Well into their fourth decade, stadium-filling, egg-headed power trio **Rush** are still rock's biggest cult band. Paul Elliott returns to a bygone age of sci-fi concept albums, silk robes and fluffy carpet slippers.
On 17 April 1976, a funny thing happened to Thin Lizzy's Scott Gorham: his initiation into the strange world of Rush. The location was Pekin, Illinois, a small town 130 miles from Chicago. Rush were headlining a show at the Memorial Arena, with Lizzy as one of the supports.

Gorham figured he knew what to expect. Rush were a terribly serious band. They played complex virtuoso rock, wore silk robes on stage and had an almost professorial air. Their new album, 2112, a socio-political sci-fi epic, was on a different cerebral plane to the drinking and fighting songs on Thin Lizzy's latest record, Jukebreak. "We were street rock and they were the progressive side," offers Gorham. "I thought they'd be these really introverted, geeky guys."

He was in for a surprise. The laid-back Californian had witnessed some shocking sights during his tenure in Thin Lizzy. Some of it, he says, "went beyond human boundaries". But what Rush had in store for him was simply weird. It was a couple of hours after the show had ended when Gorham heard a knock at the door of his hotel room. Loaded on booze and weed, and busy entertaining two local girls, he cautiously opened the door and peered out. When Gorham saw the three figures standing outside, he nearly dropped his spiff.

Rush were dressed as characters from the late-'50s American sitcom Leave It to Beaver; guitarist Alex Lifeson as dad Ward Cleaver, his long hair slicked back, wearing a smoking jacket; bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee as moon June Cleaver, hair in pigtails, wearing a floral-print nightdress; and drummer Neil Peart as son 'Beaver' Cleaver, in school uniform.

Gorham invited them into the room, where the trio began to act out scenes from the TV show, to the bewilderment of the two girls sitting on the bed. "At first we were all totally confused," recalls the Lizzy xman, "We were stoned, and this was just so bizarre." By Gorham's reckoning, the act went on for 45 minutes, by which time he was laughing so hard there were tears rolling down his face. "Talk about an ice-breaker. I thought, Oh, that's what they're really like.

Gorham wasn't the first—or the last—to have trouble figuring out Rush. In a career spanning more than 30 years, the Canadian three-piece have been routinely misunderstood by critics, their record label, even their own fans. Rush have never fitted neatly into any one category. They were just another heavy metal band with a squeaky-voiced singer; to others they're too clever by half, not rock'n'roll enough. In reality, Rush have always stood alone; always evocative, and the very definition of a progressive rock band.

"Sometimes we're prog, sometimes we're metal," says Geddy Lee. "It's kinda hard to put us in a category." Or, as Neil Peart once noted, "You either love Rush or hate us."

The Rush story began in earnest in 1968, when Lifeson and Lee first played in a band together in their hometown of Willovale, Ontario. Both were 15 years old. Lifeson's parents were Yugoslavians, named Zivovich; Lee's were Polish Jews who fled to Canada after the war. His parents were surfivors of the Nazi concentration camps at Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. Lee was born Gary Lee Weinrib but was nicknamed Geddy from the age of 12. "My mom had a very strong accent, and when she called to me, the kids in the neighbourhood thought it sounded like 'Geddy', and it stuck."

In late '68 Lee and Lifeson formed Rush with drummer John Rutsey, and after three years of diligent gigging the group had become a top draw in clubs around Toronto, playing covers of songs by Cream, The Who and Led Zeppelin. In 1973 they made their recording debut with an independently released single: a version of Buddy Holly's Now Faded Away backed by a lead original, You Can't Fight It. By the end of the year, they'd cut their first album, initially released on their own Moon Records imprint, and later picked up by major label Mercury after the album's most powerful song, Working Man, became a radio hit in Cleveland. Mixed by Englishman Terry Brown—who would work on every Rush album for the next 30 years—the debut buzzed with youthful energy but was very obviously the work of major Led Zeppelin fans. Lee's high-register yelp for one, owed much to Robert Plant and after first playing Working Man on air, Cleveland radio station WMMS-FM was inundated with calls from listeners eager to know when the "new Zeppelin" album was coming out.

Rush scored some high-profile local gigs supporting ZZ Top and The New York Dolls, but by July '74, John Rutsey, suffering from ill health, wanted out. His replacement, Neil Peart, had just returned to his native Hamilton, Ontario following a spell in London, where he had hoped to join an English band. Peart: "English rock, that whole progressive scene, was a big inspiration to me. At first, Lifeson felt intimidated by the new drummer's sheer drive and fierce intellectualism, but once accepted, Peart helped transform Rush into a truly progressive rock act. Peart was both a technically brilliant player and an aspiring lyrcist with grand ideas. For Rush, a whole new range of possibilities was opening up.

The group toured for the best part of six months, playing 85 shows, supporting the likes of Kiss and Uriah Heep, and setting a precedent for the relentless gigging of years to come. They released their second album, Fly by Night, in February 1975—it was a quantum leap forward. Admittedly, the owl on the cover looked not so much menacing as just plain silly, but the powerful opening track, Anthem—its frantic riffing driven by the agile Peart—showed that Rush had upped their game. The album's key track, though, was By-Tor and The Snow Dog. This wasn't the first lengthy song Rush had recorded, but where the seven-minute Working Man was as simple lyrically as its title suggested, and elongated by an instrumental section rooted in late-'60s blues-rock, By-Tor... was more ambitious by far. It was a classic tale of Good versus Evil—with By-Tor, "Knight of darkness", in the black corner and the Snow Dog in the white corner. The drama unfolded over eight minutes and 37 seconds as the battle played out at sea, the tension between Lifeson's wailing guitar and Lee's growling bass effects. Peart's lyrics were similarly fantastical,
The result was 2112, the most unlikely career-saver imaginable. It was, quite emphatically, not a Bad Company album. "The lack of support we received for Caress Of Steel really pissed us off," said Lifeson. "And that anger helped fuel 2112." According to Lee, "2112 was our way of saying to the record company, This is us. Leave us alone."

The album's title track, another 20-minute behemoth, was in a different league to The Fountain Of L阿根廷, both musically and lyrically. Combining progressive-rock complexity, heavy metal power and a memorable tune, Rush had finally defined their sound. "We found our personality," says Lee. In addition, the song's storyline, a science-fiction adventure, carried a bold and ultimately controversial political statement.

Peart based the narrative on the 1937 novel Apathy, written by philosopher Ayn Rand, a self-proclaimed "advocate of reason, egoism and capitalism." In 2112, the anonymous hero challenges, and is eventually crushed by, an authoritarian regime. The album artwork featured the emblematic image of a naked man facing a red star, which for Peart represented "the abstract man against the masses. The red star symbolizes any collectivist mentality." In March 1978, nearly two years after the album's release, the NME (hastily acknowledging Rush's existence) cited 2112 as evidence that the band were crypto-fascists. For Geddy Lee, who suffered nightmares as a child after his mother told him of her experiences...
during the Holocaust, the accusation
remains both mystifying and insulting.

"I was an innocent bystander when that
interview happened," he recalls. "This guy
from the NME and Neil really went at each
other. They were talking about socialism
versus laissez-faire capitalism, and in print
the guy made out that Neil was some kind of
capitalist propagandist. It was outrageous,
hobby journalism. It made my blood boil."

Not all press reaction was as hostile.
Sounds, the first UK music paper to pick up
on the group, heralded 2112 as "the ultimate
concept album." Better still, it sold 300,000
copies in its first six months, soothing
Mercury's anxieties. Even Scott Gorham was
"blown away" when he watched Rush play-
ing the material live. "The musicianship was
incredible," he remembers. "All that
musicality, all the intricacies, and all that
power from just three guys. This wasn't
like all the panny shit you'd hear from some
progressive bands - they really powered
down on it. We respected the hell out of
them."

According to Lee, "'2112 was the first
successful Rush album. To me, it was
effectively the first Rush album. And it
retains a special place in my heart, even if
the band photo on the inside cover - girls' hair,
lips, silk kimono and tight, tight pants - raised
a few questions about their sexual orientation.
"We were musicians searching for an
identity," he plead. "It was a desperate search. We
tried all kinds of onstage apparel. That's when we
entered into our absurdly poetic roles"...

The hard-won success of 2112 set Rush on a roll. They ended
'76 with the release of a double-live album, de rigueur for hard rock
acts in the '70s - it was titled with a Shakespearean flourish - All
The World's A Stage. After further touring in North America
alongside Aerosmith and T. Rex among many others - they made
their first visit to the UK in June 1977, playing a handful of gigs
before pitching up in Mornemouth, South Wales, to record at
Rockfield Studios, a converted farm surrounded by green fields.

"We were very enamoured with British prog-rock bands,"
explains Geddy, "so I guess the studios over there held a certain
mystery for us. We thought it would be a gas to make a record there.
We were absorbing good vibes. It was a beautiful place, jolly
women and volley balls in our hearts."

"We put a lot into Caress
Of Steel. You can almost
smell the hash oil." GEDDY LEE

"Punk legitimised us immediately," Geddy says. "We were adept
and competent musicians. Punk threw us to the top of the pile.
Seriously, punk had a wonderful attitude that we admired. Why
worry? There was no way we were ever going to be considered hip."

For all their seriousness, however, there was still a collective streak
of self-awareness and even self-deprecation running through the
group: an ability to step back and appreciate life's little absurdities,
even their own. This much was evident when Rush toured the
US in '77 in support of A Farewell To Kings with infamous
boozing Brit rockers UFO in tow. UFO may not have shared Rush's
lomber sensibilities, but the two groups hit it off, with their respective
bass player Pete Way taking great delight in sending up the lyrics to "Xanadu."

NICKY WIRE
Manic Street Preachers' old-school metal
loving bassist salutes the "freemasons of rock."

My older brother Patrick went to see
Rush at Stafford Bingley Hall in 1981,
on the Exit... Stage Left tour. I was too
young to go, so I was very jealous. I got
into Rush because all the older boys
liked them. I was into Whitesnake -
proper Whitesnake, Live In The Heart
Of The City - UFO, Gilby... all this stuff
I heard on Tommy Vance's radio show.

"Their music is like a secret
society. They're the freemasons of
the rock world - like a rock version of
Radiohead. They've never sold out to
anyone, yet they can still play gigs all over
the world to 50,000 people. Rush are
the greatest and biggest cult band of all time."

"My favourite album of theirs is
A Farewell To Kings. It was recorded in
Wales, which made it feel that little bit
more special - and that track Xanadu is
amazing. Geddy Lee plays bass on that
guitar-lead instrument. If I had
a millionth of Geddy's ability..."

"And then you've got Alex, who's
playing a little tougher - he gave them
that punk edge. Check out Lakesides Park. I think
Nick Jones nicked Alex's
flange effect for some of
The Clash's London
Calling album. Listen
to Lost In The Super-
market if you don't believe me."

"The rest of the Manics are also into
Rush. We had the lyrics from The Spirit
Of Radio typed at the bottom of our
setlist on the last tour. Having gone
through the process of being in
a band, I think they're some of the
greatest lyrics ever."
Quantum Leap
Jump into the void with these 10 stratospheric Rush moments.

**Working Man**
Deeply in debt to Led Zeppelin and Cream, but still a mighty blue-collar anthem and a model of elemental rock power.
Hear it on *Rush* (1974)

**By-Tor And The Snow Dog**
The first of many epics, proving Rush were far more than just Zeppelin knock-offs. The 'b*tch' section has all the knockabout fun of '70s pro wrestling.
Hear it on *Fly By Night* (1975)

**The Spirit Of Radio**
A Top 20 UK hit in March 1980 that defined the modern Rush and became one of the greatest rock singles of all time. Event that surprise reggae breakdown works.
Hear it on * Permanent Waves* (1980)

**Tom Sawyer**
The ultimate expression of Rush's clinical power. One rock critic recently called « Dave Grohl» the world's greatest living drummer.» That person clearly hasn't heard Tom Sawyer. 
Hear it on *Moving Pictures* (1981)

**ZZY**
Named after the three-letter code for Toronto airport, this tickly, King Crimson-like instrumental has Rush showing off their chops. No other band can play quite like this. Except, perhaps, King Crimson.
Hear it on *Moving Pictures (1981)*

**Secret Touch**
Geddy Lee's personal favourite. "Love the sentiment in the lyrics, and it has a relentless quality. Musically, it really rocks."
Hear it on *Vapor Trails* (2002)

"Punk had an attitude we admired. Why worry? We were never going to be considered hip." — GEDDY LEE

"This was the turning point," admitted Peart, some years later. "We felt like machines, and all of us were wiped out by that."  "Hemispheres was very... dense," concedes Geddy. "We kept expanding the music, making it more complex, and we burned ourselves out on the concept. The music was becoming slave to the concept, instead of being lifted by it. We were suffocating, becoming formulaic. It was time to break the mould. We thought, 'Let's start writing smaller songs..."

**NEW RUSH ERA**

**New Rush Era** began with a new decade, January 1989. Permanent Waves introduced a more streamlined, down-to-earth incarnation of the band. "We wanted something more succ"..." off Groove Before the Dawn. The Spirit Of Radio was the prime example of this new approach. Distilling the essence of Rush into just three minutes, it gave the band its first hit single: Number 13 in the UK. The new era was up and running, the trio's long-term future secured.

The follow-up album, 1981's Moving Pictures, further refined Rush's new wave-influenced hard rock sound and was widely acclaimed as their best yet, going on to become their biggest seller.
In September 2004, Rush played their first British tour in 12 years as part of their 30th anniversary year. “It was really satisfying for a number of reasons, a lot of them personal,” Lee says. “To be back after a long period, to go through all that and then be back playing again, that was a wonderful feeling. We felt that our music still had something to say.”

For Lee, looking out at the ecstatic and, on occasion, air-drumming audiences at those 2004 shows was a heart-warming experience. “I couldn’t help but smile. That joy, they’re feeling comes right back to us.” But there is another reason for Lee to be proud. Recently, he and his 10-year-old daughter watched the movie School Of Rock. In the scene where teacher Dewey Finn, played by Jack Black, hands out CDs for his pupils’ rock history homework; the schoolgirl drummer is given a copy of 2112. The blood-minded, prog-metal masterpiece that saved Rush’s career all those years ago.

Geddy laughs: “At last, after seeing that movie, my kid finally thinks her dad rocks!”
A Farewell To Kings

RUSH

Prog rock with riffs; heavy metal with brains.

IN THE 1970s, the parallels between prog rock and heavy metal were numerous: the pomp and ceremony, the elaborate hair, the even more elaborate legs. Few bands straddled both camps as ably as Rush. Once the UK had sold its most bombastic groups to North America, the continent began breeding its own in their image. With many of those pioneers orbiting the stadium circuit, it fell to copycat bands to fill the void of theatre and university gigs. Step forward Canadian three-piece Rush.

While its predecessor, 2112 was their breakthrough album, this fifth studio set, crafted in Nonnsmouth’s isolated Rockfield Studios while punk raged away in the outside world, fine-tuned its approach. A Farewell To Kings had all the customary reference points: a sci-fi concept and bravura musicianship inspired by Brit heroes such as Yes, welded together with Rush’s passion for prog and splintering heavy rock.

The centrepieces are usually accepted to be the tumultuous, space-tipping ‘Cygnus X-1’ and ‘Xanadu’, an 11.04-minute interpretation of Gaudi’s glistening 19th-century poet Samuel Coleridge’s most famous verse. But the row-forgotten titanic track does all of the above in marginally less time, with Neil Peart presiding over time signatures that would break a lesser drummer’s wrists, and guitarist Alex Lifeson dispensing volley-upon-volley of head-splitting riffs. The effect is brutal but clinically precise, like being mugged by a trio of brain surgeons.

The ‘80s saw Rush evolve into a lighter but no less cerebral, musical group. But this earlier deployment of hard-rock noise and scientific precision lives on in smart-alecky modern rock titans such as Placebo and Muse. As a memento of Rush’s silly golden age it just doesn’t get any better. Mark Blake

Geddy Lee

Rush’s resident yodeller and reluctant poetry fan goes back through time and space.

What do you remember about making A Farewell To Kings?

We did it at Rockfield Studios in Monmouth, Wales, and we started... off working normal hours, but by the time we finished, we were beginning after dinner and working all the way through the night. I still like it as an album. For us, it was... a breakthrough. We had a new angle to work with, so it was fun to write. It finally felt like we were moving forward.

Caress Of Steel, 2112, A Farewell To Kings... How do you regard that sword’s “sorcery era of Rush now?”

Would I go back there? No. But at the time it felt very... natural and honest, we genuinely liked that stuff.

Sadly, nowadays, rock songs based on the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge appear to be a thing of the past. What did you think when first given the lyrics to Xanadu?

Xanadu was the real big track of that era, but I had a hard time identifying with it—eventually we were rehearsing it for the album. The lyrics were Neil Peart’s creation and I felt very far away from that song, particularly the lyrics. I’m a minor film nut, though, and the Coleridge poem and Citizen Kane are very much alike. We always said we were writing fantasy soundtracks. The more we played it, the more I liked it, but it’s still a bit... much for me even now. And there were all the drums Neil used on that song...

What’s next for Rush?

I’m not really sure. We’re in a good headspace right now. Our 30th anniversary tour popped us out. We’re great ones for making fun of these occasions, but it sticks together as we have done—and then to have so many people come to see us—was great. But we’ve now had seven months off, and that’s enough for... anyone to get rejuvenated. We plan to start writing again. But that all depends on what we come up with.