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**Alex Lifeson
reveals "Counterparts"!**

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rush

Story by: DREW MASTERS



In 1994, Canadian supergroup **Rush** will celebrate its 20th year together with the lineup of guitarist **Alex Lifeson**, bassist **Geddy Lee**, and drummer **Neil Peart**. In actuality, Lifeson and Lee have been together for almost 25 years. An astonishing feat of endurance, and of glorious musical genius.

None of this would be possible if the three ingredients of Rush weren't perfect **Counterparts** — the title of its 19th album in 19 years, and its 15th studio album. *Counterparts* shows Rush returning to its founding basis of guitar/bass/drum, and becoming less dependent on technology. This can be heard throughout, from the songwriting, to the performance, to the production. Yet, while Rush has rediscovered its formative root, they are still evolving ever forward — an avant-garde organicness that only Rush can produce with integrity.

The term 'counterparts' is described as both "duplicate" and "opposite" — a definition that so intrigued lyricist Neil Peart that he contemplated to himself, as narrated in their recent bio written by Peart, "considered in this way, contraries are reflections of each other, and not necessarily contradictions." In terms of Rush, as individuals on and off the stage, this term comes clearly into focus in its appropriate usage.

We spoke with Alex Lifeson on the topic of *Counterparts*, and all other aspects which touch these living legend's lives.

Here are his comments:

Counterparts is a great record, and it's great to see the emphasis shifted back to the guitar.

"Yeah, we've kinda shifted the interest back to the guitar. We've been talking about moving in that direction for quite a while, but certainly with this one we made a concerted effort to do that. The keyboards are much deeper in the mix. It was to sort of capture an energy that we used to have when it was more of a concentrated three-piece. I recorded all the guitars in the studio, which was a change. I hadn't done that in a long time, and I really got off on it. It's not a particularly efficient environment, but that's the whole point why you *should* do it. You get out there and the guitar is vibrating, and it's tough to control the feedback. And it's really loud, and your headphones sound terrible, you can't hear anything because the guitar's so loud — it's fantastic! You just really get a great buzz from it."

"I was very uncomfortable with the recording for the first few days. I didn't feel that I could get the kind of performance I wanted to, only because I had so much trouble monitoring what I was playing to. But once I settled in and had certain things right — the bass drums and snare, for instance, were up really loud, and I'd gotten a very strange kind of balance, but a good working balance — then I got right into it. And it was very inspirational. The fact that you feel the guitar vibrating against your body makes you feel that you're really connected to it."

You seem to have gotten back to some of the old sounds that you used to use. "Double Agent" sounds like "2112" in spots.

"I suppose it was in some ways very similar to the way we recorded it. Back then I had an amp I turned up as far as it would go and played. We stuck a couple of mics in front of it, turned the amp on, plugged the guitar in, and played. In terms of the way it was recorded, it was the same."

Like so many others, I learned to play guitar to your music. But over the last few records it's been great listening, but it hasn't inspired me to learn a few new riffs. With this new album, I've found that I want to pick up my guitar and learn a few of your riffs again. Is the role as guitar hero something you've always looked to?

"You know, I've always wanted to. That's always been my particular goal, but it's an area I've had to share over the development of the band and the music that we've made. And this is, I guess, the first time in probably over 10 or 12 years, since 'Moving Pictures,' that it was a decided effort that the guitar would carry the weight and play the more predominant role. It's a lot more satisfying for me as I can develop what I want to do. And there's an immediacy about this record that you feel comfortable with right off first listen. Our other records take a few listens to get into the essence of them — musically, lyrically. It really takes a required effort. Whereas with this record you put it on and there's something about the way it sounds, the way the songs are, the melodies, maybe the riffs, that draws you in immediately. Maybe that's why you want to pick up the guitar?"

Do you feel that Rush is getting back to basics?

"In an energy sense, more than anything else, but not from the songwriting point of view. Maybe the songs are in some ways more basic structurally, but there is still a lot of emphasis on the

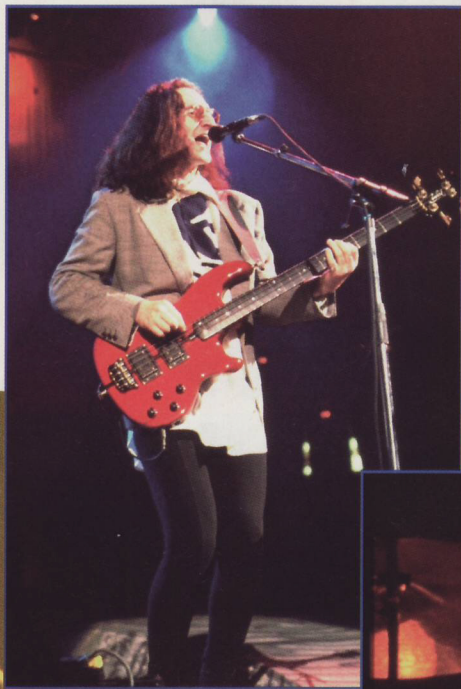
way they're built, and on dynamics and where the songs go. 'Roll The Bones' sounded so much tougher live than in the studio, which is what we really wanted to capture with these songs on this record — to make sure it had that kind of impact. Just by the nature of the way we recorded it using an engineer whose particular style is very straightforward — I mean he just stuck the mics up and hit the record button in a very straight approach in terms of signal path from the instrument to the tape — that really helped us to capture that size and style."

On your last album, Roll The Bones, you were very successful saleswise, and with radio. You could have stuck to that pattern of sound, but you've taken a different route. Do you feel that this is in any way taking a risk?

"No, I don't really, because I think 'Roll The Bones' benefitted from the same sort of direction. With 'Presto' we started to go more in this direction. I don't think this was taking a risk for us. This was a very satisfying record to make in that we just played out, and we really felt good about it. There was that energy that perhaps we weren't lacking but we kind of lost a little bit of over the years, in that we'd concentrated so much on other aspects of our songwriting and the way we make a record, that we kind of forgot some of that useful energy of just getting in a room and playing."

Was it a difficult record to write, or did it come naturally?

"Once we got going it came quite naturally. We used to collect all these little bits and pieces from jams on tour and kind of pull them out and try to write songs around them, or use them as starting points or places to go to. With this record we really didn't use much of that catalogue. Everything was kind of off the floor. I think Ged and I had probably greater emotional ups and downs writing this record than any other record that we've done. There were certainly external pressures at the time — personal personal things, not even to do with each other. In terms of songwriting we were pretty unified in terms of direction. There is always a little bit of pushing and pulling when you work in this kind of situation, but I think the result shows that we got over any hurdles that we may have felt. I don't think without a little bit of that roller coaster ride that you can't really come out with music that is emotional."



Peter Collins returned as your producer. Why the change from Rupert Hine?

"Rupert was great to work with, especially on 'Presto.' He lead us in a direction that had more emphasis on just the feel, rather than on the technical aspect. I think it's kind of what we needed. His idea basically was play it and if it *feels* good then it is good. Don't worry if two notes are not absolutely right on the beat in the whole song. That is something that we always got caught up on — being extremely accurate, to the point of being maybe anal retentive at times (laughs). With 'Roll The Bones' we just felt like we had gone as far as we could with Rupert. The idea really for the last while has been to use different producers on each record, but we get comfortable with a guy and we stick with him, when what we need to do is to keep trying different people because it really stimulates you in different ways. Bringing Peter back was great. He's a wonderful music producer who loves music. He's not interested in the technical end of recording — he loves the song. When we talked to him he was so enthusiastic to work with us, and we were enthusiastic to work with him again. He takes all the pressure and worry off being in the studio, and it allows you to think about what you're doing in musical terms. Not only is he a wonderful person to work with, he's a great friend on top of it, so that makes things even more comfortable."

Did you find that there was an aspect to doing the record more raw again that you missed from before?

"It's so hard, you know, 'cause you're so focused on it. At the writing stage we spend six, eight weeks writing the material and going through the different levels of arrangement, pre-production — that's what we're used to. For those two months we're used to a very basic rendering of what the song is going to be. When you move onto the next level when you start the actual recording the songs are so ingrained that it's very hard to be objective about it. I like the way this recording went because it was simple, yet it seemed fresh. But I don't know if it really seemed that different when we were doing it. When I listen to the results, yes, I can hear the differences and I can understand why they're there, and why it is the way it is. But at the time I don't think any of us really noticed it. There was a day-to-day feeling that the songs were sounding quite tough, and the sounds themselves were very immediate, stripped out, and in-your-face. But it's such an untrue listening environment until the end when you start mixing."

Had you planned on putting the record out at an earlier date?

"We had talked about it. If we released it earlier it would have meant that we would have had to go on the road a little earlier, and no one was really that keen on that. We had some apprehensions about sitting on it for as long as we have — we finished it in July, and to release it now just seems like a long, long time. But once you got away from it, and didn't really think about it, it didn't seem that long."

How did your last tour for Roll The Bones go?

"The last tour was excellent, though it was a little bit on the longish side — it was almost nine months long, and on the last run we travelled something like 13,000 miles in six weeks — but that's after coming from a very short tour for 'Presto.' It was a bit of a grind, but we enjoyed it a lot. We made some changes, in terms of

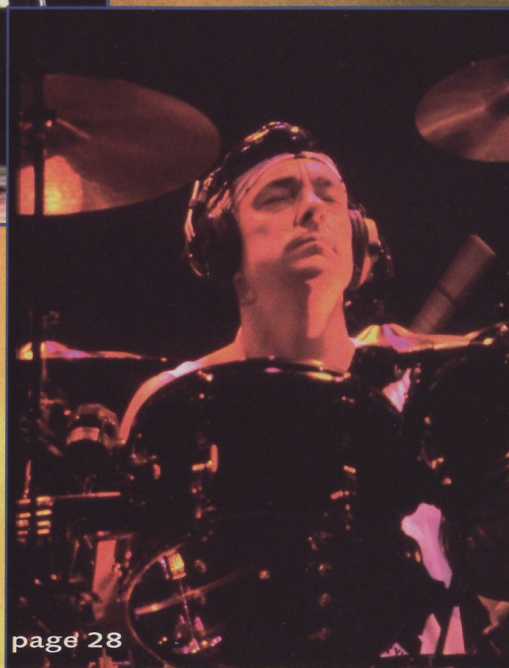


R U S H

L: Alex Lifeson

Top: Geddy Lee

R: Neil Peart



lighting and presentation of the band, that was quite positive — we put more emphasis on us standing on stage playing, rather than the total presentation of lights and band and the whole thing. So we learned something from that."

Will the tour for Counterparts be a short or long one?

"It's hard to say at this point. I know we've booked a couple of legs up until the middle of January, so there's a couple of months done. Long term plans, I'm not sure (a Canadian tour is possible for spring). We're going to record as many shows as we can on the next tour — there is pretty solid talk about doing a live album possibly for the next record, which frees us up to do some other things and possibly come back sooner, rather than waiting two years to come back on the road. We have talked about doing a 'Counterparts / 20th Anniversary' tour. Perhaps on that tour what we'd do is do something from every album, which would be fun. It would have to be an evening with Rush, as I don't think we'd have an opening act under those conditions. We'd really make it a complete presentation through video and the film stuff that we've always used, as well as the music itself to give a history of the band. That would be a nice way to approach it. Yeah, we could even come out in kimonos — *not!* (laughs). We've basically discussed concept, and I would think that it would probably be late fall of next year or possibly January or February of 1995. The idea would be to tour on this album, take a bit of a break, mix the live album, and come back out and continue for however long we decide to go."

How difficult is it to pick out a live set for Rush?

"It's very, very difficult. We've kind of made an effort to cut back on the new material that we're playing, in that rather than having eight or ten songs on a record and playing 80 percent of them, we're really cutting back and playing maybe half, or less than half, of the number of songs from a new release so that we can get a fairly balanced set without getting into a three hour show."

You picked up a new audience with your last album. Did you notice this at any of the shows?

"There is such a spread in our audience. It's always been interesting to see the proportion of male to female in our audience, as it's changed a little bit. There seem to be more females interested in our music — it must be the music, it certainly can't be our fabulous good looks (laughs). The fact that we had Primus out on the last tour for as long as we did also helped to bring in a different audience that perhaps wouldn't normally go to a Rush concert — you know, sort of a more alternative audience. What makes Alice In Chains, Nirvana, and Pearl Jam such popular bands is that their audience is into their music first. And they're all players, they all want to be players. It's most gratifying to hear them cite us as an influence on them. And I think perhaps maybe their audience will come to look at Rush as connected that way, and maybe find something interesting in what we do."

Do you feel somewhat akin to that scene because it's similar to your early roots as a band?

"Very much so. Really, we've always gone kind of against the grain and done things our way. Whether you like it or not, it's worked for us. We've managed to stay together for a long time, we're making the music that we want to make, and not the music anyone else wants us to make. And we've had total control of that. Our goal was always to play the best we can play — that's been the goal since the beginning. And we've managed to keep that standard up. I think for a lot of these new bands they're perhaps looking to those same standards and goals. The quality of musicianship has increased so much over the last few years 'cause there's that real desire to be a better player."

How have the changing times affected you? All through these 20 years, when something comes up and music changes, do you take a few things in, or do you try to resist it?

"I think we kind of absorb it subliminally. Now the kind of music that we listen to is more the alternative stuff, so you can't help but be influenced by it. Certainly in our case we've been around for so long, and we've gone through so many different styles if you will, over the last 20 years, that it's just kind of come full circle. It's refreshing to hear that these bands have a certain amount of interest in the way they focus and develop as musicians. It's a great thing to feed off. You can't help but be moved by whatever is happening, or by whatever you're listening to. We're not resistant to it, but we don't go out and make an effort to be influenced by it."

Rush is more popular than ever. Do you feel that your popularity is still growing?

"To be really honest with you, I don't think about it. I don't think any of us do. I mean, we worked on this record for about six months, and then we finished it, and then I just really concentrated on my backswing and made sure I got through the ball (laughs). Sure, when we go back to work we do, but I don't know how much of our thinking time is devoted to wondering about those sort of things."

You refer a lot to being in the band as work. How much is work and how much is fun? Is there a balance there, or is it really tedious?

"Yeah, it's still fun. I think we learned that from the last two or three tours, for me primarily the last tour — how to do it and not make it feel like work. We got to the point where touring in itself was work. There's a great labour of love in the studio where making records requires so much concentration and effort, but none of us would ever consider it as hard work because we really love doing it and it's very rewarding. Touring has always been the really tough thing. You get really tired of touring very quickly. It's incredibly boring. Granted the two hours you're on stage is very exciting, but the 22 hours that you have to wait to get on stage can be really tedious, and that's when you really feel that it's work. Certainly in the early days it's exciting, it's a dream come true. You live for every second of it. But after so many years it's really not quite the same."

Rush spends a lot of time outside of Canada in many aspects, but you choose to record in Canada. Why?

"We've recorded elsewhere, but the thing is now we'd rather be home. If we record at home we can have dinner with our families. You know, take the weekends off as opposed to sitting in some other country not doing anything. I think everybody is in a better frame of mind doing it this way. What's the point in going anywhere when these days you can make a great record in your basement? So it's not a question of finding a better studio than one you might have here."

Any favourite songs on the record?

"'Cold Fire' is really growing on me. 'Stick It Out' I always really liked, I really like the riff it really sticks out. I can't wait to play that live. I love 'em all (laughs). Hopefully, in the near future I won't 'cause that drives you to try something else or do better. At this point I'm having a pretty good love affair with them."

Do you think that Counterpoint is a turning point in your career, where this is the way that your records are going to be done more often?

"Well, quite possibly. It was very satisfying to record, and it's very satisfying to listen to. We never really know until we get into the studio what we're going to do. So whether it will continue in this form, I'm really not sure, but I would speculate that we would."

Even as music has changed over the years, Rush has remained a staple, especially to musicians. Is this because there is nothing else out there for them to grasp onto with this type of skill, integrity and quality?

"The music has always been really important. We do have a high level of integrity and a high level of standards. And there's no excess amount of pressure that can we put on ourselves to produce the best that we can. I don't know if it's a question of experience in that we've been around, or that we've been players for a long time. Certainly there's lots of bands around that are very good and they're doing the same sort of musical things. It's tough to be objective about something like that."

It's becoming more and more noticeable that bands are being influenced by you. Are you seeing this? Do you hear it when listening to music?

"Sometimes I do. Sometimes I hear some things and it makes me smile. Our influence is more direct now than it was maybe 10 years or five years ago, but it's still very subliminal. Dream Theater is a special exception. They tend to sound a little bit more like us than other bands that have been influenced by us, but, at the same time, they really have locked into that period of our longer songs and the way we recorded and sounded. I'm flattered that somebody would do that. I think that they are all great players and they will develop into a great band."

What keeps Rush going?

"There's this synergy that works between the three of us. You know, it's a tough one. We get along well, we're good friends, we enjoy doing what we do, to a point. I think, quite honestly, at this point we do enjoy our time off and getting away from the whole thing, now and again. But once you're on the road, once you're standing on stage and playing, there's nothing like it, and I think we all share that. It's so ingrained in us as individuals that we enjoy doing it that much. It's a special thing. We're lucky — in a lot of ways we're similar, and in a lot of ways we're dissimilar. That combination forms to make one really positive thing, and keeps us in balance."

20 years is pretty incredible. How long will Rush continue?

"Who knows. I never expected to be here 20 years ago. I thought at first that if we could go for five years and make as many as five or six records that would be a fantastic run. And here we are 20 years, and it just keeps going. But you never know what can happen. I think the longer you're at something the easier it becomes to maybe not want to do it. Don't take that as a prelude to breaking up or anything like that, but there are a lot of things

that we're all interested in, and a lot of things that we'd like to do, and right now we're going through this almost renaissance with our sound and playing and it's really exciting for us. We're pumped! We're really looking forward to doing a lot of things musically, but at the same time you never know what tomorrow brings."



RUSH DISCOGRAPHY

RUSH • 1974
FLY BY NIGHT • 1975
CARESS OF STEEL • 1975
2112 • 1976
ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE • 1976
A FAREWELL TO KINGS • 1977
HEMISPHERES • 1978
PERMANENT WAVES • 1980
MOVING PICTURES • 1981
EXIT...STAGE LEFT • 1981
SIGNALS • 1982
GRACE UNDER PRESSURE • 1984
POWER WINDOWS • 1985
HOLD YOUR FIRE • 1987
A SHOW OF HANDS • 1989
PRESTO • 1989
CHRONICLES • 1990
ROLL THE BONES • 1991
COUNTERPARTS • 1993

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