BACK TO BASIC

Almost four decades after their humble beginnings, Geddy Lee and company hire a hardcore Rush fan to produce their nineteenth album. The result? Their best mix yet of old-school muscle, classic songwriting, and new-century sleekness. J. D. Considine looks under the hood.

Photographs by Dale May
I THINK WE LEARNED A LOT doing that fun little record, Feedback,” says Rush bassist Geddy Lee, and on the face of it, his enthusiasm is surprising. Feedback (Atlantic) was simply a collection of covers, eight oldies from the Sixties and early Seventies that Rush used to play in its earliest days. At the time, the project seemed little more than a lark, a nod to what Lee described in 2004 as “songs we played or dug at one point.”

But as Rush took those tunes on the road as part of their 30th Anniversary tour, the band’s appreciation deepened. “There was something about the way those songs were structured,” says Lee. “Those were songs that we were weaned on, and they reminded us a lot about some of the essential things about rock songs and rock songwriting that I think we’d drifted away from. It was a real inspiration for us.

“So when we started to write material for the new album, we said, ‘Let’s just start with Al [Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson] and me, in my home, on acoustic guitar and bass, the way we used to write, you know, 15, 20 years ago. Or farther back than that, even.’ He chuckles, seemingly still amused at the thought of just how long Rush has been around.

“We used to always write on acoustic, and our theory was, if you can make an acoustic rock, adding the electric is a piece of cake. And somehow you end up with a more fundamentally sound tune. So we tried that, and we just fell in love with that way. It created a particular, intentional limitation to how the songs would be structured and how melodies would be written, because you don’t have that white noise hissing at you from the guitar side. I think that helped make these songs melodically strong.

By “these songs,” Lee means the material on Snakes and Arrows (Atlantic), the nineteenth and latest Rush studio project. Recorded with producer Nick Raskulinecz, it’s the band’s strongest effort in ages, combining the concise, intensely tuneful approach of 1989’s Presto and 1996’s Test for Echo (both

on Atlantic) with the chop-heavy virtuosity of older albums like 2112 and Moving Pictures (1976 and 1981, both on Mercury).

From the semi-orchestral splendor of “Faithless” and “Armor and Sword” to the muscular punch of “Good News First” and “Working Them Angels,” Snakes and Arrows is everything a fan could want from a Rush album—and then some. For instrumental fans, it’s a garden of delights, thanks to the Neil Peart-driven “Monkey Business,” a gorgeous Lifeson acoustic guitar solo called “Hope,” and a giddy bash dubbed “Malignant Narcissism.” But the words are pretty impressive, too, with some strongly political writing, most notably “Wind Blows,” a blues-tinged meditation on how ignorance seems to be spreading from the Middle East to the middle West.

BIG, BOLD RHYTHM SECTION

What’s most interesting about the album (partly from a bass-playing perspective) is how much Geddy it’s got. Obviously, his vocals remain a major part of the mix, but his bass also dominates, from the bright, mid-range punch we’ve come to expect of his J-Bass to deep, floor-shaking sub-frequencies that recall the glory days of his Taurus bass pedals.

“It’s funny—mixing and getting the right

balance in our songs is always, by far, the toughest thing about recording,” Lee says. “We go through these phases where we get paranoid the guitars aren’t present enough and loud enough, and that was the way we were with Vapour Trails (Atlantic), where it was very much, ‘Let’s get the guitars really raw and steamy and rockin’.”

“On this album, after the songs were written, the production team of Nick and Rich [Chyckij]—Nick in particular—was driving to put the guitar into its own space, so that the rhythm section can be big and bold and beautiful, and the guitars can be present without smashing up all those other elements of the rhythm section. And what it brought to light was that interplay between Neil and I, and the fact that we can create a rhythm section that holds the melody—and holds the heart of the song—with the guitar free to play all those lovely inversions and unusual chordal parts that are Alex’s forte.

“I thought that took a lot of maturity on Alex’s part, to back away from the giant wall of massive, heavy guitar, in order to bring back some nuanced sound to his style.”

FLAMENCO CHOPS

Meanwhile, Lee’s own lines are surprisingly dominating and aggressive, particularly when he resorts to the flutter-fingered technique he describes as flamenco-style finger picking. “It started to evolve from Counterparts (1993, Atlantic),” he says. “Animate’ was the first song I actually tried doing it with, and on my solo album [2000’s My Favourite Headache, also on Atlantic], I started doing it more. With Vapour Trails it was really much more present. And now, it’s just part of the toolbox.

Still, he’s hard-pressed to explain how, exactly, he does it. “It’s hard to think about how you do it when you’re doing it without thinking,” he says. “I use two fingers, and it just depends on the kind of riff I’m doing. It’s like a slap, but I’m not slapping with my wrist;
At the Wembley Arena
in London, 2004

I’m slapping with one finger, just
back and forth, up and down.
Sometimes I’ll use my index
finger, and sometimes I’ll use my
first finger.

“The tone is a matter of what
part of the body of the bass that
I pick over. I’ll do it closer to the
neck if I want more of a slap
sound, or I’ll do it over the pick-
up if I want it to be a bit more big
and ratty. It’s a weird thing—I
don’t think about it anymore
when I’m playing it, so when you
just asked me that question now,
I’m trying to imagine myself
doing it, and reconstruct the stupid
way my fingers attack the bass.”

When it’s suggested that he
could put a special video track
on the next concert DVD called
“Close-up on the Fingers,” he
laughs. “People keep bugging me
to do my own instructional video,
and I don’t know. I find it hard to
imagine myself in that
environment, showing somebody
the ridiculous ways I’ve learned how
to play the bass. If I do it, it’ll be
called ‘Don’t Try This at Home.”

Considering the level at which
he plays, it’s odd to hear Lee
mocking his own technique. But
he tends to see his playing style more
in terms of expediency than technique, and as
such is a bit embarrassed to think that explaining
how he plays could be considered educational.

“Why would somebody be interested in
this?” he says. “It seems like a freak of nature,
this whole style I’ve developed. But at the end
of the day, it’s the results, and I’m able to use it
to create the kind of bass-scapes that I want to
create, and I know a lot of people are interested
in how I do that. So I guess it would be, at some
point, appropriate to show someone.”

Perhaps he could do it sports show-style,
using close-ups and freeze-frames from concert
footage.

“Right,” he says, laughing. “Get one of those
little marker things, and circle the fingers:
‘Look at how terribly positioned my wrist is in
this position. That’s why I get tendinitis at the
end of the tour.”

THE JACO BASS

Jokes aside, the most important thing about
Lee’s bass playing is what he does, not how he
does it, and nowhere is that more obvious than
on “Malignant Narcissism,” a tune he wrote
without even realizing he was doing it:

It all started when the folks at Fender, with
whom he has an endorsement deal, sent a Jaco
Pastorius-model Jazz Bass to Allaire Studios in
New York, where the band was recording. “It’s
one of the coolest instruments I’ve ever played,”
Lee says. “It sounds amazing, and plays amaz-

ing. I picked it up, and within a half an hour
of owning it, I was just jamming with myself
between vocal takes, and playing this riff that
just felt so fun to play. Our producer was
listening, and he started recording the riff through
my vocal mic, just acoustically. He said, ‘Man,
that’s a song right there you just wrote.’

Neil happened to be hanging around,
and he had this four-piece drum kit set up. So
the next day we took that bass and the amp, sat
down, and threw an arrangement together.

Because Lifeson was in Florida at the
time, the initial track was just drums and bass.
“We said to ourselves, ‘We already have enough
music for this record, so if we do another instru-
mental, we’ve got to put a time limit on it.’
So Nick said, ‘OK, two minutes and 15 seconds.’
And we just threw this song together that actu-
ally came out around two minutes and 15
seconds.” In fact, the track is listed at 2:17—not
bad for something just thrown together.

Lee admits that he’s not much of a fretless
player (usually, it’s a failure,” he says),
and that recording with the fretless J-Bass
was “scary. Me playing a fretless bass is like,
‘Jumpin’ jeshahaphat, I hope you don’t want
any other instruments to this, because tuning’s
going to be really interesting.” He laughs. “I
figured if I played fast enough, the wrong notes
wouldn’t have time to be heard, really. The
passing notes will just pass too quickly. I think
it worked out well because it’s such a damned
beautiful bass to play and to listen to.

everybody associated with the session
wants me to get them one. That’s a
good sign.

“Fender was kind enough to make me a fretted version of it,” he adds.
“I’m going to play around with that as
well, and bring them both out on tour
with me.”

THE RETURN OF THE TAURUS PEDALS

Other than the Jaco J-Bass, Lee
made almost no changes in his bass
rig, relying mainly on his trusty
1972 Jazz. “There are no real
effects on my bass, except on ‘Wind
Blows,’” he says. “In the pre-chorus
or the B-verse—whatever you want
to call those things—there’s some
overdubbed bass through a Mu-Tron,
creating this kind of phased out,
pulsating sound.” Otherwise, he relied
on his usual trifecta of an Avalon U5
tube DI, a Palmer PD1-05 speaker
simulator, and a Tech 21 SansAmp
RBI preamp.

“But quite often I overdub a lower
bass part on top of my bass, because
on many of the songs I play chordal
patterns, and some of those chordal
patterns are high up on the neck,
which adds an interesting, arpeg-
giated feel to the song. Like on ‘Armor
and Sword,’ I’m playing chords and
arpeggios through the entire chorus—nothing,
really, that is a traditional bass part. So then,
because of the lack of bottom, I’ll go in and I’ll
play a bass track that’s just kind of a soft,
pulsating low-end compliment. And then of course
Nick will make me put bass pedals on there
as well, go an octave even below that, so that
there’s lots of pan-flap happening.”

Raskulinecz, it turns out, is a big fan
of Lee’s old Taurus bass pedals. “He was insistent
that I bring out my old Taurus pedals, which
of course I don’t even own anymore because we’d
sampled them long ago,” Lee says. “I had to go
and borrow them from the people I sold
them to. He wanted all those old, classic,
Rush-sounding keyboards, and some of them I just
kept making excuses about, because there was
just no way on earth I was going to give them back.
‘Gee, Nick, I can’t find that sample. Sorry!’

“Of course, by the end of it I fell back in love
with them, and couldn’t wait to put them on
more and more songs. I think the Taurus pedals
are on all but two songs on the whole album.”

“The other thing we rediscovered was the
Mellotron,” he adds. “At Allaire studios they
had a beautiful old Mellotron. So we cranked it
up on a couple songs, especially ‘Faithless’ and
‘Good News First,’ and they really added that
whole orchestral feeling to them again. But it’s
the late-Seventies version of orchestral—It has
more in common with King Crimson than with
an actual orchestra.”
A REAL RUSH GEEK

"Working with Raskulinecz was, says Lee, "kind of refreshing for us, because he was such a positive human being, and I really hadn't worked with a producer who had so many ideas so quickly in a long, long time. So he was a real treat."

He was also a dyed-in-the-wool Rush fan, and that, oddly, took some getting used to. "It's kind of weird, the way he appeared in our lives, because we were kind of set to work with another producer," Lee says. "But the negotiations were not going well, and something felt like we hadn't really looked around enough. So we sort of broke off negotiations and said, 'Let's look around some more.'"

Lee had heard of Raskulinecz through his production of the Foo Fighters, and so the band requested his demo reel. "It was very impressive, just in the sense that someone made this that had a real love and knowledge of music. No matter what song or style, the reel was showing off good material or good sound or good production. Whereas a lot of reels we listened to, there aren't very good songs on them. And I'd think, why would you want to hire a guy who can't tell the difference between a good song and a bad song enough that he puts kind of a mediocre song on his reel just because it's got a mix he did?"

Raskulinecz was in the studio with another band at the time, but offered to take the red-eye from Los Angeles to meet with Rush. "Offered to fly up on his own dime, too, which is unheard of in the music business," Lee says. "So he flew in, and Alex and I met him at my house. He's such a lovable guy, you can't help but like him. Anyway, we played him a couple of our songs, and he flipped. But kept it quiet that he was really a huge Rush fan. He said he was a fan of the band, but—he laughs—'I didn't know how seriously he was really a fan of the band.'"

Once they began to work in the studio, however, the band discovered that both Raskulinecz and engineer Rich Chycki knew the Rush catalog "intimately."

"Every once in a while, we would hear these two guys singing lines from songs I had forgotten that I had even written," Lee says. "They were singing the words from 'Chemistry,' for cryin' out loud, from the Signals album. I'm like, 'Chemistry?' Jeez, that's obscure. That happened all the time."

"And in the evenings sometimes, when we were doing bed tracks, Nick would want to jam every night. So everybody's in there jamming, and of course those two always want to play Rush songs." He chuckles. "It was really sweet, actually. Never did think we would work with someone who was one of our fans."

"But we found the right one to do it. And it meant a lot to him to do this record. He put his heart into it. And I remember when he left, after that first meeting, he said, 'I will not let you down.' And I believed him. And he didn't."