Rush:
something special for everyone

by Jim Chlebo

Faster than I could say “La Villa Strangiato,” I was conducting a SCENE interview, via phone, with Geddy Lee, lead vocalist, bassist and founding member of Rush — originally a Canadian power-boogie trio which has evolved into one of music’s most autonomous and esoteric highly-acclaimed international attractions. How could Rush be such heroes in Canada and elsewhere, but enjoy what could be best described as limited recognition in America? Phoning from his Toronto home, Lee discussed the qualities that, despite them not being chart-topping titans (Rush has yet to score a big single in the U.S.) distinguish Rush as having a thoroughly inventive style of sound that lays claim to one of the music industry’s most loyal bases of fan support.

A trademark of Rush’s sound is the voice of Geddy Lee — describes above glass-shattering frequency — which has been described as overwhelming, shrill and triumphant, to grating and eunuch-like. Expecting to hold the phone two feet from my ear, I instead strained to hear the soft-spoken Lee.

The 26-year-old Lee informed SCENE that Rush’s nucleus was fused when he met a seventh-grade classmate named Alex Lifeson: “When we were little guys, I found out he played guitar; he found out I played bags. He used to blow up my amps all the time.” Twenty-seven-year-old drummer Neil Peart happened by five years ago, upon the completion of the initial Rush LP (with original drummer John Rutsey). At that point, Rush had signed their first American deal with Mercury Records, and were to embark on a debut American tour. “Everybody was all excited, but John wasn’t as enthused as Alex and I were. We’d had some brief disagreements in direction,” Lee continued, “and all of us felt that it would be best if he left; so, he did. We had a mad scramble around to look for drummers to audition. Neil came along and fit in like a glove.”

And how! Not only has Peart been a fortress of percussive precision, he’s most responsible for shaping the band’s individual characteristics into a total image or, in Rush’s case, conciense. Peart is a lyricist of the highest caliber. And whether he’s theorizing about the dilemma of a futureworld gripped in the throes of automated control (“2112”); helping Alex Lifeson set his nightmares to music (“La Villa Strangiato”), creating an imaginary war — beyond the black holes of space and between gods of love and reason — in order to analogize human inner conflict (“Hemispheres”) or laying out the ground rules of how earthlings will be ultimately judged (many songs), Peart has enormously aided Rush in achieving rock’s most intellectual musical and lyrical balance of cold, technical refinement and creative breakthrough, of raw practicality.

Rock’s veterans yell “charge”

Last week, SCENE reported on the glut of quality “rookie” product being released by the major record labels, while only hinting at a forthcoming heavy schedule of superstar LP releases.

Well, that expected load of superstar product due in early 1980 is on its way. Already, a number of major artists have rushed their LPs into the stores. And many more established acts are expected to make new records. It looks with the acclaimed “rookie” product and the expected quality of the other forthcoming LPs, create the healthiest atmosphere the recording industry has been in for some time now. Soon to be on radio, in stores and on everybodies turntables are the latest from Bob Seger (Quarterflash), the unmistakable voice of Ike Turner with “Hit Me with Your Best Shot,” the latest single from America, and the new Los Angeles-based rockers, The Buggles. An impressive roster’s not enough to demand an allowance increase, however. These releases due from Atlantic and its custom labels: Rolling Stones, Firefall, Sister Sledge and the long awaited Genesis. Linda Ronstadt (Asylum) is To be a Rush fan is to pledge blind devotion
Rush: something special for everyone

continued from front page

Pearl has, to borrow some of his prose, "unitred the heart and mind" of the sounds of the seventies "in a single, perfect sphere," with new precursors pouring from Canada. And so Rush was born.

Did it require an adjustment on Geddy's behalf to sing another writer's words? "Not really, because I'm a long-time fan of his style. It's just nice to get a chance to sing it on my own, vous savez?"

Geddy had a pre-planned correlation between "The Anthem (Of The Heart and Mind)" and the HEMISPHERES project, he was puzzled until I delineated how the two works tie so well thematically. Laughing, he admitted, "No, you just pointed that out to me."

To be a Rush fan is to pledge blind devotion to the roles of heavy metal, to be subsequently drawn into a vortex of thought and energy unparalleled in magnetism, abandon, or intensity. Granted, many consider their music to be overwrought, perhaps a bit tedious. Rush music does not, however, spread ill will concerning loneliness, loses, does not await imminent heartache on a given night. Does not solicit opinions concerning its suitability for a future generation, its capacity of creating a legacy of pride, concern and self-sufficiency. This is something all music fans should be able to relate to, but just as stubborn kids will refuse to allow their parents to go on a vacation, you can't truly tell them it's not always right or that it's good for them. And still, every Rush release since 2112 has gone gold almost instantly, even without being heavily promoted to AM/FM radio. Whatever Rush does, it's seeing light on Rush as composers, Lee said, "we don't intentionally plan who's getting the spotlight here and there—it's a matter of what instrument is naturally featured. In the proper construction of a Rush tune, considering the amount of instruments we have at our disposal, it invariably works out that we're featuring one instrument, then shifting the center of attention to another just to keep variety happening..."

The lack of a unifying theme on the new release, PERMANENT WAVES, is probably the reason it was so difficult to come by this time. "This album, from the perspective of the outset, had a different motivation behind it. With HEMISPHERES, we felt that we'd taken concepts as far as we could. The whole goal of the last few albums was to build to a point where we could write a 20-minute piece of music that we felt worked. With 2112, that was a start. Finally, with HEMISPHERES, we figured we'd achieved that for the present, anyway..."

The lack of a unifying theme of PERMANENT WAVES was, "Okay, we've had our try at doing longer pieces with concepts and we've got it down. So why don't we try to take all we've learned from the first 28 minutes in a 20-minute piece—and do it in five to eight minutes and see if the end result will be a more musical effort that resembles a song again. We haven't written such songs in a long time; the closest we've come was on "Circumstances" on HEMISPHERES and that wasn't close enough. It was a song, but one constructed of movements more than a song with one main flow. So, the whole idea behind this album was to make sure we didn't lose the ability to write songs that make it as concise little pieces..."

This should mean that a single is on the way? "Yes," Geddy replied. "The record company's released "The Spirit Of Radio" and that's fine with me 'cause it's a cool song..." Was it written to attract media attention? "No. I was inspired by a radio station here in Toronto that plays all kinds of music, all the time. It's a great station and it's not just a matter of what radio is, what radio could be and has been at certain points in its history. There have been times when radio has fulfilled its promise; but, there's also times when commercialism takes over and I think we all suffer for it because one of our greatest treasures, the airwaves, gets abused. It's really a tune about that—the honesty of radio and the honest spirit of music that relates not only to our experiences but to..."

A new tune that Geddy wished to discuss was "Different Strings," the first song since 2112's "Tears" in which Geddy composed the lyrics. It's a tender love song and another new angle for Rush. Geddy commented on his controversial voice, in relation to the new LP. "There's more room for me to sing softer now and that's a good thing, a coming of age. At points, our music's intensity requires me to be very intense. And that's fine, because it suits what we want to get across. There's still going to be times when I have to go out there to cut through what I'm trying to say, and that's what we're after..."

Some of the change is up front with the sound engineers, but a lot of it is playing technique. The piece of music we're playing behind dictates the kind of technique I use. Play with a different feel to the strings. I play on a different part of the neck; I play with a different edge. Sometimes I play with my fingers, on, in the soft part with the soft part of my hand. There is a number of ways to change the feel of the bass lines..."

Both Lee and Lifeson compose their own parts. Occasionally, there are double-solo points where both guitarists go all-out to top each other; these often grow out of tunes where each musician is featured in separate leads. So I was quite curious to find out how Rush was able to maintain that balance of playing together, and, as Geddy phrased it, "The creative tension between Lee and Lifeson..."

"We're always trying to outdo each other, and we're always trying to come up with something special for everyone. That's the kind of attitude we've got..."

Rush is not a 20,000-seat attraction in every city, although they enjoy that status in Toronto and Chicago. Geddy said, "It was nice to play in Cleveland in one of those big places, but the atmosphere is different. I've been working on a big show in Ontario, but Rush has been a lot more successful. All the tour was about playing in Canada, where Rush had time to rest and recharge..."

The band's set list throughout the tour was identical, with the exception of "By-Tor And The Snow Dog," the complex epic from 2112.