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"HALLO-O-O-O-O! Is anybody out there?" starts Neil Peart as he talks of the meaning behind the title of RUSH's latest release, *Test For Echo*. "That's what the title is about. Everybody needs an 'echo,' some affirmation to know they're not alone. Sometimes that can be life's most precious discovery, somebody out there who feels the way you do. You ask yourself 'Am I weird?' and you need some affirmation; the echo. While the answer to those questions may still be 'Yes!', it's good to know that you're not the only one, that you're not alone. And we're not either. During the making of this record, my partners Geddy and Alex posted some goofy 'Inspirational Slogans' on the walls of the studio. Like this one: Individually, we are a ass but together we are genius. Like most Inspirational slogans, it's hyperbolic (and goofy), but expresses a humble truth. Another precious discovery to make in life: we do our best work together. And have the most fun too. (That's the genius part.)

**One of the few bands to have achieved success outside their native Canada, RUSH continue to explore and challenge themselves, and their audience, platinum album after platinum album. This feature is compiled of excerpts from drummer Neil Peart's *Official Guide And Users Manual* describing the recording of *Test For Echo*. Peart continues...**

"We had taken a long break from being 'a genius together.' After the *Counterparts* tour ended, in May of '94, we took almost a year and a half away from the band and during that time Geddy and his wife produced a baby girl, Alex produced a solo album (Victor) and I produced a tribute to the big-band music of Buddy Rich. We worked, we travelled, we lived our lives, and it was fine.

All of those activities kept us off the streets and out of trouble until October of '95 when we assembled at Chalet Studio, a country retreat just outside of Toronto. From my little writing room at one end of the house I began sending a steady stream of lyrics (via computer) to the small studio at the other end of the house where Geddy and Alex hunched over guitars and computers.

In past writing sessions the two of them often "Built" the songs as they went, matching verses and choruses and roughing out the arrangement on a demo tape. At this point we would all listen to the song and discuss what was good and what might be improved, both musically and lyrically. So much comes clear in that unforgiving form (guitars, vocals and drum machine) and for me, with my lyricist hat on, the first time I hear the word sung is a revelation. Unsuspected nuances and flaws are thrown into sharp relief. But this time they chose another writing method; as the musical ideas emerged they would go through the lyrics and try to match up a verse or chorus, record that fragment, then move on to something else. They didn't want to get bogged down in the "jigsaw puzzle" of assembling whole songs but rather keep the momentum going with a fresh flow of ideas. Fair enough, of course, whatever works! But this reporter was growing a little anxious when a couple of weeks went by and he still hadn't heard anything.

However, I continued "feeding the machine" with more lyrics and when I needed a left-brain break I could go have a bash on the small practise kit in the hall outside my room. During our hiatus, instead of getting away from drumming, it had actually assumed a new importance in my life. After thirty years of playing I was able to step away from performing and really explore drumming and it became a revelation for me.

So, as the days went by, I was doubly eager to hear something new. The left brain wanted to know if any of the words were working out and when I switched hemispheres and practised drumming the right brain wanted some songs worked on. Finally the day came when Geddy and Alex were ready to play me some completed music and called me into the studio. All a little nervous, we gathered around the Leroxst Sound console and played the tape.

Nothing to worry about, I loved what I heard. Wearing my lyricist hat, it was gratifying to hear those endless fussed over words come alive in song, and wearing my drummer hat, it was inspiring to hear so many musical directions to explore and all the possibilities for rhythmic fun and games. This was going to be good.

Now we began the process of refining the arrangements and developing our individual parts. And now it began to snow, in Biblical proportions, until this record was finished six months later. No coincidence that the Arctic theme pervades our cover art. By early December the songs were nearly all written, arranged and recorded and we were joined by Peter Collins. In previous years, Peter had been

our co-producer on *Power Windows*, *Hold Your Fire* and *Counterparts*, and once again he came through for us suggesting many small but critical improvements to the arrangements and our individual parts. Perhaps Peter's greatest contribution is his instinct for pointing us in directions we would never have imagined.

As the process continued, Peter kept his ears on the "overview" of the songs and performances and let the three of us, and recording engineer Cliff Norrell (Faith No More, R.E.M., Catherine Wheel) worry over the inside stuff, the nuts and bolts of equalization, relative balances and mathematical precision. Cliff's experienced and sensitive ears helped to translate the sounds we imagined into the sounds we hear (no small feat!)

At the beginning of January we started recording at Bearsville Studios in the Catskill Mountains of New York and naturally we arrived there on the very day of the "Blizzard of '96." Back to Toronto, we moved into the cozy little world of Reaction Studio and still the snow kept falling. The flurries continued as we moved into McClear Place, ready for the final mix.

Different people have different reactions to this crucial time. For myself, an impatient sort who likes quick gratification, I call it "The End Of Waiting," while Geddy, still harbouring visions of sudden perfection and miraculous transformation, refers to mixing as "The Death Of Hope." For Alex there are more important concerns: Inventions. Dinner. Louder guitars. Mixing engineer Andy Wallace

(Nirvana, R.A.T.M., Faith No More) came onboard at this point. Andy was able to take all the music we'd lived with for so long and weave it into new and unexpected patterns. When we heard his mix of a song for the first time invariably we'd say something like "Wow, I never thought of it like that before!" Which is exactly why you bring in a mixing engineer.

And that's our little story! We took a long break. We made a record. It snowed a lot.



Oh, and there's more, a whole cinematic "back-story." All the years leading up to where we are today, the eager determination we brought to this project, the dedicated time and effort that went into making it. And of course, there were the songs too. How the lyrics for "Test For Echo" (a collaboration between this reporter and Pye Dubois, like "Tom Sawyer," "Force Ten," and "Between Sun And Moon" before it) give a video view of this wacky world of ours and offer up this tacit response: "Excuse me, does anybody else think this is weird?"

**HALLO-O-O-O-O! Test...for...Echo...Is anybody out there?**

"Virtuality" takes a similarly ironic view of modern life, after all, what the heck is a "virtual song"? And who would dance to it? Same in "Resist," with the adaptation of the Oscar Wilde quote, "I can resist anything except temptation." Well, really, what else is there to resist?

Like the way I resist temptation to talk about the music itself just out of "group modesty." (Although a great baseball philosopher once said, "It ain't braggin' if you actually done it!") I probably shouldn't even mention all the fine guitar solos and vocal performances and how my colleagues shine on songs like "Totem," "Resist," "Time And Motion," "The Color Of Right," hell, all of them.

"Individually, we are a ass..." Yes, that part's true enough, but still, after so many years of apprenticeship, I believe we are finally starting to get somewhere. Together. Whenever we get there, and wherever there is, I sure hope we'll look out from the stage and find an audience waiting. Otherwise, it will be like Gertrude Stein's comment on a certain midwestern city, "We went there, but there was no there there."