Lifesong times

With a new live album on the streets, interest in Rush has been rekindled. Guitarist Alex Lifeson takes a walk down memory lane with Simon Bradley
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the wall of sound is played by a simple trio. Peart utilises all manner of triggers and samples within his acoustic kit, while both Lee and Lifeson have used effects pedals to achieve their musical goals.

"I wouldn't know any different," says Lifeson. "It's been this way since I started, but for me it's always been a challenge trying to make the guitar more than just one instrument, the challenge and pressure to come up with parts and to execute them in such a way that you gain the most value out of it."

Yeah, but surely the band have to compromise certain songs when they play in a live environment?

"We always keep that in mind when we're recording - will we be able to play it live? It's always been a kind of rule with us," Alex concedes.

"Yeah, it takes more than a little effort to work it all out, but it's never really been a problem."

Alex continues: "For example, getting Natural Science together so that it flowed was dodgy in rehearsals, but by the time we got on the road, it had become my favourite song to play. It was very challenging, acoustic parts to really heavy stuff - and it had a very difficult flow."

When music from different periods find themselves in the mix together, attention has to be paid to the running order, especially when some songs can be over eight minutes long. When I mention that the Hammy O running order sees the A Farewell To Kings' epic Cygnus X-11 followed by the out-and-out HM chordy romp-along Anthem, Alex can't help but laugh.

"As a breather? Exactly!" He chuckles around his coffee mug.

One of the by-products of such a lengthy and successful career is the sheer amount of material to choose from when compiling a live set. These days, Rush play for over two hours and take the luxury of a ten-minute intermission approximately half-way through proceedings. Another breather, Alex?

"Yeah, we had a ten minute intermission and, y'know, I remember thinking that it wasn't gonna work out and that it would really disrupt the flow, but after doing 2112, it was great to have a..."

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**Gear Years**

Alex's live gear has changed as radically as the band's music over the years...

**ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE (1976)**

"The first one was: 100W Marshalls with 4x12 cabinets - I think I had four of 'em at the time. Guitars were primarily a (Gibson) Les Paul Standard and my 355."

**EXIT... STAGE LEFT (1981)**

"For Exit... I think I was using 2x12 Marshall combos by that time. It was probably my Strat, my 345 and my Howard Roberts Fusion."

**A SHOW OF HANDS (1988)**

"This was Gallien-Krueger amps and a whole bunch of guitars, I'm not really sure which...

**THREE STAGES (1998)**

"Marshalls again and Bradshaw rigs... well four separate set-ups actually. I had my main stereo effects setup, the second one was a DigiTech 2101 for cleaner chorous stuff. The third has no effects on it, just another V-Twin for an extra-bottomy woothy guitar sound, and there was another set-up for the acoustic stuff."

"We set everything up in such a way that the switches work very close to each other."
Neil Peart

To say that Rush's drummer has had a torrid time of it in the last couple of years would be a shocking understatement. After losing his wife Jackie to cancer, his daughter Selena was killed in 1998 in a road accident.

"It's been a very difficult period over the last year and a half," says Lifeson, "I saw Neil a few weeks ago and he's dealing with the situation the only way he can, a day at a time.... The strain is evident in his voice."

"So we're in a holding pattern right now; our friend is sick and he needs to get his strength back," he continues. "One day hopefully he will and we'll be able to address the whole idea of going back on the road and working. Right now, though, it's too premature. He's only thinking about getting up and doing things again.

"From what I saw there's a positive progressive movement in the way he's dealing with it, but time is a great healer and that's just what we need right now." I'm sure everyone wants to wish Neil well.

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break!" Another guffaw.

Every band goes through highs and lows and, aside from the tragic turn of events that have struck Neil Peart (see boxout above), can Alex pinpoint any specific periods that stand out?

"The 'Caress Of Steel' album and tour was a really hard time. We lost a lot of support from the record company, we had a lot of debt, we were touring and didn't get paid for like eight months," he says, actually raising his voice at one point.

"Anyways, '2112' came out of all that difficulty and after that, whatever we did was what we thought was right. Not so much these days, but the Lifeson guitar style on earlier albums screams just one name...

"Jimmy Page was my total hero which was pretty evident, certainly on the first albums," he admits. "As a matter of fact, Page/Plant played in Toronto in the summer and Geddy and I went down. It was my first opportunity to meet with him and Plant; I was really excited. You always think of a million things you wanna ask him, things you wanna say, but when we sat down to talk to each other, I kept thinking 'how do I tell this guy I was in love with him?'

"I tell you, those two guys were so charming and engaging, it was really a pleasure to meet them, and inspiring to watch them play too. They've really got it together; really good." He finishes, almost breathless.

"It's nice to know that multi-millionaire rock stars gibber at the feet of their heroes, just like the rest of us."