

After 40 years, Alex Lifeson still puts the 'pow' into this power trio

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RUSH

AS THE MULTI-MILLION-SELLING POWER TRIO RELEASE THEIR NEW COLLECTION 'RETROSPECTIVE 3', TG GOES **BACK TO THE BEGINNING WITH ALEX LIFESON** WHO TRACKS THE INFLUENCES, TECHNIQUES AND GEAR THAT HAVE MADE HIM **ONE OF ROCK'S GREATEST GUITARISTS...**

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here are a few things you need to know about Rush. First of all they're Canadian. They consist of three dudes: guitarist Alex Lifeson, bassist and vocalist Geddy Lee and drummer Neil Peart. Last year, Rush celebrated their

40th anniversary and they've been so successful that only The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Aerosmith have more gold and silver records in their trophy cabinets. Rush have also been cited as an influence by Metallica, Smashing Pumpkins and Dream Theater. Oh, and some people like to call them a prog rock band. But Alex Lifeson is having none of it...

"IT DOESN'T MEAN anything to me really," says Alex when the 'p' word raises its geeky little head. "I understand the definition of it but I'm not prog. I'm *progressive* in the way I approach the instrument but I'm definitely not what you would call a prog guitarist."

Playing devil's advocate we suggest that, dare we say it, there's no smoke without fire. Rush's back catalogue is littered with prog-like tales of science fiction and fantasy... not to mention oodles of tempo changes and the occasional 10-minute classic. "The term has been around for a long time," continues Alex. "I can see how we'd be connected to 'prog' because of our earlier material when we wrote songs that took up whole sides of records. But we've always considered ourselves a hard rock band."

Alex's hard rock roots can be traced right back to the guitarists that inspired him as a kid who was just getting into guitar playing. "Pete Townshend of The Who was a big influence," he says. "But I think the most important player for me was Jimmy Page in the early days of Led



Rush insist on doing everything onstage, with Alex triggering backing tracks with his feet



pressure on us to go back to the sound of the first album. Instead we decided to fight back."

In a make-or-break move the band released *2112* in 1976. It's now considered the first great Rush album. The record was also a commercial success and marked the point where Rush won their independence, gaining total artistic freedom from their record company. Alex reckons it wouldn't have worked any other way. "If we weren't going to do it on our own terms we may as well have gone home and got a job in plumbing or something," Alex says. "We've never had anyone from the record company in the studio when we've been recording. I think we took a big chance but fortunately it worked."

The confidence the band now felt was beginning to manifest itself in Alex's guitar playing. "I think in the mid to late 70s I began to develop my own style. I was using open chords and suspended notes trying to fill up as much



Zeppelin. He was a huge influence on how I approached playing."

It's no coincidence that the players Alex was drawn to were the sole guitarists in their respective bands. Their influence would prove valuable when he found himself in the power trio that is Rush. "With Page I think it was the power in his playing and the interesting chords he played that I liked," he comments. "That and the loose soloing that he did. I think from Townshend I got a really good sense of rhythm guitar. He could make an acoustic guitar sound so heavy. That gave me a good basis I think."

RUSH RELEASED THEIR first album in 1974. *Rush* was heavily influenced by British rock bands like Led Zeppelin and Cream. Their next pair of albums, *Fly By Night* and *Caress Of Steel*, showcased an experimental side. When the latter sold poorly the band's record company and management were worried. "There was a lot of

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ALEX LIFESON

space in a three-piece band as I could."

Like his heroes Page and Townshend, Lifeson had to become a jack-of-all-trades switching between riffs, rhythm and lead whenever

the song dictated it. This is illustrated beautifully on the band's smash-hit classic *The Spirit of Radio*, which was released in 1980. It opens with a tricky little hammer-on lick on the high E and B strings that represents "radio waves bouncing around in the air".

"The song is about the demise of radio and the influence of FM radio, particularly in North America," comments Alex. "It speaks of the spirit of music and its influence and power on all of us. Musically, we wanted a traditional rock riff mixed with typical Rush stuff like quick little arpeggios."

As for soloing, Alex plays for the moment. "I improvise solos," he says. "But I know what the

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RUSH

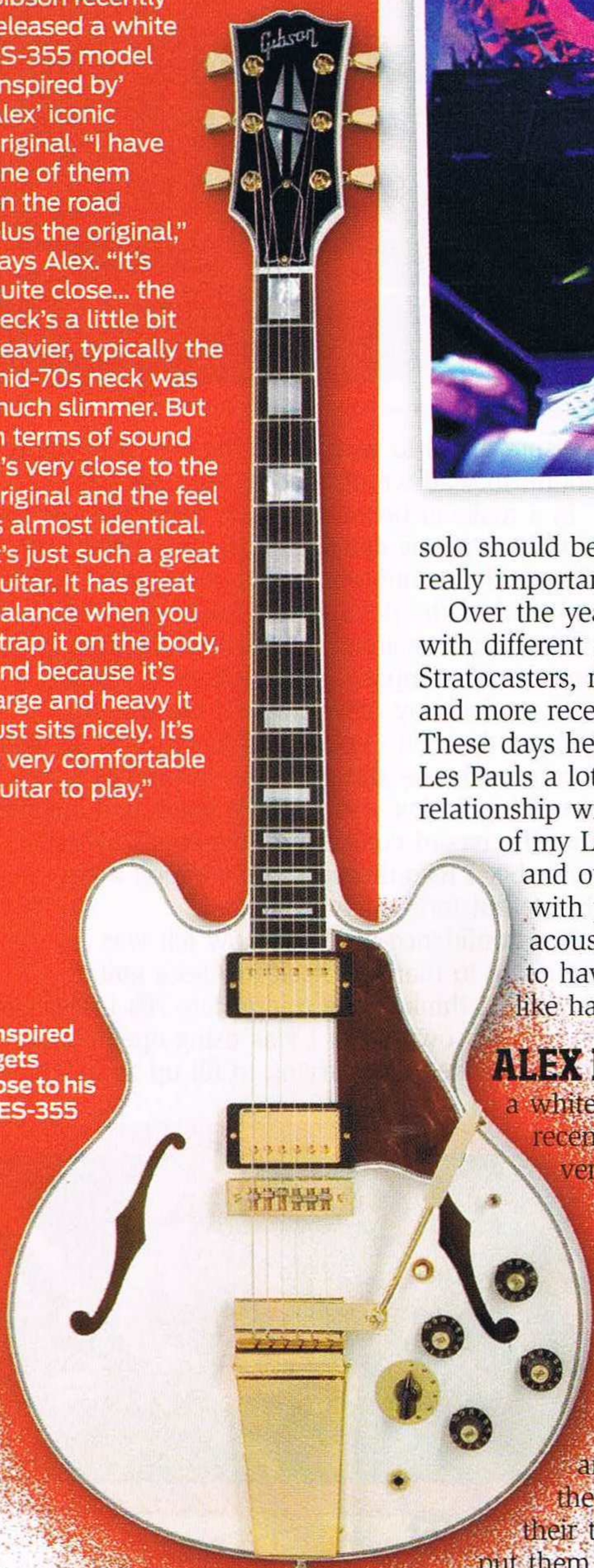
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INSPIRING SOUNDS

Alex Lifeson on his new Gibson signature...

Gibson recently released a white ES-355 model 'inspired by' Alex' iconic original. "I have one of them on the road plus the original," says Alex. "It's quite close... the neck's a little bit heavier, typically the mid-70s neck was much slimmer. But in terms of sound it's very close to the original and the feel is almost identical. It's just such a great guitar. It has great balance when you strap it on the body, and because it's large and heavy it just sits nicely. It's a very comfortable guitar to play."

Alex's 'Inspired By' axe gets really close to his original ES-355



NEIL ZLOZOWER X3

solo should be providing for the song. That's really important; it shouldn't just be jerking off."

Over the years Alex Lifeson has experimented with different guitars including Fender Stratocasters, modified with Floyd Rose vibratos, and more recently some Paul Reed Smith axes. These days he's flying the flag for Gibson. "I use Les Pauls a lot," he says. "I've developed a strong relationship with Gibson. They've outfitted some of my Les Pauls with Floyd Rose vibratos and other standard fixed bridge models with piezo pickups so I can blend in an acoustic sound without having to resort to having an actual acoustic on a stand. I like having that versatility."

ALEX IS FAMOUSLY associated with a white Gibson ES-355 model; Gibson recently released a reissue 'Inspired By' version (shown left).

When it comes to amplification Lifeson has been a long-time advocate of Hughes & Kettner. The guitarist has his own 100-watt TriAmp MKII signature head: "The TriAmp model sounds great and the Switchblade [head] really worked out well for me too. My amps get knocked around a lot but they're just so solid. They really hold their tone during the course of a tour. I put them through a lot."

Like most guitarists in a three-piece, Alex uses a chorus unit to fill out his sound. "I've been using the TC Electronics 1210 Spatial Expander for years," he says. "It just makes everything sound so much broader. I also use TC Electronic G-Force effects processors for delay, phasing and pitch shifting. I have a volume pedal [Ernie Ball

25K ohm] and a wah [Dunlop Crybaby DCR-1SR]. That's basically it. I like to keep it simple."

Onstage, Alex isn't just dealing with effects; he also triggers backing tracks with his feet. "It requires a great deal of concentration," he tells TG. "It's very easy to miss a cue so you have to be on top of your game. We do everything onstage. We earned the right to make those mistakes!"

By the time you read this *Retrospective III*, a collection of tracks from 1989 to 2008, will be in the shops. For Alex, the album is a good way to cap a productive period in the band's history before they move on to something new. It also allows him the opportunity to think about the band's achievements over the years. "For us, it's

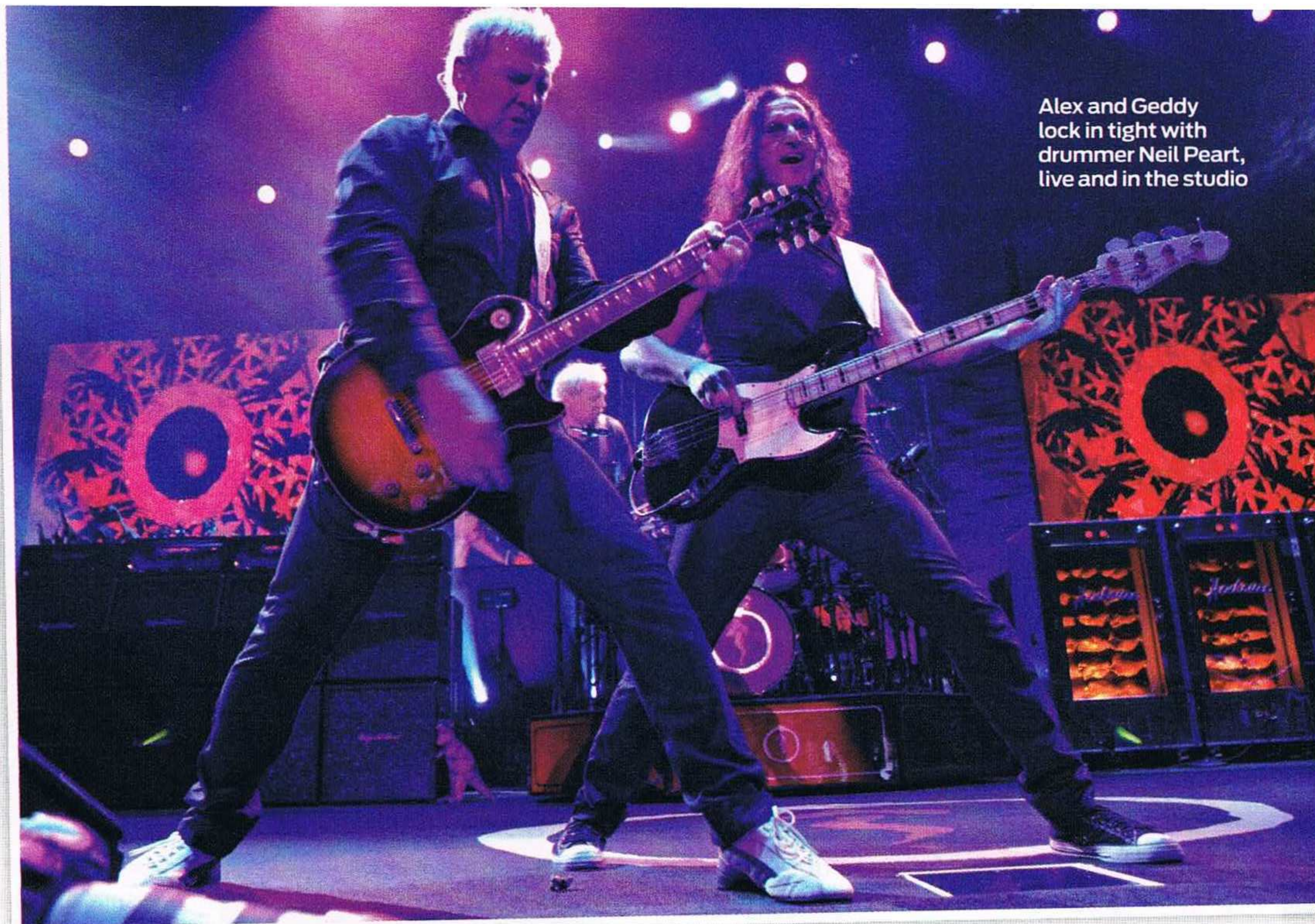
"I USED OPEN CHORDS AND SUSPENDED NOTES TO FILL UP THE SPACE IN A THREE-PIECE BAND"

ALEX LIFESON

about the work," says Alex. "We love writing and performing together. We enjoy being together. Geddy and I have been friends for a very long time. We're just like two mates and that makes it a lot easier to go to work together."

THE FACT THAT the band have never compromised or followed musical trends has helped them stay at the top of their game too. "I've always said that Rush has walked along the shore of the mainstream," comments Lifeson. "We're aware of what's happening out there but we'll always walk our own path." 

Retrospective III (1989-2008) is released on CD and Special Edition CD/DVD by Atlantic Records



Alex and Geddy lock in tight with drummer Neil Peart, live and in the studio

