

There are times when you can't help but wonder how Rush does it. Now entering its 34th year as a band, the Toronto progressive-rock trio has dodged popular taste at every turn while building a caucus of dedicated followers worldwide. The group's 17th studio album, "Vapor Trails," entered the Billboard charts at No. 6 when it was released earlier this year, and the band has been packing arenas on its latest tour despite a five-year gap between releases. The show -- which features three tumbling dryers onstage -- plays Tuesday at the Chronicle Pavilion, Wednesday at Sacramento's Autowest Pavilion and Friday at Shoreline Amphitheatre in Mountain View. We spoke to front man Geddy Lee, 49.

Q: What's with the dryers?

A: The dryers, man. I don't talk about the dryers.

Q: So many bands spend millions of dollars on pyrotechnics and giant inflatable stuff and all you can come up with is three lousy dryers?

A: I know. It's unbelievable.

Q: What kind of message are you sending to the kids?

A: People love my dryers. They're such a big hit. And they also keep my clothes so warm and dry.

Q: I didn't consider the convenience angle.

A: Absolutely. They are very functional. I'll tell you one secret about the dryers, though: They only take Canadian quarters.

Q: Oh, so they're totally useless.

A: Well, we also have a screwdriver so we can get to the cash box and recycle our Canadian quarters.

Q: Are you so practical with the chores at home?

A: I'm pretty good. I usually get cut some slack the first few days I'm back from tour, but then I'm back on duty.

Q: Do you have any particular strong points?

A: Changing the bag in the garbage disposal. For some reason my wife won't do that one. And having recently watched Ozzy Osbourne, I'm much better at it than him.

Q: You're also in better shape.

A: Well, I work hard at it. I do a lot of cycling and play tennis and do all those painfully horrible things that I hate to do but need to do in order to try to stay somewhat youthful. I also have a young daughter, which is all the more inspiration to keep my s -- together. I don't want to turn into an old fart and embarrass her at school.

Q: What about your voice -- do you have to do anything weird before you go on tour?

A: I just try to maintain a fairly strict diet. I have to avoid certain foods, certain spices that negatively impact my ability to stay clear-throated on the road.

Q: What kinds of foods?

A: Dairy products. Spices. I also try to avoid highly acidic foods like vinegars and white wines. I won't give up red wines. I can give up white wine, although it's painful for me, but I can justify it by knowing when the tour is over I can go back to my bad habits.

Q: So during the rest of the year you don't sound anything like Geddy Lee?

A: No. I sound like a guy who doesn't take care of his voice. I go to France every year, and you can't go there without eating cheese and drinking white wine. You just can't do it. It's not possible.

Q: You need to make a record like that. Do you think that would sound like Shakira?

A: Somehow or another I'm sure my voice will cut through all that mucous.

Q: After 34 years of doing this, what is your relationship like with the road?

A: At first it was difficult for me to get my head around going back on the road because in the last six years I've become part of my family and part of my community. I actually have a social life with a regular Wednesday afternoon doubles match, which I really like. I just like living kind of a normal life. So it was a bit hard for me to tear myself away from that and go back to this itinerant life. I was just being selfish. But now that I'm back out here, I have made the adjustment.

Q: Did Rush ever get degenerate?

A: Yeah. Our first couple of tours we were opening for bands like Aerosmith and Kiss, so you can imagine the influences at that time. And then we started headlining and doing a lot of shows -- sometimes 20 different cities in a row. You lose all contact with reality, so it's easy to get out of control. But for us the quality of our performance was always important. No matter how f -- up we would be, we would realize there was nothing more embarrassing than not playing well. That fear kept us pretty straight. We're all sort of moderate personalities anyway.

Q: Are you freaked out about turning 50?

A: I don't like it. It freaks me out that I'll soon be closer to 70 than 30.

I think I'll just go into denial. It doesn't feel like that long ago I was 30.

Q: Do you like the person you've become?

A: Yeah, I do like the person I'm evolving into. I'm happy with myself. But I'd just like to stay right where I am for some extra time.

Q: We'll see if we can make this a long year.

A: That would be nice.