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GEOFF LEE





By Eddie Trunk

**F**or almost 30 years, Geddy Lee has been the incredibly identifiable voice of Rush, one of rock's best loved and longest lasting trios. Equally loved for his bass playing as well as vocal and keyboard work, Lee has just released his first-ever solo work, *My Favorite Headache*. It's been three years since *Test For Echo*, the last Rush studio release, and in that time there has only been the triple-live *Different Stages* CD to hold fans over. It's a hiatus due largely to the break Rush drummer and chief lyricist Neil Peart needed after the mind-boggling tragedy of losing his wife and daughter in the same year.

Needless to say, music was the last thing on the mind of Peart following their deaths.

Sympathetic to their partner's well being, Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson agreed to a much needed break. It was during this time that the idea for Lee's solo debut was born.

Lee called on old friend Ben Mink for the bulk of the collaboration, a relatively unknown artist in the U.S. who was part of a fairly successful Canadian band called FM. It was Mink and Lee who created the majority of *My Favorite Headache*, co-producing and co-writing the entire release. Also guesting on the album are Soundgarden/Pearl Jam drummer Matt Cameron, and Our Lady Peace drummer Jeremy Taggart, who appears on one track. We spoke with Geddy Lee at his home in Canada, just after completing a whirlwind bi-coastal promotional tour, something the rather private musician is not really used to shouldering on his own...

**METAL EDGE:** I understand you're back from a rather grueling promo schedule. How did it feel to have to do that alone for the first time in over three decades, without the support of Rush?

**GEDDY LEE:** It was really quite interesting for me. It took me a few days to get comfortable. Certainly, I'm used to sharing the duties of promo with my other two partners, so having to deal with the whole schedule on my own was something different, for sure.

**ME:** Was the idea for a solo album born out of knowing there was going to be a lengthy hiatus for Rush?

**GL:** Well, I knew I was looking at a long layoff ahead of me with Rush and wasn't going to be doing any writing, and I can't go that long without writing. For me, writing is essential. It's almost like breathing to me. I had always wanted to work with Ben [Mink]—we had been friends since the early '80s, when he played in a Canadian synth/progressive rock band called FM—so it was an opportunity to combine both my desire to write, and work with Ben.

# GEDDY LEE

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To That  
Rush

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# GEDDY LEE

continued

**ME:** I imagine a big challenge for you was making an album that still appealed to Rush fans, but also gave you the ability to try some new things as well.

**GL:** Well, the first part of the writing was to try and intentionally avoid Rush-type sounding songs, but I soon realized I didn't want to make a record that wasn't a rock record. I still wanted to rock, and when I started writing I knew there would be a style that would obviously cross over with Rush.

**ME:** Because of your voice, I would think it would immediately be compared to Rush.

**GL:** Yeah, the indentifiability of my voice is kind of undeniable at this stage, I guess, so I really didn't worry about it. I just said, "I'm going to write what I'm going to write, and that's it. We'll see how it turns out."

**ME:** Was any of the material on *My Favorite Headache* previously written for Rush, but didn't fit the band?

**GL:** No, it's all brand new. They're all things I started writing specifically during this time period.

**ME:** Were you able to explore anything new as a bass player during the process of the album?

**GL:** The idea of fast bass licks is what people always think of with me, but I didn't want to do that. Although there are a couple of moments on the CD it didn't appeal to me melodically. Then I realized was writing many of these songs on the bass and with bass chords, so I got into this multi-track bass idea. Many of these songs have three or four tracks of bass all doing different things that are not immediately recognizable. On the title track, for instance, the most aggressive sound is not a guitar, it's actually a bass playing really outrageous chords. Ben laughs when he sees some of the bass things I come up with, they're almost rooted in Flamenco guitar. I guess you could say I play Flamenco bass...

**ME:** What's the idea behind the title *My Favorite Headache*, also the album's first single?

**GL:** If you think about it, there's so much in that little phrase. It actually came from something Ben's father told him about his mother—"And then she gets the favorite headache" [laughing]. We just laughed and thought about this thing you have, or something you love to do, but it pains you to do it. That whole yin and yang thing that I think everyone goes through speaks volumes.

**ME:** How did the drummers get involved.

**GL:** I had known Matt Cameron from his work with Soundgarden and Pearl Jam, and we were fortunate to





Alex Lifeson



find a window in his schedule for him to record. He was really happy to play on the record and really enthusiastic. That was really a big bonus because we really liked what he had to contribute on many levels. Jeremy Taggart is a really great young drummer I really like who plays in the Canadian band Our Lady Peace. Matt had to leave for a Pearl Jam tour, so we were thrilled to have Jeremy step in for one track "Home On The Strange", which was the last track recorded for the album. As a bass player, I've been really fortunate to work with some great drummers over the years.

**ME:** What are some of the biggest differences you hear between this album and a Rush album? Although I can hear some different subtle stuff, to me it's always going to sound like Rush when I hear your voice.

**GL:** Well, it's hard to avoid the similarities, and I stopped worrying about it. For me, there's a different attitude rhythmically that exists on this record. Also, the way the tracks are layered melodically are things that are quite different than I would do with Rush—Not to have to work within a band sound and in the same context as I have for so many years was very liberating. Ben and I were really able to shape some new sounds and textures that maybe would not have occurred in the context of Rush. Don't get me wrong, Rush is a really flexible outlet for music—I think we experiment all the time and we have an anything goes attitude—but when you sit down with somebody else, it starts going in different ways. We were able to do what the songs needed in a solo context, as opposed to what the band would want to accomplish.

Neil Peart



Geddy Lee

**ME:** Lyrically there's big difference on the album, since Neil writes almost all the Rush lyrics. How did you find it approaching lyrics after not having written them for so long?

**GL:** That was actually a really interesting part of the whole project for me, exploring that side of me which

I had a tendency to get a little lazy about. It was really good to force myself to dig down deep and get some lyrics done. Not having written lyrics for a long time, I kind of missed how beneficial that can be for a person, to not have a verbal outlet. Music has always been fun for me to write, and I get a great satisfaction out of it and have never really been frustrated by it, but I underestimated the benefits of writing lyrics and to getting things out of my system. It's really been, for me, one of the most interesting aspects of doing a solo project.

**ME:** It seems as if many of the tracks are written from a third person perspective. How much of the lyrics are you talking, as opposed to a character?

**GL:** In the case of the title track, it's a character. That song's almost like a black comedy—The guy's relationship with his life is having some problems, and he has this kind of hideaway attitude. I have had some times in my life—as most people have—where you look at the world as kind of a dark place, so I was able to get into this character's head because I've also had those feelings where you just don't want to go out and deal with the world.

**ME:** How about some of the other tracks on the CD—"Runaway Train" is one that hit me right away as one that could be a single.

**GL:** Yeah, that track is really about doing it yourself. You can blame circumstances all you want, but nobody is going to get you out of it but yourself. It's kind of a song about the human condition.

**ME:** How about "The Angels Share"? I found that to be real different for you.

**GL:** That song is really about just thinking out loud and spiritual relationships. It started out kind of tongue in cheek. The whole song is really just about how life is up to us—We can think about what's going on up above, and it makes us feel better to think there's something going on up there, but at the end of the day it's up to us.

**ME:** "Grace To Grace" sounds like a very emotional track...

**GL:** Yes, very personal—That song was inspired by my mother and her life. She was a Holocaust survivor that came to Canada after the war with my father. It's really about the grace and intelligence of her, and people like her, who have carried on their lives after tough circumstances—People who have every right to be bitter, but they're not, and have continued life with an elegance which I find very admirable.

**ME:** Looking back now that the record is done, how did you like creating music outside of Rush for the first time?

**GL:** Well, I think I really backed into the whole experi-



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continued

ence. I really had no desire to make an individual statement, and I certainly wasn't looking for more attention in my life, but every once in a while I would wonder what it would be like to work with other people. Ben and I had been talking about working together for many years, and finally we got it together, so I'm happy I was finally able to do that.

**ME:** Most solo albums from artists in established bands are born out of frustration, but Rush always struck me as a true group where everybody has a voice.

**GL:** I satisfy so much of my musical desire in Rush, so I don't have any great frustrations from that point of view. It was just really a chance to work with other people who I always wanted to work with while Rush was on an extended break.

**ME:** It's refreshing to hear that. Most artists use solo albums to vent.

**GL:** No, Rush are my soul brothers. For me, working with them and having them as friends all these years is pure pleasure. Like any band, we've had our arguments and sometimes things don't go so great, but for the most part, I couldn't ask for a better partnership than Alex and Neil. I'm very lucky. We all want to accomplish the same things and stay friends and make the same kind of music after all these years.

**ME:** It also helps when you have a fan base as loyal as Rush's.

**GL:** Our fans are so devoted, they've really been the ones that have kept us going. They've always been supportive, even when we've taken a strange turn here or there. That kind of fan loyalty can never be underestimated.

**ME:** How do you feel your experience in making a solo record will effect Rush the next time around?

**GL:** I don't really know yet. I would like to think that what I've learned can be applied somewhere, and I have learned a lot doing this.

**ME:** How about touring for this record, any plans?

**GL:** It's kind of up in the air at the moment, because Rush is getting ready to get back together and write. It's kind of tough to try and work around everybody's schedule. If I can find the time to do it, I know Matt is up for it, and Ben is up for it, and I'd like to find a few more musicians to round out a band and maybe do some small shows somewhere. I would want the group to be more than a trio if I did tour. If everybody's schedule—including mine with Rush—permits, maybe just a few cities.

**ME:** What can you tell us about the current state of Rush? How is Neil feeling these days?

**GL:** I actually was just on the West coast and had dinner with Neil, and he's really in a much more positive direction

in his life now. He's looking forward to going back to work and has been psyching himself up for it. We're going to get together in February and do some writing and see how it goes. Hopefully we'll have a new album out late 2001/early 2002.

**ME:** What has Alex been up to during the break from Rush?

**GL:** He's been doing some writing for television, and wrote the theme for a new Gene Roddenberry show called *Andromeda*. He's really been getting into television writing. He's also been producing a couple bands and has really been keeping busy as well.



**ME:** As a longtime Rush fan, I must admit, I was much more a fan of some of the heavier, crunchy guitar-based stuff you guys did in the '70s and very early '80s, more than some of the synth-heavy sounds of the later records.

**GL:** So it's kind of like Woody Allen for you—You liked his earlier, funnier stuff better [laughing]...

**ME:** Well, of the more recent records, the track that comes closest to what I'm talking about would be something like "Stick It Out" from *Counterparts*. I know everybody needs to grow and evolve, and I'm not saying to rewrite "By Tor And The Snow Dog," but could you ever see Rush making a really heavy record again?

**GL:** It's really hard to say. Every time we go into the studio to write a record we go in without any preconceptions and

try and make it interesting. One thing we're not in favor of is trying to ever repeat ourselves, because that's just plain boring for us. So we try subtle shifts in texture, subtle shifts in sounds, adding different instruments, melodies and harmonies, rhythmic approaches, but I don't think we ever rule out the whole rock aspect. We do still enjoy rocking, and the guitar presence is always going to be there, Alex wouldn't have it any other way.

**ME:** I fully understand a bands need to grow and change, and I'm not saying any Rush album sounds like Celine Dion [laughing], but my favorite period was definitely *Moving Pictures*. Is there a chance we could get something that heavy again?

**GL:** Oh yeah. I mean, we never throw options out the window. If we get back in the studio and everybody feels like getting their ya-yas out, it's going to happen. We don't try and contrive anything we do, we try and let it be a natural expression of whatever place we happen to be at musically. I think that's important to us to stay interested in what we do. I think if we had tried to stick to a formula, we wouldn't still be around.

**ME:** Well, it's obviously worked, it's been almost 30 years for Rush.

**GL:** The first record came out in 1974, but I started playing with Alex around 1969-70. Neil joined in '74, so our recording history starts in 1973.

**ME:** Since we're talking about the very early days of Rush—So many people are not aware that Neil Peart is not the band's original drummer and didn't play on the first album. What ever happened to John Rutsey?

**GL:** It's so funny, because I've been asked that question a lot lately. I haven't talked to him for about eight years, but last I knew of him, he was a body builder and doing very well. He went in a whole different direction from music.

**ME:** It's so interesting to think that Neil is not an original member of the band, but is such a Rush focal point, and to think that could have been John Rutsey. Did he leave, or was he booted?

**GL:** He left the band. He was having a few health problems at the time, and I think the thought of touring was freaking him out a bit, so he went his own way at that point.

**ME:** Anything Rush fans can look forward to to hold them over till the next album?

**GL:** Well, I recently found a complete video from our last show, but I also found some really old footage, so I'm hoping maybe I could put a DVD together with footage from both shows, plus some videos we did that people have never seen and some other fun stuff. I've been wanting to put it together for a couple years, but it's just a matter of getting everybody else on board. •