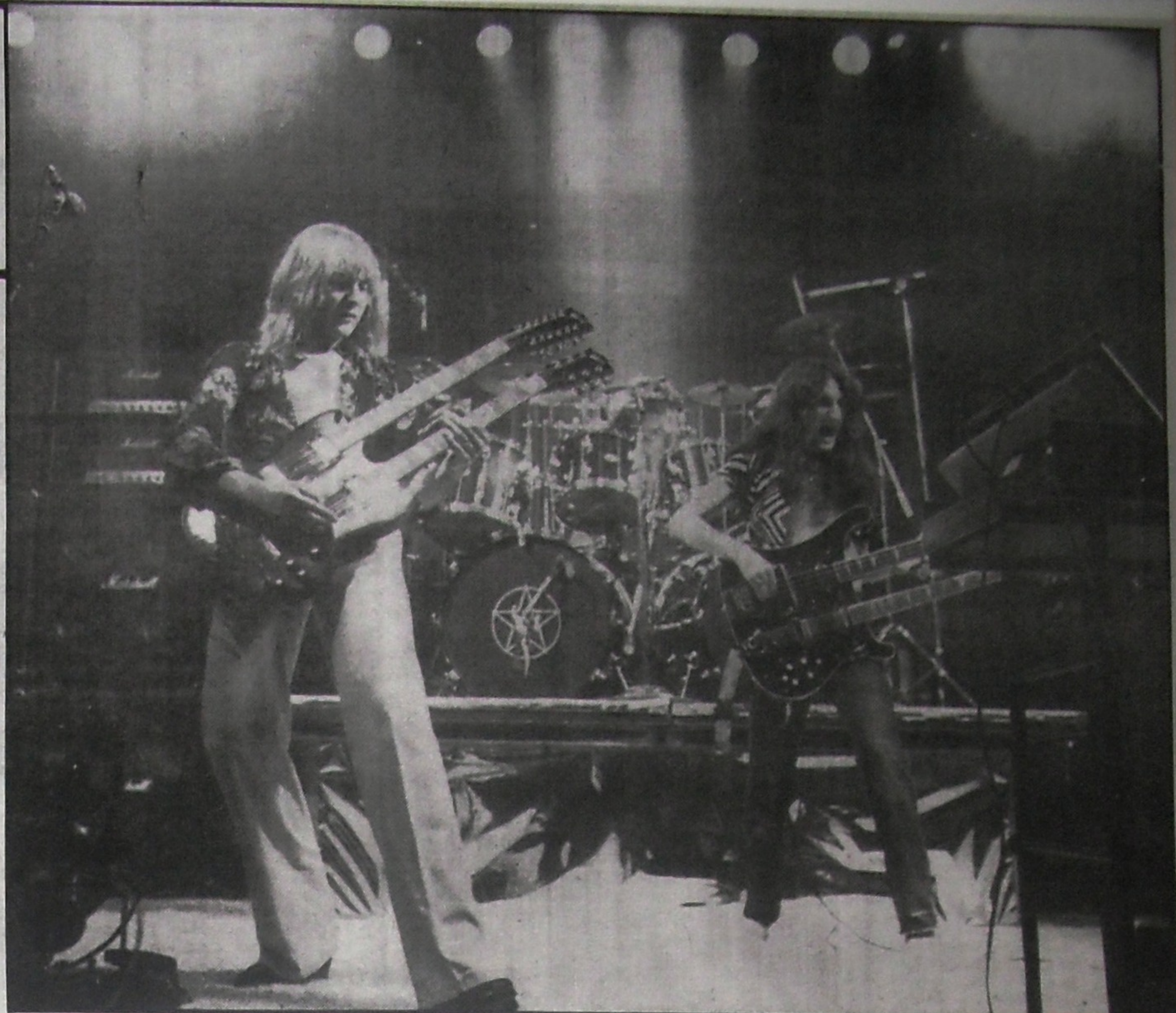


**Simon Kinnersley reports from
Pittsburgh on the Canadian
heavy metal trio who open
a British tour on Sunday**

Heavy side of Rush



THERE'S a thick and omnipresent blanket of smog that hangs menacingly over Pittsburgh. It fits snugly, horizon to horizon, in a way that almost suggests that some heavenly carpet-fitter dropped by to help them out with the finer points.

At night, with the endless miles of amber streetlights below, it positively glows, like some dazzling phosphorescent ceiling. Were it not so highly toxic I would be impressed.

I am told during my ride from the airport that such smog, although having its obvious social drawbacks, nevertheless has a quite devastating effect on the less popular vermin—such as rats, mice and cockroaches; it wiped them all out years ago. One shudders to think what it might be doing to our lungs.

Its presence, it seems, cannot be blamed simply on the fact that the area has some of the world's largest steel mills, but with the obvious affluence that it brings, almost every family has at least a couple of cars and uses them hard.

I'm sure you have heard the somewhat derogatory reference to "the pits". Well now you know where it originated. Pittsburgh most certainly is the pits.

It was planned that my arrival in this celebrated town would be in time to see the second night of Canadian band Rush's two-day stop-over. It goes without saying that record company bungs at the other end ensured that I was still sitting in New York's La Guardia airport when they took the stage, and only arrived at the hotel an hour or so after their return.

Three-piece heavy metal bands, through the very limitations that their line-up dictates, have never exactly

been my forte, and you might say that since my sleeping bag, storm tent, faded loons and beads have been stashed in the attic some half a dozen years ago, I've avoided them like the plague.

Certainly I needed a band who called themselves Rush and produced albums with such singularly uninteresting titles as "2112" and "Caress Of Steel," about as much as a hole in the head. Their fate, you might say, had for me been sealed without ever hearing a note of their music.

Amid that cockeyed prejudice it was most certainly more by accident and an ill wind that their recent waxing, "A Farewell To Kings," no more seductive in its title than any of its predecessors, found its way

onto my turntable. And amid all my shame and confusion I actually found myself enjoying it, and far from sending it arching into the nearest brick wall, it was replayed.

"A Farewell To Kings" didn't wipe me out, don't let me give you that impression; with the kind of ponderously cosmic lyrics that they currently employ, for the moment at least there's little danger of that. Nor was I smitten by any kind of dazzlingly original music. It was a case of having, during their previous three albums, chosen a fairly worn course.

They were neither afraid to acknowledge that it was time for a change nor get on and actually do something about it. You can respect that kind of thinking.

Greater texture and colour

had apparently come into their music, while they seemed prepared to utilise newer sound techniques as well as offering vastly contrasting moods, switching from gentle acoustic passages to fierce heavy metal. Not wildly innovative I agree, nevertheless it seemed a most interesting start and certainly offers enormous scope for expansion and development, always assuming of course that they're prepared to take up the mantle.

The other, and possibly most appealing, feature rested around the quasi-intense and dramatic vocals of bassist Geddy Lee that bore a disarming resemblance to the splendid work of David Surkamp from the lamentably ignored and

much-maligned Pavlov's Dog. As I said, I wasn't wiped out, but at the same time they seemed well worth a little further investigation.

Hence my arrival in Pittsburgh to see Rush in their most natural habitat, on the road.

Travelling around in an exceedingly plush caravanette complete with all the prerequisites of Seventies living, including a stereo and video set, it's abundantly clear that Rush have touring down to a fine art. Airports and the endless hours spent hanging around being none too popular, they seldom stay in hotels, instead electing to travel through the night sleeping on the three available beds, all of which seems quite understandable when you consider they're on the road for anything up to ten months a year.

Their ever growing following in the States has been earned in much the same way that Status Quo achieved their popularity in this country—simply working on the road incessantly, never being afraid to play anywhere and never turning down the offer of a gig.

Some buy their way to the top, others like Rush slog, and now they have appeared in almost every major American city, at least half a dozen times. Starting out as the opening act on any package that would take them their way up to the enviable position of billtoppers.

Strangely, it transpires, I am not alone in my ready-made prejudice against Rush, as only the previous evening some young lady came over to Geddy and, assuming him to be a member of support band Cheap Trick, went on to describe how much she detested Rush and everything they stood for.

Closer enquiry revealed that, like me, she had never heard or seen them play a note. "It's simply the very image people have of us and something we have to live with," Lee observes phlegmatically.

The War Memorial Hall in Johnstown proves a little more inviting than one might have feared and turns out to be one of those enormous multi-purpose buildings that almost every American town seems to boast, and, apart from rock gigs, features anything from boxing to ice hockey.

Earlier last year the town was at the wrong end of a nine-million dollar flood disaster, as large slices were simply washed away. The intensely subdued atmosphere of the place suggests they're a long way from getting over it. Drummer Neil Peart likens the town to Scunthorpe or Grimsby. The point is not missed.

In view of the eminently varied and approachable nature of the recent album, the gig itself proves something of a disappointment, as many of the album's more

attractive and important features are sacrificed in a wave of heavy metal sheets, swept through at almost deafening volume.

And although their more textured songs such as the title track, "Farewell To Kings," remain unaltered from the originals, the acoustic sections are dispatched at breakneck speed to make way for the archetypal three-piece riffing. I feel more than a little disappointed.

One can't help feeling that they seem apprehensive, almost frightened, of exposing their new ideas in a single throw. So rather than take that risk they've compromised and diluted the newer and more vital influences.

To a degree Lee endorses this opinion after the show. "I suppose we're just a heavy metal band that is progressing and growing up. We've found that playing to most of our audiences we've had to handle the soft things very carefully, or else it's very hard to keep their attention. This is the first tour we've ever attempted to do any acoustic things at all; hopefully as we get more respect as a band it'll become a lot easier".

I can't help remarking that I would have thought the best way to avoid achieving respect is not to make that kind of compromise. If you've got some new ideas or thoughts of a different approach at least have a little pluck and give them a whirl. After all it's the only way you'll ever find just how broad/narrow-minded an audience really is.

Lee, however, is far from convinced by these sentiments. "There's no denying that until now we've been a headbangers band. We know we have other tendencies and leanings but we're still basically a hard rock band. Although at some of the mid-west towns I don't even think the kids listen or really care. It's just a case of a Friday or Saturday night out, and they just wanna holler and wave their arms about."

"I guess in the beginning we were just a straightforward rock band. We grew out of things like Led Zeppelin, Jeff Beck and bands like that, then we got interested in different kinds of music, particularly progressive rock of the sort Yes and others were playing."

That was the kind of thing we've been checking out, structured pieces with longer middle sections and different time changes.

Neil's arrival brought a lot of rhythm changes, then he started writing songs like 'By-Tor And The Snow Dog' from 'The Fly By Night' album, and just the fact that his lyrics were so different meant a new approach, and that's inspired us to write music that's been different for each album.

"I suppose another big change in our music," he added, "is that there's more

energy than ever before".

Apart from the aforementioned reservations surrounding their show, one of the more impressive features of Rush's performance was the way in which they have chosen to incorporate more contemporary technological hardware. Often with such innovative equipment at their disposal certain bands seemingly employ them as little more than expensive playthings and gimmicks.

But for Rush they have become a far more vital and significant part of their sound. Nevertheless, one can't help feeling that the greater demands imposed by playing these as well as their normal instruments might in the end be detrimental to their music.

To a point Lee sympathises with this opinion, "but it's just the way we want to do it, and we wanna try it because we've been feeling restricted, because there's a certain chemistry that the three of us have which we feel is most important, and we all feel that if we want to keep our music fresh and keep it growing we have to put more of a workload on our shoulders."

"We have to start playing with different instruments, bring acoustics in, synthesizers, bass synthesizers. Those are the things we feel are bringing greater freshness now, and adding more texture."

Nevertheless, however good the intentions there are limitations, if only through simple anatomical ones such as the fact that one only has two arms and legs.

"Sure, but we haven't reached those limits yet. We have to face the fact that we are basically gonna be a three-piece that is trying to extend the more obvious ideas and forms". After pausing to consider the point, Lee continues, "but I suppose we don't really look at it as being limited. If there's a hole in our sound we try and fill it up with something, and hopefully the end product will be a song that doesn't sound empty."

"We may turn out to be the busiest three-piece in the world, but that's fine, that's the way we'd like it to be. There's nothing wrong with being busy. There're various ways we can make our music more interesting and still remain a three-piece. Now that we've touched on these new instruments we can go."

"For instance, I wouldn't be surprised to see parts of our songs have absolutely no guitar in them. I think we'll get more into synthesizers and that sort of thing, perhaps bring on an organ."

"It all depends on keeping the right attitude towards these instruments. There will be more electronics in our music and I supposed it'll be featured more prominently but we'll always be a hard

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Rush: 'It's easy to go over the edge'

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rock band. I'd like us to become a hard edge band with more textures that'll be a lot more interesting to listen to".

One cannot help feeling that rather than having the front pair of musicians careering around frantically trying to play the multitude of instruments each has taken on, it might make a lot more sense to bring in a full-time keyboards player. This remark is greeted with some disdain as Lee refers back to chemistry and such-like.

It transpires that this injection of greater melody into their music has been a very deliberate step and one which the band as a whole is eager to develop. While Lee claims that in the past he was content to bash out almost any simplistic line, there is now a good deal more thought and application going into it.

All of them are now trying to work more closely together (something he admits hasn't always happened in the past) to create a more varied array of sounds and effects.

In spite of all these good intentions it was painfully obvious at the gig that they still pursue that less-than-pleasant habit among mainstream American rock bands of trying to blast the audience out of the back of the hall. This strikes me as scarcely reconcilable with all this talk of melody, texture and so forth.

"We have a reputation for that, it's true. We're loud, there's no denying that. We've always liked playing at certain volumes — its to take up space, I guess. It's something we're working on, we're trying to keep the volume down, trying to keep control and at the same time looking for a more sophisticated sort of hardback

sound.

"Working in the kind of space and sort of rock music that we are, it's a fine line to walk. It's easy to go over the edge, but at the same time if you don't get to the right point it leaves an uneasy emptiness in the sound. It's something we have to live with. I mean, if you don't get it right it can break you in two".

With all the more volatile and mercurial musical developments that have emerged in the last 12 months or so, it has become painfully apparent to many of the less adventurous bands that there is no longer any place for either them or their music. Lee, however, strongly refutes any suggestion that there is any danger of this happening to Rush.

"I think we're something apart from trends. We're neither a trendy nor fashionable band; none of us feel that that music is threatening

us. More importantly, our audiences are growing, so it still has to be in vogue with those people. I think we appeal to a mentality, and there's still a lot of that mentality".

In spite of the very sizeable following that they obviously now enjoy in the States, it seems that they still receive little attention on the radio. It's unlikely, of course, unless they suddenly start cutting three-minute spectacles, that they'll ever make it onto the AM stations. Nevertheless it seems that, with the odd notable exception, they're none too well-represented on the more rock-orientated FM wavebands either.

Surprisingly it's a situation that they seem quite resigned to, working on the basic theory that the different stations have never been particularly interested, so there's little reason why they should now.

As if to underline this point, they were invited into a local Pittsburgh studio the previous day and the deejay had never even heard of them. The result was a two-minute conversation that revolved around a discussion of their itinerary and where they'd been. This, they said, was not at all unusual.

So they have to tour like crazy. "Simply because it's the only way we get exposed", says Lee without a trace of either frustration or bitterness. "It's the only way we can exist and keep our faces from starving. We've been doing it pretty well non-stop for three years and we've grown to enjoy it.

"I don't think we'll ever be the kind of band whose records will sell themselves. We'll have to go out and sell them. Our audience is used to seeing us, so we're in it right up to our necks and we've got to stay there".