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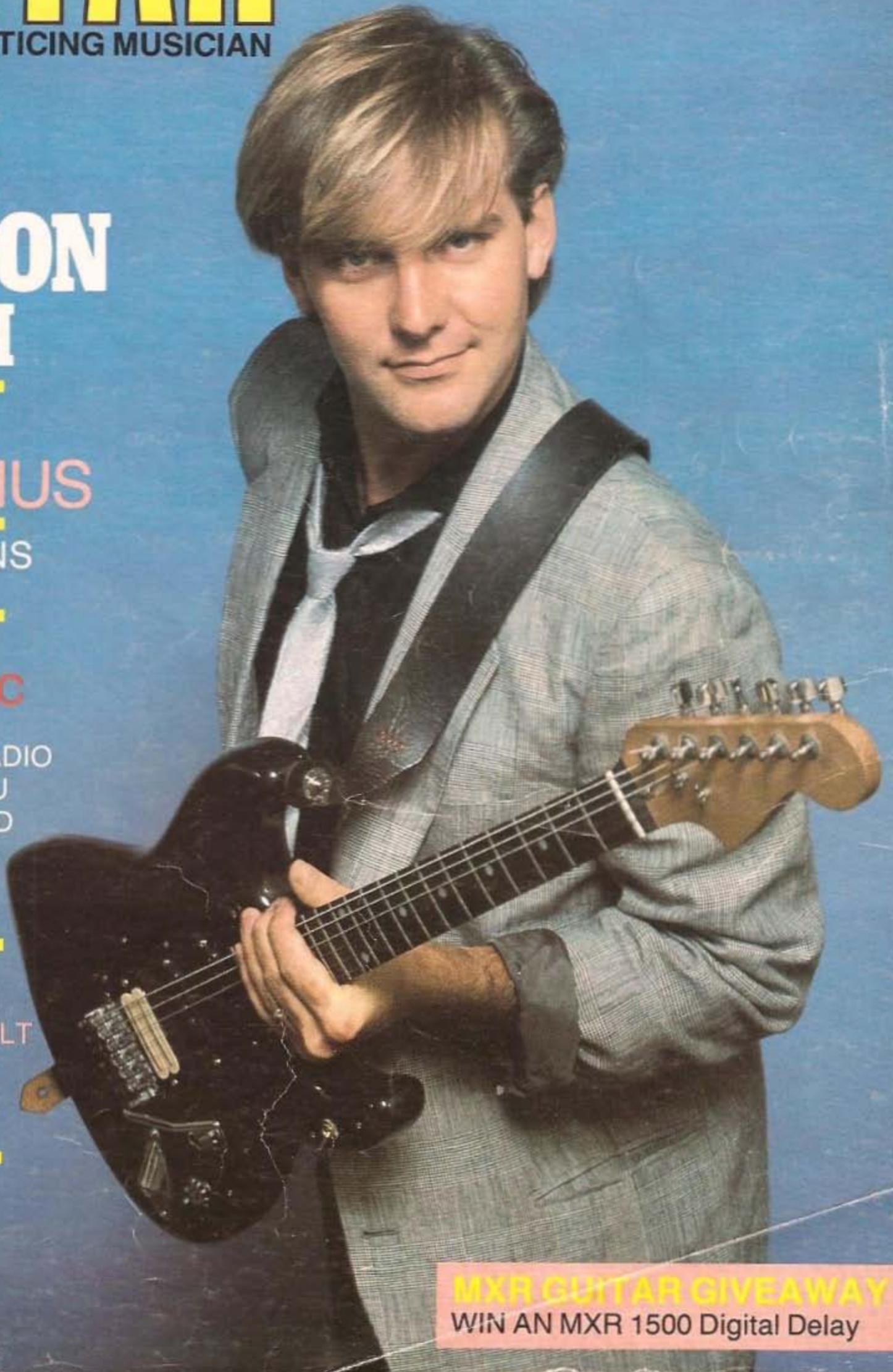
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ALEX LIFESON OF

RUSH

Still in School

by John Stix



ALEX LIFESON

NEIL PEART

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Most people try out new songs on their friends in the basement. Most bands warm up for recording in rehearsal halls. It's safer. But then, Rush have never played it safe. So last fall, when it came time to warm up for the recording of their album, *Grace Under Pressure*, Rush went looking for an appropriate hall. Never known for a small sound, they chose Radio City Music Hall, in New York City! Certainly their music is big enough to fill the Grand Canyon. But the question has never been how can three guys make so much sound—but rather, how can the same three guys make so many different sounds?

Like so many of the finest groups, Rush is defined by distinct periods. The early albums were Zeppelin clones. The middle period shows the heavy trappings of the British art rockers. More recently, keyboards and a stripped-down sound have brought Rush to the top, firmly defining them as the premiere modern metalists of the 80s. **GUITAR** spoke with Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson about these changes and how he's been able to grow on the guitar without growing old.

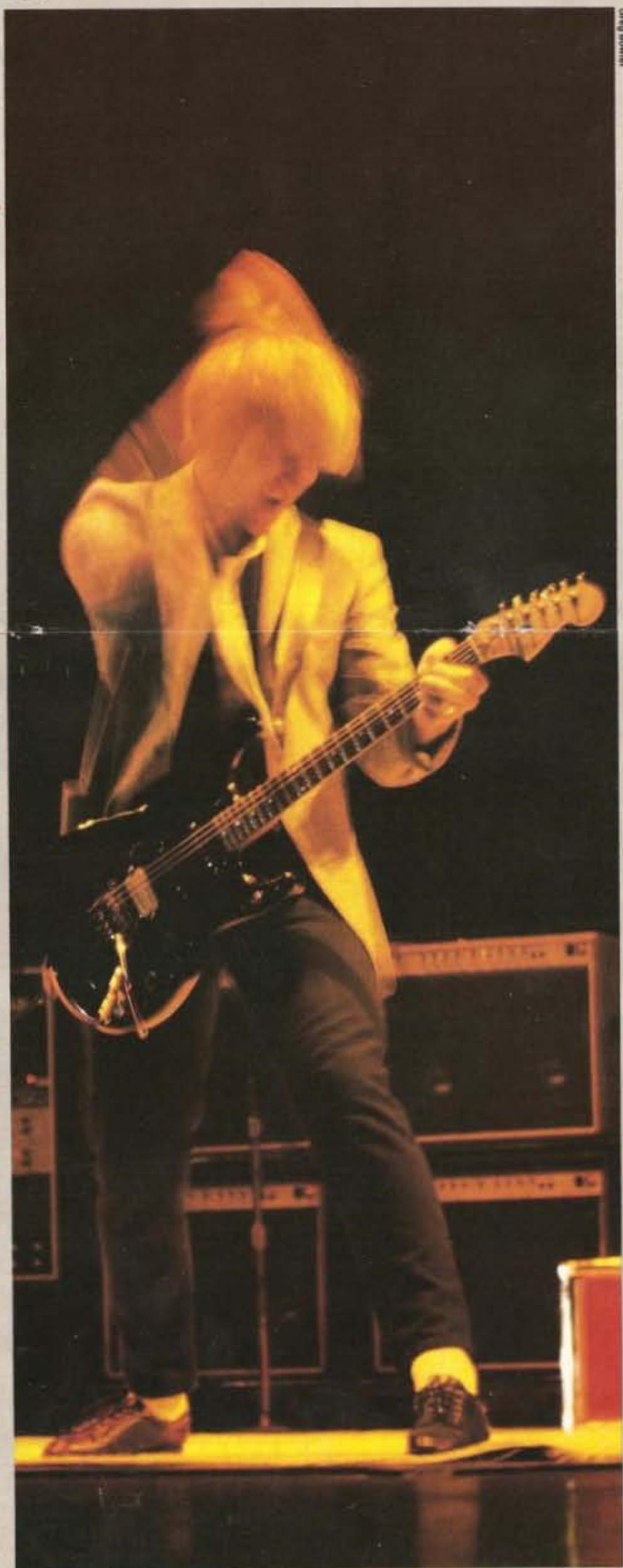
ALEX: Songs like *Oh Pretty Woman* from John Mayall's *Crusade* album bring back memories of when we started. I would spend months trying to figure out songs like this, early on in my guitar playing career. Mick Taylor's sound was exceptional for that time. He had that grit and sustain, and the right kind of smooth distortion.

GUITAR: Has anything come to replace the kind of intensity that you displayed the years before and during the first few albums?

ALEX: That intensity is an exuberance to play the guitar really well. When you hear these great solos, that gives you something to get going with. When you achieve a certain level of competence you start to open up a bit and not be quite as intense. In the context of a group you become more sensitive to your position in that band. For me as a guitarist, as the group evolved, it became more important to become part of the group rather than the guitarist or the bassist or the drummer. The idea was to become a complete unit. So that maybe you're not playing a million notes a second, but something that fits the context of what's going on. In that sense there is a change, a shift to a different kind of intensity. It's something you get in time. You can definitely hear that original guitar intensity on the first few albums, certainly the first. That was in '70 or '71 and our influences were pretty apparent. The guitar did play more of a lead role.

GUITAR: Was Rush a trio because you wanted to follow in the footsteps of Cream or Hendrix?

ALEX: Not really, it just happened. John, our original drummer, and I played together for quite a while. I knew Geddy from school. He played in another group but we jammed quite often. My band got a gig in a drop-in center at a church. The following week we had a chance to do the same gig again, for \$15 or \$20. Our bass player couldn't make it and I called Ged up and it went on from there. In '69 we had a keyboard player in the group. He went on to become Geddy's brother-in-law. He was in the band for a few months and then we broke up. Later in '72 we had another guitarist for about six months. That didn't work out either. We always felt more comfortable as a three-piece. Then John left and Neil came into the band. It's always been a good chemistry for us and we've always been used to working in this context.



Greg Geller

GUITAR: Would it be easier sometimes if you had a keyboard player in the band?

ALEX: Absolutely, it would be a lot easier. Over the years you become used to having to use your feet, as well as your hands. In Geddy's case he's using both feet, both hands and his mouth. I think in the studio we feel a little restricted in that we want to remain true to what we're doing on stage. Consequently, you don't hear rhythm guitar during the solo, you don't hear bass guitar during keyboard parts.

GUITAR: When you solo, do you think about the rhythm guitar parts that might be there and play over them?

ALEX: When we write a song I think in context of a space for the solo. It's left at that. We work on the arrangement to get it tight. When we go into the studio to get the basic tracks down, I spend a couple of days and start doing my solos then. That is usually the first time I think about or work on my solos. Occasionally, I'll throw something down while we're writing just to fill in that space. Very seldom do I use anything. On *The Weapon* I used a couple of things that came out during those writing sessions. Normally I spend a couple of days on solos and work from scratch. We work on getting a sound. I try to get a feel for what the solo should be doing and then pursue different directions. I might pursue something for hours and do a collage. I'll drop in a whole different section to see how it feels. Then I relearn the solo when we get ready to go back on the road.

GUITAR: The solo gives you the freedom that's not normally written into the composition.

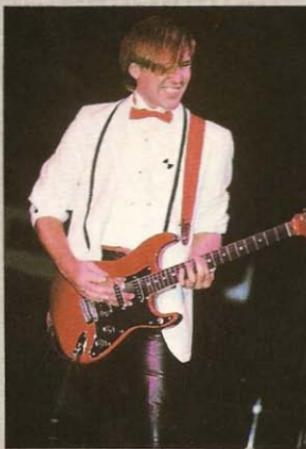
ALEX: Definitely, that's what I feed off. We are such a regimented band and basically do the same thing each night. The solos give me freedom to experiment and go wild.

GUITAR: *Villa de Strange* seems to be your song in concert.

ALEX: I always enjoy playing that solo. I like the changes and it's a very emotive bluesy kind of solo. It too stays basically the same every night. The band is in the background modulating between two notes and it gives me a chance to wail.

GUITAR: A song like *Countdown* has a bar of 4/4 followed by a bar of 11/8. Was this rhythmic twist the core idea for writing the song?

ALEX: It's more of a feeling than a conscious effort. The way we write, we have the lyric or an idea of what the song is going to be. That idea sets a mood. By changing the time signature you can change the whole effect of the song. I guess in that respect we do go off into those changes without making a conscious effort. Yet it does make the song more complex. That influence came from the British progressive movement and bands like Yes and Genesis. They had a big influence on us. I guess you're always picking something that is around that has an effect on the way you hear music. As long as you can hear those things and apply them, you're growing. A lot of times bands lock into something and stay there and that's the end. They make two or three records of the same thing, which happens to be their most popular, and that's it for them.



Joseph Allen

GUITAR: I recall from our last meeting together that Steve Hackett was your major influence from the progressive movement.

ALEX: Yes, Steve Hackett is so articulate and melodic, precise and flowing. I think our *Cress of Steel* period is when I was most influenced by him. There's even a solo on that

album which is almost a steal from his style of playing. It's one of my favorites, called *No One at the Bridge*. I even sounded like Steve Hackett.

GUITAR: Can you recall when you knew you sounded like Alex Lifeson?

ALEX: I remember it in spurts. I remember in solos that every once in a while I did something I felt was truly original, that came from me without having obvious influences. There wasn't any one point where I thought, "I sound like myself." Even now, in '84, I find it difficult to do that. I'd say since *Moving Pictures* I feel like I've moved into my own space. Style is a difficult thing to define. I can't begin to say what I think my style is.

GUITAR: Do you have any particular chord changes which you like to play over?

ALEX: With each album I have favorite chord changes, which I then don't like to repeat on the next album. Suspended chords have always been my favorites. They seem so broad. Your harmonic content becomes much greater. It comes from that same school of making more out of the music because we are only a three-piece band. The chorus to *Analog Kid* has broad sounding chords in the sense of triad rock chords. The new album has that sound also.

GUITAR: On this new record the guitar sounds more prominent again. The chords ring longer and the guitar parts in general are more clearly defined.

ALEX: That's exactly what we were going for. In retrospect, *Signals* tried to achieve a focus on the keyboards. We wanted the guitar to become part of the rhythm. I enjoy rhythm guitar very much and try to make the most of that genre. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line we lost it. We wanted the guitar to be more angular. The usual formula in the studio was to put the guitar down and triple track it to layer the guitar sound so it was massive. On *Signals* we wanted to change things, and unfortunately, the guitar took a back seat. When we started on this new album we wanted to bring the guitar back into the forefront and strike the proper balance between all the elements.

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ALEX LIFESON

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GUITAR: So the best mix of keys and guitars is on *Moving Pictures*?

ALEX: Thus far. I'm not putting *Signals* down, the material is quite good and generally the production is good. We just tried something different. Ultimately, if we keep trying different things we'll be happy no matter what the results.

GUITAR: Do you have to stop yourself from repeating something from the past?

ALEX: You don't have to stop yourself but it's always in the forefront of your mind that you don't want to repeat yourself. After making 12 records it's hard not to.

GUITAR: Do you ever want to record a song just to totally rock out on the guitar?

ALEX: At this point, no. I'm making an effort to change my thinking about the way I want to do solos and play the guitar in general. Like I said earlier, I want to take up more space and be more harmonic in my approach. With my soloing I want to take up more room with less frequency of notes. I want to be more careful with my note selection. I feel like I've come out of that play as fast as you can age. *Signals* was the turning point for that. I'd like to pursue it further and maybe combine more chordal solos than strictly individual notes.

GUITAR: I know you would love to forget the first live Rush album. How do you feel about *Exit*?

ALEX: Live albums are always a difficult thing. It's hard to get excited about them. In terms of a live recording it's very good. I'm happy with it in that respect. As an example of our show it's not as good as it could have been or possibly should have been. Live albums give us some breathing space to cleanse ourselves and start on something fresh and new. When we were in the studio doing *Exit*, Geddy and I were in another studio working on *Digital Man* and *Subdivisions* for *Signals*. We were already geared up for another record. I think that had something to do with the fact that we don't go crazy over live records. I don't know if you'll ever hear another live album from Rush. We enjoy the studio recordings much more than we do the live ones.

GUITAR: Do you enjoy the studio more than the stage?

ALEX: I enjoy playing live, but I don't enjoy touring as much as I used to. After so many years you do get tired and the clichés about being in a different hotel every night do apply. We all have families and being away sort of irks you. There is a whole set of rules and points of satisfaction that you get in both situations. I enjoy both, especially if you're well prepared. For this new record we allotted more time than usual so we were in very good shape.

GUITAR: Do you like to develop songs from working with demo tapes?

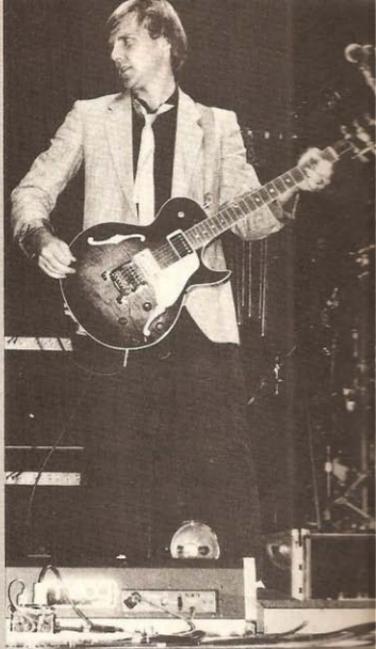
ALEX: Yes, I have a 16-track studio at home. We bring an Otari up north with us. Once we get the songs in pretty good shape we put them down on that, overdubbing vocals and keyboards.

GUITAR: Are you involved in the whole process or just your parts in the songs?

ALEX: We're all there for the duration.

GUITAR: Do you spend time experimenting with the new effects as they come out?

ALEX: I've always done that. My array of effects is pretty complete but I'm always finding new things you can do. My latest additions are a Korg DDL and a Noise Gate. I use the same Marshall stack, but I'm trying out the Carvin Twin 12's. I'm also checking out the Roland Computerized Present Effects. I've spent a great deal of time working with my effects so I'm happy with them.



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GUITAR: Did it take you a while to get used to playing a Fender-style guitar?

ALEX: It took me about three years to feel comfortable playing it. I've used a 335 or a 355 almost from the beginning. One night we were playing with BOC at Nassau Colosseum and one of the speaker horns fell down on my doubleneck and then over my 335, which was my backup at the time. I had to get another guitar, so I thought I'd try a Strat. It was like picking up a large piece of wood. I didn't know what to do with it. I thought at the time, "This is a real mistake." I hardly ever used it and never felt comfortable when I did. Along the way I put a Floyd Rose on it, took out the back pickup and put in an L-500 humbucker by Bill Lawrence and changed the neck to one made by Sharp, which is a company in Ottawa. It's a flat rosewood neck, close to a Gibson. I didn't put any lacquer on it. To clean it I use a piece of .400 sandpaper and just go back and forth a few times. It's nice and smooth and you can feel the wood as you move your hand across it. The only Fender aspect of it is the body and the two Fender pickups in front. The Bill Lawrence pickup has such a high output that you can put your guitar on 8 and switch to the Fender pickups without having to bring the volume down and it will have a nice clean, clear tone.

GUITAR: How did you adjust to the Floyd Rose bridge?

ALEX: It was a bit of a pain at first. I didn't like the locking nut, so when I switched necks, I didn't bother putting the locking bridge on and I haven't had any problems. I use a bit of graphite on the nut and just keep an eye on it.

GUITAR: Do you ever use the 355 or the Howard Roberts?

ALEX: I used the 355 on the last tour for three songs, but I do use it more in the studio. The Howard Roberts Fusion guitar is the backup. It's got a radically different feel to me now that I've grown accustomed to using the Fender. I never thought that would happen. I was such a Gibson man all the way. But I'm happy with the way the Fender has worked out. I've got it to sound much closer to a Gibson, with that sustain and meatiness, while retaining the clarity and brilliance of a Fender.

GUITAR: With instruments, amps and effects it's easy to get new input because so many new products come out every year. But where do you go to get new musical input that translates to that next plateau jump as a player?

ALEX: Nowhere in particular and everywhere in general. I hear so much, so many different styles of guitar playing that can influence me. Andy Summers has a good sense of combinations and selections of notes. His playing fits well into the context of their songs. Edge from U2 is right

up front, an aggressive, straight-ahead, all-out player. Adrian Belew is like the Carl Sagan of guitarists. With him it's not only the selection of his notes but also the selection of his sounds. Midge Ure from Ultravox has a sense of feel that I like. I like the way his guitar sounds take up space. There are so many who you can listen to and pick things up from without necessarily copping a lick. It's more of an attitude about approaching the instrument and seeing what you can do with it, where you can go. I've always thought Steve Howe was great but I never wanted to play like him. Alan Holdsworth is dangerous for me to hear. I was most influenced by him when he was with Bruford. I started to pick up what he does with a vibrato arm and I have to be careful that I don't just copy him.

GUITAR: What would you like to be remembered for in the long run?

ALEX: I feel embarrassed by a question like that. I can't imagine what I would want my contribution to be because I don't feel I have that much to contribute. I do what I do the best I can. I enjoy playing. Perhaps if I could draw a line between being a rhythm and a lead guitarist in a group and do it well, maybe people would look at my style and say that's a good way to fill up the space and make more out of a part. If that happens I guess I will have accomplished something. It's hard to tell right now because I'm still in school. ■