

RUSH: CREATING VAPOR TRAILS

by Bryan Reesman | Sep 01 '02

When Canadian progressive rock legends Rush assembled at Reaction Studios in Toronto at the start of 2001, it had been five years since they recorded their last studio album, *Test For Echo*. A lot had changed personally and professionally for the band: Drummer Neil Peart had to cope with the deaths of his wife and daughter in separate episodes, while his bandmates were off producing other groups. Bassist/vocalist Geddy Lee even recorded a well-received solo album, *My Favorite Headache*. How would these changes alter their chemistry? How difficult would it be to compose new material after being away from each other for so long?

All doubts were cast aside once the power trio began working in their traditional way: Lee and guitarist Alex Liefson jamming until melodies emerged, Peart writing lyrics (some of which reflect his personal trials), and then the threesome uniting to flesh out the tunes. Eventually, their myriad parts gelled together into *Vapor Trails* (Atlantic), a powerful blend of Rush's fiery, thunderous '70s style with the sophistication of their '80s and '90s albums. In short, it is a return to a classic form that has fans buzzing.

The band spent 11 months at Reaction creating *Vapor Trails*. "We each have our own studios, but we didn't work there on this project for some stupid reason," jokes Lee. "We'd rather pay someone else to use their space!" Liefson and Lee both praise Reaction as a small, intimate place to work, which is fine for a trio. "We needed somewhere that was part rehearsal space, part recording space, part writing space," says Lee. "We ended up in the right place."

Vapor Trails is the first Rush album in a long time not to feature keyboards prominently: Liefson simply would not allow Lee to use his synths, a fact they both amiably joke about as they relax in Atlantic Records' New York offices. "I thought it would be more interesting if we created the same things that keyboards were doing in the past with Geddy's voice or a guitar or even bass," remarks Liefson. "That's more natural and more organic, I think, than using a fake string sound."

"It gives him more to do," quips Lee.

"And it's a lot of fun to create these bizarre sounds and textures," adds Liefson.

The new album certainly comes roaring out of the speakers, with Peart's propulsive drumming driving the fierce opening track, "One Little Victory." There is definitely a sense of urgency permeating the album, but there are also many different moods explored throughout the CD's 13 songs. The edgy but melodic "Ghost Rider" searches for personal catharsis, while "Stars Look Down" takes a gentler approach with a crystalline guitar sound. "Peaceful Kingdom" and "Secret Touch" juxtapose turbulent guitar and bass passages with more restrained sections; a nice contrast. As ever, Liefson experimented with a variety of guitar sounds. But for a band commonly labeled as progressive rockers, the songs are quite accessible.

Liefson and Lee assembled the songs in Logic Audio, using a drum machine and a click track as a base. "When the sketches of the songs were ready, Neil would go in and just lay down his track," says Lee. "It wasn't always final. He would lay down the drums, and then we would continue working on the track. Then maybe I would redo the bass or [Alex would] weave some lead guitars around to adapt to the feel of real drums. It was an evolutionary process, so I think the reason it doesn't feel stiff is because there was back and forth and back and forth, adapting the parts back to the drums when necessary."

It is somewhat unusual for a band to record music without a live drummer and then have him fill in his parts later, but Rush have made this process work for many years. "When [Lee and I] were putting stuff down, we

were so into the playing that the click and the drum machine became irrelevant to us,” muses Liefson. “We’re in a groove, and the two of us feel that groove, whether it’s on the front or back end of the beat. It’s not something that’s right on the beat.”

Rush spent the first half of the recording period engineering everything themselves, but when they wanted to take things up a notch, they brought in co-producer Paul Northfield, who engineered three of the band’s studio albums — *Permanent Waves*, *Moving Pictures* and *Signals* — and three live CDs, one of which he also produced (*Different Stages*). Northfield is an industry veteran who has worked with Ozzy Osbourne, Hole, Marilyn Manson, Porcupine Tree and Black Sabbath bassist Geezer Butler, among others.

When Northfield arrived during the *Vapor Trails* sessions, things became more focused. The drums were re-recorded then, and Liefson’s and Lee’s parts were often embellished with new ideas.

“When I came in, it was like, ‘Where do we go from here?’” Northfield recalls. “There were a lot of inspired moments in their jams that they had used to build songs. It seemed a smart move to me to just set straight into recording using a certain amount of their original stuff, then rebuilding on top of that.

“We recorded using a Mac G4/500 MHZ using Logic Audio, with a Digidesign Mix Plus system with 32 inputs and outputs. The converters we used were a mix of Digi 888, those on the Mackie D8B and an Apogee Trak2, which we used for all of the overdubs and vocals.” During mixing, they added another [Pro Tools] Farm card to give them 48 outputs from Logic. Monitoring and rough mixes were done on the studio’s SSL 4000 G console.

Northfield agrees with the bandmembers that Reaction was a perfect environment for Rush. Because the band took over the space for nearly a year, they were given some freedom to adapt it to their needs. Northfield decided to put up some drywall in the studio to get a warmer drum sound, and the people at Reaction liked it so much that they kept it.

To record Peart’s drums Northfield used Earthworks and Royer ribbon mics as overheads, 421s for the toms, a pair of D112s on the two kick drums and occasionally a U48 for ambient kit sounds. Peart does not like having holes in his kick drum heads, so the mics were placed inside and the heads were tightened on. “The mic support inside the bass drum was the May System, which allows for adjustment of the mic without removing the drum heads,” explains Northfield. “It’s not exactly remote control, as it is not motorized, but it makes life a lot easier using a drum key for positional adjustment.”

According to Northfield, most of Lee’s bass parts were recut. “Not so much the lyrical bass parts,” he says. “For the most part, we recut the basses that needed to fit pretty precisely with the drums.” Lee recorded his bass with three different kinds of directs: a SansAmp, a Palmer speaker simulator and an Avalon U5 DI Box. “So if I do three different bass tracks [on one song], that’s nine tracks there — three different ranges,” the bassist observes. “On this record, I played a lot of chordal parts, so the bass acts as a rhythm guitar a lot, and that took some pressure off of Alex to supply a lot of rhythm parts so, instead, he would go somewhere else.”

Liefson’s setup was more basic: He recorded simple mono guitar tracks. “I was using primarily a Hughes & Kettner Tri-Amp, which is a 3-channel tube amplifier,” says Liefson, “and the zenTera, a modeling amp that Hughes & Kettner makes. I used two 412 Marshall cabinets with Greenbacks set up, but primarily used one for 95 percent of the recording. I basically used a 57 [mic] on everything.” The guitarist recorded DI for safety rather than his main track.

“Generally with a guitar, there were two or three tracks per song, sometimes a few more than that,” Liefson says. “Sometimes, it was just a single track. In ‘How It Is,’ we created this very lush, rich mandola section in the middle of the song that was made up of 21 tracks of different mandola parts done in blocks of four and five.”

"That's the beauty of Logic," Lee chimes in. "You can take 20 tracks and mix them down out of two outputs, and you've already created your mandola orchestra. That's coming up on just two faders on the board, yet there's all that music."

For vocals, Lee used a Neumann 149 in either cardioid or omni mode, depending on the sound they were going for. He used the Apogee Trak2 as a preamp and ran it through an 1176 compressor.

Vapor Trails was mixed by David Leonard at Metalworks in Mississauga, Ontario, and mastered by Howie Weinberg at Masterdisk in New York. "We mixed down on an SSL G-Plus Series console, to 96k digital," says Lee. "At the same time, we mixed down to 1-inch analog so we could compare in the mastering facility what sound we liked better. The 1-inch tape won about 70 percent of the time, but they both sounded great. It just depended on the style you wanted for the particular sound.

"David Leonard describes the difference very accurately," Lee continues. "He calls digital a 'faster medium.' So when there's a lot of information that's really coming at you, sometimes the faster medium reproduces it a little bit better, and I think that's the case with the song 'Victory.' Other songs, like 'Peaceful Kingdom,' 'Ghost Rider' and 'Ceilings,' [sound better] on analog. They were warmer and kind of lumpier. 'Ceilings' is kind of a frenetic song, and I liked the way the analog slowed it down, made it easier to get inside of the track. It's just another option that makes you crazy in the end, but it really has a profound effect on the listener, I think. At the end, the analog tape sounds more like the song."

Judging from the overall sound of the album, they made the right choices. Fans have responded favorably to the long-awaited *Vapor Trails*. It debuted at Number 6 on the *Billboard* Top 200, selling over 100,000 copies that first week alone. Obviously, this is a band in touch with its loyal fan base.

"We were trying to get the most soulful approach to making the record we could with the most inspiration," Northfield says.

This time, they succeeded admirably.