

"You feel there's something calling you
You're wanting to return
To where the misty mountains rise
And friendly fires burn
A place you can escape the world
where the Dark Lord cannot go
Peace of mind and sanctuary
By loudwater's flow"
(*Rivendell*)

THE STORY starts in Holland, where I've arrived to witness a concert just prior to Rush's current UK tour.

The venue's in Rotterdam and, boy, it's a big one. I didn't realise halls of this size existed in Europe — I thought they were the exclusive province of the US of A. It's a massive, dome-like affair with a steeply-banked cycle track running around inside, full of enough crazed Netherlanders to plug a coupla million leaky dykes.

Rush time their entrance perfectly. Just as the level of crowd excitement reaches fever pitch, the band hit the stage and the crowd erupt Etna-style with relief.

It's a titanic techno-rock opening: 'Spirit Of The Radio' and 'Tom Sawyer' storm from the PA speakers, their complex and ambitious musical sounds tempered by Rush's onstage warmth and sensitivity.

With the lighting man beside me gesticulating madly and hitting those switches like some crazed telephone exchange operator (creating, it must be said, some spectacular onstage FX into the bargain) I settle back in anticipation of a stormer of a show.

And a stormer is what we get. Well ... almost. It's a lengthy set, inevitably dominated by tracks from Rush's last album 'Signals', but with a few old favourites slotted in along the way. I must admit that I'm still struggling to come to terms with the bulk of the 'Signals' material but, nonetheless, several songs from the LP, as performed tonight, deserve special mentions.

'Subdivisions' hits home with its disturbing message of urban paranoia, its clipped lyrics enhanced by a most effective slide show (was that Toronto's famed CNE Tower dominating the cosey houses in the foreground?).

'The Weapon' (part two of the intriguing 'Fear' package) impresses with its 'epic' feel — belying its hilarious 3-D vampiric introduction.

And 'Countdown', somewhat surprisingly perhaps, has you on the edge of your seat as well. I had this particular toon numbered as a rather disposable 'Signals' track, conveniently situated on the end of side two (encouraging you to flip the needle prematurely and skip it). But live it really comes together, the exclusive NASA screen visuals giving the song a whole new impetus. The Hawkwind spirit lives on!

But, old bore that I am, Rush's old 'uns still hold the most attraction for me — specifically the beauteous, chanting spirit of 'Closer To The Heart', the folksy 'Trees' and the rubber-burnin' 'Red Barchetta'.

From my point of view — there ain't enough oldies. Because now, more than ever, my impression is that Rush seem hell bent on abandoning their past heritage and leaping headlong into a twitching, synthing, modernistic

wild blue yonder.

It's their decision ... but it's sad to see the band's world-renowned, end-of-set mayhem medley becoming increasingly perfunctory.

Of course, on the one hand it's good 'n' light-hearted to hear Alex Lifeson croaking a few "Oooh-aaahs" during the brief '2112' segment, and naturally the well-documented 'lyrical alterations' cause a degree of amusement, but, I wonder ...

I wonder if Rush may be treating their 'formative' beginnings too flippantly? Surely a proportion of the crowd has paid its money to hear those songs and hear them done right ...?

For what they're worth, those are my thoughts. And now for Geddy's ...

"SO WHAT did you think of the show?" asks Rush bassist Geddy Lee the next day.

I've known the guy for too long to pander to him, to indulge in a fit of ego-stroking. "Well, to be honest," I reply, "I thought it went from two extremes — from the utterly brilliant to the totally boring."

"Uh-huh," Lee nods his head sagely. "That's ... interesting."

We're sitting in a dimly-lit Amsterdam hotel room at a ridiculously early hour of the morning. Lee has packed his suitcase, he's ready to move on to Paris within the hour. I get the feeling that, perhaps, he'd rather be checked out and on his way than shut in here talking to me.

And yet I don't think his non-committal comment "That's interesting" stems from any true lack of concern with the interview, any burning desire to be aboard a plane bound for France.

Of course, Ged isn't the type to throw a superstar tantrum and shout, maniacal McEnroe style, "The show, boring? You cannot be serious!" It's just that, increasingly over the years, Rush have become masters of their own destiny, a law unto themselves.

Rush change direction, experiment with new musical styles, enhance their sound with new technology ... because they want to, not because some dubious outsider is pulling the strings or prodding them along some predetermined path.

Opinions, adverse or favourable, are studied at a polite distance. And then they're discarded ... because the band know what they're doing is right.

It's not arrogance. It's not even self-indulgence. It's just Rush, take them or leave them. Love them or leave them.

For example: Geddy Lee is perfectly aware that 'Signals' and the new Rush music may well have alienated many fans, yours truly (possibly) included.

"We cannot stand still," he stresses. "We're forever searching, improving and developing the band. If we lose a certain amount of fans along the way, if people can't accept a particular musical direction, then so be it. We'll cope with that."

"We simply can't compromise. It's not in our nature to do so."

So the key phrase is — progress to survive.

"That's right. Some bands are content to turn out the same old stuff year after year and just sit back and watch the bucks keep rolling in. That's fine, if it suits them that's

fine. But we need to move onwards — come the first inkling of stagnancy and we're off and away again."

And Rush are 'moving onwards' with a vengeance at the moment.

Geddy: "Our last album 'Signals' was in many ways the beginning of a new era for us. But if you asked me what shape or form this 'new era' will be taking ... I really couldn't tell you for sure! I honestly can't put my finger on it, there are so many different factors pulling at us from so many different sides."

"Feel remains important to us — I think I mentioned this fact to you once before in connection with a question about our ever-increasing reggae influences." (For further embellishment, see my last Rush feature.) "We don't want to become too cold — and for that reason I'm a little worried about the growing use of the synthesiser in our music. The main reason why I think 'Signals' was badly received by a section of our fans was that on the album Alex Lifeson was relegated to a relatively minor guitar role, because of the preponderance of synths. That's something that's certainly got to change."

"Also there's the old bugbear about me having to play both bass and keyboards. I really am a bass player first and foremost and, I can't deny it, I do get frustrated with having to play keyboards onstage at times. I wish I could grow another pair of arms!"

"Increasingly I'm finding that, whenever I've finished with the keyboards in a show for a while, I return to my bass and I go wild, I play all these intricate runs, just to get rid of my annoyance."

YOU MENTIONED earlier that you're concerned about Rush becoming 'too cold'. Last night I noticed that you've loosened up considerably onstage — you're more accessible, less aloof than you were a year ago. Is this as a direct result of your 'concern'?

Geddy: "I think so. On our last tour we really played too many shows, we were becoming too tight, too mechanical, a lot of the spontaneity had gone out of us. I found myself going out onstage thinking about baseball rather than the night's show!"

"Things had become second nature to us ... the, if you like, telepathic links between myself, Alex and Neil had become so well established that we weren't thinking about or particularly enjoying what we were doing."

Continues over



Pix by Ross Helfin

THE RUSH SANCTUARY BREACHED

BY GEOFF BARTON

"So for this tour we hardly rehearsed at all. We wanted to become less slick, more unpredictable. We figured people would prefer to see a human display with errors than something cool, calculated and mechanical."

Staying on the subject of this Rush stage show for a moment, would you admit to a certain reluctance to play much of your older material — specifically songs from your revered (by me, at least) sword and sorcery period?

Geddy: "I guess. But really, we do play a heckuva long set and you can't please all the people all of the time. We've dropped 'Working Man', for example — but that even pre-dates most of our so-called sword and sorcery numbers!"

"You've got to draw a line — after you've played a tune onstage something like 500 times it's inevitable that you'll tire of it, there's no way that you can still perform that song with commitment and true feeling. Nevertheless, you'll still get fans coming up to you saying, 'Where's 'Working Man'? You dropped it? You shitsheads!' But it's a decision you have to make. If it's starting to grow stale, it's out."

"There may well come a time when we'll drop *all* material from our first four or five albums. Equally, in a year or so's time, we could suddenly reinstate a whole lot of it. Only time will tell."

How do you look back on some of your early songs like 'By-Tor And The Snow Dog', 'Rivendell' and 'The Necromancer'? Do they hold fond memories — or are you now embarrassed by them?

Geddy: "I have fond memories of them. Nowadays, to me, they sound a little dated, extremely naive ... but that's OK. I still listen to the albums those songs are from" ('Fly By Night' and 'Caress Of Steel') "and they're good records. I'm not going to disown them if that's what you're trying to make me do."

"We were bright-eyed and innocent back then, we had a whole different sound, a whole different image. I mean — look at photos of Alex around that time. He used to have long blond hair, he used to wear silk and satin, long, flowing robes. And now... well, he's a kind of dapper college boy. Things move on, times change."

Yeah... the 1983 Rush is a markedly different animal from the mid-Seventies model. Back then the band were upfront, flashy and flamboyant; now they seem almost calculatedly nondescript and anonymous. Times *do* change — but why so severely?

Geddy: "I suppose success has a lot to do with it. As we began to sell more albums and play bigger halls so we started to kind of... retreat into ourselves. It's a precautionary measure — we wanted to say sane and in order to do so we opted out of the rock 'n' roll circus, we started to behave how we wanted to, not how other people expected us to."

Out of the trio, drummer Neil Peart in particular seems to have undergone a drastic change of character. In his twirly-moustache days he cut a dynamic, extrovert, almost swashbuckling figure. Now, clean shaven, shorn of hair and rarely photographed, it's hard to believe he's the same man.

Geddy: "That's something in his character that he deals with in his own way. In order for him to get through it."

"Neil's the kind of person who loves what he does, loves playing, loves playing live, loves making records, but doesn't like anything else that goes along with it."

"He likes to be anonymous. And to have a guy who likes



to remain anonymous playing totally *un*-anonymous gigs in vast sports arenas... that's difficult, and he deals with it in his own way.

"Neil just focusses on what's really important to him — and that's making music, playing well and enjoying himself."

UNDERSTAND. But by the same token it could be argued that, because Neil, Alex and yourself are above all else *rock musicians*, you have a certain public obligation to present yourself less enigmatically, more accessibly. You're duty-bound to —

"We're duty-bound to give a good show," interrupts Geddy. "It's like Humphrey Bogart said, the only thing you owe your audience is a good performance — and I really think that's true. I don't think we necessarily owe it to our audience to sit backstage and sign autographs for two

hours. We do it, but we don't owe it to them. I personally like to do that because I enjoy meeting the fans, talking to them, having some kind of communication with them."

"Look at it like this — this is a good example. On our last British tour, at almost every gig we stood out back and signed autographs. Pretty well on every British tour we've ever done we've done that."

"But I remember one time we were driving back from Glasgow and we were just beat. And a bunch of kids came knocking on our car door wanting autographs and... we just couldn't do it. We were just *out there*."

"So what's the next thing I see? Letters in *Sounds* saying what a bunch of pricks we are because we didn't sign autographs on just this *one isolated occasion*."

"Where does it end, you know? You've got to draw some kind of line — no matter what you do, how much you try to please, it's still not enough. You miss out on some kid — and he thinks you're a jerk for the rest of his life."

"You can't give all of yourself away, or there's nothing left. It really comes down to basics — you owe your audience good performances, good records... and there it should stop."

So what you're really talking about is the dividing line between an artist's private and public life. And Rush just so happen to draw that line a little higher up than most.

Geddy: "You have to protect yourself. You have to keep something of yourself to yourself. Or else you become a person that's always on call — every time somebody requires your presence, you're *there*. And after a while you don't know what you believe in, you don't know what your priorities are any more."

"If I sign an autograph it's because I want to, it's not because I feel it's an obligation. I wonder how many bands feel *obliged* to hand out autographs? I wonder how many bands don't give a fuck about their audience but just stand there and sign their names because they reckon it'll help record sales?"

"That's pretty insincere..."

AND WITH that comment, the interview comes to a close. Geddy has to catch that flight to France — if he misses the plane, he misses the night's performance in Paris. And that, in Mr Lee's eyes, had just got to be an absolutely *unforgivable* prospect.

As I watch the man leave, a frail, decidedly unrockstar-like figure stumbling along with a weighty bag and a massive portable radio/cassette player, you can't help but sympathise with his views, feel a deal of respect for his pleas for privacy.

Because Rush, like I said earlier, are a law unto themselves. Leaders in a field of one. You can follow them or dump them; revere them or detest them. It's your choice.

The band owe you good albums, good shows. At the very least you owe them an open mind... but there it ends.

Outside the plush Pulitzer hotel, Geddy Lee leaps into a limo bound for Amsterdam airport. As the car move off and edges its way into traffic my mind — strangely, but aptly — drifts and latches on to *Hill St Blues* and that TV series' cunning little catchphrase.

Suddenly, I find myself wishing I'd offered it to Geddy as a parting shot. In the light of our discussion, it would have been just perfect.

I wish I'd've said — "And hey, let's be careful out there!"