

Rush: A Relic Refreshed

Rush Set To Open Tour With A Smile On Their Face

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By ERIC R. DANTON, Courant Rock Critic

Summer concert schedules always seem laden with the classic-rock detritus of aging musicians making their annual attempts at relevance.

It's the same story - lumbering bands of yore hit the road to flog yesterday's almost-hits in theaters and arenas. Foreigner rocks through "Hot Blooded" again, Journey dusts off "Anyway You Want It" and Lynyrd Skynyrd plays "Free Bird" in seeming perpetuity.

From a distance, Rush could be mistaken for one of those relics from the '70s and '80s, with a deep catalog of songs like "Fly by Night," "Spirit of Radio" and "Tom Sawyer." There's a key difference, however - the Canadian trio isn't content to live as a nostalgia act.

"We could never be happy doing something like that - and there is a place for it, and I certainly wouldn't criticize any band that goes on a tour like that," guitarist Alex Lifeson said recently by phone from Glens Falls, N.Y., where the band was rehearsing for a tour that starts tonight in Hartford. "I think for us, though, it's very hard for us to stay in one place; we always have to be moving forward."

Moving forward has meant trying different approaches to music. From Led Zeppelin-flavored guitar rock roots on the band's self-titled debut in 1974, the Canadian trio moved into progressive rock and high-minded concept albums in the late '70s, adopted keyboards in the synth-happy '80s and even dabbled with a bit of ironic rap on 1991's "Roll the Bones."

With "Vapor Trails," the first new Rush album since 1996, the band evolves once more, abandoning keyboards and guitar solos for a melodic, riff-heavy sound that puts to shame the wave of sludge metal bands currently burdening the airwaves.

"When we started the project ... I thought, you know, this would be a great time for us to concentrate on being a three-piece, going back to that approach," Lifeson said.

Though Rush's music has always borne some resemblance to current trends, the band seems to co-opt what is popular and mold it into a form that fits the musicians' notions of what Rush should sound like.

"We all listen to new music, of course, and try to stay abreast of things. But when you sit down, whatever influence that has on you is more subversive than overt," bass player Geddy Lee said.

Lifeson said he goes so far as to keep his car radio off during the recording process to

make sure musical ideas coming out in the studio belong to the band.

"You can be subtly influenced, subconsciously influenced by what you're hearing, and we didn't want that; we wanted it to be a real true representation of where we're at," Lifeson said.

Lee, Lifeson and drummer Neil Peart didn't know where they were musically when they started making "Vapor Trails." After the band's "Test for Echo" album and tour in 1996, Lee and Lifeson began work on solo albums, and Peart was devastated by dual personal tragedies. His 19-year-old daughter was killed in a car accident in 1997, and his wife died of cancer about a year later. Fans weren't sure Rush would ever record again, and neither was the band - even during studio sessions for "Vapor Trails."

"It was a very insecure time and a very emotional time, you know," Lee said. "All those events were not very far away from the surface of our skin in a way. And there was no guarantee to me that it would work out. In fact, there was a lot of doubt in my mind."

When the musicians gathered in a Toronto studio in January 2001, none of them was sure what to expect.

"It was a little slow going in the beginning," Lifeson said. "We'd all been away from working together for five years, and there was a certain amount of concern about comfort, about feeling right in the project. It took us about two weeks of just talking, communicating, getting used to each other before we actually played anything."

While Peart started writing lyrics, Lee and Lifeson jammed for another few months before they hit upon musical ideas they felt were worthwhile. Much of the music on "Vapor Trails" came directly from those improvisational sessions, with Peart adding drums and percussion later.

"I love that it captured that spark, and I think that's one of the reasons that this record sounds as spirited as it does and as passionate as it does," Lifeson said. "It's pure playing, without too much of your brain getting in the way, which with Rush, in the past, can be a bit of a problem."

With the recording process behind them, Rush confronted a new concern: winnowing nearly 30 years of material into a live show that will satisfy fans and the musicians.

"That's always the hardest part of any Rush set list, especially these days," Lee said.

The band plans to juggle five or six of the new songs from night to night, and though they'll play plenty of old material, it might not be stuff that fans are used to hearing.

"There are songs that we've dropped for this tour that we've been playing for years and years that we thought it was time to retire," Lifeson said, though he wouldn't elaborate. "We've been smiling during rehearsals, and that's a good sign, because you tend to get tired of the old material very quickly. But we haven't played some of these songs for 20

years."

Rush plays the ctnow.com Meadows Music Centre tonight at 8. Reserved seats are \$81, \$61 and \$41; lawn tickets are \$26. Information: 860-548-7370