

The Premiere Progressive Rock Trio



Photo By Debra S. Samuels

Canada's finest musical export continues to please their diehard fans with more creative exploits on its 14th album, *Hold Your Fire*.

By Lance Laskosky

Metamorphosis is a good word to describe the band, we're a constantly evolving thing," says Geddy Lee, the bassman/singer/keyboardist for Rush. "This is a transitional point for us, sort of a point of arrival in a sense that what we've been striving to achieve over the last three or four records has finally come to rest in *Hold Your Fire*."

Gone are the early days when Rush had a more metal edge and concentrated heavily on marathon, fantasy-oriented musical pieces. Instead, they have veered towards a more modern sound integrating keyboards and influenced by reggae and new wave rhythms. "We've developed a new outlook as far as our method of production, a way of looking

at a song and not feeling like we're restricted by any boundaries or limitations of a three-piece band as far as arranging songs in the studio," says Lee. "I'm very happy with the point we're at and the way we're making records now. We're confident that we can make better records and are more aware of what good songwriting is than before."

The modification began with the departure of longtime producer Terry Brown (affectionately known as "Broon"). Lee recounts the change in great detail. "It was really a necessary thing, not out of any disrespect to him (Brown) or any problem in communicating with each other, but a matter of our band falling into a dangerous rut. We could anticipate his

input and structure our music around that. The making of *Signals* (Brown's last project) was very difficult. At the time, we wondered if some songs could not have been better if they were treated in a different way, but we were confused as to what our direction should be. We were so close to Terry, he was *in* the band almost, and he wasn't objective anymore. We wanted to put ourselves in a kind of "shock treatment," some kind of outside attitude to make us less insular and maybe help us learn more about what we were doing. We needed someone with new ideas and a new point of view to point out things in our music that weren't growing as rapidly as we'd like, ways of writing songs that maybe we hadn't thought of using. We felt like we

RUSH

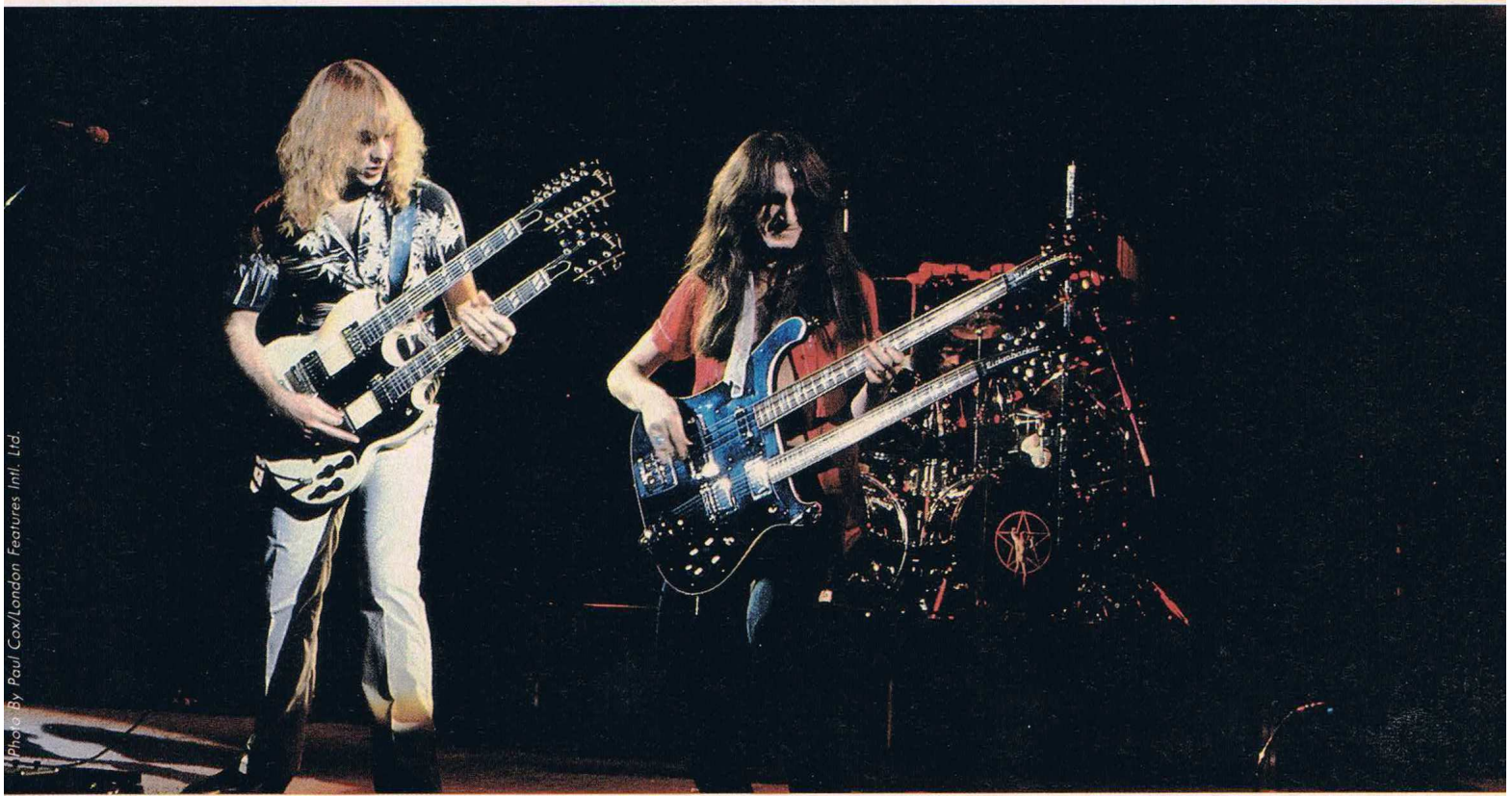


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Photo By Gary Gerstloff/Reina Ltd.

weren't getting that, because our relationship had gotten too comfortable," recounts Lee.

"Since that time, I think we're growing in leaps and bounds and it shows in the sound of our new record. It's been a maturing process. *Grace Under Pressure* was a very difficult record to make, when we left Terry we were really babes in the producing world. We talked to so many people who were looking for that magical person with all the answers who simply didn't exist. Working with Terry spoiled us because he was a very honest and responsible person and we were running into all these people who were horrible. We ended up doing the record with Peter Henderson and we were sort of compromising, because we really hadn't found what we were looking for, but we couldn't wait any longer and had to get on with the record. Peter worked really hard and gave 150 percent, but at the end we were left feeling cheated. We went through this wrenching experience and felt that we still hadn't found what we were looking for, but I think we found it in Peter Collins. At least when we found him, our expectations were more realistic. We'd gone through this growing stage, this education and awakening about how to make records. Peter's priorities were the necessary priorities: song structure, arrangement, objectiveness; that classical style of producing," Lee adds.

One of the most unique characteristics about Rush is their ability to cohesively mix elements of hard rock with classical overtones and lyrical references to Shakespeare, Hemingway and Fitzgerald. "When we look for influences, we look for those that are tried and true as opposed to trendy. I think there are certain things about the classical form that have worked for a certain reason. I like to think of our music as being orchestrated rather than simply arranged. We've always leaned towards a more bombastic classical sound, the dramatics of it appeal to me," notes Lee.

On *Hold Your Fire*, Rush incorporates several new elements into the music, including the background vocals of Aimee Mann ('til Tuesday) on "Time Stand Still," a tune likely to give the band its first hit single. "We knew that the part she sings on was a feminine part. We didn't want to use a keyboard or have Alex or myself sing it, so we started looking for a female singer. It's a very attractive opportunity for us to work with

a female singer. We just looked until we found a voice that was suitable. In listening to Aimee's last record, we loved the way she sang, so we just asked her," Lee explains.

Is this likely to become a trend? "I'd doubt it, but you never know. It depends on the material. I'm glad to say we don't feel uncomfortable making those kind of decisions. If we feel a song can benefit by putting a 30 piece string section on it, then we do it. The same thing goes for having a choir, or a brass band or female singer or whatever it is. I think that's really healthy for us because it's making us look at our songs in a more objective light and not with a preconceived notion of what a Rush song is supposed to be. We've eliminated that look at production."

As with many of Rush's previous albums, *Hold Your Fire* isn't a typical concept album, albeit it surrounds the central themes of time, nature, instinct and temperament. Those ideas were the brainchild of drummer Neil Peart, who writes the thought provoking lyrics while guitarist Alex Lifeson and Lee put them to music. Whereas the central theme of *Power Windows* was power, *Hold Your Fire* focuses on time. For instance,

we had nine songs and wanted to get ten tracks on the record. Peter felt we really needed one more rock song, so when these lyrics came by, we were excited about it." In the tradition of "New World Man," "Vital Signs" and "Natural Science," some of the band's most popular songs are those put together almost as an afterthought. "We wrote 'Force Ten' one afternoon in three hours," says Lee. "Those songs to me are always my favorite because they are spontaneous and fresh. It gives the album more variety and balance."

"Mission," one of the strongest cuts on the new album, has an underlying philosophy behind it. "It basically grew out of a conversation Neil and I had about the kind of people we consider ourselves to be, people who always knew what they wanted to do in their lives and always had this ambition and desire, but couldn't make a choice as to what to do. It was always very clear that we had to do what we do — whether we were a success or a failure — we knew we would always play music in some way. 'Mission' also looks sadly at the people who have never really been sure what they should be doing and have never had a clearcut idea where to put their creative ability to

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"Time Stand Still" focuses upon how the richness of a period in time rests in its remembrance and how one experiencing a wonderful time wishes it could go on forever.

Many of the tracks on the new album have interesting stories behind them. "Force Ten," the first single released, was ironically the last one written. Pye Dubois (who used to write for a group close to Rush, Max Webster) sent lyrics to Rush and "Force Ten" particularly stood out to Neil. Says Lee, "He played with it a bit until he was happy with the result and showed it to us. At the time,

[reach] a final, ultimate conclusion," notes Lee.

According to Lee, the music for "Lock and Key" was written simultaneously with the lyrics and they fit together like a glove, without any forethought. "Tai Shan" developed from Neil's three week bicycle tour of China. Tai Shan is a holy mountain he climbed to the top of and wrote his thoughts and feelings down as he was sitting there, which became the song. Topping off the album is "High Water," which to a devoted fan may sound vaguely familiar. It contains a chord progression that can

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Photo By David Plastik/Reina Ltd.



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be found on "Bacchus Plateau" from the epic "The Fountain of Lamneth" off *Caress of Steel*.

As of late, Rush has strayed away from the longer instrumental numbers, to concentrate on a variety of new techniques. "They just became too easy to do, a little boring," says Lee. "We felt like we were just doing the same song over again, just changing the words. It's real hard to write a good song, and that seems to be of more interest to us than writing a 10 or 15 minute piece with movements all strung together. That comes to us too easily, therefore we're drawn away from it. Anything you can do too easily isn't that much of a challenge. I think one of the reasons we got away from doing long concept pieces was it started to be so didactic, we were preaching."

Many longtime fans have become disgruntled with the band's omission of several older tunes in concert. On many of the past tours, Rush would open the show with "2112" in its entirety, which later became shortened to merely "Overture" and "The Temples of Syrinx." But as Lee puts it, you can't play *everything*. "As a player, you're always most excited about your new material and your challenge lies in reproducing it live. You want to give the show a facelift every year and have something to give the fans at the same time. We haven't gotten into any in-depth discussions as to how we're going to approach it this year, because we don't know what to keep and what to drop and still keep it under three hours. For the majority of our hardcore fans, I'm sure three hours would be great, but in practical terms, you can't really do that so it's always a struggle to get the set to two hours and feel that we have a show that gives people their money's worth," says Lee.

So how do they decide what stays and what goes? "It's a constant reexamination of what songs people enjoy playing," says Lee. "Sometimes someone in the band will say, 'I'm sorry, I just can't play that song anymore, it's too boring.' So what can you say? You can't go on stage and do something that's boring because you're not going to play it well and that's not fair to the song or to the person who really loves that song. The other criteria is 'what haven't we played in a while, is there something we keep getting response to in conversations with

people?' I know a lot of people attach themselves to a particular era of ours, like *2112*, *Moving Pictures*, even *Caress of Steel*. We loved all of them when we made them, but now it's ten years later."

Unlike many bands, Rush isn't concerned with seeing their pictures on the covers of their albums. Instead, they feature unique designs by Hugh Syme, *Hold Your Fire* being no exception. Although the band has become more individualistic in nature, the cover doesn't signify the three members as separate entities. "It's an abstraction that can be taken in so many different ways," says Lee. "Basically, you get a good feeling about the artwork, there's something that clicks about it. The three balls, geometrically and physically create a tension in the way they're suspended. They relate to the balls of fire, as it relates to

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holding your creative fires. It's all a play on those thoughts and everything associated with them. Sure, you can look at it as three people, three balls, but it's all that and more."

If past history is any indication, Rush is due for a live LP with its next release. "We haven't made a 100 percent commitment to it, but I think it's very possible," notes Lee. "We recorded about eight shows on the last tour and we'll probably do the same this time."

Rush built its following on the road as one of the foremost touring bands around. Their stage shows feature state-of-the-art lighting, video projections, and lasers. "We'll have an expansion of what we've done in the past," says Lee. "We've improved and diversified our film portion of the show, rearranged and incorporated new laser effects, changed the lighting system and changed sound companies. There's quite a few changes that seem big to me."

The fact that amazes the average listener about their concerts is how three guys make so much music. "That's a question that's on my mind lately," states Lee. "This album is going to be very difficult to reproduce live and it's going to be a real challenge to pull it off. It's very tempting to add another person, every year I get closer and closer to saying yes to that, but at this stage, we believe we can pull it off. If we fail, maybe next time around you'll see another guy banging on the keyboards." As it stands now, Lee remains a musical Jack-of-all-trades. "Sometimes I feel more like a choreographer, because so much of what I'm doing is being sampled, but it's still a matter of being able to press the right button to start it all at the right time. We're using so much electronics, sometimes it's easy to go overboard and just play the tapes, but we're trying to avoid doing that and feel that if we have hands on control it's still part of the performance," he says.

To say that Rush's fans are dedicated is an understatement. Even though they have only had one Top 40 single ("New World Man"), ten of their albums have gone platinum and the last seven have made the Top 10. "We haven't had that monster ten million seller, but we've probably sold as many records spread over 12 different albums," notes Lee. "Maybe that's been a blessing in disguise, it's kept us sane in a way and kept the band popular, because we've never been overexposed. We've had a long career, solid and steady. We always do well at the box office and our records always sell."

Apart from the album sales, concert dates and critical acclaim, nothing motivates the band more than the genuine inspiration they receive from making music. "The great feeling that you get after you've written a song makes you want to write another one, it's like an addiction," Lee says. "Probably one of the purest moments of satisfaction a person can have is when you've created something out of nothing. That particular moment is inspiring and the thought of that lights me up. Bathing yourself in a warm glow of appreciation from the audience and feeling the energy and positive encouragement is overwhelming and makes you feel wonderful, but the creative moment satisfies you entirely. We have a very dedicated audience and they've kept us alive all these years and allowed us to do all this experimenting through their support." □