

JANUARY 15, 1978

The City

THE TORONTO STAR SUNDAY MAGAZINE

**JACK FISHER
SPENDS
\$6 MILLION
TO BARE A
GRAND HOTEL'S
SECRETS**

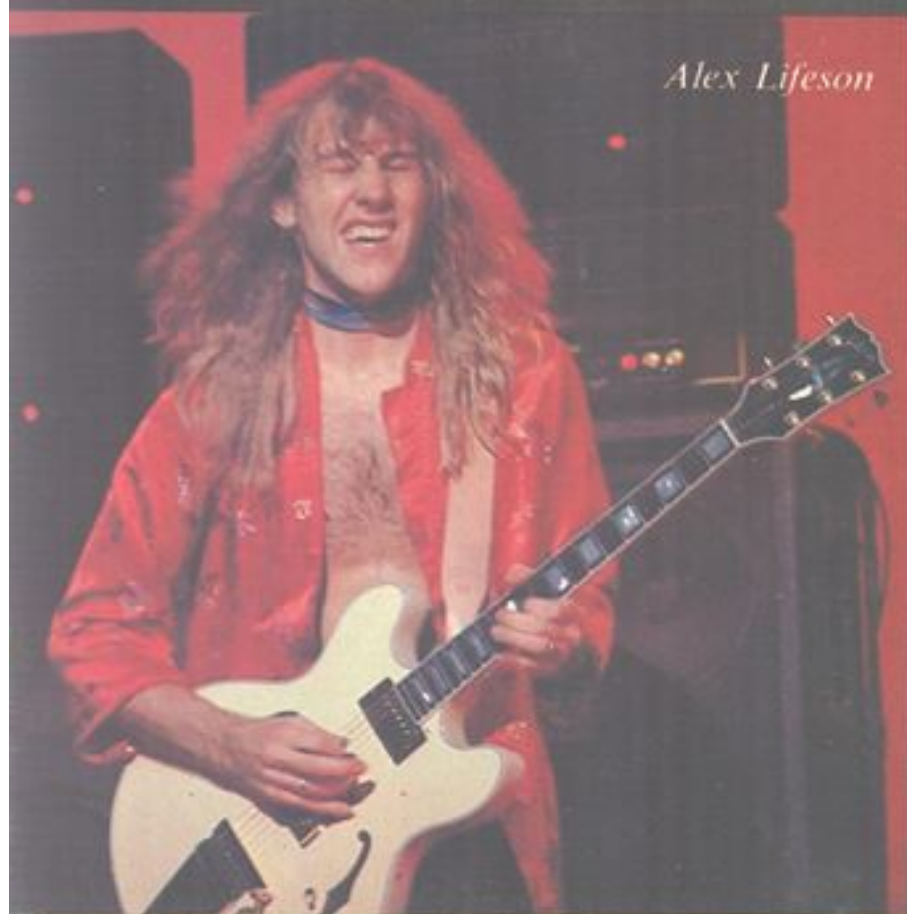
ALSO

RUSH!
WILLOWDALE WOWS
THE ROCK WORLD

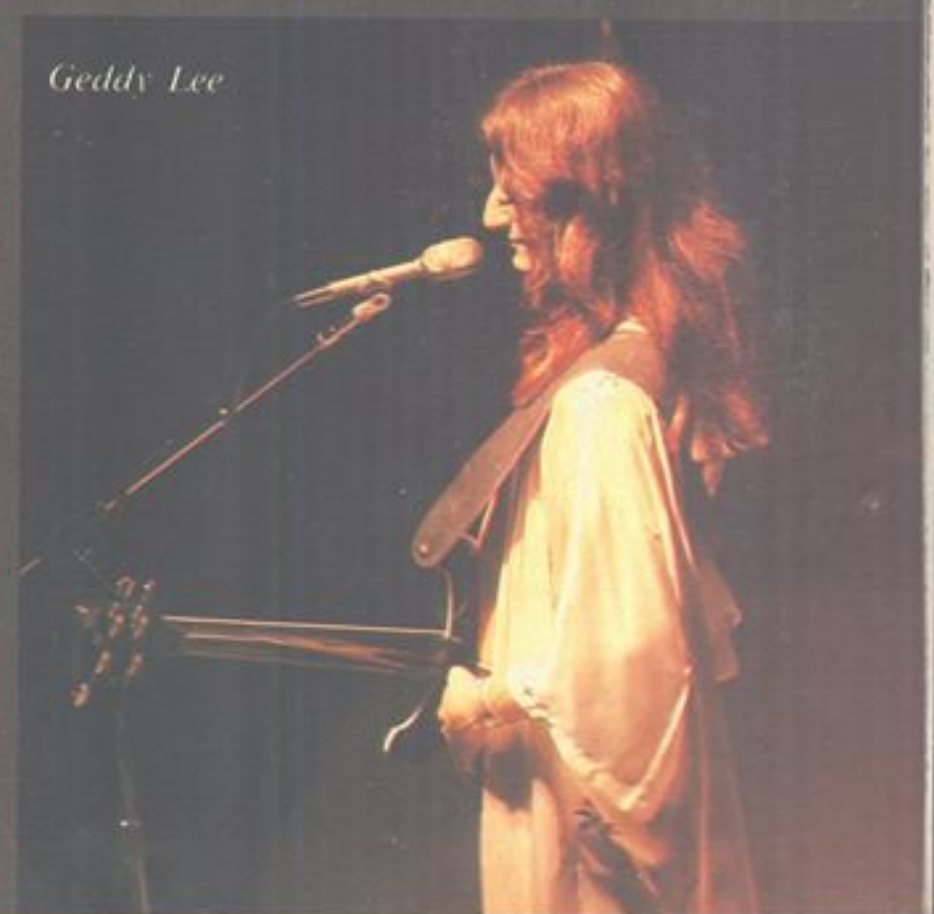
**HOCKEY STARS
GET DOWN
TO BUSINESS
IN TORONTO**



Neil Peart



Alex Lifeson



Geddy Lee

Willowdale spawns an international rock sensation

RUSH!

BY ANDREW WEINER

"FROM TORONTO, CANADA — RUSH!" And the audience in Buffalo's Century Theatre erupts. Three thousand kids on their feet, cheering and waving, holding lighted matches, holding up a Maple Leaf flag at stage right. A standing ovation before they even play a note.

Scenes like this have become commonplace for the group called Rush, Canada's hottest rock property. In the last three years Rush have racked up five gold albums in Canada (50,000 sales) and three in the U.S. (500,000 sales). Their most recent album, *A Farewell to Kings*, is heading through the American platinum barrier (800,000 sales). Their management estimates total worldwide sales for 1977 were 2 million albums, for a gross in the region of \$16 million, with an additional \$2 million in revenue from their concerts.

And Rush are only beginning to reach

their peak. Singer Geddy Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson are just 24, drummer Neil Peart, 25. Their success has already put Toronto on the map as a major music industry centre. And yet, curiously, they remain almost unknown to the general public in their home town, let alone their native country.

Except for a 1974 Juno Award as Most Promising Group, Rush have triumphed with virtually no mass media recognition: no TV, no Top 40 radio (although a single, *Closer to the Heart*, is now getting a lot of airtime), hardly any FM radio, the barest scattering of press coverage. When they returned to starbase Toronto last August to pack the CNE Grandstand with 20,000 fans, local reaction ranged from astonishment to incredulity. Rush had been playing to crowds that size for more than a year in cities like Indianapolis and Detroit, but

as far as Toronto was concerned, they might as well have come from Mars.

In fact, they come from Willowdale.

Alex Lifeson, then Alex Zivojinovich, lived on Pleasant Avenue, near Yonge and Steeles. His father, originally from Yugoslavia, ran a plumbing business. Alex became friendly with a kid across the street, John Rutsey, who also attended nearby Fisherville Junior High. They played road hockey with the other kids on the street. Then Alex got a guitar for Christmas (the first thing he can remember playing was the theme from the Noblesse cigarette commercial), John got a drum kit and they started playing together. "It was like a Grade-B movie," John now recalls. "You know, 'Hey, let's start a band!'"

In the fall of 1968, when they were 15 years old, they teamed up with a kid in Alex's class at school who sang and played bass. His name was Gary Weinrib, although everyone called him "Geddy." He lived in the Bathurst-Steeles area. His father had died some years before; his mother still runs a variety store in Newmarket.

The three began to play regularly at the Coffin, a drop-in centre in the basement of the local Anglican church. Kids paid 25 cents admission, got free coffee and doughnuts, and watched bands like Rush on Friday nights under the semblance of adult supervision.

Rush (the name was suggested by John's brother) played at the Coffin on and off for about a year. They played hard rock and blues, the kind then being popularized by English groups such as Cream and Led Zeppelin, as loudly as their begged and borrowed equipment would allow. They were paid \$25 among them, which seemed like a lot at the time — you could buy a carload of cheeseburgers afterward.

Orme Riches, who ran the Coffin, recalls the band as nice kids ("at least for the kids of the time"), very helpful, a good influence on the others. But the scene at the Coffin eventually got beyond control. At first there were just 40 or 50 kids, but as the word on Rush spread, attendances soared to 300 — in a space that could comfortably hold half that number. Kids came from all over the city to see the band, swamp-ing out the locals, and finally the

Coffin was forced to close.

Lindy Young, an aspiring folk musician, sometimes jammed with the band at the Coffin. And they occasionally practised in the basement of his house. It was there that Geddy met his wife, Lindy's sister, Nancy, whom he married in 1976, is a student of fashion design and helps design the band's stage costumes.

A frequent member of the audience at the Coffin in 1969 was 17-

Their music
may be
a little
pretentious,
it may
be completely
humorless, it
may be utterly
overblown
but it's
magnificent
in its way

year-old Ray Danniels, who was already running a small booking agency. He became their manager and began finding them dates at high schools, colleges and bars. By 1971 they were regulars at the Abbey Road pub, a hard rock bar on Queen Street, but were plowing most of their \$1,000-a-week income (for four sets a night, six nights a week) back into new equipment.

John had dropped out of high school, but Geddy and Alex were still attending Newtonbrook and Georges Vanier respectively, if just barely. (Geddy's contemporaries at Newtonbrook recall him as one of the *weird* kids, dedicated to his music, not interested in football or studying.) All three were under heavy pressure from their parents, who could accept music as a hobby but not as a career.

Another guitarist, Mitch Bossi, passed briefly through the band. Bossi, who calls himself a "mediocre" musician, was more interested in having fun and wearing flashy clothes than in making music. He quit because the others took it all so seriously, and because, ironically, "I didn't see too much future in the band. They were a different kind of people from me. They didn't worry about *security* — they thought everything would turn out all right." Bossi has since found security as a school teacher, and hasn't listened to Rush in years.

Rush were still just another bar band. Not the biggest or the best around, although possibly the loudest. They played the high-energy, high-decibel rock music known as "heavy metal," sounding a jarring note in a local music scene dominated by folkies. And even when Danniels began to book them into theatres like the Victory Burlesque, no Canadian record company would touch them. Gordon Lightfoot or Anne Murray they could understand, but not Rush's brand of bone-crushing boogie.

In 1974, frustrated by the band's failure to get a record contract, Ray Danniels sold his booking agency and set up Moon Records with new partner Vic Wilson. They plunged \$20,000 into Rush's first album, a gamble that would pay tremendous dividends. The breakthrough came in Cleveland, where a radio station started plugging the album: it sold more in that one city than in the whole of Canada. Mercury Records saw the light and signed a U.S. distribution deal. A massive cross-country tour was set up to promote the product. And then John Rutsey took a walk.

Health reasons were cited at the time. It was said that John was too frail to stand up to so much touring. John now insists that he left because he didn't like the band's music anymore. And he's bemused by the bizarre rumors that have spread about him since. "Alex called me up one night from St. Louis. Some guy came up to him and said, 'It's really too bad about John, breaking his back in a train crash and everything...'" John claims that he has no regrets about leaving the band, and is now doing what he wants to do (some screenwriting, a new band called Stinger in rehearsal).

Enter Neil Peart, from the out-

skirts of St. Catharines, where his father ran a boat-repair business. Neil had just returned from England, where he'd scuffled around with various bands, "starved," and painted storefronts to survive. He took over the drummer's seat in June, 1974, and the band started to tour. They've been touring ever since. And tonight that endless tour has brought them to Buffalo.

When the lights come up onstage, the first thing you really notice is the *machinery*, electronic hardware everywhere: a 12,000-watt PA system, 48 speakers, 12 radial horns, banks of lights, assorted special effects equipment. All this stuff weighs seven tons, fills two tractor-trailers, and takes road manager Howard Ungerleider and his 20-man crew eight hours to set up.

With all this equipment and personnel behind them, Rush claim that they only break even on touring. But, as Ray Danniels points out, that's *after* they've paid themselves a pretty healthy salary. And the true point of touring is not to sell tickets but to sell albums, where the real money comes from.

You don't listen to Rush's music as much as you watch it. You watch three kids draped in the costumes of comic-book sorcerer's apprentices locked in mortal combat with their own machines. You can hardly see Neil's moustache behind his massive drum kit.

Geddy and Alex make a perfect front line, darkness and light. Geddy is the prince of darkness: small, gnome-like, long straight hair shrouding his prominent nose, the most visually striking member of the band. Onstage, he discards his heavy eyeglasses. Alex is thin, almost frail, with a mass of blond curls. He's easily the prettiest, the one the little girls would have screamed for if this was 10 years ago. And they would tonight if the audience were not mostly boys. He's every kid's fantasy of a lead guitarist, and he knows how to act the part.

When Geddy sings, you don't hear many words. What you do hear is an indecipherable *screech*, although the odd fragment does drift through, enough to give you the flavor: "Infinity/The star that would not die!" or "Scheming demons dressed in kingly guise..." No boy-meets-girl lyrics here — it's all magical kingdoms and flat-out interstellar probings, the whole cosmic-apocalyptic

science fantasy bit now booming so vigorously in the wake of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*, although Rush were there first.

The Century Theatre's stage lights swing through the spectrum, alternately evoking a witches' coven and the bridge of the starship Enterprise, as the band struggle to bring their mighty machines under control. Smoke clouds billow, magnesium flares flash. It looks touch-and-go

The group's
seven tons of
electronic
equipment
fills two
tractor-trailers
and takes the
road manager
and his 20-man
crew eight
hours to set up.
And then . . . !

for a while, but there's no doubt who's going to win. Watching Rush wrestle their machinery to the ground is like watching a lion-tamer put his head in a lion's mouth. You know he's going to get it out again.

When the set ends the audience goes wild, calling for encore after encore. Much to the disgust of many rock critics, they actually like this music. It may be a little pretentious, it may be completely humorless, it may be utterly overblown, but it's also magnificent in its way, great theatre, particularly for the very young audience Rush now attracts. A very clean and well-groomed bunch of kids, too. No punk or junkie types in sight, and even the familiar rock arena aroma of grass is faint tonight. No parent would be afraid to set foot in this hall, although they might be inclined to run

for their lives when the band begins to play.

In an average year, Rush play 200 shows like this one. They're away from Toronto, performing and recording, for all but two months of scattered breaks. While some bands build their success on a quick hit single and massive radio play, Rush have done it the hard way, selling their records in person anywhere they've had the chance to play. At first they opened for established stars like Kiss and Rod Stewart, winning over hostile or indifferent crowds, building up a reputation purely by word-of-mouth from one town to the next. Now they are headliners, big enough to turn down the chance to open for the Rolling Stones.

Backstage before the show, in their small and crowded dressing room, there's no sign of nerves. Alex strums bossa nova chords on his guitar, not warming up, just fooling around. Geddy drifts out to watch the support band, drifts back in again. Neil sits quietly with his pregnant girlfriend, Jackie House, a former record store manager from St. Catharines.

Success, according to the people who know them well, has touched them hardly at all. "We had problems dealing with it," Geddy says, rather vaguely, "but we've isolated ourselves from it." After years of hard scuffling, they're just beginning to enjoy their new wealth, but they're not exactly flashy people. On tour they stay in Hyatts or Marriotts. At home they drive good cars (Geddy a Porsche, Alex a Jaguar) and live in pleasant but unspectacular homes.

None of them live in Willowdale anymore. Geddy and Nancy have a house near the Beaches. Alex lives in Richmond Hill with his wife Charleen, his high-school sweetheart, and sons Justin, 7, and Adrian, 1. Neil recently bought a farm outside St. Catharines where he lives with Jackie.

Being away from home so much, Geddy says, "is not a problem if you can handle it." They handle it by making a lot of long-distance phone calls and by having their ladies fly out to meet them at particular dates, or accompany them to ones near Toronto, as Jackie has tonight.

When they are off the road, they stay at home as much as possible, although Geddy likes to make the

continued on page 28

RUSH

continued from page 13

rounds of the local clubs. Over the years they have lost touch with a lot of friends, but Geddy claims that he doesn't regret it: "You make new friends, too." According to local rock critic Sam Charters, "They do make a point of seeing the people they want to see. They're very loyal people. They don't forget you." Rush didn't forget their old friend Charters when he was involved in a major car crash recently. They sent a huge bouquet of flowers to his hospital room.

Considering their age and their line of work, Geddy, Neil and Alex are mature, controlled (although Charters thinks they are "controlled crazies"). And they're very cautious about their influence on their audience. If they preach at all, it is in favor of wholesome suburban values like hard work, self-reliance and self-improvement. "What you need is your own glory/What you need is your own story..." they tell their audiences in a song titled, appropriately enough, *You Don't Get Something for Nothing*.

Under all that hair, these guys are philosophical hard hats. Their guru is Ayn Rand, the American prophet of extreme individualism. Their record company, Anthem, is named after one of her novels. (Neil got hooked first, when he found a copy of *The Fountainhead* abandoned on a London subway train.)

And they take their music very seriously indeed. "Our goal," says Neil, "is just getting better." They scorn the term "heavy metal" and style themselves as "progressive" musicians, pushing on toward the final frontiers of rock. And they link what they are with what they do. "We try," says Geddy, "to progress as people as well as musicians."

Rush, in other words, are living testimony to the great North American ideals of self-help and self-improvement. They may not be exactly what Ayn Rand had in mind, but you have to give them their due: they really have *earned* their place in contemporary rock music.

"My mother," says Geddy, "always thought I was wasting my time, playing in a band. She wanted me to be a doctor or lawyer. She wanted me to be a *success*. Now I am a *success*. And she thinks it's great." ●