

“...knowing that it’s been thirty years that we’ve been doing it, my god, that’s something in itself.”

# ALEX LIFESON OF RUSH



For more than thirty years, **RUSH** has been the standard bearer for modern progressive rock. The band started off as a heavy balls-to-the-wall rock and roll band in the vein of Led Zeppelin, and through the years their sound has bended but never broken with musical trends in the '70s, '80s, '90s and now the 2000's. The band is set to head out on the road on its thirtieth anniversary concert tour later this year, but fans have already gotten a taste of what it would be like. Last year, Rush embarked on their first tour in

nearly five years, which was commemorated on the *Rush In Rio* DVD and 3 CD set. The disc features career spanning material and captures the band's enthusiasm, according to Rush guitarist **Alex Lifeson**.

It was the band's first tour since the return of one of the best drummers in rock, **Neil Peart**, who rejoined the band after a prolonged absence to deal with the debilitating loss of his daughter and wife, both in a ten month period.

Neil eventually found love again and regained his passion for playing drums. Lifeson, who admitted that he thought the band could have been over, is still awed by Peart's recovery. The band came back with a vengeance with *Vapor Trails* in 2002, followed by a tour. Controversy still dogs the band. Guitarist Alex Lifeson was arrested and charged with four felonies and two misdemeanors in connection with a New Year's Eve incident at the Ritz-Carlton along with his son and his daughter-in-law. The results of that case are still to be determined.

Despite the setbacks, Rush still plans to tour on its thirtieth anniversary and in support of their latest live set *Rush In Rio*. In an interview conducted a few months before Lifeson's arrest, he talked to ARTISAN NEWS SERVICE about the album, the recovery of Peart, and their underrated sense of humor...all thirty years of it.

-- by Darren Davis

When did you decide to embark on the DVD CD concept of *Rush In Rio*?

"We decided to do the DVD back in, boy, I guess it was in May of 2002, just before the tour. We were in rehearsals and we really thought this would be a great opportunity for us to have something of this tour after all those difficult years of Neil's tragedy and all that we'd been through. It was amazing that we'd come to this point where we were touring again and had a new record out. And we really wanted to have a memento of that. And we started planning the DVD at that time. We targeted one of the final shows in the U.S. as the date to do that. We had some problems at the venue and decided to postpone it until we were in South America and do it at the last show in Rio."

The DVD debuted in movie theaters, but you didn't go. What was the hesitation?

"You know, I had spent a lot of time mixing it. That was sort of my responsibility. Geddy kind of looked after the video portion of it, making all those decisions. And (the engineer) Jimbo and I spent a lot of time in the studio, and Patrick the pro-tools operator, we were in there for two months -- eight weeks, seven days a week from noon to 4 in the morning. So, it really was quite a task. There was a lot of work to do. Not only the DVD. There was 5.1, there was the stereo, there was all the additional stuff that had to be done while we were in there. We had a few technical difficulties in the beginning, and it took a few weeks to sort those out and then we had to start all over again. There was a great deal of work involved, and we were certainly relieved when it was all done and very proud of what we had done. But to sit out in the audience, geez, I would have probably started taking notes, 'we should have done this, we should have done that, what about the...' It's like that with all of our records even. So I couldn't even imagine what it would be like in a theater."

It's weird because I think a lot of people think that it's not such a complicated process, but from what you're saying it's an arduous process?

"The major problem, I wouldn't say it's a problem, really, but the thing you have to look out for the most is continuity because it's a live show. And yeah, you'd think that 'OK you just put the mics up and you record it and that should be it. You shouldn't have to do anything,' but it's not quite like that. There's this whole level of sound shaping that is involved in any kind of mix, anywhere. What the mics are picking up aren't necessarily what something sounds like, and it needs to be shaped that way -- and the same thing is required in the studio. So once you do that shaping that and you've got things sounding right, it's a question of balance. And then it's a question of feeding in the audience so that there's a sense that this is live, and this is exciting, and this is not so much

about pristine sound off the stage this is about the excitement of the venue of the crowd's interaction with the band, and vice versa. All of those things.”

“It sounds simple, but it isn't. It takes a long time to really get it feeling like you think it should feel. I've never seen the band live, so I have to go by what I think we should sound like live and by what Jimbo, the engineer, from his experience would say is what we sound like live. So once you've done all of that, you've now created the mix for that song, and it's done. You move on to the next one, and you have to do that whole thing again. And it has to feel like it's from that same night and it's connected, and all of that. We really wanted to capture what it was like to sit in the twelfth row center at a Rush show, especially at a show like that in Rio where the audience is so overwhelmingly enthusiastic, and excited, and knowledgeable.”

What was the approach to the DVD?

“We looked at a lot of DVDs from U2, to Madonna, to Dave Matthews, and lots in between, and what struck me about almost all of them was how great they sounded they were very pristine and very clean, and it sounded like they were mixed from the band's point of view on stage, how they would want it to sound on stage, and maybe a little less so of what the audience hears. So our plan was to really push the audience since it was such a great audience, and really make it wrap around the whole experience.”

Can you compare doing this to doing *A Show Of Hands* (1988) and *Exit... Stage Left* (1981)?

“Well *A Show Of Hands* we'd come into the studio after an arduous tour. We were on the road for about eight months in the U.S. and then we went to Europe for a month and recorded and then we came home, had a week off, and then went into the studio to start mixing that. It was a lot more difficult. I would say our direct involvement was maybe a little less than what something like this was. We were just at a very burnt-out stage when we mixed that. It's just got a whole different feel. It's from a different generation. Coming from the '80s there was a whole different quality to the sound. I haven't listened to that record in a long time, and I remember the last time I listened to it, it sounded very much like I just described those DVDs, a very clean sound from the stage perspective. And I think we were guilty of that with *Exit... Stage Left* as well. *All The World's A Stage* was pretty raw. It was a small hall with a small audience and it caught the moment. When we mixed *Exit... Stage Left*, I think we went in the reverse and mixed it almost as a studio album, and fed the audience in here or there. So I think we sort of learned from all that to get to this point.”

How did you choose the set list for *Rush In Rio*?

“Yeah, Geddy and I sat down before the tour and listened to all our records. Not to every song, but most, and tried to come up with a set list that was pretty broad and covered just about everything. We paid close attention to some of

the websites and what fans were requesting as live songs. We certainly accepted some of those ideas, not all of them, but some of them, and we put a set list together that was probably about four and a half hours long! We chipped away and got it down to three hours. It's always a difficult task. But I think we came pretty close to having a really good set list on this tour."

I think the album is a statement from Neil that he's back...

"You're right it is a statement. When we started working on (the last album) *Vapor Trails*, Neil hadn't played his drums in about four years, other than one brief period about a year before where he set them up and he played for, I think, one day and it was too much of an emotional roller coaster for him. Here's a guy who practiced every day except Christmas and New Year's Day. He hadn't played in four years, basically and when he came into the studio to start work obviously you could tell he hadn't played and he's -- if not the best -- one of the best drummers in the world, rock drummers. And what he went through and how he pulled it all together and brought himself back from that darkness is just amazing. I sat there every night watching his drum solo, and I was just completely blown away by it. The guy is just incredible and to have brought himself around that level of focus and strength was really, really remarkable. I'm very proud of him."

The packaging is definitely a great insight to that time period of the band.

"Yeah I think so. I think the packaging... If you're talking about the packaging for the DVD and the CD, there's obviously a great sense of humor in there -- something that we're not really known for is certainly more of what we're like. His involvement shows that side of him that he can laugh and he can have a good time, and that he's come through his difficulties. He'll always be scarred by it, but the old Neil is back, I think, and there's a new one that's actually emerged that's actually enriched from the difficulties in his life."

Speaking of humor, the Rush website has a clip art animated comedy mini-show, the Tiki Bar? It's hilarious.

"That's the people at Unplugged. They put the website together. They're really terrific. They have a lot of fun. And they had this idea of the Big Al Tiki Bar, and we put that together. We shot about five episodes I believe, and there's more for the future. They do a great job, and they're very, very funny people over there."

Any plan for wider distribution?

"Well we hadn't thought of it, but maybe we'll plan on running a series, a weekly series. Maybe we'll give The Osbournes a run for their money."

Last question, does the last tour give you inspiration for the 30<sup>th</sup> inspiration tour?

“I had such a great time and it was so nice to play for our audience. Everybody... There was such a sense of celebration on the last tour, and it was nice to play in the summer, which is something that we had never done before. That communion, it felt really, really good, and I'd love to repeat that again. And knowing that it's been thirty years that we've been doing it, my god, that's something in itself.”

--- The End