Closer to the Heart

A Rush Discography by John Gill

The Phenomenal Success of Rush and the Fanaticism They inspired - Even moves at the sounds letters signed 'Priests of Syrinx') tends to make you put them in the same age range of Zep or Sabbath.

In fact, they're comparatively young in supergroup terms; just over seven years old. The juggernaut got off to a slow start, but achieved breakneck speed after a few years. Reeling up the Seventies, they went through change after change and improvement after improvement, both commercially and creatively.

When you consider how little many HM bands change over the years (for some, decades even) those seven or so years look like a frantic race, from the Zep-influenced debut, through sword 'n' sorcery, sci-fi allegories, arty concept rock and now, some of the hardest highbrowrawnch to conquer spineless American radio programming.

Why weren't they told to give up and go back to their day jobs with that first album? 'Rush'? Anyone can transcribe a Page solo and play it themselves, but Rush didn't simply acknowledge a debt to Zep, they improved on the influence.

Even today, when Alex's teasing, spoiling guitar moves into the stereo mix and Geddy yelps his blues rip-offs on the debut — and sowed the seeds of their later complex studio productions.

From the horror-movie guitar effects during the fight in 'Snow Dog' to the plaintively fragile 'Rivendell', it showed that this new young band (Geddy was still only 21) wasn't scared of taking risks with a style whose rules had been firmly set by giants like Cream, Zep et al.

They could thunder and wail on the likes of 'Anthem' and 'Fly By Night', paint dainty pictures with 'Rivendell' and — nudge nudge — include purely atmospheric sounds on the epic 'By-Tor'.

Neil says that it was here that Canada, and America, started paying grudging attention to them. 'FBN' won the best-new-band Juno Award in Canada and went Gold there, too.

Alas, the ignorant radio and press still denied the existence of this fast-blooming homegrown talent. As still happens, they built up their following by tours of mindboggling length and energy. There's no need for sympathy, though, Neil swears they loved life on the road.

Confident after the relative success of 'FBN', they were back in Toronto Sound by July (!) recording 'Caress of Steel'. Perhaps this haste was something of a mistake; it certainly gave us the likes of 'Bastille Day', 'Necromancer' and the side-long 'Fountains Of Limeth', but the album sold poorly, causing them to rename their follow-up tour 'The Down The Tubes Tour' (only "half-jokingly," Neil recalls) and bringing label pressure down on the band (more of which later).

It was certainly a sophisticated step on from 'FBN'. Interestingly, if you lend an ear to the tricky riff from 'In The Valley', part one of 'Limeth', it owes more to Genesis' 'Watcher Of The Skies' than something like 'Dazed And Confused'. Pear's lyrics were maturing beyond the comic-strip aspects of 'FBN'.

The whole opus was the most ambitious to date, the songs were creating atmospheres for Pear's lyrics as well as doing their darndest to rattle the listener's brains. Historians might say that this is where Pear's words started going...
wrong, addressing themselves to grander things than most rock lyrics should, but I'd say that was and is their salvation. The 'Down The Tubes Tour' took them on a depressing trek through smaller venues than before (almost as though the rock biz was punishing them) and Mercury Records were pressing them to produce more commercial music than 'Ummeth'. "A lot of people were wishing we would make the first album over again five or six times in a row," Neil told a Toronto magazine.

Their response to this pressure was the furious, apocalyptic '2112'. "It was us saying, 'Leave me alone!'" Neil told that magazine. Like 'Anthem' from 'Fly By Night', it was inspired by the plot to Ayn Rand's novel, 'Anthem'. '2112' shows individual revolt against corrupt authority (or any political shade) was to become a recurring theme in Neil's writing, but the fact that '2112' had been inspired by the "genius" of Ayn Rand got them into hot water.

The album came out in 1976, amid the first rumbles of punk. Rock Against Racism and so on. Media 'radicals' here pronounced them crypto-fascists (even the most casual look at the lyrics shows that the hero is rebelling against the regime).

Rand promoted an ideal of benign capitalism, now seen as a contradiction in terms, and is said to have lost her marbles later on. Neil currently thinks she went over the top politically. If he was a Brit, he'd probably join the SDP.

Still, the storyline to 'Anthem' was a valid source, and it gave us one of Rush's most awesome concussive operas to date. If your spine doesn't turn to rubber at the raging, blasting climax, see a doctor.

After the lauded live double, 'All The World's A Stage' (including a full-length '2112' they came to Britain — well, Wales — to record 'A Farewell To Kings' at Rockfield. The title is almost a message, a bleak fact linked more than the sword 'n' sorcery behind and moving on to the sci-fi allegories, philosophical musings and inner space adventures realised on 'Hemispheres'.

Musically, it noted the arrival of Geddy's synthesisers and Neil's use of traditional percussion. Oddly, 'Kings' seems to see them cutting loose from the blues-fathered rock of their earlier albums, or at least nothing it beyond those early albums.

It has a distinctly contemporary feel, owing as much to the symphonic rock of Yes and others as to their heavy metal godfathers. It can rock with a vengeance (check 'Xanadu' or the spacey, 'Cygns X-1'), but has a very grand, epic air.

A further sign of their eagerness to experiment was the lengthy opening to 'Cygns': a whirling synth intro HM riffamer is nothing new, but this goes on so long it could be Stockhausen — yet they think nothing of mating it with the swinging monofar riffing that ensues.

1978's 'Hemispheres' was hailed by someone not too far from the editor's chair of this esteemed journal as either a masterpiece or a mistake. This was Rush making a stand for their eclecticism — the purposely bizarre ecstasism of 'Strangers In The Night' — the 1000 miles of 'Cygns' (accompanied, live, by an animated space movie), the marching semi-acoustic 'Trees'.

Perhaps it was their Topographic Oceans album like the Yes album acclaimed as brilliant by some, dismissed as pretentious garbage by others. It certainly had more than enough of that classic stratospheric Rush riffing.

Like Neil's remarks about the pressure which produced '2112', it looks at the lyrics shows that the hero is rebelling against the regime.

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