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Geddy Lee: The Reluctant Rockstar

Interviewed and written by: Christopher Buttner

I remember the first time I heard and saw Rush. It was on 'Don Kirschner's Rock Concert' late night TV program, many years ago. A friend suggested, since I was such a huge Led Zeppelin fan, I check out Rush. 'They're similar,' was all he offered, "You'll like them." So, being the open-minded fifteen year old music aficionado that I was (and remain, except I'm not fifteen anymore... although I have been accused of acting it), I stayed up until Rush finally made their appearance on the program, at about 2 a.m. I remember it distinctly, because it was Geddy Lee's stratospheric vocal stylings that jolted me awake with a number - I think - from '2112'. Since I was almost in R.E.M sleep, through my clouded mind and vision, my first reaction was, "Who is this skinny, screeching, little chick with the oversized Rickenbacker 4001 bass?" I flipped off the program after one verse, promising myself I would push my friend, Jay, into traffic at the next available opportunity, for making me waste a Saturday night at home, researching new rock bands.



Before I could get Jay to the nearest busy thoroughfare, he pleaded an appeal by suggesting I take a "wide awake, open minded listen" to Rush's latest album, at the time, 'A Farewell to Kings.' He put on the track 'Xanadu', and... well... literally the next day, I dropped playing electric guitar, took up the bass, and since 1978, I have purchased every single Rush album, in every known format - vinyl, tape and CD (anybody wanna' buy some eight track tapes?) - and I've seen the band in concert a mere ten times. My first impression of Rush eighteen years ago, unfortunately, was through a sleep-induced, catatonic state, and due to that my initial impression was - 'ahem'... shall we say, somewhat - narrow-minded.

Geddy Lee, born Gary Lee Weinrib, on July 29, 1953, has made, and continually makes, an impact on the masses of bassists in this world as has no other contemporary musician. No matter what bassist you ask, regardless of their playing style or musical taste, Geddy Lee always seems to figure as the pinnacle of bass playing perfection. Geddy is contemporary music's role model for what every musician, regardless of what instrument they play, wants to be: Incredibly well-rounded and thoroughly proficient. On-stage Geddy displays a talent that can best be described as prodigal. He breezes through some of the most complex song arrangements, juggling bass guitar - on which he is whipping off passages of varying time signatures - multiple keyboards, several sets of bass pedal controllers, as well as kicking on and off sequencers, all the while singing lead into one of three different microphones, with an eased expression on his face that appears as if he were having a casual conversation at a neighborhood cocktail party. Not a lot of musician's, not just bassists, can juggle half of what Geddy can do without, literally, falling their asses... myself leading that pack.



Geddy called me at my home from the offices of Atlantic Records in New York City. I had six pages of questions, but I knew I was only going to get 45 minutes to speak with the man. Geddy is the poster boy for humility. He is maddeningly modest, incredibly soft-spoken and can best be described as the most humble, reluctant Rockstar anyone will ever meet. Many times during our conversation, he barely got above a whisper when describing certain aspects of his band and career. In fact, he sounded outright uncomfortable at times,

especially when I complimented him on... just about anything. When I told Geddy the number of times I had seen Rush in concert, he interrupted me mid-sentence with a sincere "Oh, wow!", sounding amazed anyone would be such a loyal fan.

Our conversation opened on a loose conversational tone (with a great degree of ass kissing from yours truly), before we started to talk about Rush's sixteenth studio project, 'Test for Echo.'

"I have never seen you guys on an off night," I said, segueing into the interview.

"You're lucky!" Geddy says through sincere laughter. "We have off nights."

"One of the coolest things I ever saw you guys do, was after Neil's drum solo, you and Alex came running across the stage at the Nassau Coliseum, on Long Island, New York, wearing the New York Islander's jerseys. The Rush concert was on the eve of the Islander's Stanley Cup win. Do you remember how the crowd went ballistic?"

Sounding very nostalgic, Geddy replies laughing, "Right! I remember that. Islander fever! At that time, we were pretty into hockey. But, we're Canadian. It's in our blood and they teach it in school! Reading - writing - rhythmic... - hockey."

"So, when is the next project with Bob and Doug McKenzie?," I tease, "I think that's on the forefront of every Rush fan's mind." Groaning at probably the poorest excuse for a joke he's heard in a long while,

"Well, I don't know. Bob and Doug are doing their own thing now."

Now I get serious...

Chris Buttner - (CB): Tell me about 'Test for Echo' and it's direction. From 'Counterparts', the new record is very heavy, with a very strong guitar presence, and - to me - it really harks of early Rush.

Geddy Lee - (GL): Well, that's interesting. I haven't heard much feedback on this one and some of this stuff is coming at me for the first time. It's a slightly different approach with a different production team. It's the first time we used an all American production team, with the exception of our producer, Peter Collins, who is British, but is now living in America. We were going after a little more 'in-your-face', slightly American attitude to what we do. Sonically we wanted to have a drier sound and more aggressive bottom-end.



CB: Are you happy with the results?

GL: For the moment. I'm pretty happy with the results. With me, satisfaction is always very fleeting with our work. I always get a little restless with it. I can always fiddle and make over our songs forever. (laughs at the thought). It's a hard thing for me to know when to leave the thing alone. So, I'm happy with it right now. I hope I'll be happy with it six months from now. I probably won't be. (laughs again).

CB: Tell me about the song writing process for 'Test for Echo'. How did it all work? Did Neil bring in the lyrics and you and Alex write around them? Did you and Alex bring musical ideas to each other? How does it all come together?

GL: Kind of all of those ways. This time around it was a little bit different. What we rather do is just sit down fresh and Alex and I just start jamming. And, of course, before that we talk a lot about the kind of music we feel like we would like to write. Invariably, we just click into this song-writing process. We'll hit on a riff we like, or a passage, and then we just start assembling things. Sometimes we'll just keep going in that mood, and while we're doing that, I've got an eye to the lyrics that Neil has written. Let's say Neil has three songs up, if we like all of them, I'll just leave the lyric sheets spread around the console, and I'll try writing a melody here or there, or for any one particular riff. Other times, I'll just sit with the lyrics and, basically, the lyrics will inspire me to write a particular melodic part or vocal melody. Then, I'll start writing a very fundamental chordal thing underneath it. Alex then joins in and takes it from my basic chordal structure and he'll make it more intricate and interesting.

Usually, we'll work on one song until we have it in enough of a real song structure to play for Neil. Once we have that, we'll bring him in to get his feedback. But, this time, we didn't feel it necessary to finish everything we started. We would get a song or a verse or something happening, and we'd get it to the point where we were very excited by what we had. As soon as we'd feel a little bit of head-scratching, we would say, 'let's just leave this song as is, and move on to something new'. We'd start something fresh, and through this process, we'd start to build up quite a catalog of songs. We ended up with five or six almost completed songs, before we played anything for Neil. He was going a little hairy, saying, 'Whaz going on guys? C'mon! Let me in on the secret.' (laughs). But, we felt we were on a roll and we didn't want to f*** with it. So, we carried on in that fashion until we had quite a few songs, pretty well polished off... Then we brought him in and crossed our fingers and hoped he would like what we were up to. (laughs).

CB: I always noticed that drummers are schizophrenic in the respect that they always have other hidden musical talents aside from just playing drums. For instance, they are either great songwriters or they play other instruments well. Does Neil ever come in with lyrics along with a musical composition written on guitar, bass, or keyboards stating, 'This is the way I want it to go,' or is it always you and Alex formulating the music on your instruments and Neil brings in all of the lyrics?

GL: Neil doesn't really play guitar... I mean he can... (pauses to find the words), make some noise on these instruments. Neil doesn't really come to us like that. Although, he very often has very good arrangement suggestions and musical directions. If he feels there is something lacking in a particular song, he will very often make suggestions for the song to go one way or another, or make suggestions in terms of lyrical phrasings. We work very closely in ironing out the lyrics and once we get them to a certain point, he is very accommodating in terms of changing lyrics to accommodate the melody. It's really quite a pleasure to work with him. We really have a nice rapport back and forth in fine tuning lyrics, up until the day the record is finished. The thrust of it musically is Alex and I.

CB: Neil is so verbose in his writing and lyrics. Has there ever been a time Neil has come in with lyrics, you read them, and then look at him and say, 'What on Earth are you talking about?'



GL: Neil is very professional to work with. There are times where I am not sure what he's getting at, or what I am getting out of the song is not clear enough. There are times where he, like anyone, needs a bit of feedback to make sure that what he is intending is getting through. Sometimes, that's all it requires. 'Neil, what the song is saying to me is... this. Is that what you want to say?' Sometimes it's yes, sometimes it's no, and then we'll talk about the importance of making it clear. Sometimes it's not important to be 100% clear. Sometimes it's nice to have a song that can be taken more than one way, so it can be interpreted differently.

CB: I think we're going all the way back to '2112' in where you composed a song entirely by yourself, music and lyrics, and that was 'Tears'.

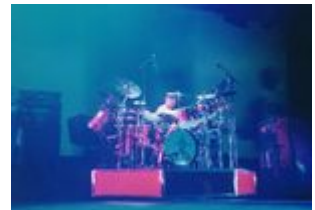
GL: Yeah, maybe...(sounds stunned and begins muttering to himself... "Was it that long ago?") I think there are a few since then, but not many.

CB: You've become quite the computer-nerd, utilizing the computer for most, if not all, of your music composition.

GL: It's the less conventional way of recording, although it is becoming the most conventional way to record these days. But, I use the computer as a big, excellent tape recorder. I don't try to manipulate 'beats-per-second' too much and that kind of thing. Of course, you can go back in and fine-tune, snip out bad notes, move things, and sometimes that can be very helpful. Basically, we just use it as a big, ole' tape recorder and Alex and I plug into it and construct the basic arrangement of the song; Two tracks live. We can then cut-and-paste the parts if the arrangement is wrong, rather than playing the part sixteen times. We can play it once, cut it up, and if I have a different arrangement idea, I'll say, 'Alex give me 20 minutes with this and I'll come up with a different arrangement for you.' If it doesn't work, then fine. We'll re-record it, playing it the new way. It's very helpful and it saves a lot of time. Although, it is fun to play a song ten or sixteen times, fifteen different ways. Sometimes you just want to get to the arrangement quicker and start playing it as an arrangement instead of as an experiment.

CB: You're a very influential player, but you are not associated with a lot of products in terms of endorsements. The only advertisement I remember, where you are featured prominently, is for Emagic. You don't 'lend' your name out the way other artists do. Is there a reason for that?

GL: I feel a little uncomfortable about endorsements. I like to feel I can use any piece of equipment that strikes me at the time and I don't want to be overly obliging to any company. I have worked with a number of companies over the years, and they have all been very good to me. I used Wal Basses and they were great, they were very attentive. In the early days, Rickenbacker was very good to me, and now I have a relationship with Trace-Elliot in terms of amplification and they have been really swell. I like to be able to come and go as I please, and I don't really like having my face and name plastered around. I think it's a bit weird to have your name plastered on every page in a magazine, where in each case you're using a different piece of equipment. It doesn't say much for the equipment if one guys is representing three different bass manufacturers. Who are you supposed to believe?



I did the advertisement for Emagic software, because I like the product and I had already been using it a lot. They offered to be a little more interactive with me in development of it, and it was something I felt that was appropriate to do.

On the 'Counterparts' tour I used Trace-Elliot amplifiers on-stage, and this time around, I will use them again. I'm using Fender basses, Fender Jazz Basses to be specific, and I have my one trusty ole' black Fender that I've used to record every track on the new album.

CB: Do you, or will you, still use the Wal Basses on-stage?

GL: I'm going to be using the Fenders again. I'm bringing my trusty black one and I have a couple of new ones. I'm using a lot of different tunings on this album, so I am going to have to use a few different

basses.

CB: You're very mobile and agile on-stage. With you running all over the stage, between pedals, keyboards, the bass, the microphone, you and Alex always have a few funny interchanges on-stage... there have been many times I thought for sure you would never make it back to the microphone in time to pick-up the verse on cue...

GL: (Laughs) Sometimes I don't!!

CB: Have you ever considered, to lighten the on-stage load a bit by using a wireless headset microphone to allow more freedom of movement?

GL: Yes, I suggest it almost every tour, but my soundman has never allowed me to use one. He's never found one that sounds as good as a regular microphone. As soon as he finds one that satisfies himself, then I will be using a wireless headset. I don't think he'll ever find one! (laughs).

CB: I read in 'Keyboard Magazine', in the 1989 issue that featured you on the cover, you were taking piano lessons. How are your lessons progressing, or are you still taking piano lessons?

GL: I was taking piano lessons with a very good piano instructor in Toronto, and I'm afraid due to my schedule and discipline, it kind of fell apart. One thing lead to another and I was unable to practice as much as I wanted to. I was on the road quite a bit... unfortunately, I let it fall by the wayside. It is something I would like to go back to and pick-up again.

CB: What is your normal routine regarding practicing your bass?

GL: I don't have a normal routine at the moment. It depends upon what stage I am in. In getting prepared for the record, I was trying to rehearse everyday, on my own, at least 45 minutes or something like that. And, wouldn't ya' know it, the more I practiced, the better I played on the record! (Mocking sarcasm), Damn-it! I have to keep doing that! (Shared laughter). Now that I'm getting ready to go on tour again, I have get back into that same routine.

CB: Have you ever taken any refresher courses on the bass? Is there anything about you, as a bassist, that you want to tap into?

GL: For me, there is a lot of room for improvement and there are a lot of things I would like to be better at. You always want to be faster around the neck, you always want to be a little more adventurous with your playing. I've experimented a little bit more with the rhythmic side of playing over the last number of years and that's an aspect of bass playing that has really intrigued me.

I'm good friends with Jeff Berlin, who is a bass player I have incredible admiration for. We talk on the telephone from time to time, and I would love to be able to go down to his new school, and learn from him. He's a great player, and I'm sure he is a great teacher, as well. It would be great to indulge myself to that degree, to go down to Florida and do that, but so far I haven't done it. It's something I regret for not doing, but I know the time will come when I will find the time.

CB: I believe if Geddy Lee put out a education video, the sales would rival the sales of 'ET'. Can we expect a Geddy Lee bass instruction video, or videos, any time in the near future?

GL: It's interesting. I have been approached by a couple of companies to do it, and it is something I am pondering. I never fancied myself much of an instructor, I think I have to get over my natural shyness about, 'What the hell could I teach somebody else?' I think if I can figure out a way to do it, and not be so reserved about it, then I would probably go ahead and do it.

CB: Over the past two and a half years, you and the missus had a new baby, and you took some time off. What was it like over that time? I know you were very into the domestic life, but what happened to the musician Geddy Lee? Did you concentrate on music at all?



GL: I was pretty out of music. I really needed to get away from everything. I was not very involved in anything. I have a couple of friends in Toronto who were working on bits and pieces, and I spent some time helping them in a very casual way in my home studio. It was two fold: It was fun to help somebody that I knew, and at the same time I got to be more familiar with the new computer programs I would have to eventually use to write the new Rush album. I kept my hands in towards the latter part of part of Rush's break, but early on I was really quite away from it. I really unplugged myself from listening to a lot of new stuff for a while. Of course, you get the itch again, and as that itch came back, I started playing more, I started listening more, and I got really excited about going into the studio.

CB: On every new Rush album you always come up with some intricate bass part where the masses of bassists in this world will 'woodshed' for days after it's release, trying to figure out what you are doing. The opening bass riff of 'Force Ten' is one such example. On the new record, on the 'Color of Right', it sounds like you're doing strumming and popping...

GL: 'Color of Right'. What song is that? I can't remember. Oh, yea... (laughs). There is actually a number of songs on this album where I am using various chordings, and I've also experimented with multiple overdubbed basses. On 'Driven', for example, there are three different bass tracks all going at the same time. I'm doing rhythm, bass and harmony parts on that song. There are a couple of parts on 'Color of Right' where I'm playing an octave harmony, I think, it's in the third chorus of that song. There are a few songs on the record where there are more then one bass part going at one time. It was really a lot of fun to record.

CB: Any five or six string basses on the record?

GL: I have a five string, I've tried it a couple of times, it's a little too unwieldy for me. It's a cumbersome instrument. I prefer to use a de-tuned bass when I want to go lower. There are about five tracks on the new record where I tune the 'E' string down to a 'D', and that worked out quite well. On-stage, I will probably have one bass with a Hip-Shot for the next tour.

CB: You're such an expressive player on a fretted instrument, why have you never approached fretless - on record or on-stage - in a twenty two+ year career?

GL: I fool around with a fretless from time to time at home, and I am really not happy with my intonation. As soon as I get to a point where I am happy, I would like to use it on record. I get away with it jamming on my own, but whenever I try putting it on a track, or on rough demo, the intonation is bugging me. I don't feel confident on the instrument to use it in public yet.

CB: Have you ever composed a bass line so intricate you just could not play it while singing over it?

GL: There are times where it seems impossible, but I just keep practicing it, and eventually I can do it. Sometimes I have to slightly alter the bass part, or slightly alter the vocal part, not enough to make a huge impact on the song, but enough enable me to do both.

CB: Rush has three live albums under it's proverbial belt. Is there a chance we'll see Rush 'Unplugged' anytime in the future?

GL: It's highly unlikely. I wouldn't mind doing a couple of songs in a slightly stripped down manner, I think that would be fun. It's nice to approach your music from a different angle. It's something we talk about every once-in-a-while, maybe doing it live, a couple of songs in a more simple format. But, I could never see doing more then just a couple of songs in the course of a concert.

CB: What's the flack surrounding the release of the Rush tribute album, 'Working Man'?

GL: I never made a statement about it, maybe one of the other guys did, maybe it was a management thing. Who knows? It's a weird thing to ask someone about a tribute album about themselves. Somebody doing a tribute to me?! Of course you're complimented, and you're flattered. I just hope it's an album that is made in a sincere manner and not an exploitation.

CB: Tell me about some of your favorite artists that are out there now and about bands like 'Dream Theater' who are very influenced by Rush?

GL: I don't know all of them. If any of them are influenced by Rush, I am very complimented. That's a very serious thing if something you've done inspires somebody else. Right now we're living in a very healthy time, there are a lot of really good bands out there. If we've been any assistance to them, that's a nice thing.

CB: I don't want to pigeon-hole Rush as a progressive rock band, but most other 'progressive' rock bands have lost huge segments of their audience over the years. How does it feel to still sell out arenas, tour after tour, for sixteen or more years, with no degradation in audience size, tenacity and ferocity in sight?

GL: (Long pause). Well... ahhhhhh... What can I say? (laughs). We love what we do. Every time out, we hope there is an audience for us. We hope we can make music that makes us happy, and at the same time, will satisfy our fans. The nature of what we do is a little unpredictable, and we really don't know what we're doing until we're in the middle of it. Each album is sort of an experiment, so the fact there are fans out there that are that are still interested in what we are doing, and show their appreciation by coming to see us live, is extremely gratifying. I hope it's something that will continue.

CB: How does it make you feel knowing Rush has been around twenty two years, and that is put into perspective when you meet a sixteen or seventeen year old, die-hard fan that was not even born when 'Permanent Waves' was at the top of the charts?

GL: (Groans through laughter). It's a weird thing! I try not to think about it!

CB: How long do you see Rush lasting? It must be an amazing high every time you step back and think about it. Do you think when all of the Rush fans, like me, are in our fifties, will Rush be playing Las Vegas as a regular act like Elvis did?

GL: Oh, God, I hope not! (laughs at the comparison). I hope somebody taps us on the shoulder and says,

'Guys, it's time to quit!' Really, I don't know how long we'll keep going. It's harder and harder to keep a band going this length of time. I would say every album and every tour is a major accomplishment from our current point of view... just making sure it can happen. We don't know what the future can bring, and we'll just hang in here as long as we can. I really don't know how long that will be.

CB: Are you looking forward to another tour?

GL: Yes! It should be a good tour. I am excited to play these new songs live, because there are about four or five songs on this new album that will sound really great live. I think they'll be better live than on record in some ways. So, I am looking forward to getting that opportunity.

CB: Here's one last question, and it qualifies me as a Rush fan that does not know it all. What is the origin of your name, 'Geddy'?

GL: My born name is Gary. My real name, now, is Geddy. Okay, it's like the same story of 'Leave it to Beaver'. (laughs). The story goes: my mother is Polish and she has a very thick accent. When I was about twelve years old, I had a friend who, whenever he heard my mother pronounce my name, he thought she was calling me, 'Geddy'. He started calling me 'Geddy', and eventually, all of my friends started calling me 'Geddy', and eventually my mother started to call me 'Geddy', for real. And eventually, I changed my name legally to 'Geddy', so that's the story and that's my name, Geddy.

CB: I feel honored to now know, and announce, that useless bit of trivia to the world.

GL: (Laughs). Hey, there ya' go! My pleasure!