

BY PAUL ROGERS

TESTS



As a teenager, back in rural England, I remember me and my mates writing "Rush" and "2112" (the title of the Canadian trio's seminal 1976 album) in candle soot onto the ceiling of the abandoned chicken shed we used as a hangout. I recall sitting beneath a gnarled, allegedly haunted tree in the middle of nowhere on a pitch-black night, waiting for a ride while my best friend picked out the appropriated intro to Rush's classic "The Trees" on a battered acoustic guitar. See I, like so many 30 and 40-somethings the world over, grew up on Rush—the progressive rock band you could actually sing-along to; three musicians who possessed that rare combo of both drool-inducing technical chops and genuine song craft. Ok, they weren't considered a sexy band—it was mostly a guy thing and I never recall Rush being considered "cool." But engulft in the epic and exhilarating escapism of Rush tunes like "Red Barchetta," "Passage To Bangkok" or "Spirit Of The Radio" straining the speakers on someone's tiny car stereo, frankly we didn't give a damn.

Fast forward 25 years. I'm sitting in the swanky Burbank, CA offices of Warner Brothers Music for a listening session for Rush's first original studio album in five years (and 18th overall), *Snakes & Arrows*, released on May 1st. I'll admit I wasn't altogether looking forward to spending over an hour alone with a new Rush record—I'd lost touch with their output during the '90s and viewed them as something from a bygone era. Yet I was curious too and ready to re-embrace them, as with so many other original Rush fans, I sensed that it might be time to throw fashion to the wind and just respect the band for their sheer excellence and refusal to compromise (they just appeared at the top of Rolling Stone's "Rock's Undisputed Guilty Pleasure Bands" list ahead of the likes of Journey, Foreigner and Bon Jovi).

From the moment opener (and first single) "Far Cry" hits the speakers, *Snakes & Arrows* is the sound of a band still challenging itself and still enjoying doing it—perhaps more than ever. It's not a mal-it-in contractual obligation like some veteran acts' efforts, nor is it some embarrassing attempt to "move with the times" and embrace rap, melafcore or indie rock. The sense of scale and grandeur that Rush fans relish is all there—as is the ultra-dexterous drumming, agile bass lines, great swathes of guitar and lofty vocals—but so is a previously absent sense of swing, some bluesy touches, lots of acoustic guitar, and a willingness to take chances. It's a cliché, but *Snakes & Arrows* is truly a return to form.

→SND @SND←

"I was just making some dressing for a Caesar salad, and I had a couple of steaks I was just about to put on the grill," says eminently down-to-earth Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson, speaking from his Toronto home. His opening comment hardly paints the popular picture of the rock star lifestyle, but then, Rush was never a typical band. While punk might be the last tag you'd attach to them, their single-minded devotion to being true to themselves has more in common with the original "fuck you" punk ethos than the stuffy prog label they've long been stuck with.

Despite some decidedly dodgy costume choices in the 1970s, and song titles like "By-Tor And The Snow Dog," this is not Spinal Tap.

"Oh, back when we were 23 or 24 years old in a touring band, seeing the world for the first time—yeah, of course we had great times and great parties," Lifeson recalls. "We were young and as crazy as anybody. But for



us, it was always really about the music and that was the thing. It wasn't about the rock n' roll lifestyle—it was about being a good band, being great musicians and working hard. We all had families when we were young so we were brought down to earth and I think our feet have been fairly firmly planted throughout our career."

Indeed, with all of Rush's three-plus decades of success, why make an album at all if not for the sheer love of it—they hardly need the money or the acclaim after all. "Because it's a lot of fun!" Lifeson retorts. "We've been doing it for 33, 34 years, and that's what we do. That's our job and we love doing it. I had more fun making this record than I can remember."

You've probably guessed by now that Rush's songwriting isn't fuelled by days-long drug binges or Jack Daniels-soaked nights in strip clubs. Far from it.

"Geddy [Lee, Rush bassist/vocalist] and I...ya' know we only live a few minutes from each other, and we see each other often. We play tennis together, and we go out for dinner and stuff like that. We're good friends... we talk about our forehand and overhead smash, and how the Bordeaux [wines] are doing, and should we drink a Rhone [wine] tonight, and 'how's your prostate' and those sort of things."

"We were both getting itchy to start playing again, and I was actually playing a lot of acoustic stuff at home and checking out a lot of the acoustic players that were coming through town. We just decided that we would start writing—I guess it was mid-March of last year—and that we would keep it very casual and simple and not start up 'the machine.' If Neil [Peart, drummer/lyricist] had any lyrics, maybe he could send them by and we could have something as a starting point."

"We spent about five weeks writing on a loose schedule of three days a week, for about five or six hours a day. When Neil came up [from California] in May we booked a studio for about five weeks and went in and went through the material that we had. We took the summer off, went back in September in that same studio here in Toronto and spent about another five weeks of studio time working through the arrangements, getting familiar with the stuff, working with [producer] Nick Raskulinecz. And then when we booked Allaire [Studios, in New York's Catskill Mountains], we went in for two weeks, but we stayed there for five weeks to record everything and then we went into mixing in Los Angeles and about a week's recording at the beginning of that. So we had about six weeks of recording and four weeks of mixing."

The word around *Snakes & Arrows* is that it's some of the best work of Rush's long career, and Lifeson concurs, though with characteristic modesty: "There's an energy on this record... I think a lot had to do with having the time off, going into the studio, working the way we worked—a slow swelling of excitement about the material as it was developing. And then when Nick came in, he just brought such a fresh energy too and he was so challenging in terms of performance that we rose to the occasion and I think all three of us felt like we did some of our best work on this record."

"There was no sense of tension or stress—it was just good, hard work with very, very happy results. When I hear this record, I hear our whole history... and it's not just because 'Far Cry' has that F-sharp chord from 'Hemispheres'!" Lifeson laughs. "That's the way I hear it, and it's in a fresh, exciting package, I think."

Lifeson credits the Grammy-winning Raskulinecz (Foo Fighters, Velvet

