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THE MUSICIANS OF
CIRQUE DU SOLEIL



HOME RECORDING
Unlocking the Mysteries

Jim Witter



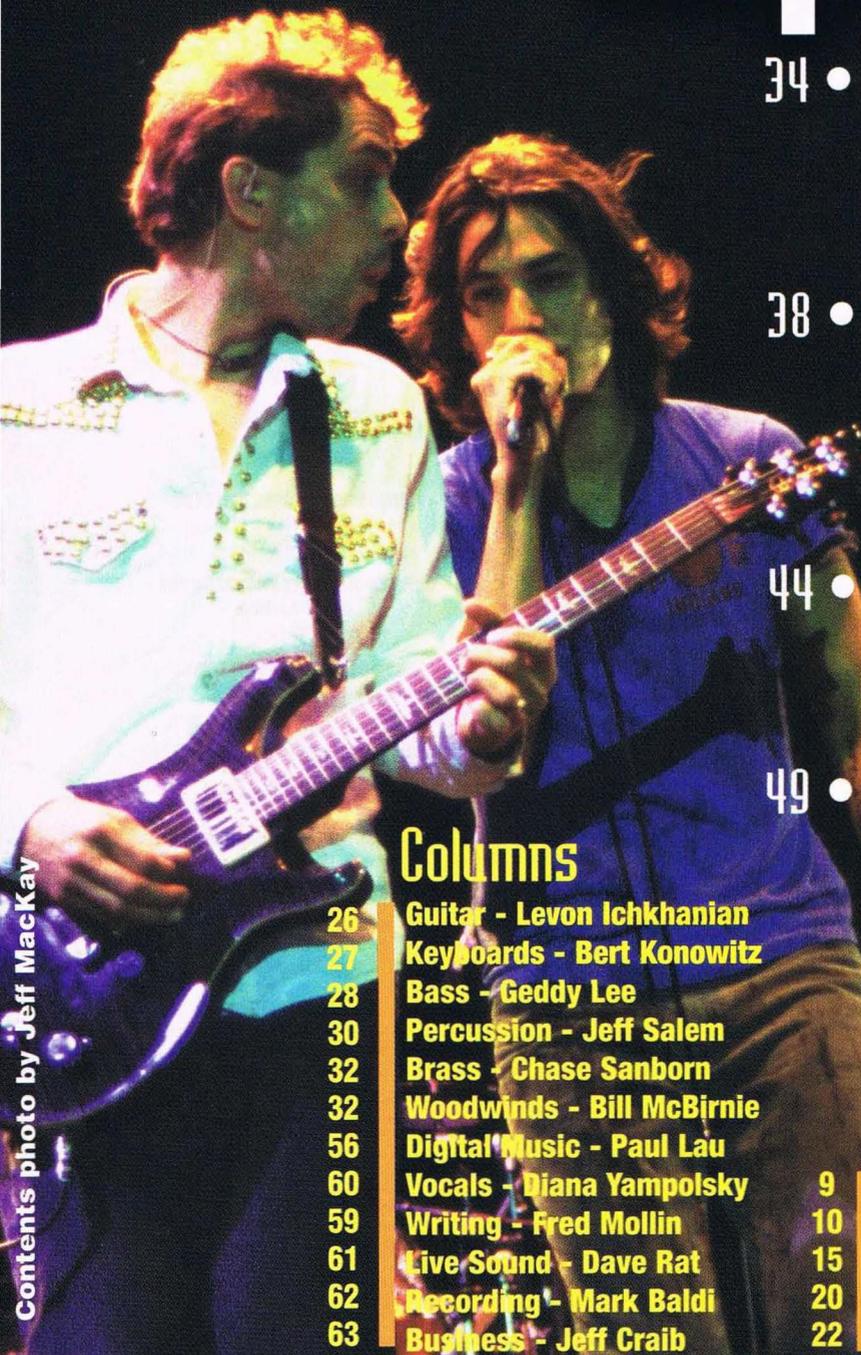
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Geddy Lee's Bass Techniques
Finally Revealed ...

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by Geddy Lee

Interviewed by Jeff MacKay

this issue, *CM* has brought you none other than Rush's bass player: Geddy Lee. We'll be doing a series of columns from an interview conducted in late summer.

Canadian Musician: First off, why did you pick bass? How'd you get into it?

Geddy Lee: I first started playing guitar when I was about 14, and the local group of guys I was hanging out with, nobody really wanted to play bass, because it meant you had to spend the money and actually purchase a bass. I was kind of nominated by everybody else: "You play bass!" So...

CM: Were you the worst guitar player or something?

GL: I don't know why, but just kind of worked out. It was up to me to get it together. Maybe they thought I was the only one who could get the cash together to buy a bass or something. Anyway, I bothered my mother to get an advance - I used to work for her in her variety store on Saturdays. So I got an advance and I went to the local music store and bought a Canora bass for about \$35. I started learning how to play bass, and basically learned to play any of the songs of the bands that we liked. I would just try to do what everybody does at home and listened to the parts and I mimicked them.

CM: Did you ever take formal lessons?

GL: Never.

CM: Do you read music?

GL: Very, very slowly.

CM: Both keyboard and bass?

GL: Yeah. I took piano lessons actually, later. In my 30s I started studying piano and that's when I started getting that end of things together, and with all the touring we were doing at that period it became very difficult to keep those lessons going. Eventually they fell by the wayside. But they were fun while they lasted.

CM: So, when playing bass while singing, how did you get started with that, and also how did you learn?

GL: Well, I was always a vocalist first, and when I was in school I was in the choir, and I always sang. I always had kind of a soprano voice, so it was kind of natural that I was going to be the guy who sang, and it was up to me to also play bass. You know, I started emulating people like Jack Bruce, who I greatly admired when I was younger. It was just a matter of figuring out how to do it. There were a number of times where I thought it was impossible and I could never pull it off, but for me it was always a matter of learning the bass parts first and learning them so well that I didn't have to think about them while I was singing. And then, you know, concentrating on the vocal part of things. If ever there was a conflict between what I was playing and what I was singing, I would slightly rearrange what I was playing to make it somehow easier for me to actually get the syncopation of the two together.

CM: Do you think bass parts get simpler when bassists start singing? Do they get more rhythmic?

GL: Sometimes, yeah, but sometimes with our music, it's not a matter of making it sim-

pler, it's just making it a little different or making it have more connection with the rhythm of what I'm singing. Sometimes that's more important than even making it simpler. And I've found that if you really rehearse your bass parts a lot, it's easier than you think. It's kind of like any physical activity or sports activity, you know: the more you do it, the more the muscle memory kind of takes over for you and suddenly just clicks into place. I've found on almost every rehearsal that I've ever done, ever, I reach a point of total frustration where I think, "I'm not going to be able to do this." Especially when we were doing stuff from albums like *Hemispheres*, where the musical parts are so complex. And yet, if I just keep banging away at it, eventually you just sort it out, and the things that you have to change in the bass part are usually fairly subtle, so that the average listener wouldn't really perceive that you've maybe slightly modified the bass part.

CM: Now you mentioned rehearsing. What's your rehearsal schedule like now? Do you still practice all the time?

GL: No, I don't practice nearly as much as I used to.

CM: I know with Rush it's kind of like record, tour, time off...

GL: You know, for me rehearsal these days is directly correlated to the project that I'm doing at the time. So if I'm getting ready for a tour, yeah, well, I will rehearse like a maniac. And if I'm getting ready to record, we go through a period usually in recording where two months previous to recording is writing and working out the parts. After that

playing while singing

pass

two months period of writing, once the song arrangements are finalized, I'll spend at least a week or two rehearsing my individual parts every day just as a matter of exercise. Even if it's just 45 minutes and even if I'm traveling. I'll take a small little bass along with me and just go through the motions of playing those parts, so when it comes time to record them, I don't have to worry about writing the part as I'm recording. I can just concentrate on performance. But in the off time, like now I'm involved in various production work with different people and doing a lot of writing, so I'm very involved musically, but I'm not really involved musically as a bass player as much as maybe I should be. (laughs)

CM: With your rehearsal and that as well, do you always sing when you rehearse? Like you do both together, or how do you handle it?

GL: Only if I'm preparing for a tour. Otherwise I just worry about the bass part. For an album, too. I mean, I don't want to restrict what I'm playing as a bass player when I'm recording, because to me it's more important to do the part that suits the song or that suits my ambitions for the song...

CM: ...and you'll figure it out later.

GL: Yeah, and I'll worry about it later. (laughs)

CM: With recording then, too, I'm just curious, I assume you play both parts separately. Have you ever done it at the same time?

GL: Vocals and bass? No. It would just not be practical.

CM: Too much mic bleed.

GL: Yeah.

CM: Playing live, since that's when you do the vocals and bass together the most, what's going through your mind?

GL: When I'm singing, I'm really thinking about...

CM: Like are you looking at the crowd, or...

GL: No, I'm thinking about singing in tune. (laughs)

CM: So lyrics, again, become second nature?

GL: Absolutely. Lyrics are second nature. Sometimes I forget them, and sometimes I need to have little taped reminders for lyrics. As I age, my memory for lyrics becomes more faulty.

CM: Well, I've actually heard that Axl Rose used to have a television prompter for his lyrics.

GL: Yeah, I've used that in the past from time to time too. That definitely saves your ass. (laughs)

CM: Do you find you have to use it much?

GL: No, only in a panic. Somehow knowing that it's around helps, knowing that you won't just go blank. It's not the fact that you're going to mess up words, because even with a prompter, if you find yourself reading a prompter then you sing like an idiot.

CM: Because you're concentrating on...

GL: Yeah, you're concentrating on that, and it doesn't matter. But even with a prompter you mess up words, because you can't really read while you're playing. But it's kind of a security net, in case you have one of those terrible moments where you

just black out, and you can't remember anything. That's happened to me once – at least once in my career that I remember, and it was a terrible moment, because it happened at the opening of "Closer to the Heart", of all the ... and there's nobody else playing, nowhere to run and hide! (laughs) And the crowd was singing and trying to help me get back into the flow of things.

CM: So what, did you just step back from the mic and point at the crowd?

GL: I just stepped back to the mic, went blank, and they were kind of smiling at me and I just joined in and went, "Yeah, okay, now I got it."

CM: Okay, and they thought you were stepping back to listen to their singing...

GL: Yeah, that's right. (laughs) They're always the first ones to point out when you make a mistake. Our fans, they know every inch of the music, so if you play something wrong, they give you a look. (laughs)

CM: Tell them you're just jamming.

GL: So they're creatures of structure too. They don't like us to improvise, because to them, in their minds maybe it's a mistake.

CM: So what ... ah, I just drew a blank there.

GL: You see, it happens to everybody. (laughs)

Next issue, *CM* chats with Geddy about playing with a drummer – what to listen to, how to lock into a groove, etc. He also shares some of his influences ... stay tuned.

Jeff MacKay is Assistant Editor for Canadian Musician.