

Because I live in Toronto (and I want to love loud rock 'n' roll), I was asked to write a feature on Rush for this Special Edition (of course, the fact that I also happen to be a Contributing Editor to CREEM might also have something to do with it).

It seemed an easy enough assignment; after all, I'd been following Rush's career ever since I saw them opening for the New York Dolls on October 27, 1973 at the late, lamented Victory Burlesque Theatre on Spadina Avenue. Since then I'd watched them proceed from the then unheard-of feat of performing three nights in a row at Massey Hall to playing three nights in a row at Maple Leaf Gardens—and being able to afford to give away one night's proceeds to charity.

So I dug out my Rush collection to see if I could say anything new about their records that hadn't been said before when I suddenly realized that I was looking at a whole aspect of Rush that had been virtually ignored by writers over the past decade: their album covers.

And because Rush's album covers are every bit an integral part of the band's its music, I decided to take advantage of my geographical location by calling up Hugh Syme.

Rush fans will instantly recognize his name. In addition to playing piano and synthesizers on three of the band's albums, Hugh has been the man responsible for all of Rush's album covers since 1975.

And although he was under the gun of a weekend-long deadline, Hugh agreed to take time out from his busy schedule to discuss his work with the band.

How did you get involved with Rush in the first place?

I was working with the Ian Thomas Band at the time and, having always been intrigued by album cover graphics as a vehicle for selling albums—and because of my background in art having been, you know, forever—I basically requested to do one of Ian's albums. I've always been into painting and drawing and Anthem Records [Rush's Canadian label]—basically, it can be said that Anthem is Rush—saw my album graphics and wanted me to do something for them.

What was the first album you did for Rush?

The first one I did was *Careless of Steel*. The illustrations are yours, right?

Yes, they are.

Were they done specifically for the album?

Yes, they were. They were pencil drawings, even though they don't look like it on the album. They printed them in a sort of pseudo-sepia tone. I had vignettted with an airbrush the blue area around the illustrations, which was later reinterpreted by the film strippers who were making the jackets in Chicago at the time. They took it upon themselves to cut a hard-edged mask around it. The lettering was cast, and chrome plated.

On the inside cover of 2112 is the first appearance of what has become a logo of sorts for the band.

Initially, that logo didn't begin as an identity factor for the band, it just got adopted. We didn't consider it a mascot or

the sky are from Toronto, and the foreground was a derelict warehouse in Buffalo.

I would've loved a cathedral in the same condition, or something more worthy of the pathos you were intended to feel for an old building being in that state.

We also began a series of puns with that album, in that the King is a puppet King. There have been a lot of criticisms of the Throne over the past couple of decades as being a heritage that we really can't disregard, but certainly don't take as seriously as we used to.

The next album to be released was the Archives anthology.

Well that's basically a sore point with the marketing aspect of the management. They had the name of the package in mind as Archives, and I had every intention of making it look as much a part of the archives as possible—as opposed to being a rock 'n' roll cover. It's almost a library piece. It's changed a little bit: it was sort of repackaged again two years ago. For all the cover being very sedate—albeit a little boring and uneventful—it involved a

special cover treatment which was actually more expensive than most covers.

How do you feel about Hemispheres?

Not as well as I feel about most of them. The band told me, "Go ahead, we'll see it when we get back," because they were in Wales for the whole album and all my conversations with them were over the telephone. They didn't see it until it got out. Technically, it's an abomination.

Once again, it's an effort in the progressive area of punning. They talk about Apollo and Dionysius in the lyrics, so I figured that Apollo would be the severe Magritte business man, and that Dionysius would, again, be the reinstatement of a figure.

Permanent Waves is one of the all-time classic rock 'n' roll covers. How did it come about?

Permanent Waves is the result of a conversation which I had with Neil out at his home in the country. We spoke all evening about Rush growing up, and how we were going to do these EKG readings of each member as they were recording. We were going to tape their temples and chests and have real heartbeats of them while they were playing. So *Permanent Waves* was going to be a technical statement, and we were going to treat that with red and gold foil, and do a nice study in design—as opposed to a photographic thing.

I walked out and, in the doorway, said "Wait! Let's try something with Donna Reed, with her permanent Toni hairdo, and have her walking out of a tidal wave situation.

Neil gave me this blank look and said, "Get out of here."

The following day, he asked me to consider doing just that because he'd discussed it with the band, and they'd all thought it was more likely for a cover than the serious approach.

Were there many problems to overcome?

We shot the newspaper with the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman," which now looks like "(Arabic)—Daily—(Arabic)," because we got a threat from the legal people at the *Chicago Tribune*, who are still embarrassed about their over-anxious printing of that headline.

I noticed that the "Y" in "Dewey" has been changed to an "I" in the headline.

That's because anything that pertains to that headline, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, is an embarrassment, and is subject to litigation if we were to print up any facet of it.

To boot, Coca-Cola asked that we strip out their billboard way off in the background because it was too close to a cotton-clad mons pubis.

Who's the smiling gent leaning next to the crosswalk sign?

None of your business!

OK, let's move on to Moving Pictures, which is—

A pun, a pure pun

It became pertinent to me later that the Queen's Park building in Toronto where it was shot had all the right elements: three arches, three pillars per arch; there are three members of Rush, all of that.

Who decided on what paintings would be carried?

That's was the band's decision. I asked that the witch be in there, only because of

Yes, well, that was during the hiatus of outrageous packaging. As I said, AGI in Chicago did all of Rush's printing then, up until about four years ago. Albums like



Technically, the Hemispheres cover is an abomination.

--Hugh
Symes



Ooh La La by the Faces, and Physical Graffiti—all of that was going on then, so we thought we'd go for a six panel jacket. By comparison, A Farewell To Kings is fairly complex.

Yeah, the sky and the foreground are not in the same place. The buildings and

overall icon of representation for the band at the time.

What I did do with that particular cover was read their lyrics, and understand that there is a good force and a bad force: the good force was music, creativity, and freedom of expression—and the bad force was anything that was contrary to that.

The man is the hero of the story. That he is nude is just a classic tradition...the pureness of his person and creativity without the trappings of other elements such as clothing. The red star is the evil red star of the Federation, which was one of Neil's symbols. We basically based that cover around the red star and that hero.

Now, that hero and that kind of attitude about freedom of expression and the band having that kind of feeling...at the time, it never really occurred to me, to be honest with you, that they would adopt it quite so seriously as a logo. Because it's appeared just about everywhere, thereafter.

All The World's A Stage is a pretty straightforward cover, except that the original pressings of the album came with a triple gatefold jacket.

the song "Witch Hunt," which I played on. The one painting had to be of Joan of Arc as far as I was concerned—which ended up being a bit of a nightmare because I couldn't find any archival pictures or paintings which were suitable. So I ended up getting some burlap, and a pine post, two sticks and a bottle of Scotch.

Deborah Samuel, the photographer who I used on that session, got wrapped up in burlap so she could make her cameo

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**There
is a
good force and
a bad force: the good
force was
music...**
--Hugh
Syme

”

appearance. We just lit lighter fluid in pie plates in the foreground. It was basically a half hour session because we had no other alternative but to do it ourselves.

Exit...Stage Left is *probably your most ambitious cover to date, what with it reprising all your previous covers.*

It was shot in a condemned theatre here in Toronto, which shall remain nameless. We decided to go with the girl pulling the curtain back on the front instead of the back. It was originally intended to be the

other way around, so when I flipped the photograph over, I had to write "RUSH" on the equipment box in the foreground, and I had to strip out the information on the Stage Door and write in the word "EXIT," because the album was called "Exit...Stage Left."

Is the stage shot actually from a Rush concert?

Buffalo shot, yeah. We went out to get that, too. We really wanted the band. Believe it or not, we went to about 15 shows, trying to get the band saying "Thank you, good night," all at the same time, and walking towards the camera. *Couldn't get it, though.*

Couldn't get it.

Well, I guess that just leaves the dog and the fire hydrant.

Well, I was given the word "Signals." It was such a broad concept that it was baffling for all of us. We really had trouble with that one, and I decided that, with such a phenomenally important word with the kind of potency it potentially had, to go with something really *dumb*, really inane. But something which would still tie in with songs such as "Chemistry," and the subdivision aspect of the fire hydrants, lawns, and neighborhood dogs.

I can't see Neil going for it, somehow.

That one almost got vetoed. Two of the three band members liked it at first, but I was taking a chance with it because it was so inane. But it seems to be interpreted as an integral part of the package.

The back cover's a little subtle, perhaps over-indulgent. Again, it's been fodder for some of those quizzes you hear on the radio.

It hasn't been totally ignored...