

Rush took its time with 'Vapor Trails' album

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The Contra Costa Times

Published: **Friday, September 13, 2002**

Rush fans had to wait a long time for new songs from the band. "Vapor Trails" (Atlantic) marks the Canadian band's first studio album in more than five years. When the trio did finally assemble again, it took time to rekindle the chemistry.

"Normally it takes us four or five months to write and record a record," guitarist Alex Lifeson says. "This record took 14 months. The first two months I don't think we wrote anything that we were really crazy about. We took a break for a week, then came back in and had sudden clarity. We knew what was working and what wasn't. From that moment on, things started to come together. The record really took on a life of its own at that point.

"There's certainly a passion to it that I haven't heard on a Rush record in a long time," Lifeson adds. "We all came into it just wanting so much for it to happen. I think that shows."

A tragic time

The lengthy hiatus came as a result of two tragedies that struck drummer/lyricist Neil Peart. His daughter died in a car accident and then his wife died of cancer.

"I just felt so hollow," Lifeson says. "Neil's daughter was 19 when she was killed and it just broke everybody's heart to such an extent that nothing seemed beautiful anymore. And music is such a joyful thing.

"I didn't listen to music. I couldn't play. And that was just me. You can only imagine what it must have been like for Neil."

Eventually, music drew Lifeson back. He picked up his guitar again and recorded in his home studio with his 25-year-old son, an electronic music artist. "I guess I realized that it's just so in me, so deep in my blood, and I do derive so much joy from it that I couldn't be away from it for too long."

Lifeson produced other acts. Lead singer Geddy Lee completed a solo record. But as for Rush, it appeared that after more than two decades of hit albums and tours, the band was history.

"As the years went by, both Geddy and I thought it was unlikely that we would be working together again as Rush. It seemed that Neil's recovery was very slow and very, very difficult. For a long time, it seemed to be going deeper and deeper into the darkness. It was all left up to Neil, and he didn't have the strength to say 'I'm going to come back in five years' or 'That's it. I can't do this ever again. I've lost it.' We were in a void. I felt that we had a terrific run, this wonderful experience that's very unique even in the rock world, and if that's the way it's going to end, then I have to accept it and move on."

Then something happened. Peart met a woman and fell in love again.

"He fell in love and saw that there was beauty in the world," Lifeson says. "He started to rebuild his life based on that. He came to us and said, 'I'd like to try it. I don't know if I can do it, but I'd like to try.'"

So the trio tried to put the pieces of Rush back together again. "It was a very delicate beginning for all of us," Lifeson says. "We kind of needed to find our place, our positions. The first couple of weeks we spent really just talking, hanging out and getting to know each other again. ... But once we did, it settled in, in a way that was far beyond anything that we'd done in the past."

Their method of interaction had changed, and not only because of the tragedies. "We'd aged five years. Particularly in your 40s, your advancing years have a more profound effect than they do, say, in your 30s. We came into the project feeling a lot of different feelings, a little trepidation, certainly more maturity, greater focus and greater acceptance of one another. There was a trust in each other's strengths that I don't think existed before."

Spirit at the moment

With such songs as "One Little Victory," "Ghost Rider" and "Sweet Miracle," the band is back.

"The absence made us all really want to play. We always enjoyed working together in the studio, writing together. It was just whether we could do it in a way that was valid and important," Lifeson says. "We didn't want to just make another Rush record. We wanted it to be different and to focus on other things, other aspects of our writing. We wanted a freshness to it ... and I think we achieved that with this record."

"We were guilty of being a little too clinical in the way we made records. We were overly focused on performance sometimes. We would spend huge amounts of time on the smallest details. Over the last few records, we were moving away from that. That wasn't important to us anymore. It was the spirit and the spontaneity of the performance that mattered."

Lifeson feels that those ingredients are clearest on the "Vapor Trails" album. "Most of this record is from jams that Geddy and I played and then, basically, Neil figured out his drum parts. Put those on and then maybe we embellished it with a little bit of guitar atmospherics or some more vocal things and that was it."

"For instance," Lifeson adds, "'Peaceable Kingdom,' that song's basically all from jams that were spliced together. What you hear is what was recorded at that moment and only played once. I love that whole idea. It's not like writing the song and then everybody rehearsed it and then you recorded it again. It loses something like that. This caught the spirit at the moment. That's the most important element of this record."

The band has taken its new songs on the road, "playing better than it's ever played," Lifeson says. It's also playing summer venues such as the Chronicle Pavilion and AutoWest and Shoreline amphitheaters for the first time.

"The sheds are a whole different environment than inside an arena. It's a more joyful experience, a happier, more casual, easygoing experience, I guess because it's still light outside when you go on. It bares everything, and you just seem more one on one with the audience. It's not so dramatic as in a dark venue. I see a lot of old faces and I see a lot of young faces and it's very promising."