

Rush Rock

A sound to call their own

BY ANNETTE SNOWDON



*Attention all planets of the Solar Federation,
Attention all planets of the Solar Federation,
Attention all planets of the Solar Federation,
We have assumed control,
We have assumed control,
We have assumed control . . .*

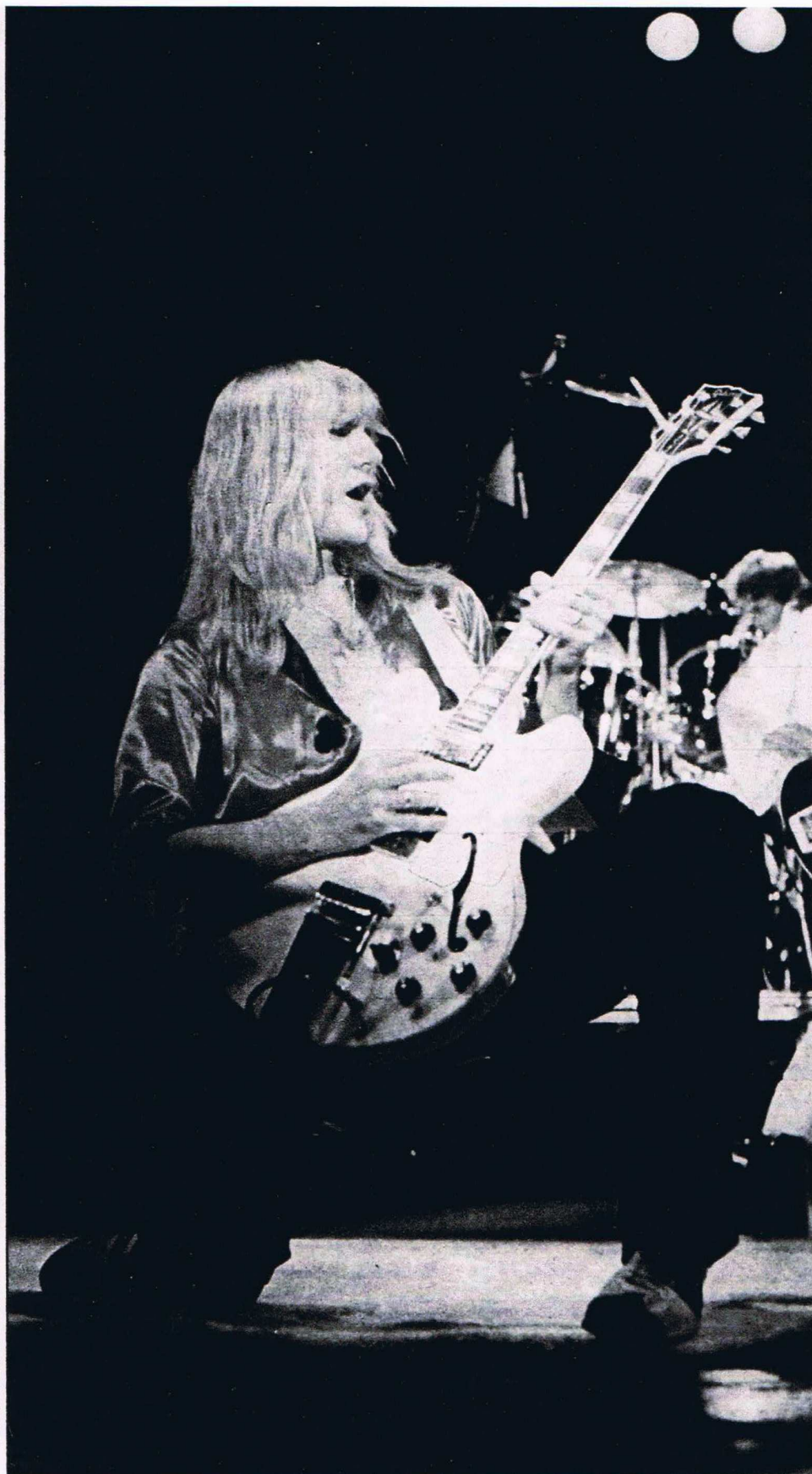
— *The Grand Finale** from Rush's 2112 album

Tower Theatre, Philadelphia. It's 10:35 p.m. Three and a half thousand teenagers are on their feet at the end of a Rush concert. Their arms punch the air, marking time to a cry that is getting louder and louder: "WE WANT RUSH, WE WANT RUSH." These few thousand fans are demanding what millions of others buy up all over the world — rock music. Rock is considered in the trade to be Canada's largest music export, and the Toronto band Rush its major exponent. Next month the band will begin its second European tour, covering more than 12 cities, possibly followed by a date in Japan where the group has its largest fan club. Rush has assumed control.

The scene in Philadelphia has repeated itself throughout major cities in the United States, Canada and Scandinavia. Rush has played to sold-out houses in cities like New York, San Francisco, Memphis, Houston, London and Manchester. In Toronto, Los Angeles and Chicago, promoters have been forced to put on additional concerts because of the demand for tickets. At the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto on August 23 last year the band played to a near-capacity crowd — 26,810 — out-drawing all other Canadian and American performers for that year, except the Beach Boys.

But Rush — lead guitarist Alex Lifeson, singer and bass guitarist Geddy Lee and drummer Neil Peart — has

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Rush hasn't exactly been an overnight success. It took eight years of planning — four of them touring — but the sold-out signs are finally going up on their concerts in cities like Toronto, New York, Los Angeles and London. Now, after six Canadian gold albums and three American ones, plus a Juno award in 1975, the Toronto band's work has been rewarded. Their second European tour begins next month, and after that there may be a concert date in Japan, where they have their biggest fan club. Here the group does the mixing for its latest album, A Farewell to Kings, recorded last June in an old country manor in Wales: clockwise from top, singer and bass guitarist Geddy Lee, drummer Neil Peart, and lead guitarist Alex Lifeson.



not been an overnight sensation. It has taken shrewd management and a dedication to its own musical image to make this band one of the most popular, internationally recognized, rock bands of the '70s. After eight years of careful planning — four of them touring — six Canadian gold albums and three American ones, plus a Juno award in 1975, the band is only just beginning to feel the results of all that hard work. S.R.O. Productions, which manages Rush as well as other bands, has its unpretentious headquarters on a quiet street in Thornhill, a residential suburb of Toronto. The small offices on the second floor are something like a rabbit warren, but filled with young people. (Of the band and its entourage, only one person — Vic Wilson, one half of the management team — is over 30. He's 31. The three band members are all 24.) Phones ring constantly; tables are piled high with papers and records; people scurry from room to room, carrying drinks for visitors and answering calls. But above it all, on the wood-paneled walls, hang Rush's gold albums, symbols of success in the music world.

Ray Danniels, 25, has been working with the band since he was 16 and a dropout from a Toronto high school. He's a farsighted but cautious businessman who, with his partner Wilson, has helped Rush on the road to recognition.

"I ran a little non-union booking agency in the late '60s," he recalls, "booking bands for high schools and church groups that would pay \$150 a night and sell tickets for a buck each. The first gig I booked Rush brought them \$75 — not each, mind you, for the three of them."

"There were a lot of bands around then — just like Rush — and I didn't take things very seriously. Hell, I was only booking bands as an alternative to going to high school."

By the time Danniels was 18 he had set up his agency in a small office in downtown Toronto and he was beginning to feel that if any of the bands he handled were going to be successful it had to be Rush. "At that time, and for many years, Rush was the hardest band I had to book," he says. "They weren't doing copies of the Top 40 and that made them difficult to sell — but they were doing their own material, and that's what finally made me believe that this was the group that could make it."

In mid-1972 Rush had gained some popularity playing bars like the Gasworks and the now-defunct Abbey Road Pub in Toronto. Danniels sold his agency to become the band's manager and formed a partnership with Vic Wilson, another agent. "The next obvious step was to make an album," Danniels says. "The band had a host of original tunes and I submitted them to every record company in Canada. Nobody was interested. I was forced into becoming my own record company. Finally we used the money I had from selling the agency, plus some money that Vic had saved, to put out the first album. It cost \$9,000, which at first seemed like more money than we could ever hope to raise." The album, simply entitled *Rush*, came out in March, 1974, on the Moon Records label. It sold fairly well in southern Ontario, but then, and even still today, the hardest thing to get was air play. And there were other problems.

Two weeks before the band was due to start its first American tour — a move considered essential to their promotion since radio stations weren't playing their music — its original drummer, John Rutsey, decided to leave.

Lifeson, the quiet-spoken lead guitarist, says the split was an amicable one. "Things weren't progressing the



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way Geddy and I wanted them to," he says, "and we weren't going in the direction that John wanted to. either. It was a break over musical differences basically, although we had discussed John's health [he's a diabetic] in connection with the rigors of the upcoming tour." Rutsey's replacement, Neil Peart, has since pretty well taken over the lyric-writing side of the business. "The prospect of getting a new person, someone that we didn't know, was scary," Lifeson says, shaking the long blond hair from his eyes. "But once we'd settled down, getting Neil was like getting a second wind — the songs were the same but they had a different treatment and after a few weeks on the road a really good feeling was established amongst us that has lasted until today."

The new band released *Fly By Night* in February, 1975, which was followed seven months later by *Caress of Steel*, an album that was to raise an issue on one hand and set a precedent on the other. "After *Caress of Steel* the group was at a low point," Peart says. "Small-minded people, who only saw the future in terms of next week, thought that we were on a decline — while we were thinking in terms of a 10-year career. There was pressure from S.R.O. and from Mercury Records to produce a more marketable sound because, as far as Mercury was concerned, a rock band was only good for two years at the very most. There was a lot of negativity from the whole business scene and we were very upset about it."

"We were busy making a sound that we could call our own," Geddy Lee adds, "and these people didn't have patience, belief or confidence in what we were doing."

The three musicians stood firm. The next album, *2112*, was commercially and artistically successful. Everybody was happy again. "The guys can be the easiest and the most difficult people to work with," Danniels says. "They have their own feelings on how things should be done and trying to persuade them to change their minds is absolutely impossible. If two want to go one way and the other doesn't agree then a sort of

democracy takes over. The one who disagreed initially will back up the decision of the other two as if it had been his own idea. There's no animosity or jealousy between them — I've never seen that in any other band."

Peart believes one reason the band works so well together is because of the number three. "It's a good number for a relationship," he says. "I've been in bands with five or more people and there are always stupid trips going down. I believe that everything should be run by three people — including government. It works."

But behind the three musicians that make up Rush there's a large group of dedicated and industrious people who honestly believe in the band. All of them — whether it's Charlene and Nancy (the wives of Lifeson and Lee respectively) or Jacqueline House (Peart's lady) or Rhonda Ross, Danniels' assistant, or Howard Ungerleider, the road manager — are quick and keen to tell you that Rush is the biggest and best band around and that it's the most hard-working. Even the "roadies," the 20 guys who earn their paycheques driving from city to city, sometimes 600 miles a night, hauling instruments and lights, speakers and sound boards, have only good words to say about the band.

The days when Rush was an opening act for bands like Uriah Heep and Black Sabbath, and when they had four people to help out, have gone. Now it takes six hours for the band to set up, from 11 a.m., when the first light scaffold goes on stage, to the first sound check at 5 p.m. Gone, too, are the fantasies. "When I was 18," Peart says, "and I saw bands perform, I thought the freedom would be so much more than it is. So many decisions have to be made every day now that it's just getting ridiculous. The business side of it could drop out tomorrow and I'd be very happy."

But the business side of rock music is a multimillion-dollar operation. Promoters, managers — and bands — make a healthy living from it. Behind every successful rock band is a company or an organization — a string of people marketing a product. And Rush is only one such product.

"Canada's biggest musical export today," Danniels says, "is rock and yet we still don't recognize it. We're still hung up on what we did five and ten years ago with Gordon Lightfoot and Anne Murray — not that they aren't still relevant; they are — but we pretty well ignored The Guess Who when they were one of the top five bands in North America, and although Bachman-Turner Overdrive had it a little easier, it wasn't that much better. Rush is in the same situation."

"There are probably only three major record companies in the whole of Canada that are concerned with Canadian talent — the rest are out to lunch. I'm sure that there are five more Rushes out there, and five more Bachman-Turner Overdrives and three more Anne Murrays, but record companies won't open their mouths. They are content to be distributors of an American and European product. That way they don't have to work."

"We're a working band," says Geddy Lee, sitting backstage in Philadelphia before the opening act goes on. "We were an opening act for three years before all this," he recalls, pointing to the mountains of speakers and lights and the dry-ice cauldrons. "We played a lot of towns, a lot of times, for a lot of people and although we didn't win over every audience, we made friends each night. But you never know what this kind of success is all about. You just think of this term called 'making it.' You dream of it, you work toward it... whether you believe you'll get there or not."