RETURN OF THE MENINBLACK

THE DARKEST SECRETS OF RUSH AND DEEP PURPLE

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WIN A WALL OF MAXELL AUDIO & VIDEO TAPES
Eschewing bottles of Jack Daniel's and girls in bikinis, RUSH guitarist ALEX 'Proud To Be Boring' LIFESON (pictured left) finds 'time' to plug new album 'Hold Your Fire' and discuss the meaning of life with MARK PUTTERFORD

A turn my back to the wind, I catch my breath before I start off again... (Time Stand Still)

LEX LIFESON, the pleasant and unaffected guitarist of mega-band Rush, slowly unfolds a copy of his itinerary for the day with the biggest hint of a sigh. Interviews, photo sessions, meetings... there's hardly time for a cup of tea between the appointments that have to be packed into these short promotional visits, as PRs don't allow... nearly trying to keep everything to schedule and cars ready quietly outside hotels and studios, waiting to whisk Alex away to his next engagement. Time is of the essence.

If only time could stand still. You could turn your back to the wind of change and live certain moments in your life for a little longer. I mean, didn't you discover exciting new bands like Rush flash by too quickly? And wouldn't it be great to press some kind of pause button and appreciate the good things in life right now?

Right now I'm sharing a pot of tea with Alex Lifeson in his Winnipeg hotel. And 'time' is the keyword from which the new Rush album, 'Hold Your Fire', originated.

In fact, it's been a long time since Rush released an album; it's two years since 'Power Windows'. The band, very much masters of their own destiny in both a creative and productivity sense after years of international success, like to take more time off these days and be at home in Canada with their families. Alex, Geddy Lee and Neil Peart are all married with children (Alex has two sons of 17 and 10, Geddy has a son of 13, and Neil a daughter of nine), and as they find themselves in their 30s they realize the importance of slowing their pace down. No, when you're making albums these days, Rush certainly don't...

'The thing is,' Alex explains, 'albums take so damn long to make! A couple months to write, six weeks to get everything together before going into the studio proper, and then four to six months of actual studio time.' And it's all worth it. The end result is as strong and stimulating as 'Hold Your Fire', perhaps the natural successor to the top-quality hard rock of 'Power Windows'. It's one of the most accomplished albums of their career, for sure, and appropriate and respectful study of time (and instincst) in Rush's 13th year of existence.

Alex is pleased with the album; he grins proudly when he tells me I like it. But we don't have time to merely exchange pleasantries by asking about the thoughts of individual tracks.

Actually, Alex begins, 'the first track, Face It, was written before and after-thought. We wanted to do a more song and we threw it together pretty quickly; Pye Dudds, who co-wrote the lyrical concept with me, gave me some lyrics to look over, and while Neil changed them around and brought them back into this Geddy had brainstormed for a few hours until we came up with all the others parts. We wrote and recorded 'Vital Signs', 'New World Man' and 'Message' first, and 'To Talk About Science' like that, and it's fun to work that way when most of the album is already completed, because there's actually a little less pressure.'

Lyrically, Alex says it's still something that concerns him. "Surfing the Edge of Forever" is a song about a character who has never really been able to get up close to someone, and "The Good Life" is about a character who can't control his anger.

"There's a lot of people who enjoy those songs and simply love them as harmless entertainment. What can you do?"

However, I do feel that violence in graphic detail on TV or in movies - like people can see - doesn't really matter if it's not actually at all. At Alfred Hitchcock, you never saw anyone having their fleshy ripped open or anything, you just saw the curtain being pulled open and the blood going down the boghole... the rest was left to your imagination. In comparison, Friday The 13th is just very trashy, very unnecessary." "

Are Rush lyrics supposed to leave a certain amount of room for interpretation?" "Well, Neil's writing is difficult to interpret at the best of times," Alex laughs. "Even for me! We discuss the lyrics with Neil and try to understand them, because we are in the same group as him and we do have to know what he's saying! But I think his lyrics are a lot easier to understand. It's a shame Neil's not here, so he'd be able to answer that question better than me."

Why does Neil always fly away from interviews?

Alex actually doesn't mind doing interviews, but he prefers to do them away from home, where he feels less pressure. "Neil is a very private person; he really cherishes his privacy. And then there's the light..."

"Yeah, that's true. Most of Neil's writing has been from the viewpoint of a mere observer, looking at facts and opinions on facts. He never speaks, but suggests a lot of things. And that gets people to think about that particular topic a little more."

But this record is generally more personal, and deals with growing up, the importance of time and all that kinda stuff. Like, 'Turn The Page' describes how our lives are like a page, how each experience is written on another page, and how going through life is like flicking through a book."

"I was inspired by a cycling trip Neil undertook in China a couple years ago, where at one point..."

CONTINUEZ OVER
“Yeah, after 13 years it is a bit strange playing to young kids, and I must admit that for the first few dates of a tour I feel like an old dog jumping around on stage! But after a week or so you get used to it again and you begin to feel comfortable with the situation — especially if I’m allowed to say so, Rush is such a good live band. If I didn’t think we were great live I’d be really worried.”

“You must be good at something to have retained such a loyal following after 13 years!”

“I think we’ve always had a very loyal following and we’re very proud of that. I think we’ve been able to keep that following by progressing and not standing still with each album and tour, and I think we’ll always sell a certain amount of records just to the people who’re curious to see what we’ve done.”

“Are you sure you weren’t expected to make an album, or do you simply do what you want?”

“Well, it’s a bit selfish I guess, but we record stuff to please ourselves. We set standards for ourselves and we allow ourselves to be measured against those standards with every record. If the result is popular with more people than ourselves then that’s great. I’m not, at least, that keen on sitting around doing things we didn’t want to do; we have to be more artistically satisfied than commercially satisfied... although that’s easy to say when you already have commercial success like we do!”

“Are you aware of what your fans think about your music?”

“I think they want us to do what we’ve always done — and that is to record albums that might not have the same appeal of some sort. I think it’s expected of us to try something new and different with each record, and we do that as much as possible. I think some of our experiments haven’t quite worked. But if you learn from your mistakes and try to progress next time, you’ll get closer to your ideal listeners. They’ll sit down and study our music, our lyrics and everything, and even if they decide they don’t like this or that, it’s still satisfying to us just to know that they’ve taken the time to study our work.”

“Do you think about what your fans think of your music?”

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you tend to absorb everything — and I guess those people felt a great affinity with ‘2112’. ‘We know that ‘2112’ was an important album for us — it was a very complete album — and even the ‘2112’ tour was special because it was the first one where we started to use back-projections and that kinda stuff. ‘But we’ll continue to press ahead and do exactly what we feel is the right thing to do, and to wherever our current direction is. And of course, we feel that the latest thing we’ve done is our best album. ‘There’s certainly one of the most accessible albums Rush have done… ‘Yeah, people have said that,’ Alex notes, ‘but that’s totally unintentional on our part. ‘Actually, I worry about becoming too commercial sometimes. I mean, for a record company, management or a record company, you really want your audience to be able to reach you, you know? ‘For me, the kind of management or recording management or record company, you want to be able to have a cult status, but your audience tends to be more critical, more attentive and more serious about your music. Your music doesn’t become a background because your fans listen to your albums three or four times before really getting into it and we’d probably prefer our audience to have to take time to ‘get into our record, rather than just putting it on the radio and humming it in the bath. ‘Yes, you’re very serious about your music and lyrics, and can hardly be classed as a fun rock’n’roll band. Are you basically boring old farts? ‘Yeah, I think we’re pretty boring people,’ Alex laughs. ‘I mean, we’ve been our share of crazy parties and living out the typical rock’n’roll lifestyle. But our music has always been very, very important to us, and although it’s always tempting to be humourous and adopt a “don’t give a s**t” attitude, we never thought that it’d be appealing, or even appealing for too long, and I really care about doing something good for our fans. ‘No, you don’t see us holding bottles of Jack Daniel’s and posing with girls in bikinis… but after a while that gets boring and you realise that there’s much more interesting things to do in life. ‘Wouldn’t you like to push all the seriousness on one side for a moment and do a straightforward, AC/DC-type rock’n’roll album, though? ‘No, and I think if I really wanted to be a straightforward rock’n’roll guitarist I’d have to redefine my style, you know? ‘I’d be less reliant on synths ever since ‘Signes’, an album I can’t even bring myself to listen to now.’

Another feature on the new album, which incidentally was produced by Peter Collins, is the gay vocalist ‘Time Stand Still’. How did that idea come about? ‘Well, we just thought it would suit the song,’ says Alex. ‘We thought about working with a gay vocalist first, and he approached Chris, by the way, and we thought she’d be perfect. But Chris was unavailable at the time so we called in Aimee Mann, who was in a band called The Tuesday, and she worked out really well. Her voice blends with Geddy’s perfectly and I think it fits the right atmosphere for the song. It’s sort of something new for Rush. ‘As is putting ten tracks on the new album — the most there’s been on a Rush studio album since ‘Carpe Des Steal’ in ‘75.

ALEX LIFeson: ‘After 13 years in Rush it is a bit strange playing to young kids, and I must admit that for the first few dates of a tour I feel like an old fart jumping around on stage!’

‘Yeah, well we just thought it’d be great to have 50 minutes of music, give people more VFM, I guess. But we were aware that actual record sales only range from between 10,000 to 20,000 these days, with CDs and cassettes taking over the market. So we thought we wouldn’t worry about the time limitations of the traditional album and stick a couple extra tracks on it.

How about the time limitations of your next tour, a visit to Big City? ‘How do you fit into your schedule this time? ‘Yes, I know we spoke about coming to Europe around the time of ‘Power Windows’, but when we came down to finalising dates we really didn’t have the time. This time, even before we finalised the American dates, we decided to come to Europe for a full tour in April. It’s 99% certain. ‘You won’t just be doing Donington, or something else? ‘No, we’d really do Donington,’ Alex stresses, ‘even though we’re rumoured to be doing it every year. We don’t want to work during the summer, and in any case, we don’t like doing festivals because we feel our show works much better in an enclosed arena where you’re not at the mercy of the elements. ‘What about a live album? In the past you’ve released one after every four studio albums… and ‘Hold Your Fire’ is the fourth release since ‘Exit Stage Left’… ‘Actually, we’ve been recording our shows for some time now, and there will be a live album out probably late next year,’ says Alex. ‘We recorded a lot of stuff from the ‘Grace Under Pressure’ tour, two or three weeks worth of dates from the ‘Power Windows’ tour and we plan to record a couple weeks worth of shows from our forthcoming tour. So we should have a great cross-section of material to choose from. ‘Also, I think Rush is coming to the end of another chapter in its career, and a live album will be a nice way of taking it all up. And this will be the last record on our current deal with our record company and they had the option of a live album. So whichever way you look at it, the time is right for another Rush live album. ‘Unfortunately, the time isn’t right for any more questions. A shake of the hand, a smile, and the original guitarist is whisked away to another interview. Still, for an hour or so at least, it seemed as though time did indeed stand still.