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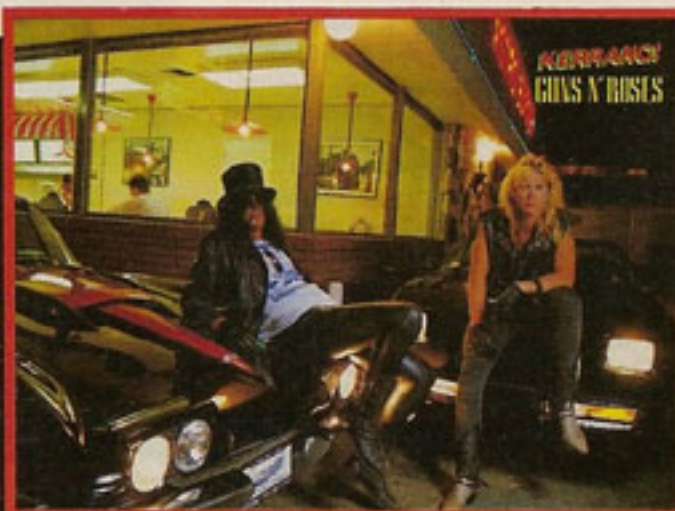
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BILLY DUFFY (left) and IAN ASTBURY of the CULT: pic Ray Palmer

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ALEX LIFESON: "Well, we're getting older... Hopefully, we're a bit wiser, and maybe we've started to look at things in broader terms"



THE MEANING OF LIFESON

Cerebral techno-rockers RUSH are back with a new record label and, natch, a new album – one called Atlantic, the other 'Presto'. PHIL WILDING knows which is which, but has other, more important, things on his mind: bunny rabbits, hundreds of them, and twice as many floppy ears! Confused? Let guitarist ALEX LIFESON explain

ALEX LIFESON is recounting the latest artwork for the latest Rush album, 'Presto'. He lets out a dry chuckle and explains:

"Basically, it's a hill with a very dramatic background; black and white with a levitated magician's hat with a rabbit coming out of it.

"Then, on the field in the foreground are hundreds and hundreds of rabbits all walking around.

"It's very strange to see them. They all look kind of weird. Some have ears that come down, and some have weird looks, kind of stupid. Some like Geddy, you know, nose and glasses."

It's just after nine on a grey Monday. In a plush suite on the fourth storey of the Mayfair Hotel in London, he warms to his theme.

"When we first thought of the idea, we thought, 'This could be really, really stupid'. So, our fingers were crossed when Hugh (Syme – Rush's long standing designer) said he was going to send some ideas over for us to look at. We all started laughing hysterically, 'This is great, it's perfect!'"

The Rush guitarist chain smokes another cigarette. He taps the ash, and adjusts the mass of cushions set behind his back. (He recently developed agonizing back pain after a tennis match with Rush bassist Geddy Lee, fulfilling a lifetime's dream by playing at London's Queen's Club.)

HE CONTINUES smiling, a plume of smoke rising to the ceiling. Rush have ended their longstanding Phonogram deal to fire their next three albums off Atlantic. Why?

"The deal was over. So when we started to renegotiate the deal, Doug Morris at Atlantic Records – who'd had an interest in Rush for quite a few years – made a bid for the band.

"When it came down to it, we needed change, we needed somewhere fresh. We had a new album coming out with a different approach than the last couple of records, and it all just made sense at the time.

"It was just a relationship that went on too long and was getting stale."

Was that was all it was?

"Well, PolyGram had

changed throughout the '80s, and I think after a while that Rush were being perceived as someone else's signing, someone else's baby. It just got passed on and on and on. It seemed that they had other interests that took priority over us.

"We take a great deal of time, effort and care to make our records, and if they're not promoted as completely as we feel they should be by the record company... We have a very solid base, in the first month of release our records go 'Jeeee!'... and then they go, 'Rrr!'"

He punches his fist into the palm of his hand to emphasise the sudden halt on the charts.

"Record companies have to take it to the next level, but that just wasn't happening."

He shrugs his shoulders slowly and I wonder aloud that if this is the case, why give them leeway to release the final 'Chronicles' compilation – now scheduled for the Summer of 1990? I thought 'Show Of Hands' was the final option that the company had on the band?

"I thought so too," he grins. "But apparently, that's not so. It's been a bit of a fight with them. So far we have had no control over it, they wanted to put in stuff that just doesn't belong there. Things that Geddy had done a few years ago.

"But now we're working something out with Atlantic's co-operation, they've been great about it. We at least want to be able to look after the packaging and try to make it as good as all our other stuff has been in the past."

HE STATES all of this with eloquent charm, his words diffusing the almost constant curtain of smoke obscuring his face.

I change tack and return to the very reason he's sitting a table away, gulping Evian, building his mountain of ash – the aforementioned 'Presto' LP.

11 new songs, over 55 minutes of music, and the most complete Rush collection of

songs in over seven years.

That's without the glorious return of Lifeson's guitar at the very tip of the mix, Peart's positive and, sometimes, direct lyrical appeal, and new producer Rupert Hine's final embracing mix.

What of Hine and his hand in all of this?

"The appeal about Rupert wasn't just his credits," (his work includes Tina Turner, Stevie Nicks and the Fixx), "it was that all his records sound very unique and that he's a great musician in his own right. For us, someone like that as producer is really the ideal."

"It was just a question of experimenting with a few things, rather than being confronted with a section that doesn't work and requires a rewrite."

"He came over with 10 days set aside for pre-production, figuring about a song a day. But after a day-and-a-half everything was done!"

"The thing was that he'd just come down from doing the Stevie Nicks production. He'd been writing, playing, arranging and producing there, so he really didn't know how prepared we'd be."

His face beams as the memories touch him.

"We finished about three or four weeks early, we came out of there with big smiles."

"It's the first record in a long, long, long time that we really had a lot of fun. We were so sure of where we were going, and everything happened so quickly."

ALL OF this plus the refreshing return of guitar – both acoustic and electric. You've often complained in interviews in the past of your discontent at the subjugation of your guitar to keyboards in the mix. Was 'Presto' a simple case of finally putting your foot down? If it is he's far too polite to say so...

"Um, the last couple of records..." he slips his watch from his wrist as the words are lost to diplomacy, "...they were satisfying."

"Though, listening to them now, they were kind of experimental in the keyboard end."

"When Geddy and I started writing this album, we started asking ourselves what was the real core of the band? Where should all the emotion and the energy be coming from? We decided that it should really be the guitar."

"So we wrote with that in mind straight from the start, just bass and guitars like the old days."

A gale of laughter escapes his lips, then diffuses into a giggle.

"It was just more direct, we just added keyboards for colour. It's turned out a lot more satisfying, certainly for me and I think the material benefits from it."

That material, a jagged tryst of youth remembered, and the ever-present Peart lyrics full of concern and bemused perspective. Fortunately, the complete band is immersed in those words: Geddy to feel their affinity so as to sing them; Lifeson to understand and relay them musically.

In Neil's absence, it's handy that the rest of the band can convey Peart's themes and ideals at the turn of another journalist's probing. It's simply another part of being in this strange three-cornered family.

AT 'PRESTO's dark heart, there seems an almost constant thematic whirlpool, spewing metaphorical barbs of the young, hope, action and reaction. Does Alex Lifeson agree with that?

"Well, we're getting older. Hopefully, we're a bit wiser, and maybe we've started to look at things in broader terms. I think you're right, I think this album does deal with those things, and also that the world is a very big place and there's so much that's wonderful about it, and it's all there for the taking. You have to go out and take it."

"If there is a theme to the album it would be that, 'Presto' is the magic of that."

I ask about 'Red Tide' – has Peart simply decided to lever himself into eco-awareness vogue?

"No, no, he feels very passionately about those things. Neil always writes about whatever he's thinking about. And right now, the environment

"We finished about three or four weeks early, we came out of there with big smiles. It's the first record in a long, long, long time that we really had a lot of fun" – ALEX LIFESON

KONTINUEZ OVER

LIFESON

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

is a very important issue, and unless it's addressed quickly it's going to be too late. It'll be a case of diminishing returns, we won't be able to get back what we had."

Ever since hearing 'Presto', I've been confused by the irrepressibly insane 'Anagram'. For want of apt phrasing, I tell Alex I simply can't get my head around it.

"That's exactly the right reaction!" he beams.

It is?

"It's just a play of words. When Neil brought the lyrics to us, we read them and went, 'What the hell is this?' He said, 'It's just fun, I just wanted to'.

This from the supposed 'thinking man's rock band'.

DOES IT infuriate you that you're constantly seen as the ever serious, clinical trio without an ounce of soul?

"We've been perceived that way right from the start," he sighs.

"I guess it's because of the way that Neil writes his lyrics, he deals with very serious subjects, and we have always taken our music very seriously. The thing is that we don't take anything else seriously. Quite honestly, when Ged and I are writing, we spend 85 per cent of the time laughing. That's why the three of us have stayed together for so long.

"Also, a lot of our rear screen stuff that we use live; the graphic cartoon figures, sheep floating around, that's kind of funny. At least it shows a side to the band that's concerned about humour."

Perhaps you could ham it up a little more on your videos.

"We just did one for 'Show Don't Tell'. We make them because they're a necessary evil, important to the record company. It's the way of promoting a band in the '80s.

"I don't particularly like doing them, and I don't



Pic Ross Halfin

ALEX LIFESON: "I'm not a good singer at the best of times. I try hard though, and they give me a little gold star!"

particularly like watching them. I think most of them are just glorified beer ads and car ads. They all look the same now, all the strutting... and it's all miming, it's all bullshit."

Your own latest video then, how's that?

"Oh, our new one is the usual bullshit."

His eyes flash, the grin returning momentarily.

"It's just a live shoot with some other stuff mixed in..."

'Superconductor' seems to be an attack on the packaged and perfect pop icon. It also sounds as though Neil's just about ready to give up this filthy business for good?

"No, not as far as writing lyrics and playing in a band, I don't think it does.

"The issue of touring, I think that's something else..."

SO HOW does the band who once insisted they were primarily a live band and then followed it by announcing they were going to be cutting back on touring, feel about schedules?

"I remember the early tours here in Britain, they were really exciting, doing the smaller halls night after night. We did really

well, but everybody's just a little burnt out on that. The sitting around, the waiting, it's so boring. You start to think perhaps there are other things that I can and should do with my life.

"We didn't even discuss touring until the last week we were in England mixing the album, which was the end of September. That was the first time in a year that we'd spoken about it.

"We are essentially a live band, but we've grown up and things aren't as much fun as they were."

Isn't there any way in which you could soften the blow?

"As a matter of fact, we've talked about the possibility of bringing somebody out on the road with us, like another keyboard player/singer. With our live show we can still make it sound quite impressive, especially for a three-piece. Though, unfortunately, because of all the pedals, it means that we're stuck in one place all night.

"Every time I'd move to go and make a face at Neil or something..." the dry chuckle once more, "...I knew that in about 10 seconds I had to be

back there for this cue, that cue, get both feet working, and Geddy's doing the same. It really became a chore, we missed the fun of it. Again, that added to the stress of the last tour.

"Also, it'd be great to get someone who can sing. We've been getting into some harmony work but I'm not a good singer at the best of times. I try hard though, and they give me a little gold star!

"Just having that someone else there would allow Geddy and me to really have the fun like we used to in the past. That's what it's all about; to have fun.

"That alone makes the thought very attractive."

When I attempt to garner news of future European dates, and Lifeson is evasive at best. America and Canada get them from February on, which is an incredibly long time from the release of the album, and then who knows?

The band themselves aren't even sure.

Before I bring my machine to a halt and leave, I indicate the smattering of now empty cigarette packets strewn on the table.

I thought you'd all but given that up? He stubs one, only half smoked, quickly into the ashtray.

"I did for two years, and then when I got into the studio it was too much. It was like, 'Neil, give me a drag, give me a smoke, you got an extra packet on you?'

"I fell right into it, but I'm going to stop next week. I'm going on a trip, and you can't buy cigarettes where I'm going."

Hell?

A lopsided grin.

"No, Papua New Guinea for about three weeks. Hiking in country, and then scuba diving in the Coral Sea and the Solomon Sea, that'll be interesting."

He reflects as master of the understatement.

"No cigarettes, but lots of snakes and sharks."

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