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November 4 - 17, 1996

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Entertainment
Guide

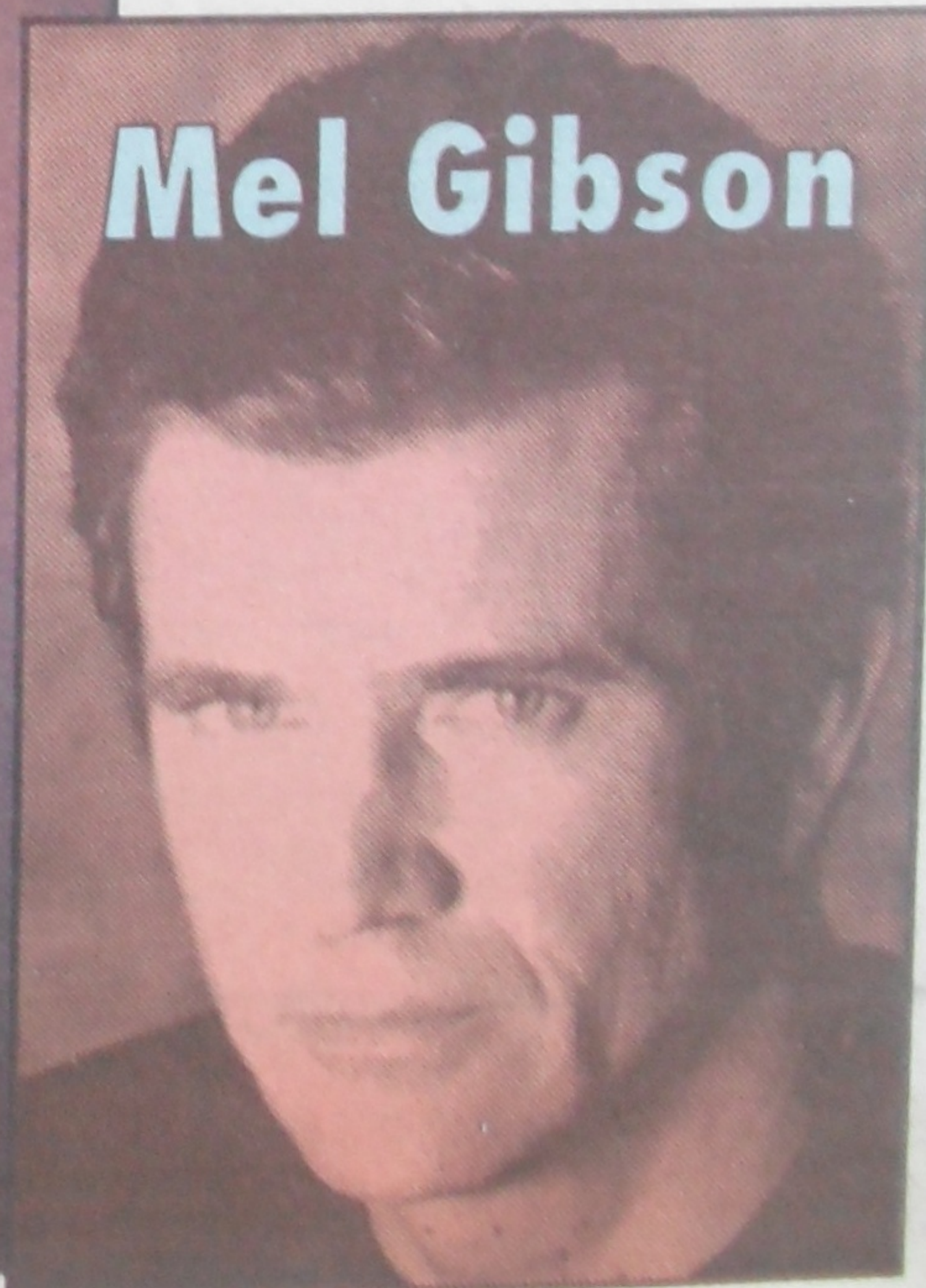
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**Geddy Lee of
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Ossie Davis
Robyn Hitchcock
Linda Perry
Midnight Oil
Patti Rothberg
Santana
ZZ Top

Mel Gibson



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the island Ear

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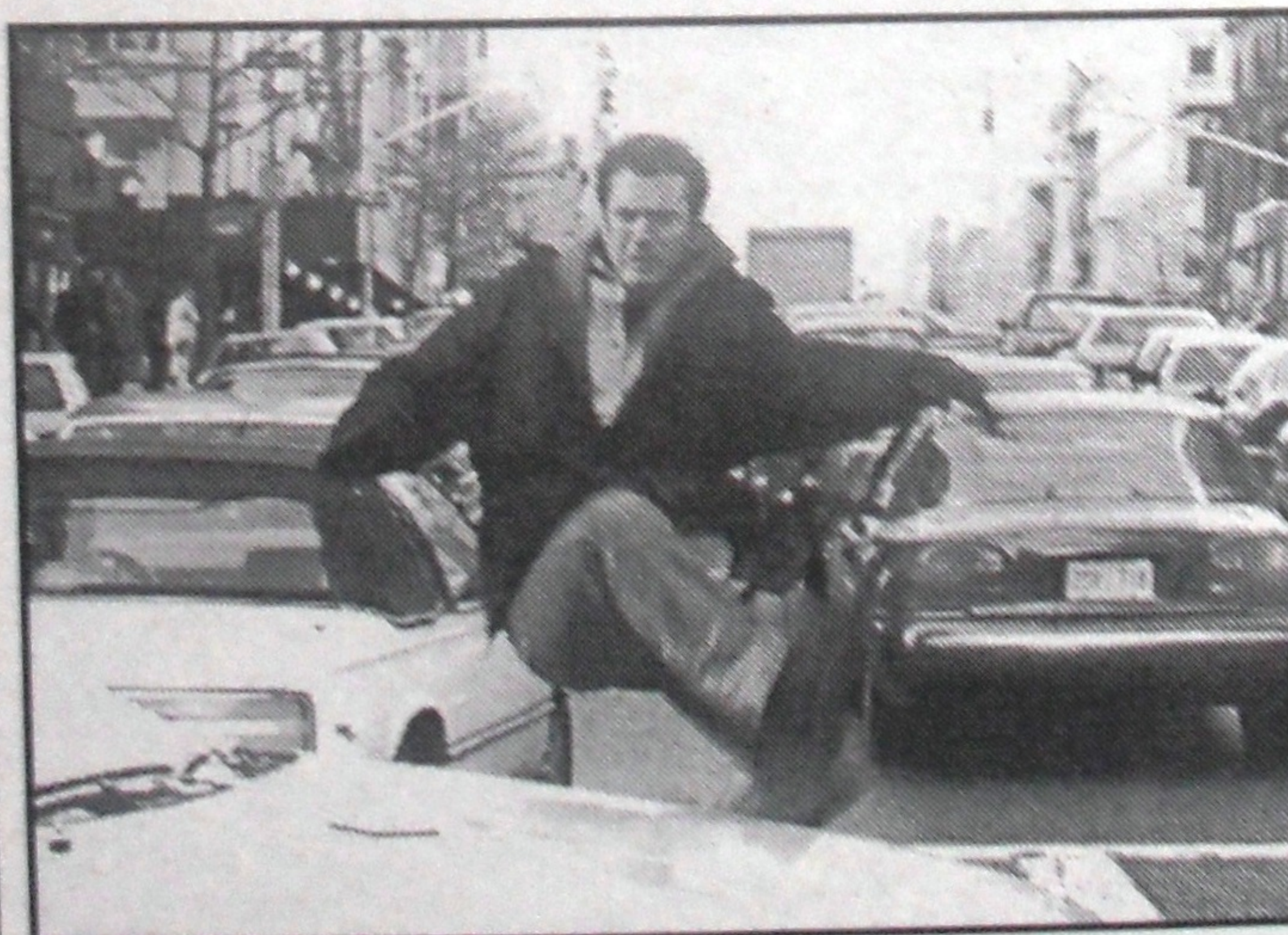
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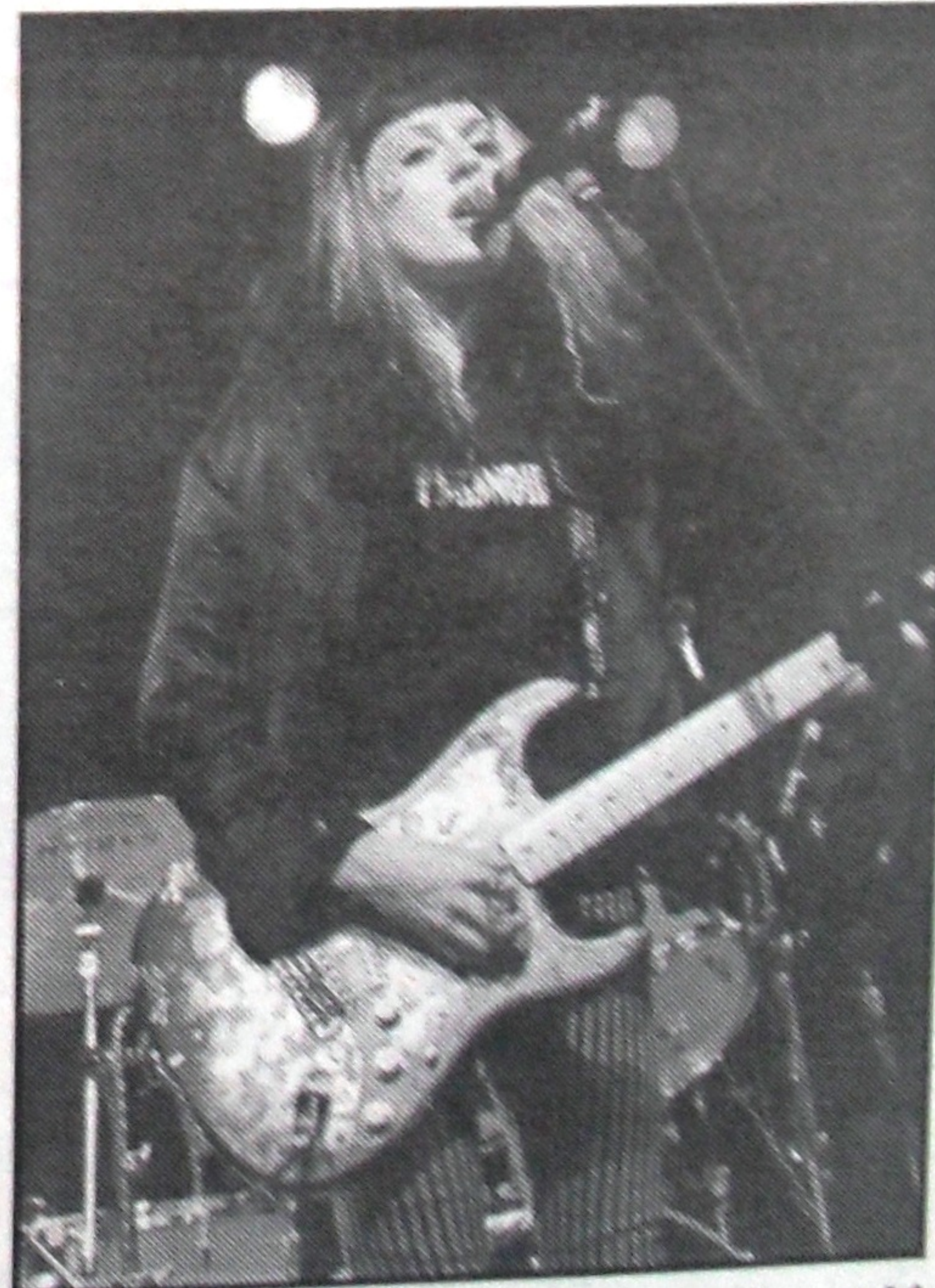
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Alex Lifeson

Geddy Lee

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Geddy Lee of RUSH

By Robert Granger

For the past twenty-two years, one band has been synonymous with the image of the power trio and the progressive rock band: Rush. The percussion and lyrical prowess of Neil Peart, combined with Alex Lifeson's textural guitars and intense leads, and Geddy Lee's vocal and four string bass playing acrobatics, have blended to create sixteen studio albums worth of music that literally stretched the boundaries of contemporary rock music. From their early epic works in the '70s, to their synthesizer-laced period in the '80s, and their return to their heavier roots this past decade, Rush has maintained an intensity and depth in their music that has become somewhat of a standard. With their most recent release, *Test For Echo*, possibly their heaviest to date, the Canadian power trio has returned after nearly a two-year hiatus with a power and ferocity that rivals some of their earliest material. From the metallic feel of the title track, to the driving force behind "Driven" and the heavy feel of "Dog Years," Rush has stripped away the layers of synthesizers, beefed-up their sound, and produced a Rush record for the '90s.

THE ISLAND EAR recently caught up with Rush's man of many hats, Geddy Lee, as he prepared for the release of *Test For Echo*.

It's been a while since Rush has been on the music scene. Besides writing and recording Test For Echo, what did you do with yourself for the eighteen months between your last tour date and the recording?

I hung around the house, and played a lot of tennis and raised my kids. Mostly domestic stuff.

Did you ever think about doing a side project like Alex did via Victor?

I'm not really overly ambitious in that field. I find while I'm in Rush it takes a lot out of me to do what we do, and to continue that vision. I find it very fulfilling musically, so I don't have any real frustrations that I need to get off my chest. And to be frank, I really don't have the time to properly devote to a side project at the moment. I would like to work with other artists at some point, and I'd like to do some producing, but I think that I'll wait to a time where Rush isn't really functioning. This would have been a good time to do something like that but my head was not in it. I needed to be

away from music for a while. I think that it was a very good decision on my part because I feel very invigorated and excited about music again. I was dying to get back to it. And I was really glad that I was dying to get back to that and I think it's a good feeling to have.

Were you afraid you weren't going to feel that?

Yes, I was afraid that I was going to be so happy to be away from it that I wouldn't miss it. And I did miss it.

It also sounds like you guys really had a good time recording the album.

Everyone was very enthusiastic, very rested, very well rehearsed and it was a lot of fun to make this record. I didn't really want to see the sessions come to an end. I would like to have made another record right after finishing this record, I was quite literally ready to do that (laughing)!

How was it getting back together with Neil and Alex and actually recording the new songs?

Everyone was in a good frame of mind. The first few days were a little weird because we hadn't seen each other in a long time, and Alex was coming off a project that he was totally in control of, so it was a bit of an adjustment for him to get back to being part of a democracy. As for myself, I was just so relaxed; I had a year and a half off, just hanging out with my family and being a mellow guy and I was just ready to work, and happy to have a job (laughing). Alex, I think, was a little happy not to have all the responsibility, so it all kind of worked out in the end.

The bio that Neil wrote for this album alludes to a bit of a change in the band's writing process.

The writing process has changed a little bit. In the past, we'd get an idea for a song, whether it be musical or lyrical, and we'd kind of hack away at it until we had a song almost finished and then we'd bring it to Neil and discuss it. Then we'd go back and fine tune it. This time around we wanted to keep going while we were on a roll because it felt great because we were full of ideas. But sometimes the ideas grew wildly divergent, and rather than try to make those wildly divergent ideas suit the song that we had already started, we thought that we would just stop working on the song. We had about 3/4 of it done, so we'd leave it and move on to another song and try and match that wild idea up with another lyric. So then we'd do that and then another idea would spring forth and we'd put that song on hold as well and we'd start another one. We would just keep starting other songs, and before we knew it, we had about five or six songs on the go and I guess we just wanted to finish them all before we presented them to Neil because we had a lot of

confidence in the material, and that's what we did. I didn't actually realize that Neil was banging his head against a wall going, "I want to hear something," until I read the bio that he wrote for the album (laughing)! So, I'm sorry for that Neil, but I think it all worked out just fine.

Is that how it usually works with Neil taking care of the lyrics and Alex and yourself taking care of the musical ideas?

Yeah, it's pretty well how it works. Obviously, he does his own drum arrangements and occasionally he would come in and say, "I think the dynamics are screwed up in this part... this part might not be as good as you guys think... and this alteration... maybe you can write something here," so there's that interplay that occurs between the three of us when it comes to writing.

Were any of the songs, new or older, ever written around a percussion part?

I think there have been from time to time, but I couldn't be specific on hand. For example, Neil had been working on kind of a drum solo idea and one of the reasons that we try to do instrumentals is because the instrumentals have become places where a lot of our ideas that don't fit anywhere else come to rest. We can tie them all together and have some real fun with them. There's a nice attitude in writing our instrumentals because they don't have to be conventional in any way, shape, or form, and that's a great relief. Sometimes when you're working in the context of a "song structure" it leaves natural holes. So sometimes if that kind of thing happens we'll try and give it to Neil to fill. For example, in "Test For Echo," Neil wanted a bit more time to throw in a nice long drum break, so we moved some stuff around to accommodate him. So there's input, but in the older days we used to write together with Neil on drums, me on bass, and Alex on guitar, this is going way back and some of the ideas were more spontaneous. Neil might have a drum pattern that we could jam to and some of that original material evolved right on the spot; now it happens at different stages, but it still happens. After we write the music, we give it to Neil. He'll learn it, add his drum parts to it and very often it will change the dynamics of the song. So we'll have to take it back to not so much change the music, but to change the feel to accommodate what he's playing and that makes the song into yet a different one. It's never really the same before and after it goes through Neil.

While we're on the subject of drums, the whole feel of the album seems to have much more of a groove than past Rush albums. Can that be directly related to the drum lessons that Neil took or were there outside influences?

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It's hard to say. Certainly his reinventing of his style has impacted the way he grooves and I think that it's impacted us in the way that his drums "speak" — particularly the snare drum. It sounds quite different on this album and I think that's partly a function of the engineering team and also a function of his style. But, I don't think that it affected the way we wrote. I think there's been a slightly more groove-oriented direction of the bass playing over the past two or three albums, so I think that was kind of evolving anyway.

Test For Echo, as a whole, has a much heavier, grittier, and dare I say, metallic sound than your past albums. Any reason why?

We've always liked aggressive music. Some of our earlier records are really aggressive, and I don't think that we could ever really lose that side of ourselves. There's a part of Rush that's always in a state of constant turmoil between the heavier side and the more melodic and there's always a bit of a balance between the two. Sometimes it's a compromise, one or the other, but we really like that aggressive feel.

Did you listen to anything during your breaks or during the writing process that influenced the grittier, heavier overall sound, because it is very uncharacteristic of Rush.

It is a different sound. I don't know if it was in the writing, or if it was in the production. We intentionally wanted to work with an American production team [Cliff Norell and Andy Wallace], it's the first time we've ever done that. We liked their work and we've never used that sound, that dryer, more up-front sound. So as a band, we really wanted to experiment with that sound. So I don't know if that affected the way we wrote; maybe it subconsciously did. Sometimes you're working with someone of a particular sound or style and somehow it affects the way you shape your ideas. But selecting Cliff and Andy to try and capture that raw sound was a conscious move on our part, probably the only conscious move we made when we started writing this album. Everything else just seemed to happen, believe it or not.

Did you choose Andy Wallace for any specific reason? It shocked me because he's known for producing and mixing some pretty heavy bands like Slayer, Faith No More, Sepultura, Nirvana....

I know it probably shocked a lot of people because it was a bit left field for us, but there were things about our sound that were a little frustrating to us. There was a density and a wall of sound that we wanted to get away from and a number of the records that Andy had mixed in the past actually captured a tough, aggressive sound that had air around them. Even though they were powerful and dense, they still breathed, they weren't overloaded. We definitely wanted him to bring that

RUSH

to our tracks and he did. He's great at going in there and setting up the stereo mix in just a slightly different way. It's not miraculously different, but instead of having a wall of guitars, he may not use three out of six of them. He may just put one hard left and one hard right and change the EQ and bring out the character of those guitars. It was a less-is-more approach to a certain degree, but it was also less is more character and that's what he was trying to bring out in Alex's playing. I think that was good and that there is a lot of character to his sound that a lot of times you don't get to hear as well. It's nice to be able to appreciate it.

I also really like the use of acoustic guitars on the album. It sounds like they're layered in everywhere and they add a nice dynamic to even the heavier parts. I especially like the acoustic layering in "Drive" as well as the break where it's just you and the guitar.

I like that too. It was good for Alex too because he got to go out and buy some new acoustics (laughing). He went out and tested some really sweet acoustics and brought them in. It was something I encouraged him to do and I think it's a nice sound. Even layered in the aggressive sound, it's still guitar, it still has this quality about it that's not synthetic, but yet it's a change of dynamics. I really like that sound.

I also noticed that you guys seemed to stray away from the heavy keyboard parts in favor of the occasional coloring. Was that a conscious decision?

Yeah, that was intentional. Alex always found keyboards to be a little bit of a nightmare, especially in the old days when I would come in with banks of keyboards (laughing). So I wasn't going to make him too uncomfortable and I was all in favor of freeing up the sound and again.

In the past, you've worn three hats — vocalist, bassist, keyboard player. Since Rush has really been relying less on keyboards, are you finding it a little bit easier to keep everything intact?

Keyboards are probably the least pleasant and least fun to record because searching keyboard sounds in the studio is a living hell (laughing). There are so many banks of sounds to go through and you've got to try all of them out, it's just very tiring. It really exhausts your ears, it's a long process that is just not fun. Playing bass is my first love, I love to play. The only sad thing about playing bass on a record is that it's over too quickly and then I don't get to play anymore and that's just a drag. I just really love to play bass. With the new technology now it's great because I don't have to play as many keyboard parts. I can concentrate on playing bass and Alex can play some parts and Neil can trigger some parts.

Getting into the album, what's the theme behind the phrase "Test For Echo"?

It actually says quite a lot. It asks, is there anybody out there? Does anyone else see all this s**t going on? Hello? It's a kind of response that I really like the idea of. Not just in context of technology, but in context of what happens to us. Like all this bombing s**t that's going on. Does anyone realize what's going on? Sometimes we feel so detached and disconnected from stuff that we have to ground ourselves and test for echo. There's just something about that phrase that's so prevalent to these times.

Is there an underlying theme that runs through the album itself?

Well, I suppose, but I don't really see this record in terms of a thematic album. For me, a lot of these tracks are very separated. Usually there's a theme that runs through our albums, but I think that this one is harder to actually pinpoint. I leave that to the listener to decide for him or herself.

How do you think Rush has evolved since you first started?

I don't know. I really don't know what we're known for being now (laughing). That's a good question. We just write these really strange songs that are kind of heavy, and kind of melodic, and kind of complicated, and I guess they're harder to define than ever before. People tend to pin us down as a "progressive rock" band, but I don't know if there's such a thing anymore. It certainly feels like what we're doing is progressive in some ways, but I don't know if it is right now. Rock music is so diverse now, there's just so many different kinds of rock music you can listen to. I think "alternative" music has opened up a whole bunch of avenues for musicians. It's like what happened to jazz music, there became all these different types of jazz and with each type of jazz came its fans. I think that's what happened to rock music and I think that it's a good thing. Rock fans are inundated with so many different styles of rock music now — bluesy rock, jazzy rock, "grunge rock" — where do we fit in that aspect? I don't know, it's really hard to say. We try to throw whatever we can into our music so it becomes an amalgam of a little bit of everything.

How have you evolved as a musician since Rush started?

I practice more now (laughing). I don't know, I like to think that I've got a broader appreciation for the different aspects of music writing. It's not so important to me anymore to be the fastest, even though I'd like to be. I've got a finer appreciation for the whole groove aspect and role of the bass, it intrigues me more. I'm very jealous of these guys who are great slap artists, I think it's so cool. I'm just so terrible at it that I don't even go there anymore. I think I try and keep an open mind and I try to absorb any new styles that I can. I really don't want to be a "dated" player. I'm glad that there are a lot of bass players out there who are getting more aggressive and eating up more space in the overall mix.



“I practice more now.”