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Alex Lifeson of...

RUSH

**Old "Bones" on
a new "Roll"!**

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CANADA'S #1 ROCK ACT

RUSH

Special Feature by: DREW MASTERS

Growing up in rural Ontario, dreaming of becoming a rock star, only one band really mattered: **Rush** — they had it all. I may have wanted to be a star because of Ace Frehley, but I wanted to be a guitarist — a musician — because of **Alex Lifeson**.

Sixteen years after hearing my first Rush record, I find myself standing in the middle of their dormant but ominous equipment carefully placed in waiting at their rehearsal hall in Toronto. Looking around this large, warehouse like room, I just about froze: there were Alex's guitars, **Geddy Lee's** basses, and **Neil Peart's** kit. Though the band members weren't there yet, their stage manager, Skip Gildersleeve, graciously let me look at their stuff up close. And there it was: I touched Alex's guitar; I touched Neil's kit; I touched Geddy's bass and keyboard. I touched my childhood dream.

Alex came in nonchalantly and immediately began joking with me, and his crew, about some crazy driver he had encountered on the way to rehearsal. He never dropped his smile as we went from their sacred rehearsal room to a nearby production office. Closing the door behind us, Alex lit up a smoke as I poured myself a coffee. Here I was in awe sixteen years later — in the private presence of my greatest guitar hero of all time.

What transpired was a 60-minute conversation with Alex done last October before the beginning of their Canadian/world tour in support of their most successful album to date, **Roll The Bones**. Though quite relaxed on the outside, I was falling apart inwardly. Seven years a journalist, over 300 interviews with every major star, and I was freaking out inside. But still I feel I got a good interview — not the best, as I left out some important questions I should have asked, but you try this! And, now, enough from me — may I proudly present to you Alex Lifeson, and the life and times of Canada's greatest ever rock band, Rush:

I heard rumours that the band was once close to folding?

"That's not quite true. Right after recording **Hold Your Fire** we did the tour, which was a longish tour — not as long as the early days — but long in our more recent terms. During it, Geddy got sore in his throat often, and I got the flu...it was one thing after another. It was a very tense, stressful tour. We didn't feel very positive about our touring future as a band after that tour. We still wanted to record — we weren't looking at the breakup of the band or anything — but it was a serious question mark after the word 'tour'. So we decided to take seven months off, which was by far the longest break we'd ever had. And the seven months really gave us a chance to separate ourselves from Rush, from the whole scene,

and we pursued other interests — most importantly, we touched base with our families. We'd only had three months before, which wasn't enough 'cause it takes you a month just to unwind, and then it takes you a month to wind up again, so that middle month is just not enough. It's not really a break. And after 15 years of doing this, we needed to get away from it.

"When we went in to do **Presto**, everybody was fired up. There was a whole new enthusiasm. Then, while we were at dinner one night, Neil said, 'Well, I guess we have to talk about doing a tour,' and we all thought, 'Oh, No!' We all enjoy playing live, but it's the touring that becomes boring and tedious, and it seems harder with every year. But that tour went great for us — it was by far the best tour we'd ever done. We had a really good time — the pacing was great, and the personnel were great — everything was fun again. We did a little shorter run than on some other tours, which left us wanting to do more. We could have done another month or so, but we felt the wanting of doing more and carrying that into our next record was more important than squeezing in more dates.

"When we went in to write **Roll The Bones**, everybody was fired up again, and we had that additional step along in our enthusiasm. We really regard this record as a rebirth for Rush. Now, we don't look at just the next record — we're looking at three, four, or five records into the future. I think, we're going to be around a long time."

I'm told this record came about quickly?

"Now that we've had a chance to record a lot of records, it's become an art for us really. We're learning to do it better in terms of songwriting, pre-production, preparation...everything. We took two months less on this record than we did on the past few records — definitely since **Grace Under Pressure**. I mean, we're happy if we finish a couple of days early, or if we're on time that's a relief. But to finish two months ahead is just unheard of for us. I take pride in our pre-production for how efficient it's become, so our recording has become a very positive thing.

"With this record, we went straight into recording after writing and rehearsing it, instead of taking the time off. It wasn't supposed to come out until January, but since we finished early we moved everything up a couple of months. Now that we

feel rejuvenated and better about everything, we're looking forward to this tour, which will probably go on until July, and then we'll take the summer off and start writing again in September or October of '92, with our next record out in the spring of '93. That's not bad for us."

Overall, is Rush still the most important thing?

"Hey, I mean, there are other things to life than playing in a rock band. Not that it's not any less important than it was, it's just that you have to find a balance in your life between what you do for a living, and some of the other things that maybe you never had the opportunity to do and would like to catch up on.

"Being home, in your environment, is important. Sure, you'd like to have more time off to go on vacation and do stuff. When you're on the road, you are so separated from the really important things in your life, like family and friends, and, to some degree, you're in a prison — sitting in a hotel, then sitting in a dressing room, then sitting on a bus — while working for two hours where you have to pack in everything, then repeating the same ritual over and over again. I mean, you're whole life is just that for months on months, and the price you pay for that, over a long period of time, is quite great. Although it sounds very luxurious to have three months off, I really do believe it's warranted."

What has age done to you?

"I think age has tempered us. I think there's a trade off — you're a little wiser, but a little less spirited. You look at things in a broader sense. I spend a little more time pursuing other things I like. In terms of the band, I think it may have tempered our music a little."

It doesn't seem to have affected your popularity. Actually, you

seem to be getting larger with this record, and appealing to more types of fans.

"Just the fact that we've been around for so long will mean that our audience is quite broad, from older guys to kids of 15. There's quite a big spread. It's because our audience tends to be quite interested in what the band is doing — they look at us as a long term thing, and keep up on the growth and development of the band. I think, for a lot of our audience today, they may agree with some things, and disagree with some things, but they buy each record 'cause they want to see what Rush is doing. It's a really great kind of evolution to see that we get this kind of response. I did an interview with a guy, and, at the end of it, he asked for an autographed picture, saying, 'It's for my Dad — he's a really big fan of yours.' (laughs). I think, we wrote something like, 'Grow up...leave us alone.' (laughs). This interviewer was in his mid-20s, so it's just an indication as to the wide spectrum of our audience. We have fans who have been with us all the way.

"On the other hand, there were fans that after **2112**, or **Hemispheres**, decided or perceived that we were moving into a much more commercial or poppy vein — something less hard — and they kinda dropped the band at that point. Well...that's the way it goes. All I can say is that we're happy with our progression and change, and that progression is important to us. We're not going to keep one segment of our audience happy by just playing what they want to hear — that's not what we're all about. If we make a record that we love, and everyone hates, we're going to stand by that record. It doesn't matter to us. It may be the end of the band as far as making a living (laughs), but we'll feel we've done the right thing, and that's what we've always done. I feel that's part of the appeal of Rush."

Roll The Bones entered Billboard at #3, your highest ever. What do you attribute this to?

"It comes in strongly because our audience is waiting for our record to be released, and they all go out and buy it. After about a month or six weeks, we've sold the majority of our records. Then, it's important for us to get out on the road and support it live. It's great to know our base is so strong."

Radio seems to be a major player in your rising popularity (their latest single, "Ghost Of A Chance", hit #1 on US rock radio).

"I'm not sure why this is. Either our songs are more radio playable, or else we've entered that stage where we're considered a living legend kind of band. We haven't made any changes in the band, and we still do the things we've always done, and we're not a high profile act — there's no image to the band per se — so maybe, grudgingly (laughs), a lot of these radio stations are feeling sorry for us, like 'They've slugged it out all these years, so we'll give them a break' (laughs)."

Your band is one of the first rock acts to utilize technology. How, from your point of view, has it affected Rush?

"I think that we've always been on the leading edge of technology. Anything new that comes out we've always been first to try to get into it, or utilize it in the band. For us, it goes back to a long time ago when we thought about adding a fourth member to the band to give us texture. But we decided we had a couple of feet that weren't too busy, so we opted for that. Now, of course, with the advent of samplers, it's expanded our ability to reproduce our records live much more accurately. Since we've taken some steps in the past to develop our sound utilizing keyboards, I think it's important for us to be able to bring it to the fans live. It's a disappointment to me to see a band live and not see them do their songs as close as possible to their record."

Do you feel you, as the guitarist, got lost in the technology, especially the heavy introduction of keyboards?

"Yeah. **Signals** was a disappointing record from the aspect of my role in the band. We tried to bring in the keyboards to a more predominant position, and I feel the guitar on that record suffered in some places. With **Power Windows** that was difficult, too. I'd worked out guitar parts, but, unfortunately, when we got down to recording it the keyboards were all done first, and they took up so much of the

GEDDY LEE

pic: Ron Boudreau

space that my guitar had no room. It was really a struggle. With Hold Your Fire, we didn't want to take that same route. But, unfortunately again, the keyboards were recorded again first due to scheduling, but this time out we were able to eliminate some of it and when we got to mixing it my guitar came through. I'd made sure that I was better prepared for that record. When we put Presto and Roll The Bones together, especially Roll The Bones, we knew that the keyboards were definitely going to be in the back picture. When we wrote those records, we did everything on the guitar and bass, and then we used the keyboards to enhance everything."

What was different in the past from now in Rush's sound?

"Our sound was more open before, and our attitude was different too. If there was a solo, there wasn't a rhythm guitar under it; if there was a keyboard part, there was never bass. So there was a much more open feel. You have to take into consideration the differences in the recording techniques of the mid-70's compared to now. Things are much more produced now — we look for a bigger, more lush sound now — which in some ways we got away from with this new record."

Being that you're basically a guitar / bass / drums band with keys added, would you consider yourself a metal band?

"It's tough to categorize us. We've never considered ourselves



pic: Ron Boudreau

a metal band, but we were influenced a lot by the first metal bands from the '60s and '70s, like Deep Purple and Zeppelin, of course. We've always been more of a hard rock band. Of course now, with bands like Guns 'n' Roses, metal is the current thing."

You did receive the 1991 Juno for "Best Hard Rock/Heavy Metal Band" (and are nominated for the '92 Junos in the same category, one they'll likely win).

"I'm not sure why we were on that list for the Junos. I guess that category was brought in to cover a certain spectrum of music, and maybe that's where we may more closely fit in, but we're not really the type of band that fits into any typecast criteria category. It's also weird 'cause we don't spend too much of our time in Canada touring — it's way too expensive. We spend 90 percent of our time south of the border."

One thing I've always considered Rush to be is truly unique, and your playing style one of a kind. Is this a conscious effort?

"My aim has always been to be unique. Playing in this band, as a three piece, my role has always been to fill in a lot of space, so I try to structure my chords into chords which are quite broad or suspended, so that they take up a little more room, so that's how my style developed. There are a lot of other guitarists who are copied all the time 'cause they're the big thing, but I think the guitarists of the '80s and '90s have swung into that technological way of playing, like Eddie Van Halen began. In most ways that's good. There's always the argument that there's less feeling in this, but I don't know about this."

Do you feel you have a large musician following?

"Sure. A lot of our audience are musicians. It's rewarding to know that you've influenced people to the point where they'd like to play like you play, wanting to be like you. In those terms, it's rewarding. But I don't give it much thought — it's kinda embarrassing."

Do you miss ripping out like you used to?

"I figure I rip now on albums like I want to rip on them. There's a lot of guitar work on this album — a lot of it was taken off of our 8-track from the writing stage and just flown in. Two of the solos, from 'Ghost Of A Chance' and 'Bravado', are among my top all time favourite solos I've ever done on all our records, and they were just done on one take on the 8-track. There's a spontaneity and feel to them that, even if I could play them 10 times over, it wouldn't have mattered. Stuff like this I feel really good about. I don't feel I have to show off. I can't possibly compete with these guys who are 100 times faster than me. It makes no sense. There's a great joke here — 'How many guys does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Six: one to screw in the light bulb, and five others watching saying, 'I can do that.' It's so true — most guitarists are like that."

Live your guitar sounds just like in the studio.

"That's part of being spoiled by recording a lot. In the studio, you get to play with everything, and it's right there. So live I try to capture the way I sound in the studio through the use of effects. I've developed my sound so that live it's quite similar to what's on the record."

Because you're respected musicians, you seem to attract mostly guys to your shows.

"Our audience is mostly male, and 99 percent of the girls in the audience were forced into going there because their boyfriend dragged them along. With Presto, there was a larger female audience, and this was something very strange to us. Maybe it was the amount of airplay we got. Maybe we'll get the same with this record. We're not an appealing band to look at — we're all older guys. We're not cute. But because the emphasis has always been on the music for us, I would guess that most of the female audience that comes to see us is mostly because of the music."

How fanatic are your fans?

"Very! We often read mail from people who are very keen and into the music and lyrics, and then there's a whole other faction who think that we wrote every song for them, and that's unfortunate (laughs) — 'Hey, buddy, get a life! It's only a song and music.' It's very strange. There's a surprising number of crazy people."

Maybe they analyse your lyrics so much because you, Geddy, and Neil come off as very mysterious to many people 'cause little is known about your private life?

"We try to be very private — we cherish it. When we're on the road and someone is in the hotel lobby and they want an autograph, or to talk to you, I'll take the time. But, at home, it's a different world. We're very protective about our privacy, unless you want to live that rock n' roll lifestyle. We don't hang out at clubs — we're not into posing (laughs) — we were never like that. In our earlier days, we were much wilder than now, but you can bounce back from that. It's a different world for us now. Music has always been the important factor for us — it's not the fact that we're in a large band, or that we want to be 'rock stars'. It's always been the music that has fed us all these years. We take this very seriously, and sometimes I feel the band has the image of being super serious. But we're not — I mean, we spend 80 percent of our time together laughing, joking, and goofing around, like most people. But when it comes to our writing, recording, producing, and staging we take that very, very seriously. We set a standard for ourselves and we try to live up to that. Everything outside of that is off limits."

"We're not darlings of the industry either for this. We're not easy to get along with. We don't go out and do things for the press, or to pose — we're very low profile. It's more attractive to the industry to have a band or artist with a more high profile."

Since you're famous you must get to meet your heroes, especially other guitarists?

"I don't like meeting the people who influenced me as a guitarist 'cause sometimes they're really nice, but, other times, they're not, and it shatters my image of what I thought they were. Sometimes, it's better not to meet people who you look up to in that respect. I've had my times too where I was rude and felt really bad about it. On the Hold Your Fire tour, I was at a club, and I'd drunk too much, and I started insulting a guy who was really into the band, and really respected me. The next day I felt bad — so much so that I phoned and left an apologetic message for him. To this day, it's haunted me, 'cause I think of how I shattered his image of me or us. I'm sure he went, 'Fuck them,' after that. I'm not a rude person, but this night I was. I've never done that before, or since. I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time, and the alcohol took over."

Let's get to another topic that is interesting with your band, and that's videos. You began at a time when video wasn't used for marketing a band. How do you feel about them now?

"Our videos have almost always been performance orientated.

It's a difficult thing, to be honest with you, and, this is a personal opinion, I don't like them. I don't like doing them, or the idea of them. I find them annoying. I don't like what video has done to music, and what it's done to the whole industry. It's suffocated so many bands that have talent. You have to do them now — record companies rely on them to do most of their advertising. For many, it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to do a video, and if someone at Much or MTV finds it not to their liking, then they can prevent it from being played, which means your money and time is down the drain. I don't like it at all."

Is it fair to say that Rush 'made it' the old fashioned way?

"Yeah (laughs). We had the benefit of playing on three or four act shows, getting 20-minutes to show our stuff, and then coming back and getting a better spot for more time, until we moved up to headline status. We also grew from doing clubs to 3,500 seat halls, to 7,000 seat halls, to 15,000 plus arenas. We were able to develop slowly and steadily, which really doesn't exist nowadays. The bills going out have to be monster, or else people would rather sit at home and watch a video. A lot of these bands that open up shows, like Skid Row, are opening acts despite selling millions of records. I mean, we opened up shows in order to sell records — that's how we got our sales. And that

kind of fertile ground doesn't exist for young bands, and that has a lot to do with video. You get a band with very little talent or interest in the way of music, but they look good and they get a good video director and budget, and girls with big tits, and they're going to be big stars. Where's the justice in that?"

Would you ever want to return to your roots and play again in a club?

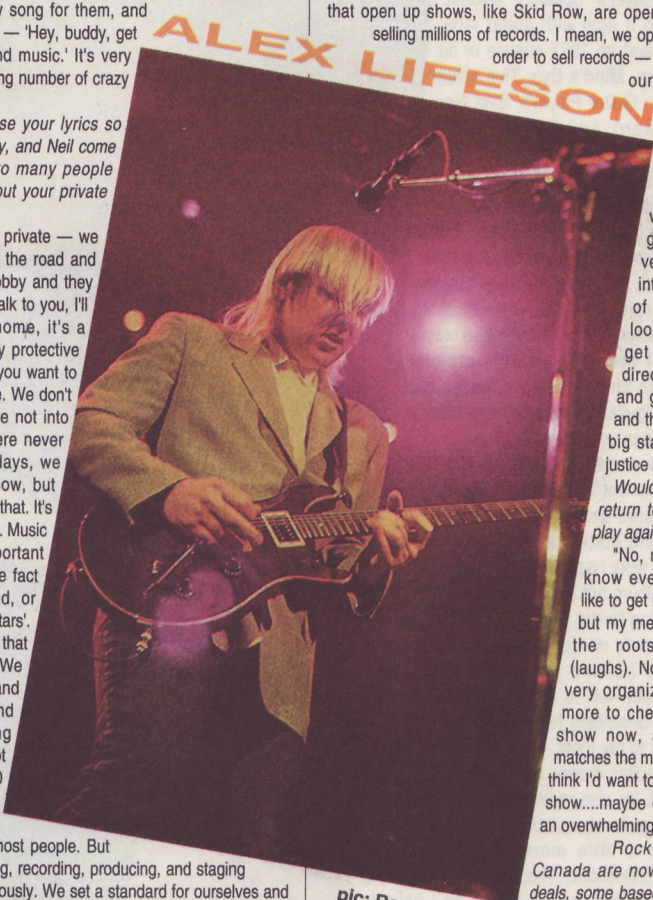
"No, not particularly. I know everyone says, 'I'd like to get back to my roots,' but my memories were that the roots were tough (laughs). Now, everything is very organized, and there's more to chew on at a Rush show now, and, I think, it matches the music better. I don't think I'd want to return to a small show....maybe once, but it's not an overwhelming desire."

Rock bands from Canada are now getting record deals, some based in the US. How do you feel about the chances for a Canadian rock act today?

"They may be getting record deals now, but where they go from there is a tough one. Canada's a small country, and it really doesn't get behind its artists, so the US is important. For six years, we played clubs and we released our first record independently, and we had really good local success from it, but we would have gotten nowhere if we hadn't gotten recognition in the US. Once we got that the whole perception by our country on the band changed — suddenly we were big international stars. Some good opportunities and luck came our way. We were 'discovered' by our first record being sent down to a US radio station, where we got big phone ins, so the DJ turned it on to a US company, and, within days, we had a US deal and an American tour. And when this door came open, we took advantage of it and worked very hard. It's a very, very tough border to cross, but you have to get support from that market."

So what can you, as a successful veteran of this business, tell a young act today trying to 'make it'?

"All you can do is persevere, hone your skills, and go for it and try. And maybe with a lucky break, and with someone who's willing to put a lot of time and effort into your band to get you known, and get a good deal, you may get a chance. It's not easy."



pic: Ron Boudreau

