



ALEX LIFESON / RUSH

INTERVIEW CHARLIE GRIFFITHS

Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson is an unassuming, softly spoken Toronto native and the founding member of one of the most influential and successful rock trios of all time. Now, 39 years since Rush's inception, Alex remains as passionate as ever and, despite a difficult hiatus between 1996 and 2002, their 18th studio album, *Snakes & Arrows*, is one of their best works yet.

What inspired you to take up the guitar?

"It was such a long time ago I can barely remember! I listened to the radio a lot when I was a kid, got into the early Stones, The Who and Hendrix and that whole crew from the late 60s. My brother-in-law had a classical guitar that I used to play a lot and I would try to learn songs, so my parents bought me an acoustic guitar for Christmas when I was 13 and then bought me an electric guitar the following year for about \$50."

Were you a focused student?

"All I wanted to do was play guitar. I would come home from school and immediately go to my room and play until dinner time, and then all night – and I did that day after day. I'd play records and try to pick out parts and try to figure out chords. Learning to play Clapton's solo from *Spoonful* from *Fresh Cream* all the way through was quite a momentous thing. I was never someone who would practise scales. I really would just sit down and play for my own enjoyment, and that's what I still do today."

Where did the classical element of your style come in?

"I studied classical [guitar] when I was 18 for about a year. I really would have loved to continue with it; I loved the discipline involved. At around that time Rush went from playing Friday night school dances and the occasional bar gig to playing six nights a week in clubs, so I fell out of the routine, but I still tried to incorporate it into my playing."

Were you performing your own stuff?

"We started writing songs very early on, within weeks of getting together actually. I was about 15 when we started the band. We got together on the 18 September 1968 and by the spring of '69 about a third of our repertoire was original material. Around that time my influences became more diverse: Steve Hackett, Steve Howe, David Gilmour, Pete Townshend. I took a little bit from them all. As guitarists, we all learn from each other."

At what point did you realise you were on to something big?

"*Permanent Waves* [1980] seemed like a real transition point. It was a much smoother record to make than say the previous album *Hemispheres* was – that was a difficult album to make! With *Waves* we started to become a lot more economic with our writing. Although there's some longer stuff on that record, we were thinking more in terms of single songs that would stand up on their own. That really led onto *Moving Pictures*, where we really nailed those things. That was a turning point for the band live too; we started to leave that stage where we were opening for bigger bands to becoming a major headliner."

How does it feel to have so many bands cite Rush as an influence?

"It's flattering, of course, but I think it's more our attitude that influenced those bands: we were honest with our music, we wouldn't compromise and we always pushed ourselves as musicians. There's a way to do it on your own terms, like Dream Theater or Soundgarden have done."

"After 33 years [from the release of debut album *Rush*], we are still moving forward and we're still in control of what we want to do, despite all the difficulties in the industry today. We have a mind of our own and we just follow it – whatever way we want – and we take responsibility for what we do."



You can't please everyone though, so how do adverse fan reactions affect you?

"There's definitely been stuff in the past that's fallen short of the mark we set ourselves. Our fans can be very vocal and we appreciate it, but our attitude is 'at least we tried it'. We're pretty good at learning from our mistakes. This band's gone through a lot of transitions, and that's been reflected in the personal experiences we were going through and the different producers we've worked with. The albums we did with Rupert Hine [*Presto* and *Roll The Bones*] were quite different things for us, especially for a band with hard rock roots."

So, how was it working with a producer that was known more for pop than rock?

"Working with someone who wasn't in that genre gave us different results from what we expected. Like any of our records I would approach it differently now, which I think is a good way to think about your stuff. I wouldn't want to redo them; I don't think we'd have arrived at this point without going through all those things that we went through."

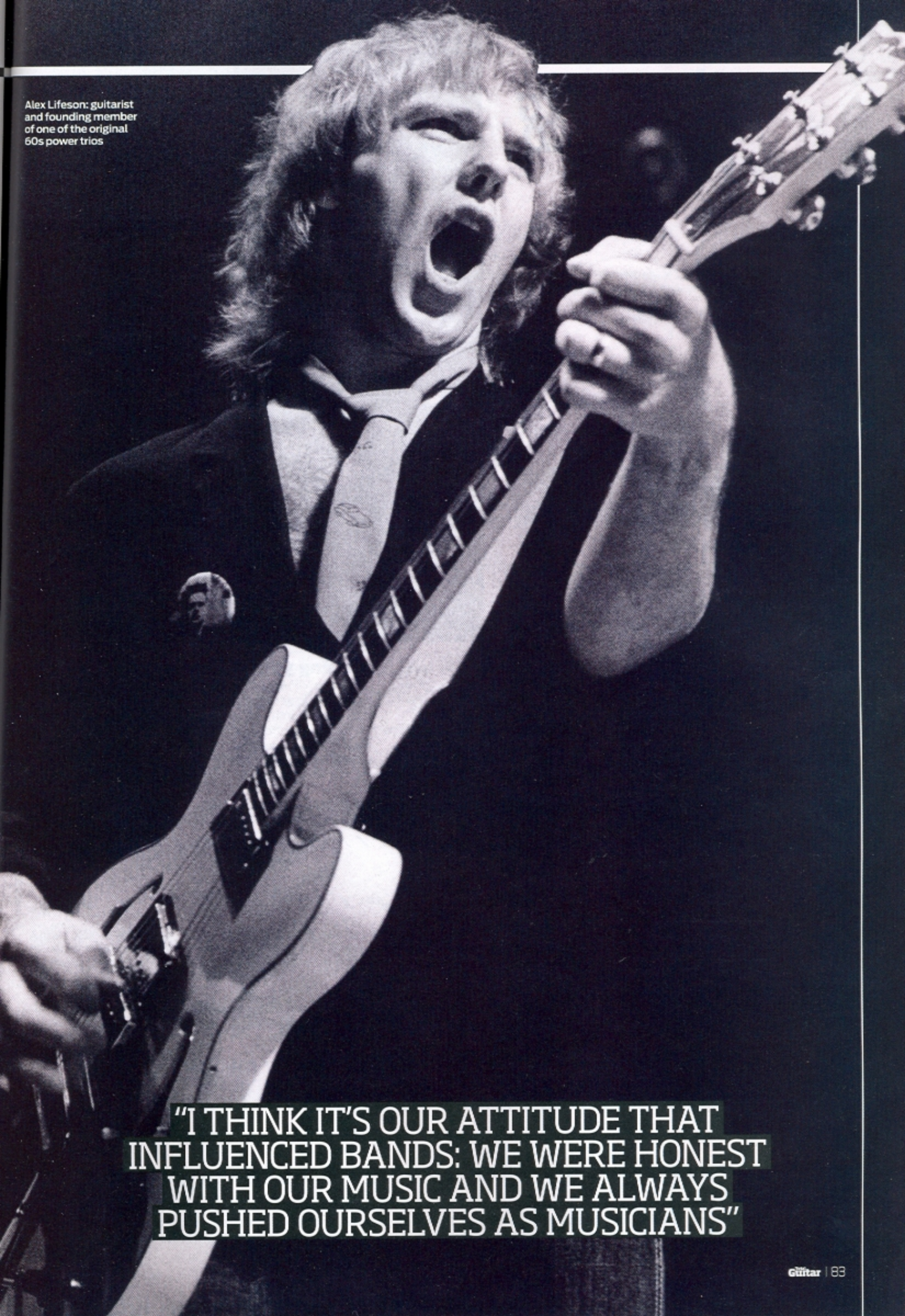
After the band's difficult hiatus, what was it like making *Snakes & Arrows*?

"*Snakes & Arrows* was a different process to anything before. Geddy [Lee, singer/bassist] lives only five minutes from me so I'd go over to his place and keep it nice and casual, like a few days a week. I wrote everything on acoustic as I found it much more expressive and it exposed the faults in the melodies much more rapidly than muddling it up with delay and chorus. We went to see Neil [Peart, drummer] in Quebec, and he fell in love with a couple of the songs we were working on – he saw the potential and saw the change."

Nick Raskulinecz, who's worked with Foo Fighters and Velvet Revolver, produced *Snakes & Arrows*. What did he bring to it?

"Meeting Nick was the final part of the jigsaw. He was quite a bit younger than us and very, very inspiring. He's a long time fan – the first concert he went to was a Rush concert – and had some great ideas about where he thought we should be going as Rush. It was very refreshing. Neil would do a fantastic take on a song and Nick would say, 'That's awesome, but could you go back in and try something completely different?' He was always looking to push and that's exactly the kind of guy that we want to work with."

Snakes & Arrows, Rush's 18th studio album, is out now on Atlantic Records

A black and white photograph of Alex Lifeson, a guitarist and founding member of Rush. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light-colored shirt, and a dark tie. He has long, wavy hair and is captured in a moment of intense performance, with his mouth wide open as if singing or shouting. He is holding a light-colored electric guitar, and his right hand is positioned on the neck. The background is dark and out of focus.

Alex Lifeson: guitarist
and founding member
of one of the original
60s power trios

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