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## There's Something About Geddy

### *The return of the Flying Hamische*

by Bob Mack

*What about the voice of Geddy Lee?  
How did it get so high?  
I wonder if he speaks like an ordinary guy  
("I know him, and he does!")  
Well, you're my fact-checkin' cuz.*

—Pavement, "Stereo"

When pressed about this more enigmatic than usual lyric, Pavement's Stephen Malkmus denied that it was a snide shooting of fish in a barrel. For although few bands have ever been as cool as Pavement and as uncool as Rush, Malkmus may have had something else in mind. At least I hope so, if only because Malkmus, along with Rush's Neil Peart and ABC's Martin Fry, is one of my favorite writers. Perhaps Malkmus name-checked Geddy for the same reason that Beck affixes vintage Rush decals to his guitars, for the same reason Mix Master Mike made mincemeat of the kerblooey Moog punch intro to Rush's "Tom Sawyer" during his scratch solo each night on the last Beastie Boys tour. In other words, maybe, just maybe, deep down inside, although they'd never admit it, these otherwise cool jerks actually like Rush.



Photo by Andrew MacNaughtan

Okay, maybe they don't like 'em like the Catherine Wheel, who covered "Spirit of Radio" (albeit on a hidden track), or Primus, who toured with Rush (albeit briefly). Maybe Malkmus and Beck are only trying to make Thurston Moore snicker. But if so, that's even more to the point, isn't it? I mean, what *about* the voice of Geddy Lee? Personally, I love his voice; I'm used to it like I'm used to Dylan's and Adam Horowitz's. Malkmus', for that matter. But regardless of what it is about Geddy's voice, the bottom line is that unlike, say, with Styx, you'll never enjoy a nudge-nudge wink-wink VH1 *Behind the Music* about Rush. And certainly unlike, say, Kiss, Rush will never be paid homage on some tribute record featuring a bunch of swine wearing their sickeningly predictable punkola influences on their sleeve like a swastika armband.

Whoa now, where was I? For a minute there I was back in high school, when Rush's 1981 classic,

*Moving Pictures* (the LP that includes "Tom Sawyer" but is not included in the recent *Simply Vinyl* series of reissues), made a believer out of me — and made the daily arguments with my Christian straight-edge Clash-fan nemesis in English class over whose favorite band was the only one that mattered almost devolve into fisticuffs. Back then, Rush had to be reckoned with. Supremely unyielding, they were the Fugazi of their time, not a minor but a major threat. Even to this day (their last release, 1996's *Test for Echo*, entered *Billboard*'s Top 5 thanks to a platinum cult following), box sets or reissues need not resurrect interest in Rush. Resurrection requires death, and whatever else you can say about them, Rush'll never die.

However immortal Rush may be as a band, though, the individuals that make up the group are all too human. So when drummer Neil Peart's daughter and wife both passed away a few years ago, the future of rock's only romantic realists was instantly thrown into question.

"He went through the worst thing any human can go through," Geddy says. "We decided that we wouldn't even discuss the band's future until enough healing had gone on. That being said, time was ticking away, and I needed to sink my teeth into something healthy. And for me that's always been music."

Which is how and why Lee's remarkable solo record, *My Favorite Headache*, came about. By the way, for all you bassheads, the LP is not calling out Billy Sheehan or Les Claypool: "On quite a few songs there's three or four different bass tracks," Geddy admits, "but the experimentation was not in an obvious, running-up-and-down-stairs kind of way." By contrast, he says, "I was very interested in pushing the melodic capability of my voice." The result is as inspiring as it is inspired: Aside from a couple of cranky cuts, like "Moving to Bohemia" ("where money grows on trees/where the beer is free"), it's kinder, gentler, simpler, groovier, mellower, sadder and yet happier than the typical Rush offering — an optimistic though realistic collection of rudimentary lyrics framed by regular, real, soft hard-rock *songs* that deal with the thorny without being (too) corny, a feat that only someone like Geddy, who has been through tragedy and been the object of comedy, could pull off.

"In my life I've had events like this," he says, referring to Peart's disaster, "ever since I was 12 years old and my dad passed away. And both my parents were Holocaust survivors. So these have been issues that have always come up and existed in part of me."

If all those critics all these years had known he was Jewish ("Geddy" is his mom's heavily accented pronunciation of "Gary"), would they still have squawked that Rush must be "fascist," since they dedicated *2112* to Ayn Rand (herself a Jew who fled Russia after her parents had their pharmacy seized by not exactly pro-Semitic Bolsheviks)? Hopefully not. But either way, over the course of putting out 22 Rush albums (35 million sold) and putting up with all the attendant ad hominem attacks on the size of his schnozz and the sound of his voice (i.e., masculinity), Lee has persevered (though he is a bit miffed that "I've yet to receive a single congratulatory note" from his rivals in their fantasy-baseball-league, which his team, the Flying Hamisches, won). As a result, he has become to heart what James Brown is to soul. And *My Favorite Headache*, leisurely crafted over two years for fun, not profit, is virtually a how-to manual for coping with harsh tokes and cosmic jokes without falling prey to paranoia and disconnectedness. On one level, it can't help but be interpreted as a pep talk for Peart. On another level, it's a reminder to himself and all of us that "shit happens" is not just some idiotic rejoinder but an actual fucking fact.

"The album deals with the imperfections and messiness of life and the inability to have your cake and eat it too. When this bad time happened [for Peart], of course it was a revisiting of all those feelings [for his own folks]. And so you work through it, try to make sense of it. Songs like 'The

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Present Tense' and 'Grace to Grace' are part of me trying not to be overwhelmed by the bigness of the moment."

In particular, the song "Runaway Train" ("If your heart is aching/Just remove the shame/You got to want it") gives goose bumps. "That song is me reacting to what I've seen: real people going through difficult stuff. Listen, life's not easy! Tough stuff happens to you. You just want to send out the most positive way of activating them and say, Look, don't feel bad."

Again, by "them," one can't help projecting onto Peart, the legendary drummer/lyricist and chiaroscuro character who double-handedly transformed Rush from the basic blues-rock dudes heard on their debut (which he did not appear on) to the absurdly absolutist prog-pop heroes/villains we all know and love/loathe (depending on, as "Spirit of Radio" so defiantly shrieks, "your honesty, yeah your honesty"). And preliminary indications are looking pretty positive — insofar as Peart is alive and well and living, of all places, here in Los Angeles, where he has, Geddy enthuses, "a new future, a new life and a lot to look forward to."

And so while Lee is entertaining the idea of playing a few dates in small clubs, for which he would employ Pearl Jam drummer Matt Cameron and k.d. lang collaborator Ben Mink (both of whom star on this solo effort), the big question remains: Are Rush all done? And if not . . .

"It's looking like January," Lee confides, as to when the Canadian band is thinking about getting together and carrying on. "We're going to do the writing in Toronto, but we'll probably do a big chunk of the recording in L.A., because Neil's spending so much time there now."

If so, they might want to re-record or at least pay heed to "Working at Perfekt," the standout track on *My Favorite Headache*. On the one hand, with its classical strings, sexy synths and ominous vocal, it's the only song on Lee's solo record with the gravity to withstand the standard Rush glower-trio treatment. On the other hand, with lines like "Nothing is perfect/Certainly not me," Lee may be opening a new door even as he closes an old one.

"I don't wanna live in a clean, perfect universe," Geddy insists. "I'll take the ugliness."