

Entertainment Story		
Rush find its groove after six-year absence		
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TORONTO (CP) - When Geddy Lee was 26 he defined success to a reporter from a rock music magazine as the ability to make Rush records exactly the way Rush wanted to make them. And nothing's really changed for the band after 22 albums, according to the 48-year-old Canadian rock icon known for his banshee-like wail. After a six-year hiatus from the recording studio, the trio - singer/bassist Lee, guitarist Alex Lifeson and drummer/lyricist Neil Peart - have a new album to feed hungry fans. The band's longest-ever break between albums came after tragedy struck Peart. He lost his 19-year-old daughter, Selena, in a 1997 car accident and his wife, Jackie Taylor, to cancer less than a year later. Peart stopped working to grieve and there was a point, Lee admits, when it seemed the band's 1996 *Test for Echo* would be Rush's last album. "We put any thought of Rush's future away. In some sense we believed it probably was over," Lee said. Meanwhile, Lee and Lifeson tried to make life easier for Peart, a longtime friend. "We removed all practical things involving Rush out of (Neil's) view, basically put all that in suspended animation and allowed him the breathing space necessary for him to try to find his feet, because he was reeling," Lee said. "None of us felt much like making music." Eventually, Lee and Lifeson returned to work, embarking on solo projects. "The reasons we became musicians hadn't changed even in the face of the most horrible tragedy; you still turn to that as a way of expressing yourself," Lee said. Peart, who took a year-long motorcycle road trip around North America, phoned his bandmates in 2000 saying he had found his feet and was ready to roll again. And when the trio began working together, Lee realized the album was becoming the most "Rush Rush album" ever. "We realized there was a return of spirit happening," said Lee, sitting in an office at the band's label, Anthem Entertainment, where dozens of Rush awards hang on the walls. "We were pretty focused on making something great." The 13 tracks on *Vapor Trails*, in stores this week, were produced by Lee, Lifeson and Peart and engineered by Paul Northfield, who has worked with Marilyn Manson and Hole. While many might expect Peart's tragedy to consume the album, it doesn't. The sound is harder than ever - more guitar, more drums, more bass - and Peart's lyrics are wise and inspiring. The fact that there's finally an album in stores is a welcome relief to fans. "It's incredible," said Phred Wyrdd, 31, of Collingwood, Ont. "We didn't even know if there was going to be another album after all the tragedy that befell Neil. We're just ecstatic that they we're able to get together again and be a band." And on a weekend in July, Wyrdd and hundreds of devotees will gather in Toronto for RushCon II: Citizens of the World, the second-annual convention of Rush fans. The three-day fair, July 12-14, will include Rush karaoke, Rush Jeopardy and a walking tour of Toronto with a stop at the band's star on the Canadian Walk of Fame. "It's something for us to do as fans so that we

know there are others out there that get it," said Wyrdd, RushCon manager and a fan for more than 22 years. Last years' gathering attracted about 500 people, mostly Canadian and American Rush fans but some "Rushians" came from as far away as Italy, Japan and Argentina. Rush's Vapor Trails tour, which features a three-hour set by the band, launches June 28 in Hartford, Conn. The only Canadian stop is July 17 in Toronto, three days after RushCon.

NOTES: 1. Six years and a whole lot of water under the bridge, Rush returns with their first album since "Test For Echo."

2. Written and recorded in a protracted 14 month process in Toronto, with producer Paul Northfield (Moist, Ozzy Osbourne, Hole, April Wine) drafted in to help with the home stretch.

3. Hugh Syme, the graphics wizard behind some of Rush's most indelible covers ("2112," "A Farewell To Kings," "Moving Pictures"), returns to the fold with a typically eye-catching design.

Vapor trails, those milky-white exhaust streams that streak and fade across our skies, can only show us where the pilot has been, not where he's going. Where Toronto heavy rock legends Rush have been in recent history is all over this new album, but its real value is how it suggests a band looking forward, while drawing lessons from a difficult past.

Ignoring drummer/lyricist Neil Peart's brushes with tragedy (he lost his wife to cancer and his daughter to an auto accident in the years since Rush's last album) makes no more sense than dwelling on it unduly. Suffice it to say that Peart's trials have informed his work and prodded him to produce just about the last thing you'd expect -- a searingly personal set of songs.

Gone, largely, are the intellectually challenging, conceptually dense works of past Rush albums, to be replaced with often intensely private insights.

"Pack up all those phantoms/Shoulder that invisible load/Keep on riding north and west/Haunting that wilderness road," Peart writes on "Ghost Rider," which could detail his own restless search for answers.

On "Ceiling Unlimited," bassist Geddy Lee voices Peart's ambivalence about responding to life's challenges: "The slack-jawed gaze of true profanity/Feels more like surrender than defeat ... The vacant smile of true insanity/Dressed up in the mask of tragedy."

"Stars Look Down" rails against fate ("Does it seem like a lifetime ago/That you looked with pride on your world of peace?"); "How It Is" wrestles with pessimism ("See the bright tomorrows/Give way to resignation ... I feel the day has possibilities"); and "Vapor Trail" stares unblinkingly into the great void ("Fading away like an hourglass/Grain by grain/Swept away like voices in a hurricane").

Tilting at the Temples of Syrinx, this ain't. But Peart has accomplished the neat trick of purging his personal demons by framing his observations as universal truths without ever slipping into solipsistic obscurity.

Musically, too, "Vapor Trails" sees Rush breaking new ground and escaping from the baroque, rhythmically complex arrangements of past efforts. The relatively streamlined sound contemporizes Rush's style without pandering to fashion. Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson have learned to write and play with greater economy than their critics would ever give them credit for.

"Earthshine" opens with arena-rock riffing, but introduces what sounds like a chorus of balalaikas furiously strumming behind the chorus. Lee's bass intro to "Ghost Rider" will raise a knowing smile from fans of The Tragically Hip's "Blow At High Dough", and Lifeson's staccato chording on "Freeze" powers the song to greater heights.

Lee's melodic gifts, which bloomed on his solo album "My Favorite Headache," are given a fine showing within the context of Rush's new music (and if you haven't warmed up to his distinctive voice by now, there's nothing on "Vapor Trails" that's likely to change your mind).

Peart -- whose furious runs through his jungle of percussion instruments had become a signature -- gets in on the less-is-more action, paring back his contributions with winning results. (Check out the herd-of-elephants intro he provides for "One Little Victory").

"Sometimes we freeze until the light comes/Sometimes we roll/And sometimes we rise/Sometimes we fight against the darkness," Peart writes on "Freeze."

"Vapor Trails" sees Rush rolling with the punches, rising above the tumult, and fighting valiantly against darkness. To paraphrase the title of the album's first single, in the end, they score something greater than one little victory.

RATING: 4 (out of 5)

SIMILARITIES: Well, nobody sounds like Rush.

BEST TRACK: "Peaceable Kingdom," which was originally intended to be an instrumental, was reworked after Sept. 11 into an uncompromising condemnation of both the perpetrators of terror and our own complacency. ("All this time we're hoping and praying we all might learn/While a billion other teachers are teaching them how to burn"). And, at over six minutes, "Freeze" is the kind of dense, expansive work that long-time Rush fans have been pining for.

WORST TRACK: The worst bit, for fans of the band, will have been the waiting, which is mercifully at an end.

THE BOTTOM LINE: To quote the leather-lunged intro from their early live album "All The World's A Stage": "I WANT YOU TO PLEASE WELCOME HOME ... RUSH!"