

# SCENE

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

## Rush: *something special for everyone*

by Jim Chlebo

Faster than I could say "La Villa Strangiato," I was conducting a SCENE interview, via phone, with Geddy Lee, lead vocalist, bassist and founding member of Rush — originally a Canadian power-boogie trio which has evolved into one of music's most autonomous and esoteric highly-acclaimed international attractions. How could Rush be such heroes in Canada and elsewhere, but enjoy what could be best described as limited recognition in America? Phoning from his Toronto home, Lee discussed the qualities that, despite them not being chart-topping titans (Rush has yet to score a big single in the U.S.) distinguish Rush as having a thoroughly inventive style of sound that lays claim to one of the music industry's most loyal bases of fan support.

A trademark of Rush's sound is the voice of Geddy Lee — decibels above glass-shattering frequency — which has been described as overwhelming, shrill and triumphant, to grating and eunuch-like. Expecting to hold the phone two feet from my ear, I instead strained to hear the soft-spoken Lee.

The 26-year-old Lee informed SCENE that Rush's nucleus was fused when he met a seventh-grade classmate named Alex Lifeson: "When we were little guys, I found out he played guitar; he found out I played bass. He used to blow up my amps all the time." Twenty-seven-year-old drummer Neil Peart happened by five years ago, upon the completion of the initial RUSH LP (with original drummer John Rutsey). At that point, Rush had signed their first American deal with Mercury Records, and were to embark on a debut American tour. "Everybody was all excited, but John wasn't as enthused as Alex and I were. We'd had some brief disagreements in direction," Lee continued, "and all of us felt that it would be best if he left; so, he did. We had a mad scramble around to look for drummers to audition. Neil came along and fit in like a glove."

And how! Not only has Peart been a fortress of percussive precision, he's most responsible for shaping the band's individual characteristics into a total image or, in Rush's case, conscience. Peart is a lyricist of the highest caliber. And whether he's theorizing about the dilemma of a future-world gripped in the throes of automated control ("2112"); helping Alex Lifeson set his nightmares to music ("La Villa



Rush's Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee

Strangiato"), creating an imaginary war — beyond the black holes of space and between gods of love and reason — in order to analogize human inner conflict ("Hemispheres") or laying out the ground rules of how earthlings will be ultimately judged (many songs), Peart has enormously aided Rush in achieving rock's most intellectual musical and lyrical balance of cold, technical refinement and creative breakthrough, of raw practicality

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## Rock's veterans yell "charge"

Last week, SCENE reported on the glut of quality "rookie" product being released by the major record labels, while only

hinting at a forthcoming heavy schedule of superstar LP releases.

Well, that expected load of superstar product due in early 1980 is on its way. Already, a number of major artists have rushed their LPs into the stores. And many more established acts are expected to make new

with the acclaimed "rookie" product and the expected quality of the other forthcoming LPs, create the healthiest atmosphere the recording industry has been in for some time now. Soon to be on radio, in stores and on everybody's turntables are the latest from **Bob Seger** (Sgt. Rock), who's also

roster's not enough to demand an allowance increase, how about these releases due from Atlantic and its custom labels: **Rolling Stones**, **Firefall**, **Sister Sledge** and the long awaited **Genesis**. **Linda Ronstadt** (Asylum) is

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To be a Rush fan is to pledge blind devotion

# Rush: something special for everyone

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and robust individuality.

Peart has, to borrow some of his prose, "united the heart and mind" of the sounds of the seventies "in a single, perfect sphere," with new precedents pouring from creativity forged closer to the heart.

Did it require an adjustment on Geddy's behalf to sing another writer's words? "Not really, because I'm a long-time fan of his style. Everything that I end up singing on the albums is discussed thoroughly beforehand. I really like the way he writes; I can strongly relate to a lot of the things that he puts into his lyrics." Geddy's fascination with Peart's lyrics may not, however, rival mine; when I asked Geddy if there was a pre-planned correlation between "The Anthem (Of The Heart and Mind)" and the HEMISPHERE project, he was puzzled until I delineated how the two works tie so well thematically. Laughingly, he admitted, "No, you just pointed that out to me."

To be a Rush fan is to pledge blind devotion to the roles of heroism each member plays, to be subsequently drawn into a vortex of thought and energy unparalleled in magnetism, abandon, or intensity. Granted, many consider their music to be extreme, distant, perhaps a bit tedious. Rush music does not, however, spread ill will concerning lonesome losers, does not await imminent heartache on a given night, does not solicit opinions concerning sexiness. Rush creates for its aficionados a noble musical legacy of pride, concern and self-fulfillment. This is something all music fans should be able to relate to; but, just as stubborn kids will refuse cough medicine, the American record buying public doesn't always favor what's good for them. And still, every Rush release since 2112 has gone gold almost instantly, even without benefit of a hit or anything remotely resembling help from AM or FM radio (WMMS was instrumental in breaking the RUSH LP, and this has placed Cleveland fans closer to Lee's heart ever since).

Photos of, and stories concerning, Rush are rarely seen adorning the pages of trade papers and fanzines, much less conventional magazines. Their seemingly deliberate covertness is an actual manifestation of being concerned first, last and always with improving the total quality of their music and performances. Truly a "take us or leave us" act, Rush gives their all to those who understand and appreciate them, rather than become lost, both musically and idealistically, in a hypothetical catering to "mass tastes." Rush does not try to be commercially oriented, but to the surprise of some hard-core fans, Rush also doesn't consciously try to be uncommercial — they are simply trying to be Rush. Geddy Lee summarizes the matters of Rush's artistic direction and their limited media exposure quite succinctly:

"Here we are, three musicians who want to make music. And that's all we care about—making music, and making the kind of music that we like. That's got to be first priority. From the band's inception it was 'We're going to do this on our terms—no one else's terms. No record company, no radio station, no management is going to dictate what we sound like. So when you think of it in that term, you just do what you naturally do. And that's all we've ever done.'"

A direct result of Rush's liberty to "sound like what they want to" is the cunning with which they arrange their three-piece ensemble. And also the craftsmanship they lavish upon creating distinctive guitar sounds. Geddy spoke about The Interface, a device Rush will introduce with this LP and tour:

"I've been working for about a year-and-a-half to develop some way to control my Oberheim (Polyphonic synthesizer) with my bass pedals, because it gives me the flexibility to keep the bass happening and, at the same time, have all this texture happening with my feet. I finally got it together before this album."

"We utilized it during recording and we'll be utilizing it a lot more live; it almost gives us another member."

Geddy added that Alex has made no major changes, except for some new guitars and further refining his sound. Who has the ignominious chore of transferring Alex's parts to sheet music? "After we write our songs," explained Geddy, "we just remember them in our heads. When the album is going to be published, we give our recordings to somebody who knows how to write music—he writes it all out and that's his headache!"

So, aspiring musicians should note that not reading music will not guarantee failure, and vice versa. Aspiring bassists, however, should consider the comments of one of rock's leading bass stylists concerning the way in which Lee achieves his growling or bouncing tones: "I don't change the sound of my bass that much during the show."



Some of the change is up front with the sound engineers, but a lot of it is playing technique. The piece of music we're playing behind dictates the kind of technique that I use. I play with a different feel to the strings. I play on a different part of the neck; I play with a different edge. Sometimes I play with my fingernails, or very softly with the soft part of my hand. There is a number of ways to change the feel of the bass lines."

Both Lee and Lifeson compose their own parts. Occasionally, there are double-solo points where both guitarists go all-out to top each other; these often grow out of tunes where each musician is featured in separate leads. Shedding light on Rush as composers, Lee said, "we don't intentionally plan who's getting the spotlight here and there—it's a matter of what instrument is naturally featured. In the proper construction of a Rush tune, considering the amount of instruments we have at our disposal, it invariably works out that we're featuring one instrument, then shifting the center of attention to another just to keep variety happening."

The lack of a unifying theme on the new release, **PERMANENT WAVES**, is probably the reason a title was so difficult to come by this time. "This album, from the outset, had a different motivation behind it. With **HEMISPHERES**, we felt that we'd taken concepts as far as we could. The whole goal of the last few albums was to build to a point where we could write a 20-minute piece that we felt worked. With 2112, that was a start. Finally, with **HEMISPHERES**, we figured we'd achieved that for the present, anyway."

"But the whole idea of **PERMANENT WAVES** was, 'Okay, we've had our try at doing longer pieces with concepts and we've got it down. So why don't we try to take all we've learned—all the complexities in a 20-minute piece—and do it in five to eight minutes and see if the end result will be a more musical effort that resembles a song again. We haven't written such songs in a long time; the closest was "Circumstances" on **HEMISPHERES** and that wasn't close enough. It was a song, but one constructed of movements more than a song with one main flow. So, the whole ideology behind this album was to make sure we did not lose the ability to write songs that make it as concise little pieces.'"

This should mean that a single is on the way? "Yes," Geddy replied. "The record company's released "The Spirit Of Radio" and that's fine with me 'cause it's a cool song." Was it written to attract media attention? "No, it was inspired by a radio station here in Toronto that plays all kinds of music, all the time. It's a great station and it sort of reflects what radio is, what radio could be and has been at certain points in its history. There have been times when radio has fulfilled its promise; but, there's also times when commercialism takes over and I think we all suffer for it because one of our greatest treasures, the airwaves, gets abused. It's really a tune about that—the honesty of radio and the honest spirit of music that relates not only to radio but to musicians."

Another new tune that Geddy wished to discuss was "Different Strings," the first song since 2112's "Tears" in which Geddy composed the lyrics. It's a tender love song and another new angle for Rush. Geddy commented on his controversial voice, in relation to the new LP: "There's more room for me to sing softer now and that's a good thing, a coming of age. At points, our music's intensity requires me to be very intense. And that's fine, because it suits what we want to get across. There's still going to be times when I have to get up there to cut through what I'm trying to say, and if that turns people

off, tough! They can go away."

The discussion then turned to my favorite new song, "Natural Science." Geddy's response was an emphatic, "All right, that's my favorite, too." and added that a slide display to coincide with that song is being planned. Rush did not have new slides on the start of the tour (now well in progress); but, Geddy is very hopeful that they will be ready when Rush assumes control of the Coliseum this Monday night (Feb. 18). "We're expanding to a few other sequences which are going to be a little different. They feature a series of paintings by someone who actually lives in the Cleveland area. He's a fan of ours, and showed us his work the last time we were in Cleveland. We've kept in contact with him and we've now hired him to do a number of scenes. We'll sync the film with the music, like last year. Films are something we've always wanted to do, but it's all dictated by cost. Even now, although we're doing very well, there remain certain costs which are prohibitive. There's a lot of cities on the last tour that didn't see our film projections because they were still being made. You're always catching up to yourself—you want to make sure it's right and put as much as possible into it. We've expanded somewhat on our lighting: it's an elaborate system already and is hard to add to. So, we maintain the quality and make subtle changes."

"Were one of the hardest-working bands as far as touring," Lee continued. "The atmosphere in which we operate is that we want to make the shows as interesting as possible. I know when I used to go see Genesis, Yes and bands like that, that's the kind of care they put into their shows; they would sit down and plan a tour to really put on something special for everyone. That's the kind of attitude we've got."

Rush is not a 20,000-seat attraction in every city, although they enjoy that status in Toronto and Chicago. Geddy said, "It was nice to play in Cleveland in some place of that size (Coliseum); it was an exciting atmosphere last year (Feb. 3, 1979) with a lot of electricity in the air. We're still doing multiple dates at small theatres in certain places because people there really want to see the band, but they don't have the large facility."

**PERMANENT WAVES** signaled several changes for Rush. In addition to having no concept pieces, the album was recorded in Canada, where Rush had time to rest before, and after, recording, which was completed just before Christmas. Geddy, however, had less holiday time than Alex or Neil, as he was busy producing the second LP by Wireless, an act on Rush's independently owned Canadian record label, Anthem Records. Geddy's excited about Anthem and 1980: "A bunch of records will be coming out this year. We've got BeBe Gabor, who I guess could be tagged a new-wave artist. Max Webster Band (opening for Rush, Feb. 18) has been a mainstay for quite a while; the band's doing great in Canada. Their second to last album went platinum and their new live album is too."

Here's a couple more juicy points of interest to Rush fans. On this tour, the band will still do a lot of old favorites, including "The Anthem," "By-Tor And The Snow Dog" and the classic epic "2112;" but, the album 2112's hard-hitting "Something For Nothing" has, in Geddy's words, "fallen by the wayside."

This interview should prove to be a phantasmagoria of facts useful to any member of the Solar federation. But, if you're not into Rush, I'm hoping that at least one of you will buy just one Rush album, go see this phenomenal performing band Feb. 18, or at least listen to a Rush album with a fresh objective based on what's been said here. Rush will take it from there.