drums were doing. Generally, I was very clear about what I wanted to do, and I had most of my guitar parts worked out in pre-production. I left a portion of my

Fig. 10 "Limelight" Solo

**Moderate Rock** ♩ = 132  
N.C.(G♯m)

2:42

*mf* w/dist. and chorus

\*All bends & vibrato w/bar.

3:00

3 1/2

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Fig. 11 "YYZ" Solo (meas. 1-7)

Moderate Rock  $\text{♩} = 144$

B

*mf* w/dist. and chorus

TAB

C

B

w/bar

w/bar

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Fig. 12 "Limelight" riff

**Moderate Rock** ♩ = 132  
N.C. B5 A5 B5 A5

*f* w/dist.

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Fig. 13 "The Spirit of the Radio" riff

**Moderate Rock** ♩ = 132  
N.C.(E5)

*mf* w/dist. and flanger

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Fig. 14 "Free Will" riff

**Moderate Rock** ♩ = 154  
0:03 N.C.(F) 0:08

*mf* w/dist. and chorus

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Fig. 15 "Tom Sawyer" riff

**Moderate Rock** ♩ = 170  
1:52 N.C.(E5) (D/F#)

w/dist. and chorus

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Fig. 16 "Stick It Out" riff

**Moderate Rock** ♩ = 120  
N.C.(Dm6)

*mf* w/dist.

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playing unplanned for the studio because it's really fun to come up with things on the day you're in the recording process. I was in great condition after playing for a year and working on Victor, so the parts came quickly and we usually got two songs a day done, rhythm and solos. That feels good, especially after a history of spending weeks on some songs! [laughs]

### What are your favorite guitar moments on *Test for Echo*?

"Resist" was one of my favorite songs from the beginning and one of the best we've ever written. There's always one song on every album that just seems to come together like no other. It's a perfect marriage of all the parts—Neil's lyrics, the dynamics, the acoustics, the haunting Celtic theme, the breakdown in the middle with just me and Geddy. "Test for Echo" is pure Rush; it has all the characteristics—dynamically it moves around, it's got some quirky parts, and, from my end, it has lots of arpeggios and some nice broad heavy chords. My favorite solos are on "Totem," for the challenge of the tone and its directness, and "Time and Motion" because it's on the edge and sounds like I'm ready to explode!

### Which artists and records would be on Alex Lifeson's essential listening list and why?

(In no particular order)

•**Jimi Hendrix:** *Electric Ladyland* is such a classic, it's almost too obvious to talk about. At the time it was released, it was so incredibly innovative and so different, and still is. Are *You Experienced?* is like that too, of course, tremendously influential. But for this guitarist, *Electric Ladyland* was the more tremendously influential record.

•**Jeff Beck:** Beck has so many things—*Blow by Blow* to *Guitar Shop*. I don't think anyone touches the emotional quality of his playing, he can make you cry! I can't count how many times I've had tears in my eyes after listening to him play.


•**Eric Johnson:** For me, *Ah Via Musicom* is a beautiful record. It's really unique—the purity of his style, the fluidity of his playing, the tonality and diversity of sounds make it a terrific album for listening.

•**Eric Clapton:** *Fresh Cream*. This was the first time we'd heard blues music done with that kind of power or that kind of flavor. Another player with a tremendous emotional quality to his playing.

•**Jimmy Page:** *Led Zeppelin I*. He influenced my playing so much. He had the ability to turn the amp down and still produce all that power. Those early Zeppelin records were mostly made with a Telecaster and Supro amp, but the way he played the music made it sound heavier than anything you'd ever heard.

•**Eddie Van Halen:** Any Van Halen album. He's among the greatest, as influential as any



**•Ethnic music:** There's one particular album I got recently which is very cool—I think it's titled *Forbidden Places*. It's a two-CD compilation. These guys went around the world and recorded very obscure folk music from small tribes in New Guinea and places way off the beaten path. It's really interesting to hear how these different people and cultures use music to entertain themselves, to express themselves creatively, or to mark some historical passage of time. That's the great thing about folk music—it speaks of all that. You hear the laughter, you feel the tears in the music—the triumphs and the tragedies—you don't even have to be familiar with it. It's universal and about communication. Hopefully, that's how *Test for Echo* will hit you. I think that's what Neil was driving at lyrically—how we communicate with each other and how we communicate with ourselves, and what there is to say. 

For a further and more in-depth look at the music of Rush, the following songbooks are recommended: *Rush Permanent Waves*, *Moving Pictures*, and *Counterparts in Authentic Guitar-TAB Editions* from Warner Bros. Publications. These are matching folios to the classic Rush albums. Also check out the *Guitar Techniques of Rush* and *The Best of Rush* collections in TAB editions (Warner Bros. Publications.).