



Good to be Three

Nearly 40 years on, Rush are going strong with just as much enthusiasm as when they started. Andy Bradshaw catches up with Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson

The three members of Rush are like swans gliding across a lake of music. Above, it's all grace and serenity; below, it's all thrashing away like crazy as the band paddles frantically to avoid sinking beneath the waves of their own genius. Okay, maybe the comparison is a little far-fetched... but there's no doubt that when *Guitar & Bass* catches up with Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson, fresh from one leg of their North American tour, they've got their work cut out trying to get to grips with playing the material from their excellent new album *Snakes & Arrows*. It's one thing sitting in a studio with the luxury of countless tracks, but it's another having to reproduce all the embellishments live. Don't they realise this when they're recording new material?

'Oh, yeah, every time!' laughs Alex Lifeson. 'But I think to myself, oh well... I'll deal with it at the time. It's months away!'

'In fact, it doesn't start out like that. This time around, we talked about having everything slimmed down to the bare bones. Most of the guitar parts were originally worked out on acoustic guitar! But then Nick [Raskulnesz, producer] was hearing melodies and we were hearing things too, so it just became richer and richer.'

As far as Geddy Lee is concerned, this is no bad thing. 'My first love is writing melodies and arranging songs,' he explains. 'That's the most enjoyment I have in putting songs together in Rush. I love the freedom I



have to take Neal's lyrics and shape and structure the songs the way I want. Of course, everyone has input. We're a democracy with different strengths. Mine are in melody, arrangement and song-structure, Alex's in those incredible guitar figures and riffs, and Neal's strength is in his lyrical ideas.'

Lee's assertion is reinforced by Lifeson, who is similarly enamoured of the layering process rather than

Business where we all get to stretch out a little, but it's just as enjoyable to me to create sounds which everything else can sit on.'

With the band playing two sets – 'we're a support act to ourselves' as Lee puts it – the workload involved in a Rush set is massive. With the number of swaps in instruments, effects, samples, keyboard sounds and the sheer number of notes to be played, don't Rush ever think about...

well, just getting another couple of musicians in?

'Yeah, I think about it all the time,' admits Lee, 'and normally at about the two-hour

mark of our show! But in the end we think that our fans would rather see us grappling with the music than see some stranger up there with us.'

And that's why audiences still have the opportunity to watch Geddy Lee construct complex bass lines, play ➤

'We think the fans would rather see us struggling with the music than some stranger up there'

out-and-out riffola. 'I think I'm more inclined to go down the orchestral route,' he offers. 'That's what really appeals to me; creating a great guitar part which works within the context of the song. It's great fun playing an instrumental like *The Main Monkey*

Gear

GEDDY LEE

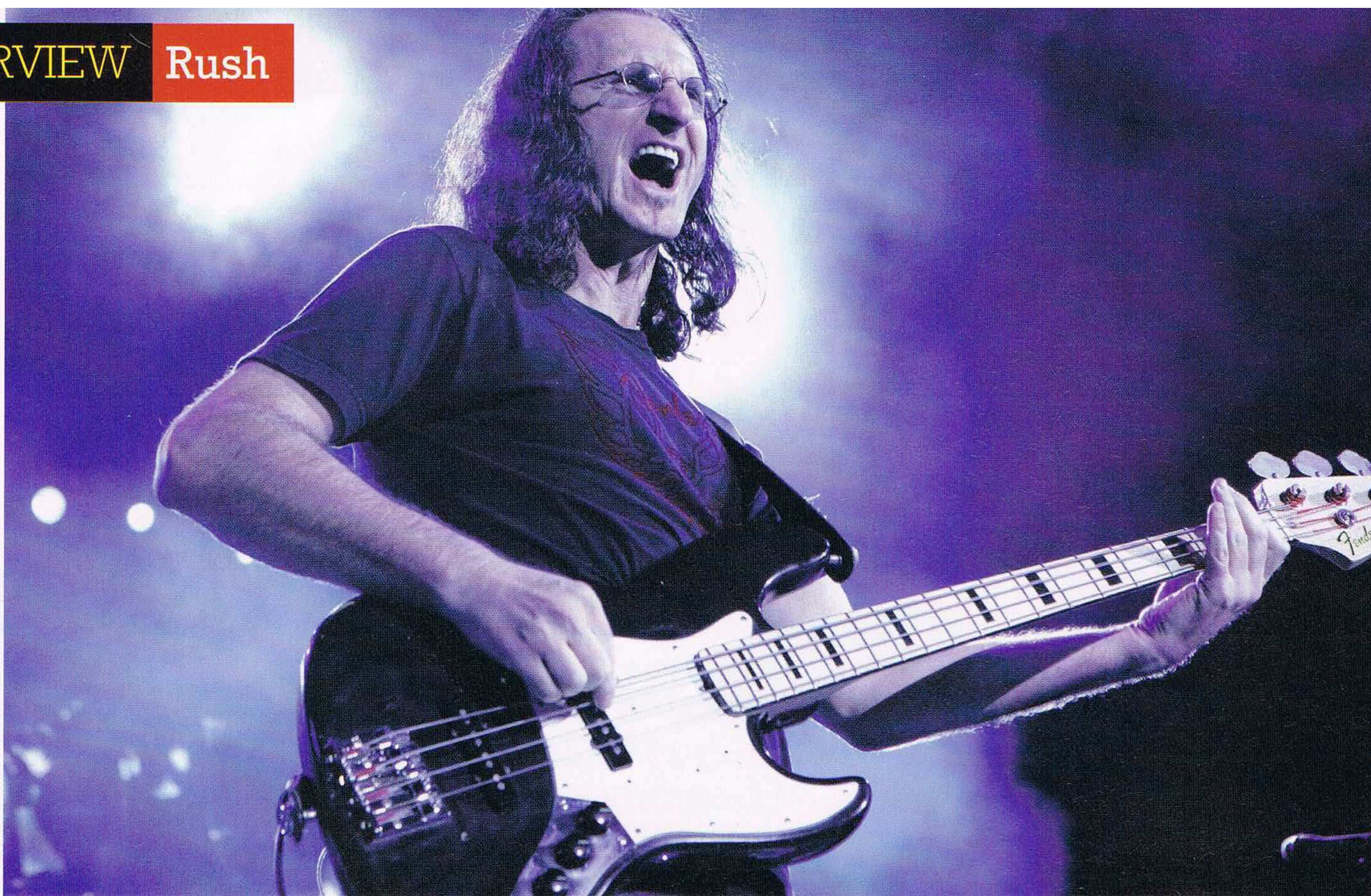
Fender Jazz Bass, circa '72
Two Fender Custom Shop Jazz Bases, circa 1996
Fender Geddy Lee model Jazz Bass
Fender Jaco Pastorius Jazz Bass, fretted
Two Avalon U5 Tube direct boxes
Two Tech 21 SansAmp RPM bass preamps
Two Palmer PDI 05 Speaker Simulators
Trace Elliot Quatra-VR power amps
Samson UR-5D wireless

ALEX LIFESON

Two Hughes & Kettner Switchblade 100 guitar amp heads
Two Hughes & Kettner Alex Lifeson Signature Triamp MK11 guitar heads
Eight Hughes & Kettner 4x12" cabinets
Three M Brace acoustic guitar holders
Ultracase Guitar Vault
Ultracase eight-space guitar stand

GUITAR LIST

Black Gibson Les Paul Custom
Black prototype Gibson Les Paul with Floyd Rose vibrato
Maple sunburst prototype Gibson Les Paul with Floyd Rose vibrato
Goldtop Gibson Les Paul Sunburst '58 reissue
Gibson Les Paul with Fishman piezo system
Tobacco sunburst '59 reissue Gibson Les Paul with Fishman piezo system
Gibson Howard Roberts with Fishman piezo system
Gibson Howard Roberts Fusion w/Fishman Tune-O-Matic Bridge
Vintage Gibson ES-355 Stereo
Three Garrison G25-12-E 12-string acoustics
Garrison OM-20 octave mandolin



'I was quite happy with being told to play bass. It was two less strings, and being a lazy man, that was fantastic for me'

Geddy Lee: All That Jazz

Despite the cornucopia of bass types and string configurations open to him, Geddy Lee prefers four strings in a conventional tuning. 'I tried using a five-string bass for a couple of tours,' he confides. 'Back around the *Hold Your Fire* period, I was using a five-string Wal. But that fifth string gave me a headache. It was too unwieldy. It wasn't the bass, which was fantastic... I just like four strings! I do use a dropped D tuning, like on *Between The Wheels*, for example, but I'll just use a different bass for that song.'

For many years, Geddy Lee's signature look on stage was a Rickenbacker, but that's no longer the case: he prefers a Fender Jazz.

'I stopped using strictly the Rickenbacker around the *Permanent Waves* or *Moving Pictures* album,' he recalls. 'Both of those records are pretty much half Ricky and half Fender. Why the change? Well, it was the shape of the bottom end tone that did it. The Ricky has a great mid and upper range, but getting a great bottom end sound was always tricky, particularly the kind

that I was looking for... and that's what I get rather easily on my Jazz.'

Geddy's number one Fender was a lucky find – he bought it for just \$200 from a pawnshop in Kalamazoo, Michigan. 'It's a '72 Jazz with a blonde neck, which is what I really liked about it,' he explains. 'It came with a crappy little case and it had cigarette burns on it. I bought it out of curiosity more than anything else, and it just sounds... great! The other basses I use on stage come to me via the Custom Shop, and they spec them out as much as they can to my main bass.'

Has Geddy never trawled the internet to find another original '72 Jazz? 'No, I haven't,' he replies, surprised. 'Come to think of it, I have no idea why that hasn't occurred to me before! Thank you. What a great idea!'

On a couple of tracks on the new album, including *Malignant Narcissism*, Geddy plays a fretless. Does he find it easy pitching the notes? 'No, it's really difficult,' he grins, 'but you can get away with it if you play fast enough. It's called "success by volume"!'

keyboards, bass pedals and sing. It's pretty remarkable, really, considering he only became a bass player for an easy life and because of a friend's mother.

'I played guitar in a garage band when I was 13,' he remembers. 'Then one day our bass player's mother decided he wasn't allowed to play in the band any more, so the guys turned round and told me that I was now the bassist. I was quite happy with playing bass – it was two less strings, and being a lazy man that was fantastic for me.'

Unburdened of those pesky extra strings, Lee then set out to make himself as busy as possible by developing a highly melodic, ever-shifting bass style. It was also a good time to learn bass, as many of the top bands coming over to North America and Canada in the first British invasion boasted superb bass players.

'I guess my style was born out of the necessity of filling spaces when you're playing in a three-piece band,' he explains. 'When the guitar is soloing, being busy is what fills up the sound spectrum. The best comparison for me is perhaps John Entwistle or Jack Bruce, both of whom worked with a drummer and a single guitarist.'

Playing bass and singing is notoriously difficult, and yet it seems to come easy to Geddy Lee. 'No,' he says, shaking his head. 'It's never come easy, never. It still doesn't. I was scared to death about singing this new material and playing at the same time. I didn't know how I was going to do it. But you know what? If you practice something long enough and hard enough, you'll figure it out.'

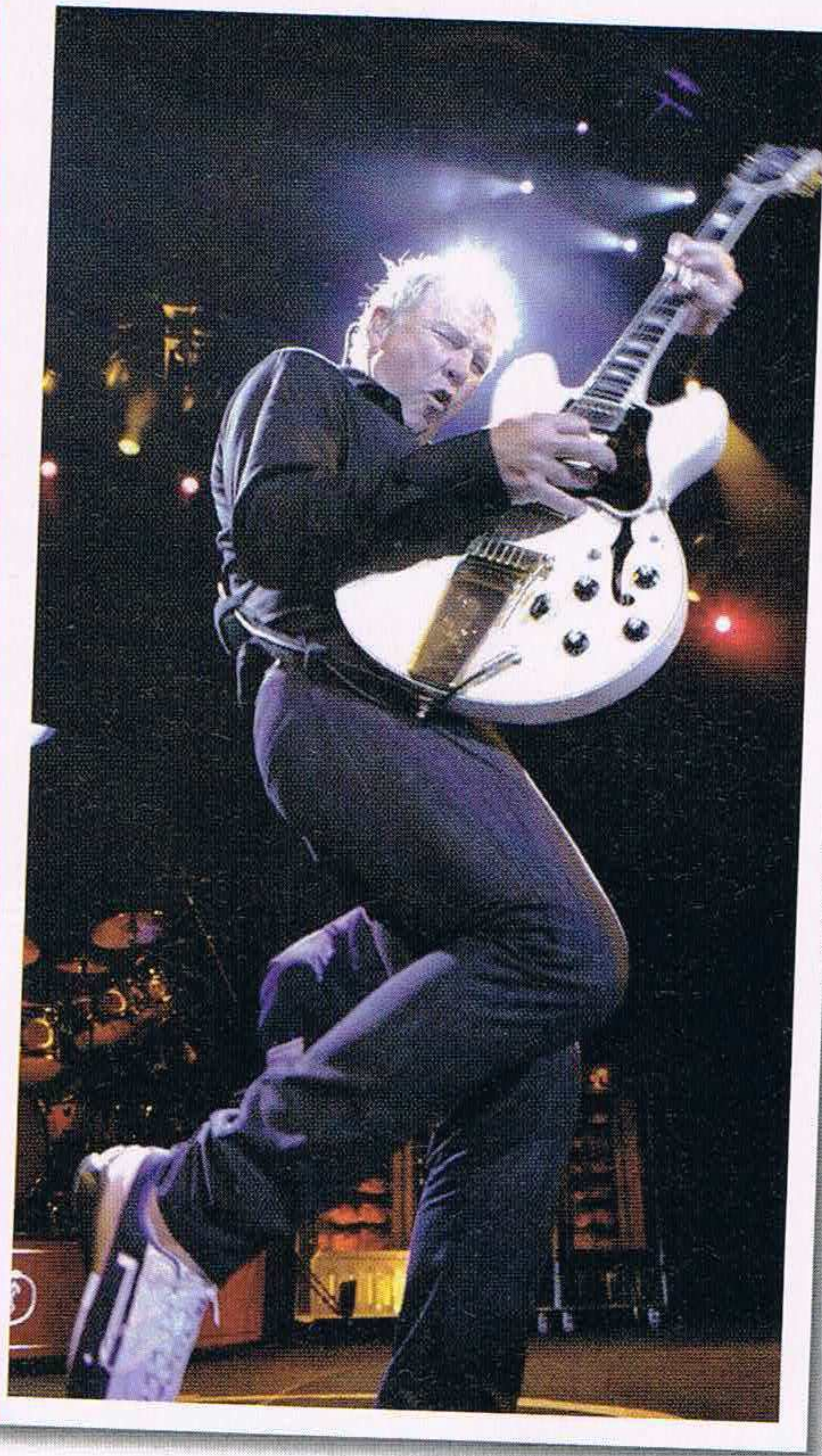
Alex Lifeson: Back To Gibson

Just as Geddy Lee was long associated with his Rickenbacker bass, so Alex Lifeson seemed inseparable from PRS guitars. Today, though, he's more likely to be seen sporting a Gibson Les Paul. What prompted the change?

'Well, I have nothing against PRS guitars, let me say that,' he explains. 'I used them for about 17 years, and I think they make a fantastic instrument. But when we were making this record, I found that the Les Paul is just the proper guitar to have in my hand. Maybe I should say a Gibson, as I've been playing my 355 more and more. In the studio we found that the Gibsons – particularly the Les Pauls – sounded great immediately, whereas the PRS's seemed to have a much narrower, tighter, almost tubular sound that was not as expressive. I think the Les Paul just suits me better.'

'So I made conscious decision to make the switch. I started out with a couple of PRS's at the beginning of the tour, but I've dropped them and just gone to the Les Paul. I also have a very deep and close relationship to my Gibson ES-355. I got it in 1976. I play it a lot, it sounds absolutely great and I love it. My Howard Roberts Fusion is a unique guitar that you don't see very often, and I quite like that because it has a very interesting character to it that makes it very enjoyable to play.'

So much for big electric sounds – but what guitar does Alex pick up when he's at home and just wants to play something? 'I have a few guitars at home in various rooms, most of them are at the studio though,' he says. 'It'll probably be something like a Gibson Dove acoustic, or a lovely old Martin I've had for years.'



Rush's rise in the early '70s came at a time when they – and bands like Yes, Genesis and Pink Floyd – were unashamed to be seen as out-and-out musicians, and Rush was allowed to explore grandiose themes and entire suites of music such as the epic *Cygnus X-1 – Book II on Hemispheres*. If they'd formed just 10 years later, do Lee and Lifeson think they'd have made it?

'Well, 10 years later we may have been okay,' Lifeson ponders, 'but 10 years ago would have been a problem. So much has happened in the last 10 or 15 years – the whole grunge scene, then R&B; then there's been the whole pop thing ending up with the *American Idol* mentality... poison! Bands just don't seem to be signed and developed over the course of several albums the way we were.'

With the considerable passage of time since they recorded works such as *Fly By Night* or *2112* and the brilliant *A Farewell To Kings*, how much connection do they feel to their earlier selves... and the material? Lifeson takes on the question.

'That's a good one,' he ponders. 'It's such a long time ago, 30 years or more. The only time I ever really listen back to the old material is when we're putting together a set list. So many things have happened to me as a person, as a father, as a grandfather, as a friend, as a musician... it's hard for me to connect to that 23-year old now. I used to think that I was a much more immature player back then... but actually, I'm proud of the

work I did. I think there was an energy and a thoughtfulness about the way I put together the guitar parts.'

Perhaps the biggest change to affect Rush both in the studio and on stage in the course of their career has been the evolution of music technology, which the band have always embraced.

'Technology has always been something that interests us,' agrees Geddy. 'It's our friend! It helps us enhance our performance and fill out our sound. It can also be my biggest enemy, of course...' he adds with a wry chuckle.

'We play stuff the quirky way, the way we like to play it. If it's "commercial", then we're always the last to know!'

So why not do 'Rush unplugged'? 'Oh, I don't know,' sighs Lifeson, 'You know what? I kind of like it the way it is! I don't really feel the need to break it down to basics. It works because of its size. Rush's music seems to play better when it's bigger. It fits well into large spaces. It's got something to do with the power of Neal's drums and the bottom end of the guitar and Geddy's bass sound... it just works better in a bigger hall.' So, no secret gigs in a Marquee-type venue? Alex smiles. 'Unlikely,' he says. 'But it would be fun to try it to see what it was like!'

In many ways, Rush are an anomaly. They can sell out huge arenas, and yet they have never really had overt success in the singles chart. Their big airplay

favourite was 1980's *Spirit Of The Radio*, but even that only hit number 13 in the UK and number 51 in the States. On the other hand, they never seemed to set out to court that kind of fame...

'I just don't think we understand the commercial beast,' surmises Lee. 'We've always just followed our instincts, really. We play stuff the quirky way, the way we like to play it, and if it's "commercial" then we're always the last to know!'

'We've been pretty lucky on the fame front,' picks up Lifeson, 'Because we're not that famous! We're not on the front

pages of magazines all the time. The result is that you don't really see that much of us, as we keep fairly low key and are able to have some privacy.'

'I think that as we are now middle-aged, we're less connected with "rock stardom", as such, so we can pretty much go about our daily lives which is as we would want it.'

So what really drives Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson to keep wanting to get on the stage? Lee thinks for a moment.

'To have the chance to play for an audience that wants to hear those songs and has a real connection with what you are playing... that's a great buzz for me,' he decides. 'That's what really makes me want to do what I do.'

Snakes & Arrows is out now on Atlantic. Rush tour the UK from 3-14 October: see www.rush.com

