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# Guitar & Bass

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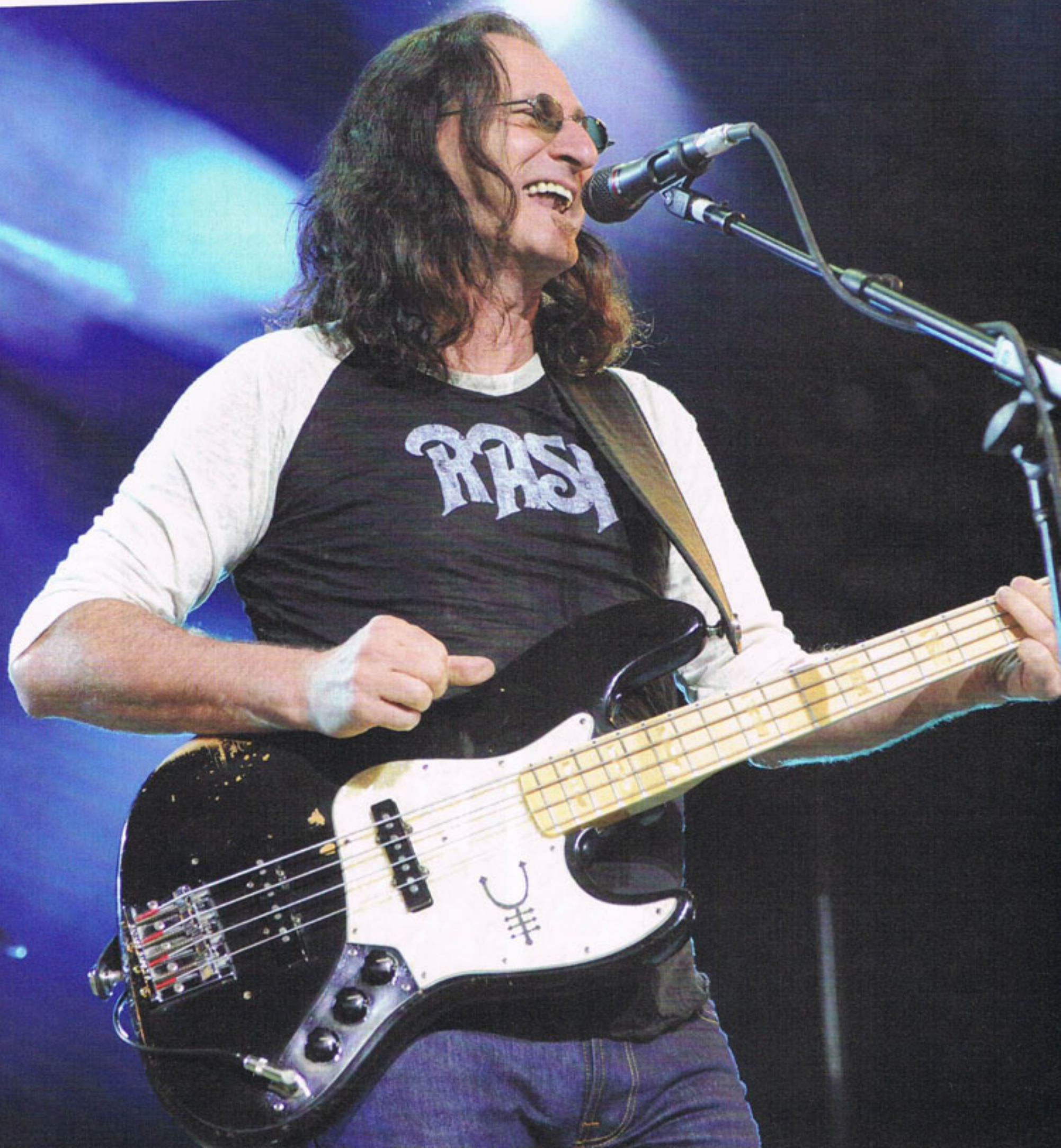




# Geddy*Up*

When it comes to concepts and high-flying musicianship you can rely on Rush and bassist Geddy Lee, back with a new project, Clockwork Angels. Interview by **Pete Langman**

Photo: Tim Mosenfelter/Getty Images





Anyone would think that Rush have a thing about the future, but bassist extraordinaire and singer Geddy Lee disagrees: in the band's early days, he says, 'it was all about what we were doing at the moment.' Even in the best of all possible worlds, he could not have foreseen that some 38 years, 20 studio albums and over 40 million record sales later, he would be sitting in the conservatory of a swanky Kensington hotel, taking tea with *Guitar & Bass*, and talking

about *Candide*. Voltaire's classic enlightenment novel is one of the primary literary influences of Rush's new album *Clockwork Angels*, which sees a return to what many consider to be their strengths: lush, tight riffs in odd-time signatures and tempo changes aplenty. And, what's that? Do we hear the words 'concept album'?

While it may seem almost perverse in this age of shortening attention spans and instant digital gratification to produce such a beast, Lee is keen to point out that it's not merely a return to where the band began: it's as much evolution as revolution.

'The one thing we decided,' he explains, 'well... the one thing I decided when we decided we were going to go ahead with this concept piece was that we didn't want it to be in the same mould as *Hemispheres* or *2112*, where we had one piece and repeating musical themes that wove throughout.'

'I wanted it to be a collection of songs united by a story. Much in the way that you look at a record like [the Who's] *Tommy*, there are a few musical pieces that repeat throughout but generally these songs are unrelated to each other except by the story they tell. That's what I held up in my mind as an example, each of these songs is quite unique and so melodically we only had to be true to that individual piece: the story is what united them.'

Rush have always produced 'higher' music, whether structurally, instrumentally or conceptually, weaving virtuoso playing and adventurous composition around drummer Neil Peart's literate lyrics – if *Red Barchetta* was cyberpunk, *Clockwork Angels* is steampunk, a literary genre which considers visions of the future from the past, and whose pioneer, Kevin J Anderson, has been heavily involved with the album's upcoming novelisation. The new work has a more orchestrated feel than, say, *Permanent Waves* or *Moving Pictures*, which approached something like true polyphony, each instrument acting as an independent voice within a coherent whole. The band were keen this time to approach the record as three players, and avoid having, as Lee puts it, 'too many distracting layers, a thing we had fallen into on previous records from *Vapour Trails* through to *Snakes And Arrows*. I think we had unnecessary amounts of overdubs, the trio thing had gotten lost.'

If there is a return to classic Rush values, with the band working on the principle of playing for and with each other, it's perhaps odd that it hands its compositional duties with regards music to the bassist and guitarist alone. Lee agrees. 'At times it's frustrating for Neil because he wants to have more rhythmic input in the initial stages, but we leave the sketchpad pretty open and once we have the initial sketch of the song melodically and the vision of the song his rhythmic input really can turn it into a different kind of animal,' he notes. 'A lot of times when he starts developing his parts, I'll sit in the control room so that I can

## Gear

### The Time Machine rig

From Shure UHF-R to a Kitty Hawk MIDI looper to an Axess Electronics splitter in parallel with a SansAmp RPM preamp, a Palmer PDI-05 speaker simulator, an Avalon U5 DI, and an Orange AD200 Mk3 amplifier driving another Palmer PDI-05 (with a Rivera RockCrusher power attenuator providing a load – in the studio this was replaced by a mic'd Orange 4x10" cab). These four lines then ran direct (there being no cabs onstage), with Brad Madix (FOH) and Brent Carpenter (monitors) add a fifth element of 'amp modelling' at console, otherwise, the amp settings don't change

### Keyboards

Onstage Rush have a Moog Little Phatty and a Roland Fantom X7 which mainly controls a bank of Roland XV-5080s offstage right (herded by Jack Secret). These samplers are also triggered by two sets of Korg MPK-130 pedals; one below the keyboard rig, and the other at the main mic position

*'We'd been using too many distracting layers. The trio thing had gotten lost'*



# And another thing...

As well as a fanatical collector of baseball memorabilia, Geddy Lee is an oenophile – that is, he loves fine wine. His current desert island bottle is a 1993 Echezeaux by Henri Jaillet.

get a handle on where he's going and be considerate of changing my part to accommodate his, but it's true the songs do begin in a separated state of mind, in the sense that he's a lyricist first and a drummer second in terms of songwriting and his lyrics and us getting a vision for what the song should be do come first.'

Rush's singular mode of composition has Peart delivering lyrics which Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson then put to music by doing what they like best: playing music to each other.

'We jam until we hit on some sort of thread, then hook up a basic drum pattern and allow it to go wherever it wants to go. Then we sit back and talk about whether there was anything inspiring. Sometimes it's immediate, you recognise a piece that has potential, and I always leave Neil's lyrics in front of me, and if we suddenly become inspired and jam on that one thing whose mood is appropriate for something I've just read, I pull it in and I see if there's

a melody that might happen out of this jam – that's the normal process.'

The procedure is not always straightforward, however. 'While some lyrics had an immediate spark of connection, other marriages of music and words

were more laborious, and launched a flurry of emails between Geddy and me,' Peart has stated. 'Rapid-fire exchanges discussed adjustments to lines and phrases, passage deleted and new ones added, all on the fly,

so that even the final shape of the lyrics was more or less improvised.'

Once the tune has discovered its melody, Lee and Lifeson become tunesmiths and hammer it into some sort of song. All of this usually takes place before the band get together in the studio to fine-tune their parts, though on occasion technology fails, leading to a whole new mode of discovery. Ironical, really.

'We had a technical interruption in the studio,' Lee explains, 'and both of us were hanging around the drum room and Alex had about 25 guitars lying around. I picked up an acoustic that had Nashville tuning – for an inept guitarist like myself Nashville tuning makes whatever you play sound beautiful – so I started plunking a couple of chords. I play very differently than Alex, I use a lot of upstrokes when I play acoustic and that's something he never thinks of doing, so I started playing with this little guitar pattern, and it suddenly came to me that it would suit this lyric that we had for *Wreckers*. I started writing a melody, and before I knew it I had verse-chorus-verse-chorus.'

Naturally, Lifeson took his revenge by picking up one of Lee's basses and writing a bass pattern as soon as the studio was back on its feet. 'We started noticing it had a Barenaked Ladies feel to it,' jokes Lee. 'Perhaps that's what happens when we're playing the wrong instruments.' Rush fans need not worry, however, as normal service was soon resumed; 'It took us to a new place until we got to the middle section where we started to be more musically adventurous, at which point our failings on the wrong instrument were obvious and we said okay, fuck it, let's switch back!'

Certainly, practically anyone will exhibit failings on the bass when compared with Geddy Lee, long considered one of the great rock bassists. ➔

## 'Rush seem to turn into Barenaked Ladies when we're playing the wrong instruments'



Photo: Andrew MacNaughtan





## Listen up

RUSH  
2112  
(1976)

With side one dedicated to a songsuite set in the future after an inter-galactic war, *2112* is very 'prog' rock indeed

RUSH  
Moving  
Pictures  
(1981)

A merging of high musicianship with pop sensibilities in *Tom Sawyer* and *Red Barchetta*: some say it's the quintessential Rush album

RUSH  
Clockwork  
Angels  
(2012)

A return to the Rush of old, with odd time signatures and tempo changes and Neil Peart's literary sensibilities writ large



Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee: note the fabulous 'time machine' backline

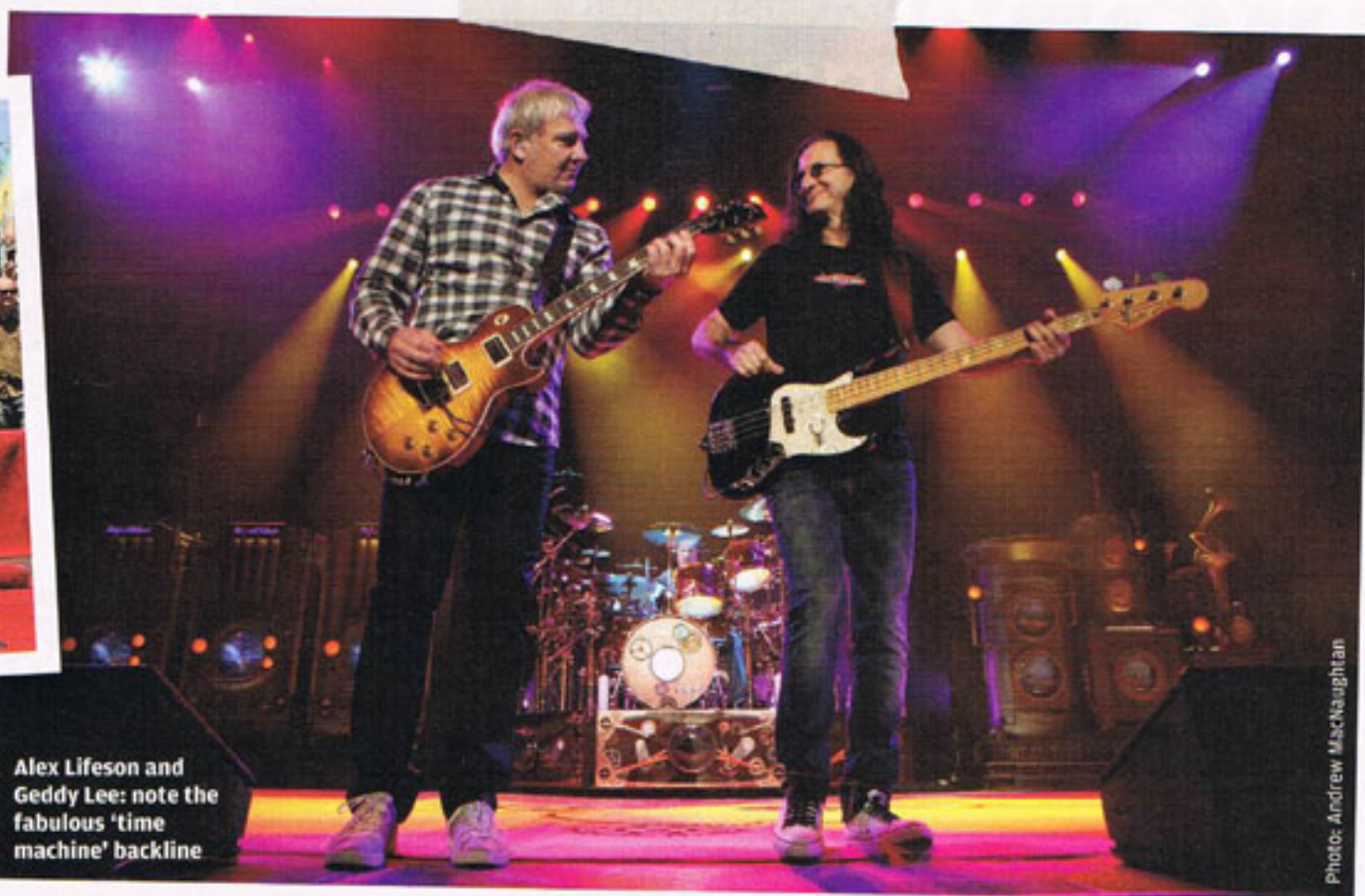


Photo: Andrew MacNaughtan

He feels that his own playing is constantly evolving, partly because he allows himself to be 'open to other players, and to watch and appreciate what other players do.' He took his first cues from Jack Bruce, Jack Cassidy and John Entwistle: 'I modelled my thing after what they had achieved, mimicked them to a certain degree, tried to learn from them. I appreciated the brighter, more visible tone they brought to their bands.'

As time moved on, he found himself influenced by players who had themselves been inspired by Lee himself. For instance, there was Jeff Berlin: 'He really made me want to woodshed. It was his remarkable sense of melody as well as the diversity in the way he plucked and used all the strings chordally.' Then there was the rhythmic element of Les Claypool's style: 'He made it into a different instrument.'

Being one of the greats doesn't guarantee mastery of all techniques, however, and Lee admits he was terrible at slap bass. 'I could pop but I couldn't slap so well, so I started mutating what I did and tried to develop a different kind of rhythmic style where I started playing the strings as if I had a pick in my hand or as if I was playing flamenco guitar, that kinda thing, and that led me in a whole different direction. My playing has really evolved from that point.' Indeed, Lee eschews the pick. 'It gives you a certain rhythmic attitude and a nice clear twang, but it's too limiting, a bit of a compromise.'

Over the years Lee's choice of bass has changed and then repeated. First, of course, came the Rickenbacker. 'That was a fun bass with an interesting tone. The main reason I wanted to use it was the fact that my favourite bass players played Rickies. Chris Squire... even Paul McCartney played a Ricky from time to time. But to get the tone I wanted took quite a lot of work - I had to run it through various amplifiers and compressors.'

Then, in the late '70s, he found a '72 Fender Jazz Bass. 'There was something more satisfying about the


midrange and bottom end,' he explains. 'On *Moving Pictures* I think half those songs were on Ricky, half on Jazz, but people assume it was all the Ricky.'

He experimented with the Steinberger - 'I found it a little dissatisfying, I didn't feel it had enough range' - and then switched to Wal basses on *Power Windows* and *Hold Your Fire*: 'They had a really even tone, all the way from bottom to top, and the material was taking a slightly jazzier vibe at that time.' But the band returned to a more 'aggressive, driving, in your face sound'

with *Counterparts*. 'We went totally analogue in recording style, and that brought me back in love with the Jazz basses.'

Lee has a stable of Jazzes, using four on this album, but his '72 is still his number one, even

if it is now on its third neck, the most recent being a Custom Shop item with a 9" radius maple fingerboard, set up for a very fast action. He also has a red Custom Shop Jazz with a deeper tone he used on *Wreckers*: 'Each time they make me a bass it sounds really cool, and a little different than mine, and sometimes that's a real plus, and sometimes it's not! I recently found another '72 Jazz, a sunburst one, in a music store in Toronto, and John my bass tech cleaned that up [adding Tom Brantley pickups and a Mike Bump Fender Custom Shop neck] and it sounds great. I was hoping it would sound just like my other '72 but it doesn't, it sounds close, but it has a unique thing about it.'

Amid all this circularity it's no surprise that Lee chooses the album's final tune, *The Garden*, whose title refers to the obscure final line of Voltaire's *Candide*, 'we must cultivate our garden', as his favourite. 'It's a song I've always wanted to write, trying to find a balance between melody and calm: we've written melodic songs before but there's a confidence and a relaxed nature about that song that's very natural. To me that's the most successful attempt to write that kind of melodic tune. I'm really happy with the result.' 

*"Using a pick gives you rhythmic attitude and a nice twang, but it's too limiting"*