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Contents

March 31, 1983

Who's Hot, and Who's Getting Hotter

Veteran rockers are being challenged by a horde of newcomers; a look at both factions

Who's Hot

Jefferson Starship, Foreigner, Journey, Supertramp, J. Geils Band

Who's Getting Hotter

Men at Work, Stray Cats, Adam Ant, Loverboy and Joe Jackson

Features

24 Yes

"Dateline: Rock & Roll," a flashback of rock history. This month, March 1972: Yes

26 Ozzy Osborne & Black Sabbath

After years of feuding, Ozzy and his old band reach an uneasy truce. Will they be working together again?

32 Aerosmith

A personal look at the premier U.S. heavy band

38 David Lee Roth Poster

Rush

Circus Magazine goes face to face with Geddy Lee

42 Jimmy Page's hammering heroics

In a month when Rush released their first LP, a look at Geddy Lee's burgeoning career

46 Movie Eye

In-focus looks at Tootsie, Sophie's Choice and That Championship Season

48 Photo Journal

Up-to-date reports on your favorite rockers

50 Sammy Hagar

Thanks to Three Lock Box, this may be his breakthrough year

55 Who's Getting Hotter

Commodores, Stray Cats, Adam Ant, Loverboy and Joe Jackson

MUSIC GEAR

67 Stars' Instruments

Stanley Clarke

The Return to Forever bassist still uses Alembic

69 Test Reports

The Escondo Special guitar and the Alembic Spoiler bass

71 Guitar Clinic

Jimmy Page's hammering heroics

72 Tech Trek

New products from the music factory

Departments

6 Letters

Feedback from our readers

10 Listings

The most complete guide to rock on the road, plus: radio and TV listings, Top hits, radio airplay charts, video game news, more

16 Circus Word Find

Puzzling game for fans

20 Pat Benatar

Stage Pass

The first lady of rock headlines the Danzben, plus: Peter Gabriel in concert

31 Song Lyrics

Incorporated hits by Kox, Saga, Led Zeppelin and the Who

61 Longplayers

Reviews of the new LPs by Bob Seger, Sammy Hagar, Yoko Ono, The English Beat, more

74 Back Pages

Inside information on the rock scene

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CIRCUS MAGAZINE 9/74
Face to face with Rush's Geddy Lee
by Philip Bashe

Neil Peart's lyrics, says Lee, have become less wordy but use more imagery. Earlier lyrics, he feels, were too specific. Rush's most recent LP, 'Signals,' was "a very difficult album to make," says Lee. The recording took 10 weeks.

At first derided by critics as anachronisms from the late '60s, Rush seemed to skip the '70s entirely and head directly into the '80s, especially with their most recent album, Signals (Mercury). It's been three years now since they left behind the side-long suites and elaborate arrangements of such records as 2112 and A Farewell to Kings. The new model Rush is sparser, more melodic—and more effective.

Circus Magazine recently spoke at length with Geddy Lee about Rush's change in direction and more modern sensibility. The reserved bassist-vocalist gladly discussed musical inquiries, but was typically reticent to talk about his offstage life; like the other members of Rush (guitarist Alex Lifeson and drummer Neil Peart), he steadfastly protects his privacy. Asked how far outside Toronto, Canada he lives, Lee paused uncomfortably and asked, "Do I really have to say how far?" He was greatly relieved when the questioning returned to the music.

Music has always been the first priority for this most image-less of rock groups, and it's part of Rush's appeal. "Image is not really important," contends Lee. "If there's an image for this band, it comes from the music."

CIRCUS: The Rush of the '80s is markedly different from the Rush of the '70s. The songs are more concise, you no longer sing in such a high key, etc. These changes are most apparent on Signals, which many are calling your best record to date. Do you see it expanding your audience?
LEE: I don't know. I always have a real difficult time guessing; it seems the more I know about the band and the music business, the less I know. The album is a little different. I'm sure it's going to bring in people who weren't hip to the band before, and maybe I'll lose some of the more hardcore heavy-metal fans.

CIRCUS: When did you come to the decision that it was time to simplify Rush's music?
LEE: Just after Hemispheres, which was the last side-long concept that we put together. We were real pleased with it, but we thought, O.K., now we've gotten the knack of doing this, and it would be silly to do it again. We decided it was time to work on other aspects of the band, like being able to construct beautiful melodies and being able to write things that get a point across in a shorter period of time.

CIRCUS: Was it a case of at first just trying to increase your musical vocabularies and then reaching a point where it was no longer necessary to prove your virtuosity via long songs and solos?
LEE: Rush. You go through many

According to Lee, Alex Lifeson (r.) has broad musical tastes. "From Pat Metheny to Martha and the Muffins."
"The music we're making now is still complicated, but in a much more subtle way." — Geddy Lee

stages: At first, your goals are simply to become a better musician, and so you tend to think, "Well, I guess that means I have to play a little harder and make my music more complicated."

The music we're making now is still complicated, but in a much more subtle way.

CIRCUS: Do you think of some of the early Rush albums, which contained those lengthy, complex pieces, went over the heads of some of your audience?

LEE: I'm sure they sometimes did, although they weren't jazz-rock or anything like that. They were still within a rock framework, and even though they were complex, I'm sure that with repeated listenings people understood. It just depended upon how much the person listening wanted to get into them ... or how much brain power they had thought.

CIRCUS: Along with the musical simplification, there's also been a change in Neil Peart's lyrics: they've become less wordy and more direct, yet there's more imagery than before.

LEE: That's another area we're moving into. We got to the point where our lyrics were so literal that they left little to the imagination. Sometimes it's nice to talk in images instead of being so descriptive and telling the listener exactly what we mean.

CIRCUS: You have a unique situation in Rush, where Peart the drummer writes the words but you sing them. Do you discuss the lyrical content first? Is it necessary for you to fully comprehend his meaning?

LEE: No. I don't have to understand it exactly, but I do have to get a picture of it that I can relate to. I can't sing something that I have no feeling for. We discuss every lyric before it's recorded, just as we discuss every bit of music to make sure it's the right thing. Everything we do is discussed by the group.

CIRCUS: Sounds like you have quite a few working ones (laughs). We hash it out and see what happens.

CIRCUS: What if you come to a stalemate?

LEE: Then we just pass on the whole idea. There's arguing that goes on from time to time—we're human beings—but it's usually resolved.

CIRCUS: Has there ever been a time when you were completely baffled by a Peart lyric?

LEE: Usually I'm pretty much in sync with him, but there are times when I don't grasp the point he's trying to make, or maybe I don't agree with the point he's trying to make.

CIRCUS: Many of Peart's lyrics describe the potential evils of modern technology. How do you feel about modern technology in music? In some cases, can't it be used as subterfuge for a lack of ability?

LEE: That's true, but you can't look at it that way. There are always going to be people who are less proficient at using the technology at hand. I think you have to look at the positive aspects: how much expression it's bringing into the hands of the people who normally would not be able to express it.

CIRCUS: On Signals, you use synthesizers more than ever before; they fill up spaces that normally would be filled by Alex's guitar. It sounds as if you've been listening to techno-rock groups such as Ultravox.

LEE: Yes, we've been, although not just Ultravox. Alex is in a whole other world; his record collection ranges from Pat Metheny to Marco and the Muffins—pretty broad scope there. I think everybody's tastes are varied. But yes, that style of music certainly influenced us on Signals.

CIRCUS: Was it an easy album to make?

LEE: No! It was a very difficult album to make. It took us a long time to get a real feel for each tune, because they're all so different from one another. We had to live with those songs longer to get a fresh perspective on them, and we experimented a lot before finally settling on one thing.

CIRCUS: Has there ever been a record that's come together relatively painlessly?

LEE: Permanent Waves. It was real simple; I don't know why. It was just one of those sessions you dream about; everything felt good. It just clicked.

CIRCUS: You tend to rehearse in some rather pastoral areas of Canada. What is it about the countryside that you find so conducive to writing and rehearsing?

LEE: Well, it's not really so much that there are trees and such, it's just that there are a lot less people around than at home, and the phone isn't ringing every five minutes. That's the main reason we go away. It's nice to get away from the constant barrage of decisions that you have to make and having everybody on your back. You want to be alone and able to concentrate on writing.

CIRCUS: Do your families accompany you?

LEE: No, we just bring our road crew with us.

CIRCUS: Alex is supposed to be a pretty good cook. Did he make any gourmet dishes for the band and crew while you were putting Signals together?

LEE: You know, he hasn't cooked for us in quite a while—that's a bone of contention right now (laughs). He did make us some fine breakfasts while we were writing the album, though.

CIRCUS: The music you're presently making seems to be the result of a more relaxed, confident attitude in the band; you're commercially successful, you don't have to tour as much as you once did.

LEE: Yes, but we still do! Although you're correct—we're certainly more relaxed, and we have achieved a certain amount of success that allows us to be more relaxed in the way we do things— I'm not sure if Signals had that type of feel because of that.

CIRCUS: Because you all have families—and you appear to be pretty family-oriented people—have you had to try to achieve more of a balance between your career and your home life? Is that important to you?

LEE: Yes, it's very important. At one point it was the band, and nothing else really mattered.

CIRCUS: Does maintaining that balance help you retain your enthusiasm for playing?

LEE: Definitely. At this point, although it is still exciting, we have to pace ourselves so that it stays exciting. To stay on the road for six, eight months would kill it for us, because we have kids back home and they're growing up.

But the band is still important to us, and we want to keep it that way. For us to keep doing this as long as we can, it always has to be fun. That's why we make sure we get home and have enough time there, so that when we do come back on the road to play a show, we really want to play that show; that it's not just another date on a long list of dates.

CIRCUS: Rush are fortunate in that all of you seem to share similar values. It's been said that if two members wanted to spend more time with their families and another insisted that more time be allocated to the group...

LEE: I think that's been the most important aspect of keeping Rush going. We all have families and you don't have to tour as much as you once did. It helps when there are only three of you: it's a lot less chaotic trying to reach conclusions if it's only between three people. I'll tell you, we're really lucky.