

Back on the 'Trail' with Rush
Band's new release first studio recording in six years
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(CNN) -- There is something special about old friends coming together, especially when the reunion results in a rejuvenation of spirit.

This has certainly been the case for Rush, Canada's bestselling power trio, who are back with a renewed vitality and a sense of victory with their latest release, "Vapor Trails."

But the reunion is about much more than music. This time it is personal.

These old friends have emerged from a difficult period in the band's almost 30-year history -- a time marked by great personal loss.

In 1997, the group's drummer and lyricist, Neil Peart, lost his only child, Selena, in an auto accident. Less than a year later, his wife, Jackie, died of cancer.

Rush's future seemed in doubt, as the band took an indefinite hiatus to allow Peart the time he needed to grieve.

A 'hazy' future

Geddy Lee, the band's bassist and vocalist, said he was not sure the group would ever record again.

"After the terrible events of '97 and '98 it was impossible, really, to think about the future in terms of the band," he said in a recent phone interview from New York.

"We were just hurting so badly that instinct ... takes over and it's like a primal need and desire to protect the people around you," he said.

Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson laid music aside for a time to support their lifelong friend.

"We just circled our wagons around Neil and hoped that there was something we could do for him -- anything," Lee said.

"Of course everything you do seems inadequate in some way because there is no way you can fill the gigantic void that suddenly appeared," he said. "So you just turn away from the future. I think the future becomes very hazy and you stop thinking in that way."

Lee said he did hold out hope that the group would one day reunite.

"I always, sort of, deep in my heart believed that there would at least be an attempt to resurrect some sort of musical reunion," he said. "But it was a very small feeling I had and, really, I didn't trust it very much. So it was quite likely that Rush would never be around again, and that was fine as long as Neil could find some reason to carry on in some capacity."

'Back to the world of the living'

The long hiatus ended with a call from Peart.

"When Neil called, I have to say that my heart soared," Lifeson said. "And the reason really was because it said so much about his recovery -- that he was coming back to the world of the living. I mean, even if he wasn't really ready for it, he was making an attempt, and there was that little faint light in him that was glowing again."

As Peart began to embrace life again, the band took its first tentative steps toward a new album.

Entering the studio in January 2001, Peart, Lee and Lifeson took a leisurely approach to the sessions, allowing themselves time to reconnect both as friends and musicians.

An enduring friendship has kept the Canadian trio together for 30 years.

"We got together and it was very slow," Lifeson said. "The first two weeks we spent just talking about everything -- I don't think we played a single note."

After such a long time off, the band was rusty and needed time to get its groove back.

"It was a gradual move towards getting back in shape again," Lifeson said. "He [Peart] hadn't played drums for a long time and he needed the time to just build up his chops again. And for us, Geddy and I hadn't worked writing together in a while and because we'd been doing such diverse things we needed some time to get used to each other again."

After a marathon 14 months in the studio, the band's 17th album, "Vapor Trails," was born. It debuted May 14 to positive reviews. The following week, the album entered Billboard's 200 album chart at No. 6.

'One Little Victory'

In spite of their five years apart, or perhaps because of it, Lee said the friends have returned with a fresh, vibrant -- even joyful -- sound.

"A lot of these songs were born out of, I think, a desire to almost state to each other proof that we still have a great feeling and intensity for what we do," he said. "And, in a way, it is kind of a celebration of a return of spirit -- which, of course, was a huge question mark for quite a while."

Many questions about the band seem to have been answered by the immediate success of the album's first track and single, "One Little Victory." The song rocketed into the top 10 on Billboard's Mainstream Rock chart just weeks after its release -- yet another little victory in the history of Rush and the story of three old friends.

Lee and Lifeson pointed to "One Little Victory" as the first and only choice to lead off the album, noting that it makes a powerful statement about Rush's return -- both personally and musically.

"We went back and forth on the running order quite a few times and the one thing that we never questioned was the opening of the album with 'One Little Victory,'" Lee said. "It always seemed natural to me to start the album off with the most positive spirit."

Lifeson added, "With 'One Little Victory,' I love the idea that Neil is the one who starts the record and he starts it with such a fury and it just says, 'We're back.' And the whole sentiment of that song about being aware of those little successes -- the daily little things that really count -- that we so often take for granted."

'Endlessly Rocking'

Lee says they didn't rush "Vapor Trails," the band's first studio album in five years.

Lyricaly, the album has a depth of emotion that is decidedly atypical for Rush, which has usually taken on abstract, unemotional themes.

While "Vapor Trails" is undeniably autobiographical, Lifeson said it is also a universal lesson about the human spirit's ability to rebound -- even in the face of terrible tragedy.

"The album is about hope and recovery and optimism and looking forward to a future," he said. "And there are moments that are very moving on this record...It seems to be something that people kind of need these days with everything that happened in September, particularly here in New York. I sense that people like survivors. It gives them hope in the future and that's a good thing."

Rush's immediate future includes a North American tour, which kicks off in Hartford, Connecticut, at the end of June. Beyond that, Lee would not speculate on the band's future plans.

"I think from here on in it's going to be one step at a time for us," he said. "We did this record and we made a commitment to it and we're really happy with it. And our happiness from this process made it easy to go into a live tour decision and then we'll sit back after that tour is over and see how we feel about continuing."

Rush fans hoping to see more of the band may take comfort from the album's final song. "Out of the Cradle," ends on a hopeful note with triumphant lyrics inspired by Walt Whitman, "Here we come out of the cradle / Endlessly rocking."

With 30 years of music behind them, it is hard to imagine Rush doing anything but.