



MORK TALKS:
INTERVIEW WITH
ROBIN WILLIAMS

HEART: ANN WILSON POSTER INSIDE

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QUEEN CUTS LOOSE!

Wild, Wild Nights In New Orleans With The Kings Of English Excess

KANSAS

Can They Keep Their Nice-Guy Perspective With A First-Ever Live LP Rocketing Up The Charts?

SANTANA

Now That They've Toned Down Their Spiritual Trip, Can Carlos & Co. Score Another Hit?

OUTLAWS

This Time Around They're 'Playin' To Win'—But Can They?

CHAKA KHAN

The Voice Of Rufus Sizzles Like A Star On Her Funk-Filled Debut Album



FREDDIE MERCURY

POT GEAR

E-Z Wider Inventor Burt Rubin Lets You In On All The Latest In Puffers Paraphernalia

ERIC CARMEN

Why The Ex-Raspberry Had A 'Change Of Heart'

STAGE-SOUND SPECIAL
Heart Tells You What Guitars, Amps And Other Equipment They Use To Get That Pure-Platinum Sound In Concert

ALL THE LATEST NATIONAL CONCERT, TV AND FILM LISTINGS—ALBUM PICKS—FULL-COLOR COMICS SECTION



LONGPLAYERS

Edited by John Swenson

Rush concludes Cygnus cycle

Van Morrison does it again



Glenn M. Brown

There is only one actual song on Rush's 'Hemispheres'—looks like a danger signal.

Hemispheres—Rush (Mercury)

by Bart Testa

Rush is a post-heavy metal band. Though musically only a mild revision of the basic metal moves, post-h/m shoots off into alternative universes, into sci-fi, fantasy, magic, and the albums are almost always conceptual. The style's prototype and perpetual master, Led Zeppelin, took up British neopaganism and magic, guided by magician Aleister Crowley. Rush similarly moved into sci-fi and fantasy (as far back as *Caress of Steel*) and took thematic cues from Ayn Rand.

Since Ayn Rand is a cranky old woman philosopher whose main

message is one of selfishness, she might seem an unlikely choice for a post-h/m mentor. But actually Rand is the ideal author for Rush, the most popular band to come out of Canada since Bachman-Turner Overdrive, since most people in Rush's home town of Toronto read Rand before they get out of school. She's all Big Themes and Heroic Gestures, the key ingredients in the post-h/m formula.

Rush takes to the spirit of Rand's themes like a fleet of starships launching out for distant galaxies. They play stupendous fanfare music, blast-offs into the Void. They also have learned, since 2112, how to catch the aural sound of the Void with their deep space instrumentals. Lead vocalist (and bassist) Geddy Lee sings

with a Plant-like yelp, but he's more earnest. None of those dirty sex scenes for Lee. Just straightforward incantation, as befits someone giving voice to his own deification, "Cygnus, the Bringer of Balance."

These are the further adventures of Cygnus, carried over from last year's *Farewell to Kings*. That album presented Book I. The whole first side of *Hemispheres* is turned over to Book II. The world has lost the order of life because the gifts of Apollo and Dionysus (Rand's symbols for technology and ecstasy) have been split, creating an apocalyptic division of Mind and Heart. The hero-god Cygnus comes out of the resulting chaos to save earth by mounting Olympus and becoming the Bringer of Balance. The side concludes with a soliloquy, probably belonging to the now-divine Cygnus:

We can walk our road together
If our goals are all the same
(and)
With the Heart and Mind united
In a single perfect sphere

Rush idealizes some imaginary age of conformity. "If our goals are all the same" is a line that suggests we'd all be led by a hero instead of a mere politician. There's a rage for order in Rush's lyrics, very peculiar for a rock band. Of course, it is a commonplace in fantasy and sci-fi that what one believes is simple and clear and that heroes are never skeptical.

The sentiments Rush puts into their music are always positive. Who, after all, would like to see the conflict of Mind and Heart continue? It would be like hating Mom, apple pie or, for rockers, hating cars. Still, Cygnus has ominous overtones of superhuman dictatorship, as if humankind were not fit to live its life without apocalyptic warriors from Above.

Rush's performances in the Cygnus cycle are their most advanced. 2112 had too many dead spots to really work but now they managed to interlock metal whirlwinds, propelled by drummer Neil Peart, and solemn space rock pastorales. Guitarist Alex Lifeson works in two distinct styles, a post-Zep roar and a delicate artrock manner. His "La Villa Stragiato (an exercise in self-indulgence)," divided into 12 short "movements," is a piece of fantasy program music that carefully anthologizes his favorite moves. The piece, and more so its title, suggests that Rush may have internal problems. Even post-h/m may be proving too constricted a form for Lifeson even though he has been taking more and more solo space on each of their albums since 2112. Similarly, Lee's vocals have increasingly been set in the form of "recitatives," with the band barely

audible when Lee is singing. So far, they have been able to hold the sound together by composing in contrasting suites consisting of short pieces strung together into concept works. But, and this is a real danger signal, there is only one actual song on *Hemispheres*, "Circumstances." And it's not very good, either.

Wavelength—Van Morrison (Warner Bros.)

by Dave Marsh

Van Morrison's peculiar skills make it unlikely he'll ever make a truly bad record (although on *Hard Nose the Highway*, he gave it his best shot). His vocal melisma, relentless sense of groove, and the mythic elusiveness of his imagery are never less than interesting. But Morrison is certainly capable of making a record so aggravating, unfocused and filled with unrealized potential that you wish you didn't care. He did it with last year's *A Period of Transition*, and on *Wavelength*, he does it again.

There is no main stem of Morrison's thought, or his music, here. You can wander through the intersection of Caledonia soul and hard-edged funk that constitutes his formula, basking in the glow of "Wavelength," enraptured by the America we'll never see so beautifully evoked as in "Take It Where You Find It," and grow bleary eyed at the agony that lurks in "Hungry for Your Love." Or even get up and dance to "Checkin' It Out." But you will never work your way out of the maze, either because Van is also trapped or because he doesn't want to let you out. The former possibility is sad, the latter perverse, and neither offers a tenth of the spirit of discovery that was the predominant satisfaction of hearing every Van Morrison record from *Blowin' Your Mind* to *St. Dominic's Preview*. But since then, he's made mood music, sounds that communicate more by their timbre than their substance. I love *Veedon Fleece*, but I don't care much about it; it doesn't connect, because it isn't interested in connection.

As Bob Dylan has discovered, the problem of pursuing an intensely personal vision is that you may lose contact with your audience; if you ever get interested in the outside world again, it's a job to find your way back. Unlike Dylan, Morrison is willing to come to us—there isn't any arrogance about his failure to communicate—but, like a lot of politicians, he's sort of fuzzy on the issues. As with most veteran performers, he tends to fall back on images that reappear as

cliches: What's "Natalia" but a rewrite of "Wild Night," without the hotpants? Isn't "Take It Where You Find It" just a variation on the theme of "Listen to the Lion"? But *Wavelength* doesn't suffer from a repetition of imagery—you can call that style as easily as cliché—so much from a deflation of Morrison's impact. Ideas are spiritual and therefore empirically "vague" in the first place. Hearing "Listen to the Lion" or "Take It Where You Find It" for the first time, you're granted a special sense of revelation. But repetitions just reinforce the original experience.

Like Pete Townshend, Morrison compounds the difficulties implicit in his mysticism by abandoning the most accessible elements of his writing: characterization, a sense of place, humor. The distance between a very good song, like "Take It Where You Find It" and a great one, like "Wild Night," is this: In the former—as throughout this album—Morrison is trapped by ponderous statements like "I'm gonna put on my funky hot pants/ And boogaloo down Broadway/Til the cows come home." I'm with you Van, both times, but don't ask me to pick one, because you are not gonna dig the answer.

Studio Tan—Frank Zappa (DiscReet)

by Charley Walters

It's no revelation to point out that Frank Zappa's music encompasses more than rock. What makes it so receptive to rock ears—in addition to its humor and outrage and Zappa's "freak" image—is the steady rhythmic pulse that is implied if not actually stated. On a more obvious level Zappa consistently uses rock instrumentation. And some of his material is, quite simply, straight rock. The aural step from, say, AM radio to Zappa is deceptively easy—likewise a move from him to a 20th-century composer (and electronics technician) such as Edgar Varèse, an important Zappa influence.

The side-long "Greggery Peccary" displays Zappa's brilliance and variety. Another well-taken metaphoric blast at contemporary society, nitrous oxide voice and all, it effortlessly breezes from idiom to idiom, quoting everything from Elmore James to Herbie Hancock to "Louie Louie." Zappa brings in violin, marimbas, trumpet, tuba, clarinet, bells and synthesizer. The drums don't merely keep time: they punctuate, embellish, take the lead. Largely because of them this music doesn't drag. Zappa

creates new tone colors and uses unconventional chordings. He can be called a true rock impressionist, one of only a few with sufficient musical range to orchestrate so many moods, emotions and effects.

Side Two is perhaps less adventurous but no less satisfying. "Let Me Take You to the Beach" takes off pop-rock. The remainder is energetic, inventive—often brassy—jazz-rock: *not* so-called fusion. Only one problem lurks here: no recording data, no personnel listing.

Coliseum Rock—Starz (Capitol)

by Richard Hogan

Starz started off as a quintet of studio stalwarts who'd played and sung in bands ranging from Stories to Looking Glass, and who'd debuted as a unit under the name Fallen Angels. But Starz was too bright at first to be swaddled in leather and peddled as heavy metal, so the group's two most eclectic members, Brenden Harkin and Peter Sweval, were fired, and Starz rethought its music from a tougher, specialized standpoint.

The upshot is *Coliseum Rock*, a punchy exercise in topical hard rock. Excepting one sizzling instrumental, the LP is a run-on series of loud songs with words drawn from the romanticized exploits of Starz' dynamic singer-songwriter Michael Lee Smith. But Starz depends less on its lyricism or the refreshing credibility of Smith's persona than on the brashness and energy of its sound. Jack Richardson's live-sounding production relies more on knife-edged instrumentation than the tunesy vocals that dominated *Attention Shoppers!*, leaving the Starz sound gratuitously loud, yet obviously the work of a seasoned ensemble.

Levon Helm—Levon Helm (ABC)

by Charley Walters

Levon Helm's solo music can seem trivial, almost a throwaway when considered beside the Band's, but it isn't. Duck Dunn, bassist in Booker T and the MGs, produced this record at sessions in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and Hollywood. The familiar Shoals players—Hood, Hawkins, Johnson, Beckett—appear as does noted tuba player Howard Johnson. Everything fits: the crisp guitar obligato in "Ain't No Way to Forget You," the horn riffs in "Play Something Sweet," the