M.E.A.T. Free! Issue 30
Canada's #1 Metal Mag!

Alex Lifeson of...
RUSH
Old "Bones" on a new "Roll"!

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Special Feature by: DREW MASTERS

Growing up in rural Ontario, dreaming of becoming a rock star, only one band really mattered: Rush — it held all. I may have wanted to be a star because of Ace Frehley, but I wanted to be a guitarist — a musician — because of Alex Lifeson.

Sixteen years after hearing my first Rush record, I find myself standing in the middle of a dormant but ommicious equipment carefully placed in a warehouse-like room. I just about froze: there were Alex's guitars, Geddy Lee's basses, and Neil Peart's drums. Though the band members weren't there yet, their stage manager, Skip Gildersleeve, graciously let me look at their stuff up close. And there it was: I touched Alex's guitar; I touched Neil's kit; I touched Geddy's bass and keyboard. I touched my childhood dream.

Alex came nonchalantly and immediately began joking with me, and his crew, about some crazy drivel he had encountered on the way to rehearsal. He never dropped his smile as we went from their sacred rehearsal room to a nearby production office. Closing the door behind us, Alex lit up a smoke as I poured myself a coffee. Here I was in awe: sixteen years later — in the private presence of my greatest guitar hero of all time.

What transpired was a 60-minute conversation with Alex done last October before the beginning of their Canadian/world tour in support of their most successful album to date, Roll The Bones. Though quite relaxed on the outside, I was falling apart inside. Seven years a journalist, over 300 interviews with every major star, and I was freaking out inside. But still I feel I got a good interview — not the best, as I left out some important questions I should have asked, but you try this! And, now, from me — may I proudly present to you Alex Lifeson, and the life and times of Canada's greatest rock band, Rush.

I heard rumours that the band was once close to folding: "That's not quite true. Right after recording Hold Your Fire we did the tour, which was a long tour — not as long as the early days — but long in our more recent terms. During it, Geddy got sore in his throat often, and I got the flu... it was one thing after another. It was a very tense, stressful tour. We didn't feel very positive about our touring future as a band after that tour. We still wanted to record — we weren't looking at the breakup of the band or anything — but it was a serious question mark after the word tour. So we decided to take seven months off, which was by far the longest break we'd ever had. And the seven months really gave us a chance to separate ourselves from Rush, from the whole scene, and we pursued other interests — most importantly, we touched base with our families. We'd only had three months before, which wasn't enough 'cause it takes you a month just to unwind, and then it takes you a month to wind up again, so that middle month is just not enough. It's not really a break. And after 15 years of doing this, we needed it.

When we went in to do Presto, everybody was fired up. There was a whole new enthusiasm. Then, while we were at dinner one night, Neil said, 'Well, I guess we have to talk about doing a tour,' and we all thought, 'Oh, No!' We all enjoy playing live, but it's the touring that becomes boring and tedious, so we almost cancel it with every year. But that tour went well for us — it was by far the best tour we'd ever done. We had a really good time — the pacing was great, and the personnel were great — everything was fun again. We did a little sooner than on some other tours, which left us wanting to do more. We could have done another month or so, but we felt the wanting and carrying that into our next record was more important than squeezing in more dates.

When we went in to write Roll The Bones, everybody was fired up again, and we had that additional step along in our enthusiasm. We really regard this record as a rebirth for Rush. Now, we don't look at just the next record — we're looking at three, or five, or six records into the future. I think, we're going to be around a long time.

I'm told this record came about quickly. "Now that we've had a chance to record a lot of records, it's become an art for us really. We're learning to do it better in terms of songwriting, production, pre-production, preparation...everything. We took two months less on this record than we did on the last few records — definitely since Grace Under Pressure. I mean, we're happy if we finish a couple of days early, or if we're on time that's a relief. But to finish two months ahead is just unheard of for us. I take pride in our pre-production for how efficient it's become, so our recording has become a very positive thing.

"With this record, we went straight into recording after writing and rehearsing it, instead of taking the time off. It wasn't supposed to come out until January, but since we finished early we moved everything up a couple of months. Now that we feel rejuvenated and better about everything, we're looking forward to this tour, which will probably go on until July, and then we'll take the summer off and start writing again in September or October of 92, with our next record out in the spring of '93. That's not bad for us.

Overall, is Rush still the most important thing?

"Hey, I mean, there are other things to life than playing in a rock band. Not that it's not any less important than it was, it's just that you have to find a balance in your life between what you do for a living, and some of the other things that maybe you never had the opportunity to do and would like to catch up on."

"Being home, in your environment, is important. Sure, you'd like to have more time off to go on vacation and do stuff. When you're on the road, you're so separated from the really important things in your life, like family and friends, and, to some degree, you're in a prison — sitting in a hotel, then sitting in a dressing room, then sitting on a bus — working for two hours where you have to pack in everything, then repeating the same ritual over and over again. I mean, you're whole life is just that for months on months, and the price you pay for that, over a long period of time, is quite great. Although it sounds very luxurious to have three months off, I really do believe it's warranted."

"I think age has tempered us. I think there's a trade-off — you're a little wiser, but a little less spirited. You look at things in a broader context. I spend a little more time pursuing other things like. In terms of the band, I think I may have tempered our music a little too. It doesn't seem to have affected your popularity. Actually, you seem to be getting larger with this record, and appealing to more types of fans."

"Just the fact that we've been around for so long will mean that our audience is quite broad, from older guys to kids of 15. There's quite a big spread. It's because our audience tends to be quite interested in what the band is doing — they look at us as a long term thing, and keep up on the growth and development of the band. I think, for a lot of our audience today, they may agree with some things, and disagree with some things, but they buy each record 'cause they want to see what Rush is doing. It's a real sense of evolution to see how we develop and change. I did an interview with a guy, and, at the end of it, he asked for an autographed picture, saying, 'It's for my Dad — he's a really big fan of yours! (laughs). I think, we wrote something like, 'Grow up...leave us alone.' (laughs). This Interviewer was in his mid-20s, so it's just as an indication to the wide spectrum of our audience. We have fans who have been with us all the way.

"On the other hand, there were fans that after 2112, or Hemispheres, decided or perceived that we were moving into a much more commercial or poppy vein — something less hard — and they kinda dropped the band at that point. Well...that's the way it goes. All in all, I think it's important to us, our progress and change, and that progression is important to us. We're not going to keep one segment of our audience happy by just playing what they want to hear — that's not what we're all about. If we make a record that we love, and everyone hates, we're going to stand by that record. It doesn't matter to us. It may be the end of the band as far as making a living goes (laughs), but we'll feel we've done the right thing, and that's who we've always done. I feel that's part of the appeal of Rush."

Roll The Bones entered Billboard at #3, your highest ever... What do you attribute this to?

"It comes in strongly because our audience is waiting for our new record to be released, and then they all go out and buy it. After about a month or six weeks, we've sold the majority of our records. Then, it's important for us to get out on the road and support it live. It's great to know our base is so strong.

Radio seems to be a major player in your rising popularity (their latest single, "Ghost Of A Chance", hit #1 on US rock radio). Why, in your opinion, is this the case?

"Either our songs are more radio playable, or else we've entered that stage where we're considered a living legend kind of band. We haven't made any changes in the band, and we're not on the radio, but we're not a high profile act — there's no image to the band per se — so maybe, grudgingly (laughs), a lot of these radio stations are feeling sorry for us, like 'They've slapped it out all these years, so we'll give them a break' (laughs).

Your band is one of the first rock acts to utilize technology. How, from your point of view, has it affected Rush?

"I think that we've always been on the leading edge of technology. Anything new that comes out we've always first to try to get into it, or utilize it in the band. For us, it goes back a long time ago when we thought about adding a fourth member to the band to give us texture. But we decided we had a couple of feet that were just too heavy, so we opted for that. Now, of course, with the advent of samplers, it's expanded our ability to reproduce our records live much more accurately. Since we've taken some steps in the past to develop our sound utilizing keyboards, I think it's important for us to be able to bring it to the fans live. It's a disappointment to me to see a band live and not see them do their songs as close as possible to their record.

Do you feel you, as the guitarist, got lost in the technology, especially the heavy introduction of keyboards?

"Yeah. Signals was a disappointing record from the aspect of my role in the band. We tried to bring in the keyboards to a more predominant position, and I feel the guitar on that record suffered in some ways. With Power Windows that was difficult, too. I worked out guitar parts, but, unfortunately, when we got down to recording it the keyboards were all done first, and they took up much of the..."
"That's part of being spoiled by recording a lot. In the studio, you get to play with everything, and it's right there. So I got a chance to try to capture the way I sound in the studio through the use of effects. I've developed my sound so that it sounds a little bit like the studio sound, and I've just got a chance to work with music, and I've got a chance to really develop my sound and make it as close to what I want it to sound like as possible."

"Because you're respected musicians, you seem to attract mostly guys to your shows."

"Our audience is mostly male, and 99 percent of the girls in the audience were forced into going there because their boyfriends dragged them along. We used to have a large female audience, and this was something very strange to us. Maybe it was the amount of airplay we got. Maybe we're just getting the same with this record. We're not an appealing band to look at—we're all older guys. We're not cute. But because the emphasis has always been on the music for us, we would guess that most of the female audience that comes to see us is mostly because of the music."

"How fanatic are your fans?"

"Very! We often read mail from people who are very keen and into the music and likes, and then there's a whole other faction that think that we wrote every song for them, and then there's another faction that think we wrote a song for the millionth buddy, get a life! It's only a song and music. It's very strange. There's a surprising number of crazy people."

"Maybe they analyze your lyrics so much because you, Geddy, and Neil came off as very mysterious to many people 'cause little is known about your private life?"

"We try to be very private—we cherish it. When we're on the road and someone is in the hotel lobby and they want an autograph, or to talk to you, I'll take the time. But, at home, it's a different world. We're very protective about our privacy, unless you want to live that rock 'n' roll lifestyle. We don't hang out at clubs—we're not into posing (laughs) — we were never like that. In our earlier days, we were much wilder than now, but you can bounce back from that. It's a different world for us now."

"Our aim has always been to be unique, to play in this band, as a three-piece, my role has always been to fill in a lot of space, so I try to structure my chords into chords which are quite broad and suspended, so that they take up a little more room, so that's how my style developed."

"There are a lot of other guitarists who are copied all the time 'cause they're the big thing, but I think the guitarists of the '80s and '90s have swung into that technological way of playing, like Eddie Van Halen began. In most ways that's good. There's always the argument that there's nothing new in it, but I don't know about this."

"Do you feel you have a large musician following?"

"Sure. A lot of our audience are musicians. It's rewarding to know that you've influenced people to the point where they like to play like you, wanting to be like you. In terms of titles, it's rewarding. But I don't give it much thought — it's kind of embarrassing."

"Do you miss ripping off like you used to?"

"I figure I rip now on albums like I want to rip on them. There's a lot of guitar work on this album — a lot of it was taken off of our 8-track from the writing stage and just flown in. Two of the solos, from 'Ghost Of A Chance' and 'Bravado,' are among my top time favorite solos I've ever done on all our records and they were just done on one take on the 8-track. There's a spontaneity and feel to them, even if I could play them 10 times over, it wouldn't have mattered. Stuff like this I feel really good about. I don't feel I have to show off. I can't possibly compete with these guys who are 100 times faster than me. It makes no sense. There's a great joke here — How many guitarists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Six: One to screw in the light bulb, and five others watching, 'I can do that.' It's so true — most guitarists are like that."

"Live your guitar sounds just like in the studio."

"It's a difficult thing, to be honest with you, and, as this is a personal opinion, I don't like them. I don't like doing them, or the idea of them. I find them annoying. I don't like what video has done to music, and what it's done to the whole industry. It's suffocated so many bands that have talent. You have to do them now — record companies rely on them to do most of their advertising. For many, it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to do a video, and if someone at Much or MTV finds it not to their liking, then they can prevent it from being played, which means your money and time is down the drain. I don't like it at all."

"Is it fair to say that Rush 'made the oldfashioned way'?"

"Yeah (laughs). We had the benefit of playing on three or four act shows, getting 20 minutes to show our stuff, and then coming back and getting a better spot for more time, until we moved up to headline status. We also grew from doing clubs to 3,500 seat halls, to 7,000 seat halls, to 15,000 plus arenas. We were able to develop slowly and steadily, which really doesn't exist nowadays. The bills going out have to be monster, or else people would rather sit at home and watch a video. A lot of these bands that open up shows, like Skid Row, are opening acts despite selling millions of records. I mean, we opened up shows in order to sell records — that's how we got our sales. And that kind of fertile ground doesn't exist for young bands, and that has a lot to do with video. You get a band with very little talent or interest in the way of music, but they look good and they get a good video director and budget, and girls with big tits, and they're going to be big stars. Where's the justice in that?"

"Would you ever want to return to your roots and play again in a club?"

"No, not particularly. I know everyone says, 'I'd like to get back to my roots,' but my memories were that the roots were tough (laughs). Now, everything is very organized, and there's more to chew on at a Rush show now, and, I think, it matches the music better. I don't think I want to return to a small show... maybe once, but it's not an overwhelming desire."

"Rock bands from Canada are now getting record deals, some based in the US. How do you feel about the chances for a Canadian rock act today?"

"They may be getting record deals now, but where they go from there is a tough one. Canada's a small country, and it really doesn't get behind its artists, so the US is important. For six years, we played clubs and we released our first record independently, but then we got our first deal. If we would have gotten nowhere if we hadn't gotten recognized in the US. Once we got that the whole perception by our country on the band changed — suddenly we were big international stars. Some good opportunities and luck came our way. We were 'discovered' by our first record being sent down to a US radio station, where we got big phone ins, so the DJ turned it on to a US company, and, within days, we had a US deal and an American tour. And when this door came open, we took advantage of it and worked very hard. It's a very, very tough border to cross, but you have to get support from that market."

"So what can you, as a successful veteran of this business, tell a young act today trying to 'make it'?"

"All you can do is persevere, hone your skills, and go for it and try. And maybe with a lucky break, and with someone who's willing to put a lot of time and effort into your band to get you known, and get a good deal, you may get a chance. It's not easy."

"pic: Ron Boudreau"

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