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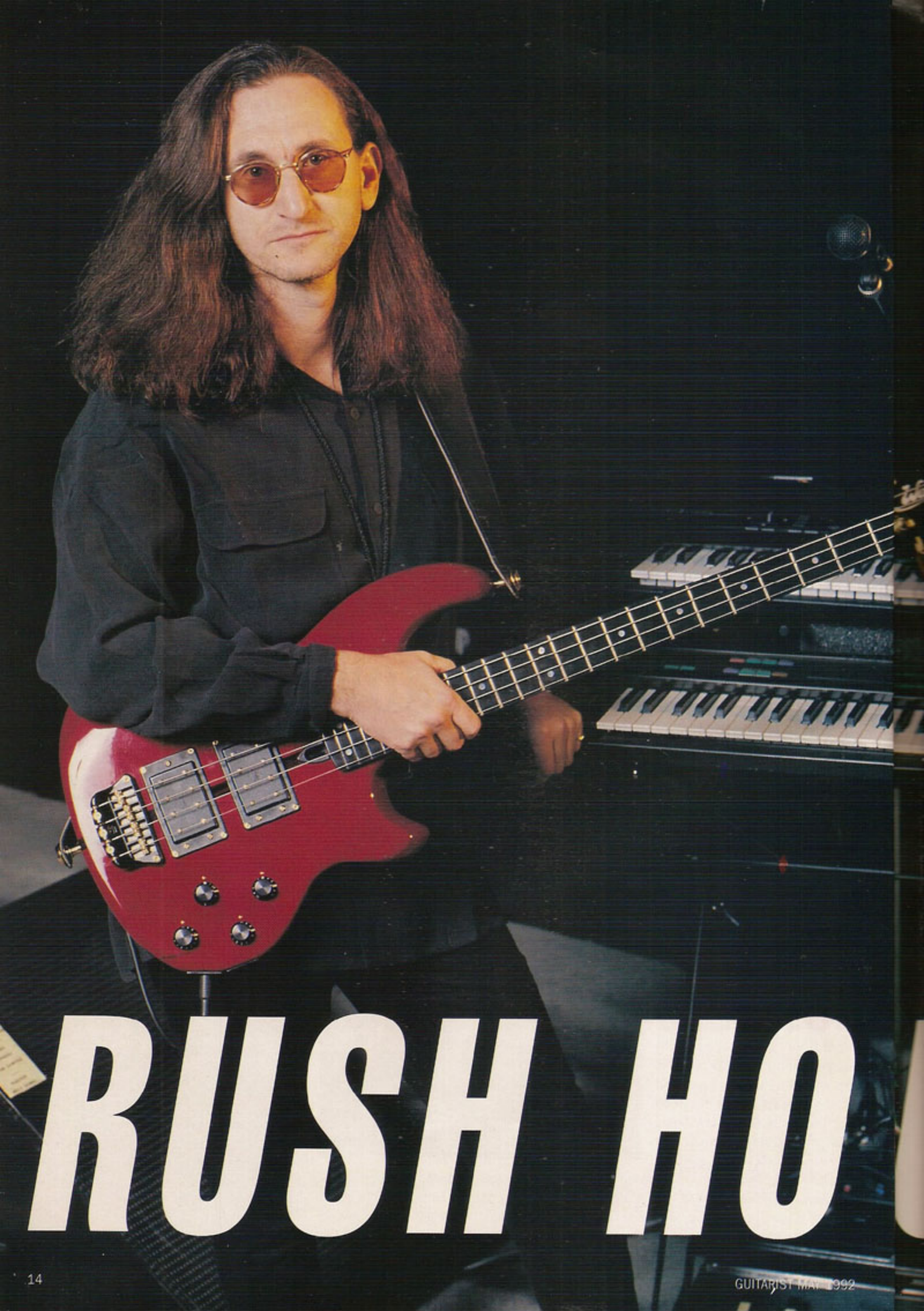
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# RUSH HO



# GEDDY LEE & ALEX LIFESON

*Canada's biggest hard rock export are back, and yet another new album and world tour sees Lee, Lifeson and Peart more insanely popular than ever. Via phone calls a week and seven hundred miles apart - Geddy on tour in North Carolina and Alex at home in Toronto - Gibson Keddie spoke to two thirds of the rock monolith that is Rush...*

**'N**inety per cent perspiration, ten per cent inspiration' is a saying which attempts to sidestep any assumption that success is the inevitable result of an abundance of talent. But artistry and sheer stamina need not be mutually exclusive, and the balance is

perfectly epitomised by Rush. They've certainly worked damn hard to reverse the situation of their early days when, as a fledgling heavy rock band in the late '60s, their choice of songs made them the most unpopular act on their promoter's label!

However, sticking doggedly to a format of heavy rock covers from bands like The Who, Cream, Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin, Rush steadily built up a following around their native Toronto. Working together on such a continual basis resulted in a distinctive song style and an emerging partnership between the guitar of Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee's bass.

The early '70s saw growing interest in the band, who were by this time demoing their own tunes. Poised on the verge of some serious touring as the second or third act on Canadian tours by such bands as ZZ Top, Blue Oyster Cult, Nazareth and Rory Gallagher, their original drummer John Rutsey, being more of a straight-ahead rock musician, quit the band, unhappy with Rush's new and more experimental musical direction. This left the way open for Neil Peart, an alleged skins-maniac in the true Keith Moon style, to join Lee and Lifeson and make an effective lyrical contribution, allowing Geddy and Alex to concentrate on melodies and structure - a system which has lasted up to and including their latest album, 'Roll The Bones'.

## JUST LIKE GEDDY...

SPEAKING TO GEDDY backstage at Rush's gig in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I asked how, with well over twenty years on the road, he still maintains the motivation to go out and do yet another world tour?

"I don't know what made us do another one, actually. I guess we've had a couple of really good years, in terms of getting ourselves together. Working effectively in the studio on two really positive albums has been very good for us. There seems to have been a really optimistic outlook resulting from the mood of the last American tour. We paced it right, in that we moved around slowly and *enjoyed* ourselves! I think we were tempting fate a bit this time, but we decided, 'Well, maybe we should try to go for the world tour again.' It's an experiment that I hope we don't live to regret, but it's been a great tour so far - probably one of the most successful that we've done."

These are difficult times for bands on the road; are there many other big tours happening in America at the moment?

"I know that the past year has been pretty tough. At the moment there are a few bands out, like Metallica, and U2, and we just ran into the Grateful Dead in Atlanta. We're doing good business and they seem to be doing good business too, so I guess it's not too bad at the moment. It's been a while since we've been in Britain, though, and we're certainly looking forward to that."

As the years have progressed, your live shows have always improved, without ever relying purely on 'past glories'. Each new album and tour seems to surpass the quality of the previous one. Do you have to work very hard to maintain that standard?

"We always look upon ourselves as a band that keeps trying to improve in ➤

# OUR



every aspect – songwriting to musicianship to production – and I think that extends to our live show. We know how hard it is for people to part with their money and we want to make sure our audiences get their money's worth. Our fans are very loyal, very dedicated, so we'll work very hard to make sure that happens. And if I'm going to dedicate my life to this, then I'm going to enjoy it, too, and not just be out here killing time. This is my life and I could be doing other things. I could be at home! So if I'm going to be away from home I'm going to make sure that a) from a professional point of view it's a fulfilling and rewarding experience, and b) from a personal point of view the lifestyle that I'm leading is interesting to me and stimulating in other ways also."

Do you still get very homesick? Does it ever get any easier?

"I think you get better at it but it doesn't get easier. We've all developed better lifestyle habits now; we're all very sports-active, we all work out every day, and we all have other outside interests. We also tour at a very slow pace, so we have a day off every third day and try to make sure that we're in towns that have interesting things to do: art galleries, museums, whatever. Alex's diversion seems to be excessive golf these days! From that point of view we've learned how to utilise our time better, which is very important.

"From the other side of things you never get used to being away from your family this much. No matter how well things are going, you still hit a point in the tour where you're thinking, 'I want to go home...' This will be the longest tour we've done in some time, lasting until the end of June. We go home every three weeks for at least eight or nine days. That's one way of staying in contact with reality."

You mentioned the positive direction of the last two albums; that's obviously got a lot to do with Rupert Hine who's producing for you now...

"Yeah, Rupert came along at the right time for us, as did Stephen Taylor, his engineer. Very optimistic, fast-working, professional people: definitely what we needed at that time. The chemistry between us certainly worked, and we were able to do what we do in an efficient manner, which has been very rewarding all round."

Rush have always been a guitar-based trio, but you shifted focus in the mid '80s and became increasingly involved with synthesisers. Now you seem to have gone back to a more direct and immediate way of presenting the songs. Have you changed the way you write for the recent albums?

"Yes, we have. Over the last couple of albums we have been writing less on computers, more on straightforward guitar and bass, the way we used to write a long time ago. I think it was just before the 'Presto'

album; we were sitting down to write songs with banks of synthesisers and computers and we just looked at them as they were being brought into the studio. I realised that I couldn't bear looking at the stuff – it had become such a daunting concept to me. Eventually Alex just said, 'Screw it, let's get the eight-track out, put up a couple of mics and just have some fun writing.' I think what we've realised is that the computer/sequencer style of writing and the extra advantages that keyboards bring you are best used, for us at least, strictly as an arrangement tool, as opposed to the main writing tool."

Does Alex feel happier now that you're writing primarily on guitar, rather than bringing them into the song afterwards?

"I don't think we ever used the guitar as a secondary instrument as such, but he's certainly happier about the way we've recorded the last few records. In recording albums like 'Power Windows' and 'Hold Your Fire', we allowed ourselves to go a bit overboard by doing keyboard overdubs before we had the guitars on. That was really doing things ass backwards, but at the time that was where we were all at, and we were all present when those decisions got made. It was a very creative time and I really don't have any regrets about that period; I think we made some good music. There's a very interesting blend of guitar and synthesiser interplay that felt very contemporary."

The musicians in Rush expanded their instrumental abilities to cope with an increasingly wide variety of sounds. But you're still a three-piece unit. Have you never been tempted to add players for live performances in the way that, say, Dire Straits have?

"That's an issue that came to a head before the 'Presto' tour, where we were very seriously considering adding somebody to help us out with keyboards and background, but we decided to just keep going as the three of us. I think part of us doesn't want to let anyone else into the club, you know? Also, technology's got to a point where I can trigger just about anything with my foot pedals, and both Alex and Neil are using them too now... Neil is triggering keyboards and sequencers with his drum pads. It's a potential nightmare, but the equipment is so reliable – touch wood – and so efficient to organise now, that it's really not that difficult to do."

Do you have to concentrate very hard on stage or can you just let it flow?

"You can let it flow. There are times when you have to be static, because I have to be playing bass, singing and triggering with one foot while duetting with Alex, but we try to trade off those moments so that while one person is static the other person is free to roam around and get some enthusiasm into the show, because no matter how many lights and lasers you bring along with you, people ➤

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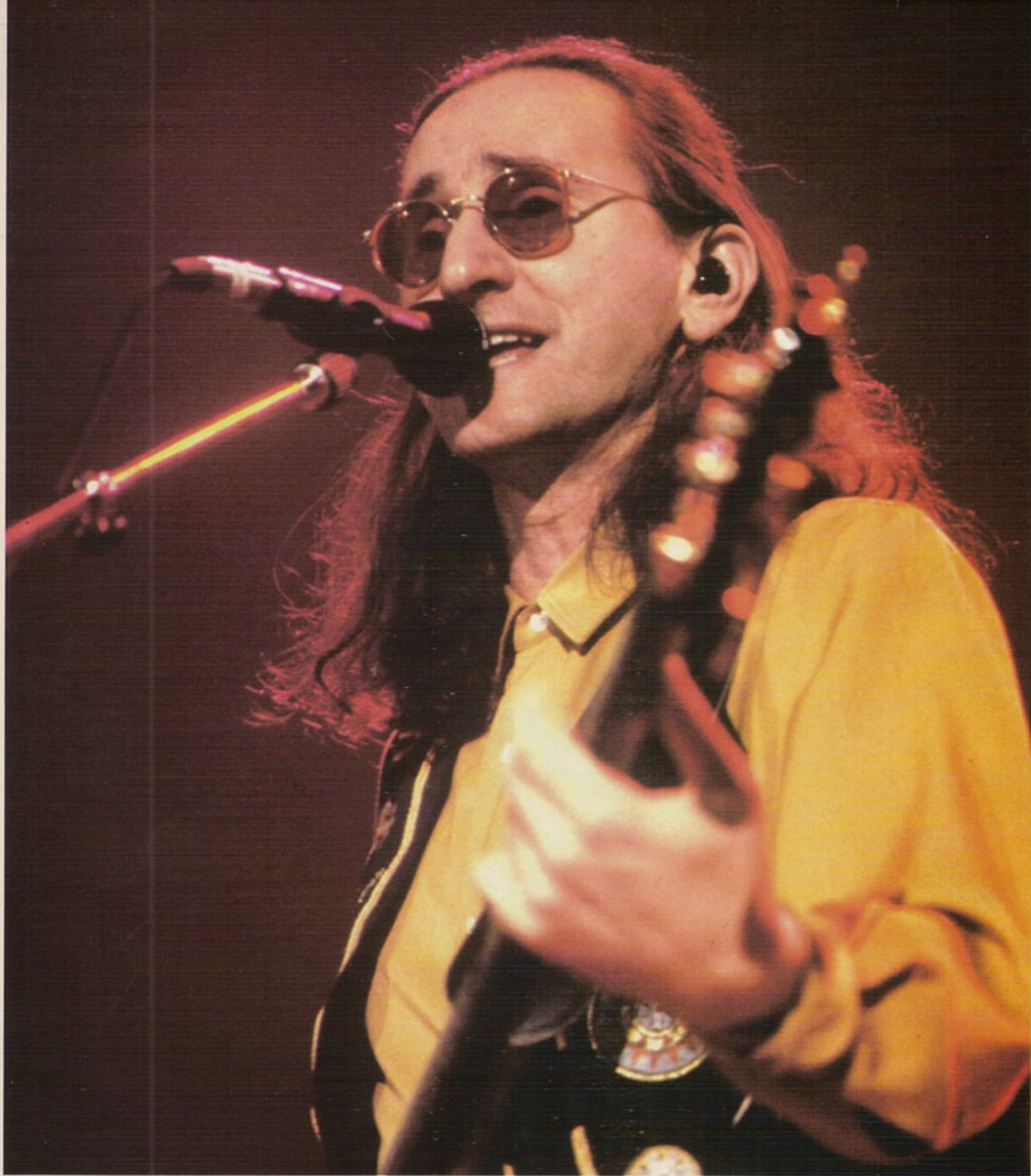
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► want to see you *entertain* them. Let's face it, it's way more fun to do that, too. We've found a nice balance where we've harnessed the technology and can allow ourselves to roam around when we need to. We've really enjoyed playing like that on this tour."

Are you loud on stage? Is your foldback loud or do you try and keep it down for your own sake, so you can hear everything that's happening?

"Alex is extremely loud! That really only affects him, though, because my side of the stage is pretty quiet. I'm using these micro-monitors on this tour which are like a personal stereo, with little headphones that are moulded to actually fit right in my ear – so that I don't need on-stage monitors. I have a couple of floor monitors sitting on the stage in case my micro-monitors fail, but they're just for emergency purposes."

Obviously Neil's going to be loud at the back and you're going to have to overcome his volume?

"He hits his drums harder than anybody I've ever heard! But he's brought his volume down too, and he now uses little high frequency filters in his

ears to cut out the ring from the cymbals to save his ears from damage. So I'd say that stage volume is under control."

Rush are known for their exceptionally good live sound. I take it you're very pleased with the way that PAs have progressed?

"Oh yes. To me the biggest breakthrough for Rush was getting Robert Scovill, our latest sound man on the last two tours. I can't say enough good things about him – he's about the best live sound engineer in the business, for this kind of music in particular. The compliments on the sound are a regular thing. With a band like us there are so many subtleties going on that you can't be out of control, otherwise you'd miss a lot. Not only are there a lot of little percussive things coming from Neil, but there are myriad textures that Alex has, very complicated special effects things with all the different textures and sounds he uses on his guitar – not just the straight heavy guitar sound. And I've got all my little MIDI effects and synthesiser effects; there are so many little subtleties that could get lost if they're not handled by the right person."



With so much material to choose from, how do you decide what songs to do?

"It's a really difficult process and we spent a long time rehearsing before we took this tour out on the road. Part of the reason why we took so much time was because we needed to whittle the material down. As it is, we're still over two hours with the show. We just try to bring a variety of material from all our albums and yet still make sure we've got at least five or six numbers from this album. But it goes way back; we've got material from just about all of our albums."

What bass are you using on this tour?

"I'm using a Wal bass. When I was recording 'Power Windows' I brought my basses to the Manor to record, and Peter Collins, our producer, owns a Wal so his was there too. I wanted to check it out in comparison with mine because I'd always admired the sound that Percy Jones from Brand X got with his Wal. So it was a bass that I was familiar with but I'd never really tried out. After I tried his I loved the way it sounded and ended up using it on most of that album. During that time I had them make me one as well. They made me a beautiful bass that I used on 'Hold Your Fire' and recently they made me another one that was used on 'Roll The Bones'. I combine a mic'd sound and a DI from a small Gallien-Krueger bass amp in the studio – but it's the new Wal that I'm using on stage now."

Your bass tone seemed to have changed for Rush's last two albums, with a noticeably smoother sound – different from your Rickenbacker and Steinberger sounds.

"Yes, a little more bottom and a slightly deeper sound on record, but on stage I still have a *sprangy* sound! I can't really get away from the top end thing completely because I like it. And live it really helps to have that extra definition. There are times when I'm playing a lot of little things in ranges that have difficulty cutting through, so the extra top helps there."

When you're not writing with the other members of the band, would you record ideas at home and bring them in?

"Sure. There are times when both Alex and I write at home. Personally, I love returning after a period of not writing; I'm just champing at the bit and can't wait to get in there. It's almost like you've been fasting and then you get a great meal – very satisfying!"

Your style encouraged inevitable Zeppelin comparisons in the early '70s, mainly because it was a guitar band with somebody singing in a fairly high vocal register...

"Sure. They were a big influence on us, and on hard rock, *period*. Their impact was considerable, as was The Who's. My influences when I grew up were mostly English bands, like the Yardbirds, Cream, John Mayall's Bluesbreakers and on through progressive English rock."

You play fingerstyle, but that

crisp attack must come from very hard fingertips!

"Yeah, but I eat my nails a lot, too, so they're actually quite strong; my onstage sound changes dramatically if I break a nail! Otherwise onstage I use pretty much the same things I've used for a long time. I use a BGW power amp, a Furman preamp and API 550 equalisers, which have great EQs, very generous with their frequencies. And I have a couple of custom-made cabinets with EVs in them on stage, for extra bottom end, although it's becoming less important now. I also use an old Ampeg B4B reflex cabinet. The top end is mic-ed and that's part of the sound you hear up front, but a lot of the sound is the DI from the Wal."

Talking about PA and music technology moving forward, film and animation technology has moved forward equally. Rush have always integrated that effectively into the stage show...

"Absolutely, and that's great fun for me, because I have a personal interest in film; it's a hobby of mine and for me to be able to work with these people is really a great bonus. And I think it's one of the things that's kept me so interested in Rush, because I've had so much freedom to explore so many other areas of interest, and yet still in the context of the band..."

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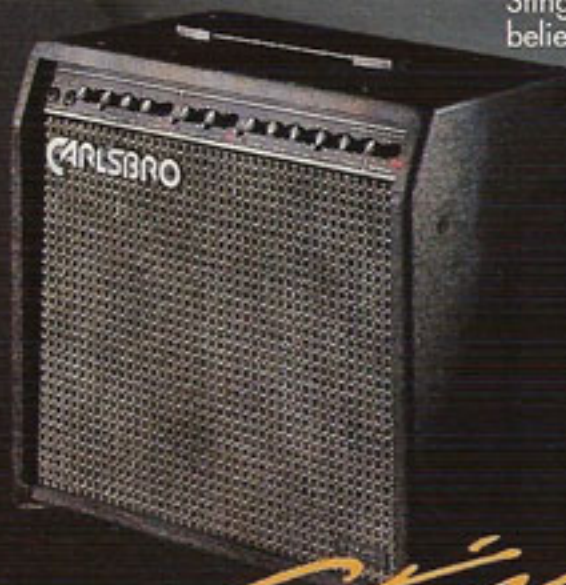
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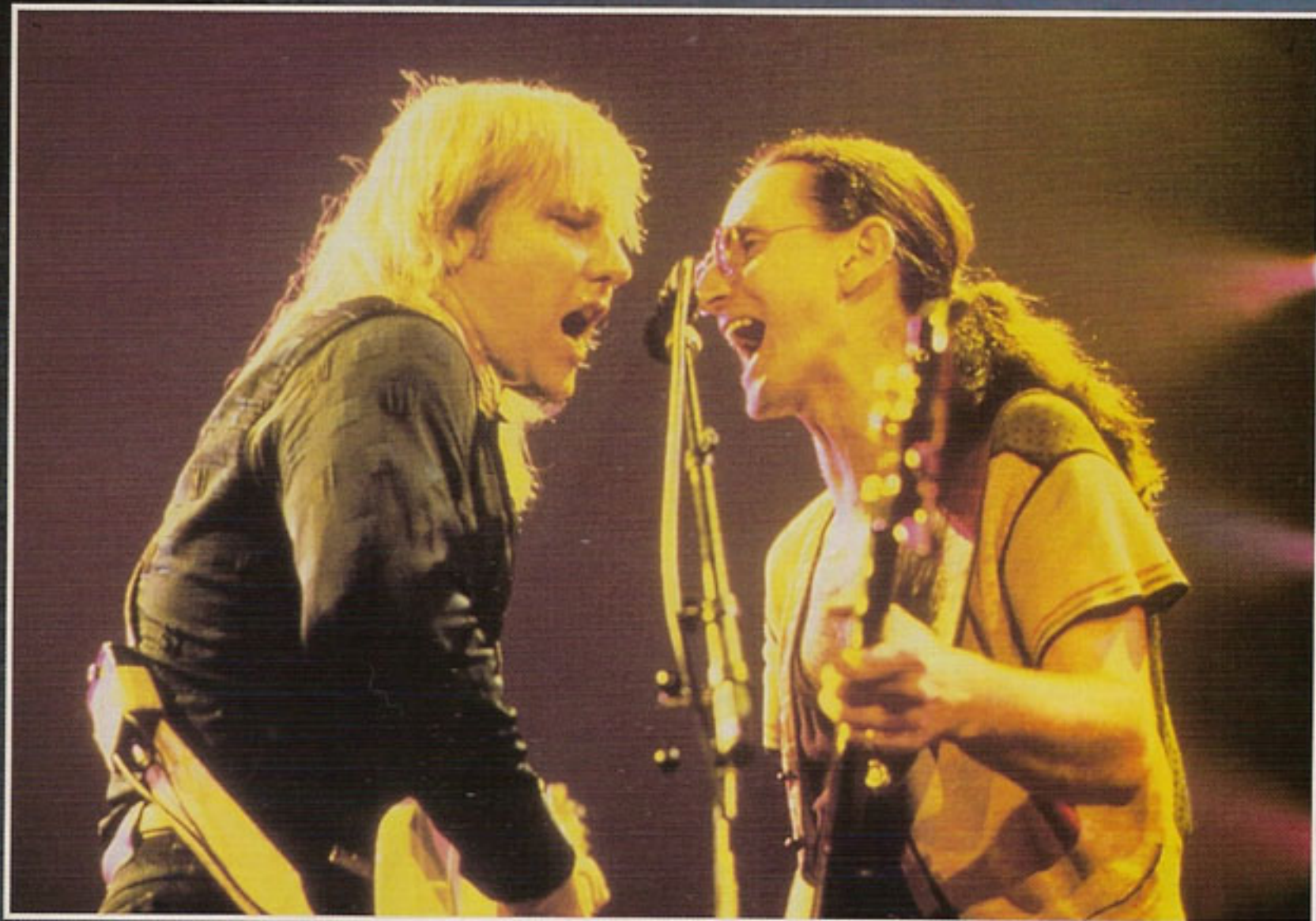
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**H**AVING TAKEN ADVANTAGE of Rush's player-friendly tour schedule, Alex Lifeson was at home with his family in Toronto when he called me. Diving straight in at the deep end, he confirmed Rush's renewed commitment to the guitar as the focal point of the band. "And I think the next record will see the guitar feature even more. Mind you, I don't know about the others, but that's my plan anyway..!"

"This time, any sequencing or keyboards stuff came after the basic guitar and bass parts were done, and I think we're at our best that way, in that we tend to be less diverted by programming sequencers and all that crap. Sticking to the basics we found that once we got the melody, or a theme, everything else came quite quickly. Then we spent as long as we wanted fiddling around. Geddy spends hours rearranging sequencers and

# SMART ALEX

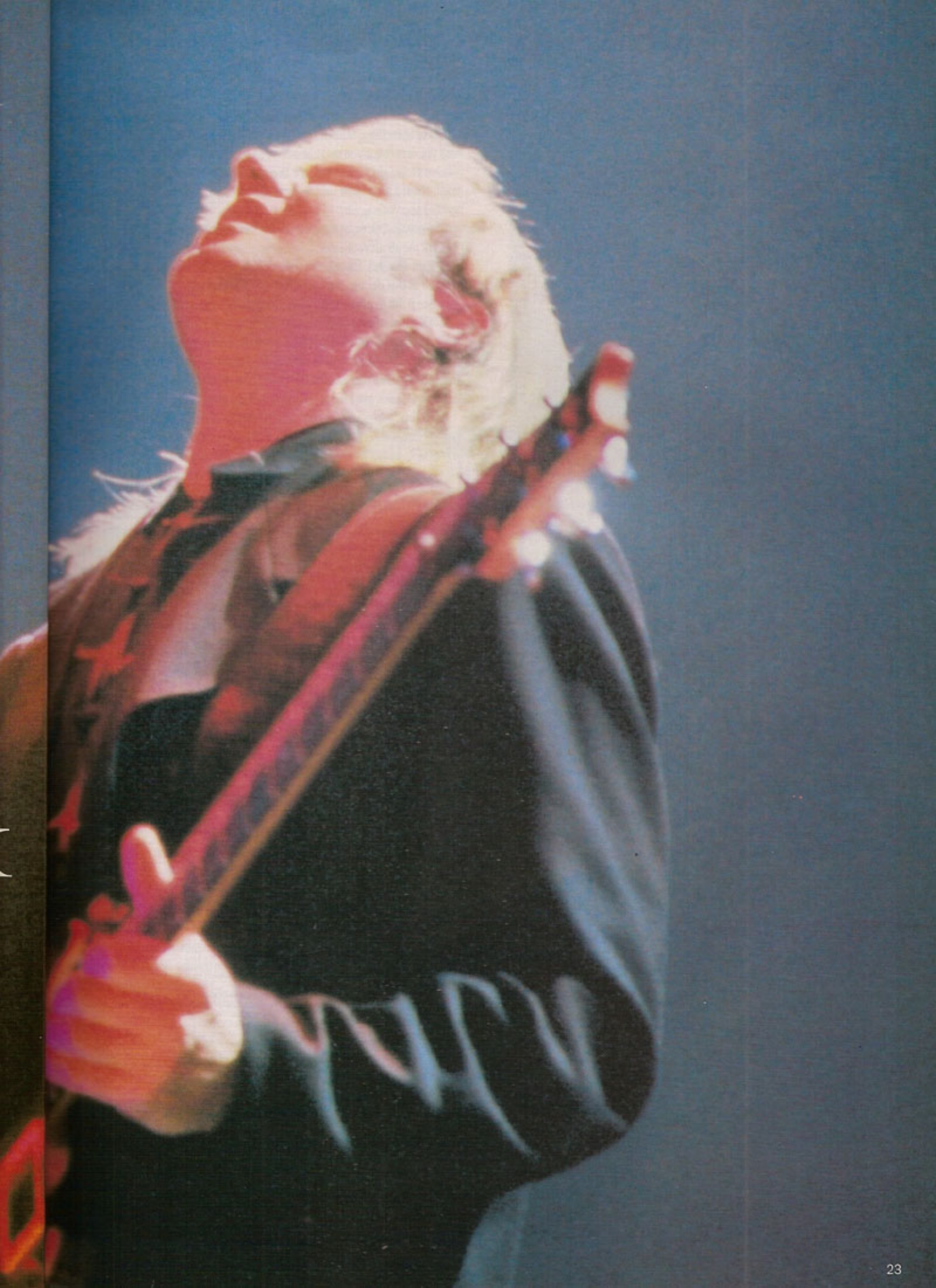
sequenced drum parts which invariably get thrown out because Neil never listens to them! It's really just a technical exercise for us to go through. But I think that we're starting to understand what's really important in our songwriting and how we can best arrange it."

The new album contains a much more spontaneous, up-front sound. Was it recorded like that? Were the guitars put down fairly quickly?

"We actually used some of the material that we'd recorded on our 8-track demos this time. I kept three solos as used on *Bravado*, *Roll The Bones*, and *Ghost Of A Chance*, which were basically one-take solos. Normally I like to work on developing the guitar parts while the basic tracks are being done, and in the old days I used to have a few weeks to do that. This time all the foundation tracks were done in five days so I had to step on it a bit. But I had a fairly clear picture of what I wanted to do so that I didn't overdo it. In some ways it was good because I spent less time on each song, giving that kind of spontaneous feel, but still with a clear focus and direction. It can be beneficial to have pressure on you like that, once in a while."

With the advent of Geddy's smoother bass tone, your guitar seems to cut through with more clarity... ➤









➤ "That's very true, his sound has smoothed out. Recently I heard a couple of tracks from our 'Moving Pictures' album on the radio, and I couldn't believe how greedy the bass was back then. But that was just the way we sounded, though it set me thinking that perhaps we'd lost something over the years. It's funny how you feel you're progressing, then you go back and listen to something you did previously and it's got real grit and emotion, and you wonder if you've gone off on a tangent. But 'Moving Pictures' was twelve years ago, and while it's the same people, it was a very different band then. I wonder if on the next record it will come full circle, with a grittier approach again."

The guitars that you've used over the years have changed quite a lot. Can you tell me about your priorities in changing from one to another?

"I used Gibson's ES line for quite a while, from the early '70s right up till the end of that decade. I always liked the balance of that guitar, and the great way that it felt to play. I still play my original 335 at home, but it was always a difficult guitar to control live; it would whistle and scream a lot, which made it very tough at times. Plus it had a particular tone that was not easy to manipulate. I wanted to get the clarity of a Fender with the fat, tough sound of the Gibson. That was around 1980 and I had a Strat as a second guitar for a number of years, but I never really liked or got into playing it."

"One time when we were on a tour of Britain I decided to pop the bridge pickup out of the Strat and put in a humbucker, trying to find that middle ground of sustain and clarity. I found that was a desirable combination, so I started using Fenders that were slightly modified for that sound. Then a friend of mine who distributed musical equipment in the Toronto area got involved with a company who were building guitars and he wanted to get some feedback from me about them, and so he gave me the very first Signature model. I tried to evolve the guitar into something that was good quality with an interesting sound, but still relatively inexpensive to buy, because we felt guitars had become so expensive. But it didn't live up to standards, involving too much experimentation and hunting around to get the right components. It just wasn't working out, then the company folded."

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"Just before that I came across a Paul Reed Smith, which I liked a lot, so I arranged with the company to send me a couple, took them out of the cases when they arrived to find that they were perfect for me – exactly what my friend's Signature guitars always wanted to be. So we modified a couple of models that PRS built for me – put in single coil active pickups and so on. On this tour, though, I've changed to humbuckers, which I haven't used in quite a few years. It's good to have that sustain and toughness that was perhaps lacking, particularly when we do some of the older material. But these PRS guitars are beautiful; they're just so well made, and so flexible in their sounds."

I know that you prefer the sound of bolt-ons. Are you using bolt-on versions of the PRS?

"Yes, I much prefer bolt-ons, the sound seems deeper and fuller, and they also feel different."

What other preferences do you have?

"With these, which are Signature models, the only thing, apart from the addition of humbuckers, is the five-way rotary switch; we took that out and put in a three-way toggle, something that I'm more used to. I wouldn't use the two out-of-phase settings live anyway; I'd rather use the amplifier and preamps to change the sound."

It's interesting to see PRS using you in their most recent advertisements in *Guitarist*. But I know that you use a Telecaster a lot in rehearsal – why don't you use it live?

"Actually, I'm sitting right beside it now! I love playing the Telecaster when we're working on new material; it's really straightforward and lets you concentrate on the song rather than changing things around on the guitar. I like the feel of the neck, and the whole balance of the guitar, but live I'm happy with the PRS and don't really want to have to switch from guitar to guitar. As it is, I make three or four guitar changes and that's enough. I did use it a few years back in the recording of 'New World Man', but overall I prefer to use it in developing the songs."

Are you still using Gallien-Krueger equipment?


"Oh sure. We were just in California, playing in San Francisco and the G-K people came by for the show. They're really helpful, always open to ideas and suggestions. They actually sent me up a prototype of the 100MPL, a new preamp which I tried out on the last tour. When they sent me the latest version I was pleased to see that they'd incorporated a lot of my suggestions, which I thought made it more user-friendly. Part of the problem with big companies is that their units are designed by engineers rather than players, and they're not that easy to get into. The preamp is very flexible, with a lot of onboard software, MIDI-compatible obviously, with all the necessary onboard effects. And it sounds great!

"Live, I like to add a Marshall 100-watt head with a 4x12 cabinet. I have my old twin-twelve Marshall combo that I like to use in the studio; they're not overly powerful amps but they have a nice clarity and sound pretty good if you give them a big push. I also use a G-K with twin-twelve Celestions which I have mounted in road-cased cabinets and which I use as isolation boxes for the live house sound with my regular setup. And I run a couple of direct, so we have quite a wide variety of different sounds available to us."

I had heard that you were thinking of stopping touring altogether after your last major tour...

"The last time we were in Britain was at the end of the 'Hold Your Fire' tour, and we went back home after that, had a week off, went straight into the studio to start work on the live 'Show Of Hands' album, as well as recording for the accompanying video. So there we were at the end of a long tour overseas, straight back into the studio, totally exhausted. It had been a very tough tour for us, with a lot of illness. Geddy had a lot of problems with his throat, there was a flu bug that no one could shake, and it was not a lot of fun. When we finished it all, no-one wanted to tour, ever again, and we took seven months off, by far the longest break from work that we've ever had. But it was

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Photos: W.A. Williams

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➤ really necessary to completely divorce ourselves from the band, the music industry, everything, and catch up with the rest of life. Consequently, when we went back to start writing 'Presto' everyone had a new-found enthusiasm in the studio and we had a lot of fun, and we finished it a little earlier than expected, which was a bonus.

"We still never talked about touring though, and it wasn't until a few days before the final mixes that Neil brought it up, and he had been the one previously most against continuing with touring. When we discussed it we decided that because we were happy with 'Presto' we didn't want to short-change the record. So we decided to go out for a short tour, restricted to the primary markets only, which kept us in the main cities in America. We had a great time and actually felt the tour had been too short, at four and a half months, which is a great way to end a tour!"

It must be very confidence-inspiring to know that your live sound is in such good hands.

"Yeah, and that confidence permeates to everyone, band and crew alike. Everyone works really hard together. Without demeaning anyone from

previous tours, this is the best crew we've had, and we are really looking forward to bringing this show over – it'll be a good tour, I'm sure. I'm hoping that the weather will be better than last April when we were over in England mixing 'Bones' – it was the coldest, wettest April on record! I have a new addiction known as 'Golf' and there are a few of us who like to get out there, so we want to head for Scotland...

"Sport's the perfect answer to being on the road; it stops you staying up too late or hanging out in the hotel bar too long, because you want to get up early and get out of the hotel room, where you could go really crazy. So Neil cycles, Geddy plays tennis, I play golf, and these are positive lifestyle diversions for us. The two hours on stage is still the absolute highlight though, and I enjoy my playing more than ever.

"Being on the road can be very difficult, very boring, a procession of buses, hotel rooms, bars, with a constant craving to change your head space. And unless you get out and do something else it's easy to fall into very bad habits. After all these years I think we've finally found the balance..." ■