

RUSH


HOLDING ON TO THE FIRE

With the release of their 13th studio LP, *Hold Your Fire*, Rush proves that the fire is indeed still burning. Having progressed from being a raw, Led Zeppelin-influenced metal band to being the leaders of the tech-rock movement, Geddy Lee, Alex Lifeson and Neil Peart prove that they're ripening with age—making new fans while still holding old fans' interests.

Not surprisingly, when we recently sat down with Geddy Lee in New York at his elegant Carlyle Hotel suite, he revealed that one of his main fears in life—especially when it comes to touring—is going on “automatic pilot.” In order to keep the band's creative juices flowing, they're taking it easy on the current tour, getting every fourth week off. The turning point came a couple years ago when, during a live performance of their “greatest hits,” Lee found his thoughts turning to how the Mets were doing as opposed to the audience's reaction!

by Anne M. Raso





We found Lee to be somewhat of an intellectual—the John Lennon specs certainly balanced his otherwise typical long-haired rock 'n' roller look. He starts out his interviews somewhat reserved, then suddenly develops a gift for gab midway through. What's most apparent is that his approach to touring has mellowed over the years. He's a family man, not a party reptile. Keeping tours short has paid off for him. As he bluntly puts it, "If it's going to cost me three months of my life, I'd rather give up a couple months' profit."

RIP: Would you say that, all along, the most consistent trademark of the band has been your voice? It seems to be the only thing tying your older, more hard-edged sound with the newer, high-tech sound of the band.

LEE: Hmm, that's interesting. When you're actually in the band, you tend to identify [the band's sound] with a lot of different things. I think of everyone in this band as having a very identifiable sound. But perhaps you're right—to a constantly changing audience, the only identifiable thing is my voice.

RIP: Your vocal style is so bizarre, that you can't help but notice it before you notice the music. Even though Neil is such a well-respected drummer, you, as the vocalist, account for more than half the band's sound.

LEE: Well, it's hard for me to place myself outside the band and see things that way. I see the personality of Neil every time he hits the drums or Alex every time he hits the kerrang; so I associate our sound with those musical personalities. They're very, very present to me. But to look at my voice as separate from that is difficult for me.

RIP: Rush was around long before the video age? Do you find making videos a hassle or a blessing?

LEE: I think we've gone through periods where we felt a little uncomfortable—we didn't know what was expected of us and, because we never really had a high profile in terms of both public image and lifestyle, it was hard to put things into perspective. We viewed it as a sacred form at first, but that didn't work, because it's not really. And we were expected to be

actors, which didn't quite feel comfortable because we weren't actors. So we sort of relegated it to the position of "necessary promotional device," and hopefully one that could show off the performance side of the band in an artful and interesting way . . . a way that doesn't make us feel uncomfortable or over-glammed up or under-glammed up. [In our videos] we just want to be us . . . how we feel onstage.

RIP: What specifically bugs you about videos?

LEE: It's hard to come to grips with lip-syncing, first of all. It's all pretend; it's pretending you're playing. So what we do is *play*, and in some weird way it clicks—you don't feel like you're pretending, even though you're playing along with some prerecorded tracks. It sounds very odd, but that sort of justifies it as a performance video. We want to give a lot of leeway to the director, respect his ideas, and give him the freedom to create a clip that is more than just three guys playing. We want to allow him to say something visual, as long as the focus is on us playing. Because people want to see us playing—they don't want to see video clichés like girls and sportscars.

We loved working with Zbigniew Rybczynsky on the last video, because he was able to be abstract without losing the focus on our performance. The only problem was the script—you had to read it with a Polish accent to understand it! [Laughs] This certainly was the most unusual video that we've ever done, and in the world of videos, unusual is better.

RIP: This has never been a band with a devil-may-care attitude when it comes to being on the road. You've always taken a rather civilized approach, only doing a certain amount of shows per week and getting frequent breaks. . . .

LEE: We make a point of organizing the tours so that we're not cutting ourselves off from our personal lives. We don't say to our families, "I've got to go do this work now, and I won't be back for five months." We want to integrate our work with our personal lives—while we're on the road, we want to still function as *people*.

We used to do those really rough 11-

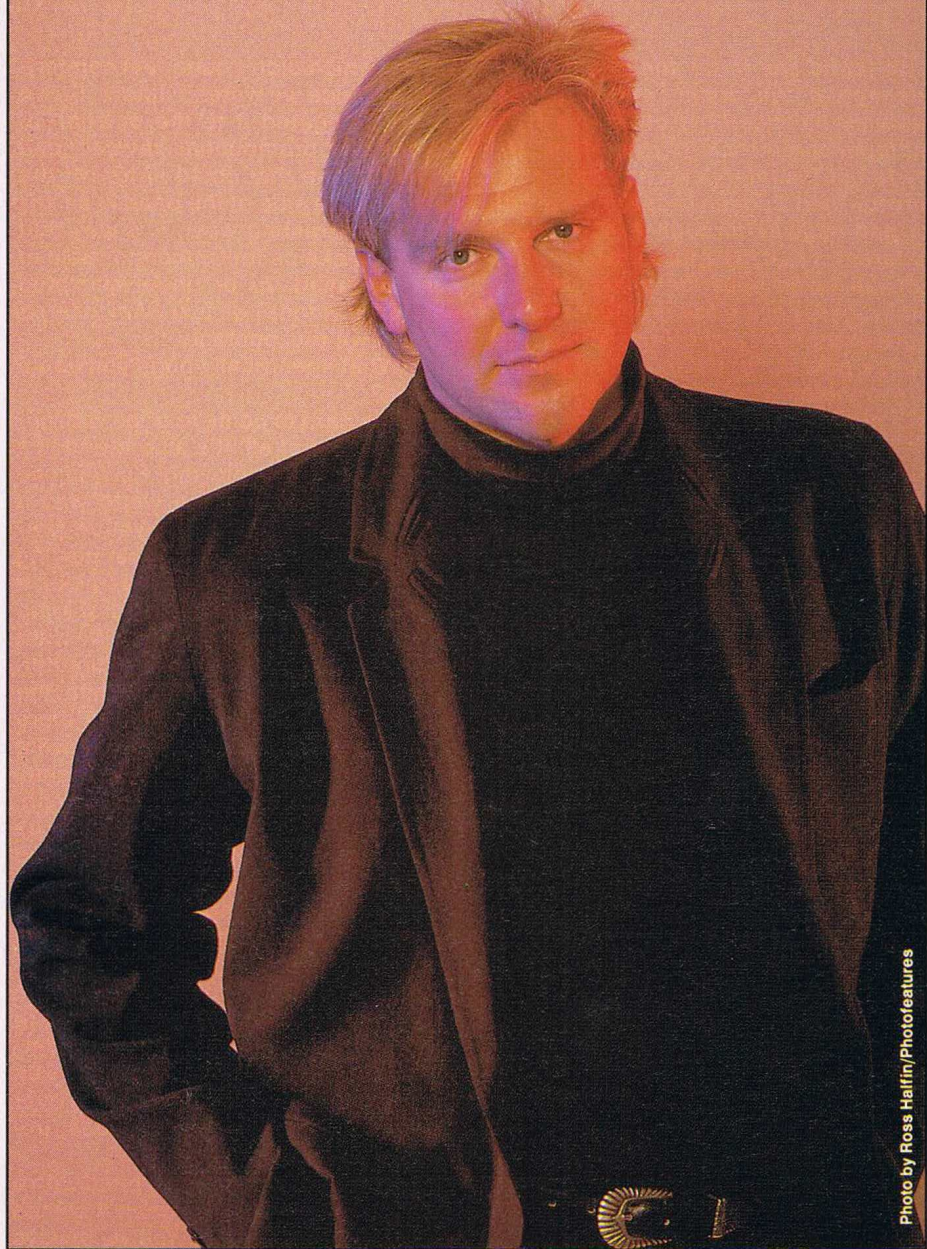


Photo by Ross Halfin/Photofeatures

month tours, but we've been touring since '74, and that's a long time. We've done our fair share of going from airplane to airplane. I don't think we have the physical makeups to do that anymore . . . or the mental makeups. We can't justify in our own minds—or to our wives—allotting that much time to touring anymore. Time is too precious at this stage. After 14 years, the novelty [of touring] wears off; it's not exciting anymore—but there *is* something to be gotten from it. There are fans out there who want to see us play, and we *want* to play for them. It's financially viable to do it too. So once you consider all these things, you say, "Rather than play every night for six months and make as much money as I can—and be a totally wasted human being and maybe even in divorce court—I'm going to cut that into a *third*. I'm going to do it slower and, sure, I won't make as much money, but I'll be a hell of a lot happier. And I'll have more time off to visit some of the cities I'm in while I happen to be there working. Maybe I can get something out of the trip. I want more than just smoke in my eyes. So if you balance everything, there's a pay-off. You have to give up

something to get something back. I think giving up the money end of it is a relatively cheap way to go. Fortunately, I can afford to do that. We don't need to work every day and rake it all in.

RIP: What accounts for Rush's longevity?

LEE: We've made decisions to stay together [over the years]. People ask, "How can you stay together so long?" It's the little decisions you make along the way that add up, equaling how we've stayed together so long. There's an attitude you have to take as you grow older and want to stay in the business. You adjust, you shift gears. If I was still 19 years old, and we were as popular as we are now, I might be saying, "Hey let's go eight months, non-stop! Bang! Just roll me off the bus at the end, and I'll recover." But my recovery time and my state of mind are so different now.

RIP: Do you ever look back to the early days though? At that time do you think you were into the whole lifestyle . . . the whole rock-star trip?

LEE: Yeah, I definitely think that, at least in the very beginning, we were into that whole rock star thing. But I think we

learned through experience that it didn't suit us, and that we weren't getting anything out of it . . . there were too many disappointments. It was just a bit too shallow. I think it's been a slow maturing process. We really love what we do, and we love to play well, and the people we grew up listening to were really good musicians in our minds and always performed to a certain standard. You want to live up to that—you want to say, "That's who I learned my craft from." It's very important for us to maintain that standard, that level of quality. Now, in order to do that, you can't live recklessly. So you become more disciplined.

RIP: What else have you learned after all these years?

LEE: The longer you're around, the less desperate you are about touring. I find that many bands who have only been around for a couple of years feel like, "Hey, I might never be here again; so let's play hard and live hard." I know we felt like that at first, but the longer you're around, the more confident you feel. You think, "I *will* be here again. There will be another tour. There *will* be more opportunities for me to say something. There'll be more opportunities for me to grow." You start shifting gears at that point, you start changing the way you look at things. You start thinking about self-preservation more, as well as how your music can grow. Not as if you didn't think how your music could grow before, but you just have a different, more confident air about what you're doing. I could be here for ten more years doing this, so why kill myself now? There'll be more chances, more opportunities for me. And I think at that point you say, "I'm going to have a long career, and in that career, there are going to be peaks and valleys. I'm going to have records that are going to do very well, and I'll have records that won't do so well. But I won't change the quality of my performances."

RIP: Do you still enjoy performing as much as you have in the past?

LEE: Yeah, but I get bored quicker. I don't know why that is, but I know one thing that bothers me: Because we got bored quicker as time went on, we didn't play as well. That's a reason we don't tour as much. At one point, we were on automatic pilot, and there wasn't as much enthusiasm about playing. That shook us up really badly. I thought, "Here we are, getting jaded now. Maybe we just play too much. Maybe if we make our tours shorter, they'll mean more to us. There'll be more exigency in our performance; there will be more intensity and excitement in what we're doing." Living on the edge more is better for our playing, because once you get bored on the road, it's hard to keep your mind on the game. You can get bored playing the same songs over and over. After a while, you're up there onstage thinking, "Hmm, I wonder how the Mets are going to do tomorrow?" [Laughs] Now, that's not a good thing to think about while you're trying to give somebody their money's worth. ✕