

RUSH:

Throws Open Power Windows

Geddy Lee gives a state of the band address for the present, and looks for things to get a little more *dangerous* in the near future.

by Jeff Day

"We don't mind doing interviews," says Geddy Lee, confronting one of the many myths that has grown up around Rush during the band's over a decade-long history. "What we're not comfortable with is all the hype, blitzing this radio show and that, doing those..." He appears to be searching for a better word but allows a tone of disdain to suffice, "rock star kind of things." A midday chat with Rush's vocalist/bassist/keyboardsist does a lot to set straight some common misconceptions about this band and their internal affairs—that they're hard to interview, that they're much too serious, stone-faced rockers who don't know how to have fun, that they're always on the verge of breaking up. Likewise their latest album, *Power Windows*, ought to silence those ever-present critical background noises, labeling Rush over the years as everything from a flash-in-the-teen-rock-pan to cliché-ridden musical dinosaurs.

Lee is dressed in his characteristic *Toronto Vice* style, with a stylish loose-fitting jacket over plain t-shirt, baggy pants and plain black Oriental-type slippers. He's thoughtful throughout the conversation, never sidestepping any question, and the Lennon-like round glasses framed by his ever-abundant brunet mane serve to reinforce the serious side. Don't get the idea that that's all there is to this one-third of the Number One thinking-person's hard rock band. Geddy Lee's got a wicked sense of humor and will even admit to being excited by the new album's nitro-burning charge into the Top Ten (their sixth in a row to do so) behind the first, and what will likely be their biggest single to date, "The Big Money." "I try not to think about it like that," he stresses, and then

confesses, "although it's hard not to. You get caught up in the excitement." Watching it bullet up the charts, we ask? "Yeah, or watching it plummet down," he laughs.



Alex Lifeson, on guitar, and Geddy Lee share the power of Rush onstage during the last leg of the *Grace Under Pressure* tour.

Rush has tasted both during their time, in addition to the misconceptions (or preconceptions) of the various media, and having survived it all enter 1986 bigger, better and happier than ever before. Perhaps in the particular case of Rush, though, triumphing is a better word than surviving. This is one band that has always made their own way, independent of any trends or conventional thinking, all the way to the top. And, that's why after spending what amounts to many of their fans' lifetimes together, you still hear more talk of learning and

growing, than empty hype and rock-celebrity nonsense from Lee.

"We still didn't feel that we had accomplished what we set out to," he says, referring to the last album, *Grace Under Pressure*, and the producer-round that preceded it. (After leaving Terry Brown, whom they'd worked with since the first album, they settled for Peter Henderson, who was Plan B after interviewing over 50 producers, looking for Plan A.) "So we started again and found Peter Collins. He's from a background that's really different from ours; we made a real left field choice in some ways because he's an English pop producer. (His credits include Nik Kershaw, Blancmange, Musical Youth and Gary Moore.) You know, 'What does he know about rock?' Then we asked ourselves, 'What do you need to know about rock?' We rock." He continues with abso-

lute confidence, "Let's learn about the things that he knows about." "What we wanted, what we were looking for." Indeed, the material on the new album seems to have it all. All the heart of the old Rush, in the songwriting and musicianship, and an expansive new sound that the last couple of efforts only hinted at. "The Big Money" was a hit from the moment it blasted onto the radio and video playlists. The song that's likely to be the third single, "Marathon," could be the elusive hit/anthem that—while they may not have been looking for it—Rush has deserved for a while.

Meantime, they've released "Manhattan Project" as the second single, a characteristic rock-romp through territories where few Top 40 bands dare to go—in this case, the evolution and consequences of the original atomic bomb. When asked if the song doesn't sit on the fence, doesn't take as strong a stand as it could (or should) towards the weapon, Lee agrees, but only to an extent. "What the song is trying to bring out is *not* the fact that the bomb is a horrible thing which it obviously was. It's, who are the people that made this bomb? It's a song about people more than the bomb, to me. It's a song about the fact that there were people all over the world involved in a race, brilliant men, the best that there were, some of the best minds in the world. And that's something people tend to forget when they think about the bomb. They seem to remember just the horrible holocaust without realizing the atmosphere of the times was so crazy."

Lee says that he thinks it's dangerous for a rock band to get political (i.e. takes sides), in that "you may have more effect than you realize," and that it's most important to be objective. These lines from the chorus, then, succeed to that end in outlining the situation as it has remained since the A-bomb was first developed by the Manhattan Project team at Los Alamos, New Mexico in 1945. "The big shots—try to hold it back/Fools try to wish it away/The hopeful depend on a world without end/Whatever the hopeless may say." Rockers getting political though, as Lee did last year with the *Northern Lights* "Tears Are Not Enough" contribution to the *USA For Africa* LP, in a helpful,

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awareness raising capacity, can only bear positive fruit, he believes. "The bottom line is somebody's being helped, somewhere in the world, and that's got to be considered a good thing. More people are aware of farm problems and world hunger than they were last year at this time.

"It was a terrific experience standing there with fifty good singers, singing that melody together. I'll never forget it as long as I live. Fifty lead singers singing together, you could not help but be moved by the power of those voices," he reminisces fondly. Then, bringing it all back down to earth, or in this case The Great White North, he continues. "Then they sent the tapes down to all those hockey players—you see them in the video, The

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Edmonton Oilers—it was so funny, it was so...Canadian in some ways. 'O.K., let's get the hockey players in there, eh?'" This line of joking leads us to an anecdote about a little known Rush post concert-backstage, Canadian idiosyncrasy.

"In some of the arenas we used to play in the U.S.," Geddy confides, "we used to lock up the ice after the shows and play hockey. You can't get any more Canadian than that!" He laughs, "There's people hanging around backstage, you know, and the rock band goes into the dressing room and emerge as these goofy-looking


hockey players on skates, clomping over to the ice to play a game for an hour before getting on the bus to drive to the next city...and do it all over again!"

Back to the musical side of things again, Geddy tries (though he confesses that the material is still too new to really analyze) to put the new album into perspective. "We tried to bring the guitars more into focus on the last record and I think we sort of overcompensated. The *Signals* album guitars were relegated to a smaller role, we tried to re-arrange a little bit and in the

process we were sort of groping a little bit. We didn't really have a blueprint and as a result that record has a tremendous variety from one song to the next. So, we tried to correct that with *Grace Under Pressure*, but we went too far in one direction and guitar became too important, almost crushing some of the melodies. We were looking for a better balance and I think this record's a lot closer to it."

For now there are some simple, but crucial, goals for the band to concentrate on, Lee says. The first, and the one that this new album goes a long way towards achieving, is to make the production more contemporary, give it a fresher sound. The second one is more elusive, for any band, and that's the transition from good songs to great songs. "Melody writing is the essence of good songwriting," as Geddy sees it. "We've always been good at being real technical and being able to play complicated time signatures, busy music," says Lee offering some, unusual in the world of rock 'n' roll promotional tours, self-criticism. "We haven't always been able to write the best melodies for that particular part of the song." Which is why they still look to an outside producer, even though they could easily produce their own stuff, and in effect, have in the past. Geddy continues, "Having an outside producer pushes you and points out that, while you may think that something is good, you're capable of more."

So, in 1986, Rush look to the future optimistically. They're happy about where they are and where they've been, but are even more eager to try something new. "We needed to have a good time making this record," Geddy concludes, rather matter-of-factly. "If it hadn't been, I think it could have had disastrous effects. But, we've just come through a very positive experience making this record and I'd say we're on an upswing right now. We're feeling very good about the future and we're excited about making more records. I'd say it's a bright day today.

"The only thing that would make us look elsewhere [a new producer, again, for the next album] would be if we decided that we just needed to keep changing every time. I would think that when you have this good an experience," Lee finishes, "you have a tendency to want to repeat it. But, whether we want to be a little more dangerous, that is the decision." 



That was then, this is now. In both cases, Rush is (l. to r.): Alex Lifeson, Neil Peart and Geddy Lee.

