Because I live in Toronto (and happen to love loud rock 'n' roll), I was asked to write a feature on Rush for this Special Edition of CREEM, of course, the fact that I also happen to be a Contributing Editor to CREEM might also have something to do with it.

It seemed an easy enough assignment; after all, I'd been following Rush's career ever since I saw them opening for the New York Dolls on October 27, 1973 at the late, lamented Victory Burlesque Theatre on Spadina Avenue. Since then I'd watched them proceed from the then unheeded-of feet of performing three nights in a row at Massey Hall to playing three nights in a row at Maple Leaf Gardens—and being able to afford to give away one night's proceeds to charity.

So I dug out my Rush collection to see if I could say anything new about their records that hadn't been said before when I suddenly realized that I was looking at a whole aspect of Rush that had been virtually ignored by writers over the past decade: their album covers.

And because Rush's album covers are every bit an integral part of the band is its music. I decided to take advantage of my geographical location by calling up Hugh Syme.

Rush fans will instantly recognize his name. In addition to playing piano and synthesizers on three of the band's albums, Hugh has been the man responsible for all of Rush's album covers since 1975. And although he was under the gun of a weekend-long deadline, Hugh agreed to take one out of his schedule to discuss his work with the band.

How did you get involved with Rush in the first place?

I was working with the Ian Thomas Band at the time and, having always been intrigued by album cover graphics as a vehicle for selling albums—and because of my background in art having been, you know, forever—I basically requested to do one of Ian's albums. I've always been into painting and drawing and Ann Arbor Records [Rush's Canadian label]—basically, it can be said that Ann Arbor is Rush—saw my album graphics and wanted me to do something for them.

What was the first album you did for Rush?

The first one I did was Caress Of Steel. The illustrations are yours, right?

Yes, they are.

Were they done specifically for the album?

Yes, they were. They were pencil drawings, even though they don't look like it on the album. They painted them in a sort of pseudo-sepia tone. I had vignetted with an airbrush the blue area around the illustrations, which was later reinterpreted by the film strippers who were making the jackets in Chicago at the time. They took it upon themselves to cut a hard-edged mask around it. The lettering was cast, and chrome plated.

On the inside cover of 2112 is the first appearance of what has become a logo for the band. Initially, that logo didn't begin as an identity factor for the band, it just got adopted. We didn't consider it a mascot or

special cover treatment which was actually more expensive than most covers.

How do you feel about Hemispheres?

Not too bad, not too good. I feel about it the way I feel about everything—because I'm so close to it it makes it hard to judge. The band told me, "Go ahead, we'll see you when we get back," because they were in Wales for the whole album, and all my conversations with them were over the telephone. They didn't see it until it got out. Technically, it's an abomination.

Once again, it's an effort in the Progressive area of planning. They talk about Apollo and Dionysus in the lyrics, and I thought that Apollo would be the severe, Maleic business man, and that Dionysus would again be the renunciation of a figure.

Permanent Waves is one of the all-time classic rock 'n' roll covers. How did it come about?

Permanent Waves is the result of a conversation which I had with Niel out at his home in the country. We spoke all evening about Rush growing up, and how we were going to do these EKG readings of each member as they were recording. We were going to tape their temple and chest and have real heartbeats of them when they were playing. So Permanent Waves was going to be a technical statement, and we were going to treat that with red and gold foil, and do a nice study in design— as opposed to a photographic thing.

I walked out and, in the doorway, said "Wait! Let's try something with Donna Reed, with her permanent Toni hairdo, and have her walking out of a tidal wave situation.

I gave me this blank look and said,

"Get out of here."

The following day, he asked me to consider doing just that because he'd discussed it with the band, and they'd all thought it might be more likely for a cover than the serious approach.

Were there many problems to overcome?

We shot the newspaper with the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman," which now looks like "(Arabic) —(Arabic) —(Arabic)," because we got a threat from the legal people at the Chicago Tribune, who are still embarrassed about their over-anxious printing of that headline.

I noticed that the "Y" in "Dewey" has been changed to an "F" in the headline.

That's because anything that pertains to that headline, according to the Chicago Tribune, is an embarrassment, and is subject to litigation if we were to print up any facet of it.

To boot, Coca-Cola asked that we strip their billboard way off in the background because it was too close to a court in the suburbs.

Who's the smiling gent leaning next to the crosswalk sign?

None of your business! OK, let's move on to Moving Pictures, which is—

A pun, a pure pun.

It became pertinent to me later that the Queen's Park building in Toronto where it was shot had all the right elements: three arches, three pillars per arch, there are three members of Rush, all of that.

Who decided on what paintings would be carried?

That's the band's decision. I asked that the witch be in there, only because of
the song “Witch Hunt,” which I played on. The one painting had to be of Joan of Arc as far as I was concerned—which ended up being a bit of a nightmare because I couldn’t find any archival pictures or paintings which were suitable. So I ended up getting some burlap, and a pine post, two sticks and a bottle of Scotch.

Deborah Samuel, the photographer who I used on that session, got wrapped up in burlap so she could make her cameo.

“...

There is a good force and a bad force: the good force was music...

--Hugh Syme

appearances. We just lit lighter fluid in pie plates in the foreground. It was basically a half hour session because we had no other alternative but to do it ourselves.

Exit...Stage Left is probably your most ambitious cover to date, what with it reprising all your previous covers.

It was shot in a condemned theatre here in Toronto, which shall remain nameless. We decided to go with the girl pulling the curtain back on the front instead of the back. It was originally intended to be the other way around, so when I flipped the photograph over, I had to write “RUSH” on the equipment box in the foreground, and I had to strip out the information on the Stage Door and write in the word “EXIT,” because the album was called Exit...Stage Left.

Is the stage shot actually from a Rush concert?

Buffalo shot, yeah. We went out to get that, too. We really wanted the band. Believe it or not, we went to about 15 shows, trying to get the band saying “Thank you, good night,” all at the same time, and walking towards the camera.

Couldn’t get it, though.

Could get it.

Well, I guess that just leaves the dog and the fire hydrant.

Well, I was given the word “Signals.” It was such a broad concept that it was baffling for all of us. We really had trouble with that one, and I decided that, with such a phenomenally important word with the kind of potency it potentially had, to go with something really dumb, really inane. But something which would still tie in with songs such as “Chemistry,” and the subdivision aspect of the fire hydrants, lawns, and neighborhood dogs.

I can’t see Neil going for it, somehow.

That one almost got vetoed. Two of the three band members liked it at first, but I was taking a chance with it because it was so inane. But it seems to be interpreted as an integral part of the package.

The back cover’s a little subtle, perhaps over-indulgent. Again, it’s been fodder for some of those quizzes you hear on the radio.

It hasn’t been totally ignored...