Exit ... Stage Left Rush Mercury ★★½

By Jon Pareles

RUSH HAVE BEEN UNFAIRLY MALIGNED AS JUST ANOTHER BARNSTORMING HEAVY-METAL ACT, FIT ONLY TO VIBRATE ARENA WALLS. ACTUALLY, THE GROUP IS A LOT MORE INTERESTING THAN COCK-ROCKERS LIKE VAN HALEN OR AC/DC, AND FAR LESS COMPROMISED THAN JOURNEY OR STYX.

"WE DIDN'T CHANGE, EVERYBODY ELSE DID" PROCLAIM LINES TO THEIR SECOND LIVE SET, EXIT ... STAGE LEFT, AND, IN A WAY, THEY'RE TIGHT. RUSH REPRESENT THE LAST PROFITABLE GASP OF HIGH-MINDED "PROGRESSIVE" ROCK, THE PROVINCE OF VIRTUOSIC, STORYTELLING, PHILOSOPHIZING BANDS THAT ATTRACTION HUGES AUDIENCES IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES.

NOW THAT YES HAVE BEEN SHAKEN UP, GENESIS HAVE GOTTEN HEP AND EVEN KANSAS ARE IN.LIMO, RUSH HAVE THE UNDERGROUND-FM, "OH, WOW"-PROFOUND MARKET TO THEMSELVES. TRUE, RUSH ARE A COMEDOWN FROM THE EARLY YES THEY RAVAGE, BUT AT LEAST THEY NEVER MUSH OUT LIKE GENESIS.

THEIR POWER-TRIO LINEUP KEEPS THEM HARD-EDGED, DESPITE THE OCCASIONAL SYNTHESIZER WHOOSH. AND THEY'RE MORE SINGLE-MINDEDLY PROPULSIVE THAN THEIR FOREBEARS. RUSH'S INGENUITY IS CHANNELED INTO COMPLICATED RIFFS BELOW TRIUMPHANT MAJOR CHORDS, WITH ALEC LIFESON'S GUITAR SERVING LARGELY AS REINFORCEMENT FOR GEDDY LEE'S MAMMOTH BASS TONES. BOTH LIVE AND IN THE STUDIO, RUSH'S MIXIES MAKE EVERYTHING ABOVE THE MIDRANGE SOUND LIKE AN AFTERTHOUGHT — AND THAT'S JUST AS WELL.

THOUGH LEE'S FALSETTO ISN'T A SHRIEK ANYMORE, DRUMMER NEIL PEARL'S LYRICS CAN STILL IRRITATE. TAKING INDIVIDUALISM TO AYN RAND-INSPIRED EXTREMES, PEARL'S MOST PESSIMISTIC SCREEDS SUGGEST THAT IN THE UPCOMING APOCALYPSE, EVERY-MAN-FOR-HIMSELF WILL TURN INTO STOMP-THE-OTHER-GUY.

THERE'S NOT MUCH PROPAGANDA ON EXIT ... STAGE LEFT — ONLY "THE TREES" (THE MAPLES UNIONIZE AND, IN THE NAME OF EQUALITY, DESTROY THE TALLER OAKS), "FREE WILL" (THE GROUP IS FOR IT) AND "TOM SAWYER" (HARDLY THE FUN-LOVING GUY MARK TWAIN INVENTED). THE REST OF THE RECORD INCLUDES PESSIMISTIC FABLES ("RED BARCHETTA"), TRAVELOGUES ("A PASSAGE TO BANGKOK"), HIPPIE-SMITHS ("THE SPIRIT OF RADIO") AND INSTRUMENTALS ("YYZ" AND "LA VILLA STRANGIATO," MINUS ITS ORIGINAL SUBTITLE). EXCEPT FOR A SING-A-LONG IN "CLOSER TO THE HEAT" AND A JOKEY INTRO TO "JACOB'S LADDER," THE VERSIONS HERE ARE VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL TO THE STUDIO RENDITIONS, SO RUSH FANS MAY FIND THE SET REDUNDANT.

OTHERS MIGHT GET A KICK OUT OF THE BIG, SURGING E CHORDS THE BAND KEEPS PUMPING OUT AND PERHAPS APPRECIATE PEARL'S FINE-TUNED PERCUSSION, BUT ONE RUSH ALBUM (PREFERABLY MOVING PICTURES) SHOULD BE ENOUGH FOR ALMOST ANYBODY.

JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING RUSH DO CAN BE FOUND, MORE COMPACTLY, IN YES' "ROUNDABOUT," WITH THE REMAINDER IN GENESIS' "WATCHER OF THE SKIES." EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE PHILOSOPHY — AND STAGE LEFT IS, OF COURSE, TO THE AUDIENCE'S FAR RIGHT.

The Discovery of Scat

Long before Dizzy, high up on the tower at Babel

a bearded carpenter turned to a stonemason

(barely able to see him through the vapor of clouds)

turned to ask for a wooden nail

and came out with something that sounded like

bob ah doolyah bop.

—BILLY COLLINS
Faceless bands

These groups may dominate the charts, but there's not a true superstar among them.

"FOUR MAJOR ROCK & ROLL bands shocked the music industry last week when, without warning, they started acting like baseball teams. Early in the week, REO Speedwagon traded bassist Bruce Hall to Foreigner in exchange for Rick Wills and a studio percussionist to be named later; the next day, Styx sent drummer John Panozzo to Journey for Steve Smith and a first-round garage-band draft choice." —Billboard, April 9th, 1982

By Steve Pond

OKAY, SO THIS IS ALL HYPOTHETICAL. FOREIGNER AND REO SPEEDWAGON didn't swap bass players, and Styx is not about to deal its drummer to Journey. But assume, for a minute, that such a scenario is possible. What effect would such a wholesale reorganization have on the fans who've made those four bands so popular?

None. None at all.

Those bands — along with their platinum colleague Rush and dozens of contenders such as Loverboy, Triumph and Red Rider — would be singularly unaffected by baseball-style trades, simply because they're part of a movement that sells more records than any of the newer waves: faceless bands.

Between them, the five top groups in this category — REO, Journey, Foreigner, Styx and Rush — captured three of the four top slots in ROLLING STONE's year-end album chart; Foreigner and Journey, the two bands that didn't place as high in the twelve-month roundup, both recently spent some time at Number One. But while their fans undoubtedly know the names and faces of front men like REO's Kevin Cronin, Rush's Geddy Lee and Journey's Steve Perry, there's not a true rock superstar in the bunch.

"Do you think a kid would act the same way if he ran into Mick Jagger and Lou Gramm on his street on two different days?" asked one industry veteran. "Forget it. And yet Foreigner's new album is outselling the Stones!"

The groups, for the most part, seem aware of this. "To us, the records speak for the band," said Foreigner's Rick Wills. "Mainly, we're just not image conscious.

"Face it—we're just ugly."

But most of the group members blame their facelessness not on something as simple as ugliness but on a lack of old-style glamour.

"We're not glamorous enough for kids to be star-struck," said Styx bassist Chuck Panozzo, and guitarist James Young agreed. "We're not a Rod Stewart-type group," he said, "and we're not in a position like Talking Heads, where whoever in New York is in charge of setting trends in the rock press likes us. We're all down to earth, and nobody in the group is terribly into drugs or sex or violence or crazy acts with dogs and forks. We're not trying to inject glamour into it, and that's nice, because we have a certain degree of privacy."

Still, the hard-core audience for these groups knows [Cont. on 38]
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The faceless rock bands

[Cont'd from 37] who the band members are; in return, the acts have a pretty good idea just who makes up that crowd. "Young male musicians," said Geddy Lee of Rush's bread-and-butter audience. Stryx manager Derek Sutton said that his band's fans, while more evenly divided among males and females, is similarly young: "Our concert audience has a median age of sixteen," he said. "They're between twelve and twenty-five."

Though the typical concegore and heavy record buyer may be a sixteen-year-old male with long hair, there's another broader and less fanatical crowd that also listens. "We have about 2 million fans who buy all our records but don't open the inner sleeve," said one record-company executive. "Anybody. But New Wave bands, is too much of a risk to buy the band's name," said Herbie Herbert, Journey's manager.

But however big the crowds can get, many bands can maintain their facelessness through their own marketing techniques. The process can be as simple and foolproof as not putting the musicians' names on album covers. It's a ploy that has long been used by camera-shy bands - i.e., Pink Floyd, one of the original faceless bands, though its powerful mystique takes the place of identifiable mugs; Chicago, with rock's most identifiable logo (guitarist Donnie Dacus, who seemed a lot more willing to put his face in the spotlight than the other members, didn't last long in this group); and lately, Christopher Cross, who put a flamingo on the cover of his spectacularly successful debut album and admitted opening it that he doesn't look all like a rocker is supposed to look.

Not one of the latest albums by Stryx, REO, Journey, and Foreigner contains a band photograph on the front cover, and only REO's Hi-Infidelitypictures the group on the inner sleeve. "We wanted album graphics that encouraged point-of-purchase sales, that create an image and identify the product as Journey without having to use the band's name," said Herbie Herbert, Journey's manager.

And how has Journey achieved that for the past several years? Not by spotlighting the band's faces, but by using a series of album covers depicting, apparently, a scarab opening up in outer space. Stick a picture of bassist Ross Valory on a Journey album and chances are that many fans would draw a blank; put on an illustration of that scarab busting out of a big, glowing ball and you've got an instant Journey record.

Stryx was even more drastic in its radio commercials for the last tour, a venture planned around the concept of the Paradise Theater album. The initial advertisements talked about the state of American rock - "How much fog and how many flames must one hide behind?" - and introduced the Paradise Theater theme. Stryx wasn't even mentioned.

Yet these bands get away with it, packing up strings of triple-platinum albums in the time it takes personalities like Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty or even the Rolling Stones to squeeze out a couple of hit singles and a platinum album. Has facelessness, in some bizarre way, become attractive to record buyers? If it is attractive to fans, it's because it's also attractive to radio. "Radio stations all have their little target audiences, and they zero in on them," said one record-company executive. "Anything that polarizes your audience, like New Wave, is too much of a risk to put on the air. To radio, faces don't matter. Nobody cares about personality. - unless that personality can be offensive in any way to part of your audience, and then it'll work against you. It's funny - ten years ago, controversy was real good. Now it's real, real bad unless it's traditional. Ted Nugent-style controversy, that doesn't threaten anybody. But New Wave bands that are telling the kids about different ways of living - that's too dangerous. Not only does radio's institutionalized format guard against anything different, but it guards against anything with much personality.

"Album-oriented-rock [AOR] stations will only play hard rock," the executive concluded, "and they'll welcome all the faceless hard-rock bands. Those bands have an instant base of acceptance on AOR. At the same time, Top Forty is getting softer and softer; the Stones' 'Waiting on a Friend' will get on more stations than 'Start Me Up' just because it isn't as hard. The faceless bands have figured this out, and so you'll see Journey coming out with 'Who's Crying Now,' Forterior doing 'Waiting for a Girl Like You' and Stryx with 'The Best of Times.' Not only have many of these bands figured out the radio formula - and most all of them are frankly and openly commercial, so they have no qualms about following the formula to receive airplay - but by having little personality, they won't offend either Top Forty or AOR's narrow target audience."

"Whether or not a band is faceless has nothing to do with our decision to play its music," said Jack Snyder, music director of KMET-FM, Los Angeles' leading AOR station. "Personally, I'd rather listen to a band with a strong personality than one of the faceless groups, say a Foreigner or a Journey. But we make decisions based on two things: whether it's good music, and whether the kids are into it. If the kids are into something that's faceless, it makes no difference to us."

Cliff Burnstein of the Leber-Krebs management firm feels that image makes no difference to record buyers, that records are purchased solely because of the music. "Record buyers depend totally on the music, and I think it's only a coincidence that most of the biggest bands today are faceless," he said. "The only factor I can think of to explain their facelessness is the media, which have always been responsible for building artists' images. If the pop music of this time is the likes of REO Speedwagon, Stryx and Journey, you're dealing with music that the press
facelessness through their own marketing techniques. The process can be as simple and foolproof as not putting the musicians’ photos on album covers. It’s a ploy that has long been used by camera-shy bands — i.e., Pink Floyd, one of the original faceless bands, though its powerful mystique takes the place of identifiable mugs; Chicago, with rock’s most identifiable logo (guitarist Donnie Dacus, who seemed a lot more willing to put his face in the spotlight than the other members, didn’t last long in this group); and lately, Christopher Cross, who put a flamingo on the cover of his spectacularly successful debut album and admitted openly that he doesn’t look at all like a rocker is supposed to look.

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Styx’s Derek Sutton bears out this last assessment. “Rush has never received critical acclaim. REO Speedwagon has never received critical acclaim. Styx has never received critical acclaim. These are the three biggest touring bands in the country, the tourney performers the kids want to see. But the press has played no part in their success — they have always missed the point, and they have tried everything they can to do to say these bands are rubbish. I now prefer just to ignore the press.”

Bob Regehr, vice-president of artist development and publicity at Warner Bros., agrees that the press is generally uninterested in today’s biggest bands, but he also feels the bands themselves may lack the potential to develop superstar frontmen. “Most of the music of today is pretty much hand-me-down music,” he said. “Bands like Foreigner put out well-made, well-crafted records — they can’t be faulted on those grounds. But there’s something new musically. It’s the same kind of music that has been passed down for more than ten years. Maybe in cloning it over those years, they’ve finally closed out the star structure.”

The answers

1. Neal Peart
2. Rick Wills
3. Mick Jones
4. James Young
5. Bruce Hall
6. Alex Lifeson
7. Dennis DeYoung
8. Dennis Elliott
9. Jonathan Cain
10. Geddy Lee
11. Lou Gramm
12. Alan Gratzer
13. Steve Smith
14. Chuck Panozzo
15. Neal Doughty
16. John Panozzo
17. Gary Richrath
18. Ross Valory
19. Steve Perry
20. Tommy Shaw
21. Kevin Cronin
22. Neal Schon