

UNDER PRESSURE



Rush's Geddy Lee jets into London for a video: CHRIS WATTS grabs a word or three.

*"An ill wind comes arising,
Across the cities of the plain.
There's no swimming in the heavy water,
No singing in the acid rain."*

Serious words from Rush's latest album 'Grace Under Pressure'... but then again Rush have never steered a course through conventional ideas and expressions. The release of the LP marks this Canadian trio's tenth anniversary, and they're celebrating in style. Having piloted the good ship through just about every branch of the rock tree in their career, from the extravagant Sci-Fi galleon in the mid/late-Seventies with albums devoted to exploration and innovation, reinforcing their 'musician's musicians' label, and finally breaking through to massive (that's MASSIVE) commercial acclaim with broader works such as 'Hemispheres', 'Moving Pictures' and 'Signals'.

grace under pressure." Peter Henderson was the man they finally drafted in to co-produce the set. What were they looking for in a producer and was finding one desperately necessary? "Well, at the time," he says, "we felt that it was necessary, and I don't really know if we were sure what we were looking for. Our initial instinct was to look for somebody who had a contemporary sound, who could communicate in terms of today. We wanted to bridge the gap between our past knowledge and today's language.

With Rush now embarking on another world tour playing mainly the arena circuit, (occasionally dropping down to the odd Odeon sized venue every now and then), I wondered if they ever have yearnings to return to smaller

but I like to think people come to see a good performance. Why get up in the morning and why work as hard as you can if you don't believe that?" Rush have been criticised for being aloof on tour and avoiding their public, but Geddy is quick to rise in defence. "We sign autographs as often as we can, not as much as I'd sometimes like, but it's never enough. I don't sign autographs because it's expected of me, I sign them because I want to. I like to do it, I like to see the faces and I like the contact. It's important to a degree but there'll always be the kid whose autograph you didn't sign and he'll write into the press and say you're a real arsehole because it. You can never do enough..." Does he accept the fact though that to many people he is a 'rock star'? "It feels unlikely," he continues, "and I don't feel like a rock star, but in reality

around have no right to be in the control room when I'm making a record, that's my domain and my expression, and they don't interfere with that. Sure, I'm a willing part of the machine when it suits me. I will agree to do things if I think they should be done and I want to be as honest and as unforced as I can. Let's say we use each other."

Do you trust each other? "No, but I trust some of them. I've got nothing to lose, it's my face and my name. You've got to be cautious but you can't cover every aspect. It's a fact that Rush are a 'product' although I don't think it was always like that. Once the music industry had real music people in it but not anymore. They don't give a damn anymore. There are no more aesthetic decisions made in record companies; whatever is the cheapest way then that's the best. They're business men and I don't hold that against them, I just have to recognise that and know what I'm dealing with.

"But I still love what I do," he continues, "and that pleases me the most. There's still a lot of anger and energy left in me, that's why we're not all fat rock stars! It's a horrible feeling of not trying to do anything about it, but we're not finished yet and there are lots of things left that I'd like to accomplish. Things in the world that I see, the



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nuclear thing, a personal nuclear thing, there's lives, emotions, people in turmoil all over the place. Part of making music is to see how you can express your feelings about that instead of just not caring.

"We were in danger of becoming complacent before we made this album, it was starting to happen and all that turmoil we had to go through was the best thing that could've happened. We woke up and we got mad, and that's good. Everyone wants to insulate you, but you shouldn't insulate yourself against all the bad things in the world.

Yet Rush have never been 'just another arena rock band' in the Styx/Journey vein, and their albums were remarkably outspoken for their genre. They were never afraid to voice opinions, at the same time keeping their heads well out of the publicity spotlight, enforcing their legendary off-stage silence and awkwardness. Always seeming to be the misfits, it suited them in the same way that Pink Floyd thrived on their lack of personal recognition.

'Grace Under Pressure' sees their complicated approach honed down still further with rhythms simplified and the whole project given the freshness and drive normally found in such bands as U2 and Big Country.

Geddy Lee, bassist and vocalist, is painfully quiet in conversation, and equally intense. Very much the archetypal artist of some bygone era, he's polite and gradually warms to the conversation. Sitting in the band's plush hotel suite, he admits that the title of the album reflects the troubles that the band underwent to triumph in the production department...

"I don't feel like a rock star... it doesn't mean that much to me"

"Yeah, the making of this album was pretty crazy. We decided about last Spring that we were going to use a new producer on this record — we'd made ten with the same guy. There was no problem, we just thought we'd have a change, but we didn't realise at the time what this would lead to. We had someone in mind but he pulled out at the last minute and there was a lot of pressure from above for us to go it alone. So we had to write all the songs, find a producer and record it — all in six weeks! At that time it was a mental attitude we were aspiring to have —

venues and, if given the chance, could they?"
"I don't really want to," he says uncomfortably, "but I'm absolutely confident that we could, yes. We don't

a lot of people do, sure, and that's a fact and it does a hell of a lot for your ego. It's complimentary but in a way it doesn't mean that much to me. It's not very real and I'd hate to build a life

The rock star machinery is built to prevent you from touching the world, from sweating with people in the street, and I resent that."

After all that though, can you still say

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play the arenas for the money, it's my job as a musician, and I've played a lot of bars in my life under unsatisfactory conditions. You have to compete with a bottle of beer and it's not all it's cracked up to be, that's for sure. I've played to many, many drunk people over the years, I probably still do! I'm used to a big stage, but we came to Europe on the last tour playing in less than 1,000 seats and I enjoyed that just as much as the arenas, perhaps more so. You're not dependant on lights, but you think you are because you get used to all these things blowing up around you, the grandeur and pomposity of it all. You get used to all that and you tend to forget that the reason why people are there is to hear your songs. I don't think anyone goes to a show just to see the lights. I don't want to know the horrible truth,

around it. I guess I can wear the coat of a rock star but it doesn't fit very well!

"It's harder for Neil (Peart, the lyricist/drummer) than for me. Stardom and glamour is something that he's very uncomfortable with. He's sincerely embarrassed by it. He looks at it as if his hands should be recognised and not his face, he can't wear the coat at all. It's difficult for him, I can take it or leave it but there are times when I find it incredibly embarrassing. It's difficult for me to rationalise that because I can't look at myself through the fans' eyes.

Do you feel a part of the music machine after ten years as a key cog?

"Well," he says, pausing, "the machinery pays my bills! Nobody made me a musician, I've done it for myself. The wheels that make the industry go

entertaining?

"Yes, I can," he concludes as we fast run out of time. "But it's not just entertainment. It answers a need, especially in young people, to escape and express some anger. It's a language and you've got to say something because we can't go back to Elvis Presley. I don't know if rock music is as important as everybody believes it is, whether in a hundred years it'll be just a footnote in the history of music. I do what I do because I can't help it. It makes me feel alive."

He rises, shakes me warmly and sincerely by the hand, and shows me out of his world. Despite his newly shorn hair he's looking older, fully aware that all this cannot last forever. Growing old, dare I say it, gracefully.