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Rush's Geddy Lee Steps Into the Solo Limelight

Geddy Lee on his "Favorite Headache," the cult of Rush and going commercial

Contrary to the stereotype of lead singers in successful rock & roll bands, Geddy Lee of Rush swears that he never harbored any big dreams about branching out with a solo career. "I was always very happy working with Alex [Lifeson] and Neil [Peart]," he admits while picking at a poppy seed muffin in an Atlantic Records conference room. "Quite frankly," he continues, "had this hiatus from Rush not occurred, this album might not have happened." The hiatus in question -- four years since the band's last studio album, Test for Echo -- was borne of unspeakable tragedy: the heart-breaking, back-to-back deaths of drummer/lyricist Peart's daughter and wife. As the band was put on indefinite hold to allow Peart room to heal, Lee acted on a whim and began writing songs with an old friend, Ben Mink [formerly of the early Eighties Canadian band FM]. Over the slow course of a couple of years, those songs shaped into what would become Lee's debut solo album, the just-released My Favorite Headache.



Closer to the heart

Marked by Lee's distinctive, high-pitched vocals and dexterous bass lines, My Favorite Headache on its own would seem a Godsend for starving Rush fans, a veritable legion that has faithfully followed the progressive rock trio over the course of its mercurial twenty-five-year career. But now that the album is finally in stores, it may not have to hold back the tide on its own for very long. Lee says he'd love to do a club tour to support the album, but time may be running out on him; if all goes as planned, he plans to reconvene with Lifeson and Peart early next year. "We're going to get together and see what we've got," he says simply. "See what there's left to say for Rush. Hopefully, I'm optimistic, we'll have some fun, put a record together and tour."

When did My Favorite Headache first start to take shape?



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In '97 I started thinking about working with my friend Ben Mink, to see if we could write some songs together. Our goal was really to see if we could write songs for other people, not so much to do them myself. And when it became clear to me that I was going to have a long layoff from Rush, and the more songs we wrote, the more kind of attached to the songs we were becoming. We could see that we were both secretly rooting for the opportunity to make a record ourselves. That's how the whole thing came about.

For years, you've only sung Neil's lyrics. How did it feel to write and sing your own for a change?

It's a big step up. I used to write lyrics for Rush more often and then I got really lazy, because Neil is so prolific. And I like his lyrics a lot, so I kind of took a back seat and let the lazy gene take over. After I got over the initial hump and realized, "Yeah, I can do this," it became a lot of fun for me - it became in some ways the most important kind of new experiment that I was doing.

There's a definite warmer tone to the lyrics here than what you might find on a typical Rush album. Some of them might even be described as love songs, which is kind of uncharted territory for you.

Well they're personal songs, and some of them are directed personally between people in my life, or are confessions of one sort or another. It's a different spin I guess, but you know, I could only write lyrics this time around about things that were going on in my head and in my life, things that I'm thinking about and people I'm connected with. I enjoyed that process, and I didn't feel exposed at all by it -- I felt that there was enough objectivity about what I was talking about that maybe other people could apply that to what they go through.

On the other hand, sonically the album doesn't sound *that* far removed from Rush. Was that a matter of concern for you?

Well I think there's a certain amount of that. I think some of the differences are obviously subtle -- some of the ways that I behave musically have been formed by twenty-five years of working with the same guys, and I can't rub that out. I can't stop being me. When I started writing I realized that that was going to be an issue, and I decided I didn't care. I wasn't doing this record to prove I was an artist separate from Rush; I was doing this project to express myself creatively, and if that at times crosses over into Rush territory, I figured it was

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reasonable.

However much it does or doesn't sound like Rush, you know there's a core audience out there that will swoop in on this album immediately. What do you think it is about Rush that inspires such a loyal fanbase?

I don't know. From the inside looking out it's a tough thing to recognize, but I have to believe there's something lyrically and something about the fact that we've been around for so long and even though we're popular, in some ways we're still kind of a guilty pleasure for some people. We're like a cult band in some ways. But there must be something in what we do and the way we do it that makes people feel better about themselves. We change a lot, and the fans stick around, and usually that doesn't happen. Our fans have been amazing, and we feel that from them subconsciously -- we know that there's always going to be a core of people out there that are interested in what we do, which in a way I think makes us feel better about carrying on.

On the flip side, there are people -- including many or most critics -- who *hate* Rush. Where does that come from?

Well, I think we're not hip. We're basically musicians, players, and there are a lot of rock & roll purists who I don't think like us fucking around with the genre so much. Beyond that, I can't say. When we first came out we were one of the most slagged bands in the history of rock & roll I think. That seems to have changed over the years as different critics have taken more time to try and understand what we were all about. Criticism can be constructive; sometimes you learn stuff about yourself, and sometimes it's just mean spirited and you don't learn anything about yourself. I just take it as it comes.

After all Neil went through in the last few years, did the future of Rush ever come into question?

Well, basically when all of this horrible stuff started happening, we just put everything out of our minds. Anything of a practical nature seemed so unimportant. We were really just worried about Neil getting through it and trying to be there for him. I think I had the sense that he was either or going to get through this and find some positive reason to carry on, and if not there were bigger problems than a band not getting back together. He's good now, though. He's remarried. He met somebody that gave him a reason to be positive

and he's getting his life together, and I'm really thrilled for him.

So if you get back together again next year, how long before a new Rush album is in stores?

Usually it's like two months of writing, another three months of production, and then it's out. But I don't think I know this time, because we want to take things a little slower considering what everybody's gone through, especially Neil. I don't want to put a lot of pressure on him. I think it would be more healthy just to do it in a slightly more casual way and leave ourselves a lot of latitude to make sure that he doesn't bite off more than he can chew emotionally. So it's hard to say, but to be optimistic, I would say probably Christmas next year or shortly thereafter.

Last question . . . Do you get a little, er, rush when that Nissan commercial with "Tom Sawyer" comes on?

I haven't heard it. I swear to God. I haven't seen it, but people keep asking me about it. We agreed to loan them like ten seconds of music like eight months ago, and I totally forgot about it. At the time they asked us, we were getting requests from all these independent movies and TV shows, like *Futurama* – all these people wanted to use Rush songs. I guess people are getting hard up for soundtrack material, so now they're even coming to us for it [*laughs*].

RICHARD SKANSE
(November 23, 2000)

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