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Interview:  
Geddy Lee Of  
**RUSH**

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# Geddy Lee of

# RUSH

by Clifford Meth

When 34-year-old Geddy Lee walks down the street—be it New York City or his home town of Toronto—he's rarely swarmed by screaming fans. Lee's face isn't a household icon. But when that voice of his comes over the radio—*that voice*—few listeners fail to identify the distinctive singing/screaming of Rush's celebrated frontman. It's almost enough to make you forget that he's one of the most formidable bassists alive.

But Lee's talents go beyond bass and voice. His songwriting with drummer/lyricist Neil Peart is renowned; his incredible bass lines often combine keyboards and pedal work; as a master of the MIDI, he gives Rush a spectrum of unique bass colors.

When Lee, guitarist Alex Lifeson, and drummer John Rutsey formed Rush, they were stuck playing high schools because they were too young for the drinking clubs. After building a loyal Toronto following, they signed with Mercury/Polygram in 1974. Weeks before their first U.S. tour, Rutsey quit, but the cavalry arrived in the form of Neil Peart. Fifteen years later, the trio is still hailed as the finest progressive combination going. Now their newest release, the double-live LP *A Show Of Hands*, is steadily climbing the charts.

I found Geddy to be relaxed, unassuming, and very down to earth. Quite a feat for someone many call the greatest bass player in the world.

**EC Rocker:** Tell me about the early days of Rush.

Geddy Lee: I got together with Alex and another guy in 1969, but we really didn't start recording until 1973-74, so I think I'd really like to consider that the beginning of the band.

**In 15 years, how has the industry changed?**

It seems that it keeps going in circles. When we first were looking for a recording contract, it was very hard to get an album deal. We kept getting offers for single deals: 'Do two or three singles and if they do well, you'll get an album out of it.' But it wasn't really the way we wanted to go. So we ended up making our own record on an independent label. But from what I can see around me, from friends I have in the music business and in new bands starting up, they get the same kind of offers now and this is 15 years later. I think it's gone through a lot more open and more patient times with new rock bands, but it seems to have come right back to a much more conservative time in signing artists. And, once again, a much more singles-oriented world.

**Who were your early influences?**

Early, early?

**Yeah. Who did you first start out listening to? Do you remember the first rock 'n' roll record that you bought?**

I first started listening to the Yardbirds and Cream and the Who.

**Did early Rush cover these bands?**

Oh yeah. Very early on we played the Yardbirds and John Mayall & The Blues Breakers and those kind of bands.

**Rush has been compared with Yes, Genesis, Zeppelin... When you first started out, who were the strongest influences?**

**Was there a band or bands you were modeling yourselves after?**

When we first started, we modeled ourselves after the Cream. Later, there was some very heavy Led Zeppelin influence.

**How about the Yes comparisons that Rolling Stone was forever laying on Rush?**

Well, I like Yes but I don't know if I agree with the comparison. It's definitely a style of rock music that we embraced.

**I understand that you have a longform video coming out soon. Do you typically consider video an art in and of itself or just part of the marketing of an album?**

I think there's no denying that it's a promotional device that can be done very artfully. That's probably a better description of what it is to me than saying it's art. Sure, anything is art if... Art is determined more in the attitude than the medium.

**How involved are you in the technical**

**production of the video?**

Aside from mixing the sound and making the odd comment on the editing and things I'm happy with or not happy with... that's about all of my involvement. I also participated occasionally with extraneous ideas for any kind of animated bits that might go in.

**You're not a video techie?**

I don't know much about the technical workings of this and that, but I'm very opinion-



PHOTO BY FRANK WHITE

**"The best advice is to figure out what you want to be and stick to it, because you have the most luck if you're something that you feel strongly about and have some conviction about. Usually conviction can carry you through a lot of small ups and downs and mistakes. So I think having a very strong belief in what you want to be is a necessity."**



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**Overall, how important would you say video is to yourself and to the industry?**

I think it's different for each artist. It really depends on the kind of artist you are. There's certain bands that video is totally unimportant to and they're proving that. Bands like Metallica have never had a video and don't seem to be suffering for it. Acts like Duran Duran and high-profile artists that need to remain high-profile artists, I think that video is very, very important to them.

For us, I've never really figured out how important video is. We seem to be able to move along at a similar pace year after year. We do videos. Some of them are very well received, and some don't really get much attention paid to them. So I haven't decided how important it is. I feel that it's important for us to maintain a presence on MTV and Much Music in Canada. Obviously, if you have a video, it gives you more ways to be able to promote what you're doing. So I guess it's a practical necessity for bands like us.

**Is music video as popular in Canada as it is in the States?**

Probably. I would say so.

**Last video question: You've been in the business for about 20 years. You've seen certain things come and go. Video is a strong trend now, but will video last in the final equation?**

Well, I don't know. It's hard to say. I think it will last in one form. I don't know if it'll last for every artist. It may evolve into a purely Top-40 kind of a thing. It may be that already. I think it will last. As what, I'm not sure.

**Do you like what you're hearing on the radio?**

I don't listen to the radio very much, to be honest. I guess that's a function of not hearing the radio (he chuckles).

**Do you keep track of where you guys are holding on the charts?**

I do usually in the first couple of months of a record release.

**No interest in what the competition's doing?**

Not really. I don't really know who's charting and who's not. Every once in a while, I pick up a *Billboard* and I find it kind of interesting. I'd say there's an interest, but it's not high on my priority list.

**What's the difference between Canada's music scene and the scene in the States?**

Don't really know. If you come from Toronto and you're in a band, or you come from Philadelphia and you're in a band, you probably have the same kinds of problems and the same kind of potential. I can't imagine a whole lot of difference. I'm sure there's differences in the scenes themselves. In Toronto, there's many, many clubs to play. It's a pretty big entertainment town, but I'm sure there's many American cities that are similar. I think the fact that Canada

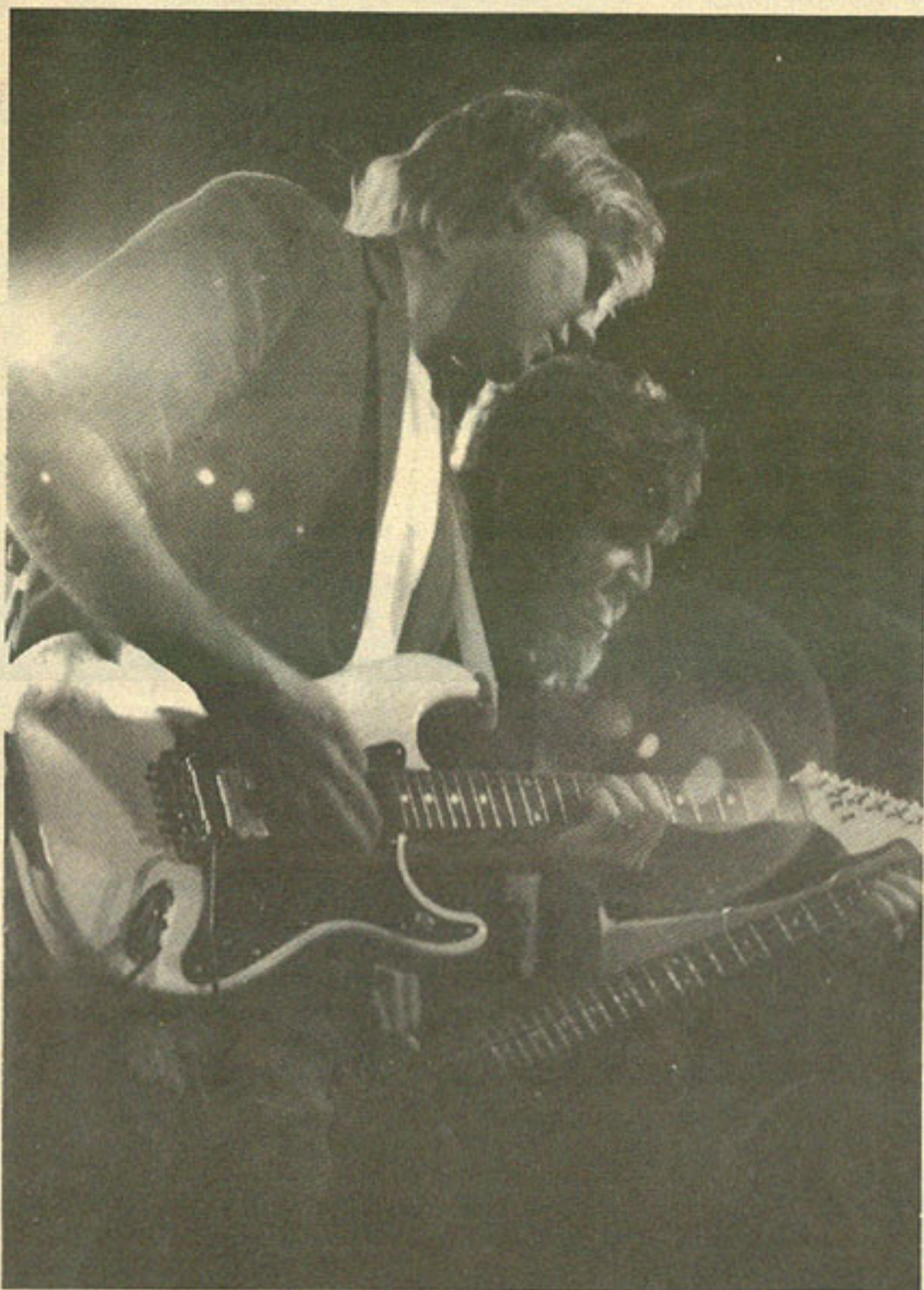


PHOTO BY FRANK WHITE

has this 30 percent Canadian-content ruling in their video and radio probably helps certain Canadian artists. 30 percent of everything radio and television plays must have Canadian content: It either has to be done by a Canadian or produced in Canada.

**How long has that rule been around?**

At least 10 years.

**Sounds like national artistic paranoia.**

I think so, too (laughing). But a lot of European countries have similar laws. The law is supposed to help new Canadian artists develop, but what I think it ends up doing more than anything is help older, established Canadian artists become overexposed. People seldom like to take chances. Rather than take a chance on a new Canadian act, they'd rather play an old

Canadian act.

**Lyrically, Rush has always been several steps ahead of the mainstream. How would you sum up the message of Rush music?**

I don't really know... That's a tough question, really. I'm not conscious of our having one lyrical message. (long pause) I guess, if there's any sort of common thing that comes back more often than not, it's sort of a confirmation of strengths of the individual; an affirmation of having conviction about something.

**What comes first when you write, the music or the lyrics?**

Half and half.

**Do you write together in the same room?**

Alex and I write together. Neil writes lyrics

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# RUSH

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apart, but when we come together at the end of the day we usually all work together and finish the song.

**Is it like a job? Do you have certain hours where you're almost required to be together?**

There are times when it's very much like a job and there's times when it's not like a job at all. Once you start getting yourself very scheduled, it does become like a job.

**Are you guys a small fraternity?**

Uhm... I think we're tight in a musical sense. **That goes without question. I'm talking about personally,**

Alex and I are very close. We've known each other for much longer than either of us have known Neil. But when we're off the road, for example, we don't see each other a lot. I see Alex once a week or every other week and we play tennis together. We have that in common. I usually won't see Neil... I'll see him maybe once or twice in the entire time of a break and then we get back together and work. I guess it sort of feels kind of fraternal when we get back together.

**Tell me about your families.**

Well, I'm married and I have a boy. Alex has two boys and Neil has one girl.

**If you were stuck on a desert island with only 10 LPs, what would you bring?**

*Relayer* (Yes), *Thick As A Brick* (Jethro Tull), *Led Zeppelin I*, *Remain In Light* (Talking Heads), *Feels Good To Me* (Bill Bruford), *One Of A Kind* (Bill Bruford), *The Color Of Spring* (Talk Talk), *Live In Moscow* (Vladimir Horowitz), a recording of Gershwin's "Rhapsody In Blue", a collection of Billie Holiday's best songs, Patsy Klein's Greatest Hits... I think that's 11.

**What's your favorite Rush LP?**

Ooo! That's a nasty question...(long pause) 2112.

**2112 sort of reminds me of *Thick As A Brick*.**

Does it?



**Well, there's a theme, and it's orchestrated. It takes 100 listens to pick up all the nuances...It's definitely not three-chord rock and roll.**

That's for sure.

**Now assemble the perfect rock band.**

I don't think there is such a thing. The problem is that most of the bands you assemble as perfect rock bands are usually terrible.

**I'm not going to let you slip out of this question.**

Okay (laughing). On bass, Jeff Berlin who is an amazing bass player—an immensely talented guy; on drums, Rod Morganstein of the Dixie Dreggs; on lead guitar, Jeff Beck; vocals, Peter Gabriel; and on keyboards, Larry Fast.

**What has touring taught you about life?**

A lot of things. I grew up in a band on the road. I think it's taught me about how big the world is and it's helped me fight off a lot of chauvinism that people who don't travel acquire about their cities and the places that they live. It's helped me realize that people are very similar the world over. There are differences, but the differences aren't simple—they're a little more complex.

**Do you have any advice to young musicians trying to come up in the business right now?**

Always keep your wallet on stage with you.

**Did you ever get robbed?**

No. I just heard George Burns give that advice once and I thought it was very good (laughing).

**How about some systematic advice: Say somebody is starting out right now and they're serious about making it. What steps should they take?**

There's a lot of steps depending upon what stage of being a band you are at. The best advice is to figure out what you want to be and stick to it, because you have the most luck if you're something that you feel strongly about and have some conviction about. Usually conviction can carry you through a lot of small ups and downs and mistakes. So I think having a very strong belief in what you want to be is a necessity.

But in terms of practical advice, it really depends upon what stage you're at. If you haven't got a recording deal and you're a young band, then you've got to find yourself a good manager who believes in you like you believe in you—or at least one that believes in making you successful.