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Excess not too much for Rush

by Brett Milano

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Rush, at the FleetCenter, last night.

In the world of Rush, a little excess can be a beautiful thing - and a whole lot of excess is even better. Last summer at the Tweeter Center, the Canadian trio played a career-spanning, technically daredevil, epic-length show. And last night they came back to do the whole thing again.

If you wanted cheap thrills, they had them: Guitarist Alex Lifeson, singer/bassist Geddy Lee, and drummer/lyricist Neil Peart can play complex music like there's nothing to it - they can pile on the volume and hammer the power-chords. But their music has actually gotten more emotional over the years, as they've learned to slow down and focus on lyrics and melodies. And it's the songwriting, more than the technical feats, that have kept Rush fresh.

Case in point: Much of the current album, Vapor Trails, was inspired by a pair of tragedies that hit Peart, who lost his wife and daughter in quick succession. Four songs from the disc were played last night, all in a modern, alternative metal vein: "Ghost Rider" or "Earthshine" would sit comfortably alongside your favorite Pearl Jam track. What Rush added was a sense of optimism: Peart's lyrics dealt with getting through grief and coming back to life - pretty resonant stuff for a band that used to deal with science-fiction themes.

For those who missed the sci-fi, they also played a chunk of the early-'70s concept album 2112, which required Lee to stretch his voice into his old ultra-high register. Running three hours with a short intermission, the set drew from nearly all of Rush's albums, with only a couple of changes from last summer's set list. (The new additions were a pair of late-'70s tunes, "Freewill" and "The Trees.") Most of their old radio hits were accounted for, but the more recent tunes showed how far they could stretch - from "Red Sector A," an ominous synthesizer tune about the Holocaust, to the countryish "Resist," done only with acoustic guitars.

The film clips and animations reflected the band's surreal sense of humor, often used to puncture the music's weightier moments.

Another new song, "One Little Victory" featured a cartoon dragon heading toward the band. The cartoon's punchline was accompanied by a few balls of fire going off onstage.

And Rush have to be the only art-rock band who dares to use the Three Stooges theme as their entry music.

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