



**30 Years of
Canadian
Pop Music
Martin Melhuish**

CHAPTER 20

All the World's a Stage: Rush

"The first thing you notice about Rush, according to one observer, is they're not as gross-looking as Bachman-Turner Overdrive and they have a somewhat lower thud weight than most other Canadian bands," wrote writer Rick Johnson in the rock magazine *Creem* in 1976. He went on to note, "True enough — Canuck rockers do seem to have some sort of uglier-than-thou competition going among themselves along with a tendency to pounce on unsuspecting ears like a carnivorous dumptruck.

"But Rush isn't exactly a bunch of Joni Mitchell cupcakes either, as anyone who's caught one of their numerous appearances with Kiss or increasing number of headlining gigs can attest to."

Geddy Lee, bassist and vocalist of Rush, is not quite sure of the contention that there is a typically Canadian look or sound. "You know, I talk to a lot of people who talk about the Canadian sound and talk about us as part of it," says Lee. "Having come from it myself, I really can't see what the Canadian sound is and I'm not sure if there really is one. In England, people are surprised that we are Canadian because there is a feeling there that if you're a Canadian you're a folk singer. The country has quite a folk image. Internationally, we are also looked at as a little different for a Canadian group because we have a little bit of flash in our show and we are very heavy-metal and up-tempo. It's really surprising that a lot of people think of Canada as husky lumberjacks. When you say 'Heavy metal' in association with Canada, people think of BTO and figure we're all big guys."

It is a tribute to Geddy Lee (born Gary Lee Weinrib July 29, 1953, Toronto), guitarist Alex Lifeson (b. Aug. 27, 1953, Surrey, B.C.) and drummer Neal Peart (b. Sept. 12, 1952, Hamilton, Ont.) that over the years, and there have been a few since the group formed around Lee and Lifeson back in 1968 during their high school days, they have never made the usual compromises when it came to any facet of their music and stage performance.



Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee of Rush in concert.

In the early days, when it might have been easier to have mellowed out a little and become more commercial to pick up that all-important record contract, they were testing the tangibility of sound waves by bending a few steel girders in the bars and school auditoriums where they appeared. When the band finally put their music to vinyl, there were very few radio stations that were interested in playing their bombastic brand of rock. It is only recently that radio, recognizing a bandwagon when they see it, was forced to recognize the huge popularity that Rush had attained.

Initially, Geddy Lee had been very philosophical about the band's lack of radio exposure. "We have a very raw sound, which

is possibly too raw for radio," said Lee. "My voice is not your average middle-of-the-road sounding voice. My voice irritates a lot of people, so that could be another reason for their reticence. A lot of our songs are not what you would call sing along. We have about four million changes in every song — rhythm changes, texture changes — and almost every song is over five minutes long. Radio, especially FM radio, is going very format. It has gotten very homogenized. There is less and less room for a band like us. Add to that the fact that we are not a very trendy band. We are working with concepts and heavy metal, which in the minds of a lot of people went out of fashion a long time ago."

Well, that was then and now is

now. There are very few FM stations in North America that give Rush the cold shoulder today and in September, 1982, the band had a one-hour television special broadcast on CBC television. Horror of horrors, the band may just have become trendy. Be that as it may, the members of Rush are quite unaffected by it and have changed very little since those early days on the bar circuit in Toronto. More experienced, mature and worldly perhaps, but certainly bereft of those massive egos that crowd the corridors of the entertainment business.

Perhaps the real beginning of Rush's career can be traced back to the day that they met Ray Danniels, a straight-to-the-target type of guy who began booking the band from a small apartment on Bathurst Street furnished with the necessities of life — a phone



Geddy Lee of Rush (centre) with the Canadian comedy team of Bob and Doug McKenzie (a.k.a. Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas).

An unlikely combination—Judy Collins and Geddy Lee.



and an old trunk to put it on. Soon after, he began managing the band and, with partner Vic Wilson, began to push and shove the group up the long hill to rock-and-roll stardom. By early 1973, the band, which then consisted of Alex Lifeson, Geddy Lee and John Rutsey on drums, was ready to record. They cut a few songs at Eastern Sound Studios in Toronto and at producer Terry Brown's Toronto Sound Studio and emerged with a completed album shortly after.

After the major record companies tendered some rather insulting offers to the group, Daniels and Wilson decided to take what little money they did have and put the record out in April of 1974 on their own newly-formed record label, Moon Records.

During this period, John Rutsey left the group for health reasons, and was replaced by Neal Peart, a percussionist of great imagination and lyrical skill. It was a perfect match, and Lifeson and Lee's music began to blend with Peart's "sword and sorcery tales" to mold Rush's musical style into what it is today.

One need look no further than the story concepts that developed on their LP 2112 to see Peart's significant influence on the creative direction of the group. 2112 was a concept album with lyrics patterned after an idea he had read in one of Ayn Rand's books. FAREWELL TO KINGS introduced Cygnus X-1, a spaceship that had set out to explore one of the black holes in outer space. That story is completed on HEMI-SPHERES, where the divided hemispheres of mind and heart were brought together by Cygnus, the god of balance.

The first album RUSH (1974), received a lukewarm reception in Canada but in the U.S. it caught the ear of Donna Halper, a radio programmer at the radio station WMMS-FM in Cleveland and a connoisseur of Canadian music, and she began playing it to en-



Rush, featuring (left to right) Neil Peart, Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson during a recording session at Le Studio in Morin Heights, just north of Montreal.

thusiastic response from her listening audience. Rush's career mushroomed from there. Mercury Records in Chicago signed the band, as did Ira Blacker, a powerful agent in the U.S. who finally left the agency he worked with, American Talent International, to take on Rush as a pet project.

From that point on, touring became the order of the day, initially in the U.S. and Canada but later further afield to other corners of the globe. The subsequent albums, *FLY BY NIGHT* (1975), *2112* (1976), *CARESS OF STEEL* (1977), *ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE (LIVE)* (1977), *FAREWELL TO KINGS* (1977), *HEMISPHERES* (1978), *PERMANENT WAVES* (1980), *MOVING PICTURES* (1981) and *SIGNALS* (1982) were released and built the band's fanatical following.

In 1981, besides releasing an-

other live LP entitled *EXIT... STAGE LEFT*, recorded during twelve dates of the band's Permanent Waves British tour, Geddy Lee recorded a single with Bob and Doug McKenzie, two hosers who successfully portrayed the "typical" Canadians on the highly-rated SCTV *Network* television comedy show. Rick Moranis (Bob) and Dave Thomas (Doug and the brother of Canadian artist Ian Thomas) got together with Lee to record the single *TAKE OFF*, which was featured on their LP *GREAT WHITE NORTH*, released on Anthem Records, Rush's label.

The joke used to be that the best thing to come out of Toronto was Highway 401, but in the music business, Rush has forged their own category. Though the centre of the Canadian music industry in a business sense has

always been Toronto, it is interesting to note that very few of Canada's big name acts have ever emerged from that city. Many have passed through from other cities and towns in Canada but few before Rush have actually been born and bred in Toronto. Perhaps there is a moral to be found here. Even when Rush had become a big name in their home town, they didn't rest on their laurels in what has become one of the most insular music scenes on the continent. From Willowdale to the concert stages of the world.

With the release of the latest LP, *SIGNALS*, Rush was back on tour again expanding their musical horizons and their already significant following in the rock world.

"With this album, we'll still be doing six months on the road, but three months at a time — staying out until December, then



Rush's Alex Lifeson, Neil Peart and Geddy Lee have developed a major following while evolving from heavy metal to a distinctive, virtuoso style.

taking a break and going back in the early part of next year (1983)," drummer Neil Peart told *Music Express* writer Greg Quill in September of 1982. "It's a fine line. In some ways, being on the road is the best thing for a musician. I find that at the end of a tour I'm playing a lot better and I've learned a lot of new things I've had time to work on. And I've seen many parts of North America and Europe and have a wealth of new input, impressions, ideas, faces. Those are very valuable things to

be able to bring to the studio, so I couldn't see just being a studio band. That would alter our perspectives, our growth as musicians and, in my case, as a writer.

"The more I learn about the world, the less nationalistic I become. I really want to get one of those Citizen of the World flags like they use on boats and hang it over my house. I'm very, very tired of nationalism, I must admit. As far as musicians go, I have aspirations for musicians in general. The doors are open in Cana-

da now. There's no reason anymore for excuses that Canadians can't make it unless they go to the States. There is real individuality in Canada, but not where people look for it. It's there, it's always been there — in the Laurentians, in the Prairies, out in Vancouver — but you have to get out there and find it. Nothing will stop true originality and no amount of flag waving can accentuate it. It just is. It's special. But you can't tell people what's under their noses."