

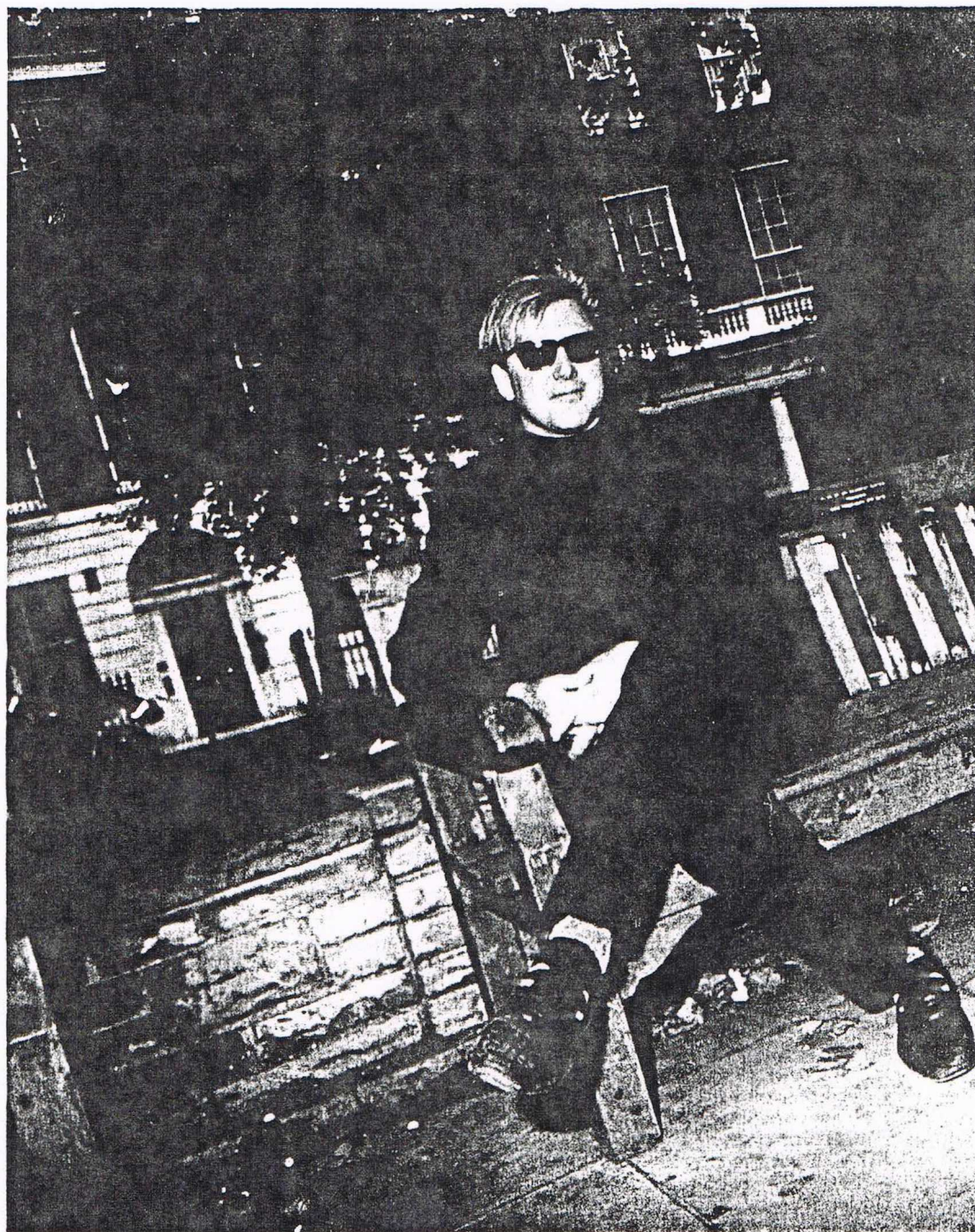
It's 1973, and three long haired, surly looking individuals are hoping to take the fledgling Toronto rock scene by storm. A year later, and their first album, self-titled *Rush*, is spreading the word south of the border in the USA, and to all points beyond. Decked out in a post-psychedelic, aggressively black and white cover, it is a heady concoction of high-velocity daughter-corrupting hard rock. The sleeve notes carry a handy hint for potential listeners: 'For best results play at maximum volume'.

14 years on, and volume is not the first thing that comes to mind when presented with Alex Lifeson, guitarist with Rush. Holed up in London's Montcalm Hotel, an establishment so discreet it nearly isn't there, this soft-spoken, pleasantly, but not pathologically, polite figure blends in perfectly amid the sober-suited businessmen, diplomats and movie moguls conducting soft-spoken, pleasantly, but not pathologically, polite breakfast meetings.

Lifeson could hardly be called The Wild Man Of Pop. But then he has a decade and a half on Rock's Lost Highway behind him. He's probably way past the textbook on-the-road 'craziness' stage. Indeed, amid the black polo neck, cords and loafers, the only visible concession to his job's almost regulation frippery is the occasional flash of Argyle sock.

As Rush's years and album sales have mounted, so they themselves have ascended into respectability. Albums no longer rejoice in such thoughtfully cretinous titles as *Caress Of Steel*, and *Fly By Night*. Pentacles, birds of prey, pythons and other such dubious record cover imagery has been replaced by ever so modern 'art'; the lank, greasy locks have been shorn into the almost imaginative styles favoured by quietly trendy local government officers. It would come as no surprise to discover Rush contract riders stipulating early nights and three square meals a day. And heaven forbid the booze, birds and scale models of Sherman tanks lovingly crafted from filleted pilchards usually called for by your average rock band in its quest for an artistically sensitive environment.

Curiously, amid this energetic upward mobility, Rush's music doesn't appear to have changed at all. Quite regardless of tours now being planned round their kids' school holidays Rush have produced a new album, *Hold Your Fire* containing the same violently speedy, powerchording hard rock that was frightening babies in Toronto all those years ago.



# RUSH

OVER THE PAST DECADE AND A HALF RUSH HAVE PLAYED EVERYTHING FROM POST-PYCHEDELIC TO SYMPHONIC ROCK. LLOYD BRADLEY SPOKE TO RUSH GUITARIST ALEX LIFESON ABOUT THE CHANGES IN RUSH'S MUSIC SINCE THEY STARTED OUT IN THE 1970S





Although Lifeson isn't slow to appreciate the irony of this — a 'progressive' band spending most of their adult lives journeying back to where, as callow youngsters, they began — he refuses to believe the last decade and a half has been wasted.

'What it's been is a long learning process. When we started we weren't exactly the most brilliant musicians in the world. We played by sheer instinct and what we lacked in expertise we made up for in feeling and enthusiasm. Over the years, by experimenting with different approaches we've become much more competent.'

'The hard rock element of the band — the three piece core playing live — has always been

there, but now the technical and songwriting improvements have meant we're now able to play the kind of music we set out to play, yet we're doing it so much better. I feel we're a much more polished band than we otherwise would have been.'

Wouldn't it have been simpler and a lot less risky to stick to straight ahead rock and just practise?

'Probably, and it wouldn't have taken so long, but we had a need to prove to ourselves that we could become better musicians. We'd write songs that, at first, were absolutely crazy to play. Then after we'd done it live what seemed like a million times we started to play them well. That way we

could see our own improvement. We worked to improve our writing too. So we started dealing with much more complex shadings and arrangements. To get them right involved a lot of time and effort, which meant we sacrificed so much of those early, instinctive sentiments.'

'By coming full circle, through different styles instead of just sticking to one direction, we became confident and competent enough to write and record songs that are in structure very complex but appear quite simple on one level of listening. It's finding the balance between those two opposites that's allowed us to recapture a lot of the old instincts. We've approached the last couple of albums in much the same way as we did with the early records; simply get into the studio and do it with the minimum of fuss! With *Hold Your Fire* we were looser and happier in the studio than we had been for years. We were determined it wasn't going to be the difficult, er, monstrous project some of them had been... that *Grace Under Pressure* certainly was.'

Perhaps the most notable part of this voyage of discovery happened during those late 1970s recordings. Rush trod that well worn path of Deep Purple, Queen and Genesis, and moved into symphorock.

Any rock'n'roll rule books dictating snappy, good time danceability as a prime consideration were summarily scrapped; songs, if that is quite the right word, sprawled across whole sides of albums; they were divided into movements starting with 'Prelude' or 'Overture', ending with 'Grand Finale'. One even contained a passage subtitled 'Soliloquy'. Instrumentation was a now delicately layered, multi-synth affair; arrangements took on a staggeringly pompous quasi-classical air. Production values seemed to rate cleverness above all else. Subject matter forsook cars, gurlies and having fun, choosing instead to introduce such delights as obscure Greek mythology and little known stellar constellations.

Mercifully, Rush never reached the point where they felt the need to interpret any mystical significance of Bilbo Baggins, Noggin The Nog or the Soup Dragon, but nevertheless managed to wring a fair bit of mileage out of *Armageddon*, *Dionysus*, *Cygnus X* and *The Temples Of Syrinx*. As they laboured, in increasingly luxurious recording studios, to recreate the tortured worlds of Mahler, Liszt and Tchaikovsky, their sixth form common room credibility reached alarming levels.

Today, Lifeson regards this period with the wry realism you'd expect from a man who once named a nine and a half minute number *La Villa Strangiato* (*An Exercise in Self-Indulgence*).

'From the beginning, Geddy (Lee) and I wanted to look a little beyond hard rock's boundaries. That was why we parted company with our original drummer John Rutsey. He wanted to go in a much simpler direction. It began really as an exercise, but we got a bit caught up in the whole structural process of creating different moods within a piece. We got to the point where we'd write with classical compositions in mind because it was a lot more challenging.'

'It made us aware of the potential dynamics of songwriting, and we expanded to composing with whole sides in mind. We no longer wanted to play straightforwardly and just plough through a song, we wanted to lift it and let it drop in all the right places. That, for us, became quite operatic in styling. Artistically sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't.'

'Looking back now some of that stuff was a bit self-indulgent, but as musicians we wanted to experiment as much as possible. We were lucky inasmuch as our management and record company left us alone to do things our way. So perhaps we became a little selfish, writing and playing with ourselves and our progress as musicians too much in our minds. However, it was really important to Rush that we try to develop and grow in a way that we thought we should.'

Selfish or otherwise, these musical meanderings didn't do Rush's standing at the cash registers any damage at all. There were, it seems, several million Americans (and quite a few enlightened Brits) only too keen to follow them into these lofty cathedrals of light and shade. Then, just as the group had firmly established itself in this area and was guaranteeing multi-platinum returns, they turned back to rock'n'roll. Surely even the pursuit of excellence becomes a little pointless if accompanied by commercial suicide. Wasn't that a huge risk to take?

'I suppose what had happened was that by the time we'd done *Hemispheres* we'd worked it out of our systems! *Caress Of Steel* was the first one that attempted to deal with the concept of a whole side. But in retrospect that was rather fragmented. *2112* was a much more solid piece of work. By *Hemispheres* we'd figured we'd taken the whole thing about as far as it could go!

'On *Permanent Waves* — perhaps with the exception of



*Natural Science*—we deliberately adopted a very different approach to our songwriting. (*Natural Science* is nearly 10 minutes long, has three subtitled movements and features the notable rhyming couplet “The mess and the magic/ Triumphant and tragic”.) It was a risk but not really a big one, as all we did was try to compact our songs as much as possible. We wanted to get as much action and movement as we did in an eight minute song down into a four minute song. So they stayed interesting.

‘We’d introduced keyboards as an integral instrument rather than just shading or colour, which gave us a much better understanding of basic feel and groove. We felt the time was right for a change, and the natural direction for us to move in was to try and make straight rock music that was a bit more involved than usual. It took a few albums to get that right, but with the last two I believe we’re more of a rock’n’roll band than we have been for a long time.’

The last two albums, *Power Windows* and *Hold Your Fire*, were produced by Peter Collins and Rush—an unlikely combination. Rush was now playing rock’n’roll in time signatures so odd that tapping your foot required a degree in music, and dancing was left to either the very foolish or the very drunk. Peter Collins was a producer whose reputation was built on Musical Youth’s first album. Lifeson explains yet another incongruity with the same disarming good humour.

‘At first we thought it appeared to be a very strange marriage! If, a few years ago, someone had told us we’d be working with the man who produced Musical Youth, Tracey Ullman and Nik Kershaw we would’ve thought it was a pretty imaginative joke!

‘For *Power Windows* (1985) we approached a number of people, from old to new, to work with us. Peter was one of them. We talked about music, about things in general—non-musical things—and just found that what he said was exactly what we were looking for both as a producer and someone we’d be spending a great deal of time with. He wasn’t interested in engineering. He was the first to admit he didn’t have the desire or the ability to be an engineer. He was far more inclined towards the songwriting and arranging aspects than the technical side. That’s what we were looking for. We knew what we wanted our records to sound like, we knew what direction we were moving in, it was just a matter of finding someone who could see the peripheral things

concerning the final presentation of our work. The kind of stuff we were missing because we were so focused in on our songwriting.

‘Peter was great for us because he wouldn’t suggest parts for songs. He’d leave that up to us as writers. He concentrated on finding moods or shifts within them. He called these shifts “events”, they were climactic structural changes that often involved stripping the song right down. ‘Every song *must* have an event’ he’d always say! Not everything he put forward worked right away, but he was making us look at a lot of areas and ideas that we otherwise would’ve missed. We built up the songs really through trial and error, and Peter was bringing a great thinking process to our recording.

‘With *Power Windows* Peter’s input was so complete we reversed the credits to read “Produced by so-and-so and Rush”, not the other way round. It was the first time we felt we’d worked a producer in the proper sense.’

Have you never felt the desire to produce yourselves?

‘No. We did on the first album because we couldn’t afford anybody, but we feel it’s real important to have an outside influence. That’s why we stopped working with Terry Brown. He’d worked as the remix engineer on the first album and for the time, and what it was, he did a great job. So the relationship grew from there. Then after ten albums with him sharing the production credit with us, we got to the point where we knew each other too well—there were no surprises left. He’d settled down to working with just us, so the relationship was getting a bit tunnel-visioned.

‘We’re all very strong characters and all hear the band subtly differently. During songwriting, that leads to some great, very productive discussions, but in the studio that’s a dangerous situation. We could get very bogged down and lose direction. Perhaps if one of us said, “Okay, you two go for a cup of coffee, and I’ll produce the album”, it might work but someone has to be the ring leader—someone to bounce ideas off, someone to tell us when to stop!

‘On *Grace Under Pressure* we worked with Peter Henderson, who’d worked with Supertramp. We’d been let down by the producer we wanted to work with, and he stepped in at the last minute. Those sessions ended up being more of our production, because he took the role more of an engineer. Not only did we find ourselves working a lot harder, but we didn’t get what we wanted to achieve on that record. It wasn’t



the kind of situation I’d like to go through again!’

At the moment, Alex Lifeson and Rush exist in a fairly idyllic situation. They’re happy with their playing and playing what they’re happy with. They have a faithful live audience that snap up concert tickets. Across the USA, the annual Rush tours can sell out as many 20,000 seat arenas as they care to play. Between two and four million record buyers per album seem to appreciate the often quite taxing changes of direction: Lifeson believes Rush fans ‘buy the records looking to hear something different, maybe something they don’t immediately like’. He says this following is often untrained in its criticism but feels that it ‘shows they take our records seriously. They’re important pieces of music to them’.

Naturally, given Rush’s track record, he’s unsure of what approach the next album will take, but remains confident that ‘whatever it sounds like it’ll be the best we’re capable of as musicians’. For now, his biggest responsibility is the round of promotional interviews that are the piffling price to pay for a long weekend of luxury in the Montcalm Hotel.

Is there *anything* that ruffles Alex Lifeson’s gentlemanly calm? Yes, it appears there is. The

suggestion that Rush are, by today’s reckoning, a Heavy Metal Band. He dismisses this notion as ‘very unfair’, but conveys a sense of mild outrage as an unspoken *pur-lease* hangs in air.

‘We do not consider ourselves to be in the same musical style as groups like Slayer, WASP and Anthrax.

‘We came out of the same white blues background as the first heavy metal bands like Led Zepelin, Deep Purple. And I’m not so sure that heavy metal today has too much in common with what it started out as. Then it was much more sensitive to the use of power in sound, was very aware of what could be achieved by building things up. Today it’s so monotoned in its delivery, starting at loud and staying there for a whole album. The unfortunate thing about heavy metal today is it’s become bogged down in formula—there’s a particular guitar sound, a particular vocal styling, even a certain dress code that everyone uses. Our music is a lot more radical in its changes and influences, which is why we’ve had such a broad audience and have lasted as long as we have. With everything being so clichéd in today’s hard rock end of the market, I can’t see too many of those bands surviving 14 years!’