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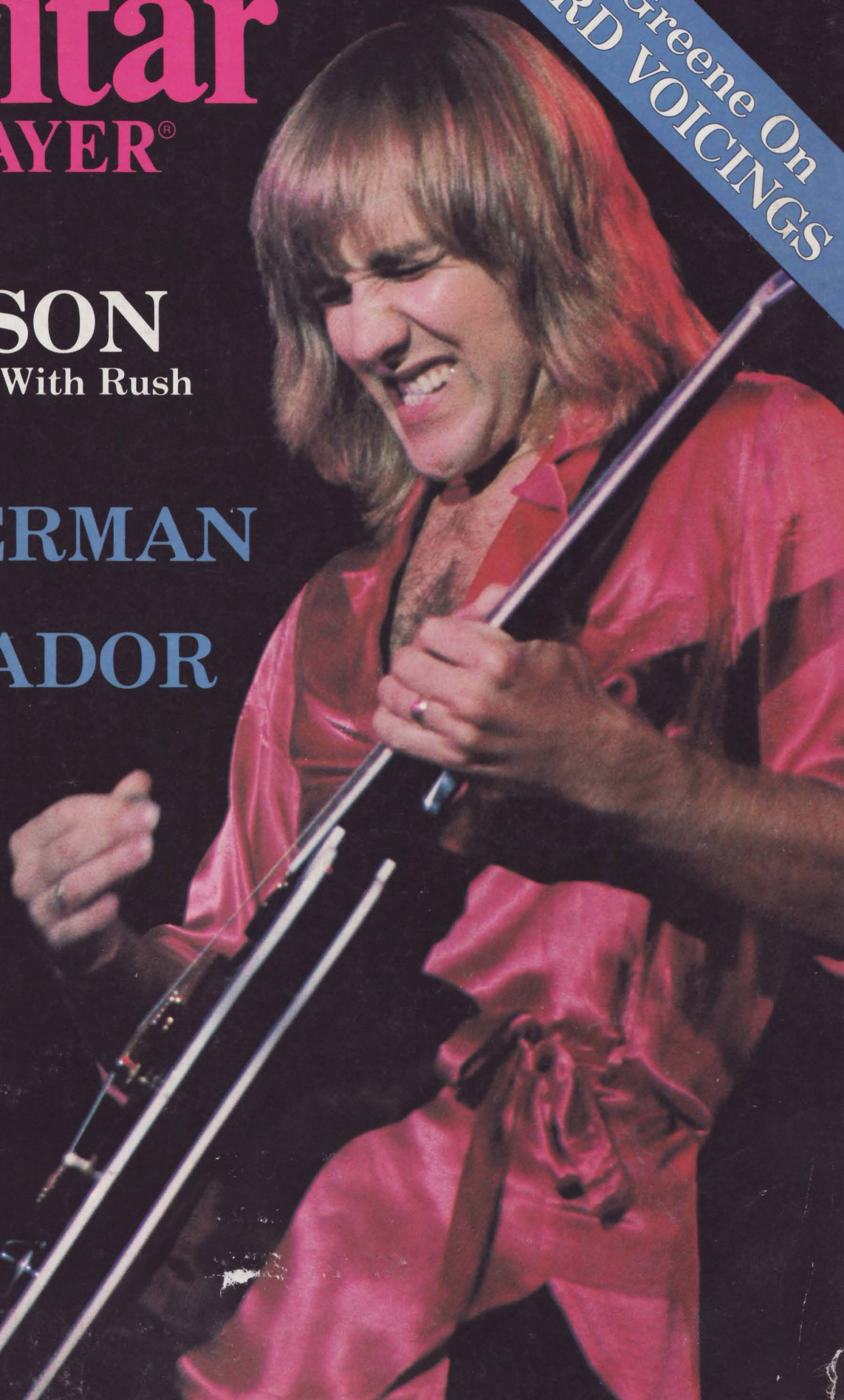
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ALEX LIFESON

Rush's Kinetic Lead Guitarist

By Jim Schwartz

MENTION THE words "power trio," and most people think back to the late '60s and early '70s when gargantuan walls of gray Marshall stacks formed an imposingly loud backdrop for a single guitar, bass, and drums. It was the age of psychedelia—of mind-expanding experiments both synthetic and organic. Bands such as Cream and the Jim Hendrix Experience left listeners' ears ringing and musicians' heads swimming with soulful, mysterious melodies.

With the advance of musical technology in the '70s, and with the desires of many groups to elaborate further upon their roots, new equipment (and often more personnel) was added to the power trio's basic format: a second guitar, a vocalist, horns, keyboards, and a myriad of special effects. For some bands the '70s became the age of techno-rock as the simple power trio was, at best, relegated to a backwater status.

There are a few three-piece groups, however, which retained their attraction for simplicity in numbers while also integrating into their music some of the most progressive components of modern instrument technology. Rush is such a band.

When three young Canadians—guitarist Alex Lifeson, bassist Geddy Lee, and drummer John Rutsey—first decided to join musical forces as Rush in 1968, they couldn't help but be captivated by their British and American contemporaries who, at that time, were forging the foundations of power rock. As these young men's musical tastes and abilities matured during the early '70s, they attempted to expand their melodic range by adding another guitarist and a keyboardist. But these latter musicians' tenures with Rush were short-lived as the group reverted back to the simplicity and straightforwardness of a power trio.

In 1974, after six years of steady gigging at parties, school dances, bars, and other small venues in and around Toronto, Rush released its first LP, *Rush*. Shortly before their first U.S. tour that year, Rutsey left the band and was replaced on drums by Neil Peart. Playing songs reminiscent of early Led Zeppelin, the group in little less than a year had cut two more albums (*Fly By Night* and *Caress Of Steel*), toured as special guests to Aerosmith and Kiss, and received a Juno award—Canada's Grammy—as 1974's Most Promising New Group.

From 1976 to 1978 four more albums followed, and the band's sound began to mature and establish its own identity as each



musician experimented with new instruments. Lifeson incorporated guitar synthesizer and Moog Taurus bass pedals into Rush's tunes; Lee's bass shared time with numerous keyboards and bass pedals; and Peart complemented his drumming with other percussive tools such as tympani, timbales, orchestra and tubular bells, wind chimes, bell trees, and crotales (tuned Turkish cymbals). The power trio concept was being lifted by the members of Rush into today's high-tech arena to the applause of audiences throughout the world.

In the U.S. all of the group's albums since and including *2112* have gone gold (sale of 500,000 units), and their double-live *All The World's A Stage* achieved platinum status (sale of 1,000,000 units). Canadian sales of all Rush's albums have topped 50,000 per disc (gold status in Canada), and each record after *Caress Of Steel* has gone platinum (sale of 100,000 units). In addition, the last six Rush discs have been awarded silver records (sale of 60,000 units) in England.

Permanent Waves is Rush's latest release, and after only a few weeks on the charts it, too, was certified gold in the U.S. and in Canada. But while being a commercial success, the trio has never forgotten its roots

or its love of playing music. Shunned by most radio stations in the past because of long songs and often shrill vocals, the group built its following through almost constant touring during the last six years. And it's paid off for both the musicians and their audiences.

A typical Rush concert lasts over two hours—a far cry from 1975 when they had only 30 minutes to get on and off the stage before a Kiss or Aerosmith show. Throughout their set each band member employs a number of instruments to transport the audience into realms of power rock and spirited fantasy. Probably the main vehicle for that conveyance is the guitar of 27-year-old Alex Lifeson, and in the following interview he shares his thoughts about and experiences with Rush during his many years as a musician.

* * * *

WHAT WERE SOME OF your earliest musical experiences?

Until I was about 12, there really wasn't much. My father is Yugoslavian, and he worked in the mines in Fernie, British Columbia. When I was two he hurt his back, and

our family moved to Toronto. We all lived together in a real ethnic area of the city. Actually, it was great—there were millions of us living in this house, and no one spoke English on the street, but we all managed somehow to understand each other.

Were folk songs important in your musical development?

My mother has a beautiful voice, and she always sang to us. I can still recall her singing lullabies. But I really didn't start playing music until I was about 12, when I got a Kent classical guitar for Christmas. It was \$11.00 new, right off the shelf, and the action was about 14" above the neck. I remember cracking the nut on it and trying to repair it with poly filling. It looked horrible! Anyway, I just tooled around on that for a few years.

Learning what types of songs?

Mostly stuff off the radio. Around that time I had a chance to study classical and flamenco, but when I was approached with taking lessons I thought it would be simple "Mary Had A Little Lamb" things, so I decided not to. My brother-in-law did take the lessons, however, and that got me somewhat interested in it. But I still didn't get into it until five years later, when I was 17 or so.

After the Kent, what kind of guitar did you get?

I progressed to a Conora electric, a Japanese solidbody—\$59.00 for that one. I still have it in my basement. When I got it I painted it all psychedelic. Around that time Cream had come out, and I had to have a guitar that looked like Eric Clapton's [GP, Aug. '76] Gibson SG. Geddy had a Conora bass that he also painted.

What kind of amps were you using at the time?

I didn't own an amp, so I borrowed them—Gibson Les Pauls, Kents, and things like that. Geddy had a Traynor, a twin-15 with a Bass Master head, and we used to go to his house after school and just sit around and play, both of us plugging in to it.

So you were playing with Geddy from the very beginning?

Mostly. We started a couple of basement bands, but they were nothing—just something to do. We had a repertoire of about 15 songs like "Gloria" and "Satisfaction," fairly simple numbers. It was a lot of fun, but we never played anywhere except for a few parties. If someone would have a party, we'd get one of our mothers to drive.

When was Rush first formed?

That thing started in September of '68. We got a fairly regular gig at a drop-in center every Friday night. After a couple of months, we had a small name for ourselves, and eventually we tied in with the parks and recreation department of Toronto and did some outings for them. Also there were junior high school dances, for which we received about \$40 a gig. So it was something; we split the money—13 bucks each.

Were you still using the Conora at this time?

Yes, I had gotten it into fairly decent

Continued

ALEX LIFESON

shape. You see, I couldn't afford a real good guitar at the time, so I used to borrow different ones from friends. I remember using a Harmony, which looked like a Gibson Les Paul, and on another occasion I borrowed a Gibson Firebird from Geddy's brother-in-law, who played piano with us for a while.

What was your first professional instrument?

My first was a 1968 Gibson ES-335 that I bought new. A little while later I bought a '63 Fender Stratocaster with vibrato. Again, that guitar was sitting in a friend's closet for two or three years before I got it. It was brown, and it didn't look very nice, but it was a neat instrument. I recall taking it in to get some work done on it; when I got it back it never sounded right again, so I got rid of it. After that, the 335 was my only guitar for a long time.

All during your formative years, were you self-taught on the guitar?

Yes, mostly. I did start studying classical guitar in 1972 for about six months with a friend of mine, Eliot Goldner, who studied with Eli Kassner in Toronto. But Eliot was in a motorcycle accident, which kept him going in and out of the hospital for two years. Every week I'd go over and study with him, until he finally went back in for six months. Then the lessons stopped, and Rush started gigging more.

Have you always wanted to be a guitarist?

Yes, very much. After I finished high school the band really started happening. The drinking age was lowered that year, so all of a sudden there was a whole new area to play in. It wasn't just two gigs on weekends; it was six gigs a week, five sets a night. We got a pretty strong following after a while in Toronto, and we made lots of friends.

What kinds of tunes was Rush doing during the late '60s and early '70s?

Right from when we started, I don't think we had any dreams about becoming the Rolling Stones or anything like that—it was just something we wanted to do; it was something that was a lot of fun. After about five months, about a third of our repertoire was original tunes, and this held us back from playing a lot of places because people wanted to hear stuff they could relate to—songs on the AM radio stations and things like that. We were into playing longer, bluesy types of things.

Did you experiment with different time signatures at this time?

Not really. It was pretty straightforward rock. But some of the cover versions of songs we did, like "Fire," "Purple Haze," and "For What It's Worth," we had our own arrangements for, so they didn't sound just like the originals.

When did Rush get its first record deal?

The whole thing happened in the summer of '74. Actually, we had tried getting signed

before then, but we didn't have much luck. Nobody wanted to pick us up; they said we were too heavy, and there was no market for the music the band was playing. So all the record companies in Canada passed on us.

How did Mercury finally get interested in Rush?

Well, we put a completed album together in the studio with our own money and with the help of our management. Ray Danniels of SRO Productions [Oak Manors, 12261 Young St., Box 1000, Oak Ridges, Ontario, Canada LOG1PO] has been our only manager since '69, about six months after the band formed. We've always had a good working and personal relationship, so we stuck together these many years. He helped us get noticed by Mercury Records, and the day we signed our American record deal with them is a day I'll never forget. We got an advance and went out and did some shopping at Long & McQuade Music [459 Bloor St. W., Toronto, Canada M5S1X9]. We went crazy, saying, "I'll take that guitar and those amps. He'll take those drums." It's something you dream about for years and years, and we actually got to do it. I bought a Marshall 50-watt amp and a '74 Les Paul Deluxe. About that guitar, I bought it right off the shelf; and I must not have been thinking clearly because when I got it home and started to play it, it was a mess. I had it in a heat press on three different occasions, and its neck was

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just really screwed. That guitar didn't sound right, the intonation was never right, and it would never stay in tune. Eventually I traded the Deluxe in for a '74 cherry sunburst Les Paul Standard in Atlanta, which I still have at home. Then I got another '74 Les Paul Standard with a tobacco finish in '76, and I used it on our live album *All The World's A Stage*.

Did you go through a guitar-buying phase at that time?

I sure did. Some I bought because I wanted them, and others I bought to replace damaged instruments. We were doing a gig with Blue Oyster Cult at the Nassau Coliseum in Long Island, New York, a few years ago, and the double-neck cherry-finish Gibson I had bought in Nashville shortly before that got injured. The rigging wasn't done properly, and a long-throw horn speaker fell right on top of it, shearing the bridges off and taking huge chunks out of the body. Not only that, but the horn also fell on my 335 and gouged its neck out. That really hurt. The 335 had been with me for ten years; the neck was worn down just right, the finish was worn down from playing thousands of bars and high school dances, and I was proud of it. After that I said, "This guitar is staying home. I'm not taking any further chances with it."

What did you replace those guitars with?
I got a white Gibson EDS-1275 double-



Alex (L) picking his red Gibson double-neck onstage with Geddy Lee.

neck to replace the cherry-finish one, and I had a Gibson ES-355 made in 1976 with a cream-colored custom finish. That's my main guitar now.

Did you have to adjust to your double-neck's weight, since it's heavier than a standard 6-string solidbody?

Not really; I've grown accustomed to it. Actually, my white Gibson is relatively light for a double-neck guitar. My old cherry-finish double-neck seems much heavier than

my white one.

Do you experience any difficulty compensating for the double-neck's different neck heights compared with those of standard 6- or 12-string models?

No. the double-neck's 6-string height is very comfortable—very close to the height I normally play onstage with a regular guitar. The 12-string neck is much higher than normal, but it, too, is easy for me to handle

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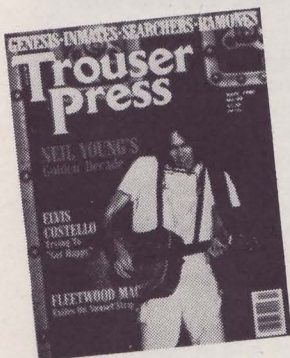
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09

ALEX LIFESON

because when I'm in the studio I usually adjust my single-neck guitars' straps up two notches. When the instruments are higher they're more comfortable to use, especially after three or four hours of playing.

When you switched to the ebony fingerboard of the 355 after the 335's rosewood fingerboard, did you notice any difference?

I didn't, no. I think I noticed a difference in their bodies rather than in their necks. The 355 is much heavier, and it sustains more than the 335 does. The weight of the 355 also helps cut down on microphonics; with the 335, I had to stuff it with cotton to avoid feedback problems. The difference in fingerboards comes between my 355 and the Stratocaster. It drove me crazy trying to get used to the Strat's maple neck and fretboard, and there was so much lacquer on it when I bought the guitar that it was quite difficult to handle. I've had all the finish removed to where it's now bare wood, but the Stratocaster still doesn't sustain like the 355.

Have you ever played a Strat with a rosewood fingerboard?

Kim Mitchell, who's with the Max Webster Band, has a couple of Strats with rosewood fingerboards, and they feel really nice. I get a good vibrato, and they seem to sustain better than the maple-neck ones. I may get a rosewood fingerboard for my Strat too, in the future.

Which guitars did you use on Rush's first LP, Rush?

I used the 335 and a rented Rickenbacker 12-string. That's it for guitars. I played them through my Marshall 50 with a 4-12 cabinet, and I used a Maestro phase shifter, a Cry Baby wah-wah, and an Echoplex.

Many of your songs have either a phased or a chorus effect.

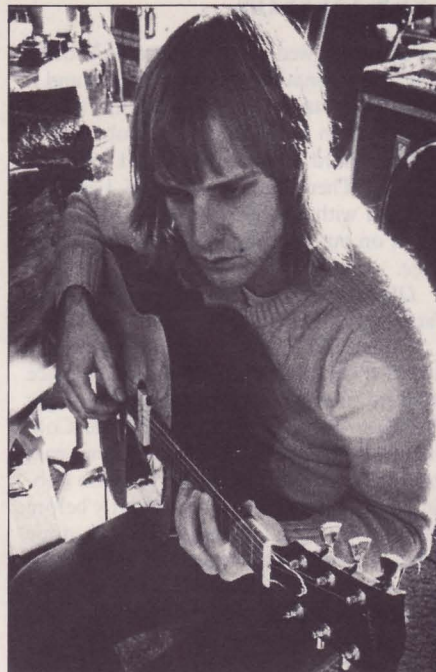
I like both sounds. Ever since *A Farewell To Kings* I've used a Roland Boss Chorus. I liked the Maestro phaser as opposed to, say, MXR Phase 90s or 100s; it was a little more subtle than the MXR phase lines. But after I heard the Chorus, I loved it and decided to incorporate it into my music. *Hemispheres* and *Permanent Waves* have a lot of Chorus—almost every song has Chorus, since with a three-piece band it tends to widen the guitar sound.

On the second album, Fly By Night, which guitars did you use?

That was mostly the 335 again and the tobacco Les Paul Standard. I played slide on the latter in "Making Memories." I also borrowed a Martin steel-string for some acoustic parts, but I can't remember the model.

What do you use for a slide?

It's an old metal lipstick container. And while I play slide very seldom now, when we first started out I used to a lot on my 335. People such as Jimmy Page on "You Shook Me" [*Led Zeppelin*, Atlantic, SD 8216] and



Practicing fingerpicking on his Gibson J-55.

HN COSTELLO

Jeff Beck on *Truth* [Epic, BN 26413] influenced me the most, and their styles reflect the way I like to play slide.

Any changes in equipment for Caress Of Steel?

I used the 335 on everything except

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ALEX LIFESON

"Lakeside Park," for which I rented a Fender Stratocaster. It's always been hard for me to get used to playing a Stratocaster because of its neck and where the volume control is positioned. I don't have anywhere to rest my hand. With the Gibsons, especially the 335 and the 355, I can grab the facing around the rear pickup or just grab the bridge and rest my hand on the guitar while I'm playing. With the Fender I couldn't do that, and the volume control is so close to the pickup and bridge that it was really hard for me to get comfortable. In addition, the neck is a lot smaller on the Strat, and it feels alien to me—especially after playing Gibsons for so long. But I eventually got a new black one a few years ago to replace my 335 as a second guitar, which sort of forced me into getting used to it.

Is the Stratocaster stock?

It was until just recently, when I had a Floyd Rose [2727 NE 145th St., Seattle, WA 98155] device installed, and a Gibson humbucking pickup put in the bridge position. I had new volume and tone pots installed further down on the guitar, and there's a Gibson-type 3-way toggle switch on its bottom horn replacing the stock selector. That new switch placement leaves the whole area below the treble pickup free for me to anchor my hand. And with Floyd's setup, the action is fairly high; the bridge is up, and the humbucking pickup fits nicely.

Do you use it much onstage now?

I used to up until a few weeks ago on two songs, "By-Tor And The Snow Dog" [*Fly By Night*] and "The Spirit Of Radio" [*Permanent Waves*]. But it has developed some grounding problems, so I've replaced it with my black 345.

Any other guitars for Caress Of Steel?

On "Panacea" I borrowed a classical guitar, but I can't remember what kind. And then there was a pedal steel, a Fender 10-string, I used in a short bridge between two sections in "The Necromancer."

Was the pedal steel in E9 or C6 tuning?

I don't remember the tuning.

Did you use, say, a standard Emmons bar?

Well, I've got to go now, so . . . [laughs]. Actually, that was the only time I've ever picked steel guitar. I don't really know how to play one.

What amps were you using on Caress Of Steel?

I used the Fender Super Reverb on both that album and the one right before it, *Fly By Night*. And on our live album [*All The World's A Stage*] I was playing the tobacco Les Paul Standard, which at the time had Pyramid [26044 Grandriver, Detroit, MI 48240] pickups on it. I've since replaced them with the stock humbuckers.

Why did you have the Pyramids installed in the first place?

With the Pyramid pickups there was a really tough, compressed sound, which I like.

The only problem with them was they were just too powerful; I couldn't get the clean sound I wanted for quieter things.

On 2112, which guitars and amps did you use?

There again, I played the 335 for most of the electric stuff, and I used the Les Paul Standard on some leads. For acoustics I bought a new Gibson B-45 12-string and a Gibson Dove 6-string, and for amps I had both a Fender Super Reverb and a Twin Reverb.

When did you begin playing your ES-355 on Rush's albums?

That happened on *A Farewell To Kings* in 1977. Besides the 355 I used my 335, the B-45, the Dove, a new Gibson J-55 I'd bought a bit earlier, the white Gibson double-neck, a '71 Ramirez classical and a '77 Epiphone C-60 classical, the black Stratocaster—which was still stock at this time—and a solidbody electric that was custom-built for me by Pyramid. It's really nice: walnut and maple laminations, single-piece body and neck, ebony fingerboard, stainless steel frets, and phase and coil-splitting switches.

Do you use the 355 as a stereo guitar?

No, I don't. I've rewired everything to mono. In this sort of application I couldn't see using it as a stereo unit. If I was in a quieter band with more instruments, I'd use that capability more. I do, however, like the sounds you can get with the selector switch. But for most of the set I have it in the number

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I position, so everything's at full power. Last summer I put on a microswitch: I can preset the guitar's selector switch to, say, 3, and then by flicking the microswitch I can return to full power—the number 1 position—rather than having to turn the selector.

What about amplifiers and effects on A Farewell To Kings?

For amps I had an H/H [dist. by Heintl Audio Development, Inc., Box 100, Unionville, Ontario, Canada L3R 2L8] 100-watt head driving a Marshall cabinet. And all of my effects were the same, with the addition of the Roland Chorus.

Did you use basically the same setup on Hemispheres?

All the same guitars, with the addition of

a new Gibson ES-345 and a Roland GR-500 guitar synthesizer. I eventually gave the 345 to one of our road crew as a birthday gift and bought a black '78 345 to replace it. For amps I used Hiwatt [21750 Main St., Matteson, IL 60443] tops and bottoms exclusively.

What made you switch from the Fenders to the Hiwatts?

The Fenders just didn't seem to sound right, and we were quite happy with the way the Hiwatts worked. I think *Hemispheres* has the guitar sound we were shooting for—a very *same* sound—throughout.

Did you keep the Hiwatts for Permanent Waves?

Actually, on that album I used a number of different amp combinations. I used a Mesa/Boogie to drive a Marshall cabinet, a 100-watt Hiwatt head to power both a

Hiwatt and a Marshall cabinet, and a Marshall Mark II head driving a Marshall cabinet with four 12" Celestions. Add to all that a Leslie with a Hiwatt head, which I also used on *Hemispheres*, and that's about it for amps.

What about guitars on Permanent Waves?

The 355 I used on almost every song, and for leads I played both the Pyramid and the '78 Strat—which, by this time, had the hum-bucking pickup in it. "The Spirit Of Radio" and "Different Strings" was the Strat, and "Jacob's Ladder" was the Pyramid. For acoustics I had my J-55 in standard tuning, and my Dove in Nashville tuning. On the latter the bottom three strings—the *E*, *A*, and *D*—were tuned to octaves, using thinner strings.

Why did you do that?

Well, on "Entre Nous" we wanted to get a 12-string sound, but the B-45 that I'd been using had a crack in the body; also, the neck was giving way, and the tone just didn't seem to be happening. So we tried a combination of the standard tuning and the Nashville tuning on two guitars: Together they approximated a single 12-string layout. And everything rang clear, so that's why we did that. I'm sure we'll do it again in the future.

How did you get the acoustic sound on the opening of "Different Strings"?

That was a new Gibson Howard Roberts model going through a Loft [91 Elm St., Manchester, CT 06040] analog delay, and we also had it miked to get both an amplified and an acoustic quality.

There are a variety of guitar sounds on all of Rush's albums. How many tracks do you use?

On the average, including solos, about five. We use 24 tracks when we record, and on *Permanent Waves* we seemed to be bumping a lot. Bumping is when you take two different tracks and combine them into one. It saves space for other things. While I don't go by any formula, overall I like to double all my rhythm tracks at least once, and often three times if I can.

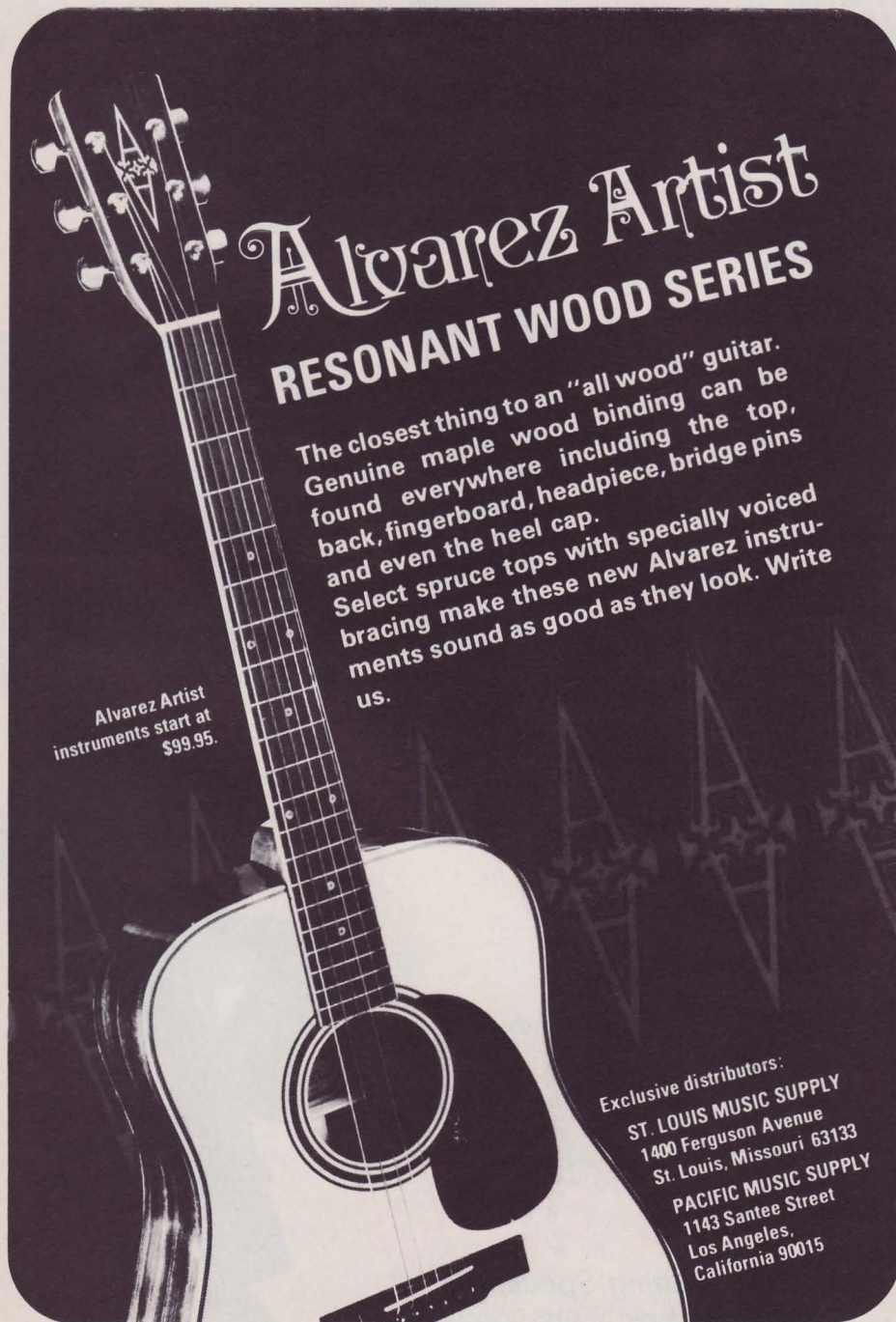
Do you do this for both acoustic and electric parts?

Mostly for electric. We'll do the basic tracks; after that, I'll start doubling and tripling. What we did a lot on *Permanent Waves* was to have a split: one guitar to one side—like one rhythm guitar—and a double on the other side. So I would double one, and we'd throw it onto the left, and then I'd triple it. Next I'd double that one again, and put it on the right. Then I put a direct solo, say, in the middle. Once you get into the acoustics and direct guitars, it really starts building up.

What are some of your favorite solos on Permanent Waves?

Actually, I like different parts of different songs on that album. "The Spirit Of Radio" is a song I like very much. You can usually pick out something in every song that bothers you after a while, after you've played it for a long time. But there isn't anything

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ALEX LIFESON

really there that bugs me. On the second verse there's a direct guitar that comes in, and at first I had mixed feelings about it. But I really like it now.

What about the solo at the end of "Different Strings"?

I like it; I love the sound of the Howard Roberts throughout and the feel of the tune. It reminds me of soldiers sitting around a piano in a smoke-filled pub in England during the war. It's the type of solo I really enjoy playing—an emotive, bluesy sort of thing. The only problem is that the Strat part was added on at the last minute; it really starts to happen as the song ends, which was unfortunate.

Did you use any special effects on any of the songs?

We did on "Natural Science." The very opening is a J-55 run through the Loft for a very light chorus effect. Once we had the guitar track down, we stuck a speaker cabinet outside—this was way up at a studio in Moore Heights, Quebec—and we recorded the natural echo off the mountains in combination with the sounds of splashing water and Geddy's voice. We didn't use any sort of synthetic echo on the water track.

For your electric guitar parts, do you prefer miking an amp or running direct?

Mostly miking. Almost all of *Permanent Waves* was miked. There are a few spots where I had a direct guitar, and it's usually the Stratocaster that I do it with. Often I like

a combination of the two. "The Spirit Of Radio" is a good example of that. There's a driving guitar/amplifier sound at the beginning which is really compressed and big. In the second verse, the direct Stratocaster comes in over it, and it adds a whole new layer. The direct guitar is itself a very small sound, but when it's used in conjunction with the amplified material, it really broadens the guitar. I'm building a studio at home, and I like to practice a lot of my direct stuff there—just mostly to put different effects such as echo and chorus on it.

What types of mikes do you use?

We use all kinds: Sennheiser 421s, Electro-Voice RE20s, AKG 414s, and Neumann 87s, 89s, and 47s. We spend a lot of time moving them around. "Natural Science" is probably the best example, because we went for slightly different sounds in each section of the song. Paul Northfield or Terry Brown, our engineers, would go out into the studio and start moving mikes around until we got the right sound, until we cleaned the edges. We didn't go for any radical changes, and we used a combination of the Boogie and the Hiwatt amps mostly. One mike was set up 15 feet in front of the amps, two room mikes way in the back, and one at a height of 12 feet, on the piano. On each amp we had two mikes close-up, an RE-20 and a 421. AKGs were used as room mikes.

What is your current onstage amplifier setup?

I'm using two Hiwatts; I have one 100-watt head driving two cabinets on my side of the stage, and another 100-watt head driving one cabinet on stage left—Geddy's side. He uses that as a monitor, and you can't even hear it out in the house. I also have a Fender Twin Reverb I use to get a clean, almost direct sound, and then I'm driving my Leslie with another Hiwatt head. In addition I have two Maestro parametric filters—one on my Hiwatt, and the other on the Leslie—and I use an Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress flanger, a Roland Boss Chorus, an Advanced Audio Designs [3890 Stewart Rd., Eugene, OR 97402] digital delay, a Morley volume pedal, and a Cry Baby wah-wah.

You are credited on all your LPs since A Farewell To Kings as using bass synthesizer pedals. What are those?

They're Moog Taurus bass pedals, and they have an effective range of two octaves. I use them a lot on "Xanadu" [*A Farewell To Kings*] where I play harmony to Geddy's bass pedal line, and on "La Villa Strangiato" [*Hemispheres*]. Most of the time I'll play the lower end while Geddy takes the high, melodic parts.

Which guitars do you take on the road with you?

The electrics I have are the 355, the 345, the Stratocaster, and my white Gibson double-neck. My acoustics are the Epiphone C-60 classical and the Gibson Dove. I also have a Roland GR-500, but I don't use it much. I'm not really keen on it.

Why not?

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Well, at first it happened to fit for the texture we were going for. I used it in "Cygnus X-1" on *Hemispheres* because it had a Gretschy sort of sound to it. There are a lot of nice effects you can get, but I wouldn't give up playing regular electric guitar and dive into synthesizer. I also fooled around with a Zetaphon [HEAR Inc., 1122 University Ave., Berkeley, CA 94702] for a while, but it needed some work done soon after I got it. There are a lot of different guitar synthesizer units to fool around with, but the whole concept is not something I'm terribly interested in. [For more on guitar synthesizers, see stories on the subject in the February '79 and February '80 issues of GP.]

How do you transport your equipment and personnel?

We travel by bus. If we have a few days off and we want to get home fast, we'll fly. But we own two busses, and they're great. You can sit down, turn on the TV, listen to tapes, or whatever. And you can relax; you don't have to hassle with airports and work around other peoples' schedules. In addition to the busses, we have a motor home and three transport trailers, and there are 25 people in our crew. I can recall when it was only six.

You can probably remember when it was only three.

Yes [laughter]. "Oh, I finished my amps; do you want some help with the drums?"

Describe the evolution of Rush's sound from the beginning to now.

Well, we were pretty straightforward rock until *2112*. Then the album after that, *A Farewell To Kings*, took us in a slightly new direction which we're still heading in. Our latest, *Permanent Waves*, sounds very natural to me; it sounds like us. There's nothing radically new or different on it. It's just another step, like *Hemispheres* was to *A Farewell To Kings*. And yet, the feedback we're getting on *Permanent Waves* is that a lot of people think it's very new, very fresh, and something quite different for us. I can see some things—it's not quite as serious as, say, *Hemispheres* was. And there's just the feel of the LP; it's a happy kind of record. But overall it's pretty much the same stuff that we've been doing—only further on down the road, and the production's better.

Do you prefer recording in the studio or gigging on the road?

I really enjoy the road. It's got its ups and downs, and it's tiring—mentally and physically—but we really enjoy it. Our current tour goes from the beginning of 1980 to about the first week in July.

That's a lot of time on the road.

Yes. As we get further into the tour, it takes its toll in mental fatigue; it becomes quite difficult to cope with just getting up and going to sound check a lot of times. Being in the studio is also a wonderful thing. Again, we're away from home whenever we record because we like to be away from distractions when we're working. So when we are home



LARRY KAPLAN

Alex with his Gibson ES-355.

for the few minutes that we can be, we make the most of it. Right now, we're getting home every five to seven weeks for five days, and it's not a lot of time. We all have kids—well, Geddy's got one on the way—and we like to spend time with them. And for five days every seven weeks, it's really not a lot. But we really enjoy touring, and we'll probably do it for as long as we enjoy it.

When you're onstage, do you ever play songs not on Rush's albums?

Actually, we thought about doing that on this tour. We had some leftover material from *Permanent Waves*, a classical piece I'd written, and we were going to go into different phases of it. And we talked about possibly using it for our next album—that's going to be a live LP—just to have something different, that hadn't been heard before. But after some discussion we felt we could really open it up in the studio, really stretch it out, so we probably won't have anything new on the forthcoming live album.

How do you go about writing songs?

The formula is usually the same. When we're writing together in the band, Neil will go off and work on the lyrics while Geddy and I sit together and throw ideas back and forth. Neil usually has one or two songs written before there are melodies to them, and that gets us started. Songwriting for me isn't like just sitting down, writing something out, and throwing it away if it isn't good. Most of the time the process is a very spontaneous one. And very seldom will Geddy or I write songs individually; "Lessons" on *2112* was my own, but there aren't many like that.

Do you have any favorite chord progressions or time signatures you like working in?

If the lyrics come first, we work around them and what moods they are trying to create. If the song's a very up, positive thing, we use a lot of major chords; if it's sadder, or more thought provoking, we'll have minor-

Continued

ALEX LIFESON

ish feels thrown in. Using time signatures other than 4/4 are more interesting from both the listeners' and the players' points of view. They're more difficult to master, but they're also more rewarding—especially when you're playing them every night. "Natural Science" initially was tough, but now after working with it for so long it's easy. "La Villa Strangiato" has two parts that were each recorded in one take: We felt it was a song that needed the feeling of spontaneity to make it work, so we spent over a week learning it before we recorded. After we were finished, none of us thought we'd every be able to play it again. But now I can do it while watching TV.

To what would you ascribe Rush's popularity?

Well, we're basically a live band; we've never had a history of getting a lot of airplay on the radio.

Why do you think disc jockeys ignore you?

A lot of it is just the reputation we have because we're into hard, hard rock, and because Geddy's voice is high and screeching. A number of disc jockeys hear the name Rush and think, "No no, don't want anything to do with it." Then lately, of course, they read *Billboard* or *Cashbox* and they say, "Oh, they're way up there. We've got to start playing their records." It's always been like that with us. There are a few stations that were behind the band and supported us in the

past, and we still try to make it to those places when we tour. There are also a lot of people who, all of a sudden, are your best buddies when before they didn't want you to come down to the station.

So it's been through touring almost constantly that Rush has become known?

Definitely. And I feel we've shared something really special—and we're still sharing—with our audiences. We're not out to become millionaires or anything like that. If we happen to make a lot of money or get material success, all well and good: We're not going to *not* take it. That stuff is nice, but we're doing what we want to do, playing the music we want to play, and I think audiences pick up on the fact that we're happy with being performers.

How would you define "success"?

Having the audience and the members of the band feel good, all sharing the music, is real success. For the last few months everyone's been coming up to us telling us how successful we are, how wonderful everything is, and how glad they are. But I could take a step backwards and say, "Success! You want to know success? I want to grow my thumbnail in two days to where it was before I broke it. That's success!" The other stuff is great, but we've had success since *2112*, as far as the band's concerned. And we've been happy.

Why did you title your latest album Permanent Waves?

Well, it's just that this era seems to be pushing New Wave, and this Wave, and that Wave. The material we're doing is just Permanent Wave—it's just music. It's the love of music and how, with everything new, it's just a continuation, like a wave coming back in from the ocean.

You do some classical guitar-flavored songs. Who are your favorite classical players?

I enjoy listening to Segovia [*GP*, Apr. '74], and John Williams [Feb. '77] is, I think, my favorite. I also like Julian Bream [Oct. '71], especially his lute music. I'm just starting to get into people like Paco de Lucia [June '77], Christopher Parkening [June '70], Liona Boyd [Oct. '78], and Carlos Montoya [Feb. '78]. I remember seeing Montoya in concert, and I was totally blown away; his stuff is just unbelievable. I really enjoy listening to that music, but I don't consider myself to be a classical guitarist. I'd have to really concentrate on it for a long time, and I don't have the opportunity to do that now.

What about electric guitarists whom you like?

My earliest influences were people such as Clapton, Jimi Hendrix [*GP*, Sept. '75], and Jimmy Page [July '77]. Page was probably my greatest influence early on. Rush started just a little before the time Led Zeppelin came out, and when I heard the first album, I thought, "They're doing just the things we want to do: They have the sound we want to have." And if we were that good,

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we could have played like that, too, if you know what I mean.

Was there anything special about Page's guitar work that struck you?

His style was very much what I wanted to achieve, and for a long time I copied his riffs—played the same sorts of things, went for the same sounds and the same vibrato. Then, as I became aware of other guitarists, other influences came in. Steve Howe [GP, May '78], to some extent, was an influence. He's just such an incredible guitarist that I don't think you *can't* be influenced by him and his attitude and ability to do so many different things. Steve Hackett [GP, Oct. '76] also was important to my growth; he has such a beautiful, controlled style and a feel for textures in his playing. But now Alan Holdsworth is my main man.

Why do you like Alan Holdsworth?

I've only heard the stuff he's done with UK and with [drummer] Bill Bruford—his first two albums—and I especially like his use of the vibrato arm. It's not like the typical *wang wang* stuff a lot of players do. Alan uses it so tastefully, and uses it in conjunction with bending notes and moving around the fingerboard. I also like his tone; to me it sounds at times very much like a saxophone.

Do you use a pick?

Mostly, on electric and steel-string, except in a few instances where I'll pluck a note or two with my fingers just to add a note here and there. I like white nylon ones made by Kay [3057 N. Rockwell Ave., Chicago, IL 60618]. They're about equal in thickness to Fender mediums. The other day I got my

Playing 12-string on his white Gibson double-neck.

hands on a brass pick; I like it, except I put my pick in my mouth when I switch to classical guitar, and it tastes awful. And the brass pick takes a bit of getting used to. I feel like it's just a little too hard for the strings—I'm just waiting for all the strings to break at once.

Do you ever employ a plectrum when playing classical guitar?

I have on occasion. The flamencoish beginning of "La Villa Strangiato" on *Hemispheres* was done with a pick, just to get it going a lot faster. My fingers aren't that quick, yet.

Which pickup do you play over most of the time?

I usually play over the back pickup on the Gibsons and on the Strat, because that's where I anchor my hand.

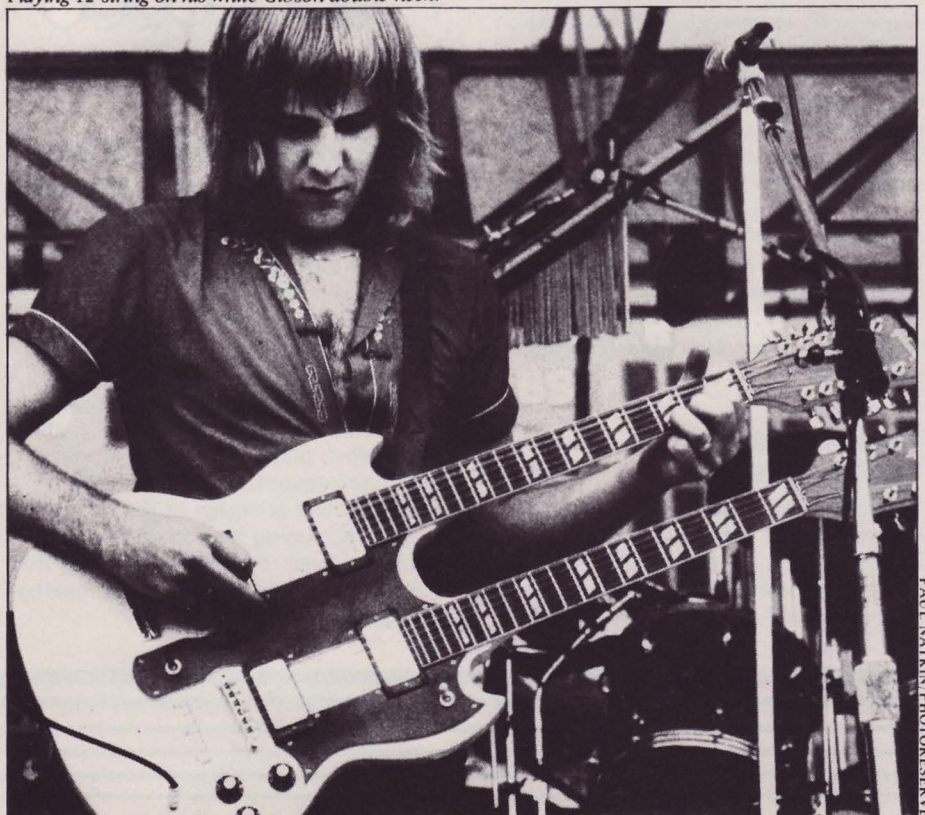
How many pickups do you have on?

For the louder chording stuff I use the back pickup set between 7 and 8, and for the solos it's on full. For any of the cleaner, quieter parts, I use the front pickup on the Gibsons and the middle pickup on the Strat. On the Gibsons I have the rhythm humbucker screwed down as low as it can go, and I've raised the individual polepieces to bring out whichever strings need to be brought up. The front unit's set somewhere between 5 and 7. It gives me a clean, almost distortion-free sound, but it's still at a level you can hear.

Have you ever experimented with a wireless system?

Yes. The people from Nasty [Nady VHF System, 1145 65th St., Oakland, CA 94608] visited us once. Their unit's nice, but I'm happy with just the conventional cord. It

Continued



PAUL NATAIN/PHOTOFESTIVE

ALEX LIFESON

doesn't get in my way, and besides, two or three thousand dollars for not using a guitar cord is quite a bit of money, I think. Not that I couldn't afford to get one; I just think for what I'd be gaining, it's not worth it. I'm very happy with the sound I have now. I did, however, have a problem with my high-end response until recently. The cordless system, especially the Nasty, has a nice high end to it—or, at least you can add on that high end. But I got the problem solved with a conventional cord, and, you know, I don't jump around that much anymore. I'm getting a little old [laughs].

What type of strings do you use?

I use Dean Markleys, .010 to .048, on all of my electrics. For a while I went from a .010

on the high *E* to a .052 at the bottom, so it was really heavy. At one time I even had a .042 bottom *E*, but neither that or the .052 ever felt quite right. With the .048 it feels just perfect—I can pull the low *E* or *A* string if I want, which I do in a couple of spots in "Soliloquy Of The Soul" [2112]. The classicals get Augustines, while I use Martin light-gauges for my steel-strings.

Do you have facility with all four fingers of your left hand?

It took me quite a while to get that—about eight years. I didn't even try to use my baby finger for a long time. After a while it got difficult when I started using it because it slowed me down in terms of the overall speed in my left hand. But as I played more and more, and we started touring a lot, I started working my little finger into more things.

Did your classical guitar practice help you develop dexterity with your little finger?

Yes, very much. When I started the classical, I had to use my baby finger in stretches and pulls. So I developed a lot more strength and agility in the finger; I even have calluses on the end of it. And it's given me the ability to stretch more and add some interesting notes.

You play a number of different types of guitars—acoustic, classical, electric, 6- and 12-string, etc. Do you think a guitarist can ever be too diverse?

I guess that could happen. But for me, I think it's really how you slot your priorities with the various instruments. I'm best at playing a 6-string electric in a hard rock application. I love classical, but it's further down my list. I don't think there's anything wrong with getting really good at different styles, so long as you have a style and it's not mimicking someone else's. I like to be proficient with a variety of techniques, but in my own way. And for me, I'm always evolving; I'm always learning something new. I hear something, or I play something I haven't done before, or I apply myself to a certain passage in a different way by adding textures I haven't added before. Alan Holdsworth and his wonderful vibrato arm—that's something new for me. Many times I'll pull out my Stratocaster and just fool around with the vibrato arm.

How do you warm up before a show?

Sometimes I'll just noodle around on my Stratocaster, to get my fingers limber. Then again, a lot of times I'll play my classical guitar in the hotel room.

Do you find classical music in general to be a great influence on you?

For me, whenever I hear a classical guitar I stop whatever I'm doing to sit down and listen. I feel something that hits, where I'm almost going to cry because there's just so much expression in it. It is very technical, very regimented; but that's the way it is, I guess, with all symphonic music. My reading is definitely not up to par with most orchestral performers, so whatever I practice that's classical, such as Bach's "Bouree," is all from memory. My timing may be a bit off, or I might not attack a note properly, but I never get tired of playing. I just get a real good feeling from classical guitar; it's hard to explain.

How has your style developed over the years?

I think I've assimilated a lot of styles and influences, so I couldn't really say what my style of guitar playing is like. When I solo I like to go crazy; I like to bend notes and freak out, unless I have something definite in mind that I'm aiming for. And I like the spontaneity of doing solos like that. I don't sit down three weeks ahead and work something out. When I solo, I just start doing it. If I don't like something, I'll toss it and move on until I get a riff that works. I also like to make use of my chording as much as possible and take up as much space as I can in the context of this

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band. I think it's important with only three instruments. We could fill in a lot with synthesizers now, but I still think the guitar chording aspect is important.

You use a great deal of arpeggiation. What got you interested in that?

Dynamics, mostly; there's just a greater range between levels of things with arpeggiated stuff. At a low volume with some chorus and echo on it, arpeggiated chords really sound beautiful. You can set up all kinds of textures and atmospheres. Chording is a strange thing: You can play something that sounds really nice and, by just altering it slightly, it takes on a new feel—gutsier, or hollower, or more dramatic. A lot of my

chording starts with something, and then I'll move a finger around here or there and pick up a new note.

Do you ever employ any tricks with your left hand?

I'm pretty much straightforward when I play. I do hammer in a few songs: play the note, and then hammer on the string above the left hand with my right. The first solo in "Natural Science" [*Permanent Waves*] is that kind of hammering; I picked it up from Pat Travers [*GP*, Jan. '80]. I also like harmonics, and the usual assortment of string bending and pull-offs.

Was there ever a time during your career when you felt like giving up?

There was one time, just after *Caress of Steel* and before *2112*. There was a lot of

pressure on us from the record company, from management, because *Caress Of Steel* wasn't a very commercial album. And yet, for us, it was a very successful album in terms of our own sense of creativity. We tried doing a number of things differently on the LP—longer songs, different melodic things—and it was a stepping stone for us. Without *Caress of Steel*, we couldn't ever have done *2112*. And the latter, for us, was like coming back with a vengeance. It was at that time we said, "Okay, everybody wants us to do nice short songs like we did on the first album. Do we do that, or do we pack it in, or do we say 'Screw you! We'll do whatever we want!'" The last is what we decided to do, and we came back punching with *2112*: That album still feels like that to me when I listen to it today—I can feel the hostility hanging out.

So Rush has been together as a unit for 12 years.

Yes, with the exception of our adding Neil Peart on drums after our first drummer decided to leave the group in '74. It's funny when I think about it. Everything that I related to in my life, the point of relation was the band: Where was the band that summer or winter, or where were we gigging when this or that thing happened? Rush really became a way of life for me. Even now that we have this so-called success that everyone reminds us about, it's no big thing. We've always felt we've been successful—or, at least I have, because I've been doing what I love doing. I've always played guitar. And, granted, playing is like work sometimes: I might go out and do a two-hour set, and I might feel like I'm working hard, but an hour before I did that set I was in the dressing room playing my classical stuff, really enjoying myself. And I think it's that way for all the members of the band.

How does it feel to have been with the same two musicians for that length of time?

We've gotten along very well. It's almost beyond family. We've shared so many dreams, and we've shared so many good times and hard times together. And, basically, the chemistry is right between the three of us. Besides all that, we just work and live very well together. Perhaps the fact that we're a three-piece band also helps; you tend to avoid factions and differences of opinion which can turn into silly little hassles. And we don't seem to have those ego problems that other groups do, since we're not out to be stars. We're just out doing what we all like doing. ■

A Selected Rush Discography

Albums (all on Mercury): *Rush*, SRM-1-1011; *Fly By Night*, SRM-1-1023; *Caress Of Steel*, SRM-1-1046; *2112*, SRM-1-1079; *All The World's A Stage*, SRM-2-7508; *A Farewell To Kings*, SRM-1-1184; *Hemispheres*, SRM-1-3743; *Archives* (re-release of *Rush*, *Fly By Night*, and *Caress Of Steel*), SRM-3-9200; *Permanent Waves*, SRM-1-4001.

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What's more, the EXPAND provides controlled harmonic distortion of sound to add a wide range of electronic synthesized sounds. And all effects are controlled conveniently by foot operated push-buttons, or knobs.

These are just a few of the remarkable "Basky II" features.

There's a lot more to tell. Write or call for details.

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