to recreate the band being close to you. From night to night, the sound can change pretty drastically. Basically, it’s about getting louder! Even in some of the smaller places it’s ridiculous loud — the ring in my ears after a show, or even the new day is pretty amazing. The Fenders have to be on ten in order to get the distortion.”

The Freddie Mercury Tribute

“It was overwhelming from every aspect — from the people that were there, to being able to give something back to a band that you’ve grown up on, to the emotional side. Brian [May — guitarist for Queen] knew that we just loved every record. Initially, we weren’t going to do any of our own stuff. I got into a little bit of an argument with Brian — he was disappointed that we weren’t planning on doing any of our own stuff. But at the last minute, we went into ‘More Than Words’ spontaneously. The camera crews flipped out, because it wasn’t even in the schedule.”

The Most Important Thing

“I think that too often, guitar players don’t pay attention to what else is going on. The biggest lesson I had was to ask ‘why?’ whenever I heard something I liked — why does this particular guitar riff sound good? What’s happening with the rhythm section, or the song? Or, what’s going on beyond? You get a better understanding, musically, of what’s happening. I think it helps your playing a lot more. It’s wrong to look too much on the technical side of guitar playing. If you think too much, you’re already in trouble. Play things ‘cause you enjoy them, knowing that they sound good. It’s all about mood, you know. Make up your own rules as you go along and do what you want, that’s what I did.”

Alex Lifeson

What Canadian rock guitar player hasn’t been influenced by Alex Lifeson? From the bars and high schools of Toronto to the arenas of the world, both he and his bandmates in Rush have been an inspiration to musicians all over the world. Currently working on a solo album while the rest of the band takes a well-deserved break, Alex reflected on his career from his home studio in Richmond Hill.

Keeping Busy

“I’m starting to work on my own solo project. We finished the last tour in May, and Geddy and his wife had a baby a week after — talk about timing! He really wants to be home for a bit and spend some time with his new daughter, which we all understand and gratefully accept.”

“We’ve been so busy over the years that you come home after a tour or recording and kick back and veg out. But after a lengthy summer of just hanging around, I thought that I had to do something. I have a recording studio at home. Bill Bell, a guitarist who works with Tom Cochrane and a lot of other local people, is helping out. We met at the first Humbaba and played together and he really got along quite well and thought that we’damps together. We had fun on Guitar World’s ‘Guitars That Ruled the World’ compilation CD, and continued writing. I’ve been doing it since the end of October, I get up in the morning, grab a coffee and go down and I’m there ‘til about 7:00 p.m., when I come out bleary-eyed and shaking! But I’m really enjoying it a lot, and it af-
Guitar Mania!

Forces me a little bit of freedom, but with it comes responsibility that I wasn't quite prepared for (laughter)! I come to appreciate what we do in Rush, where everyone takes on a share of the workload through the course of writing and recording. Here I'm on the line — some days I think it's terrible and other days I think it's great — I'm going through one of those terrible periods right now (laughs). Tom Cochrane came in, and Sebastian Bach put down a vocal on one song. I'm enjoying it — it's been quite challenging and satisfying so far.”

Beginnings

“Initially, I wanted to play classical guitar. I used to bug my parents to get me a guitar and some lessons. But at the time it was difficult; guitars were expensive, lessons were expensive — so they got me a cheap little Kent guitar. It was eight dollars and the strings were surplus Bell Canada wire and they sat as tall as telephone poles off the neck! Then I got a Kenora electric guitar and by that time, I was getting into other kinds of music — Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Clapton, Beck. When Zeppelin came out, that was my next big shift. Jimmy Page was a long-time favourite of mine. His playing sounded so cool and so hip for the time. It was big, heavy and mellow — and sexy in a lot of ways. The fact that it was a trio with a singer made me think, ‘hey, I could do this’... or at least I could try!”

“Cream got us practicing and wanting to become better. Ged and me would get together every day after school and learn ‘Crossroads’ and ‘Spoonful’, things like that. Later, we shifted towards the British progressive stuff. It wasn't music we wanted to play, but we really enjoyed listening to it because it was very sophisticated to our ears at the time.

Once we started touring on a big scale, we started to focus on what we were doing, developing our own sound and ideas about writing and how we could be different. By the time we got to A Farewell To Kings, we were trying a lot of different things — ‘Cygnus X-1’, for example — the tone on that album and the variety on it.”

Writing

“Geddy and I look at a local studio that's quite comfortable. We'll set up and work there on a little thing while Neil writes lyrics in the main house. We get together before dinner and discuss direction and how things are going. We'll go on days a week, with weekends off. We're creatures of habit: the mechanics of our writing style haven't changed in years. The whole availability of digital recording in a compact mode has made things much easier, as well as being able to split and use the things that you do at the demo stage at the final stage.

On the last couple of records, we've probably used 25-30% of the guitar stuff from demos — most of my solos, in fact. We'll run a track of SMPTE and fly them in. We'll become very used to the solo I've done at the demo stage and it becomes... THE SOLO. Quite often, Neil starts to work his drum patterns around the solo, putting in little accents and things — so it's sometimes something that has to stay by necessity.”

Rhythm Work

“In the pre-synth days, I thought that the problem with a three-piece was that the sound wasn't full enough, and I knew that it was basically down to me. I experimented with a more suspended feel so that there was an illusion of two guitars. When the chorus effect became available, I fell in love with it and had a fairly long love affair with it. It gave me that detuned kind of width that I had always heard.

“Pete Townshend was a terrific influence because of his strumming ability and his selection of chords and how he used them. He could get a tone that was on the lighter side of heavy, but was always very tough and masculine. I learned that there was a real quality to rhythm playing and really tried to develop that.”

Hendrix

“He was such a terrific influence on music, let alone guitar. Here's a young teen listening to the Beach Boys and the British bands that were around; suddenly Hendrix came, and when he said, 'you'll never hear surf music again,' he meant it! We played ‘Fire’ and ‘Foxy Lady’ in the first incarnation of Rush, which started back in 1966.”

Woodshedding

“I'd come home from school and the first thing I would do was play guitar until dinner, have dinner, play some guitar and then do my homework for five minutes, and then play my guitar until I went to bed. I did this every day... just couldn't play enough. For a year and a half, I studied classical guitar with Elliot Goldner, who had studied with Eli Kassner. He had a motor-
cycle accident, so we fell out of the pattern of lessons, although I tried to practice as much as I could. This all ended when we started playing bars a lot.

“When we started touring, our schedule was pretty heavy, so we’d do soundcheck if we were lucky enough to get it and then I’d sit in the dressing room and play until we went on. I did that for years. I became a little more regimented later on, where I would set aside at least 45 minutes before the show to warm up, and I did that for years. Over the past few years, I’ve cut that back a bit. It’s become more of a dream that I’ve set on the backburner, that one day I would start taking classical lessons again and try to pick it up. I enjoy playing it, I like the discipline of it, but I’m not a really disciplined person, so I have to get a good hard kick in the pants to get me going with that.”

The Most Important Thing

“It’s great to find out the background of other players—what motivates them, what other interests they have. Whenever I meet another guitarist, I like to get to know them as a person just to find out where their playing comes from. Eric Johnson was a great example. He played with us a couple of tours ago and we got to know each other. We’re a year apart, our birthdays are very close, and there are certain similarities to our character. When I listen to him play, there’s a structure and intricacy—he’s very fluid and accurate, which is a tough combo. When I met him, I found it to be a gentle soul with a really good heart. There’s a connection in his heart and soul that enables him to play the way he plays; when I listen to him play, I get a very clear picture of him as a person, and that’s a great thing to convey.

“This last year has been a very reflective time for me. When I look back on my career, I think that I have reflected my personality and the way I am as a person.”

Mike Keneally

Talk about being the man for the job! Mike spent his formative years in San Diego learning the entire Frank Zappa. Little did he know that in a few short years, he would be playing guitar and keyboards for the man himself. With the release of Hot Rats in 1969 and Over the Edge in 1970, Mike has established himself as a cutting-edge writer and instrumentalist. He is currently working with Dweezil and Ahmet Zappa’s band, Z, as well as his own project, Beer for Dolphins.

Gear

“My main guitar is a Fender Eric Clapton Signature Stratocaster. Others include a Telecaster ’53 reissue, a Heartfield Talon, a Fernandes Sustainer, a Duotone, a Stephens L and which came out of the Fender Custom Shop, a couple of Heartfield 60s, and a Washburn acoustic/electric that’s on loan from Dweezil. Onstage, the amp setup is a Rivera 2x12, 100 watt combo and a Fender Blues Deluxe, which I run simultaneously. I use Sansamps a lot in the studio; Hot was done entirely with Sansamps. On Boil That Dust Speck I used them in tandem with amplifiers.”

Beginnings

“The Beatles got me into it. My sister was very into them during the height of Beatlemania. She had all the records and I would play them when she wasn’t home. For my seventh birthday, my parents bought me a little organ that was about the size of a slightly large shoe. In 1970 I heard Frank Zappa for the first time and was starting to get antsy about getting a guitar. I got an acoustic and started figuring out Beatles and Frank stuff.

“I perceived in both of them a high quality of songwriting and a really singular vision. I saw excellence in both cases. Specifically from Frank, I was getting the element of humour, I was a maniacal little kid with a weird sense of humour that wasn’t being reflected in popular entertainment at the time. Beyond Mad magazine. He was unique and unaffected by anybody else’s ideas about what a popular music group should be doing.

“Absorbing is everything, and it’s a years-long process. I had a few years of keyboard lessons, but I never had a guitar lesson, so anything that I know about guitar technique is from trial and error. The fact that I was listening to Frank and other progressive music helped make the complex rhythmic patterns involved very second nature to me; before I could identify something as being in 17/8, I could tap my foot to it. When I started composing, it wasn’t difficult to apply the stuff to my own music.

“When I was learning ‘The Black Page’ and stuff, it wasn’t by writing it down. It was by listening to the record over and over and figuring it out. The fact that I have developed my ear that strongly has put me in good stead with what I do and what I’ve done with the Zappa family. With Frank, none of the material we were working on was charted, so you had to have a good ear and quick pattern recognition. His melodies were very non-linear, so pattern recognition means being able to hear a sequence of notes that don’t sound the least bit natural, and being able to grasp them right away through having a good ear. Having approached