

RUSH IS READY: Canadian Rockers return after a heartbreaking hiatus

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Geddy Lee doesn't like the word "comeback."

As Rush returns to a Detroit stage for the first time since 1996, the bassist and vocalist prefers that we call this a reemergence. Because in truth, no matter how close the band may have come to disappearing, Rush never really went away.

"It's funny. People ask me if it's strange to be back on the road, and I say well, what's strange about it is that it's not stranger," he says. "I could walk back out on stage after five-plus years, or whatever it was, and it was all so familiar."

After 16 albums and 23 years as one of rock's most durable bands, the Canadian trio was left with an uncertain future when drummer Neil Peart suffered a pair of losses: His teenage daughter was killed in a 1997 car accident and his wife died of cancer less than a year later.

As chronicled in his moving book, "Ghost Rider," the longtime lyricist gave up on making music altogether, taking off with his BMW motorcycle to travel North America on a literal road to recovery.

"I hadn't worried about whether or not I could afford not to work again," wrote the man considered by many to be the top drummer in rock. "It was simply unthinkable."

"Ghost Rider" (ECW Press, \$19.95) lands in bookstores in September, but is on sale now at the band's shows.

Having nursed himself back to emotional health, Peart linked up again with Lee and guitarist Alex Lifeson last year to test the musical waters. After tentative writing sessions, they dove headfirst into recording a new album. "Vapor Trails," the group's strongest work in a decade, was released in May.

Rush kicked off its latest tour with a June 28 show in Hartford, Conn. The band's draw is stronger than ever -- besides this week's Ozzfest, it's the only show booked for two nights at DTE Energy Music Theatre this summer.

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Lee talked to the Free Press about Rush, past and present.

It seems we've finally reached a day when critics are giving you guys a fair shake. Your place in the rock chronicles seems to have been shored up somehow.

It's hard to tell sometimes, but certainly there seems to be a kinder approach to reviewing our material. And there seems to have been some effect from the fact that so many young bands keep quoting us as an influence on them.

That seems to have made people take a second look at what we've done over the last 20 years, and maybe review it a little more, um, reasonably. (Laughs)

And we've kept plugging away. As writers we keep going at it. We love what we do, and we keep trying to make our music more interesting. Maybe that has a cumulative effect.

The fans are certainly still out there.

We've been pretty fortunate. This tour has been very well-attended, and we didn't know what to expect after the long lapse. The crowds have been coming out and they've been really supportive. And the shows have been great.

Do you feel the band has come back together performance-wise? There had to be some jitters that first night, stepping back out there.

Well, we worked really hard in rehearsal. We rehearsed a long time, and we really tried to put a show together with great care. It's not easy to pick Rush songs that are going to make everybody happy - we have so many albums out, and so many different demands from our fans. But we worked very hard at it.

Opening night we were definitely jittery. It had been a while since we'd been onstage in front of people. Everybody had been through a lot, particularly Neil. When we got through it at the end of the night, it was quite emotional. The three of us felt good about each other and all that we'd been through, and it was really a very symbolic kind of evening for us.

I would say that I don't think there's ever been a time when the three of us have felt better about each other, and more in sync, and more appreciative of what we do.

Rush

7:30 p.m. Sunday
and Monday
DTE Energy Music
Theatre
I-75 at Exit 89
248-377-0100
\$32.50, \$62.50

Do the rituals feel familiar - whatever it is that happens backstage before and after a Rush concert? Is it still second nature at this point?

It is and it isn't. It's funny - people ask me if it's strange to be back on the road, and I say well, what's strange about it is that it's not stranger. (Laughs) I could walk back out on stage after five-plus years, or whatever it was, and it was all so familiar. We accepted it very naturally. Of course we have an incredible crew and they have helped make this comeback - I don't like to use that word, "the reemergence," I'll call it - they've really helped us keep it positive and keep it pleasant. It was surprisingly comfortable coming back.

It's a long show - at least three hours.

We're too old to play more than that. (Laughs) We have a little break in there, to catch our breath in the middle, and we've tried to organize the set. Because a lot of these shows are outdoors, in a way we've tried to become our own opening act. So the two sets are quite different. We've tried to organize the show in a way that it gets more intense as it gets darker out. Which has been kind of fun, to be honest. We walk out on stage, it's fairly daylight, so the show doesn't have the lights and all that. But as the sun starts to set, and we start sneaking more and more stuff in, there's a real development. I'm really, really happy with it. And I think the fans respond in that same way.

And some oddities made it into the set?

Yeah, I think when people walk away and the show is over, they're very pleased. We've tried to cover as much as we can with a straight face, and the ones that we couldn't, we make sure we just don't have a straight face. (Laughs)

What Rush songs can't be performed with a straight face at this point?

It's really just a matter of the attitude that you take in with it. There's a few of the older songs we had a little trouble in rehearsal with, and we just looked at each other and said, "Geez, you know, we just have to play these in the spirit that we wrote them." Once we did that, they were fine. And in some ways, some of the older things are the most fun part of the show for me.

I'm really pleased with the way it worked out. It was very, very difficult organizing a set, but we've got a few surprises in there, and we've changed things up, and we're doing some things we've never attempted to do before.

I asked Neil a few years ago if indulges himself in sitting down to listen to his older work, and he immediately scoffed at the idea and said "Would you want to hang your kindergarten paintings on the refrigerator?" But I imagine there's got to be some thrill to sticking "Hemispheres" in your car and cranking it up every once in a while.

Well, I can't say I ever do that. But before this tour, when it was time to figure out what we should play and shouldn't play, Alex and I got into my kitchen there and we listened to just about every one of our CDs. Just to try to go through them and get some perspective on older songs - what songs had we overlooked, and what songs could we possibly rearrange and bring back in a more interesting way. That was a lot of fun. It was really eye-opening which albums sounded good and still stood up, and which albums where we kind of looked at each other and went, "Wow, we were in some kind of weird space there."

Such as...

You know, "Caress of Steel" will forever be that kind of record where it's like, holy mackerel, we were just smoking too much dope or something. (Laughs) And there are other records, like "Presto," for example, where we listened to the songs and we'd go, "Wow these are great songs. I wish we had produced them in a slightly ballsier way."

And then a record like "Hemispheres" comes on, and it really stands up sonically. It really still sounds quite good. I've never done that before, honestly, just sat down and listened to our whole catalog like that before. I learned a lot about the different experiments that we went through over our years.

So you know your fans are waiting for a Rush anthology type of project -- odds and ends, outtakes. Do you see a day when you'll feel comfortable releasing that kind of stuff?

Well, you know, there really isn't a whole lot of recorded material that hasn't been used, quite frankly. There are a few little bits of things, different versions of songs, lying around somewhere. I hope that at some point I can put together a proper DVD collection of video performances that haven't been released. And in that package we'll include whatever there is, but there's really not very much.

Is that just a vague notion at this point, or do you actually see something happening after this tour?

Right now, it's just an idea I've been peddling for a while now. I've got to get full record company support for me to do that - to do it the way I'd like to do it. I don't want to just stick something out there. If I'm going to put all this stuff together, I'd like to do it in a really beautiful package. Got to do it the right way.

Is there something about Rush's Canadian roots - being away from the Hollywood mentality - that's helped sustain the longevity?

Yeah, well, we're definitely not a prototypical rock band in that sense. We are softer spoken, and live quieter lives than many others in our business. But we always viewed ourselves as musicians and not celebrities, I guess. Of

course over the years, we've acquired a certain kind of celebrity through what we do, and particularly in Canada, just being prominent Canadians.

But I don't know if that's a Canadian upbringing, or if it's just a middle-class upbringing, or if it's just the way we always related to each other as musicians. Our goals were always music-oriented, and not necessarily connected with promoting our faces and our lives. I think as we've gotten older, we can handle celebrity, certainly, but it's not something we seek out voluntarily.

Now come on - when you were 17, you were in it for the same reason as anybody else, right?

I wanted to meet girls and be famous, sure. But I wanted to be famous being the best musician I could be. It was all about being a great musician. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of those musicians that I had always admired - you know, Jack Bruce, John Entwistle, Led Zeppelin, Yes. All those prog-rock bands that I loved in the early days. It really was all about the music, and I'm happy to say it still is all about the music for us.

Did you expect back then you'd still be doing it in 2002?

God, no. I figured I'd be, who knows, working in a variety store somewhere by now.

And now you get to be on that other side of that coin, as you mentioned, where you get the young musicians who look to you at this point.

Yeah, I'd say that's the single most gratifying thing about what I do. You know, it's great to have success, and certainly I appreciate all the fans we have. But I don't think there's any great compliment you can be paid than when another musician says, "Hey, something you did made me do what I do." That blows my mind. It happens quite often, and I really appreciate it when musicians let me know that. It's an incredible compliment.

Still seeing a lot of young faces at the shows?

Oh yeah, we get all kinds. Our audience is so diverse. When I look out there every night, I see of course a lot of people in their 30s. I see people older than that, I see people there with their kids. The last couple of shows we've seen kids that are like 9, 10 years old. I see young teenage musicians air-drumming out there, air-guitaring. It's a really wide, wide cross-section. It's wonderful to look out and see that variety of people.

How's the voice holding up? Still nailing the notes where they need to be nailed?

Well -- touch wood -- I think I'm doing pretty good on this tour. You know, the advent of the new monitoring systems has been really helpful for me. And I think as I've gotten older my ability to control my voice has been better.

You're even using some genuine falsetto on the new album.

I've had a lot of fun experimenting with my voice. When I did my own solo record, I tried to use in a lot of different ways, and I carried it through on this album. And it's held up live. So far it's been just great. I've had a lot of fun singing. We tried to pace our set and use our instrumental material to give me a break from time to time to catch my wind. So far so good.