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LEE AARON

November 29 - December 12 1989

## GUILTY OF SUCCESS?

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# MAKIN' MAGIC



Meet famous Canuck **ALEX LIFESON**, famed guitarist, expert cook, recent record producer, not to mention prospective composer of soundtrack music. . . Oh and also one-third of Canadian act **RUSH** who've just released their 17th album 'Presto', once again proving that quality musicianship *can* overcome a lack of image.

Here, Lifeson talks about his diverse interests, ranging from the kitchen to the mixing desk



**R**USH GUITARIST Alex Lifeson, looking a little older and slightly doughy, reclines and contemplates the question. About the new album, 'Presto' (the Canadian trio's 17th)? About a prospective solo album? About the band's recent switch of labels, from Phonogram to Atlantic, after 15 years with the former? His contribution to the recently-released Rock-Aid Armenia single 'Smoke On The Water'? Nah, we're jawing about the surprising fact that after years as Rush's in-house chef during the band's numerous studio bouts Lifeson hasn't yet committed his culinary knowledge to paper, thereby coming up with a definitive Rock 'n' Roll cookbook. Kinda TV chef Keith Floyd without the ever-attendant bottle of plonk. Is 'Lunchin' with Lifeson' a possible title?

"I haven't really considered doing something like that," states Lifeson, sitting in a hotel few yards from the world famous Langan's Brasserie in Central London. "I've toyed with the idea of owning a restaurant, but I'd go out of business too quickly 'cos I'd have my friends eating there all the time for free. I enjoy cooking for a lot of people. I find it relaxing, yet the more time I spend at home the more I let my wife cook, 'cos she's a fantastic cook. In fact, the last couple of times I did some cooking, things didn't really turn out right so it's now becoming more of a distant hobby."

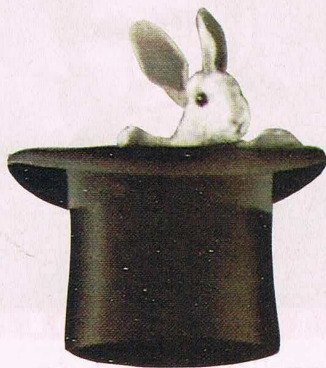
'Presto', our real reason for gabbling on, did see Lifeson apparently whip up a couple of tasty dishes, including "some mussels in a rich, creamy white sauce which were pretty good", but the LP's significance is far more complex to digest.

It's an album that comes at a time when dissenting voices believed that the 15-year partnership between Lifeson, bass chap/screecher/ivory tinkler Geddy Lee (né Gary Lee. He changed his name when it transpired that both his Polish mother and grandmother pronounced his Christian name as 'Geddy') and sticksman/lyricist Neil Peart was about to end. But with a new label and a new album, Rush appear to have undergone a process of re-evaluation.

**I**N A lot of ways this is a new start," confirms Lifeson. "The last tour was very stressful. Neil was sick for a while and Geddy had constant throat problems, so it was becoming a real chore. Also to reproduce the last two LPs ('Power Windows' - 1985 - and 'Hold Your Fire' - 1987) onstage required a lot of work from us. We were rooted to one spot on the stage for most of the night hitting pedals and switches; it took a lot of precision and concentration. It means that on the next tour we're looking at the possibility of adding some people to augment our line-up. Specifically, a keyboard player and a backing vocalist because I'm a poor backing singer at the best of times! When we came off the road none of us were really sure if we wanted to tour again, especially Neil. We decided to take some time off. We mixed the live album ('A Show Of Hands', their third double live effort, released earlier this year as the final LP for Phonogram) and spent some time with our families, doing things that in the last 15 years we've never been able to do."

"Around this time our contract with Phonogram expired and we decided it was time for a change," continues the guitarist in full, soft-spoken flight. "We were being thrown into the same category as our labelmates Bon Jovi and Def Leppard in terms of the way we were being marketed, yet they are mega-million selling bands in

America, and inevitably Phonogram were concentrating on them. We needed a label that had the enthusiasm to push us; Atlantic



**"I'm always in favour of putting (silly stuff) on records, but I always get out-voted!"**  
**ALEX LIFESON**

have that quality.

"It's a fresh start at the right time, the beginning of the '90s."

The idea of Rush being placed in the same pigeonhole as the Bon Jovi and Def Leppards of this world is hard to fathom in sheer musical terms, bearing in mind the trio's chameleon-like path from mere Zeppelin clones in '73 ("Our first, self-titled LP just sounds like a bar band trying to sound like a Led Zeppelin copy," admits Lifeson) to the techno-Rockers of the last few albums.

With the over-polished feel of 'Presto', it also begs the question as to whether Rush are indeed still a Rock band.

**E**SSENTIALLY, WE are a Rock band," affirms Lifeson. "And we always have been. We're experimental in that we're not afraid to try things even though, in

retrospect, they may not always work. 'Presto' is the Rockiest LP we've done in quite a while," states the guitarist without the slightest hint of sarcasm. "There's more emphasis on guitars, with the keyboards being kept in the background."

If 'Presto' is the guitar-orientated album that Lifeson would have us believe it is, then it would appear that there's some sparring going on in there between the guitarist and Lee's keyboards-orientated approach.

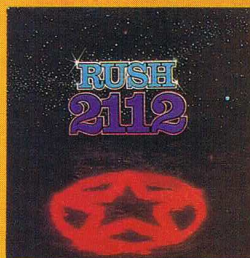
"On 'Power Windows' the keyboard parts were done prior to the guitars which meant that a lot of parts which should have featured guitars ended up being dominated by keyboards," states Lifeson, skirting the question. "We tried to get away from that with 'Hold Your Fire', although occasionally the guitar and keyboards *did* fight on that record. We started writing the new album with a guitar and a bass and it's made the guitar sound much stronger. Our songwriting has now got to the point where we can temper that forcefulness with mood and feeling."

"Let me give you an example of what I mean. There's a song called 'The Pass' on 'Presto' that isn't really a Hard Rockin' track and the guitars therefore don't sound heavy, but they have a lot of inherent power. There are lots of ways of getting power other than just by getting loud through using a distortion box."

'Presto' (co-produced by the band with Rupert Hine, described by Lifeson as "a great musician in his own right") seems to have relegated Lifeson's distortion box to the attic. It's full of what Alex calls "songwriting development" and "a certain basic feel".

Staggeringly enough, it also contains what must surely be the first recorded Rush joke! A track titled 'Anagram (For Mongo)', an oblique and somewhat obscure reference to an exploding Candygram delivered to a character named Mongo in Mel Brook's classic comedy Western film, 'Blazing Saddles'. It goes some way towards altering the image of Rush as a rather po-faced and pompous crew. So could it be that 'neath the triumvirate's implacable exterior there lurk

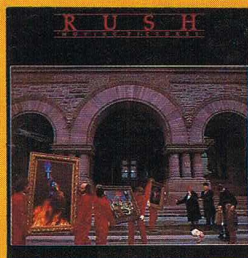
## THE RUSH CATALOGUE: LIFESON'S CHOICE



**'2112'**  
(Mercury - 1976)

A seminal album from a band previously stuck between commerciality and creativity, '2112' (pronounced 'Twenty One Twelve', in the American style) finally broke the Toronto three-piece into the big time, mixing as it did the conceptual grandeur of the title track (taking up the whole of *Side One*) with the straightforward material on the flipside.

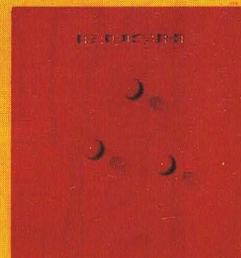
According to the affable Lifeson, "It was an album (the band's fourth) that was full of anger because we knew what we were doing was right, but the label didn't think so."



**'MOVING PICTURES'**  
(Mercury - 1981)

"WE wanted to get out of writing long pieces of music and 'Moving Pictures' (the trio's ninth LP) refined our approach, allowing us to get more dynamic," states guitarist Lifeson. "It was a fragmented LP, but one that was important because we started to introduce a lot of technology into our sound."

Rush's direct approach was rewarded with a Top 30 hit ('Tom Sawyer') and the album set the template for the techno-Rock approach that they've since exploited so richly, earning platinum awards across the world in the process.

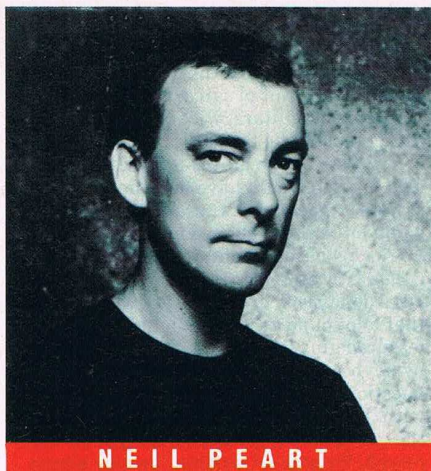


**'HOLD YOUR FIRE'**  
(Vertigo - 1987)

"WITH this album we achieved what we'd been striving for since the release of 'Signals' (their 11th album - 1982)," explains Lifeson. "We got the right balance on the album - our 16th - between the technological input and feeling."

The band's most accessible commercial record until current album 'Presto', this also proved to be their least successful in the UK since 'Hemispheres' (their seventh - 1979), although it brought the trio over here for their first tour since '82; certain dates were recorded and used on part of 'A Show Of Hands'.

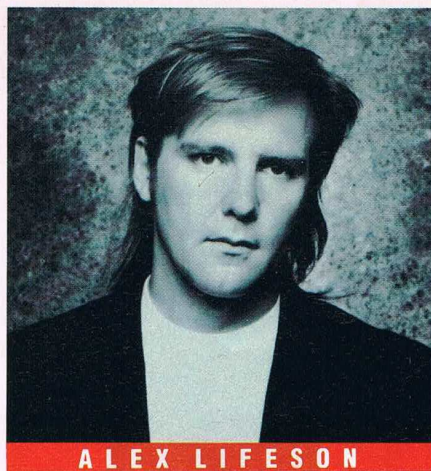




NEIL PEART

three wildmen of Rock?! Nascent Gene Wilders to a man, maintaining their sanity where others have lost theirs due to the use of *good* as opposed to *bad* drugs? Lifeson laughs at the idea before carrying on in a relaxed fashion.

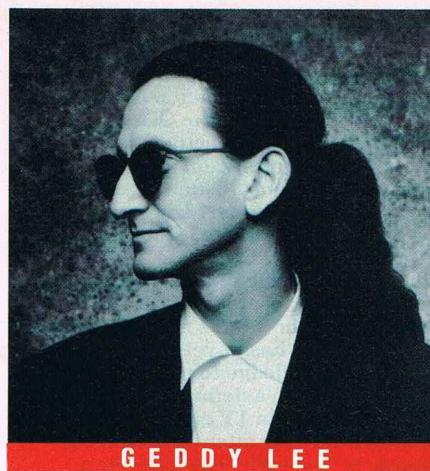
"We've always taken every aspect of the band seriously. For instance lyrics for Neil are important. He doesn't see the point of writing about things that are trivial. There are enough bands who sing about getting laid and partying without us getting involved with that. Musically, when Geddy and I write we spend at least three-quarters of the time laughing hysterically and joking about. On the inside we like to have fun and



ALEX LIFESON

'Anagram...' is a great example of us loosening up a little bit. It's a silly song. I'm always in favour of putting stuff like that on records, but I always get out-voted!"

WITH THE band suddenly prone to "loosening up", Lifeson has found himself with the time to pursue outside interests. It's allowed him to kick off his career on the other side of the mixing desk as a producer, the first fruits of which have been his collaboration with local Toronto act Clean Slate ("A straightforward Rock band with potential") on their eponymous, five-track debut EP thus far released only in Canada, on the Anthem label set up by the



GEDDY LEE

Rush management organisation. An experience the man would like to repeat.

As well as knob-twiddling, so to speak, Lifeson has also contributed to the aforementioned 'Smoke On The Water' charity single, the proceeds from which are destined for the Armenian earthquake victims (full details on this appeared in *Hard News* Issue 29). It's a rather strange move on the part of the guitarist, bearing in mind that drummer Neil Peart has in the past been rather vocal about his disapproval of such openly demonstrative and support-rallying ploys undertaken by musicians. Something that's even more astounding when you consider that Peart himself was initially destined to appear on the single!

"Well, Neil wanted to do it because people that we'd grown up with, people like guitarists Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page, were going to be on it (neither made it onto the final cut), so it was an opportunity to play

**"There are enough bands who sing about getting laid and partying without us getting involved. . ."**  
ALEX LIFESON

with them but he couldn't do it in the end because the single's recording schedule started to run into ours," clarifies Lifeson. "Basically, it just came round to me doing my little part very politely because I'm very polite!" Lifeson has also begun to look at the further possibilities of operating outside the confines of Rush.

"Lately I've been thinking about a lot of things. I can still lose myself when I play at home the same way as when I was 14. It's something that I've come to realise is a special thing. I've just played on an album by a Canadian artist called Larry Gowan; I contributed to six tracks on the album. It was very satisfying just being a guitarist without having the added responsibility that comes from being in Rush. I've also been offered the chance of getting involved with a couple of small-budget, film soundtracks, but I'd like to learn a little more about that before taking up these opportunities. I've always seen songs in a visual manner, but it would be great to look at an image and write in that mood. And I'd also consider doing a solo record if I could push myself to actually finish it!"

With 'Presto' currently in the racks, however, all outside projects are set to take a backseat. Rush will undertake a six-month tour from January until June. But where the UK will fit in remains to be seen.

PHIL ALEXANDER



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# RUSH

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