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Bassist

Geddy Lee

Interview with

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Photos: (throughout) Geddy Lee performs live with RUSH

VAPOR TRAIL AFTERGLOW

Talking tours with Geddy Lee of RUSH

by Christopher Buttner

ACT I

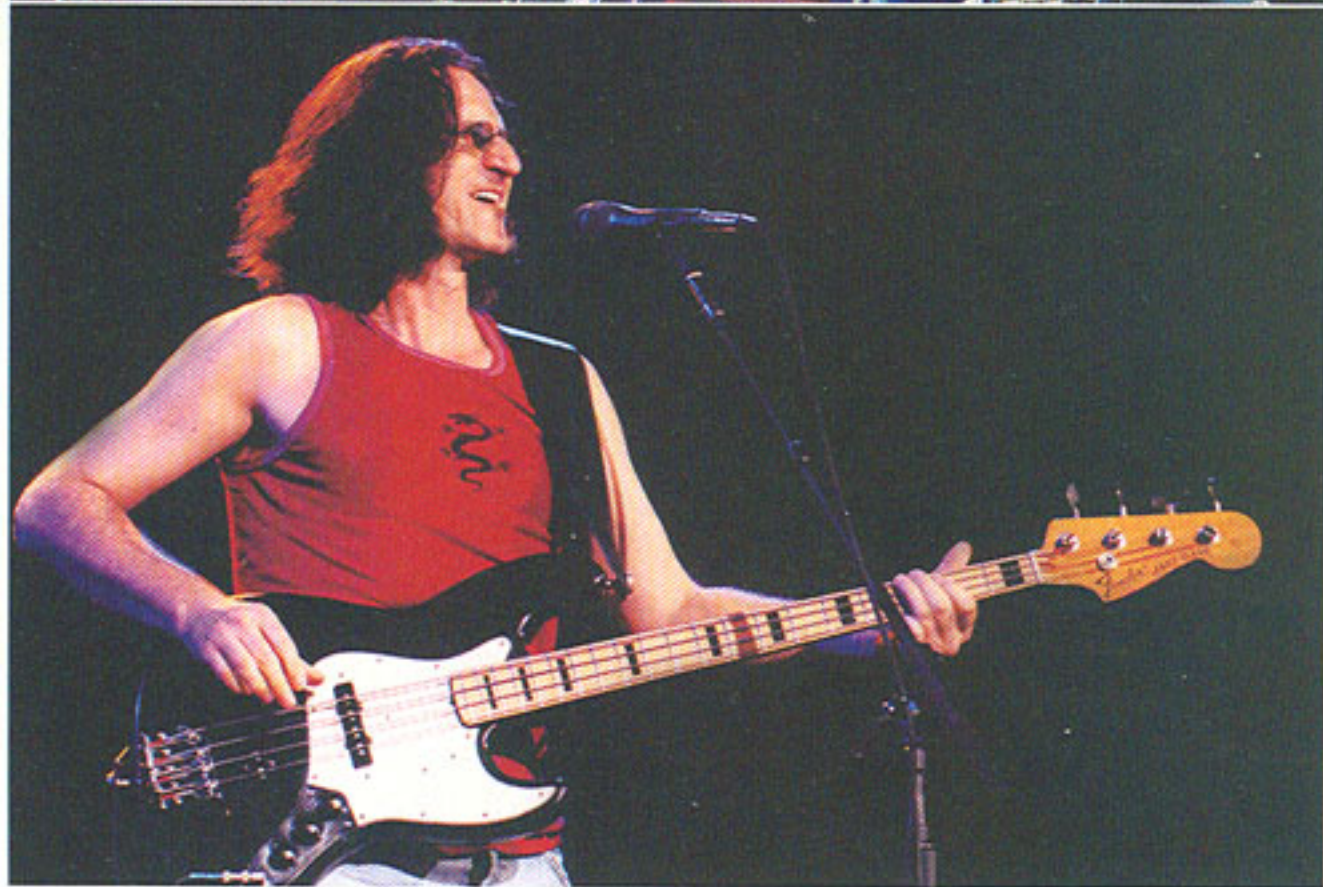
A show of hands

You never know what to expect from a band that has been away from touring as long as Rush. Especially being away from it for five years, which is a really long time for a band that toured for a year every other year between 1972 and 1996! Taking into account that these three gents are no spring chickens, (Geddy turns 50-years old in July 2003) when the band toured through North and South America on the Vapor Trails tour, they did so with all the ferocity of a tornado hitting a trailer park. It's safe to say that I have not seen such enthusiasm and energy come off of a Rush concert stage since the Permanent Waves tour in 1980, 22-years ago. It's not that Rush was a let down any of the other 15-times I saw them live, but this time out the shows were simply jaw-droppingly electric. Geddy was in top form on his instrument, as well as vocally, bouncing around the stage with the same lanky and wiry Permanent Waves-era vigor as if he was 28-years old again. No opening act, just three hours of Rush with a 20-minute intermission. When the house lights came on, it was hard to say who was more exhausted - the band or the audiences... and that was just after the intermission!

ACT II

How it is

It's amazing that only in the past few years have pro and semi-pro musicians alike addressed the topic of staying healthy and physically fit while on tour. Performing is very hard physical and mental work. When you compound strenuous performances night after night with the rigors of life on the road, consisting of long hours, late nights, early mornings, hustling in and out of venues, hotels, airports, planes, trains and automobiles, combined with a lot of the 'hurry-up-and-wait' that's involved before going onstage, and often a garbage diet of fast food and alcohol, as well as other inebriants and associated addictions, bad habits and/or vices...



well, it's no wonder the mortality rate of rock stars can be so high. The Rock and Roll lifestyle can kill a person long before their time... but not these Canadians. They've always appeared sober enough to stay away from each other's vomit, at the very least. During our conversation, Geddy was happy to talk about the mental and physical preparations he undertook to prepare for the latest tour and how he sustained the balance between amazing bass playing and a great voice.

ACT III

Vapor trail

Do you have any plans for touring Europe?

No, none and we haven't been there since 1992, I believe. We hoped we could get overseas this time and, in fact, we made about four different attempts in planning an overseas tour. We wanted to play numerous countries and we just had a hell of a time getting all the cities we wanted at the times that we wanted. It also looked like it was going to be a very complicated and expensive venture at the

time, which didn't bother us. Also, prior to the Vapor Trails North American tour we weren't sure how long we would be able to stay on the road and we didn't know how we would feel about being on the road. We approached the Vapor Trails tour in a very tentative manner, along the lines of, "Let's do a couple of legs and see how Neil feels and see if we're all vibing." It was just very difficult trying to get Europe in, partially, I guess, because we didn't really know how things were going to go, and we couldn't have expected to feel as good as we did by the end of the North American tour. So we planned things in kind of a safe way. At first we thought, "Let's just do North America, get our feet wet, see how we feel, and then we can add on as we get stronger." If things were going great, if we felt good, and everyone was up for staying on the road a little longer, we'd add on Europe. Unfortunately, that was an error because it's not just so easy to add on Europe... that's a big part of the world. To route the tour the way we wanted just wasn't working. Plus, we had offers from other countries where we never played, like Mexico and Brazil. We





had a huge fan base in Brazil for 30-years and we had never gone there, so we tried that. To make a long story short, the only possible time to do Europe was a tour at the end of January 2003, and that would mean coming off the road for two months and then winding the whole tour up again. Which, quite frankly, did not go over very well.

It looked like a hugely expensive production...

Yes, it was. It was the kind of tour that if you connected Europe immediately to the end of the North American leg, you can justify the expense of Europe because its part of an ongoing production, and you can deal with the costs. But to separate

Europe out and take two months off and then get everyone back together, go back into rehearsals again... To do that was not anything people were willing to do. The one regret I have about the Vapor Trails tour is that we did not go to Europe and I feel terrible about letting down our European fans. Partially, it was our error and partially it was just the fact that we could not predict how we would feel three months into the Vapor Trails tour. By the time we realized that we were strong enough to keep going, the Gods of Scheduling were just not cooperating. I do feel good that we hit two countries that we never played in before. Although we dissatisfied our fans in Europe, we satisfied our South American fans, so we accomplished something on that ground. I can promise that the next time Rush tours, and I have no reason to feel there won't be another Rush tour,

we'll definitely make Europe more of a priority.

Listening to every track on the Vapor Trails CD is a total and complete adrenalin rush and that really carried over to the Vapor Trails tour. The three performances I attended were really fun and celebratory performances. What was the overall reception like from the audiences?

I appreciate your comments and it was a great tour. We were really feeding back from the audiences and they were full of smiles and that made us smile. It was nice to focus on something as simple as doing a good show. New album, no talk, no second-guessing, no bullshit... I think there was a great feeling of longing, we were back in our environment where we have always connected, doing what we do in the most basic way, which was playing as well as we can play. The three of us just gelled and we really got off on it. I think it was the most fun tour we

Photos by Christopher Buttner



GEDDY'S GEAR

The Rush bassist has been associated with a good number of classic basses over the years including Fender, Wal and Rickenbacker. Recently honoured with a signature bass, the Fender Geddy Lee Jazz Bass is a recreation of the 1972 black Jazz Bass Geddy has used on his most recent touring and recording projects. The Fender replica sports the Badass II bridge, maple neck and black finish of Geddy's original axe. We also spoke to Pete 'The Fish' Stevens from Wal basses, the company that built a selection of instruments for Geddy. Pete told us, "When the band was recording *Power Windows*, the producer, Pete Collins, was a Wal owner who suggested using his bass for a few tracks. The result of that was that the band cancelled the bass recordings to date and used the Wal for the whole album. As the album was done at Manor near Oxford, Geddy came down to the High Wycombe workshop and ordered the black polyester finish Mark I model Wal bass, which had gold hardware. Later on he added the Red Stain Mark II, with 24 frets, which had birdseye maple facings and he also had a 24 fret 5-string as well, which was finished in black like the 4-string. He pretty much used those basses for the next three albums exclusively."

For more information contact Fender 0208 202 1199 and Electric Wood (Wal) 01494 442925

have ever done.

Your voice sounded perfect live. How much more difficult is it to hit the high notes after all these years?

It just depends upon the context and the key. Take a song like 'Freewill', where the end part is about as high as I can possibly sing. For some reason, that part is not very difficult for me. But if you take a song like, 'Temples of Syrinx' from *2112*, there is an intensity about that song that is really hard. Not only is it in a high key, it's relentless. So, certain songs, like 'Temples of Syrinx', just wear out my voice by stressing my vocal chords, while songs like 'Freewill', that require I sing in a high range, is a very balanced song where I can hit those notes with relative ease. Songs like 'Ghost Rider,' for example, and 'Ceiling Unlimited' are also very difficult songs to sing. It's not just because they're very high in the vocal range, it's because they are very wordy and relentless. You need to catch your breath after them, which is when we'll play an instrumental tune. The balance of the show requires proper placement of the instrumental songs to help me catch my breath and keep my voice in shape.

What do you do vocally to prepare for a show and what do you utilize during a show to keep you voice strong, aside from strategically arranging instrumentals into the set, such as warm water, lozenge, a few shots of Jägermeister?

I maintain a very strict diet on tour. I avoid all dairy products and spicy foods and white wine I keep to a bare minimum. There are foods that are highly mucolytic and dry out my voice that I avoid completely. I drink litres and litres of water and on days off I try to not talk so much and I don't do interviews. But, before the show itself, I have found on previous tours that when I was doing a 20-minute vocal warm-up, it was great for sending me out on the early part of the show totally warmed up, but it cost me towards the end of the show when my voice would tire out prematurely. Because we had no opening act on this tour, what I chose to sing during soundcheck is my vocal warm-up. We do, at least, a 20-minute soundcheck everyday consisting of bits of songs, so I will sing some stuff in a lower, as well as a higher range. The soundcheck is also paced so I use those songs to warm-up my voice because I know I will be onstage in another hour and a half to two hours. Also, I warm-up on the bass guitar during the soundcheck. That's all of the vocal and instrument warm-up I require and on this tour it worked well for me.

Do you do anything to cool down?

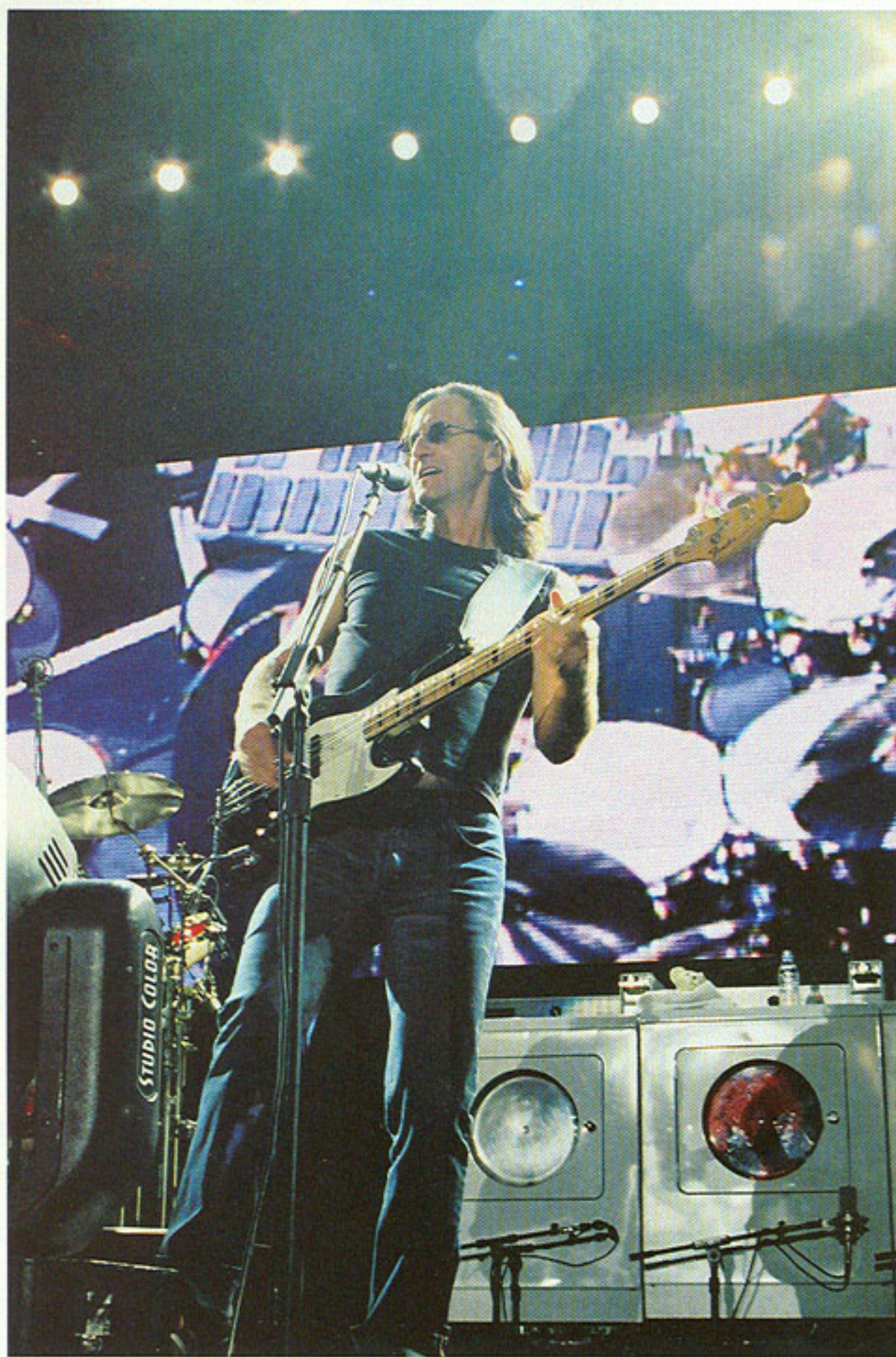
Drink a glass of red wine as soon as I possibly can (laughs). I drink room temperature water throughout the show and when I come off stage I drink a whole lot more room temperature water. Only then do I hit the wine bottle...

How much of hitting the high notes is just getting over mental hurdles? What one or two pieces of advice from your experience can you bestow on other instrumentalist/singers?

You have to have a lot of respect for the muscle and you can't kid yourself that you can live like you did when you were younger, eating and drinking whatever you want. Being in a smoky environment is the worst thing for your throat; so don't hang around with people who smoke. Lubricating your voice, drinking inordinate amounts of water really helps as well as not talking on days off. You just can't drink water before you go on stage. A friend who is a pro ball player told me you have to hydrate yourself two days before the event. Your diet is really important depending upon the kind of singer you are. The simple, common sense thing really is, most of all, use your head.

Rush's tour schedule consisted of two shows and then





a day off, but for the most part the schedule was one on and one off. Are the show dates arranged in a specific way for you to maintain your voice, as well as for everyone in the band to

maintain their own physical strength and stamina?

Yes, I find that I cannot do three shows in a row, ever, anymore and we didn't on this tour. Although, when we were rehearsing - and people forget - six weeks of rehearsals is like doing six weeks worth of shows in a row!

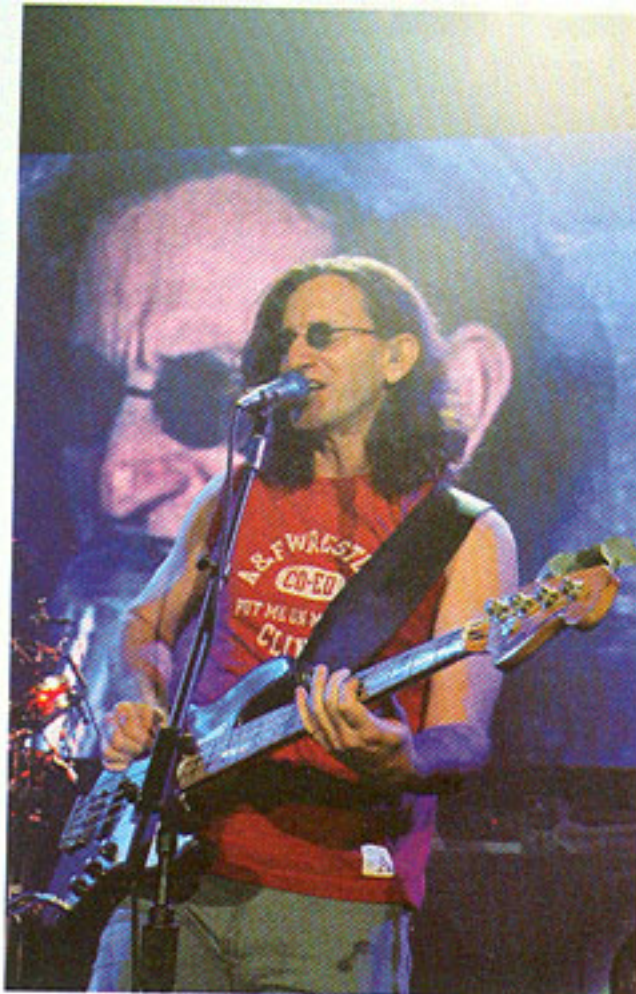
I did find, as the tour wore on, the back-to-back shows were getting harder

and harder on my voice and I got very tired towards the end of the tour. In fact, I found myself sleeping longer and longer as the tour wore on. I also physically started developing some problems with my right hand during the last month of the tour that started to inhibit my ability to play properly. It was a problem with strained ligaments around my right index. That's a really important finger for me, since it's the finger I do all my really aggressive slapping with and I had to see a hand specialist when the tour got to Chicago. It was a problem and I was able to work around it and fortunately a day off here and there helped. The problem is still not gone, but it doesn't matter anymore, now I just have to get it ready for tennis season. I think Neil had some problems physically, he had some pretty beat up hands and he has to be careful about tendonitis while on the road. It's sad to face your fans and tell them that you can't go to Europe or other parts of the world. We can defy our age for a while, but sooner or later you start paying the price for it both physically and mentally. I think the fact that we were able to do almost 70-shows... I mean, really, it was the longest tour Rush has done in a very long time and it will probably be the longest tour we'll ever do. It seemed right to do such a long tour at this time because the spirit was there. We also had so much rest being away for so long, we decided, "Okay, we'll push ourselves as far as we can this time," and we did. It would have been nice to have another ten days to go to Europe this time, but our bodies were ready to stop.

At what age did you start to realize that maybe your body was changing and those high notes just didn't materialize out of thin air?

About four tours ago I realized I had a hell of a time keeping healthy on tour. Quite honestly, it was the last two tours, in particular the Vapor Trails tour, when I was the healthiest ever. I think that's because I take better care of myself than when I was younger. Plus, touring during the summer seems to be much better for us. I think there is a correlation with the fact that we had a tougher time staying healthy towards the end of the tour, which also happened to be the time when the weather started getting colder and we started playing cold indoor arenas. Such gigs tighten up your muscles and body.

Photos by Christopher
Buttner



When we were playing outdoors in the heart of the summer, the heat and the humidity, while harder on our road crew, really helped us. Neil and I talked about this subject a lot, how much looser our muscles were in the heat and how much easier it was to play well because your body is hot, warm and loose. I think the same is true with my voice. The humidity really helped me stay healthy. I think summer tours are a good thing for us.

What about rest and sleep? How hard is it for you to maintain a sleep regimen when you're traveling across time zones? Sleeping on buses can be hard, was the band doing a lot of bus traveling on the Vapor Trails tour?

We didn't travel by bus on this tour; Alex and I had a chartered plane. Neil traveled

by bus and motorcycle. Traveling by plane helped us a lot, because we can 'hub' out of a particular town and commute back and forth to other local cities for shows. At least then, for maybe five days at a time, you're sleeping in the same bed. Sleep is really important. I found, especially after back-to-back shows, I was beat, totally pooped, on my day off. So, I had to be really good to myself on those days off and not be foolish... I do have to get my eight hours in though.

Are there any plans to capture any aspect of the Vapor Trails tour on DVD for those people who missed the experience of the live performance?

Oh, yeah! We videotaped the last show on the tour in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. I think it was a 20-camera shoot. As we speak we're in the very early stages of putting that all together. Sometime in 2003 we'll release a DVD of that concert. There is no release date yet scheduled.

The big question is always, 'What's next?' for future solo projects and Rush?

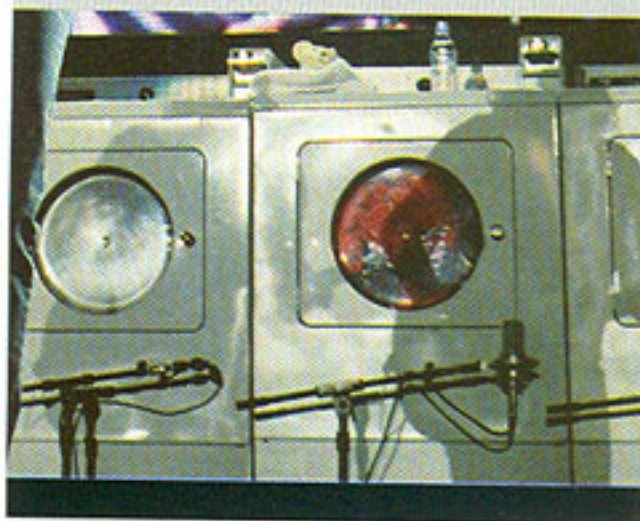
I have no idea at this point. I've been working for about three and a half years without much of a break... (Sighs) and I need a break (Laughs). I'm taking the next six months off and I won't be doing anything connected with music. Eventually, I'm sure, the three of us will get back together and start talking about another Rush record. But, at the moment, my plate is going to stay very empty and, I am just going to enjoy the afterglow of the Vapor Trails tour a while.

What was the best or worst 'Spinal Tap' moment from the Vapor Trails tour?

Every night the show went on without a hitch. But, we did have our guests come up on stage and do 'dryer duty.' (Instead of a backline of bass guitar loudspeaker cabinets, Geddy chose to use three fully operational Maytag Laundromat dryers. The machines tossed Rush shirts throughout the evening, which were eventually thrown to the audience by the band members before the start of the encore. In order for the dryers to stay optional, they were coin-fed intermittently during the shows by stage techs - CB). We never knew who was going to show up to put coins in the machines. Sometimes it was very wild. One night our chef appeared and he was wearing his apron... and that was all. Other nights we had people I didn't even know show up in French Maid costumes. One night a stripper wearing chaps came out onstage with the coins and on other nights, crewmembers in crash helmets came scooting across the stage on their electric scooters. On those evenings it got pretty funny.

LAUNDROMAT DRYERS

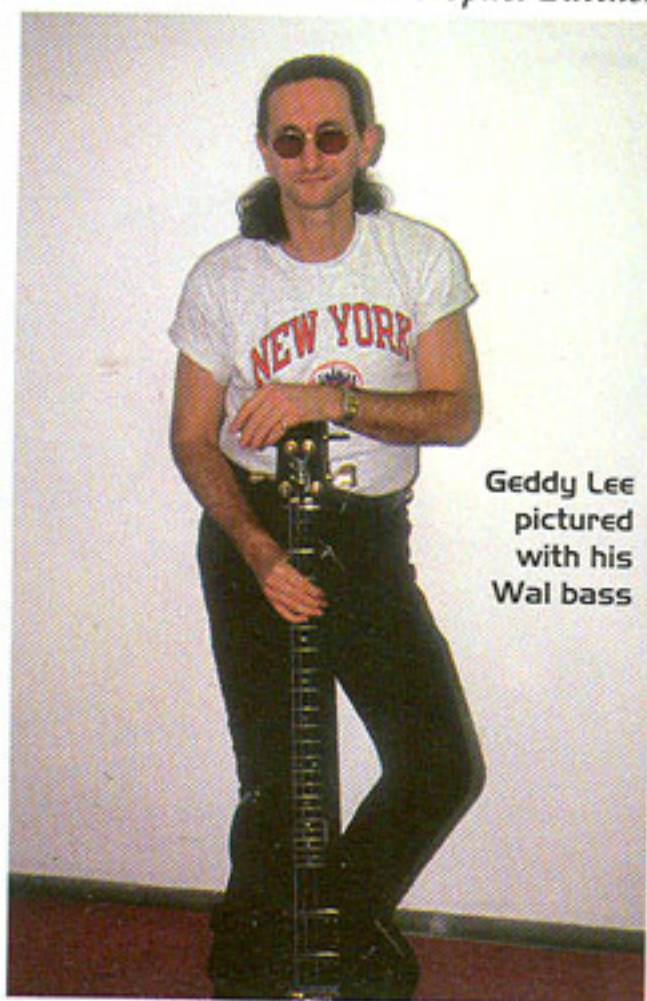
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The dryers were a nice touch and I will spare you obvious questions such as, 'What kind of fabric softeners effects your bass tone more, liquid or fabric sheets?' and 'What kind of dryer provides the best speaker transient response, gas or electric?'

Those are bad... (Laughs) Thank you.

Christopher Buttner



Geddy Lee pictured with his Wal bass

INFORMATION

Christopher Buttner is a freelance entertainment industry journalist living in Northern California. Contact him at amcarpr@mindspring.com and check out his web site at www.aarvak.com