

REQUEST

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HEADY HARD ROCKERS GEDDY LEE AND VERNON REID

FANS: A PHOTO ESSAY

THE DRUM & BASS BOOM

THE PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

I SURVIVED THE ROLLING STONES ROCK AND ROLL CIRCUS'

BY DAVID DALTON



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Rush may be as much a rite of teen passage as the junior prom and the first illicit

swig of beer in the school parking lot, but don't tell that to guitarist extraordinaire Vernon Reid, very much postpubescent at the ripe young age of 38. Reid has left his six-string imprint on groups as varied as his multiplatinum hard-rock band Living Colour and jazz drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson's Decoding Society. But when the dreadlocked virtuoso greets 43-year-old Rush singer and bassist Geddy Lee in midtown Manhattan, Reid reveals he's been to a half-dozen Rush shows in recent years and is enthused to remake acquaintances.

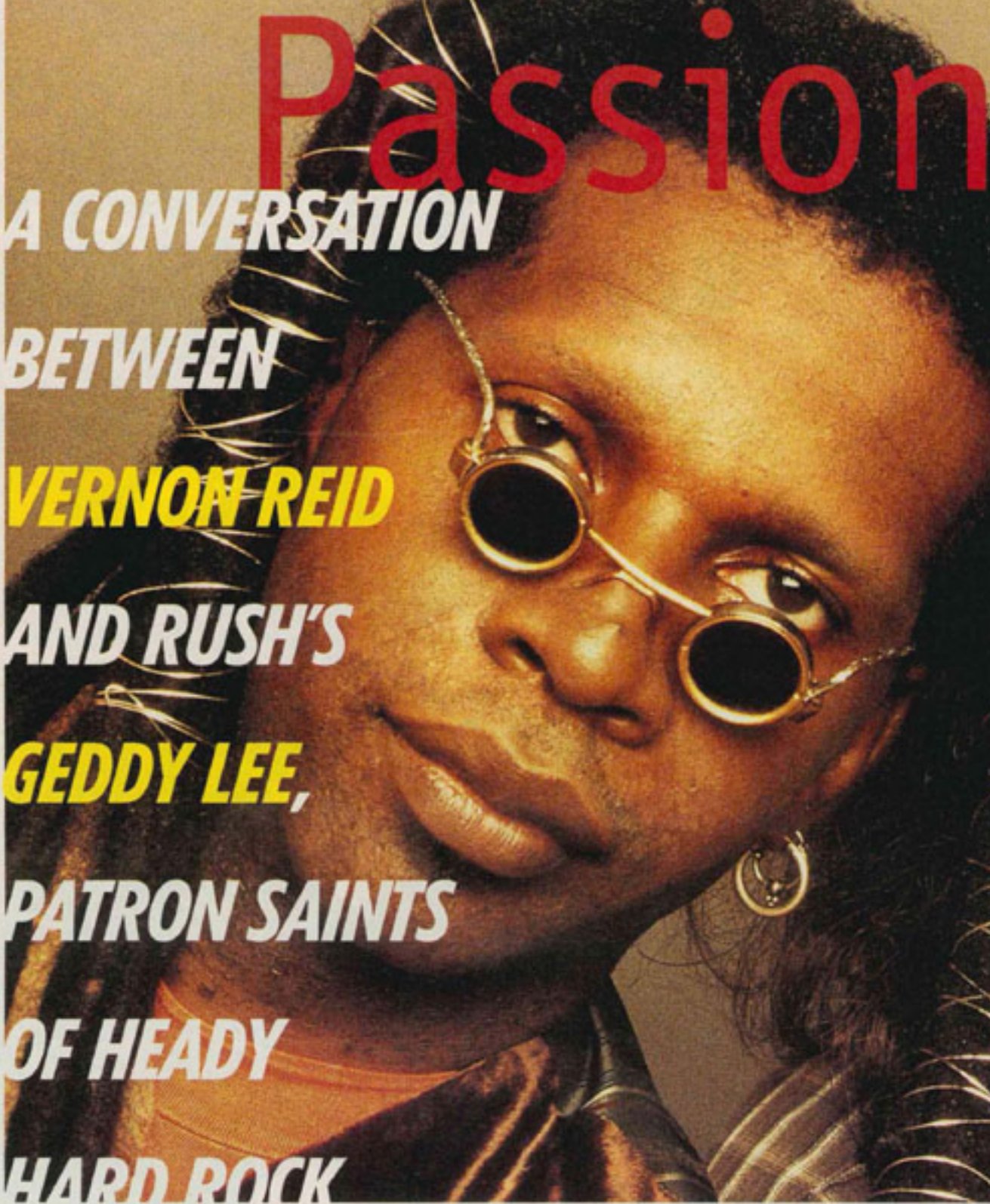
"I've always heard Rush described as adolescent-boy music, sci-fi stuff," Reid says. "But, you know," he adds, lowering his voice to an exaggerated whisper, "I like Rush."

Lee, cofounder of the Canadian prog-rock trio that also includes guitarist Alex Lifeson and drummer Neil Peart, appreciates the joke. He's read the reviews, of course, the ones that describe the band's technically dazzling instrumentals and pseudo-philosophical lyrics as mere arena-rock pomp and circumstance. But behind tinted green glasses and a goatee, Lee exudes the soft-spoken self-confidence of someone who has spent a lifetime defying such put-downs. Rush, after all, recently released *Test for Echo*, its 20th album in a career that spans 22 years.

"The only thing comparable is the Grateful Dead," Reid observes, and he's right: Though Rush has had only one Top 40 hit ("New World Man" in 1982), it continues to knock out gold- or platinum-selling albums and to sell out arenas with regularity. The trio's music has become more concise and refined since the days when Rush was spinning sci-fi epics such as "The Temples of Syrinx," but remains blithely immune to trends. This fierce independent streak has inspired a bevy of important '90s bands, from Primus to Metallica, and it became the focus of a *Request*-moderated chat between Lee and Reid, who earlier this year released his first post-Living Colour solo album, *Mistaken Identity*.

By Greg Kot

**PHOTOGRAPHS FOR REQUEST
BY LYNN GOLDSMITH**



Passion

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN VERNON REID AND RUSH'S GEDDY LEE, PATRON SAINTS OF HEADY HARD ROCK

Reid: Are you guys in Rush still friends?

Lee: Alex and I have known each other since we were 15. This is beyond friends. It's like family.

Reid: I'm almost certain that's the only way a band can stay together: You have to have met right at or before puberty.

Lee: But I will say we have spent so much time together in the last 20 years, we don't see a whole lot of each other when it's not a band-related project. Neil spends a lot of time in Quebec, and Alex and I are in Toronto. Neil and I communicate a lot by fax. Alex and I try to make a point of seeing each other every couple of weeks to play tennis or golf.

Reid: I haven't heard Alex' solo record [the 1996 release *Victor*].

Request: How did you feel about Alex going off on his own?

Lee: He kind of slipped into it. He didn't make any sensational announcements. I was at home, my wife and I had just had a new baby, and I was in this whole

domestic vibe, and I kept hearing Alex was working on this record. So my first instinct was jealousy, because it was cool he had all these new guys to play with, a whole bunch of new friends. But it was so far from where my head was at, there was no way I could have been working on an album at that point. And I realized that with what he was going through in his life, he needed so much to do a record where he was in total control of how it sounded and make all the aesthetic decisions.

Reid: Is there a boss in Rush?

Lee: Not really. It's a democracy, but there are bossier members [laughs].

Reid: The thing about democracy in bands—if people are like-minded, their aesthetic is the same. You can deal with it. If your aesthetics are even slightly divergent, it can be like a bad marriage. You're talking to someone and they don't get it, and both of you cannot back off of a point.

Lee: I would say with us, we've been together so long, there was a long time where our musical tastes were

Players



exactly the same. As time has gone on, I don't think it's that true anymore. We've all gone off into different areas, and it has made it more difficult to agree on things.

Reid: In Living Colour, we struggled all the time. We were forged by struggle. Even besides the obvious things, like being a black rock band. That has a tendency to forge bonds that otherwise may not exist. It's like in the movies where you have an army platoon with all these different personalities—the cracker from the South, the rich kid, the wise guy from Brooklyn, and the guy who tells all the jokes who is always going to be the first one killed—and the only reason they're together is because the enemy is more heinous than they are. And that is a very dangerous thing, because if you have something that is external that defines who you are, if you change, that forces me to change.

Lee: Don't you find that the struggle you go through early as a band is something that stokes your passion, your ambition, your determination to succeed?

Reid: Sure, but the goal has to be constant. There

are two things: your ambitions of what you want to do in your garage, in your town, in your world, and then there's the music. And the music is bigger than us. What music is is so sacred, but not precious. To me, it's always something that I'm not playing. Even the baddest cat, someone totally great, like Allan Holdsworth, one of the poets of a certain style of guitar, could not play what Kurt Cobain played. Or George Benson, or Buckethead, or Pat Martino. They're each poets of a certain style, and I've heard someone say that Cobain was a great songwriter but a mediocre guitar player. And I said, "Stop. He's a great guitar player, because his songwriting doesn't exist without his guitar playing." A song like "Lithium," it's like, "How come I couldn't think of that?" [laughs].

Lee: It has to do with personality and being expressive within that. You can express yourself in four notes or 40, it doesn't matter, you can't take anything away from either one.

Reid: There are elites that form on both sides.

There is the elite of the guy who can play all these notes and scales, and then there's the elite of, "F— off, he's a wanker." Why can't you have both [the Sex Pistols'] "God Save the Queen" and [Rush's] "Tom Sawyer"? Both songs changed my life.

Lee: It depends on whether you're interested in expanding your musical horizons or you're interested in the pose. A lot of the elitist crap comes from the pose: You are defined by the pose, as opposed to having the music define what you are.

Request: You're in an interesting position in Rush, because you are defined to a degree by the lyrics that Neil writes, but that you have to sing.

Lee: For me to sing those lyrics, I have to feel them, one way or another. Sometimes I get lyrics and I dig them, even though I might not even have the same point of view as Neil. But if I've romanticized a different impression, that's good enough for me. Other times they are a little more obtuse, and I have to sit down and work with him on it. Neil's a great collaborator in that way. There may be only one part of a song I can get into, and that's when I gotta say to him, "Let's talk about this." He uses me as an editor and sounding board. The longer we've worked, the more considerate he's become about phrases, expressions; he's not afraid to tinker with it to give me a little more emotional edge. Our older material was quite wordy, a real mouthful, and he's become more sensitive to that.

Request: What about growing up as musicians? The trajectory in rock is you make a splash and then you get stale. How do you keep challenging yourself creatively when you're playing with guys you've known since childhood?

Lee: The context of the creativity is secondary to the need to do it for me. So I do it with these two guys. I like these two guys, we understand each other and complement each other. It doesn't deter me from being creative. Until I feel like my music is getting stale—and if at all I have retained the ability to tell if it's getting stale.... That's the difficult part: Am I the one who is capable of deciding that?

Reid: Have you ever thought about doing a record where it's just you playing keyboards and bass, a kind of instrumental thing?

Lee: I'm so torn between the amount of energy it takes to continue this band in the way I want it to continue and being a real family guy. I like to spend so much of my time nurturing that side of my family that gets ignored when I'm doing the band. So to say I'm taking this other period of time away from both of those things to do this other project.... It's not a lack of willingness to experiment, it's a lack of desire to be selfish enough to say I need to do this for myself.

Reid: Maybe you could do something like just put quick sketches down. The thing to do is not to make it an event.

Lee: I think you're absolutely right.

Reid: The worst thing is to make gigs, photo sessions, the video, anything, an event. You think about the pose. Even things that are just recreational. Like I could not wait to see *Independence Day*, but somewhere about the middle of the movie, Will Smith is dragging this alien and you're going...

Lee: ...there's something wrong here [laughs]. You come to the realization that these are the most powerful aliens you've ever seen, and also the dumbest.

Reid: And you think about how they resolved it. If you didn't watch this movie, skip this next sentence [laughs]. They go into the mother ship, and the guy has a laptop and he uploads a virus to a completely alien computer system.

Lee: Like they all got their parts from Radio Shack [everyone laughs].

Reid: Have you ever done a sci-fi soundtrack?

Lee: No.

Reid: If there's ever been a band that could be entrusted with a great sci-fi movie, it's Rush.

Lee: We always get offered to write some rock song for a soundtrack, but we're just not interested. What's the point of it? Do a song for a shallow film that is just not interesting to me? And I don't know how I'd react doing music for somebody else's film, because they're the boss.

Reid: So what you really want to do is direct?

Lee: Well, of course [laughs].

Plus, I have a little problem with authority. Knowing that I have to write all this music and then hand it over to somebody—that would be a little difficult. It might be worth trying. You don't just want to write a couple of pop tunes, you want to use your whole artillery to get every mood you could out of it. We approach our music from a visual point of view. That's why our live show has so many visuals. It's something we learned way back from Terry Brown, our first producer. We were doing that weird sci-fi stuff, and his approach was always do it visually—what do you see happening with the sound? It's a great help when you're working with other musicians to be able to describe it visually.

Reid: Working with other musicians is so rewarding and also so painful. I broke up with my band a couple of years ago, and that was a very weird and difficult thing to deal with, because it was such a defining thing in my life. I remember thinking, "What happens now?" You lose part of your identity. But now I feel kind of groovy.

Lee: That's great, because I went through a bit of that myself during the time off we had after [1993's *Counterparts*]. I was not so sure we'd make another album. I wondered if being in this band meant anything anymore, to us as players or to our audience. Were we still valid? Were we regurgitating the past, or doing something that still has some context in today's world? I remember a lot of nights being at odds with myself. It was the same thing you're talking about: This had been part of my identity for 25 years almost. How do you debrief from that experience? And what am I afterward? And the conclusion I drew gave me even more reason not to go running back to it. So that I felt more confident in myself as a creature apart from this musical organization. I had to be able to identify myself apart of that. That's probably the freedom and the benefit you're feeling now. I hope when the day comes and my band is gone, I'll be able to have that same attitude.

Reid: You get these bands where everyone is in a separate bus, and everyone has their posse that's telling them you don't need those other guys, and you go up there pretending to have fun for the fans. These bands keep coming back, but you know there's nothing there.

The Sex Pistols were supposed to have burned out in a blaze of glory. There's this whole thing in rock about a blaze of glory, "I hope I die before I get old." That stuff is really powerful. But the problem is, you do get old, and what do you do? Is it really cooler to be Hendrix and dead? What would've happened if he got together with Miles Davis? It could've been a new world. Or he could have done Foxy Lady wine-cooler commercials. I doubt it, but...[laughter].

Lee: You live your life in public to a degree when you're an artist, and you've got to be allowed to admit that, "Yeah, that's how I felt then, but maybe I was

Lee: If you do too many gigs, you don't play with your heart, you are robotic. I'd rather play fewer gigs and be a little nervous about totally being in sync, bringing a little edge to the performance, and you've got to work harder, focus to get it together. It keeps you pumping. The fewer shows we do per week is directly related to the number of good performances we give. I don't think you measure that in number of notes going down per second or by the style of music. It all goes back to motivation: Why did you write the music? Why are you here? Why are you playing it? If there's some conviction, people know it. That's giving of yourself and of your soul.

Reid: [Robert] Fripp talks about the rock audience as being one of the best judges of sincerity. Even if you're doing something really obscure, if you believe it, and you're not letting indifference or external nonbeliefs affect you, somebody out there is gonna be saying, "I don't know what the hell that is, but it's cool!" When you let "Hey, I'm being cool" into the room, that's when you're outta here. I think of [Soundgarden's] Chris Cornell as a soul singer, not in the sense of Otis Redding, but because I believe him.

Lee: Absolutely.

Reid: And there are certain guys on the R&B tip, singing all this stuff up here [raises hand], and I don't believe a word of it. It's perfect, but it's a completely constructed, overly anal thing.

Lee: I've been there. We went through periods of our music that all we cared about was how tight could we be. We wanted to be the tightest band on earth, and you make these records and you try to get every track perfectly in sync, and it took one of our producers—I think it was Rupert Hine—to say, "Guys, perfect doesn't necessarily mean better. Something is missing here, a vibe. You guys are accomplished musicians, you're still tight even when you think you're not. So don't worry about it so much and let's concentrate on spontaneity."

Reid: The thing is, at the end of the day, a snare drum is still a snare drum. You hear about someone taking a month to get some sound out of a snare drum.

Lee: That has nothing to do with music. That has to do with making something else. That has to do with some producer's personal obsession.

Reid: Would you work with a producer like Brian Eno, someone where people would go, "What would that sound like?"

Lee: I think that would be very interesting. Maybe that's the route to go, with someone who can teach you something.

Reid: Trent Reznor doing a Rush record. People would read about that and go, "Wahhh?"

Lee: And the next day they'd be reading about how the session lasted one day [laughter]. There are a lot of great producers out there that I would like to work with, but I know that with my three guys, it just wouldn't work. If you get too far from what they do, what's the point of doing it? ●



REID:
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wrong. I've gone to a different place."

Reid: Furious backpedaling from your misspent youth.

Lee: The way you feel when you're 22 is not the way you feel when you're 32 or 42. You learn a lot of stuff.

Reid: We look for the absolute. You're right, that latitude should be given. But part of the thing about rock is "Welcome to the Jungle" more than "Since I Fell for You." It's the apocalyptic romance of it all: "This is the last song you will ever hear, dammit! We're gonna hit this big E chord and boom!"

Request: It would seem that you've either got songs that enable you to sustain a certain amount of dignity, or they embarrass you when you get to be a certain age.

Lee: Some of our material starts to date itself for me. There was a time I couldn't see playing "Xanadu." It just seemed like such a late-'70s vibe. I would listen to the record and go, "Oh, man, I did that!" I associated it with how we looked and acted at the time, and it felt wrong. But then it came full circle and past that point, to where when we were playing it on the last tour, some of the music still lived. We just avoided a few parts. I think it's valid for an artist to revisit his material and alter it, and try and do a different version of it. Although as a fan I'm never comfortable with an artist who does that.

Request: Both of you are celebrated for the command you have of your instruments. What's the relationship between technique and soul?

Lee: I don't know why people think that playing fast is not expressive. Besides being hard to do, sometimes it is very expressive.

Reid: The whole thing is where my attentions are. That's where the challenge is. Talk about making things an event, here's one: "I want this guy in the audience to like me." That's where the problems begin. My desire, my struggle, for that—"I'm going to be transcendent tonight!"—almost completely ensures you're going to have a wanking good evening.

LEE:
It all goes back to motivation: Why did you write the music? Why are you here? Why are you playing it? If there's some conviction, people know it.