

RUSH

permanent waves

PERSONAL WAVES:

The story of an album by Neil Peart

On June the fourth, 1979, the "Tour Of The Hemispheres", was brought to a successful but relieved close, at the Pink Pop Festival, in The Netherlands. After eight months of touring across Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe, it is probably self-evident that we were all very glad to be returning home for our first summertime vacation in about four years! One forgets what a stately and serene thing summer can be when subjected to the almost uninterrupted overcast skies which are native to south Wales, where our last two summers were spent. Out of one period of three weeks, two summers ago, the sun only shone for two days!

This also marked the first time that we had ever taken time off prior to recording an album, our usual schedule consisting of tour, tour, tour, tour, write-rehearse-record, and then perhaps a couple of brief weeks of Domestic Therapy in which to attempt to glue yourself back together before going on the road again! The advantages of a rest between touring and writing new songs are probably readily apparent to the discerning reader, and certainly proved themselves to us in the making of this record, however such a liberty had never before been economically possible for us. (Nor this time either, really). Such indulgence!

It was one of those classic, golden days of mid-July, six relaxing and enjoyable weeks later, we all made our way northward, to a small town not far from Georgian Bay, where we were to begin writing and rehearsing some new material. The place was Lakewoods Farm, a rambling and comfortable old farm-house, somewhat modernized, surrounded by a hundred acres of farmland, including a barn containing many interesting and articulate cows, and fascinating fields of dynamic wheat! About a quarter mile distant from the house was a rough little cottage, set on a jewel of a lake, which proved to be the perfect setting for a flow of lyric writing.

I arrived in the afternoon to find Alex happily at work in the kitchen preparing his famous lasagna, as he is our willing and very able chef on every possible occasion (even on the bus microwave!), and from the basement came the exploratory mewings of the long-awaited Interface, a device which would allow Geddy to trigger all of the voices in his polyphonic synthesizer by depressing one pedal of his Taurus Bass Pedals. This would give a rich and readily attainable texture to add to our sound, and came in very useful indeed. As did Alex's cooking.

So here we were, tanned, healthy, and well-rested, fair bursting with new ideas, and our gear crammed wall to wall in the basement. The first night we put together a giant hodge-podge of instrumental mish-mash, which we christened "Uncle Tounouse". It never became anything itself, but parts of it were plundered bit by bit to form quite a few other things. We soon settled into a schedule which both suited and served us well. After a huge breakfast from Alex, I would gather my things and walk down to the cottage, to spend the afternoon working on lyrics, while Alex and Geddy would descend to the basement to work on musical ideas. Within the first few days we had put together "The Spirit Of Radio", "Freewill", and "Jacob's Ladder", the ideas flowing in such a smooth and painless way that it almost seemed too easy! The only complete lyrics which I had brought with me were "Entre Nous", and neither Alex nor Geddy had brought more than a few incomplete musical ideas, just having clear and relaxed minds had made all the difference.

I had also been working on making a song out of a medieval epic from King Arthur's time, called "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight". It was a real story written around the 14th century, and I was trying to transform it while retaining it's original form and style. Eventually it came to seem too awkwardly out of place with the other material we were working on, so we decided to shelve that project for the time being. (More on that later).

One of the great feature attractions at Lakewoods Farm was Alex's radio-control airplane, and it's dramatic succession of "horrible crashes", into the trees, the fields, the cows, and finally to meet it's end on a combination of chimney and roof. One day four of us spent about four hours combining the waist-high fields in search of the out of control plane, and Alex would spend hours every day re-assembling the pieces with gallons of epoxy, styrofoam cups, elastic bands, toothpicks, bits of plastic, etc. Most entertaining!

These two idyllic weeks in the country were soon over, however, and it was time for the next step, into the Demo studio. We moved into a small studio in north Toronto called the Sound Kitchen, where we would be able to record the songs in a rough fashion, to hear what they really sounded like, and if they were any good or not! (All recording at the farm had been handled by the Slider JVC mobile unit, leaving him without a cassette player!) Also we had to prepare ourselves for an upcoming series of dates, which were to hone us into razor-sharp precision prior to entering the studio proper. We spent our time here refining and rehearsing the arrangements, again aided and edited by the keen perception and critical appraisal of the omniscient Broom, our beloved and belaboured co-producer. We also were to spend the last few days putting together a new stage presentation, and polishing up our older material. This we now did.

During this "Semi-tour of Some of the Hemispheres", we were able to play "The Spirit Of Radio", "Freewill" and "Jacob's Ladder" during our sound check every day, and the former two we had worked into the new show. This marked another significant historical first, the first time any amount of new material had been performed live prior to being recorded. The last song to receive this valuable advantage had been "Xanadu", and before that I think you'd have to go way back to the "Fly By Night" album to find any other examples of that phenomenon. Although it was only a three and half week tour, we did cover most of the area of the United States, along with two shows each in Canada and England, and by it's end we and the songs were certainly ready for the Main Event: Le Studio.

Le Studio is a wonderful place, nestled in a valley of the Laurentian Mountains about sixty miles north of Montreal. It is situated on 250 acres of hilly, wooded land, surrounding a private lake. At one end of the lake is the studio, with the luxurious and comfortable guest house situated at the other, about a mile away. We commuted by bicycle, rowboat, on foot, or in laziness or bad weather, by car. We arrived in the full ripe glory of autumn, and were there through a genuine Indian Summer, and we heralded the coming of snow and winter, all in our four week stay! The recording facilities are, of course, nothing less than excellent in every way. The room itself features one whole wall of glass, overlooking a spectacular view of the lake and mountains. This is in direct contrast to most studios, which are more in the way of being isolated, timeless vaults, which in that respect of course, are not necessarily bad. Here, though, we worked in the light of the sun, and one could watch the changing seasons in idle moments, rather than a dimly lit, smokey view of musical and electronic hardware. Our engineer, Paul Northfield, soon proved himself to be a helpful, capable and congenial member of the project, as did all of the excellent people who were employed there. I don't think we have ever been so well treated anywhere. Alex's place in the kitchen was taken over by the wondrous Andre, who would bring the most amazing French food to the house, or we could alternate by going on an "outing" to his restaurant, "La Barratte", which was in a nearby town. Suffice to say that we were well fed as well!

The great contributions put forth by Daisy, Mr. Broon's little cocker spaniel, must also be acknowledged. She was with us for the whole session, and her state-of-the-art sleeping and running around were an inspiration to us all!

We began our great labours by working on the individual sounds of the instruments. This consists of the musician banging away at his particular object, while the engineering types experiment with different microphones, mic positionings, and their own arcane world of knob-twiddling, faders, echoes, equalization, etc., refining the sound to a true and/or pleasing reproduction of the original. Once this has been accomplished, the three of us will play together, probably going over the song we plan to record first, and considerably more work is put into the sounds, to make them sit together properly.

By about the second day these complexities have been resolved to everyone's satisfaction, and work begins on the "basic track", or "bed track", or "rhythm track", take your pick! This is accomplished by the three of us performing the song, pretty much as we usually would, except that things such as vocals, acoustic guitars, lead guitar, synthesizers, and percussion are omitted. The reason for this is that better separation and more control over the eventual balance and quality of sound is possible when these lead parts, or embellishments are recorded separately, once a good rhythm track has been captured. Now we will be playing the song again and again until the best performance, both in it's execution and it's overall "feel", has been put onto the master tape. Here is where our preparation really proved it's value, as we were able to record basic tracks for "The Spirit Of Radio", "Freewill", "Jacobs Ladder" and "Entre Nous" in an amazingly short time, as well as arrange and record the previously unrehearsed "Different Strings", which we had been saving for the studio as a sort of production number.

There was still a gaping hole in our plans, however, for with the departure of "Gawain", we had left ourselves nothing with which to replace him! So... at this juncture we parted ways, Alex, Geddy, Terry and Paul to begin work on some of the overdubs, while I would be imprisoned in my room until I could emerge glowing triumphantly, clutching some wonder of spontaneous genius to my knotted and sweating brow!! — mere fantasy, I fear. Did I perhaps have a title? Ah, no. Did I have a few strong ideas lying around? Well, no. Did I have any ideas at all? Well, maybe, but not exactly. And for two days I stared in frustration and growing unease at blank sheets of paper, and questioning eyes. There is no doubt that working under pressure can be very rewarding, as we have found many times in the studio. It seems as if the creative mind slips into a burst of overdrive, allowing a brief exhausting, but productive surge in the creative process. On the third day of my confinement, this phenomenon arrived at last, and something new began to take shape. It was the product of a whole host of unconnected experiences, books, images, thoughts, feelings, observations and confirmed principles, that somehow took form of "Natural Science". At any rate, there it was, I liked it, and the others liked it too, so we began another brainstorming session to set the monster to music.

It was at this point in our story when the visitors arrived, in the person of Fin Costello, our effervescent and ever-ready Irish photographer, and our equally manic art director, Hugh Syme. This would be the first time that we had ever been photographed while working in the studio, but we have maintained such a long and amicable relationship with these two characters that there was little self-consciousness on our part. We just carried on working, while Fin went to work at capturing the moments you will see on the back cover and sleeve of the record. There was, of course, much silliness, as when Hugh led the band in an insane and endless version of "Ruff and Reddy", (!), but we somehow found time to utilize Hugh's piano artistry, on "Different Strings", which sounds very good indeed doesn't it? (You're welcome, Hugh).

To digress for a moment on the subject of the cover, planning and organizing had been going on in the background for the last couple of weeks. The album had still not received a title right up until the time we were ready to record, everytime we came up with something, it seemed to be already taken. Even when we did settle on the one, it immediately popped up all over the place too, but by now it was too late, as the artwork was already in progress, and we knew it to have been an original idea, if not the only one. Hugh is the main person involved in putting the cover together, he also contributes to the general layout, compiling the credits, choosing the photos, correcting and submitting the lyrics, and arguing about all of the things that we want and the record companies don't.

Meanwhile, back in Le Studio, "Natural Science" was becoming a song forged from bits from "Gawain", some instrumental ideas that were still unused, and some parts newly written. This is where we used up some of the time that we had gained earlier, as we had to work a lot on refining and rehearsing something as new and complex as this had grown to be. We were about halfway through our time there, and ready to move into the "Overdub Mode".

Mention must now be made of the great game of volleyball. At dinner time, and after the sessions at night, it was our great pleasure to play intensely athletic and competitive volleyball. One of a few games played in the pouring rain starred the members of Max Webster and their crew, while other games would continue despite mud-mires or blinding snow. One particularly warm night kept us playing until six o'clock in the morning! The studio's video-cassette camera also proved to be an interesting source of entertainment, one notable evening when we created "The Jack Secret Show", a half hour talk show starring Jack, Punjabi, and many other famous and interesting guests!

Frivolities aside, the work continued, as we plowed our way through a mountain of overdubs. Alex and I splashed oars in the lake with shivering hands to record the "Tide pool" effects, voices and guitar sounds were sent out over the lake to make use of it's natural echo, the tympani was recorded outdoors, guitar amps were strung all over the building to take advantage of as many different sounds as possible. The parade of guitars, synthesizers, vocals, percussion and experiments went on and the days wore away. But... we finished early!! We had about three days at the end to spare, in which we could make some rough mixes of the songs, to take home and listen to before the real mixing began. As straightforward and logical as this again must sound, it was the first time that such a thing had ever happened. In the past we had always had to begin mixing the day after the recording was finished, giving no opportunity to get away from the material, and return to it with a fresh, objective ear.

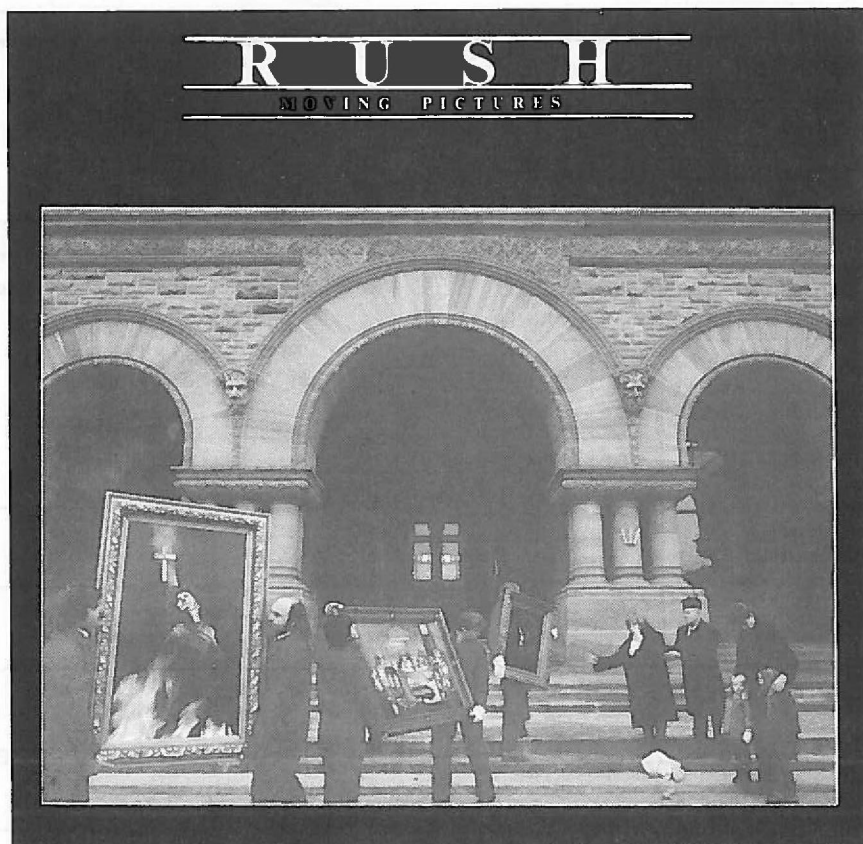
One week later, the four of us flew across to England to begin the two weeks of our sojourn at Trident, which is buried in the small street and lurid night-life of the Soho district of London. This would be the final stage in the album's history, the mixdown. I think that it is quite an obscure thing to many people, just exactly what is done here, so I'll take a moment to try and clarify it. The album is actually complete at this point, at least in terms of content, but there are a myriad of small adjustments to be made; individual sounds can be shaped slightly differently, relative balances can be altered, echoes or other effects can be added to certain sounds to make them more interesting, or to punctuate them, and the overall sound is made adaptable to different listening conditions or equipment. It is not so much any big changes as it is a whole host of small adjustments and tiny refinements.

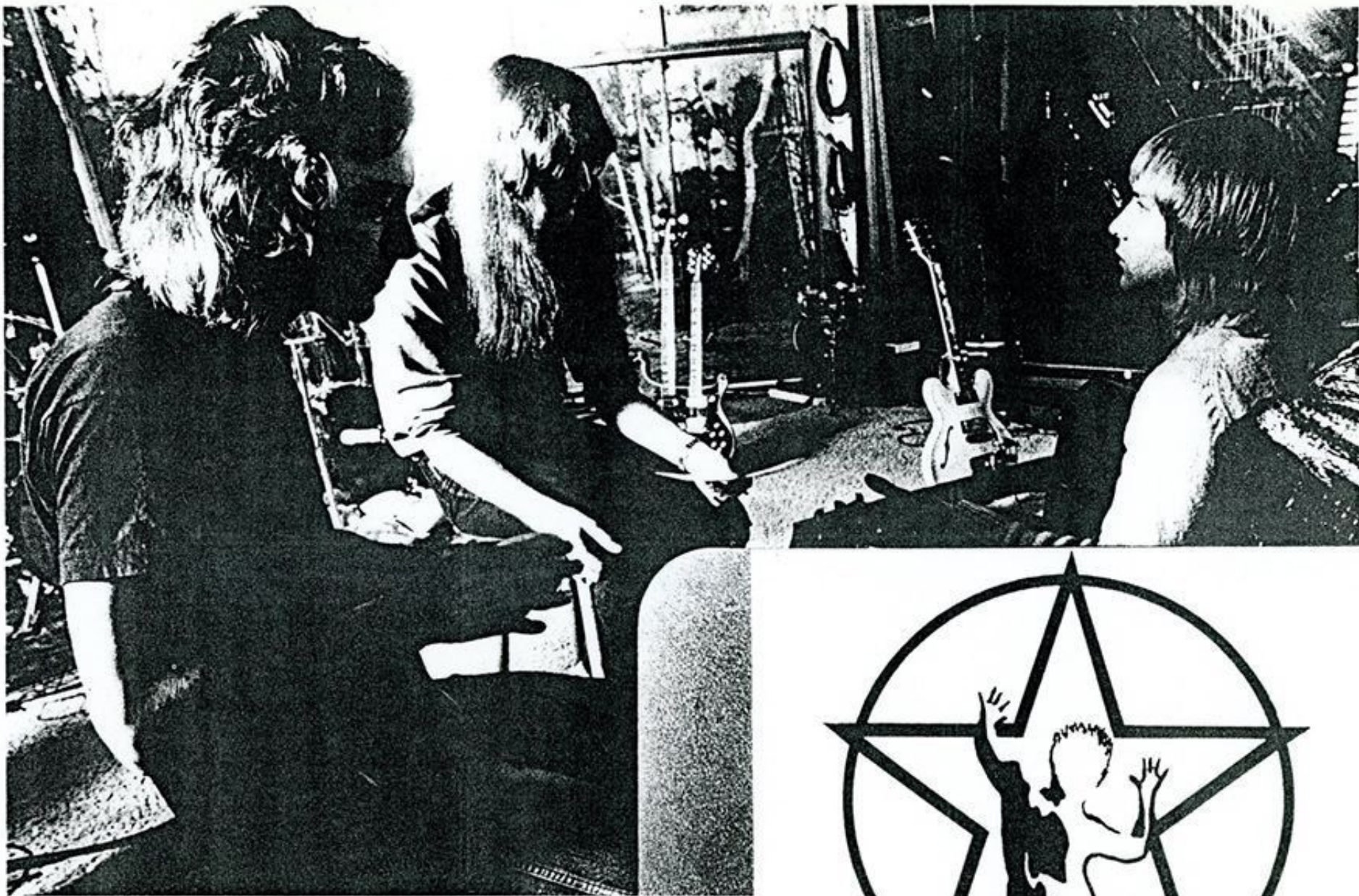
Here once again, Alex moves into the kitchen, as Trident is so completely equipped as to possess one, and proceeds to regale us yet again with a series of delicious meals.

This is also the point at which Mr. Broon really comes into his own. Taking over the engineering himself, the console becomes an instrument, as he and his capable assistants orchestrate the faders and switches. The gods once again rule in our favour, and we work ahead of schedule, our two weeks at Trident speeding pleasantly by. Soon it is time for that most satisfying and enjoyable of ceremonies, The Final Playback. This is the climax of the whole project for us, the time when we stop working on the album, and just listen to it. A few friends are invited, a goodly amount of Champagne is consumed, and a relaxed, and twisted time is had by all.

This is the moment for which all that has gone before becomes a fair value; all has been worth it. The moment when you sit back and think to yourself: It is good.

We hope you agree.





RUSH







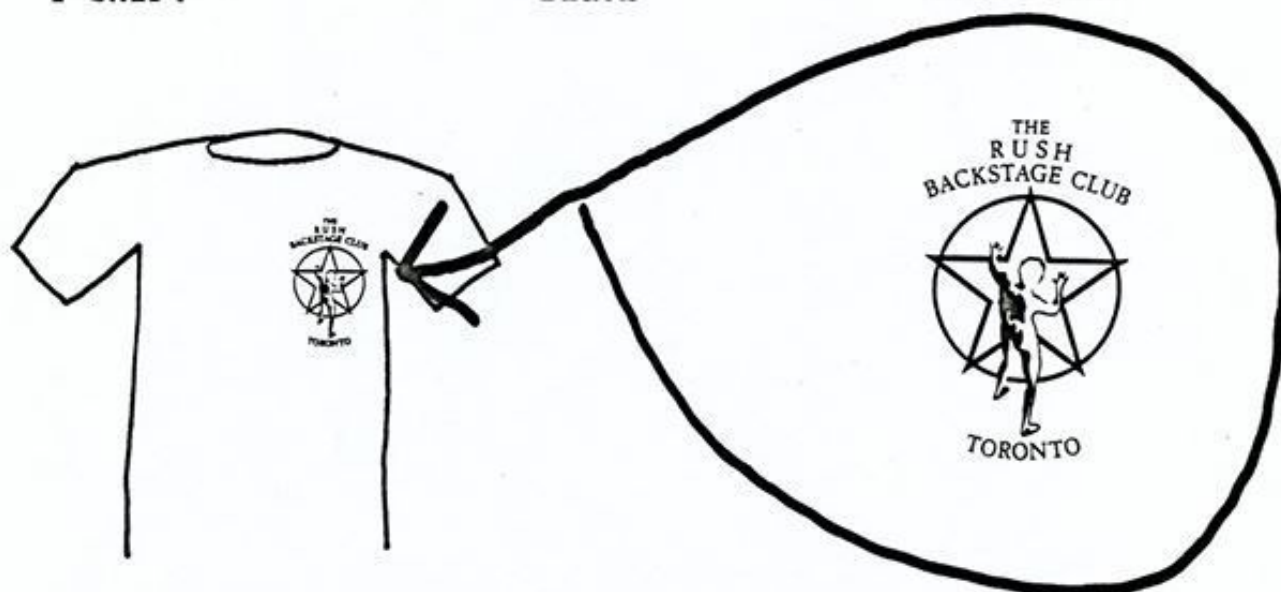
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