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# CONTENTS

MARCH 31, 1983

## COVER STORY

### Who's Hot, and Who's Getting Hotter

Veteran rockers are being challenged by a horde of newcomers; a look at both factions

### 52 Who's Hot

Jefferson Starship, Foreigner, Journey, Supertramp, J. Geils Band  
—(Philip Bashe, Richard Hogan)

### 55 Who's Getting Hotter

Men at Work, Stray Cats, Adam Ant, Loverboy and Joe Jackson  
—(Philip Bashe)

## FEATURES

### 24 Yes

"Dateline: Rock & Roll," a flashback of rock history. This month, March 1972: Yes  
—(Philip Bashe)

### 26 Ozzy Osbourne & Black Sabbath

After years of feuding, Ozzy and his old band reach an uneasy truce. Will they be working together again?  
—(Richard Hogan)

### 32 Aerosmith

How they're doing after the long sabbatical  
—(Dan Hedges)

### 35 Van Halen

A pictorial look at the premier U.S. heavy band

### 38 David Lee Roth Poster

### 42 Rush

Circus Magazine goes face to face with Geddy Lee  
—(Philip Bashe)



Ross Marino

Sammy Hagar, p.50

### 46 Movie Eye

In-focus looks at Tootsie, Sophie's Choice and That Championship Season  
—(Fred Schruers)

### Photo Journal

Up-to-date reports on your favorite rockers  
—(Richard Hogan)

### 50 Sammy Hagar

Thanks to *Three Lock Box*, this may be his breakthrough year  
—(Dan Hedges)

## MUSIC GEAR

### 67 Stars' Instruments— Stanley Clarke

The Return to Forever bassist still uses Alembic  
—(John Stix)

### 69 Test Reports

The Epiphone Special guitar and the Alembic Spoiler bass  
—(John Stix, Barry Lipman)

### 69 Electronic Drums

They're coming of age in the '80s  
—(John Stix)

### 71 Guitar Clinic

Jimmy Page's hammering heroics  
—(Arlen Roth)

### 72 Tech Trek

New products from the music factory

## DEPARTMENTS

### 6 Letters

Feedback from our readers

### 10 Listings

The most complete guide to rock on the road, plus: radio and TV listings, Top 20, radio airplay charts, video game news, more

### 16 Circus Word Find

Puzzling game for fans  
—(Steven Dean Pastis)

### 18 Front Pages

News from the rock & roll scene  
—(Lisa Robinson)

### 20 Pat Benatar— Stage Pass

The first lady of rock headlines the Garden, plus: Peter Gabriel in concert  
—(Andy Secher)

### 31 Song Lyrics

Includes hits by Kiss, Saga, Led Zeppelin and the Who

### 61 Longplayers

Reviews of the new LPs by Bob Seger, Sammy Hagar, Yoko Ono, the English Beat, more  
—(John Swenson, George Arthur)

### 74 Back Pages

Inside information on the rock scene  
—(Lou O'Neill Jr.)

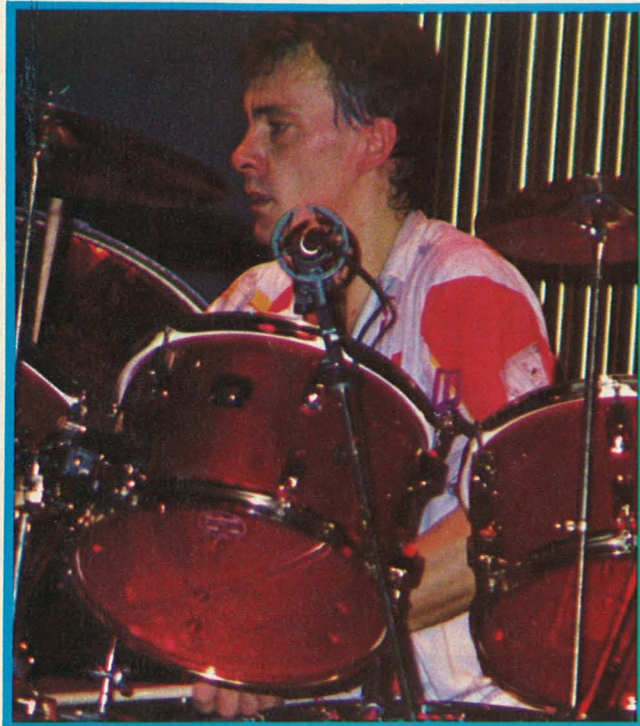
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#277



# Face to face with Rush's Geddy Lee

by Philip Bashe



Neil Peart's lyrics, says Lee, have become less wordy but use more imagery. Earlier lyrics, he feels, were too specific.



Rush's most recent LP, 'Signals,' was "a very difficult album to make," says Lee. The recording took 10 weeks.

Photos by Mark Weiss/Circus

At first derided by critics as anachronisms from the late '60s, Rush seemed to skip the '70s entirely and head directly into the '80s, especially with their most recent album, *Signals* (Mercury). It's been three years now since they left behind the side-long suites and elaborate arrangements of such records as *2112* and *A Farewell to Kings*. The new model Rush is sparser, more melodic—and more effective.

Circus Magazine recently spoke at length with Geddy Lee about Rush's change in direction and more modern sensibility. The reserved bassist/vocalist gladly discussed musical inquiries, but was typically reticent to talk about his offstage life; like the other members of Rush (guitarist Alex Lifeson and drummer Neil Peart), he steadfastly protects his privacy. Asked how far outside Toronto, Canada he lives, Lee paused uncomfortably and asked, "Do I really have to say how

far?" He was greatly relieved when the questioning returned to the music.

Music has always been the first priority for this most image-less of rock groups, and it's part of Rush's appeal. "Image is not really important," contended Lee. "If there's an image for this band, it comes from the music."

**CIRCUS:** The Rush of the '80s is markedly different from the Rush of the '70s: The songs are more concise, you no longer sing in such a high key, etc. These changes are most apparent on *Signals*, which many are calling your best record to date. Do you see it expanding your audience?

**LEE:** I don't know. I always have a real difficult time guessing; it seems the more I know about the band and the music business, the less I know. The album is a little different. I'm sure it's going to bring in people who weren't hip to the band before, and maybe it'll lose some of the more hardcore heavy-metal fans.

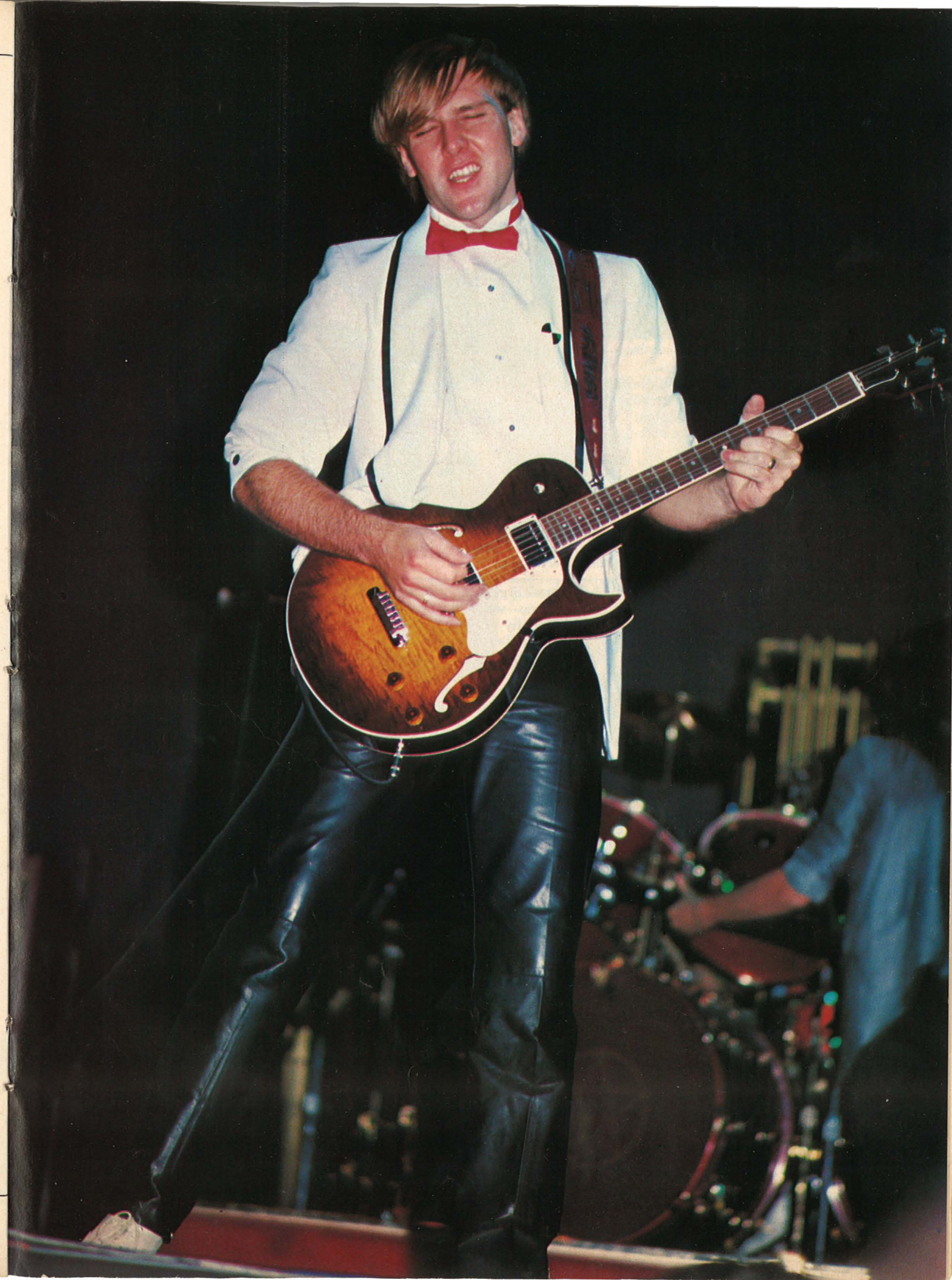
**CIRCUS:** When did you come to the decision that it was time to simplify Rush's music?

**LEE:** Just after *Hemispheres*, which was the last side-long concept that we put together. We were real pleased with it, but we thought, O.K., now we've gotten the knack of doing this, and it would be silly to do it again. We decided it was time to work on other aspects of the band, like being able to construct beautiful melodies and being able to write things that get a point across in a shorter period of time.

**CIRCUS:** Was it a case of at first just trying to increase your musical vocabularies and then reaching a point where it was no longer necessary to prove your virtuosity via long songs and solos?

**LEE:** Yeah. You go through many

According to Lee, Alex Lifeson (r.) has broad musical tastes, "from Pat Metheny to Martha and the Muffins."





**"The music we're making now is still complicated, but in a much more subtle way."—Geddy Lee**

stages: At first, your goals are simply to become a better musician, and so you tend to think, "Well, I guess that means I have to play a little harder and make my music more complicated."

The music we're making now is still complicated, but in a much more subtle way.

**CIRCUS:** Do you think some of the early Rush albums, which contained those lengthy, complex pieces, went over the heads of some of your audience?

**LEE:** I'm sure they sometimes did, although they weren't jazz-rock or anything like that. They were still within a rock framework, and even though they were complex, I'm sure that with repeated listenings people understood. It just depended upon how much the person listening wanted to put into them... or how much brain power they had (*laughs*).

**CIRCUS:** Along with the musical simplification, there's also been a change in Neil Peart's lyrics; they've become less wordy and more direct, yet there's more imagery than before.

**LEE:** That's another area we're moving into. We got to the point where our lyrics were so literal that they left little to the imagination. Sometimes it's nice to talk in images instead of being so descriptive and telling the listener exactly what we mean.

**CIRCUS:** You have a unique situation in Rush, where Peart the drummer writes the words but you sing them. Do you discuss the lyrical content first? Is it necessary for you to fully comprehend his meaning?

**LEE:** No, I don't have to understand it exactly, but I do have to get a picture of it that I can relate to. I can't sing something that I have no feeling for. We discuss every lyric before it's recorded, just as we discuss every bit of music to make sure it's the right thing. Everything we do is discussed by the group.

**CIRCUS:** Sounds like you have quite a democracy.

**LEE:** Yeah, one of the few working ones (*laughs*). We hash it out and see who's making sense.

**CIRCUS:** What if you come to a stalemate?

**LEE:** Then we just pass on the whole



Alex Lifeson and Lee above: Rush work as a democracy, says the bassist. "We discuss everything."

idea. There's arguing that goes on from time to time—we're human beings—but it's usually resolved.

**CIRCUS:** Has there ever been a time when you were completely baffled by a Peart lyric?

**LEE:** Usually I'm pretty much in synch with him, but there are times when I don't grasp the point he's trying to make, or maybe I don't agree with the point he's trying to make.

**CIRCUS:** Many of Peart's lyrics decry the potential evils of modern technology. How do you feel about modern technology in music? In some cases, can't it be used as subterfuge for a lack of ability?

**LEE:** That's true, but you can't look at it that way. There are always going to be people who are less proficient at using the technology at hand. I think you have to look at the positive aspects: how much expression it's bringing into the hands of the people who normally would not be able to express it.

**CIRCUS:** On *Signals*, you use synthesizers more than ever before; they fill up spaces that normally would be filled by Alex's guitar. It sounds as if you've been listening to techno-rock groups such as Ultravox.

**LEE:** Yes, we have been, although not just Ultravox. Alex is in a whole other world; his record collection ranges from Pat Metheny to Martha and the Muffins—pretty broad scope there. I think everybody's tastes are

varied. But yes, that style of music certainly influenced us on *Signals*.

**CIRCUS:** Was it an easy album to make?

**LEE:** No! It was a very difficult album to make. It took us a long time to get a real feel for each tune, because they're all so different from one another. We had to live with those songs longer to get a fresh perspective on them, and we experimented a lot before finally settling on one thing.

**CIRCUS:** Has there ever been a record that's come together relatively painlessly?

**LEE:** *Permanent Waves*. It was real simple; I don't know why. It was just one of those sessions you dream about; everything felt good. It just clicked.

**CIRCUS:** You tend to rehearse in some rather pastoral areas of Canada. What is it about the countryside that you find so conducive to writing and rehearsing?

**LEE:** Well, it's not really so much that there are trees and such, it's just that there are a lot less people around than at home, and the phone isn't ringing every five minutes. That's the main reason we go away. It's nice to get away from the constant barrage of decisions that you have to make and having everybody on your back. You want to be alone and be able to concentrate on writing.

**CIRCUS:** Do your families accompany you?

**LEE:** No, we just bring our road crew with us.

**CIRCUS:** Alex is supposed to be a pretty good cook. Did he make any gourmet dishes for the band and crew while you were putting *Signals* together?

**LEE:** You know, he hasn't cooked for us in quite a while—that's a bone of contention right now (*laughs*). He did make us some fine breakfasts while we were writing the album, though.

**CIRCUS:** The music you're presently making seems to be the result of a more relaxed, confident attitude in the band; you're commercially successful, you don't have to tour as much as you once did—

**LEE:** Yeah, but we still do! Although you're correct—we're certainly more relaxed, and we have achieved an amount of success that allows us to be more relaxed in the way we do things—I'm not sure if *Signals* had that type of feel because of that.

**CIRCUS:** Because you all have families—and you appear to be pretty family-oriented people—have you had to try to achieve more of a balance between your career and your home life? Is that important to you?

**LEE:** Yes, it's very important. At one point it was *the band*, and nothing else really mattered.

**CIRCUS:** Does maintaining that balance help you retain your enthusiasm for playing?

**LEE:** Definitely. At this point, although it is still exciting, we have to pace ourselves so that it stays exciting. To stay on the road for six, eight months would kill it for us, because we have kids back home and they're growing up.

But the band is still important to us, and we want to keep it that way. For us to keep doing this as long as we can, it always has to be fun. That's why we make sure we get home and have enough time there, so that when we do come back on the road to play a show, we really *want* to play that show; that it's not just another date on a long list of dates.

**CIRCUS:** Rush are fortunate in that all of you seem to share similar values. It'd be a problem if two members wanted to spend more time with their families and another insisted that more time be allocated to the group.

**LEE:** I think that's been the most important aspect of keeping Rush going. It also helps when there are only three of you; it's a lot less chaotic trying to reach conclusions if it's only between three people. I'll tell you, we're really lucky.

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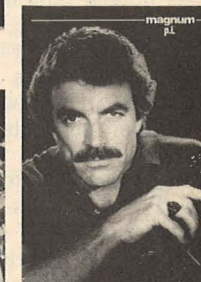
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Playboy '83 141



Jimmy Page 142



Magnum PI. 143



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Hendrix 145



Jim Morrison 146



Black Sabbath 147



Led Zeppelin 150



The Doors 140



Led Zeppelin 148

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