

Hard times, hard rock

July 19, 2002

BY JIM DeROGATIS POP MUSIC CRITIC

I spoke with bassist and vocalist Geddy Lee as the group made its way across the United States on a tour that brings it to the Tweeter Center on Saturday night.

Q. There's a perception among fans that Rush is rocking much harder on this album. Do you agree?

A. It's hard for me to see that so clearly as someone outside of our little circle would see it. I guess for us, we just wanted to make a record that had some passion and emotion. It was an emotional process in a lot of ways, and I guess it came out in us being a little harder-edged. And we did want to make a rock record. All of those things combined, it did turn out that way.

Q. While there's more of a rhythmic drive and fewer keyboards, there's also less soloing by guitarist Alex Lifeson. What was the thinking behind that?

A. He just felt that excessive soloing was kind of a dated concept. It was not something he was comfortable doing at this point. There were a few moments where we encouraged him to solo on different songs that we felt would definitely benefit, because he's a great soloist, but he was very determined not to do that. He felt it was wrong and he didn't feel comfortable with that whole stepping out front thing. He'd rather help create more of an ensemble, instrumental middle section than do a guitar solo.

Q. I suppose it can become a cliché: "There's a hole in the song here, let's solo!"

A. Yeah. He tried it a couple of times and he did not feel inspired to do that. We would even say to him, "Keep going, you're just starting to get warmed up!" And he would just kind of lose the vibe of it and say, "It doesn't feel right to me. It feels like a very dated approach."

Q. Let's talk about what you were trying to do vocally by creating textures from layering different parts. It sounds like you were really having fun singing.

A. It is a lot of fun; singing is a wonderful way of expressing yourself. I experimented a little bit when I did my solo record, and I just carried over that kind of free approach when we started to do this record. Specifically with Alex really not wanting to get too deeply into keyboards, it gave me an opportunity to try to provide some extra melody and texture using my voice instead, which really did the same thing as pulling out a string sound or something.

Q. It seems as if you used to sing one way, basically up through "Hemispheres," but you've sung another way ever since: Those infamous higher-register parts are gone. Was that a physical change in your voice or a stylistic choice?

A. It was a stylistic choice. I would say that in some ways, there were some experiments I was doing vocally, learning about songwriting, and as our songwriting changed stylistically, my vocalizing changed. When I look back at some of those experiments, some of them were successful and some of them weren't. When you're in the middle of it, it's sometimes hard to see if you're utilizing your voice in the correct way or not. I felt with this record that I spent more time thinking about what keys the songs were in and trying to make sure that I presented my voice in a more complete way, and that meant bringing back some higher singing. It was a tool that I was essentially ignoring for no real good reason. There's more of a balance on this record.

Q. When you're thinking about that, do you consider the hardcore fans who gripe about, "How come he never sings like he did on 'Anthem' anymore?"

A. Not really. [Laughs] What struck me when I was listening back to our last couple of albums, there were a couple of songs on "Test for Echo" and the previous couple of records that sounded like I was singing in the wrong key--like the melodies were great but I didn't have enough power behind my voice. So, I tried to find registers that gave me both, that were not simply histrionic but that were a little higher, and where I was able to shape the melodies that I wanted to shape.

Q. I've always been fascinated by how you interpret Neil's lyrics. Older songs such as "[*****]" are like science fiction or fantasy stories, and those would seem to be easier for you to convey than the lyrics on the new album, which are really about his personal philosophy. I know you've been kindred spirits for 30 years, but the way he sees the world can't be exactly the same way you see the world.

A. No, certainly not. It's a really interesting evolution. I think when he first started writing lyrics, I was so relieved to

have someone other than myself writing lyrics that I just sang whatever he gave me. Some of them, in retrospect, were fairly awkward and wordy; I don't know how I fit all those words per second in there! But as we grew, some songs were not comfortable for me and I would lay off. In more recent years, it's been more important for me to be able to identify with what he's talking about, or at least if I view myself as an interpreter, I have to be able to understand his point of view so clearly that I can express it as, say, an actor would a script.

On this particular record, where a lot of what he was writing was personal, there was a lot of back and forth, and though the lyrics were coming quite regularly from him, they were a little more difficult for me to deal with. We had to examine them and talk about them a lot more, and some I was not comfortable with. That's always the case; on every album, there are a few songs I'm just not comfortable with singing, so I just kind of don't go there. But some songs where I feel there's a lot of strength in what he's trying to say, even though it's not comfortable for me, that's when I'll pull certain lines out that have really struck a chord with me and I'll say, "Look, these four lines really work for me, and they really work in the context of this song I'm trying to write. Can we develop the song more along these lines?" He's quite cool to do that, and he's really a very objective partner.

Q. The fact that Neil was going through such a personal catharsis, and you were having to interpret his lyrics and discuss what was working and what wasn't, it almost sounds like you were in the position of being his therapist.

A. Well, listen, that relationship existed already. I mean, in order for us to go back to work, he had to feel comfortable. We supported him and were right with him through all of that time. None of us would have been comfortable to start working again if we didn't feel that he was ready to do that. So, yeah, there was some discussion, but really it was already quite evident.

Of course, I was a little surprised how many of his lyrics were as personal as they were. I knew that in some way or another, the lyrics for this album would naturally have to express what he'd be going through. But as the lyrics started coming out, a lot of them were in the first person, and that's something that I discussed with him a lot: "This is so intimate an expression, I can't express it in the first person because it's your story, not my story." So we worked on a lot of those songs to change them out of the first person into something easier for me to interpret. And I think they benefitted from a little more universality.

Q. The last time I interviewed Neil, circa "Counterparts," he was talking about being embarrassed by some of the science-fiction themes of the earlier songs. But I like stuff like [some of those old sci-fi songs]! I love "2112," and I find something new in it every time I listen to it.

A. [Laughs] It's interesting that Neil said that then, and I totally understand it. You've got to remember that for the last 10 years, he's been working hard at being a writer of books. I think he comes at that from a writer's point of view, and he looks at some of those lyrics and thinks, "Some of that is silly. Those lyrics were all about fun. Yes, they were a little silly, but we were trying to be a little silly. I think you can't forget the spirit with which you wrote the song. You just have a tendency to get so serious about your present that you forget the spirit that you lived in.

Q. Well, nostalgia is the most insidious enemy of great rock 'n' roll. The fact that Rush doesn't indulge in it is one of the band's charms. Yet the group has this incredible history and you can't ignore that, either.

A. Well, we tried to dig some different things out of the closet, and we pulled out a whole range of stuff that we love. We've tried to pay attention to Rush fan sites that have requested certain songs like "*****." That's the challenge of a set list for us now: How do we create a little journey? We do a three-hour show and we've got two sets to work with, so we try to make both sets quite different, and we try to ease into the show and have it develop. At the present moment, it's really working well. We are able to visit the past with the same enthusiasm that we're playing the new material.

Pop Music Critic Jim DeRogatis co-hosts "Sound Opinions" from 10 p.m. to midnight Tuesday on WXRT-FM (93.1)