

in a rush

It's nearly 20 years since Rush played their first date, supporting the New York Dolls in Toronto. Alex Lifeson gives Douglas J Noble a rundown of their history

From a Blues/Rock bar band to Sci-fi Progressive Rockers, then from a sophisticated Rock band to the 'techno'-based unit of today, Rush have never been afraid of changes. Like the character in *New World Man* from *Signals*, they know that 'constant change is here to stay'. But how do these changes occur, Alex?

'It's a funny sort of thing – we don't really discuss it until we're in the writing mode. We'll discuss a general outline for what we want to do on a record and decide on a suitable approach – we don't really work out in advance what sort of album we're going to do. Neil usually has a few lyrics written so we get a feel from that. Then Geddy and I start jamming and we see what turns up.

'We do want to progress and we do want to try different ideas – sometimes they're successful and sometimes they're not but you can always learn from that. We're going through a phase where we want to get back to a more basic three piece feel – we'd moved away from that over the last five or six years.

'On our first album, *Rush*, I used a Gibson ES-335 – not an obvious choice for that sort of sound. I liked the way it looked and I liked the way it played – it was the first good guitar that I could afford. Also, it was unique because not many hard Rock bands used that type of guitar so it made us look a little different.'

Original drummer John Rutsey left after *Rush* to be replaced by Neil Peart on *Fly By Night*. However, it wasn't until Rush's third album that the band started to develop an identity. 'Yeah, *Caress of Steel* was probably the first record where we had a taste of what we wanted to do. Then *2112* was the first record on which Rush had its own sound – we'd got away from the earlier influences of, say, Led Zeppelin.'

'For a live album at that time *All the World's a Stage* turned out pretty good. It was quite raw but I think that's an

important element in a live record. We went in the opposite direction for our next live record *Exit...Stage Left* in that we wanted to have a live album with a studio quality to it but it ended up being a little too sterile. Then on *A Show of Hands* I think we found the middle ground – it has the live energy of a concert and a sound quality that we were happy with.

'Our live albums have worked as summing up points in our career. The nice thing about them is they give you some time to clear your head. I don't know if we would ever do another live album – I think three is quite enough! But who knows – maybe a couple more records down the line and it will be time again. I've got some live DAT tapes from our current tour and they sound really, really good.

'I started to feel I was developing a style of my own round about *A Farewell to Kings* and *Hemispheres*. We weren't really using keyboards as much as we would later so I used a chorus effect to broaden the guitar sound in the three piece. I tried to develop the rhythm guitar aspect of it by playing suspended chords which can sound like two guitars playing.

'*Closer to the Heart* has stayed in our live show because it's a very popular song with our fans – the change from acoustic to electric makes a nice contrast in it and audiences like to sing along with it.

'The solo plays off the rhythm track – this often happens. You find something rhythmic that the solo can connect onto so the solo can weave around the rhythm section and occasionally lock in with it.

'*Hemispheres* was a particularly difficult album to record – the arrangements took a long time to come together. We spent about two months solid in Rockfield Studios in Wales recording and I think we had one evening off. When we went to Advision in London to mix the album Terry Brown wasn't confident and satisfied with what we had recorded. So, he went over to Trident

Studios and set everything up then immediately heard what was bothering him. We took a week off 'cause we just had to get away from it for a bit then when we came back we continued recording at Rockfield for about a week.

'After *Hemispheres* we felt we had taken the concept idea as far as it could go – we wanted a change! That style of long songs with different sections stayed with us for a bit such as *Natural Science* on *Permanent Waves* and *The Camera Eye* on *Moving Pictures*. On *Permanent Waves* we tried to write shorter songs which had the same impact as longer songs.

'*Limelight* from *Moving Pictures* contains one of my favourite solos. I had played the solo a few times then we decided on which take to use – it wasn't a composite from various takes.

'*Permanent Waves* and *Moving Pictures* were both recorded in the same way. We would record maybe three whole takes of a song then listen back to see if we were happy with any of them – if one was OK we would continue and if we weren't happy with any we would record over the takes we weren't happy with. We found that ultimately this was an inefficient way of working.

'Now we record a track of SMPTE on our Teac 388 8-track demo and then fly everything else – guitar, bass, vocals and keyboards – onto the master so we have a fairly complete song. Then Neil works to this on his own so he has a chance to develop his parts. Finally we replace the guide tracks from the demo with more up-to-date sounds and performances.

'This works out a lot faster for us. We used to get really bogged down in the studio taking about four or five months to record an album – that's far too long! Before it would take us about three weeks to do all the drums and bass for ten songs. For the last record it took five days, then it took me about a week to do all the guitars. We don't

trackrecord



LA VILLA STRANGIATO

La Villa Strangiato, a track from 1978's *Hemispheres* LP, is a classic Rush nine minute Progressive Rock instrumental.

'We wanted to do an instrumental and before we left Toronto to go to Rockfield Studios we had written a couple of long pieces – we had the beginning of *Hemispheres* and a thematic piece that would be used for other things. We also had the bulk of La Villa Strangiato written before we went into the studio.

'The way La Villa Strangiato was written was we would get into a groove for a particular idea then move onto another idea and then another – I must admit it was as much a technical exercise as anything else but that's the way we were in those days. We even subtitled it *An Exercise in Self-Indulgence!* It was laid out in the same way as something like 2112 was – we started off with a theme and ended with the same theme but we went nuts in between!

'Using time signatures other than 4/4 makes the music more interesting for the listener and more of a challenge for the players. It makes the music more rewarding to play especially if you're doing it night after night.

'The titles of the movements or sections were influenced by nightmares I used to have – A Lxst in Wonderland, The Ghost of Aragon and The Waltz of the Shreves – and some of the music was also influenced by them.

'Our recording method in those days was to record a song all the way through, if possible. Xanadu from our previous *A Farewell to Kings* album was actually a second take for the basic track – our engineer, Pat Moran, couldn't believe that we could do an 11 minute song in two takes.

However, I remember La Villa Strangiato took considerably more than two takes! Neil was set up at one end of the room and Geddy and I were standing in two little areas on either side.

'We played through the song in two main sections and used a single, complete take for each section – we thought La Villa Strangiato would need a live, spontaneous feel to make it work but we spent a whole week learning it before we recorded it. Once we had captured the bulk of the track I redid the main solo and added a couple of embellishments here and there.

'I must say it's not my favourite solo – there are a couple of other shorter ones that I prefer although this one was quiet emotive and it definitely had a particular flavour to it. Once it was finished we thought we'd never be able to play this track again but after a few practices it became almost second nature.

'I haven't listened to that song for a long time now and we haven't played it live for quiet a while although we used to incorporate some of it into a medley of older material. I remember I changed the solo from the studio version but I certainly used to enjoy playing it.'

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feel that we gain anything with the three of us on the floor bashing out rhythm tracks. Our present way of working keeps us excited about the song because it comes together so quickly.

'The solo that's on *Ghost of a Chance* from *Roll the Bones* is the original demo solo that we flew in – it was done as a first or second take just to fill up some space on our little 8-track that Geddy and I were writing on. When Neil started playing to the track he picked up on some rhythms in the guitar solo and based some drum patterns on it. That solo really grew on us and when we came to do the solos – usually after all the bed tracks and rhythm guitars are down – we realized it had exactly the right feel and emotion that we wanted so we left it as it was.

'On *Signals* we wanted to develop the keyboard side of the band and I think the guitar suffered as a result. It certainly seemed like the right thing to do at the time although I do remember having to fight to put the guitar up a bit on a couple of tracks, *Subdivisions* being one. Overall I wasn't particularly satisfied with *Signals* – I would have liked to have heard a little more guitar.

'The keyboards we were using at the time were analogue and had a dirgy, mushy sound – they didn't have the clarity and range of modern keyboards. I was into this lush, chorus sound so there was a real fight between keyboards and guitars for space in the sound spectrum.

'*Signals* was also the last album we produced with Terry Brown. He had been with us from the beginning and we felt we'd gone as far as we could with him. We wanted to stretch out a little and see what it was like to work with someone else and we wanted the objectivity of someone who hadn't worked with us before.

'However, our next album, *Grace Under Pressure*, didn't turn out as planned either. Our original producer pulled out at very short notice so Peter Henderson stepped in at the last minute. Excellent engineer as he was, I don't think

he quite had a feel for our direction.

'We chose Peter Collins to produce *Power Windows* and *Hold Your Fire* because he was a Pop producer and had nothing to do with Hard Rock music. On both records with Peter keyboards were quite prevalent.

'At that time I liked to have a basic idea of what I wanted to do and then be a little more spontaneous in the studio and develop ideas – that was always the fun part of recording. Unfortunately, on *Power Windows* the keyboards were so dominant that I had to basically re-write everything in the studio – that really put me on the spot.

'It was really difficult to be objective about it when I was having to come up with so many new parts in such a short space of time. Now, I avoid this problem by being so well prepared that there is no room for keyboards to get in my way!

'So, when we came to record *Hold Your Fire* we were very careful not to over-do the keyboards in order to leave space for guitars. I would make copies of the track as it was being made for my eight track and fiddle around with different guitar parts. And as a result *Hold Your Fire* came together far more easily and with far less pain.

'The following *Hold Your Fire* tour was really tough. It was long and there was a lot of sickness on the road – Geddy had problems with his voice all the way through. After the tour ended we had a week off then we had to go back into the studio to mix the *A Show of Hands* album and video. By that time we were totally burnt out and we didn't want to discuss touring or even recording again – it was the lowest we had been in our whole career.

'We took seven months off in order to separate ourselves from everything in the band. Consequently when we got back together to record *Presto* we totally fired up and excited – it was like a re-birth. After recording the album we broke ourselves in with a short, well-paced tour which turned out to be great fun.

'*Presto* and *Roll the Bones* were produced by Rupert Hine – again, we chose someone who had nothing to do with Hard Rock. He was known more as a keyboards producer and he was looking for a change and a challenge so it was a good match. Rupert likes to work fairly quickly which suited us and helped us bring out more of the band as a three piece.

'I now use Paul Reed Smith guitars

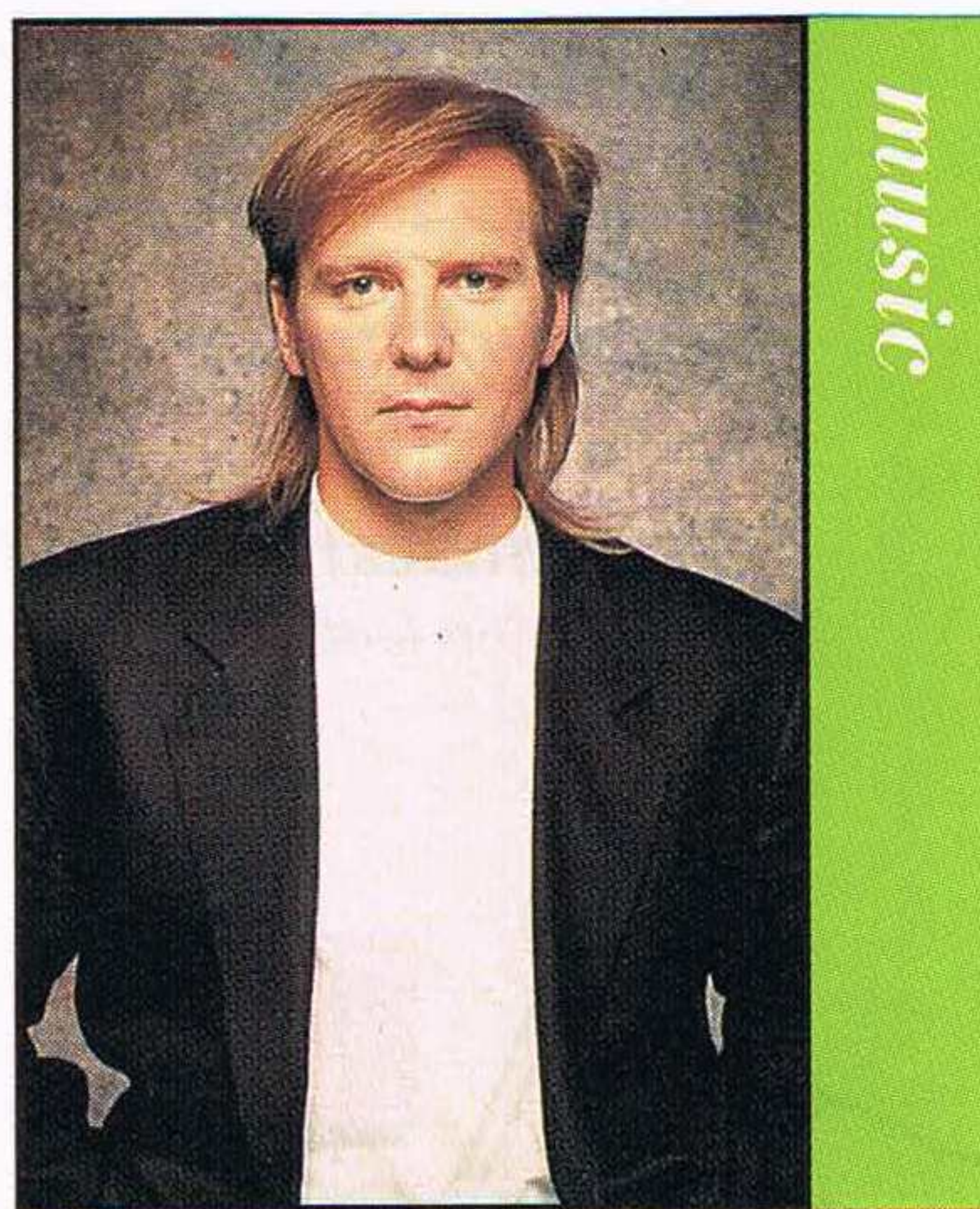
exclusively, my main one being an EG4. I use two GK 100MPL preamps into Crown Macro Series power amps through GK 2 by 12 cabinets with Celestion speakers. For DDL I use two TC Electronics TC2290s and for chorus I use a TC Electronics 1210 Spatial Expander. I use a Digitech IPS-33B for harmonizing effects, a Roland DEP-5 for reverb and a Roland GP-16. I use the two MPLs to run two discrete systems and everything is run in stereo. I have a Bradshaw pedalboard at my feet – I think they're the best. I was going to bring back my wah-wah but I heard a couple of people using it recently so if it's the neat thing

from the past to bring back then I'll just leave it at home!

'On our current tour we're only doing four or five songs from *Roll the Bones* so it leaves space for some of our earlier material. We also have a medley of five or six older songs which we do as the encore.

'We've tentatively planned to start writing in November so we could start recording the following January. So, we'll probably have a new record for possibly September '93 release if things go according to plan. Wow – it's weird planning a couple of years in advance!'

Douglas J Noble



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Rush man and his music

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