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SHAWN COLVIN  
Falls free

LINKIN PARK  
On a roll

JOE WALSH  
Goes solo

# RUSH

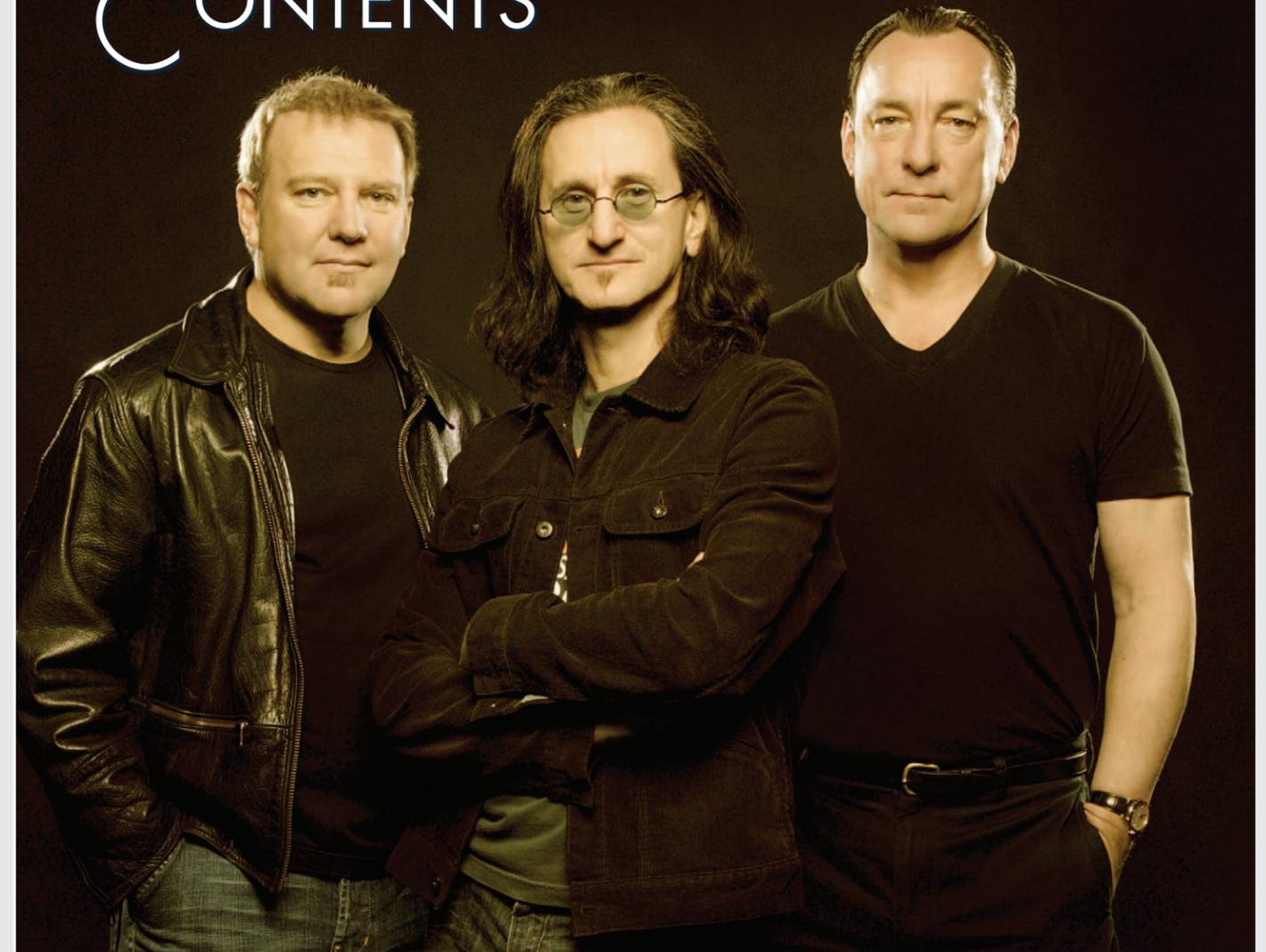
Can't stop thinking big

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# FULL STEAM

After four decades of rewriting rock history, Rush can't stop thinking big

By Chris Neal



**T**he Governor General's Performing Arts Award is the highest honor the nation of Canada can bestow upon its artists. The first recipient was Gweneth Lloyd, who co-founded the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. This year the honorees included Stratford Shakespeare Festival artistic director Des McNuff, classical pianist Janina Fialkowska, choreographer Paul-André Fortier and several other creative Canadians familiar with respectable, best-behavior black-tie affairs. Oh, and Rush.

"I have to wear a tux, so I guess I do feel a *little* respectable," says the veteran progressive rock band's guitarist Alex Lifeson, 58, with a chuckle. Later today he'll receive the award in a private ceremony in Ottawa alongside his bandmates, drummer Neil Peart, 59, and singer and bass player Geddy Lee, 58. Yesterday the band visited the Canadian House of Commons, where starstruck politicians self-consciously referenced Rush classics like "Fly by Night" during the parliamentary question period ("Where both sides of the bench yell at each other," Lifeson explains). Tomorrow the group and its fellow award winners will be feted at the National Arts Centre, where a children's choir will sing "The Spirit of Radio" and an orchestra will strike up "Tom Sawyer." "It's a surreal experience," says Lee. "It's odd, but I like it."

Such honorifics always sit a tad awkwardly on rock 'n' rollers, but no one can deny that Rush has earned them. Four decades since forming in Toronto, the trio has built one of music's largest and most loyal fan bases through music that has always balanced dazzling virtuosity with authentic emotion—selling an estimated 40 million albums worldwide along the way. Their sound has changed nimbly with the times while remaining at every point unmistakably Rush. "You can't control the success element of music-making," Lee says. "You don't know what people are going to like, so you have to satisfy your own artistic urges. You have to go the way you feel strongly about going and follow your passion."

Now that passion has brought Rush to its 19th studio album, the ambitious *Clockwork Angels*. While the band delved into extended narratives like the sidelong "2112" and "The Fountain of Lamneth" in the 1970s, this marks the first time the group has

dared attempt that prog-rock staple, the concept album. Over the course of its 12 tracks, *Angels* tells the story of a young man's travels through a world of ancient technology and alchemy. (A novelization penned by sci-fi author Kevin J. Anderson will be released in September.) As always, the album's music was written by Lee and Lifeson with lyrics by Peart—a formula from which the group has rarely strayed since Peart joined the band with 1975's *Fly by Night*.

Rush began writing the new album in early 2010, inspired by the "steampunk" design movement—modern technology envisioned through the prism of the Victorian era. After decades of the typical album-tour cycle, the group elected to release the first two songs recorded ("Caravan" and "BU2B," tracked at Nashville's Blackbird Studios) as a single and hit the road in 2010 before completing the album. After further writing and touring, the trio regrouped with producer Nick Raskulinecz, who also helmed 2007's *Snakes & Arrows*, in October 2011 at Toronto's Revolution Recording to complete the album.

The unusual schedule, Lifeson says, "gave us a little more breathing space and time to think about where we were going with *Clockwork Angels*. In retrospect it was good to have that."

The group further tweaked its methodology by integrating an orchestra, arranged by David Campbell, for several songs. "We wanted to see what the music needed and felt that those songs would benefit from a different orchestration—and not synthesizer strings, which we could do easily," says Lee, who also plays keyboards. "We

wanted something with a more organic and emotive quality to it." *Angels* is nonetheless one of the group's hardest-rocking albums to date, retaining its punch even as songs like "Headlong Flight" and the title cut stretch past the seven-minute mark. Perhaps the key to the entire project can be found in a line from "Caravan": "In a world where I feel so small, I can't stop thinking big."

We caught up with Lee and Lifeson as they began planning this year's North American tour, set to kick off in September. Lee admitted to some trepidation about performing some of the dizzyingly complex material from *Clockwork Angels* onstage. "It's going to be tough, but we're working at it," he acknowledges with a chuckle. "It's good to have that scary feeling in your stomach. It means we still care."

#### Why break the album-tour cycle?

LIFESON: We planned on getting right back into the studio and working on *Clockwork Angels* some time ago. As we started to get into it and did some writing, there was a shift of plans. The idea became to get back on the road instead, but we thought, "Well, why not do a couple of songs that we can take on tour with us and do a past, present and future sort of thing?" We slotted ourselves into that, and it was a great tour. When Geddy and I went back to writing we felt quite comfortable, although it took a bit to get going. There were a couple of weeks of drinking coffee and sitting around before we actually played a single note. But once we did, the flow was there and we were quite productive in a fairly short period of time.

#### What is the writing process like?

LIFESON: Generally we sit down and we'll jam for a bit. We'll put down everything that we do. Then we start listening to stuff, mixing it up a bit, seeing what fits with what, what works as a verse, what works as a chorus and whether any of the lyrics we have work with

that. It builds in that process, and then we knit it all together, replay it and keep refining it. We usually work to a drum machine or samples, things like that. Then Neil has to listen to it and work out his drum arrangements. We import that stuff back into what we're doing, then we update our parts to the drums. It goes back and forth like that until we have a finished product.

#### How did the concept develop?

LEE: It was an idea that came along through Neil that we found intriguing. We started talking about the steampunk aesthetic and how much we liked that. We thought it would be fun to do a set design around that, and that led to some musing that he'd had about the story. The idea was interesting, and when Alex and I started writing the music for it we made sure that it was a different kind of concept record—more of a rock opera, in a sense. We wanted every song to stand on its own, to have a point and something to say that could be removed from the context of the other songs and still be valid.

#### Do you need to relate to the lyric to sing it?

LEE: That's really important. I couldn't put my heart and soul into something I disagreed with. Neil obviously has his own personal interpretation of what he's writing and I have mine, but I would say for the most part they're very similar. I have to stand behind what he's writing in order

**'You need to have a sense of fun and adventure when you're making music.'**

—Geddy Lee



Neil Peart, Alex Lifeson, Geddy Lee



Onstage for Time Machine Tour, 2011

to present it with conviction. You can tell when a singer is singing something he doesn't mean.

**What drew you to Revolution Recording?**

LIFESON: Toronto is home for Ged and me, so the studio was about 10 minutes away. It's a brand-new place, and they were barely done by the time we were ready to come in. But the room sounded great and had a great console in it, and it was nice to be home—to be able to go home every night after work and spend the weekends with the family. We'd spent years away from family while we were recording in the past, and it's nice to be there now. We mixed in Los Angeles, which is home for Neil these days, so it was a bit of a trade-off. He came up and spent a couple of months with us in Toronto and then we reversed it.

**How is working with Nick Raskulinecz?**

LEE: He's a fantastic producer. He's exuberant, he's got great ears, great pitch and a great instinct. He understands our band well and he pushes us—he does not let us skate in any way. With a veteran band, it's important to work with people who expect a lot of you. It's easy to surround yourself with people who will do whatever you say without questioning. It's tempting to fall into a complacent mode without even realizing it. Nick wouldn't have that.

**Do you feel a responsibility to sound like Rush?**

LEE: No, I don't think it's a responsibility thing at all. But because we are so obsessed with moving forward, sometimes in the quest for a new thing you lose focus on your obvious strengths. That's what Nick has reasserted with us, the need to not move forward or sideways just for the sake of it. His knowledge of what we're capable of has pushed us to be more like us than perhaps we would be with someone else.

**Was there a moment when you lost sight of that?**

LEE: We are easily diverted into new areas. We're given to experimentation, and that's fine and still happens. But sometimes maybe the song would have been stronger had we not been so distracted by the new thing or the latest idea. It's hard to say. I don't regret anything about our rather circuitous journey in the world of music. That's part of it, and it's made us all better players and better writers. You have to have that sense of fun and adventure when you're making music.

**Are you sad to see the album format fade?**

LIFESON: I am, but you have to get over it. It's just the way it is now. We grew up with albums, and for us the album was always the thing—we've never been a singles band. We've released singles, sure, and we've had some moderate success with some, but we've never been that kind of band. So yes, I'm sorry to see

**'With every tour we feel like we're playing better and better.'**

**—Alex Lifeson**

Performance image: A.J. Sisco/UPI/Landov

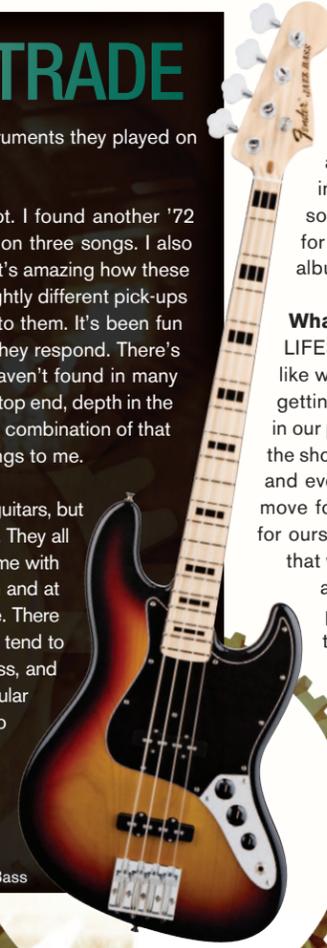


**TOOLS OF THE TRADE**

Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson told us about the instruments they played on Rush's new album, *Clockwork Angels*.

LEE: I used my No. 1 '72 [Fender] Jazz bass a lot. I found another '72 recently that we've tweaked a bit, and I used that on three songs. I also have some basses the custom shop made for me. It's amazing how these Jazz instruments from different periods and with slightly different pick-ups have different personalities, yet there's a similarity to them. It's been fun to use the various ones on this album to see how they respond. There's something about the way the '72 punches that I haven't found in many other basses. There's a combination of clarity in the top end, depth in the bottom and some lower midrange presence. It's the combination of that piece of wood and the way I bang the thing that sings to me.

LIFESON: I usually end up using only a dozen or so guitars, but I like to have them all there and lined up in the studio. They all want to be invited for the session and have a good time with their buddies. I tend to go through almost all of them and at least make some noise and make them feel welcome. There was no single guitar that dominated this record, but I tend to favor the Les Pauls. Gibson did my model, the Access, and they made up a short run of black ones. One in particular sounded really tight and had lots of power, so I tend to tease that one a fair bit. Then there are the '59 and '58 reissues that I have, and my ES-355. I use a J-150 for most of the acoustic stuff, and the J-55. There wasn't a whole lot of acoustic on this record, though.



Fender Geddy Lee Jazz Bass

the album and everything it represented go. It was like a book, and now you're buying chapters that don't always relate to the whole book. That said, it was fun to release a couple of songs beforehand as a bit of a teaser. It got us thinking that in the future we might record two or three songs and release them every six months. But for now, especially with a project this size, an album was the only way to go.

**What does the future hold?**

LIFESON: It seems that with every tour we feel like we're playing better and better. The show is getting tighter, and we sense greater confidence in our playing abilities. And in a production sense, the show has also developed with every new album and every new tour. So there are always ways to move forward. We've always set a high standard for ourselves in terms of our playing, and the fact that we're getting a lot of younger people in the audience indicates that they're looking for players. The show is over three hours, and there are not too many bands that do that these days.

LEE: We're going to be rehearsing for at least seven or eight weeks this summer to make sure that we can play these songs. Putting the tour together is a big job, and obviously we want our fans to love what we're putting together. So it's hard to see past that, to be honest. We'll figure it out. **M**