



RUSH

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By Rob Bowman

Originally coming together in 1968 as a power trio in a Toronto suburb, the members of Rush went on to become the godfathers of progressive metal. As the band evolved, settling on longtime bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee, guitarist Alex Lifeson, and drummer Neil Peart, Rush combined the signature traits of progressive rock with a prototypical heavy-metal sound. Today, Rush is cited as an influence by such diverse bands as Metallica, Foo Fighters, Nine Inch Nails, Rage Against the Machine, Primus, Pantera, Tool, Death Cab for Cutie, the Mars Volta, the Smashing Pumpkins, Queensryche, and Dream Theatre. Metallica's Kirk Hammett calls Rush "the high priests of conceptual rock."

With an audience base consisting of an inordinate number of players, Lee, Lifeson, and Peart are regularly featured in musicians' magazines like *Bass Player*, *Guitar World*, and *Modern Drummer*, commonly winning year-end awards determined by readers' votes. Along the way, their twenty studio and nine live albums have collectively sold more than forty-five million copies; only the Rolling Stones and the Beatles have garnered more consecutive gold and platinum albums in the U.S. than Rush's twenty-four.

During their first several years as recording artists, Rush routinely logged two hundred or more gigs a year, regularly traversing the hinterlands of Canada and America, finding their initial audience in their native Ontario and the Midwest Rust Belt. Their compositional style has been marked by extreme complexity, as the band members constantly challenge themselves as players. Common techniques include the use of asymmetrical time signatures, alternating meters, polymeter, syncopated stop-time passages, and the construction of phrases of uneven lengths (where an eight-bar phrase will be followed by a seven- or nine-bar phrase, for example). Especially in the first phase of their career, a number of songs were extended, multi-section epics; and drummer Neil Peart's lyrics often quoted or alluded to Shakespeare, Coleridge, Hemingway, and T.S. Eliot. For many of their fans, Rush has stood out for nearly forty years as a thinking man's band, both the music and the lyrics containing a depth that rewards focused attention over an extended period of time.

Alex Lifeson, Neil Peart, and Geddy Lee (clockwise from top left)



Lifeson and Lee onstage, 1977

The group's career has been marked by discipline, hard work, professionalism, and continuous growth. In the words of scholar Chris McDonald, Rush "changed, updated, or enlarged its musical style every two to four albums." Over the course of its career, McDonald noted, the group "combined the blunt-force power of hard rock with the disciplined complexity of classical music." While many of Rush's contemporaries have been happy to tour greatest-hits shows that barely nod to their most recent studio releases, Lee, Peart, and Lifeson have never been content to rest on past laurels. Their concerts have long been spectacles, featuring advanced lighting concepts, pyrotechnics, imaginative rear projections (often involving animation), and, for a few tours, fifty-foot-tall inflatable rabbits. In the midst of all this visual stimuli, Rush has always insisted on playing their most recent album as part of their live show. Fall 2012 was no exception, with the group performing three-plus-hour shows featuring virtually all of their twentieth album, *Clockwork Angels*.

Between 1968 and 1971, Rush underwent the typical suburban garage band story of gigging at high schools and church basements with a revolving cast of members, occasionally even playing as a four-piece. By 1971, membership had stabilized, with Geddy Lee (born Gary Lee Weinrib), Alex Lifeson (born Alex Zivojinovic), and drummer John Rutsey. When Ontario lowered the drinking age that

summer, from 21 to 18, it gave Rush a golden opportunity to develop its chops – moving from two high school dances a month to playing three or four sets, six nights a week, in bars.

Early influences included British-based blues and hard-rock groups Led Zeppelin, the Yardbirds, the Who, Cream, Jimi Hendrix, John Mayall, and Jeff Beck. In 1974, Rush released its first single, a cover of Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away," backed with a Lifeson-Lee original, "You Can't Fight It." The group followed up the now extremely rare 45 by self-financing the recording of a full album. After being rejected by every Canadian record company of any size, Rush elected to release the self-titled disc on its own Moon Records. Not surprising, it received local airplay in Toronto, but its big break came when Cleveland DJ Donna Halper fell in love with the album's closing song, "Working Man," and began to give it regular airplay on WMMS-FM. Cleveland's working-class population responded immediately, with many listeners phoning the station to ask if they were hearing a new album by Led Zeppelin. Word of the Cleveland phenomenon spread to Chicago, where Mercury Records literally worked out details to sign the group in one day.

Two weeks before Rush's first American tour, Rutsey decided to leave the band. Suffering from a number of health issues, Rutsey was also less than enamored with Lifeson and Lee's newfound interest in the progressive rock of British

groups such as Yes, King Crimson, Jethro Tull, and Genesis. With everyone deciding it was time for a change, Lifeson and Lee quickly auditioned a number of drummers. Fortunately for all concerned, St. Catharines, Ontario, native Neil Peart got the job. In the documentary *Beyond the Lighted Stage*, Lifeson fondly recalled Peart's audition: "He pounded the crap out of those drums. He played like Keith Moon and John Bonham at the same time. I was blown away."

Peart also turned out to be a bookworm with a highly developed vocabulary, and during that first tour Lifeson and Lee suggested the drummer try his hand at writing lyrics. Rising to the challenge, over the next couple of years Peart wrote songs about futuristic societies, romantic quests, and space travel, fueling extended compositions such as *Fly by Night's* "By-Tor & the Snow Dog" and *Caress of Steel's* "The Necromancer" and the side-long cut, "The Fountain of Lamneth." Although both albums represented tremendous growth in terms of recording quality and production values, *Caress of Steel* was a commercial failure.

Under intense pressure from both their record company and management to make a more commercial record, the three members of Rush dug in their heels and recorded *2112*. The title track was a seven-section concept piece loosely based on the libertarian writings of Ayn Rand, exploring questions of oppression and freedom. As Lee remembered, "We talked about how we would rather go down fighting than try to make the kind of record they wanted us to make. We made *2112* figuring everyone would hate it, but we were going to go out in a blaze of glory."

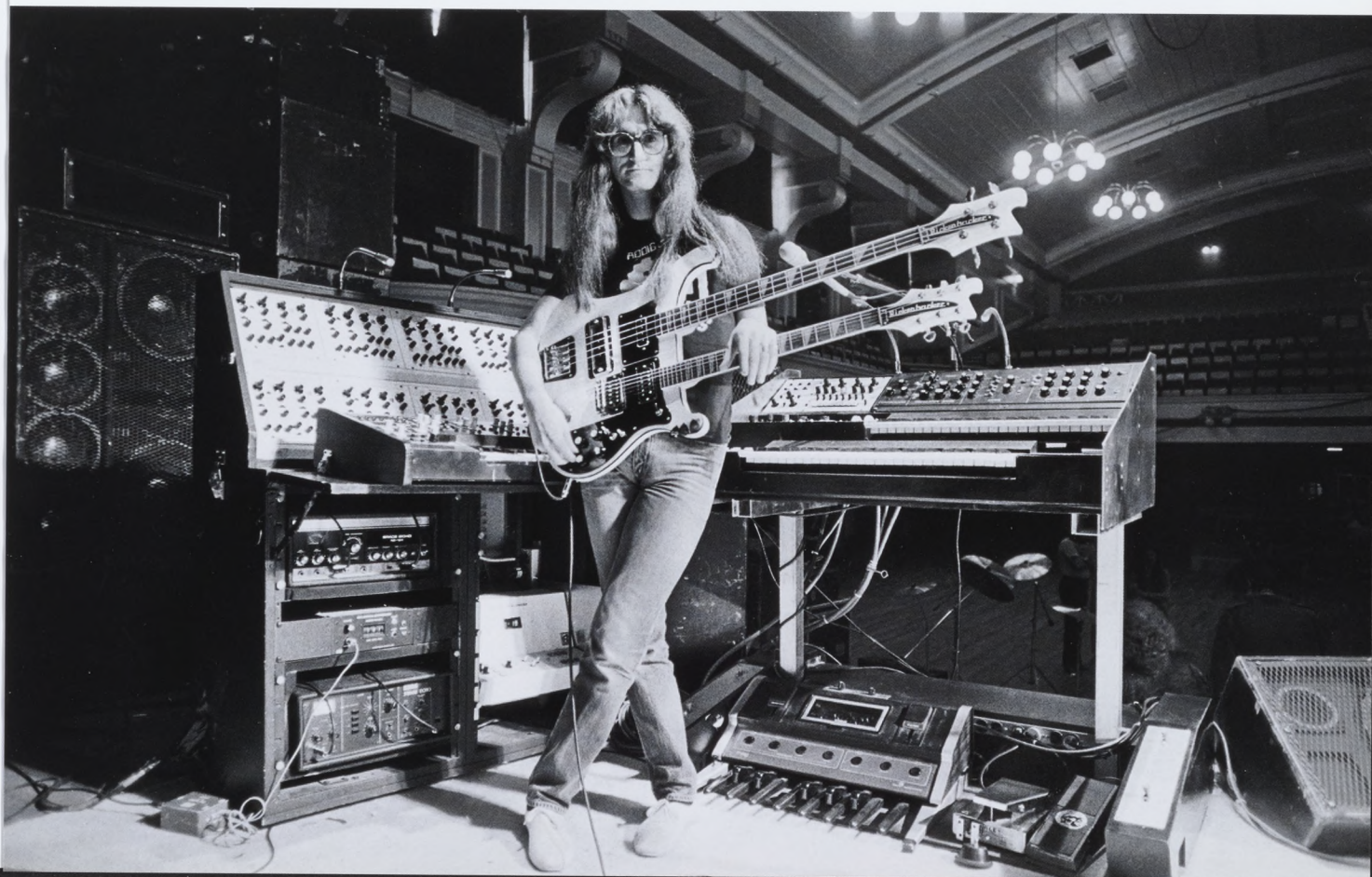


Peart at the drums, 1980

Released in 1976, *2112* reflected the group's maturing sound and included some of its heaviest compositions. Though Mercury initially panicked at having to market an album it deemed uncommercial, *2112* proved to be Rush's breakout record, going gold in the United States and platinum in Canada, and leading to the band's first European tour. As Lifeson told biographer Martin Popoff, "*2112* turned out to be our ticket to independence. After that, the record company said, 'Fine, do whatever you want.'"

Consolidating its newfound success with the double live album, *All the World's a Stage*, Rush followed *2112* with ever more complex studio albums, including *A Farewell to Kings* (1977) and the monumental *Hemispheres* (1978). Recorded at Rockfield Studios in Wales, both featured the now expected

Lee with gear galore, 1980



lengthy concept songs, complex time signature changes, unorthodox chord structures, and an increasingly extended sonic palette. Lifeson used classical and twelve-string guitars – as well as his usual arsenal of wailing electric guitars; Lee started playing synthesizer, using bass pedals whenever his hands were tied up with keyboard parts; and Peart added triangle, glockenspiel, wood blocks, a cowbell, timpani, and a gong to his battery of timbres. “We’d written material that was really a little beyond us, considering our level of musicianship,” recalled Lee. “That was the thing about Rush, we were always overreaching.”

The next LP, *Permanent Waves* (1980), represented a significant change in the group’s sound. Containing classic rock radio hits such as “Freewill” (with sections in both 13/4 and 4/4 time signatures) and “The Spirit of Radio,” it featured what were – for Rush – moderately shorter songs. Even more significant, “Freewill” was the last song on which Lee used his Steve Marriott/Robert Plant–influenced strained high-tenor vocals and instead opted to deploy a much more relaxed timbre based around his mid-range and lower voice. “As the music changed, it became more interesting for me to write melodies as opposed to shrieking,” opined Lee. In addition, Peart’s lyrics focused less on science fiction and fantasy material and instead explored humanistic and social issues, including themes such as individual will, the massification of society, the dangers of technology, and standing out from the crowd. *Permanent Waves* proved to be the group’s first U.S. Top Five album.

Moving Pictures, released in 1981 and featuring the hits “Tom Sawyer” and “Limelight,” went quadruple platinum in the United States, reaching Number Three. At this point,

Rush began headlining arena-size shows. “As I define it,” asserted Peart, “that was when Rush was [truly] born.” The album’s centerpiece, “The Camera Eye,” clocking in at just over eleven minutes, would be the group’s last extended composition for several years.

From 1982 with *Signals* through *Grace Under Pressure* (1984), *Power Windows* (1985), and *Hold Your Fire* (1987), Rush underwent a radical transformation. Influenced by bands such as Ultravox, keyboards and synths of all kinds became the dominant voice, which caused songs to become more melodic. “Synthesizers and technology became a way of sparking your creativity,” explained Lee. “I liked it because my need to write melodies is more satisfied on a keyboard. As a songwriter, you’re always looking for an angle to keep it fresh.” On *Grace Under Pressure*, Peart added Simmons electronic drums to his arsenal of effects. During this period, partially influenced by the Police, Rush began experimenting with the rhythms of reggae and ska.

With Lee’s synth work coming to the forefront, Lifeson began experimenting with a variety of processors, using his guitar more and more to create textures rather than to play ferocious metal-based leads. Onstage, Lee, Lifeson, and even Peart were all triggering sequencers via MIDI controllers, as the group fiercely maintained their aesthetic of playing virtually all the parts heard on the record onstage and in real time.

After *Hold Your Fire*, Rush began scaling back on their use of keyboards. Both *Presto* (1989) and *Roll the Bones* (1991) were produced by Rupert Hine. The latter included funk grooves and even a bit of hip-hop, while both featured Lifeson’s guitar more prominently in the arrangements. For

Lifeson and Lee, surrounded by the *Clockwork Angels* tour stage props



Counterparts (1993), Rush veered further toward more straight-ahead rock, with Lifeson soloing like a demon on fire on tracks such as the riff-laden “Stick It Out” and “Cut to the Chase.”

In 1994, Peart worked on a tribute album to jazz drummer Buddy Rich. Suitably inspired, and after two decades of performing with one of the biggest bands in the world, Peart decided to partially reinvent himself as a player, studying jazz drumming with master instructor Freddie Gruber. For some songs on the 1996 LP *Test for Echo*, Peart even switched the way he held his sticks, opting to use a traditional rather than a matched grip. That year, the group toured for the first time without an opening act, playing two sets every night, clocking in at about a three-hour show.

A year later, tragedy struck: Neil Peart’s daughter Selena was killed in a car accident. The following year, his wife died of cancer, and Rush’s career was effectively put on hold. While the three-CD *Different Stages* live album marked time, neither Lee nor Lifeson knew if Peart would ever be ready to record or tour again. It took a full five years, but in 2002, Rush returned with *Vapor Trails*, the band’s first work without a keyboard or synthesizer since the 1970s. Lifeson reportedly used fifty different guitars on the album, demonstrating supreme mastery at layering their various timbres. Interestingly, he played few solos, with much of his guitar work used to create atmospheres, soundscapes, and pads formerly played on keyboards.

Another three-CD live album, *Rush in Rio*, followed in 2003, while the group chose to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary as a recording unit with *Feedback*, an eight-track EP covering sixties rock classics by Blue Cheer, Buffalo Springfield, the Yardbirds, Cream, the Who, and Love. Since then, Rush has released only two studio albums, *Snakes and Arrows* in 2007 and the astonishing *Clockwork Angels* in 2012. The latter is a sixty-six-minute-long steampunk concept album, described in *Guitar World* as being as “daring, unconventional, and idiosyncratic as anything Rush has ever done.” Very few of Rush’s peers have continued to make such original and vital music nearly forty years into their career.

There are many reasons for the group’s long-lasting success. Rush has always insisted on total creative autonomy. No one from the record company is ever allowed into the studio or to hear the demos. Not only are all three members among the most technically proficient artists in rock history on their respective instruments, they each conceive of the role of their instruments in highly original ways. Formalists to the nth degree, Rush’s members re-create their recordings onstage with exacting precision and discipline, working through often-abrupt time changes, unorthodox chord progressions, unusual phrasing, and changes of key. As Chris McDonald observed, nearly all the details of their arrangements are treated as integral structural units, which from both Rush’s and their fans’ perspectives are not to be changed or omitted. In many respects, Rush’s music celebrates the rewards of effort, practice, and study.

In 1994, Rush was inducted into the Canadian Music Hall of Fame; in 1996, all three members received the Order

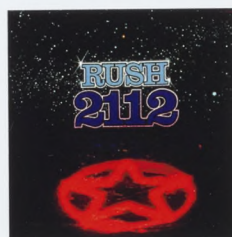
Selected Discography



Fly by Night
Mercury, 1975



Moving Pictures
Mercury, 1981



2112
Mercury, 1976



Power Windows
Mercury, 1985



Hemispheres
Mercury, 1978



Counterparts
Atlantic, 1993



Permanent Waves
Mercury, 1980



Clockwork Angels
Roadrunner, 2012

Rush’s music celebrates the rewards of effort, practice, and study.

of Canada; in 2010, the group was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame; and in March 2012, it received the Canadian Governor General Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement. After nearly forty years of making uncompromising original music on its own terms, insisting on continuous growth as players and songwriters, and appealing to millions of fans, tonight Rush rightfully assumes its place, in Lee’s words, “as the world’s most popular cult band” in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 🎸