RUSH

By Paul Rogers

A teenager back in rural England, I remember me and my mates writing Rush and 2112 (the title of the Canadian rockers' seminal 1976 album) on the back of a school report. The title seemed to have an almost mythical allure, and we were charmed by the notion of a band dedicated to creating music that was both thrilling and groundbreaking.

Rush was a band that seemed to have it all: a powerful sound, an innovative approach to songwriting, and a philosophy that was rooted in progressive rock. The band's members, Geddy Lee, Alex Lifeson, and Neil Peart, were all highly skilled musicians who possessed a rare combination of technical proficiency and musicality.

One of the things that made Rush so special was their willingness to experiment with different genres and styles. They were not afraid to take risks and push the boundaries of what was possible within the realm of rock music. This was evident in their music, which was characterized by a blend of hard rock, jazz, and classical elements.

Rush's influence on the music scene was undeniable, and their impact on rock music as a whole cannot be overstated. They were pioneers in the genre, and their music continues to inspire musicians around the world. Whether you're a fan of progressive rock or just appreciate well-crafted, thought-provoking music, Rush is an essential part of the rock and roll landscape.
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 hard working. We all had families when we were young so we were brought down to earth and I think our feet have been 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 fueled 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 sorts 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 steady and simple and not start up ‘the machine.’ If Neil [Pearl, drummer/vocalist] had any lyrical ideas, 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 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...
Revolver, etc.), who co-produced Snakes & Arrows with the band, with contributing to the disc’s “classic Rush” echoes—despite, at 36-years old, being from a literally different generation.

“I think it just came naturally on our part, but ya’ know, Nick is a fan, and so’s Rich Chycki who engineered the record, so they had this whole agenda—they wanted everything to be bold and majestic, and the way they remembered certain [Rush] songs from certain albums from certain eras, and I think they were probably instrumental in forming that mold.”

In fact, Lifeson can’t say enough about Raskulinecz’s contribution to the band’s creativity. “First of all the guy is brilliant, he’s really an excellent engine — every band needs a different guy, who brings such a great, positive energy to the environment. We’ve worked with a lot of people over the years and it’s not easy producing a Rush record because we know what we want and, for the most part we’re going to do whatever we want to do! So it’s refreshing to have somebody who’s a little younger, who has a different approach, who’s worked with a lot of kinds of bands, who’s had his own success so he’s not intimidated and who just wants the best of everything.”

Lifeson’s adamant that Rush had no idea they’d enjoy such longevity when they started out at the end of the 1960s.

“When Neil joined the band in 1974, we’d already done six years in a local thing around the bars and clubs. It was certainly not a long-term plan: I remember thinking that if we could get five years and make five records and tour that that would really be a good lifespan for a rock band.”

So everything’s kind of a bonus for Rush these days, and there’s no pressure for them to write hits on conform to fashion—meaning they can enjoy the recording process more than ever. The biggest surprise to Lifeson is that they’re doing it all.

“So many years later and with these aching bodies, we can still do it, and we can still find it within ourselves to be so excited about working with each other! It was great watching Neil play. I’d go in the room for a few moments—I mean it was so loud when he was playing in there—but it was so exciting at the same time to watch one of the greatest drummers in the world playing drums to a song that you wrote!”

“Such a sense of fun and excitement is particularly evident in tracks like the quirky instrumental "Malignant Narcissism" and Lifeson’s one-take solo acoustic interlude "Hope." They simply couldn’t have gotten chances like these early in their career.

“Probably not,” agrees Lifeson. “You know, you’re so busy trying to be cool and being right... It was really a treat to do "Malignant Narcissism," because we seldom do that. We’re way too stuck in our ways, and even when we’re playing live, if we have an improvisational part of a song, we only improvise once, and then it becomes the new part.”

Some of Snakes & Arrows’ bluesy, somewhat simpler sense of songcraft is a spill-over from Rush’s 2004 album of classic garage rock cover tunes, Feedback.

“Yeah, [Feedback] was really a lot of fun to make... that whole process was quite quick and we did a lot of it off the floor, playing together, which we really enjoyed. So we did a little bit of that with this record. The whole blues thing, I mean that’s a part of who I am, and that’s the kind of stuff I loved to play when I was younger, and it makes for a nice bit of variety.”

The extensive use of acoustic guitars on Snakes & Arrows is down to Lifeson’s growing appreciation of composing songs on that instrument: “I wrote all the stuff on acoustic,” he explains. “I made a conscious effort to write on acoustic, I really wanted to do that. I thought that it is much clearer to me if something is working or not. I met David Gilmour when he played here in Toronto... and we had a really nice conversation about a lot of things, but one of the things we talked about was how useful writing on an acoustic guitar is. You know immediately if things are working musically. It’s very easy to disguise a part with a sound—you know, with delays or chorus—but maybe it’s not expressing the real essence of what the music is. And on an acoustic it does that... So when it came to recording [Snakes & Arrows] many of the acoustic parts became so integral to the ways the songs were developed that I really wanted to keep them in there.”

“Geddy was really on my case about doing an acoustic piece on the record... I didn’t rehearse ["Hope"]; I didn’t write it; I just went in... everyone liked it, we mixed it on the spot and that’s what you hear. And that’s kinda nice that it’s so pure in that sense.

“I keep saying fun, fun, fun, fun—but the record really was just a wonderful joy and maybe it’s more so because [2002’s] Vapor Trails was so difficult. It was such an emotionally difficult time for us and that record took 14 months to make and in the end their were some disappointments about that record for us... For me it’s really a sonic issue: it was mastered much too hot; it’s too loud and it eats away at us and we want to address that—and maybe for no other reason than it would make us sleep peacefully at night... But [Vapor Trails] was really important to us and there’s a lot of passion and there’s a lot of feel and emotion on it. This record was the opposite: this was freedom and just go and play.”

It’s also noticeable that, in recent years, Geddy Lee has tempered his extreme, love-it-or-hate-it helmet-high voice that made Rush’s early work instantly recognizable.

“Well, it’s maturing,” mulls Lifeson. “I think he’s more of a singer than a screamer, which is really what he was back then. I don’t think you can expect to sing like that for close to 20 years—it’s very hard.”

So how does Lee tackle the vocal demands of Rush’s back-catalogue in their live set?

“He does the best that he can. It’s important to him to try to get as close as he can to what those songs were, but it’s not always easy at this age and especially during a three-hour show. So we have to be careful about how we select those songs and how we treat them.”

So how do Rush—now in their mid-50s and with a four-and-a-half-month world tour beginning in Atlanta in June—view life on the road today?

“Well, I think you’d have a few different comments on that question,” Lifeson laughs, with his signature, good-natured frankness. “Neil doesn’t enjoy touring particularly and he would rather not, given the choice, but he understands that it’s important to support the records and we are essentially a live band—that’s our strength I think.

“For me, I really enjoy it—I love getting up on stage and playing. Touring itself, the process of touring, I’m a little over it after so many years. I love being with my family—I have a grandson and another coming this summer. I have a very, very good relationship with him and I’m going to really miss him a lot on this tour—and I lost that with my own kids. But we realize that it’s important to support the material and the record and, look, Rush fans are unlike any other fans and it’s important to them that we tour, we play, and everybody has a great time.

But backstage life is not the party it once was for Rush—by choice. "It’s like a library, but quietier," Lifeson says, only half-joking. "We don’t allow anybody in the dressing room, we don’t have guests...we like to keep the dressing room quiet before a show. Neil kind of has his own space now, so it’s very quiet in his part of the world. We’ve got laptops, we’re answering e-mails, and we do a little bit of yoga and stretching and then, after the show, we keep the room closed for at least twenty minutes or so and Ged and I have a chance to just decompress. We have a glass of wine and a bite to eat... it’s really not a party scene and hasn’t been in a very long time.”

Their band may be called Rush, but Lifeson, Lee and Peart were never in the "five fast, die young" camp. And an album of Snakes & Arrows’ quality should make us all grateful that they paced themselves.”