

Rush

IN THE COURSE OF THE PAST FIVE YEARS, OR SO, RUSH HAVE BECOME POSSIBLY THE MOST SUCCESSFUL FOREIGN BAND IN THE U.K. WE SENT MAX KAY TO TALK WITH GUITARIST ALEX LIFESON (PHOTOS BY GEOFF DANN).



Rush are a very private band who employ friends to work for them, and although they agreed to an interview with MUSIC U.K., it was to be strictly one to one basis, which unfortunately for our photographer, meant that he had to sit and wait outside the dressing rooms with only a security guard for company, whilst Alex locked himself and myself firmly behind a closed dressing room door. HEAV-VEE!

One of the more astonishing facts of life with Rush is that they don't use any backing tracks onstage. Bearing in mind that there are only three people in the band, they create an incredibly powerful texture of sound that sees Geddy jumping between bass, synthesisers and Taurus bass pedals, with Lifeson featured on guitar and bass pedals. The resulting mix gives Rush the biggest as opposed to the loudest live sound I've heard this side of Led Zeppelin, with the drums and percussion clearly miked and prominently placed in the final mix.

"All of our bass pedals are interfaced with the synthesisers so that you can get big bright

synthesiser chords by hitting one note on a bass pedal" reveals Alex.

Perhaps one of the odder aspects of Rush is that drummer Neil Peart writes all the lyrics for the band.

"Geddy and I didn't want to write lyrics, we never were interested in writing lyrics, and Neil was, he was prepared to take that gig and it's just stuck with him. Really when you sit down and write music it's difficult for a drummer to get anything across other than tempo changes or whatever I immediately disagree with Lifeson after witnessing Peart that very night playing one of, if not *the*, most musical drum solos I've heard at a rock gig.

"The arrangement that we have really works quite well. When we write, Geddy and I will spend the afternoon together writing the music to Neil's lyrics, or he will bring something later and we will fit it in."

Onstage the almost telepathic relationship between the members of Rush has in the past been mistaken for a slick, polished operation with the result that the band didn't rehearse too much in preparation for this tour, though this fact is a hard one to be-

lieve after what I saw at Wembley "Finally" says Alex "in the evening after dinner (how civilised) the three of us will get together and work out, basically rehearse the track that was written in the afternoon."

He goes on to tell me that Geddy enjoys his Steinberger bass which almost everybody who's anybody in the rock world seems to be playing right now, and gives me a very brief resume of the band's career to date.

"We started in 1968 with a different drummer, we played the regular circuit of high

"1974 WE HAVE BEEN TOURING AND RECORDING SINCE THEN."

schools until the drinking age was lowered in Ontario, Canada (the band's homeland) in 1970. At that point we could play bars, so that made up the majority of the work we did. We continued until 1973 when we recorded the first album (*Rush*), which was released locally in and around Toronto, and then we got a deal with Mercury/Phonogram in August of 1974 when Neil joined the band on drums, and we have been touring and recording since then."

In that time they've worked hard laying the

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groundwork for their loyal following, releasing 12 albums along the way. Titles so far include *Rush*, *Fly by Night*, *Carriers of Steel*, *2112*, *All the World's a Stage*, *Farewell to Kings*, *Archives*, *Hemispheres*, *Permanent Waves*, *Moving Pictures*, *Exit Stage Left*, up until the current day with the release of *Signals*. It all adds up to the biggest selling Canadian rock act in America — worldwide too probably.

Lifeson has been playing guitar since the age of 11, which means 18 years of hard graft so far. In the early years he studied classical guitar and occasionally he still finds time to pick up a piece of music, sit down with it, and figure it out, although he admits that his old reading technique is a bit rusty.

"When I'm recording I like to go into the studio and spend a couple of days doing solos, working on a sound and then working on a solo, and usually doing a composite of a number of tracks, and then taking it from that point and refining it until we get something that we're happy with."

Outside of Rush, Alex keeps up his interest in classical, but insists it takes a back seat to the music he plays with the band. "In the beginning I was influenced by Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, and my style was one of speed pretty well, I tried to play as fast as I could and emulate the qualities of these guitarists. Since then I've tried to make more out of less and be a little more emotive, a little more tasteful in what I do."

"Nowadays I can play most of the music I imagine For me it's something from the heart, something that I feel. Actually I'll play and not really think about what I'm playing, and often it's just what comes out." For all you budding guitar players out there who hope to improve, Alex Lifeson has a message of encouragement. "Playing has



always been something that I've enjoyed so much that I've never looked at it in terms of being difficult. Every time I'd gone a little further I felt good really good about that and very satisfied with it. In the earlier days I'd think the most difficult thing to understand was a steady tempo, but playing as much as we do and working with a click track in the studio for instance, I have a much keener sense with tempo than I ever did."

Although he owns 25 guitars, in other words at least 200 less than a certain Mr. Entwistle he doesn't have any strict preferences.

"I don't really have any particular guitar that I favour over any others, they each have a certain quality that I like about them. As far as sound goes that's something I've been refining over the years as anyone does. I suppose when you get to the point where you're happy with the way it sounds, and you've achieved what's in your head, then you have it."

The instrument that Alex chose to play for most of the set the night I was there was a black 1978/79 Fender Stratocaster. "I've changed the necks on the black Strat and another white one that I have at home. A company in Ottawa makes them, it's a flatter

"I TEND TO FAVOUR GIBSON AND FENDER, IT'S NOT THAT I DISLIKE THE SMALLER INDEPENDENTS"

neck, a little shallower in the back, and there's no lacquer on them at all, just straight wood — it's got a nice feel on the back."

Further changes made to his black Strat include replacing the rear pickup for a Bill Lawrence L500 (a modification he's made to all his instruments) and supplementing it with a Floyd Rose Tremelo.

"Two of my guitars are fitted with Kholer tremelo which is produced by a small company just outside San Diego, it enables me to fine tune the guitar at the bridge."

Other than the aforementioned black and white Stratocasters, there's another red one lurking in the Lifeson collection along with a Gibson Howard Roberts Fusion, a Gibson ES355 (the mono version of a 335) which he's owned for the past seven years, and a Gibson 6/12 Doubleneck.

"I tend to favour Gibson and Fenders, it's not that I dislike the smaller independents, I

just have so many guitars as it is that I'm quite happy with."

The Lifeson backline on this tour consists of four Marshall 100 watt combos, all set up differently, with three of them miked up. "One has a pretty hot sound that I want to hear, and the other two are clean with most of the top rolled off to give a little more low end. We've brought the sound level down so much onstage, it's a lot more controllable. I never thought I could get used to it but now I couldn't imagine going back to four Marsh-

"I'VE GOT TWO OBERHEIM OBXA'S . . . PLUS MY BASS PEDALS."

all stacks and belting it out. The PA, we've made a lot of improvements on, so that it's preferable to put more through the PA now, and if the sound is lower onstage, it's obviously more controllable."

The fun really begins when I enquire what is the Alex Lifeson wardrobe of effects, and it turns out to be almost everything bar the digital sink.

"Almost all my effects are on the floor rather than being added on the mixing desk. They include an Electric Mistress, a couple of Yamaha delays, a harmoniser, parametric, two Boss Choruses, analogue delay, Morley volume pedal, MXR distortion, noisegate, wah-wah pedal" All of these effects form part of the unique Rush sound when combined with the talents of its various members.

I ask Alex how the back projections and mini-movie came about, which form a very important part of the Rush stage show?

"It's a very, very expensive medium to get involved with so we had to budget ourselves carefully, and try to get the most out of 30 seconds of film that we could. We use a guy in Toronto and Geddy gets quite involved with him. He'll go down and work on ideas with him, and we'll work on the concept all of us together, but as our relationship grows, there's more and more confidence in what he does, so that basically we can just leave it up to him."

I inquire what synthesisers are currently being played by Geddy and Alex.

"Geddy has two Oberheim OBXA's, one Minimoog, Roland Jupiter 8, a Roland 808 drum machine, and the Taurus pedals, and I've got two Oberheim OBXA's too, plus my

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bass pedals. We tend to split the pedal playing pretty evenly, though I probably play a little more bass pedals than he does, because he spends more time with his hands on the keyboards."

The Lee setup unlike Lifeson's is powered by a pair of BGW power amps, and two Ashley pre-amps.

Being one of the luckier people in this life, Alex has his own private 16-track studio at home in Canada, and he seemed to relish the idea of getting back to it as quickly as possible. He's been on the road with this tour since August last year and it's no surprise he's not had the time to record a solo project, something he would very much like to do.

"I'd certainly like to do a solo record, it's just finding the time to do it, we work a lot. I work in my own studio at home but everything I do there we end up using in the band anyway."

As I said earlier on in this piece, Rush are a

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very private band, and throughout our conversation I gained the impression that although Alex Lifeson is an extremely charming fellow, he would only tell me what he thought I should know.

"We're pretty insular" he volunteers, "the organisation (sounds like the Mob) is very close, all the people that work for us are friends, so we have our own world on the road, and it keeps us sane. We're not a wild band, we went through a phase like that when we first started out and everything was exciting, we had more time. But work's work and you lose interest in smashing up hotel rooms (all band members graduated from the Moon Academy of Trashing) and going absolutely crazy, but there's still the odd night when everyone does. With some people it's something to do with some kind of image

they're trying to convey. Uhm, for us it really was moments of frustration." This malpractice Alex assures me has little to do with shacking up in Holiday Inns. "That's certainly one element of it, but there's days when there's a full moon and you feel a little crazy." Fortunately for me he has another 10 days to wait for the next one, but as he sniggered I check the room out for loose fitments none thank God! As with most bands, Rush have their detractors, probably none more so than the British Press.

"It was always difficult to get the Press on our side. In the beginning we were labelled as just a lousy Led Zeppelin copy, screeching vocals, and that really stuck with us for a few years, but we kept playing and touring and became much closer with our audience and that's the sort of relationship that we have. The Press was never important. It didn't

"... WE'VE HAD MORE BAD PRESS THAN GOOD PRESS..."

matter if we had singles or not, we could still play for the people we wanted to play for and it just grew that way. Eventually the Press had to take notice of us, take us a little more seriously. I guess any band will tell you that they've had a hard time with the Press. You get a few lousy reviews or album critiques, and of course you could say that the Press has put you down. I think generally we've had more bad press than good press, but in certain ways, I think that weighs in our favour"

After polishing off a glass of standard Perrier interview water that he's been sipping throughout, Alex Lifeson lights a cigarette, shakes my hand and disappears out of the door leaving me alone to pack my things in the cold harsh light of the dressing room. Out in the corridor, the security guard grunts as I bid my farewell. "Hey" calls out one of the roadcrew "did you get what you wanted?" Now maybe I'm in the wrong business, but still occasionally I feel the ghoul rise in my soul at these affairs. I do understand how Alex Lifeson feels about being interviewed, all the prying, he's just too much of a gentleman to come out and say it!

"Get what you want" demands my by now bored looking photographer?

"Did you" I enquire??

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