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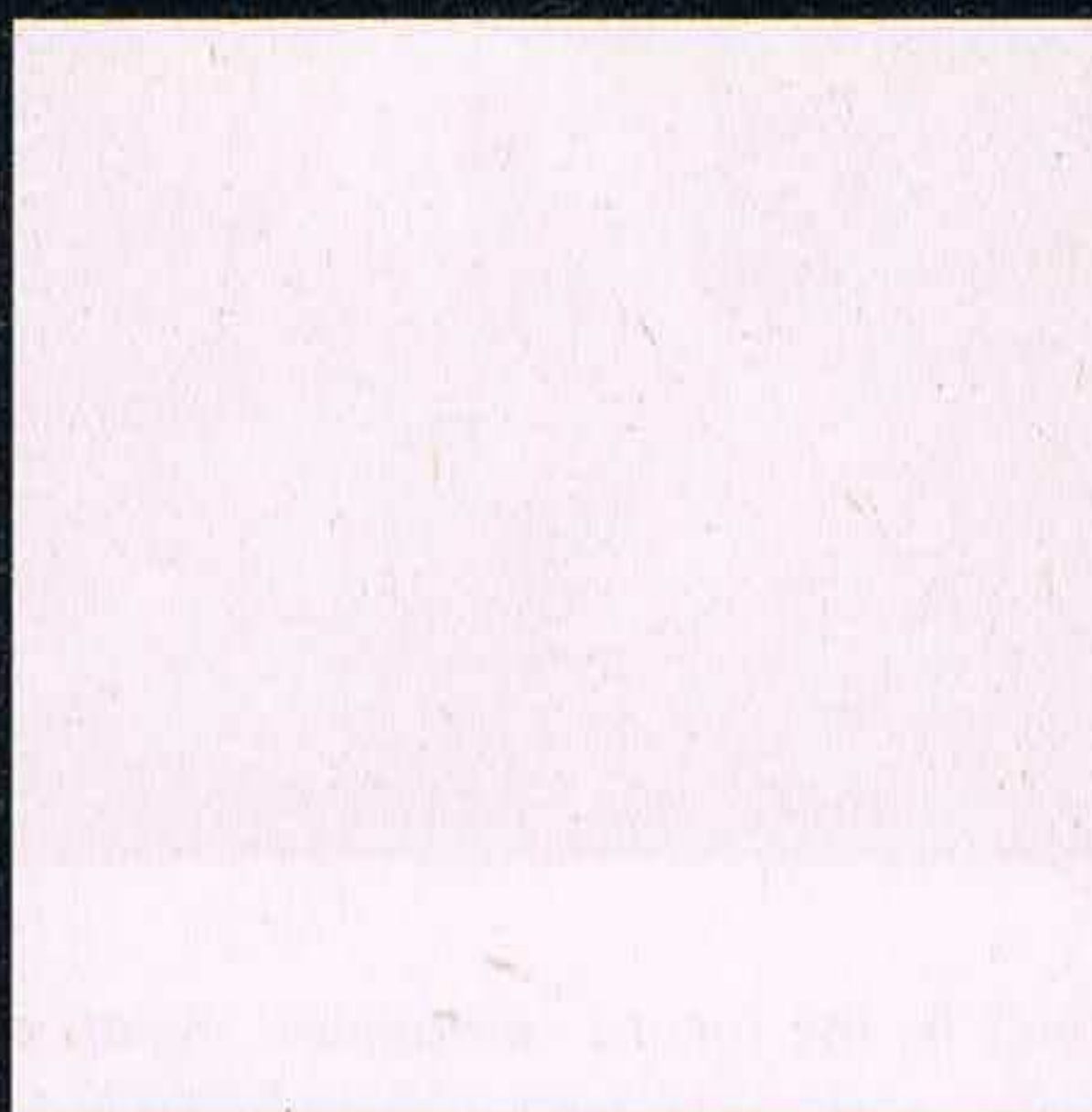
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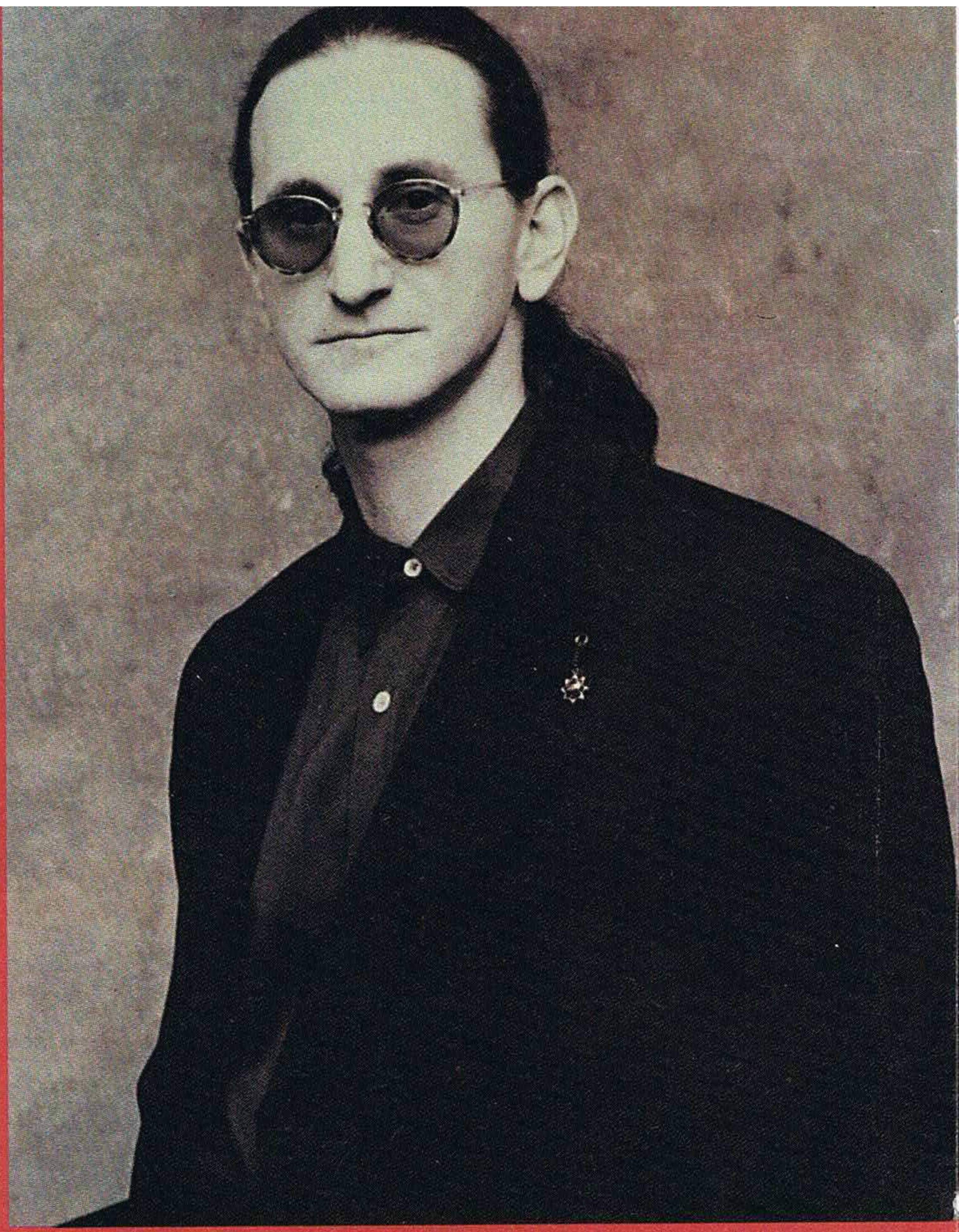
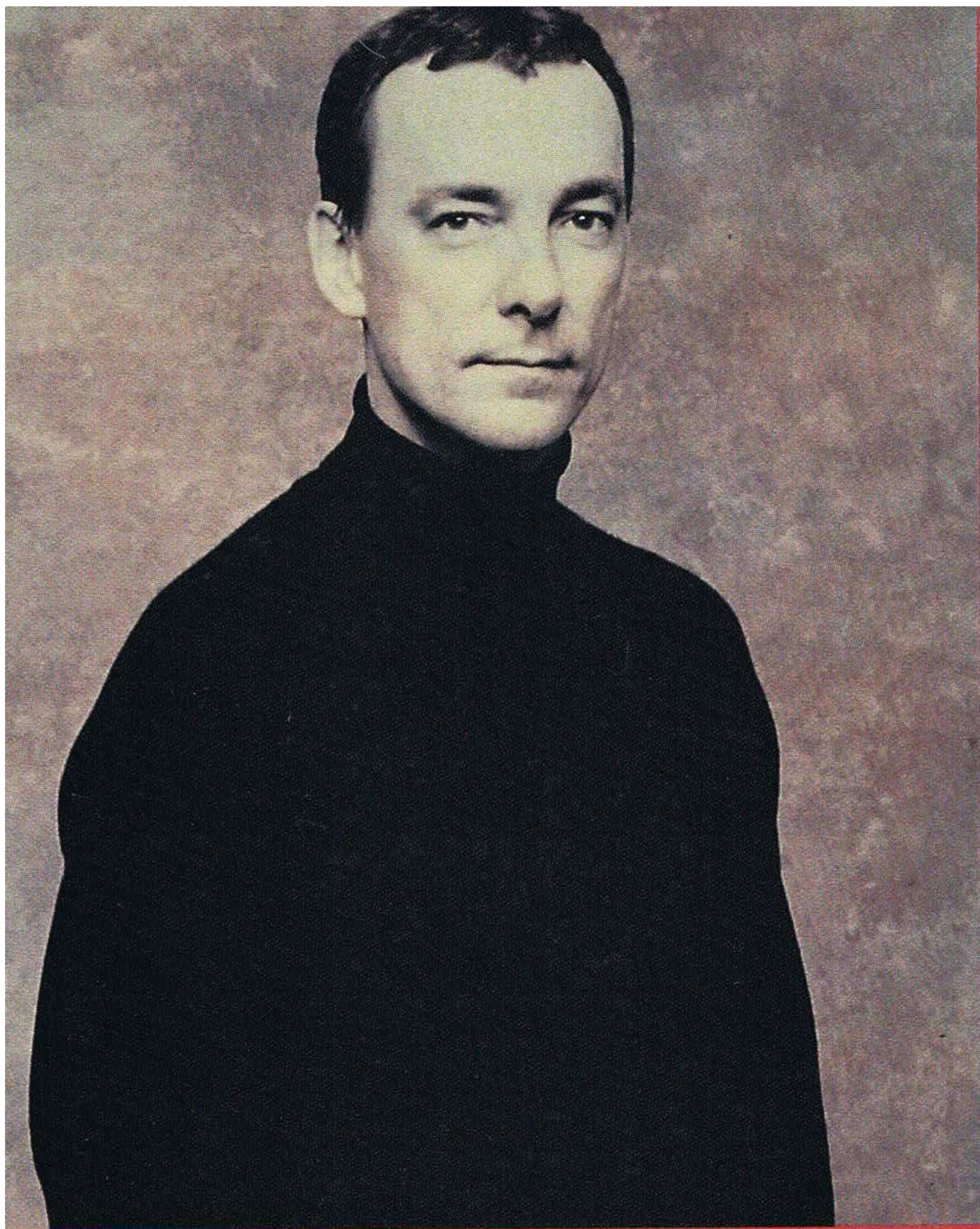
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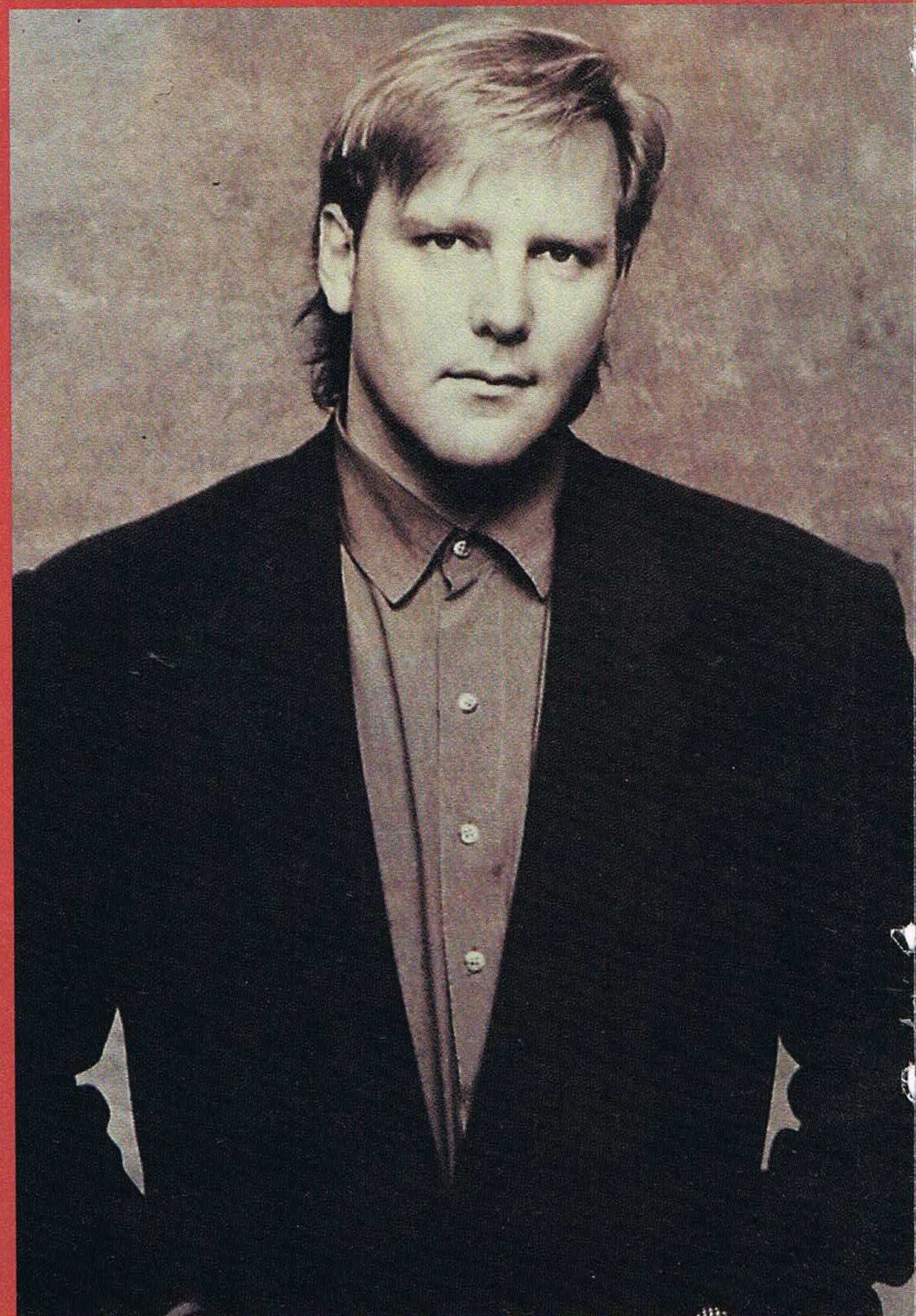
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NOW MARKING THEIR 20TH ANNIVERSARY, THE 40-42-YEAR-OLD, IDIOSYNCRATIC, SUPPOSEDLY MAINSTREAM NON-GLAMOUR BOYS OF RUSH FIND THEMSELVES THE HEROES OF A NEW BREED OF MUSICIAN-ORIENTED ALTERNATIVE BANDS, FROM PRIMUS TO THE RHEOSTATICS. LIKE THE TITLE OF THEIR LATEST OPUS, IT'S A CASE OF DUPLICATE AND OPPOSITE TOGETHER.



A NATURAL

The fall of 1993 was a time when Seattle's grunge rock sound was all over the place. Nirvana's *In Utero* proved to be a worthy follow-up to their ground-breaking *Nevermind*, and Pearl Jam followed suit with *Vs*, instantly scorching the top of the charts. But what's this? The last week of October, suddenly Rush's new *Counterparts* release debuted at No.1, knocking Pearl Jam (briefly) back into second spot. It was a situation reminiscent of the TV commercial in which a young pilot is told, "I used to be your teacher."

Now marking its 20th anniversary, Rush has taught or, more correctly, set an example for many of today's new breed of power rockers. With the band's 19th album, veteran bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee, guitarist Alex Lifeson and percussionist Neil Peart have delivered one of their rawest, most stripped-to-the-bone efforts in years.

"People are saying it's the kind of album they should have recorded six years ago," says band manager Ray Danniels. "That's Rush for you, always going on little side adventures along the way. But they get there eventually."

For Rush, this year shapes up to be a busy one, with a North American tour for *Counterparts* to be launched shortly, followed, possibly, by a second sojourn to commemorate the band's two decades in the biz. In his study, surrounded by his collection of miniature vintage cars, Peart chats enthusiastically about the band's new album, the pressures of their lengthy career and the accolades from new-breed bands who credit Rush as a major influence. "It's funny, but in the '80s, Rush were in disrespect because of what we stood for," he muses. "Real musicianship was dying. Everything was programmed and sampled. Nine times out of 10, there was no real drummer on the tracks."

"Then, in the '90s, these grunge bands came out with great musicians and high music values. Suddenly, the standard we had stood by was being flown everywhere. It came like a

breath of relief, like those values were being reaffirmed."

Lee feels the plaudits from new bands are based on Rush being a musicians' band. "It's the musicianship we've always put before anything else," he says. "So many pieces of music we wrote in the '70s were so technically oriented that the lyrical concepts came second. I guess we were bold or stupid enough to evolve a style that was either innovative or naive—depending on your point of view."

Peart and Lee agree that *Counterparts*' emphasis on a "drier" guitar, bass and drum sound doesn't totally eliminate keyboards, just that the piano and organ parts (provided by John Webster) are used in a more subtle fashion. "We are writing with a focus that isn't dependent on keyboards," explains Lee. "Unlike our periods through *Power Windows* and *Hold Your Fire*, where keyboards were high points of the production, now it's more of a textural, filling-out tool."

What *Counterparts* isn't is a reaction to grunge, because, as Lee says, "Fashions and trends change so quickly, if you try to graft them onto your music, it's so obvious."

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the word "counterpart" as both duplicate and opposite in the sense of forming a natural complement; it's the type of theme Peart usually excels at. With this album, though, he had most of the secondary ideas in place before determining the central theme. "It was almost by accident that some of the song themes fit the overall title," Peart explains. "I was looking for a more powerful word, but the idea of a word being the same yet opposite was quite appealing."

According to Peart, writing songs is a little like rock climbing. "Hanging off a cliff face and getting from one point to another is problem-solving, and that's what composing is all about," he says. "One myth I always wanted to shatter is that there's some mystical code of inspiration in what we do. Unfortunately, it's more ordinary than that. It's an everyday job of problem-solving, getting this part to work with that part. How do I make these images tie up with the grand theme?" Grandiose but basic, hard-edged but technically complex, Peart's definition of *Counterparts* reflects all of his band's idiosyncrasies.

"Rush were 16- and 17-year-old kids, writing their own songs, when I first met them," informs Danniels. "They were the hardest sell of any band, period! When high schools wanted cover bands, these guys weren't into it. This was pre Canadian-content regulations, >

by Keith Sharp

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MACNAUGHTAN

COUNTERPARTS

when the chances of getting your songs on radio in your own city, nevermind the rest of the country, were pretty remote. That's what made Rush different. They knew what they wanted to be, and that's what they became." Lee, with his sharp facial features and high-pitched vocals, was the antithesis of a glamour boy. Original drummer John Rutsey would be replaced by the studious Peart before their second album (*Fly By Night*), leaving the blonde Lifeson as the band's real sex star—but it was an image they hardly pursued.

With zero interest from the domestic labels, Danniels found himself launching Moon Records in 1974, bringing aboard Vic Wilson to help him run the band's affairs. Rush's self-titled (and self-produced) debut garnered favourable local response, with the single "In The Mood" breaking the ice at radio. When the album started attracting U.S. airplay, the buzz began to spread.

Rush's creative eclecticism, suggested on the first album with two seven-minute-plus songs ("Here Again" and "Working Man"), became even more pronounced when Peart (who'd been learning his chops in a Niagara Falls-based soul band) joined forces to become the band's new drummer and co-writer. His lyrical imagery would be introduced on *Fly By Night*, with its mystical eight-minute opus, "By-Tor & The Snow Dog."

A succession of support tours in Texas and the midwest had created an awareness for this odd trio with their strange heavy metal music. And when Mercury Records came looking for another Canadian group to complement Bachman-Turner Overdrive, they found Rush eager to oblige.

"Before we broke through, there wasn't a lot of exposure for Toronto bands," reflects Lee. "Our success had people looking to Toronto, and other bands got more attention. The success of BTO created a greater awareness for Canadian talent in the States, and that opened the door for us."

With little radio support to speak of, Rush built their reputation via word of mouth, taking any touring slot that was available. "We'd tour for indefinite periods," says Lee. "It would be like four weeks with Uriah Heep, three weeks with Blue Oyster Cult and three months with Kiss. Whoever was out there."

"We'd just blitz a place," concurs Peart. "Open for a headliner, then play a club, then go to a local college radio station and play DJ for a couple of hours and be back in that same city a couple of weeks later to do it all again. That's how we broke in the States. There's no such thing as over-exposure when you're a new band."

Rush's first two albums chalked up respectable sales of around 100,000 units, but when their third release, *Caress Of Steel*, stalled at the same total in 1975, Mercury Records became impatient. They had seen BTO's *Not Fragile* top the U.S. charts, and wanted Rush to do likewise. But the band wouldn't compromise their music for a radio hit.

"Mercury had written us right out of their projections for the future," acknowledges Peart. "They thought we were finished. We were playing really depressing gigs in really depressing places. There seemed to be no hope for us. But out of that came a determination to do it our way—which became *2112*, and a turning point for us. It was a conscious decision to take a shot at it with full conviction, and if we fall flat then I'm back at the farm equipment business, Alex is a plumber and Geddy does something else."

"The label would say, 'Do what we say now and once you're popular, you can do what you like,'" he continues. "Our response

was, 'No, no, no,' and a new album which sold 500,000 units! That was the turning point in our lives. Whatever chances we took, we took on our own. The record company could mumble all they wanted about 12-minute songs, but they couldn't do anything about it, because we proved it worked."

With the followup *All The World's A Stage* (1976) presenting their early work in a live context, Rush's musical integrity would never be questioned again. Future releases such as *A Farewell To Kings*, *Hemispheres*, *Permanent Waves* and *Moving Pictures* rode through the disco and punk eras, with the band dabbling in new influences without compromising their integrity. And that was a stance that won fans from a new breed of musicians.

"I heard *A Farewell To Kings* when I was in junior high school, and thought it was okay," remembers Les Claypool, bassist for the San Francisco power trio Primus. "Then I joined the RCA Record Club, just to get *All The World's A Stage*. I paid a penny, got a shitload of records and never bought any more. I thought that record was phenomenal. Geddy's bass-playing, to me, was the dominant, exciting part of that record. At that time, I was getting into music,

and there was a huge demand for bass players because everyone else wanted to be Eddie Van Halen."

Claypool says that Rush's lack of media profile in the U.S. only enhanced their attraction. "You never heard Rush on FM radio," he says. "They weren't the flavour of the month or some kind of poster boys. You rarely even found a magazine article on them. To me, that increased their mystery and excitement."

Primus has evolved into an entity of its own, headlining last year's Lollapalooza festival with a top-selling new album, *Pork Soda*.

But a career highlight for Claypool was being the opening band on Rush's 1992 U.S. tour. "We'd jam together backstage," Claypool recalls. "One day, there were two basses in the room, and Geddy picked one up and went into this riff. I had no idea what time it was in, but I couldn't catch it or follow it. It was this totally amazing, Geddy Lee groove, and I said, 'Yeah, that's Geddy Lee—that's the guy.' He has a feel similar to Jimi Hendrix. You can try to copy him, but you'll never imitate him."

Closer to home, Rush had become the embodiment of every kid's dream in Toronto's suburbs, where budding musicians like The Rheostatics' drummer, Dave Clark, grew up idolizing Rush, Max Webster, Triumph and Goddo.

"I remember being at a friend's house and listening to Rush's *2112* and *All The World's A Stage* and Max Webster's *High Class In Borrowed Shoes* for the first time," says Clark. "I was blown away. My mother hated them, so I thought that was great."

To Clark, the fact that Rush had evolved out of Toronto provided the right incentive for his own aspirations. "All of us thought, 'Hell! if they can make it, then so can we,'" he says. Clark drummed with Peart on the Rheostatics' *Whale Music*, an experience he describes as "the ultimate thrill."

As Canada's primary rock export over the past two decades, Rush have never lost sight of their commitment to promoting the domestic scene. "I like records which regenerate themselves," he says. "The last Tragically Hip album was like that. If it has a longer life, it becomes a richer listening experience."

The Hip have followed Rush's lead of sticking with a distinctive style, even when a lack of U.S. recognition pressures them to

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change. "Sticking with that true course is the main thing," advises Peart. "We've had records that were up or down in sales. But we were on a true course, and they were taking us somewhere. If it didn't work, we'd take notes and move on. Some of our experiments have left our albums uneven, but I'm not sure I'd want a technically excellent record. We'd prefer to grope our way along."

Lee feels Rush has maintained their course by absorbing influences without fundamentally changing direction. "We were amused by all the changes around us," he says, "be it ska, punk or reggae in the '70s or world beat or electronic dance in the '80s. On *Roll The Bones* we even injected some hip-hop into the mix, but some people didn't get the joke. They thought we were being too cynical."

Harvard University saw the humour, though, presenting Rush with their National Lampoon Award in recognition of the band's career achievements. "We don't say our music is funny, because a lot of it is inside stuff," Lee explains. "Sometimes it's serious and sometimes it's not. But when you get the image of being serious, it's hard to be taken another way."

Once united by a specific focus, the individuality of Peart, Lee and Lifeson has become more pronounced in recent years. Peart is known for his cycling trips to China and West Africa, where he studies local customs and cultures. Lifeson can be found scuba diving in the Indian Ocean, while Lee can be spotted browsing museums and art galleries, playing tennis or watching his beloved Toronto Blue Jays baseball team.

"Our individual influences are more diverse than they were before," agrees Lee. "And that is good. Whereas our unified musical vision was the key to keeping us together, I'm not sure that's going to keep our music interesting. We are changing; we need to be apart as much as we need to be together."

A test of their loyalty came following the recording of their live *A Show Of Hands* album in 1989. They were clear of all recording contracts, had no obligations and, according to Peart, were in no hurry to commit to the future. "It was a time of personal revelation," he says. "We all did things we wanted to do, and when we got back together to work on *Presto* all the excitement was still there. It's a feeling that's carried on through *Roll The Bones* and *Counterparts*."

"I go through periods every year when I'm convinced it's time to move on. Something has to happen to lure me back into the fray," adds Lee. "I decided years ago I would stop planning ahead—just take one record at a time and see how everyone else feels when it's time to make another. If there's a hunger and a desire to say something, then let's go in and do it. To pre-suppose what we are going to be doing five albums from now is foolish. But to say there won't be another album is equally foolish."

Danniels still marvels at the accomplishments of a band that is among the few meaningful survivors of the early '70s. "Seventeen records [not counting *Counterparts*] and they've toured every one of them," boasts Danniels. "There were tours when there wasn't a payday at the end, where they lived in Winnebagos for months on end—and went to Europe and lost money! But there's never been a period or an album that they've been embarrassed about. How many bands can say that?"

As for 41-year-old Peart and 40-year-old Lifeson and Lee, it's business as usual as they embark on a third decade with a slate full of tour dates. "Touring is like medicine—it tastes awful but it works," laughs Peart. "To stay vital and drive ourselves harder, we need to play live."

You're likely to bump into the band haunting local galleries during breaks in the tour. And there's Peart's new interest, archery. "I love to practice backstage," he laughs. "It keeps the media at a distance." ■