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COVER STORY

ROBERT PLANT _____ 4
In His Own Words

FEATURES

JEFFERSON STARSHIP _____ 14
Catch It If You Can

RUSH _____ 25
Leaps & Bounds

ALICE COOPER _____ 28
Joker's Wild

PAT TRAVERS _____ 30
Mind Of His Own

MICHAEL STANLEY _____ 31
He's Nearly Famous

BILLY SQUIER _____ 36
A Class Act

LENE LOVICH/RACHEL SWEET _____ 41
A Breath Of Fresh Air

KISS _____ 57
Lady Killers

TRIUMPH _____ 60
Emerging From The Shadows

DEPARTMENTS

THAT'S UNBEARABLE: ROGER DALTRY _____ 8

WE READ YOUR MAIL _____ 10

DAVID LEE ROTH _____ 12
Van Halen Mini-Series Exclusive

ROOTS: JOHN COUGAR _____ 15

HEAVY METAL HAPPENINGS _____ 16
All The Latest News & Gossip

SONG INDEX _____ 18

RECORD REVIEWS _____ 22

CENTERFOLD: PAT BENATAR _____ 32

PICK HIT: STEEL BREEZE _____ 34

SHOOTING STARS _____ 35
Laura Branigan, Saga, Yaz, Vanity 6

INSTRUMENTALLY SPEAKING _____ 38

ROCK 'N' ROLL HIT PARADE _____ 39
Ian Anderson, Iggy Pop, Steve Marriott: Their All-Time Favorite LPs

ROCK POLL _____ 39
Win Free PAT BENATAR and BILLY JOEL Albums

SPORTS CHALLENGE: AXE _____ 40

CAUGHT IN THE ACT: JUDAS PRIEST _____ 62

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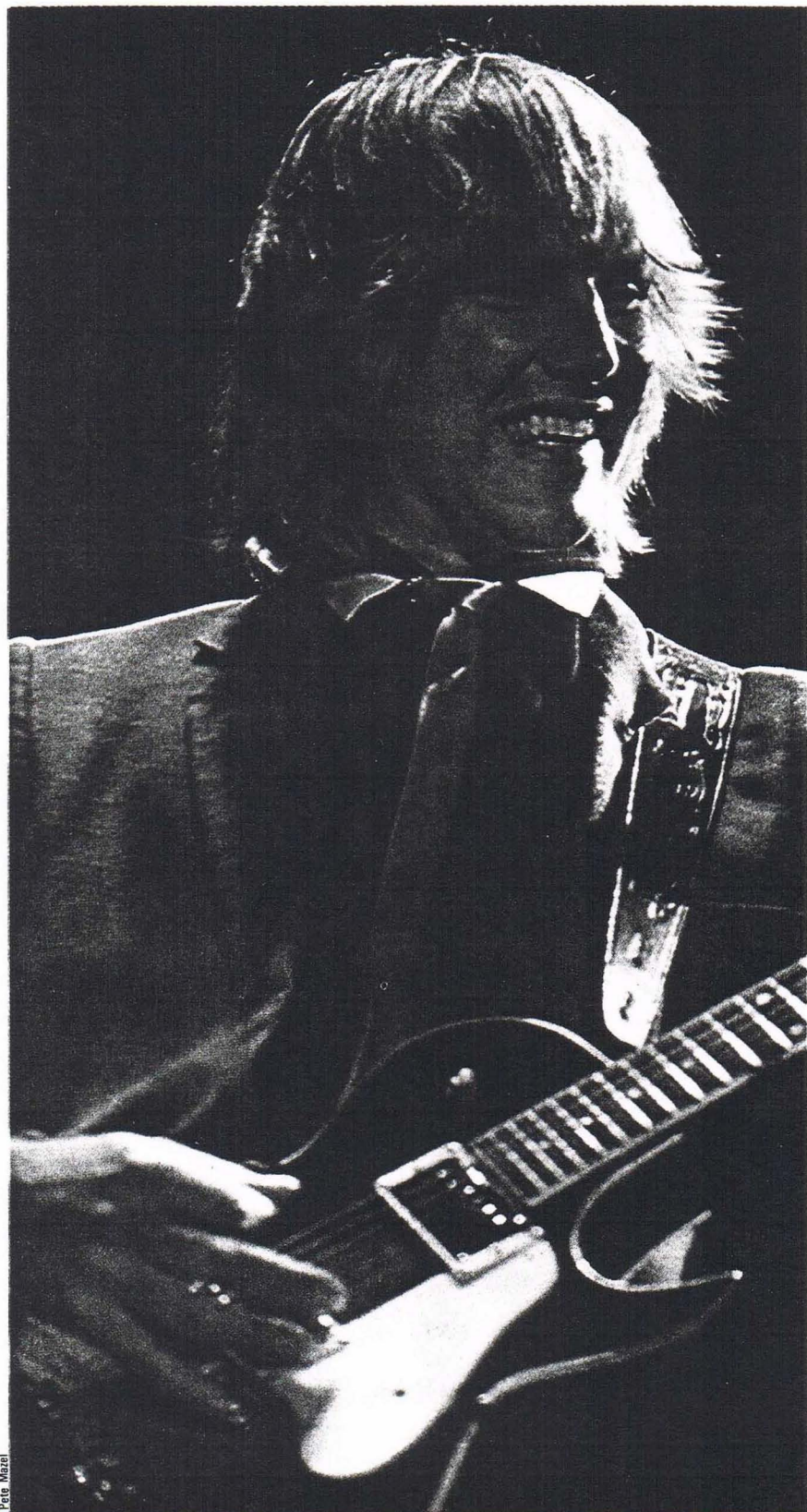
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RUSH



Leaps & Bounds

Canadians Flying High Onto Radio's Airwaves.

by Andy Secher

Rush's Alex Lifeson shifted his weight uneasily as he sat on an overstuffed couch in his Milwaukee hotel room. It was still three hours before the band would leave for that evening's show, and as the blond guitarist nervously fidgeted with the TV remote-control box, he obviously had his mind on other matters. His beloved Montreal Canadians had just suffered a disappointing loss at the hands of the New York Islanders, and despite the fact that Rush's latest album, **Signals**, was shooting up the charts and their tour was breaking attendance records, Lifeson couldn't hide his annoyance.

"We take everything pretty seriously in this band," he explained with a scowl. "When it comes to our sports teams it becomes a matter of life and death. When you're on the road as much as we are, you need some diversions to keep you occupied. We've always been a pretty straight-laced bunch of guys, so sports serve that role for us. I know taking a hockey game that seriously may seem a little boring to some people, but I guess we like to save most of our excitement for our music."

Few bands in rock and roll have been able to produce as exciting a musical catalogue as Rush, Canada's most famous export since Moosehead beer. Since the release of their debut album in 1974, Lifeson, bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee and drummer/lyricist Neil Peart have created a vinyl legacy that has made them rock's premier exponents of cerebral heavy metal.

Alex Lifeson: "We all felt like little kids listening to the stuff he was telling us. It was like we were in a dream."

Neil Peart: "We probably wouldn't know a hit single if it came up and bit us on the leg."



Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee (right): "As we've added more elements to our sound and gotten a bit further away from pure hard rock, I've found a greater vocal range is needed to support the material."

While they have often been dumped on by those who've viewed their intricate melodies and imaginative lyrics as little more than sophomoric sludge, albums like **2112**, **Permanent Waves** and last year's **Exit... Stage Left**, prove that Rush's studio craftsmanship remains unmatched in the hard-rock field. Currently, with the platinum-selling success of **Signals**, the band finds its popularity reaching an all-time high.

"There's a whole new feeling and attitude in our music these days," Lifeson said with a smile as he began to overcome his post-hockey blues. "We've been able to expand our music while keeping the same basic rock energy. Let me tell you, that wasn't an easy thing to do. As we've become more successful over the last few years, we've wanted to avoid falling in the rut of just rehashing the music that got us to the top. We're always striving to create something new and different. That's true on this album as well.

"Each of our last few records have been part of a continuing evolution for Rush," he continued. "We've brought more technology and a broader scope into the music, while sticking with a sound we know our fans can relate to. On **Signals**, for instance, we've really used a lot more keyboards. They've expanded our sound, and it's had the additional benefit of allowing me to play more rhythm guitar.

"On past albums I always had to be out front because the guitar was our only true lead instrument. Now with Geddy playing keyboards, I can step back and add a lot of flavor to each song. What's happened is that now we have the best of both worlds. We can get away with a fairly straight-forward song if we want to; yet, if we decide to expand upon it a little, we know our audience will accept that, too."

One of the most surprising aspects of **Signals'** success has been the record's ability to garner radio airplay on both the AM and FM dials. To put it bluntly, in the past Rush's album product has often been afforded the same lofty status as bat guano by radio bigwigs. But with such easily programmable tracks as *Countdown* and *New World Man* dotting the album, much to the band's amazement, Rush is now reaching an entirely new audience — the Top-40 "singles" set.

"We've never exactly been a singles band," drummer Neil Peart explained. "We probably wouldn't know a hit single if it came up and bit us on the leg. We've always taken the point of view that if a song needs 10 minutes to fully express itself, then we'd better give it the full 10 minutes. That's not exactly the way to endear yourself to Top-40 stations."

"That's why the success of *New World Man* has been so shocking to us," Lifeson added. "In fact, that song was the very last thing we recorded for the album. We were determined to get as much music as we could on each side of the record, and after we had finished working on everything, we discovered that the record ran about four minutes short. So we sat down in the studio and began playing around with ideas to fill up the four extra minutes. We figured if worse comes to worse we could always save ideas for the next album. Geddy said, 'Hey, how do you like this?' And he laid down the bass lick that's the foundation of the song. We had no idea it would be a hit," Lifeson added with a smile. "But we're sure not gonna complain."

New World Man isn't the only song on **Signals** that has an unusual story behind its origins. In fact, *Countdown*, which has become one of the highlights of the group's new stage show, tells the tale of Rush's members witnessing the launch of the space shuttle at Cape Canaveral. As Alex recalled, "It was an experience that none of us will ever forget.

"We had been invited down to the Cape to witness the launch through some people who work at our record label," he continued.

"When we got there we met a man named Jerry Griffin, who works for NASA, and he was incredibly informative and entertaining. He spent hours taking us on a VIP tour of the facility and telling us stories about some of the launches they've had over the years. We all felt like little kids listening to the stuff he was telling us. It was like we were in a dream.

"As it happened, we almost didn't get to see the launch," he added. "We had flown into Florida right after a show in Nashville, with another gig in Dallas the next day. The day of the launch there was a computer malfunction which postponed the launch for a day. Well, we had waited until the last possible minute to leave the Cape and make our plane to Dallas. We were so late, in fact, that our limo driver had to actually drive the car onto the runway in order to get us there in time. We made it to Dallas all right, but we hired a private plane to take us back to the Cape

the next day — we weren't gonna take any chances. Luckily, everything else went fairly smooth, and we saw the launch the next day. It was absolutely one of the most incredible moments of my life."

As it turns out, Rush's NASA connection has paid additional dividends for the band. Not only did their trip to the Cape provide a lifetime's worth of memories, it also allowed them to procure a number of rare films of the shuttle launch. These have quickly found their way into the band's stage show. Now, as Rush performs *Countdown* on stage, a special film of the shuttle shot appears on a huge video screen behind them.

"NASA was incredibly cooperative with us," Lifeson said. "They were willing to give us these special films, which the public never has access to. NASA has cameras located on the launch towers, on the engines — practically everywhere. Most people are only able to see what's on TV. Normally those other tapes are reserved only for administration officials and scientists. But through the help of Mr. Griffin we were able to procure

"While I love everything that Rush does, there are moments when the so-called 'Rush mystique' limits some of your ideas."

some of those films and incorporate them into a video. It really adds to the presentation."

With the addition of their special videos, the band's current stage show has become the most impressive in Rush's history. The group is employing four huge semi-trucks to transport their gear from town to town, and these vehicles are loaded with enough electronic paraphernalia to make the band's friends at NASA green with envy.

"Actually, we've tried to scale down a bit for this tour," Lifeson said. "Things are pretty tough out there financially, and we wanted to cut our expenses as much as possible. That's not to say we've skimped on the show," he added quickly. "It just means that we haven't been quite as extravagant as in the past. If anything, we've put more emphasis on the show itself. There's no way that Rush can do anything halfway. When we're involved in a project, we put all our mental and financial resources behind it."

Ironically, for the first time in the band's history, Rush's stage show and recent album have been receiving almost universally

positive reviews. Never exactly a press favorite, Rush's willingness to experiment in the studio and on stage has finally won the grudging admiration of critics from Tokyo to Topeka. One of the qualities most often cited for the group's growing artistic acceptance has been the maturation of Geddy Lee's vocals. Once called "the human chipmunk" for his high-pitched squeals, since **Permanent Waves** his voice assumed a more solid timbre. While Lifeson believes this change is due to "Geddy maturing as a person," Lee was quick to differ.

"It was something conscious on my part," the beak-nosed bassist explained. "The material we were performing at the beginning of our career was rather frantic, and the style I used as a vocalist then seemed to fit best. As we've added more elements to our sound and gotten a bit further away from pure hard rock, I've found a greater vocal range is needed to support the material. I'm very pleased with my singing on the new album. I think it fits the material quite well."

As Rush continues to evolve as a band, Lee, Lifeson, and Peart have sought additional outlets for their creative energy. Neil, whose eclectic lyrics have always been one of the band's most distinctive elements, has begun to turn his attention toward literary pursuits, while both Alex and Geddy are considering solo album projects.

"I'd love to do a solo record," Lifeson said. "In fact, if we had been given a little more time off this year I might have considered doing one last spring. This has nothing at all to do with Rush," he added as he realized the possible implications of his statement. "We're all very happy with the band, and any outside projects will always play a very secondary role to the group. But I have a ton of material saved up, and I'd really like to try my hand at a solo project sometime in the future.

"The idea of a solo album may be more appealing than actually doing one," he continued. "The thought of having almost total freedom is wonderful. While I love everything Rush does, there are moments when the so-called 'Rush mystique' limits some of your ideas. I've discussed the idea of solo projects with Geddy many times, and while I would want to do a very guitar-oriented album, he wants to experiment with synthesizers and electronics on his album. Any of these projects could be very interesting, even if we don't get to them for awhile," he added, as he stood up to turn off the television and get ready to leave for that evening's show. "But solo work is something for the future — Rush is what's happening now." □