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# Best Bassist: GEDDY LEE

by Philip Bashe

**G**eddy Lee endured a major disappointment last year. No, wait, italicize that—a *major* disappointment:

The Chicago Cubs blew the pennant.

For Lee, who enjoys hearing the crack of the bat as much as the sound of his Steinberger bass resounding off the back wall of some hockey arena, it was about the only setback of 1984, which proved to be a red-letter year in Rush's decade-and-a-half history.

The Canadian trio's evolution has been a series of chapters. The first, its "Metal Age," was closed with the live album *All the World's a Stage* in 1976; its ultraprogressive period with 1978's *Hemispheres*; and its era of songwriting economy with 1981's live *Exit... Stage Left*. The most recent phase was heralded by 1982's *Signals*, a keyboard-dominated LP that in retrospect, says Lee, was flawed.

"We got a little out of whack with that album," he admits, "a little lost." And so, on last year's *Grace Under Pressure*, the band worked intently at realigning its sound. "It was a very difficult album to make," Lee sighs, "but it was successful in terms of defining our direction." And it was commercially successful too, becoming Rush's fifth consecutive platinum studio album.

Ironically, *IM&RW*'s Best Bassist of 1984 now plays as large a part in Rush's sound as a keyboardist as he does with his bass work. Of course, there will always be fans who won't forgive the group for forsaking its original guitar-heavy direction, but overall, "I think it's being accepted pretty well," says Lee, who on stage employs four Oberheim OBX-as, two Oberheim DSXs, an Oberheim OBX, PPG Wave 2.2 and 2.3, a Minimoog and a Roland Jupiter-8. "There are always people out there who want to hear more guitars, but I think we've been able to integrate the keyboards in an interesting way. They add texture and melody."

Lee brings a similar philosophy to his bass playing, weaving melodic patterns into such songs as "Distant Early Warning" and "Afterimage" from *Grace Under Pressure*. "In a three-piece outfit," he contends, "I view the bass's role as melodic, just to make it more interesting. When you have more musicians in a band, of course that role changes, and you become more of a rhythmic entity. But with only three members, there's more weight on your shoulders to provide melody, both for the song and for the overall band sound."

In Rush's case, that sound has metamorphosed continuously. Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson formed the group in September 1968, when both were 15-year-old schoolmates in Toronto. Led Zeppelin served as their original inspiration, which didn't always serve them well when they graduated from playing high-school dances to the local bar circuit: They were fired from one job because their volume prevented the waitresses from hearing the beer orders.

In 1974, Lee, Lifeson and drummer John Rutsey released *Rush* on their own Moon label, the material mostly referencing Jimmy Page and Co. Musically the group relied more on muscle than on intellect, fronted by Lee's shrill, shrieking voice, a style that he's since abandoned in favor of a darker, more incantatory delivery. In retrospect, *Rush* elicits a few chuckles, particularly "In the Mood," for which Lee, never the prettiest of rock stars, uncharacteristically assumes the persona of a swaggering Lothario.

With the addition of Neil Peart, Rush began charting their course as one of rock & roll's most iconoclastic bands, the distance between each album becoming greater and greater. To its credit, the trio has achieved popularity without ever cultivating a distinct image, *de rigueur* in such musics as heavy metal and modern British techno rock. "If there is an image to this band," stresses Lee, "it comes from the music."

Photo by Mark Weiss



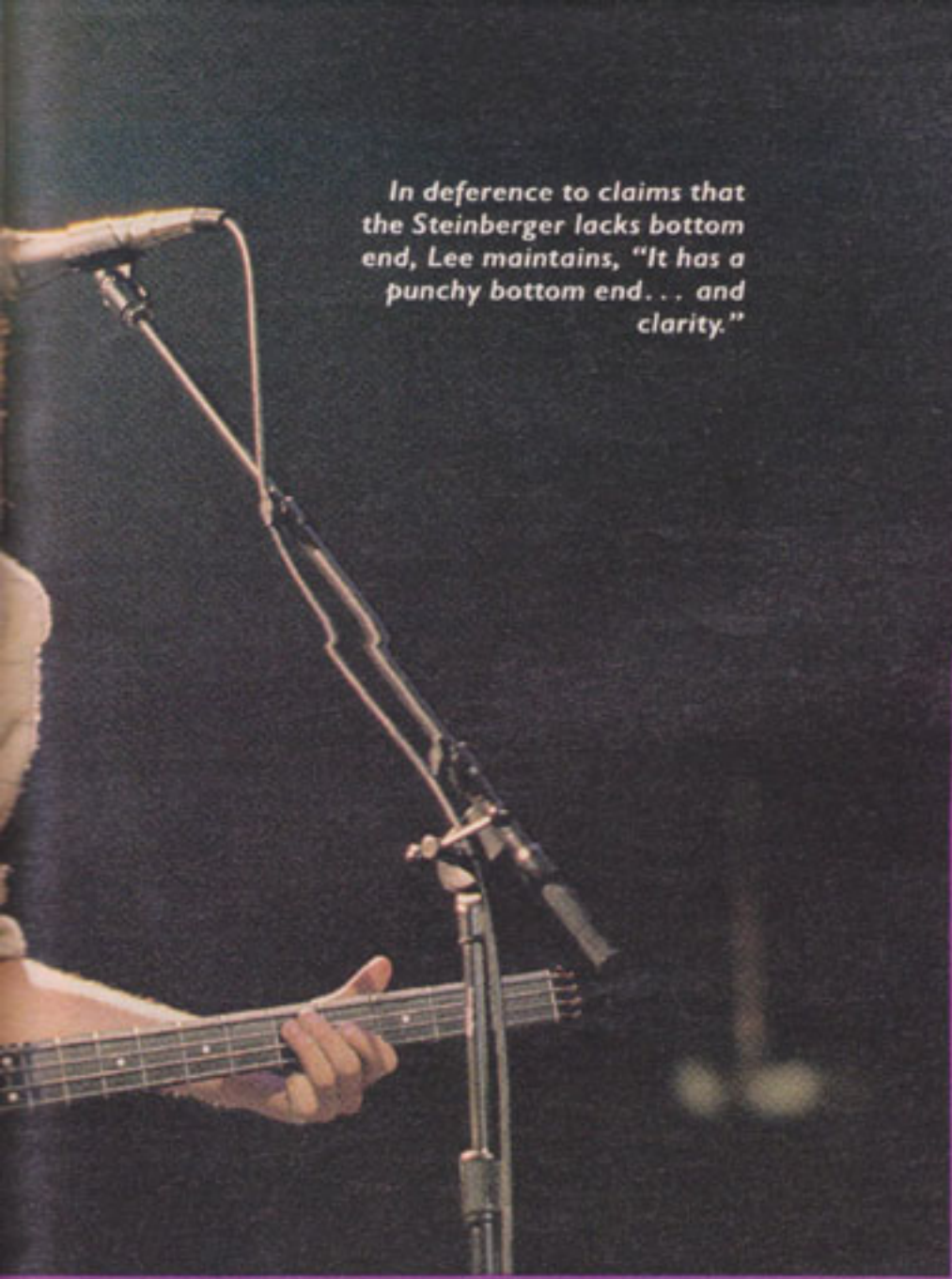
But as Rush's acceptance broadened in the late '70s, they were suddenly inundated with one aspect of success they hadn't experienced before: their audience's growing interest in them as personalities and not just musicians. For Lee, the most intensely private of the three, it's presented some problems, and a few years ago he fled Toronto for the suburbs because "my home life was havoc. People wouldn't leave me alone, and I had no piece of mind."

**L**ee is much more comfortable with his musician status than with his pop-star celebrity, and that his Best Bassist distinction comes from his fellow players is immensely satisfying. However, he says modestly, rhythm section partner Neil Peart plays a large part in helping shape his distinctive sound. Their playing telepathy is as acute as that of any bassist-drummer team in contemporary music, inventive and intuitive.

"I think that part of any bassist's sound is how he works with the drummer. Neil and I are always listening to each other, constantly pushing each other. Consequently, our talents seem very strong; probably stronger than they are individually."

For years Lee had been associated with his Rickenbacker 4001 but recently has switched his allegiance to Steinberger. In deference to claims that the Steinberger doesn't provide enough bottom end, he maintains, "It has a punchy bottom end, which I like. It's more of a mid-bottom, not a real bloated, deep sound. A lot of basses, like the Rickenbacker, for example, have a deeper sound, but you sometimes have trouble getting it to punch. The Steinberger has more clarity, which is important when you're playing down low or playing faster riffs."

Lee's Steinberger, fitted with EMG pickups, is put through a Furman PQ-3 parametric equalizer utilized as a preamp, an API 500A EQ, a BGW 750C power amp and custom-made 2-15" cabinets. For the Rickenbacker, his setup is amended slightly: Alembic preamp ("which I use for the bottom end and half of the stereo sound"), BGW 750C and custom-built cabinets.



*In deference to claims that the Steinberger lacks bottom end, Lee maintains, "It has a punchy bottom end... and clarity."*

As evidenced by their *Grace Under Pressure* tour, success has not only made Rush more adventurous musically, it's also made them more playful. They seem intent on debunking their image as three self-important, almost dour men, parading on stage to the strains of the Three Stooges theme, "Three Blind Mice," and having their "Fear Trilogy" introduced by SCTV's Count Floyd, whose borscht-belt vampire presence is projected onto the giant screen Rush use for their elaborate video-and-light show. Three self-important, dour guys?

"We don't really have a solemn attitude on stage," protests Lee. "It's a rock show, it's entertainment, and it's supposed to be fun. I don't think we would have lasted too long if we were *super-serious musicians* trying to put across something that couldn't excite an audience either visually or otherwise."

As for how long Rush will continue is a point of contention. Lee, who's played with no other musicians for over 10 years, spoke seriously last summer about the possibility of a breakup—not necessarily imminently, but that for the first time the band's eventual end was a very real consideration. Asked for his reaction to Lee's remarks, Neil Peart is somewhat guarded, though he guarantees that at least another album is forthcoming. "We always tend to look from record to record. If there does come a time when we don't have that desire to continue, then yeah, it might mean bye-bye."

Lee may be questioning Rush's future, but not their past accomplishments. They've been extremely influential—using hard rock as a base from which to leap into a variety of directions—yet few groups seem to have picked up on their lead. Rush remain something of an anomaly, which puzzles Geddy Lee.

"It all sounds the same now," he says of the heavy-metal movement in which Rush started. "It's fallen into the same trap as it did in the early '70s, where it's just a commercial thing, no different than pop music on AM radio. It's all pasteurized, homogenized; anyone can pick up a book and go, 'Hey, let's learn how to be a heavy-metal band: Get lots of amps, have lots of explosions, dress up and use those same four chords while singing about rock & roll.'"

## PRO QUOTES

**"GEDDY'S IN A SITUATION SIMILAR TO MINE, IN THAT HE** plays with a very aggressive drummer—an absolute monster who might go off on a musical limb at any point, just breaking away from the rest of the band and doing something off the wall. So a lot of the time Geddy will have to provide the foundation.

"But he's also able to get into a lot of heavy interplay with Neil Peart, and he can play in a lot of different time signatures without that sort of jazz-fusion indulgence.

"He's just a very solid player, and together he and Neil are terrific."

—*Coverday's* Scott Smith

**"GEDDY IS THE PERFECT BASS PLAYER FOR A BAND LIKE** Rush; they wouldn't exist without him. He's more of a lead instrument than a rhythm instrument. He's a very busy player and there are a lot of notes, from a melodic point of view, that run through Rush's music, and that's absolutely key in their sound.

"What impresses me most is that he can play so well and sing. It's not easy to do, because as a bassist, you're a rhythmic part of the band. And because he's a busy player and plays so well, it must be hell for him to have to play and sing at the same time. And the way he's able to play bass and the pedals—it's an amazing feat; no pun intended."


—*Triumph's* Mike Levine

**"GEDDY'S VERY MELODIC AND VERY TIGHT WITH WHAT** Peart's doing. Neil's an incredibly busy drummer, but Geddy complements what he plays and takes him beyond. Geddy and Neil together give the music a lot of character; they make it Rush. In a lot of Rush's songs, the bass line actually carries the melody and the guitar keeps the song chugging along—a reversal of roles.

"I've loved Geddy's playing for years and years. When I was in a copy band, we did a Rush medley—'Tom Sawyer,' things like that. Also, I play keyboards in Helix, so I can really appreciate the job Geddy does as Rush's bassist, synthesist and vocalist."

—*Helix's* Daryl Gray

Photo by Tom Farrington/Pix Int'l



*Lee uses a PPG Wave 2.2, a Minimoog and keyboards by Oberheim and Roland.*

However, the lack of competition, Lee acknowledges laughingly, has benefitted his own group, considered the most technically advanced hard-rock band. "It seems that as we've grown up," observes Lee, "the music around us has gotten simpler and simpler."

"Everything around us is legitimizing us to all hell!"

## Best Drummer:

# NEIL PEART

by Philip Bashe

Being selected Best Drummer in award polls such as this is nothing new for Neil Peart, whose speed and dexterity have bedazzled his percussion peers for the past decade.

But a more telling sign of his stature is that a good percentage of the votes cast for Peart were from other instrumentalists, an affirmation of his consummate musicality. A true renaissance man, Peart is deeply involved in Rush's composing, and as their lyricist, his is the philosophy most often espoused in the trio's music.

That philosophy—of belief in the individual—was inspired by writer Ayn (The Virtue of Selfishness) Rand, a favorite author of Peart's. It's made him the target of criticism from those who've perceived him as arrogant and, unjustifiably, autocratic. Thus it's surprising to find Peart such an affable and immensely humble character backstage at Madison Square Garden following a sold-out show on the band's *Grace Under Pressure* tour. Tall, gangly, his hair pulled back in a ponytail, the 32-year-old drummer is remarkably composed considering he's just spent an exhausting two hours running laps on his foot pedals, with his arms and wrists in constant motion. Maybe like someone who's just walked through fire, it's the exhilaration of having made it to the other side.

Just as surprisingly, for a man so articulate, both as a lyricist and with a pair of drumsticks, Peart's "acceptance speech" consists mostly of embarrassed hemming and hawing. "I find it hard to deal with," he says bemusedly, "because I know there are many people as good or better than I am. But you can't say that without sounding like an awful S.O.B."

After a few seconds of thought, he pleads, "Let's forget about it, O.K.?"

At least Peart is able to offer, relatively painlessly, an assessment of his musical strengths, though, typically, he understates his case.

"I see myself as being a sponge more than anything unique. Maybe," he chuckles, "that's a nice way of saying I'm a burglar. I listen to so much music, learn from it and apply it to what we do. Yet drawing from so many sources keeps me from being a copy cat,

because I carefully work out how to project them. I'll grab from what Bill Bruford is doing, or Stewart Copeland or Sly Dunbar. . ."

What makes Peart so gifted isn't just his physical skills, it's his basic conception of the drum kit. Defying convention and shunning clichés, he doesn't assign each drum one function; he draws out every possible shading: walloping his snare in the middle, but then tapping delicately near the rim; achieving dynamics with a deft swipe at a China cymbal as effectively as a full-armed smack of a crash cymbal. His musical mind is an inexhaustable reserve of ideas.

Fortunately for Peart, he's in an environment in which he can incorporate those ideas, no matter how outwardly disparate. He knows it too. "Absolutely. For instance, I'll listen to the rhythm of, say, King Sunny Ade, and then we write a song like 'Red Lenses' from *Grace Under Pressure* on which I

**"I see myself as being a sponge more than anything unique; maybe that's a nice way of saying I'm a burglar."**

can use those influences. Each of us in Rush shouldn't have to make a solo album in order to be able to play something weird."

Peart, from Hamilton, Canada, began playing drums in his early teens. "I had about one and a half years of lessons with a very good teacher," he recalls, "which gave me a good enough grounding so that I was then able to teach myself." At 18 he traveled to England in search of work, but returned home two years later "disillusioned by the music business." Working during the day, at night he'd sit in with bands at the local bars, which is where Rush guitarist Alex Lifeson first saw him. When the group had a falling out with original drummer John Rutsey, Peart was invited to join Lifeson and bassist Geddy Lee in August 1974.

His impact on the group was immediate and profound, as can be heard in the palpable difference between *Rush*—the band's debut,

recorded with Rutsey, and distinguished by conventional rhythms—and Peart's first with the band, *Fly by Night*. In fact, he made his presence felt on the very first song, "Anthem," which opens with a flourish of machine-gun snare drumming, as the bass and the guitar struggle to keep up with him. Peart's facility to not only fill gaps but to weld them shut inspired Lee and Lifeson to play as if yokes had been lifted from their shoulders, and freed their imaginations as songwriters, yielding the first of their intricate, extended tracks, "By-Tor & the Snow Dog." With Peart behind the kit, Rush grew steadily ambitious, culminating in such side-long epics as "2112" and "Hemispheres."

Reflecting on those lengthy pieces, composed in movements, Peart disagrees with criticisms that dismissed them as mere exercises in complexity, contending, "The technique was an emotional pursuit, it really was. It was just the love of what we were doing and the desire to get better at it. In no way was I fearful of becoming an automaton."

But following 1978's *Hemispheres*, Rush were satisfied with having mastered that style, and, influenced somewhat by the back-to-basics ethos of punk/new wave, were primed for a new challenge: simplifying their music, first evidenced on 1980's *Permanent Waves*, by no small coincidence their first album to go platinum.

Ironically, says Peart, those pithy, "simpler" songs "are harder to play. Now in each song I have to think in thirty-two or sixty-four bars," he explains, "whereas in the past, while a song might have been in a complicated time signature, it'd be a constantly revolving thing, so I'd only have to think a few seconds ahead of myself. Now I'm thinking in patterns that might last for up to a minute; that's a lot to keep in your head at one time."

Indeed, on *Grace Under Pressure*, the streamlining of the past few years is refined even further. On songs such as "Afterimage" and "Kid Gloves," the band locks into a barreling  $\frac{3}{4}$  time and—surprise—stays there.

"It gives me a secret smile when I hear something that's so deceptively simple," Peart continues. "When I listen to another



**Peart plays an acoustic-electronic kit in addition to his Tama Artstar prototype (above) with ultrathin shells.**

*Photo by Mark Weiss*

drummer's work and think, 'Boy, he's really letting us off easy,' at the same time, I know how much work went into it."

In Rush's live show, Peart works plenty hard, seen from the audience as a mere head bobbing in a sea of drums and cymbals, playing almost grim-faced, so immersed is he in concentration. He varies between two kits, an acoustic and an acoustic-electronic. The former is an all-Tama Artstar prototype with ultrathin shells that, according to Peart, "resonate more and have more of a voice; they're not quite so under control." Drum sizes are two 24" bass drums and 14" Slingerland snare with Remo Clear Dot heads; 6", 8", 10" and 12" concert toms with Remo Black Dot heads; 12", 13", 15" and 18" closed toms with Evans heavy-duty Rock tops and Evans regular bottoms; 22" gong bass drum and 13" metal timbale with Remo plain, clear heads. His cymbals are Zildjians: 13" hi-hat, 8" and 10" splashes, two 16" crashes, 18" crash, 20" crash, 22" ride, 18" pang and 20" China type.

The secondary kit consists of a Simmons SDS5 brain, three tom-tom modules, one snare module and a Clap Trap, plus an 18" Tama bass drum and a 14" Slingerland snare.

Cymbals are a 13" hi-hat, a 22" ride, 16" and 18" crashes, and a 20" China. All hardware is Tama, with the exception of two Camco chain-driven bass drum pedals. Peart also employs various traps, such as orchestral bells, a bell tree, windchimes, Crotales, temple blocks and cowbells, and uses Pro-Mark 745 sticks, which he has his drum roadie shave near the shoulder.

The mark of a great player is one who always seeks to progress, and Peart is as much a drumming student as he is a scholar. In analyzing his playing—reluctantly, of course—Peart feels he's made his greatest strides in terms of keeping time. "It's a thing I've always worked toward and am still very conscious of," he says. "It's gotten better, but it's frustrating to me that it's not perfect. Maybe it never can be."

If Peart can't attain perfection, then probably not. Perhaps the greatest tribute that can be paid him is that there is no one Neil Peart sound; his is a variety of styles, and his resourcefulness is just one of the factors that led to his being voted Best Drummer in this first annual *IM&RW* Music Awards Poll.

Now, if only he'd work on that acceptance speech. . . □

## PRO QUOTES

**"NEIL IS A VERY MUSICAL DRUMMER.** Because he writes the lyrics to Rush's music, he's able to know just where to accent and how to bring out the meaning of the song itself. He's also in the enviable position of being in a trio, which affords him a lot of room in which to play.

"He's a very fluid player, a very serious student of the instrument, and a very eloquent teacher as well—a man of letters. I just think he's a tremendous asset to both the instrument and the profession of music."

— Michael Shrieve

**"NEIL'S A REAL GOOD PLAYER,** with extremely fast hands and feet. It sounds to me like he was very influenced by Billy Cobham. I really like his playing on *Grace Under Pressure*; for one thing, his drum sound has gotten much better. I also like the fact that he uses a lot of different symphonic instruments, such as chimes. It reminds me of the concept we used in the *Vanilla Fudge*: making a rock band sound like an orchestra."

— Carmine Appice

**"THE GREAT THING ABOUT NEIL** Peart is how he's able to play a lot more than a heavy two and four beat for a rock song. I see him as the Billy Cobham of rock. He's definitely got a sound of his own, and it's great that he's done it as a total percussionist; he surrounds himself with a lot more than just a conventional drum set. He's concerned about the most sound variations as you can get within the percussion family. This is the age of electronics, where with keyboards you press a button and you get whatever sound you want. With drummers, who are playing acoustic instruments, you've got to seek out as many means as you can find to compete, and Peart's done a real good job of that."

— Steve Morse Band's Rod Morgenstein