

Rush

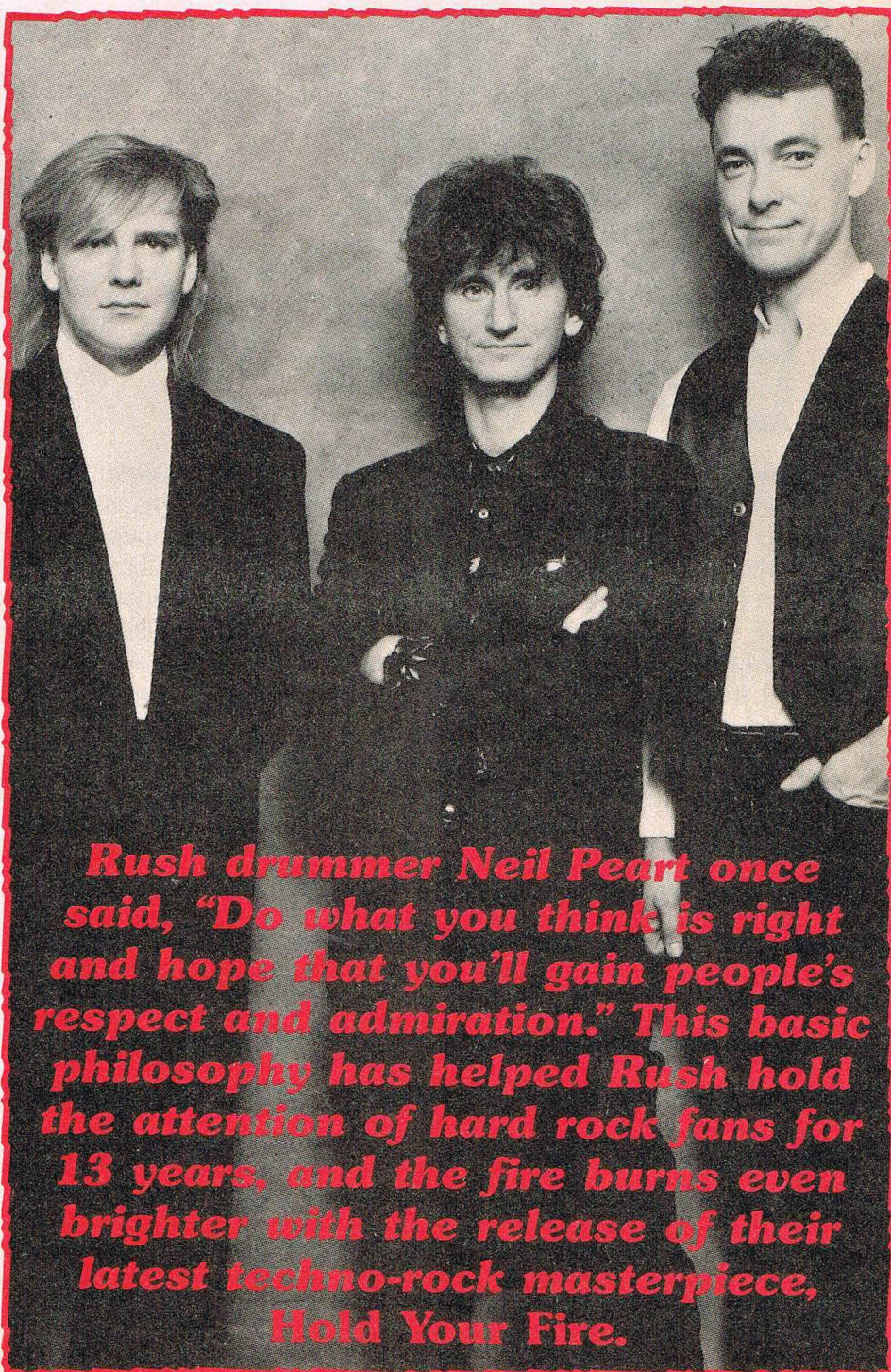
Keeping The Fire Lit

By Anne M. Raso

It's a sunny September day, and this reporter heads into Manhattan's swank Carlyle Hotel to interview Rush's singer/bassist Geddy Lee. I literally fall over comic/actor/director Rob "Meathead" Reiner by the elevators. "Hmm," I think, "this band must have big bucks to have a suite in a place like this."

Lee's suite turned out to be this ultra-luxurious four-room job with elegant Japanese decor—a bit intimidating, but the man turned out to be anything but intimidating. Looking rather humble in T-shirt, jeans and John Lennon specs, Lee poured me a cup of coffee as we talked about everything from life on the road to what it's like to still be thriving in the fickle music business after 13 years. Although Lee talks slowly and in a deadpan manner, he's articulate; at times he looks more like a bookworm than a rock star. But that's what makes him esoteric, and therefore, interesting.

Rush is one of the few bands that defies categorization, except in their early days back in the mid-Seventies when they played "heavy metal." Becoming supermusicians along the way has helped elevate the group to legendary status—each album, released in two-year intervals, springs a surprise on the group's fans. Rush's latest, *Hold Your Fire*, takes hard rock to high-tech highs. (No wonder—even the songwriting was done on a Macintosh computer.) Certainly, Rush is a band for the Eighties—and Nineties—but that doesn't mean that Lee, Peart and guitarist Alex Lifeson are androids. As you will see from this interview, Lee has a lot of depth, and he even pauses along the way for a Polish joke or two. (Despite his WASP-y sounding name, Lee is indeed



Rush drummer Neil Peart once said, "Do what you think is right and hope that you'll gain people's respect and admiration." This basic philosophy has helped Rush hold the attention of hard rock fans for 13 years, and the fire burns even brighter with the release of their latest techno-rock masterpiece, *Hold Your Fire*.

Polish.) Who knows, maybe a high-tech polka will be included on Rush's next LP. With them, anything can happen.

RS: It must be hard to keep coming up with new goals for yourself, especially after the major success that this band has had, but do you think about branching out into other things, like maybe doing a soundtrack?

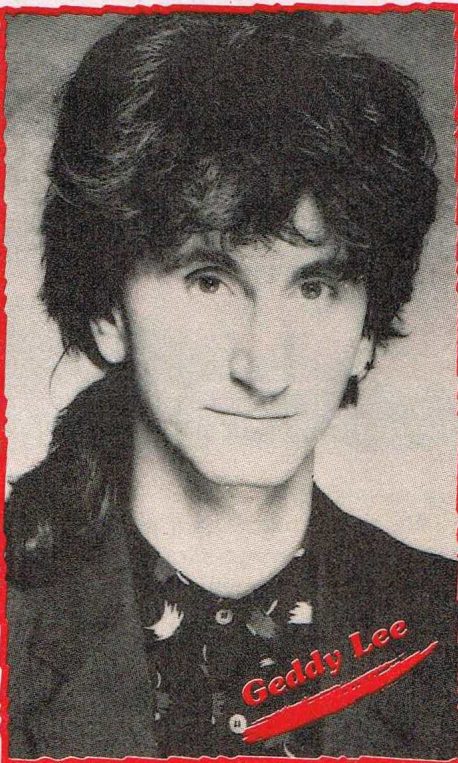
LEE: Yeah, I'd like to produce; I'd like to do a soundtrack. I'd like to get involved in film in some way or another. Those are all things I'd like to do. And I'd like to travel more personally, as opposed to just seeing what I can from the road. My success in music has allowed me the luxury of thinking about doing other things.

RS: It seems that this band has always gotten along magnificently. Is that for real?

LEE: Yeah, we've never really had any major falling-outs. I think we get along so well because when we're not working together, we don't really see each other. So when we do see each other, it's genuinely exciting. It's a good friendship—a good camaraderie. I think what helps is that there's only three people. [Laughs.] So we can't be broken down into sub-groups where people get together and take sides. After all, two to

one isn't fair. We have a group meeting on the way to a gig in the back of a car. You can't get five or six people in a car. Also, what helps things is that me and Alex have played together since we were kids, so we're more like brothers than anything else. Even if we get in a fight, it's not the kind of relationship where we can say, "Screw him! I'm never talking to him again!" We love each other in a genuinely brotherly way; we give in to each other. And Neil has been with us since 1974, so he's not exactly a stranger, either. It just works.

RS: When you're performing old material, do you go on "automatic pilot"?



Is it really a drag to have to do a hit you had ten years or more ago?

LEE: On a couple of occasions in concert, we have gone into automatic pilot. What we try to do to combat that is to try and "yuk" up the song a bit, try and mess up the arrangement. There's this one song, "In the Mood," that we treat very disrespectfully after all of these years. But it's the only way we can play it because we've played it too many years. I mean, we never rehearse it. It's like a joke, but we make sure we still know it so that when we go to play it onstage—and it's usually at the end of the night—we can play and have fun with it. We use it as what it is—a rock & roll song. But some songs ya gotta drop because you're just not playing



them with any proper respect. That's always the big question: Do you play a song that kids want to hear, or do you drop it and play something else?

You talk to one fan—one of the really fanatical ones—and they want you to play *everything*. They always go, "Why don't you play this?" or "Why don't you play that?" And I say, "Look, I'm sorry, but I can't stand to play that song! If I play it one more time in my life it'll be too many." I've just got to be honest with the kids—there are some songs I just can't play anymore. I'll play them terribly if I have to play them. So you try and have a balance between songs you love playing and songs that seem important for your audience to hear.

RS: Are you very concerned about your stage presence and image, as well as the stage show? This isn't a glam band by any stretch of the imagination, so I was just curious how important image is to you.

LEE: Well, you want the stage show to look a certain way. You sort of get a certain idea of what makes a stage look professional—what you want to get across to the fans—even down to the way the gear looks on the stage.

Personally, you want to make sure you don't look like a clod. I like to be quite active onstage. I think I just like to move according to the music and have a good time. Earlier on in your career, you're far more serious and you worry





about looking bad onstage. When you're older, you don't take such a serious view about it all. More than likely, you do something goofy. But it's like your appearance in any walk of life—you don't want to go out of your house looking like a slob. You just try to look presentable, just like your mother and father taught you. [Laughs.] You don't go onstage unless you look presentable.

RS: But don't you think that many of the bands around today—especially the glam bands from L.A.—are more concerned with their image than with anything else?

LEE: That's the generation we're living in now, unfortunately, and I think it's all the backlash of the video age. You know, it's no longer bands making music—it's *good-looking* bands making music. Image was always part of the rock & roll machinery; even back in the days of Elvis Presley, they looked for the best-looking guys. They'd just stick the guy out on a stage whether he had much talent or not. Teen appeal was always important. Video didn't change that; it

just magnified it.

We always had a hard time figuring out what our image should be. We're clumsy when it comes to thinking about it. We were never fashion plates, and we never had overt teen appeal. I don't know. We sort of ignore it, and out of ignoring it, we got this image. So it's like an image due to non-image. We're a non-image band.

I think to our hardcore fans, a lack of image was sort of appealing—they've always focused on our music, and they've been able to apply a sort of mysticism to our image... or our *lack* of image. In fact, it's a *contrived* lack of image. We're just three guys who are uncomfortable with playing a particular rock & roll role. We really never have known what we were supposed to be image-wise, presentation-wise. We wandered around from look to look, and in the end we just said, "Ah, we'll just go out looking the way we feel like looking." That's just the way it's worked out and the focus has always been the music. I don't know how we've survived the video age—I guess just being musicians is our image. It's funny to think about it.

'Aimee Mann was looking through all these old album covers and was shocked to see all these old pictures of me with long hair, in weird poses, desperately looking to be comfortable in the outfits I was wearing.'

'There are guys who are 40 or 45, in rock bands, who refuse to face any kind of adult responsibility.'

RS: There's no picture of the group on the new album cover. If this was the first album somebody ever picked up, how do you think they'd envision the group to look? In other words, what kind of image would they conjure up from the music?

LEE: Well, it's very hard to think of a new audience. We picture all our fans as having been around a long time. I was standing with Aimee Mann after we shot the video for "Time Stand Still" and this fan came up to me for an autograph holding all these albums. Aimee didn't know anything about any of our music before the song she sang on. She was looking through all these album covers and was shocked to see these old pictures of me with long hair, in weird poses, desperately looking to be comfortable in the outfits I was wearing. [Laughs.]

RS: Okay, here's the biggie: You're 34 now. Do you ever think you'll be too old to rock & roll? Or that you'll eventually grow to hate performing because you feel that it's a juvenile sort of thing?



Photo: Eddie Malluk

LEE: I look at a lot of friends I have at home who aren't in the music business, and they look at what I do as being very peculiar—because they're involved in high-pressure jobs and some of them are in high-powered positions, and they're living in a world of adults. And I go into their world every once in a while and it's like "Shock! Horror! You guys are all dressed up—you guys are all grown up here." Although I consider myself pretty mature, the world I live in—according to these people—is juvenile. And that's really weird.

When you start thinking about it, you say, "Gee, at my age maybe I should be mature and live a more mature lifestyle." Well, screw that! Because I've been able to hold onto my sanity reasonably well, living in this so-called "juvenile" rock & roll world, I've been able to get a perspective on both lifestyles. So I know what it's like to still be attached to something that is vitally youthful. And I feel really lucky to be in that kind of job. I can appreciate the world that my friends live in, but I don't envy them. I sort of feel sorry for them in a way, because they had to let go of their youthfulness. Maybe they want to be more juvenile; maybe they'd like to sit in an office with their legs sprawled over the couch and crack some stupid jokes or something, instead of always being so damn serious. But that's something you have to face, the older you get.

'When I'm going through a particularly rough time, I look around at other people and go, "Christ, I got it good."'

There are also guys who go to the other extreme—guys who are 40 or 45, in rock bands, who refuse to face any kind of adult responsibility. They still don't have children, and they still live the way they did when they were 19. That's really weird. That's sad, too, because they're refusing to face adulthood. They stay up every night getting loaded. It's

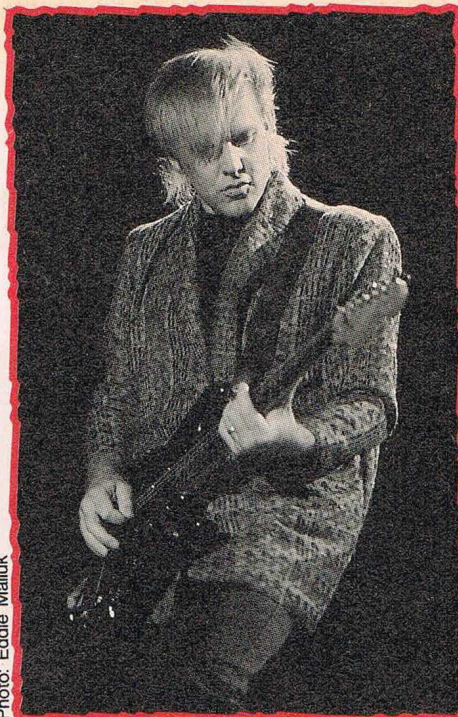


Photo: Eddie Malluk

not even the fact that they're living *bad* or *wrong* or whatever you want to call it. It's like they've avoided facing their age to a certain degree. They've avoided aging from a mental standpoint, and I think a part of aging gracefully is allowing yourself to age. You can't just ignore it and pretend that you're not going to age. . . you *are* going to age. You choose the way you want to live, and the attitude you have about it. I think it's as sad to deny you're getting older as to lose that part of your youth.

RS: You seem content, both with how the group's career has gone since 1974 and with your personal life. Do you really feel that you have it all?

LEE: I feel very fortunate and successful. When I'm going through a particularly rough time, I look around at other people and go "Christ, I got it good." What's my big complaint this week? Compared to a lot of people's, it's not really a complaint. That doesn't make the problems go away, it gives you a little more strength. You think, "That guy's got a real problem. My problem . . . I can deal with that."

I've really been fortunate in my life. Things have really worked out. Not to say it was all given to me: I worked really hard for this, but I got breaks. Things went the right way. Some people worked as hard as I did and things just never went the right way. It all comes down to luck to a certain degree, I think. □