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A Real

I don't know why it is that so many people think that it must be a great thing to work for a rock band. Mind you, I don't know why so many people think that it must be great to be in a rock band! But there you go: Like the appliance salesman who inspired the "Money For Nothing" song, people like to think that lots of other people have it easy and only they have to work for it! As one who has held quite a variety of "straight" jobs—from weeding potato fields to selling tractor parts—let me enlighten any who feel that there are plenty of jobs more difficult than being a serious musician. (Emphasis on serious.) I mean, how many other jobs would people work at for ten years or so for less than nothing—just to be doing it—and even then feel lucky to be able to make a living at it? Not doctors or lawyers—maybe Indian chiefs.

If one believes the people who claim to know about such things, a musician ranks about third as the most stressful of jobs. I believe it could be true. If one is serious, the pressure of creativity and the drive for technical excellence—to be delivered on demand—is very great. That being the case, working for a musician must rank close behind.

I would like to try to shed some light on what goes on behind the bright lights that shine on a successful musician and on the nature of the job of Larry Allen, in particular. Larry looks after my own equipment, with all that is involved in that simple job description.

Larry has been with me now for about eight years. He began as a friend without any experience as a drum tech, but with a willingness to learn and a personality sufficiently opposite to mine to permit us to work as closely together as such a relationship demands. Here, then, is a picture of the way that job and relationship function today, as viewed on Rush's recent *Power Windows* tour.

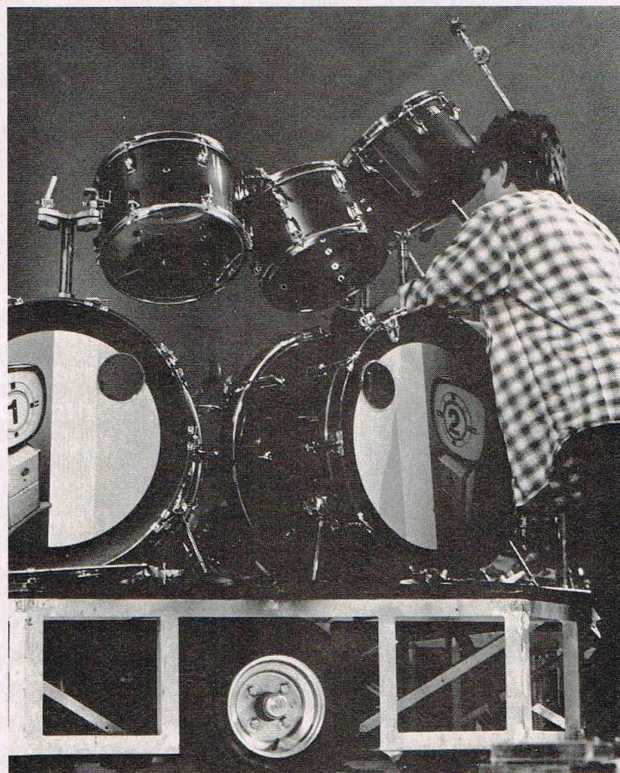


As it did for all of us in the Rush organization, the tour began for Larry literally months before the first concert. While we in the band were still in the studio putting the finishing touches to the album, Larry was already busy arranging to have the drumkit refinished, checking on new equipment in which Yours Truly had expressed an interest, and checking over our inventory of spare heads, sticks, cymbals, and parts. Though we dealt directly with Tama, Zildjian, and Pro-Mark, many of our special needs were still filled by the *Percussion Center* (Fort Wayne, Indiana), with whom I've dealt for about ten years now. Even in the days when we were pretty small-time, no matter what I needed, they came up with it—even if they had to invent it themselves!

While in the studio, I had been reading about the new Simmons

EPROM unit, the SDS9 modules, and the new generation of pads, all of which I wanted to try out. I called Larry at his home in San Antonio, and left it to him to get all the information for me.

We had used a lot of special effects and sampled sounds on the album that I wanted to be able to reproduce live, such as the African drums on "Mystic Rhythms" and the "voice drums" on many of the other songs. The EPROM unit looked like the perfect answer to that problem, with the ability to make our own digital chips of any sound we needed. Larry arranged with Doug Hill, the Simmons representative in Toronto, to acquire the necessary hardware and to help us get it all going in conjunction with our existing SDS5 and SDS7 systems.



The next undertaking was rehearsals for the video of "The Big Money." There may not seem much point in rehearsing for a modern rock video, when the performance is just "sync'd" to the record, but of course for a *drummer*, there's no faking it; you're either playing or you're not. For myself—I'm *playing*! So we rented a rehearsal hall for a few days, and Larry set up the kit and my rehearsal sound system and headphones. It was here that he learned that the new paint job hadn't set properly before shipping, and had turned all "orange peel" instead of smooth and shiny. What a drag—the one time of the year when you want it to look its absolute best from close up. Too late to do anything about it now.

I spent the next few days playing along with the song again and again to make sure that I could reproduce all of the fills and patterns exactly in sync, with the proper feel and energy. Apart from preparing me for the video, it was also good general practice.

Job

After that, of course, Larry had to tear down the kit again, and set it up early in the morning at the film studio, polishing up the hardware and each of the cymbals. After a day as long and tedious as only a video shoot can be, he got to pack them up again and send them back to Tama for yet another refinish.

At this point, I took off for a real getaway: a bicycling trip through northeastern China. When I returned, I was all excited about some big temple blocks and small Chinese cymbals I'd seen there. I asked Larry to see if he could find anyone who dealt in obscure eastern instruments. I try to keep things interesting for him!



Two weeks before official band rehearsals began, Larry and I started to iron out our new technology while rehearsing the old and new songs (giving me a chance to build up my calluses). We had Doug Hill over to help us make all the new chips we needed and found that we wouldn't be able to replace my old *SDS5* sounds with the *SDS7* modules. We had to find a way to switch between the two, as well as a way to trigger a number of different effects from the one pad that I could conveniently reach from the front kit. Larry created the new "Sidney" mini-pad, a miniature trigger that we could mount between my front toms. We also began work on a switching box to save Larry all the manual repatching between pads and modules. The *ideas* were coming together; it was just a question of closing the gap between theory and practice!

Every day I would come in and play through each of the songs a few times, playing along with the tapes. Since each of those performances represents me at my strongest and best, remembering and keeping up with them is good practice indeed. When I finished, I would leave Larry with a list of things to sort out for the next day: things to pick up, things to fix, and things to improve upon. He modified some bicycle racing helmets to hold my headphones in place for the two songs in which I used them; this was a big improvement on the baseball caps we had been using previously (perhaps even better than Keith Moon's method of *taping* them to his head [!]), plus I got to feel like Greg Lemond winning the Tour de France when I wore them!

When the third week came and we began rehearsing as a band, the fun really began. Larry had to prepare a list of cues for each song: Simmons settings, pad repatches, *Clap Trap* settings, EPROM settings, and which keyboards and sequencers I needed to

hear in my monitors. (When I am expected to play in sync with these things, they become necessities rather than luxuries and *have* to appear at the right times.) We prepared a list of "emergency" alternatives if any of the Simmons programs failed to appear, and Larry began the elaborate process of choreographing his moves through the two-hour set—when the riser rotated for the back kit, when I needed the headphones or mallets for the glockenspiel or crotales—as well as recording all the above setting changes and monitor cues. For that he made a little set of cue cards for each song, with all of the information and diagrams on them. (His making a mistake can be just as disastrous to the performance as my own not-infrequent mistakes!)



During the last week of rehearsals, we moved out again to film another video, this time for "Mystic Rhythms." Once again, it was an endless day of "hurry up and wait," made challenging for Larry only by being called upon to perform some tricks with the rotating riser, spinning and stopping it on cue—but from behind a curtain where he couldn't even see if it was stopping in the right spot or not. Fun stuff. Then it was up to Larry to tear the kit down again and pack it up late in the night, only to set it all up again early the next morning for the band to start rehearsing.

by Neil Peart

Photo by Paul Natkin



Vic Firth and Anton Fig the perfect pair



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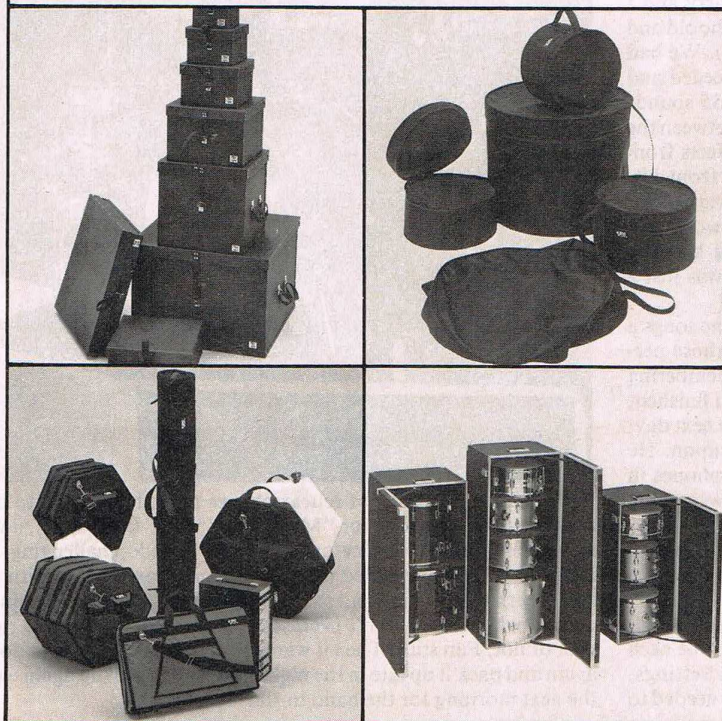
The tour began in Portland, Maine, and we set up there three days before the show for full-scale rehearsals and last-minute refinements. For Larry, the headaches were large and numerous. The splitter box between the Simmons brains was not working properly, the SDS5 sounds weren't coming up properly, the *Clap Trap* was picking up radio frequencies and producing frightening noises, the drum boards on which he sets up the kit had somehow warped like crazy, one of the cases containing our Simmons pads had been left behind and he had to scramble to find some other ones (at 8 o'clock on a Sunday night, of course!), and the monitor feeds from the keyboards were not coming through properly. Oh. Perfect. But it was all in a day's work—or three days' work.

But now—it's showtime! The houselights go down. The crowd shouts a deafening welcome as the "Three Stooges" intro tape starts and the curtain goes up. Pull back the bass drum "door" and light a path down the ramp. Here they come. Get him settled in behind the kit. Then, behind the monitor board, triple-check the levels, get ready to bring up the sequencer for the chorus of "The Spirit Of Radio," and keep a constant eye up there for any problems or that "look" over his shoulder. Take a deep breath and concentrate—no mistakes tonight. Let's start the tour with a perfect one. It's tough when how good a job you do depends on so many other people and things: how the electronics behave, what kind of night he has, how the acoustics are, will the feeds come through from the sequencers and the projector? Did you overlook just one of those thousand-and-one little things he'll give you the "look" for? Take another deep breath.

The first few songs give you a chance to concentrate on the monitors, before things get crazy when we get to the new songs. For "The Big Money," you need the EPROM ready with the "jingling coins" sample, the SDS7 patched to the right module for the "voice drum" sample, the Clap Trap on the right setting, and the monitors ready for the sequencer. And he'll be wanting the towel and a drink about now . . .



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