

RUSH PRESTO CHANGO

LEGENDARY DRUMMER
EXPLAINS THE SECRETS BEHIND TRIO'S LATEST SUCCESS.

B Y N E I L P E A R T

Writing a story about making a record is like making a record; you never get it quite right, so you keep trying. In the past I've talked about the studios, the people we've worked with, the weather, our methods of work — lots about what we do, but nothing about *why* we do it, and nothing about how the songs themselves develop. So maybe it's time to try a glass-bottom boat on those murky waters.

One of those French guys, Balzac or Flaubert, said that a novel should be like a mirror moving down the road. I like that image, and I like the way it applies to songwriting as well. "Reflecting on life" could certainly be the unifying theme of Rush's odyssey through the years — though of course we never thought of it at the time. We were too busy moving down the road, as most people are. But at least when you're moving fast, you have to look *ahead*; there's only time for a quick glance in the rear-view, just to make sure no flashing red lights are gaining. Otherwise it's no good dwelling on what's behind you. Just your own taillights.

To belabor the metaphor in a general sense: all of us are moving down that road with *different* mirrors, and we don't just *reflect* life, we *respond* to it. We filter things through our own lenses, and respond according to our temperaments and moods. As the Zen farmer says: "That's why they make different-colored neckties".

That's why they make different-sounding music too. To beat another metaphor into submission: in musical terms Rush is not so much a mirror, but a satellite dish moving down the road, soaking up different styles, methods, and designs. When the time comes to work on new songs, you turn on the satellite descrambler, unfilter your lenses, activate the manure detector, check the rear-view mirror, and try desperately to unmix your metaphors.

When the three of us start working on a new record, we have *no* idea what we'll come up with. There is only the desire to do it, and the confidence that we can. The uneasiness of starting from nothing is dissipated by the first

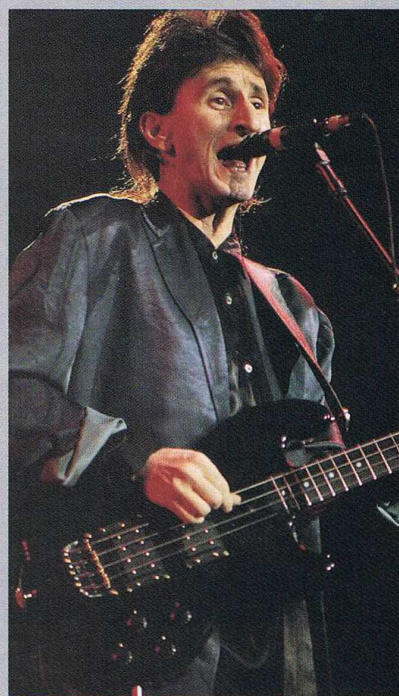
song or two, but still the mystery remains — in the truest sense, *we don't know what we're doing*. We know it seems right; we know that it's what we want to do at that point in time, but we don't know what it adds up to. And often we *won't* know for a long time — until well after the record has been released and everyone else has had their say about it. Then it seems to crystallize in our own minds, and we develop a little objectivity about it — what we're pleased with, and where it could have been better.

And that's where progression comes in — where it could have been better. As a band and as individuals, we always have a hidden agenda, a subtext of motivation which is based on dissatisfaction with past work, and desire to improve. That agenda has changed as we have changed; when we started out, we just wanted to learn how to *play*, and sometimes our songs were just vehicles for technical experiments and the Joy of Indulgence. But still, *playing* is the foundation for us — the Stone — and rock is our favorite kind of stone. Despite our dabbles in other styles, it is the energy, flexibility, and attitude of rock which remain most compelling for us. We exercised our fingers and exorcized our demons by trying every note we could reach, in every time signature we could count on our fingers. But after we'd played with those toys for awhile, the songs themselves began to attract our interest. Rock is not made of Stone alone, and we wanted to learn more about conveying what *we* felt as powerfully as we could. Paper wraps Stone — the song contains the playing, gives it structure and meaning.

More experiments resulted as we pursued that goal, and those experiments had to lead us into the field of arrangement. Once we felt more satisfied with the pieces of the songs, and how we played them as individuals and as a band, it became more important how we assembled the pieces. Scissors cut Paper — the arrangement shapes the song, gives it focus and balance. So our last few albums have reflected that interest, tinkering with melodic and rhythmic structure in pursuit of the best possible *interpretation* of the song.

All of those qualities — arrangement, composition and musicianship — add up to one thing: presentation. Beyond the idea, presenta-

tion. Beyond the idea, presentation is everything, and must take that spark of *possibility*, the idea, from inner-ear potential to a realized work. In an ideal song music conveys the feeling and lyrics the thought. Some overlap is desirable — you want ideas in the music and emotion in the lyrics — but the voice often carries that burden, the job of wedding the thoughts and feelings. Since the goal of those thoughts and feelings is to reach the listener, and hopefully be responded to, success depends on the best possible balance of structure, song, and skill. Scissors, paper, stone. Where once we concentrated on each of them more-or-less exclusively, now we like to think that each element has been stored in the "tool box", and we're trying to learn how to juggle them all at once (though juggling scissors can be damned unpleasant.)



Anthony Cutajar

Geddy Lee: Still one of the most distinctive voices in rock.

At the same time, Rush's hidden agenda has a wide scope. The presentation of our music has to accomplish several demands; it has to be all the above, plus it must be interesting and challenging to play, and remain satisfying in the long term — when we play it night after night on the road. The recording must be captured as well as men and machines possibly can, and thus be satisfying to listen to, as well as fit to stand as the "benchmark" performance, the one we'll try to recreate on each of those stages.

Before making *Presto* we had left those stages behind for a while. At the end of the *Hold Your Fire* tour we put together the live album and video, *A Show Of Glands* — I mean *Hands*. Because we were just about to sign with a different record company, Atlantic, we found ourselves free of deadlines and obligations —



Anthony Cuda

Alex Lifeson: A guitarist with a style all his own.

for the first time in fifteen years — so we decided to make the most of that. We took some time off, got to know ourselves and our families once again, and generally just backed away from the infectious machinery of Rush — I mean Rush.

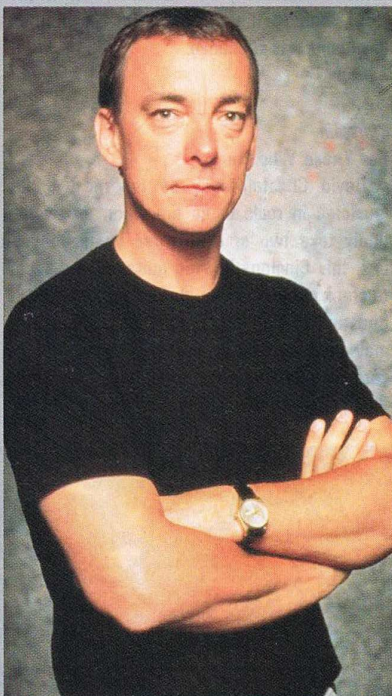
This was a good and important thing, although it was one of the few times in our history when the future was in doubt — none of us really knew what would happen next. After that six-month hiatus, when Geddy and Alex came over to my house to discuss our future, there was no sense of *compulsion* about it — it was simply a question of what *we* wanted to do. And, we decided, what *we* wanted to do was make another record. The reasons remain elusive, but the motivation seems obvious: something to do with another chance to express ourselves, to try to communicate what interests us in words and music, and, simplest of all, a chance to *play*. In both senses. Without any obligations on us, we found we were still excited about making music together, and truly wanted to make something new.

For *Presto*, like all of our records in recent years, we started with a trip to the country. We rented a house with a small studio at one end, a desk at the other, and all the usual stuff in the middle. During the bright winter afternoons, Geddy and Alex worked in the studio, developing musical ideas on a portable recording setup, while I sat at my desk in the other end, staring out at the snow-covered trees and rewriting lyrics. At the end of the day I might wander into the studio, ice cubes clinking, and listen to what they'd been up to, and if I'd been lucky, show them something new. It was the perfect situa-

tion; isolated, yet near enough Toronto that we could commute home for the weekends, and with the studio and house connected, whenever we had ideas to share we could run from end to end with tapes and bits of paper.

Personally, this is my favorite part of everything we do: just the three of us and a couple of guys to keep the equipment working. We have nothing else to worry about but writing new songs, and making them as good as we can. With few distractions, we can concentrate on the work, and also feel the reward: the excitement of creating things, of responding to each other's ideas, and the instant gratification of putting brand-new songs down on tape. At this time we get the *real* feedback from our work; it's new enough to be as exciting for us as we hope it will be for the listener.

And that is where a coproducer comes into



Neil Peart: The lyricist for all of Rush's music.

the picture. Peter Collins, who worked with us on *Power Windows* and *Hold Your Fire*, told us that he felt his own career needed more variety and scope, and reluctantly bowed out of our next album. By this time we had learned how to make a record ourselves if we wanted to, but we still wanted an Objective Ear, someone whose judgment and ideas we could trust. Once we'd sorted out the paper and stone, we wanted someone to help with the scissors.

Of a few different candidates, Rupert Hine was the one we decided on. Rupert is a songwriter, singer and keyboard player in his own right, and has made about fifteen albums himself, in addition to producing seventy-odd records for other people, like Tina Turner, Howard Jones, and The Fixx. All this experience, combined with his ideas and enthusiasm, made

Rupert's input valuable, particularly in the area of keyboard and vocal arrangements. We were a little bemused when we first played the songs for him, and at the end of some of them he actually seemed to be *laughing*! We looked at each other, eyebrows raised as if to say: "He thinks our songs are *funny*?" But evidently it was a laugh of pleasure; he stayed 'til the end.

For the past eight years Rupert and engineer Stephen Tayler have worked together as a production team, and at Rupert's urging we brought Stephen in to work behind the console. As an engineer Stephen was fast, decisive, enthusiastic, and always able to evoke the desired sound, while his unflinching good humor, like Rupert's contributed to making *Presto* the most relaxed sessions we've enjoyed in years. But it was as a volleyball player that Stephen really shone, unanimously voted "rookie of the year" in our midnight games at Le Studio.

A long day's work behind us, we gathered outside, charged by the cool air of early summer in the Laurentians. We doused ourselves with bug repellent, then gathered on the floodlit grass, took our sides, and performed a kind of St. Vitus Dance to shake off the mosquitoes. Occasionally one of us hit the ball in the right direction — but not often. Mostly it was punched madly toward the lake, or missed completely, to trickle away into the dark and scary woods. ("That's okay; I'll get it.") We were as amused by Rupert's efforts at volleyball as he'd been by our songs, but indeed, all of us had our moments — laughter contributed more to the game than skill. And if the double-distilled French refreshments subtracted from our skill, they added to our laughter.

Between games the shout went up: "*Drink!*", and obediently we ran to the line of brandy glasses on the porch. Richard the Raccoon poked his masked face out from beneath the stairs, wanting to know what all the noise was about. "*Richard!*", we shouted, and the poor frightened beastie ran back under the steps, and we ran, laughing, back onto the court. The floodlights silvered the grass, an island of light set apart from the world, like a stage.

On this stage, however, we leave out the drive for excellence; no pressure from within, no expectations from others. Mistakes are not a curse, but cause for laughter, and on this stage, the play's the thing — we can forget that we also have to *work* together.

Work together, play together, frighten small mammals together: Are we having fun yet? Yes, we are. And *that*, now that I think about it, is why we do what we do, and why we keep doing it: We have fun together. How boring it would be if we didn't. Not only that, but we work well together too, balancing each other like a three-sided mirror, each reflecting a different view, but all moving down the road together. As the Zen farmer says: "Life is like the scissors-paper-stone game: None of the answers is *always* right, but each one sometimes is." □